

**RE-TRAINING THE UNIVERSITY TRAINED TEACHER:
A RESOURCE FOR TEACHERS IN NORTHLAND SCHOOL
DIVISION NO. 61**

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Abstract

This project - “Retraining the University Trained Teacher” - explores teacher stories, from my colleagues teaching in Northland School Division, and from my own experiences, to assist new teachers in Northland School in making those critical connections with the students in their classrooms that allow teaching and learning to follow. The following questions are asked: If a teacher chooses to work in a community he or she is not familiar with, how may this teacher become more effective, be made more welcomed, and be more successful? What stories can be shared that would explain the moments of understanding that take place between the teachers and the students they teach? How can a teacher become a learner in his or her classroom and community? Teaching stories from five Northland teachers and I are presented and analyzed. The document implicitly and explicitly discusses the importance of making connections with students, learning from experiences, and understanding the roles we played as individual teachers in the management of our classes. Stories were chosen to underline the importance of this to new teachers. The project considers the teacher as learner in his or her own classroom; understanding and using the values and expertise the students bring with them in helping this teacher to become more effective.

Preface

I have written the personal narrative in this text in **comic sans** font to differentiate it from those parts of the text that explain the intentions of this project, provide the rationale and strategies for proceeding, and analyze the narratives. This allows the reader to distinguish between narrative and analysis, reducing the number of headings necessary to organize the text. I want the reader to be able to distinguish the narrative voices from my analytical voice. This method allows me to move out of a particular narrative to discuss a point brought out by the story, and re-enter the narrative with a minimum of transition. The use of a separate typeface helps maintain cohesion.

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Part One: Researching Teachers Stories to Help New Teachers

Aoki, (1993) writes that:

"...it could well be that it wasn't so much that we chose to teach, but rather we were chosen, that is, we were called upon to teach. Within this understanding, teaching as a vocation is not so much a job we chose, but more so a calling to which we feel we responded, responsibly, we hope." (p. 1)

Purpose of Research

Northland School Division #61 has a long and strong tradition of telling stories and learning through stories. It is an essential part of the cultures of the students and has permeated into the way teachers talk about their teaching to our colleagues. Classroom experiences become the point from which ideas and beliefs emerge. Northland School Division #61 teachers inevitably tell stories of their experiences when meeting together, linking and connecting the shared experiences of working in this division. Many teachers' stories have become a part of the fabric of Northland School Division #61 and affirm the rewards of teaching in the North. Teachers can take stock of themselves in the stories they tell, and consider what they could be doing from the stories of others.

Raymond, Butt & Townsend (1989) state that:

"Teachers' accounts of their own development emphasize the importance of pre-teaching influences and processes for their professional identity as well as for framing the way they change during their careers." (p. 11)

This project - "Retraining the University Trained Teacher" - explores teacher stories, from my colleagues teaching in Northland School Division, and from my own experiences, to assist new teachers in Northland School in making those critical

connections with the students in their classrooms that allow teaching and learning to follow.

The monograph has been created for use in workshops and presentations in which I am involved and can be used as part of Northland School Division #61 orientation for its new teachers, including the New Teacher Orientation in Peace River in August of each year. It may also be useful for teachers at the schools as examples of reflective teaching for their Professional Growth Plans and individual schools' mentorship programs. The Division's mentorship program model encourages both mentors and protégés to keep diaries, share their experiences and write about what they have learned from them.

Methodology

The monograph is the product of a year of research and analysis into my own and other teachers' stories.

Research Subjects

I approached a dozen Northland School Division teachers of my acquaintance, including educators from each of the following categories: teachers in isolated communities; teachers who have completed two – three years with the Division; teachers who have stayed within the Division for more than ten years committed to the students they teach and the community in which they live; and Northland School Division administrators who have assisted numerous new teachers to successful careers in the Division. These subjects were chosen on the basis of previous work we had conducted together for the Division or the ATA, and the ongoing discussions we

have on the subject of teaching and learning in our Division. I was aware of the details of participants' assignment through previous contact with them.

I asked each of them the following question:

"If a teacher chooses to work in a community he or she is not familiar with, how can this teacher become more effective, be made more welcome, and be more successful? If teachers' stories could assist new teachers to the Division make connections with the students and their learning, what stories from your teaching could give examples of those moments in your career that defined the teaching and learning that go on in your classroom?" Five of these teachers contributed their stories to this document.

Permission to Conduct Research

Permission to conduct this research has been given by the Northland School Division #61 Education Committee and the Human Subject Research Ethics Committee of the University of Lethbridge.

Analysis of Stories

The analysis of the story identifies where the insight came from: students, parents, community members, fellow staff members, or administration. It examines how the teacher knew this insight had impact on teaching and learning in the classroom: what did it look like and how was it different? In other words what did these teachers learn and how this knowledge could be used by a teacher new to the Division.

The teachers who responded chose stories of initial insights of the communities in which they chose to teach and memorable moments they had with students. Given the nature of the question they were asked, the stories reflected some

attributes that were consistent with the themes being explored in my own stories. Therefore the stories acted as a kind of narrative research that affirmed themes I explored in this monograph.

Data Collection

Each teacher was contacted via telephone and the intent of the project was explained. The teacher was then asked whether he or she was interested in participating in this project. A consent letter was sent to each teacher who expressed verbal interest requesting their signed permission to participate in the proposed study. Teachers who had agreed to participate submitted stories, most of which have been included in this document. Some stories were not selected as they explored themes already illustrated in another story by that teacher or did not address the question the teacher was trying to answer.

Free and Informed Consent

Each member of the initial sample was telephoned and the intent of the project was described. Each teacher was then asked if they would be interested in participating. If the answer was yes consent letters were e-mailed or delivered by hand to each participant. If the answer was no the teacher was thanked for his or her time. No other method of persuasion was used. Some subjects withdrew from the project due to time constraints and other duties. Those who submitted stories were given the opportunity to comment on the use of their stories in the project.

Privacy and Confidentiality

As the stories may be read by others within Northland School Division #61, teachers were asked to share stories that they were comfortable with allowing other

teachers and the community at large to read; or stories where a confidence of a student, a staff member, a family, a school or a community could be violated. The participants have been named in the acknowledgements to celebrate their teaching experiences in Northland School Division #61 and to honour these teachers for the work they have done. However, the teacher's names or the communities in which they teach have not been identified in any story used in the project so as to reduce the risk of identifying third parties who may not wish to be identified with the story.

The document implicitly and explicitly discusses the importance of making connections with students, learning from experiences, and understanding the roles we played as individual teachers in the management of our classes. Stories were chosen to underline the importance of this to new teachers. The project considers the teacher as learner in his or her own classroom; understanding and using the values and expertise the students bring with them in helping this teacher to become more effective. Assurances were made to participants and oversight bodies that stories that would place a teacher at risk or clearly identify an individual student or community without permission from the student or family. This has not been necessary given the stories that were submitted. Most of my stories came from my first years as a teacher thirty years ago where it is less likely to be able to identify the students.

The intended goal of the project to consider the teacher as learner and the students as teacher with stories that demonstrate how the students helped make the teacher more effective. Stories that implied serious social problems within a community were edited so as not to identify or denigrate the community. The filter

used was to provide enough detail to keep the issue clear - without negative implications to a family or a community.

This information was provided to each of the subjects in the consent letter. Each contributor signed an agreement to participate and FOIP form that had been included with the consent letter.

Balance of Harm and Benefit

The focus of these stories has been about what the teachers have learned from their students or the community that improved teaching and learning in their classroom without violating student / community confidentiality. The primary benefit of sharing these stories is the opportunity to help new teachers to the Division become better teachers and through them, to improve teaching and learning within the Division. The immediate benefit to the subjects was an opportunity to share, to have their stories heard and, in doing so, to consider again those moments that improved teaching and learning in their careers. The risk of harm to the subjects was low as they were identified only as contributors and not in the text of any story.

Participants were clearly informed that their stories would be part of a public document and to ensure that no story violated student or community confidentiality.

The risk of harm to students and former students and the communities in which they live was minimized as the selected stories were edited to focus and reflect on what the teacher learned.

Right to Inquire about Research

All participating teachers were informed of their right to inquire about this research and their contribution to it in the consent letter.

The project is available through the University of Lethbridge and possibly from Northland School Division

Part Two: Re-Training the University Trained Teacher

Willing to Learn

“To me, being a teacher does not mean being a missionary, or having received a certain command from heaven. Rather, a teacher is a professional, one who must constantly seek to improve certain qualities or virtues, which are not received but must be created. The capacity to *renew ourselves everyday is important.*” (Friere, 1985, p. 15)

One of the duties I was assigned when I first became an administrator was to supervise the Youth Challenge Program. This is a dropout recovery program funded by the Bigstone Cree Band and administered by Northland School Division No. 61. One of my first duties was to participate in the interviews to replace the program's original teacher who was retiring.

The interview committee consisted of a number of representatives from Northland School Division and the local schools.

The position had been advertised throughout western Canada and of the four candidates who had been short-listed two interviews stood out.

One applicant had been involved in Integrated Occupational Programs for some time. His knowledge and background suggested that he had considerable experience in organizing specialized activities for

students. The covering letter with his resume assured us that he was the man for the job.

He began his interview by telling us that he had been to the graveyard on his way into the community. He said that he noticed a lot of people had died under the age of thirty. This observation startled me. It made me very uncomfortable, but in a way I could not immediately define.

The next candidate had no previous teaching experience, but had worked with inner city street kids. His most common response was that he was willing to learn. He was the candidate that was hired.

Afterwards, I sat in my office puzzling over how the candidates' remarks had impacted their chances of being hired. A staff member at our school walked in. She told me that as the unsuccessful candidate waited to be interviewed he had commented to her about his visit to the graveyard and how he had noticed that there were so many people who had died under the age of thirty. She told me it had left her unsettled and that it had taken her awhile to figure out why.

She suggested that comment should have come from a community member, not from someone who was visiting the place for the first time.

I agreed with her and began to theorize what might have happened in the minds of the other members of the committee that day.

By using this observation in his opening remarks the candidate had implied that by hiring him there would be fewer deaths; and, by extension, that not enough was being done presently to address the problems which had led to such a high number of deaths among teens and young adults.

He had no knowledge of the problems involved, or of the efforts of community members working with the young people of the community. It felt like a judgment: things are not working here, hire me and things will change.

He appeared unaware of the emotional impact of his comments. He did not know that a year earlier that one member of the hiring committee had found the body of a sixteen-year-old girl by the road near her home. The girl had died of an overdose. He did not know of the number of young people I had said good-bye to at wakes and funerals. He did not connect that he was referring to family members of the people who were interviewing him.

By contrast the candidate who was hired told us immediately that he had had no previous experience and was there to learn. The committee members described a number of scenarios that he might encounter. He did his best to answer, but kept reminding us that he would ask for help if there were something he did not understand. He would ask for help from his teacher assistant, the students, parents and community members.

The committee members recognized the risk of hiring a teacher with no previous experience over the other candidate who had a lot of experience. The young man was hired because he recognized that to be effective he needed to be both teacher and learner in his classroom, helping the students as they helped him. For the next two years this teacher worked patiently and successfully with students that could not be reached in a regular classroom environment.

The man who suggested that he had the answers implied that he had nothing to learn and so was unacceptable to this committee.

From this first story I began considering a project for new teachers that would speak to the importance of making connections with students, learning from experiences and understanding the roles that we play as teachers in our classrooms. I asked myself, "What could experienced teachers tell a newcomer to the division that

could assist this teacher new to the Division? In answering that question, this project will speak to the importance of the teacher being a learner in his or her own classroom: understanding and using the values and expertise the students bring with them in helping this teacher to become more effective through teachers' stories. I sat down and asked myself these questions:

1. If a teacher chooses to work in a community he or she is not familiar with, how may this teacher become more effective, be made more welcomed, and be more successful?
2. What stories can be shared that would explain the moments of understanding that take place between the teachers and the students they teach?
3. How can a teacher become a learner in his or her classroom and community?

In writing and analyzing the teaching stories that follow I will use these questions as my compass.

The Road as Metaphor

One contributing teacher describes the road in to her first teaching assignment in the north:

"My first Northern position meant driving through a summer road that was not much more than a track of clay slithering through the dense forest. Cat in cage, dog on leash, and a summer downpour left me stranded on an unknown journey of the heart. With the car stuck I started walking. Meeting a bear five kilometers from the vehicle, stilts of mud built up on my new canvas runners, a light denim jacket plastered

to my frame, with thirty kilometers to go, made the community feel like a piece of paradise when I finally got there.

The soul sighs when it reaches the north. The sun moves in tight circles here. One cannot tell North from East nor does it seem to matter. The sense of direction becomes compact. The store is there, the school is over here, and the forest is all around. The road leads out through traumatic adventures to the nearest supermarket and the highway from there leads to what was once home."

This resonates with anyone who has had the experience of traveling northern roads. All of our experiences, learning and understanding began with a journey to the community in which we chose to teach. I can never forget that first northern road. The road reminded me of a cart track in places. The gravel, in those few places where there was any gravel at all, made me feel like I was driving on marbles. The dust from another vehicle could hang in the air for miles making it difficult to see what was in front of me. If it rained, some parts of the road had the consistency of runny chocolate pudding. In other places the road disappeared entirely into a quagmire of mud, water and ruts.

I can remember that first journey vividly:

When I went to Wabasca-Desmarais for the first time in the spring of 1971, I hitched a ride with a long-time resident. He went so fast we seemed only to hit every second bump. The road was so rough

that the dried mud and gravel on the floor of the truck landed in my lap as we careened towards the community. I was never sure the driver was watching where he was going. He did not need to. The road was so familiar to him - twists, turns, bumps, ruts and washboard - he could concentrate on yelling all the things he thought that I should know about the community. I was so transfixed by the road I don't remember a word he said.

Two years later when I returned to teach I had to drive the road myself. Any false move, any loss of concentration could send me into the ditch on either side of the road. Each journey on the road was unique. I could travel to town in the morning choking on dust from the vehicles in front of me and find myself up to the axles in mud on the way home. I hit the ditch on more occasions than I care to admit. I still do. Yet I have found that someone has always come along to pull me out.

At the end of the road was where we chose to teach. The road was a condition of teaching there. As a teacher we found that we had to travel far to begin making connections with the students that we were given to teach. The roads we traveled were filled with twists and turns and gravelled with the unexpected. We had to learn how to negotiate them. We hit the ditch many times and were put back on the road by colleagues, parents and especially students. In a way this road to the

community is an apt metaphor for the journey we would take to become more effective, be welcomed, and be more successful.

First Journey - Learning to Appreciate

Another contributing teacher reflects on her initial impression of teaching in the north with this description of her arrival at the school and community for the first time:

That first day was a day of tears, incurable despair, and scepticism. A whole new world was opening up and I did not under any circumstances want to be a part of it. It was the day both my husband and myself got teaching jobs, not in the city of Calgary where I had already taught for one year. Not in the small towns of Alberta. No. We got teaching jobs in a small northern community. Definitely not a community that was pretty by any stretch of the imagination. Our interviews the previous day had brought us to this desolate lonely place where the first objects I noticed were the dirt, the gravel, and the dust that rose so effortlessly from the road and settled upon every possible nook and cranny. Stepping out of the truck cab with my interview clothes and high heels I couldn't help but look at this oxymoronic picture with the thought that I didn't fit here. Walking into the school proved to be no better as we were presented to the principal who was seemingly

unprepared for the interviews but upon reflection, was running on local time. It was difficult identifying the staff from the students as many were dressed in street clothes seemingly haphazardly thrown on in order to face and merely get through the day. High school students were wandering the hall aimlessly searching for a place to belong. The children in the elementary wing possessed those beautiful smiles that can only come from ignorance—unaware of what the world has to offer, the hope that lies down a partially gravelled road. I did not think that hope existed in this school, in this community. I could not understand my being in such a desolate place. Without jobs or a place to go, that barren depressing place had to become home—TEMPORARILY. There was no way that I would allow this place to grow on me. Get in, work for two years, and get out. I convinced myself that I could live in this place for a short time and then move on and get on with my life. Well, that was over 12 years ago and 'that place' has now become home. I no longer see high school students wandering aimlessly but I see in them a part of what has made me the person I am. I hear hope in their words and see hope in their faces. No longer do I notice the perpetual dust or the exhausted homes but a community of beauty that has accepted me in my high heels

and city ways. A community that has given me hope and love unconditionally even though I continue to clash with the rustic beauty of the land that initially may be difficult to see.

This teacher's increased appreciation for the community is one example of the kinds of the journeys that have enriched the lives of Northland SD 61 teachers. Moving beyond an initial impression of the community in which you teach can be accomplished when you begin to see the community through the eyes of your students.

In the summer of 1971 I had been hired by the Alberta Service Corps to run a play school and organize recreational activities in the community hall situated on Reserve 166A in Desmarais. We were university student volunteers earning a dollar a day. My partner was also an education student at the University of Alberta and boarded at the nursing station for the summer.

The playschool was held in the Desmarais community hall, a log building that contained two long tables and four long benches. I believe that there was a wood stove in one corner to be used in the winter. There were three or four light bulbs in the ceiling and two windows. The hall opened on to an outdoor skating rink that served as our playground for the summer.

Our first difficulty was in finding supplies to start the program. The community had given some toys, crayons and colouring books to us but we needed paper, scissors and glue. One morning I went to Mistassiniy School to ask for their assistance. The principal directed the vice-principal to open the storage room and invited me to help myself. In that one morning we were given enough supplies to last the summer.

That act of generosity neatly demonstrated a prevailing attitude of willingness to help. We found throughout the summer that all we had to do was ask. The school, community groups, community members and the band did their best to support us.

The playschool ran for two hours in the afternoon every weekday. The children arrived by bus. We had no class list to let us know who they were and we also had no one to assist us from the community for the first three weeks. Luckily for us several older children wandered by and stayed to help out. Eventually we figured out everyone's name and got the kids to sit down on the benches. Then we started to explain the activity we wanted them to complete that day. It became clear in a hurry that the children did not understand what we were saying. Very soon they got up to play again. We pulled

out the old standby - colouring and drawing pictures. This lasted for a half hour or so. We then let them out into the rink for recess. They immediately tore around after each other.

A half hour later they were finally sitting on the benches, more or less. One child asked me a question. I did not understand him so I pointed back to his seat. Instead he went outside to the outhouse. "Oh", said I.

We then tried to get them to cut out coloured paper and paste it on manila tag to create mosaics. After gluing on two pieces they headed off to play again. Our little pieces of coloured paper were scattered all over the hall. We looked at our watches and realized we still had forty-five minutes to go. Communication was difficult, we pointed a lot, our English was met with blank stares and we reacted the same way to their Cree. By this time the older children had vanished from the chaos and we were on our own. Eventually the bus came, the children left and we stood shaking our heads knowing that they would be back the next day.

Houses surrounded the community hall and parents could watch us from their front steps. Several commented that we did not

have the children under very good control. They were right. We asked for an assistant to help us, and eventually a wonderful lady came to our rescue. She was more than an assistant to us. She gave us credibility. Several of her own children attended the playschool and her quiet and gentle manner with all the children was a counter balance to our frenetic attempts to establish order. Within days we had established the routines that served us for the rest of the summer. We were also beginning to break down the language barriers between us, often finding that the students understood us better than we had thought. Our assistant would hear me giving directions to a student who would shrug and stare blankly at me. Then she would come over and repeat the same direction - in English. The student would then do what she had told him to. The assistant would smile at me and tell me not to be fooled by the children.

It is from that first summer I began to understand the importance of community members who work as teachers and paraprofessionals in our schools. These coworkers can help provide the credibility we needed in the eyes of the students we taught.

Regardless of our struggles most of the children came every day and as we established our routines, we began to really enjoy our

time with them. My partner looked after the younger children, and I worked mostly with the older ones.

While establishing our routines it became clear that my daily planning left a lot to be desired. I did not have a clear idea of the educational components of a playschool and even planning enough crafts or physical activities for the two hours was a challenge. Eventually we taught primary numbers, colours and the alphabet. We played games in the skating rink and managed to get the students back inside with less and less difficulty. We tried every paper craft imaginable including some of mine that had no point to them whatsoever.

Learning to plan appropriately has been a key factor in my classroom management throughout my career. When I experienced difficulties with a class I would assess the lesson plan for that class as a first step in resolving the problem.

Most of what I learned that summer came from the children. We often asked them to draw their home or their neighbourhood. When we asked them to explain their picture to us they would talk with pride about their family. We got a sense of family life as they saw it.

The kids were fascinated with us as well. They touched us on the arm or held our hand or finger when they spoke to us, they huddled

right into us. However, they did not make eye contact with us. Our assistant told us this was a sign of respect and I had to learn not to insist that the student look at me when I talked to them. Often, a student would ask me a question for another child such as if someone else could go to the bathroom. I responded by asking why the child did not ask me himself. Again the assistant explained that in getting another student to ask me the question I was saved from the embarrassment of having to say no to a child. Again, their behaviour was intended to be courteous and my responses baffled them. We had to learn not to pull away when being touched. We had to learn not to back up when they huddled into us to hear a story. The assistant's explanations of the students' behaviour helped us overcome many of the communication problems we faced. The children began to talk to us quietly. As their initial shyness disappeared they proved to be curious about everything and asked questions about each activity we did with them. They expected us to be prepared every day and if we were not, we had difficulty in maintaining order.

At the end of June some of our students' older brothers and sisters dropped into our playschool. We got to know more of the

children who lived around the community hall, and this assisted me in trying to organize recreation activities for the older children.

For the first two months of that summer I was given room and board at the residential school. I met children from across Northern Alberta, but very few from the community itself, other than the four and five year old children who showed up at the play school. However, during the second half of my stay, the Chief placed me with his sister, who lived very close to the community hall. It was here that I was introduced to the community, and they were introduced to me. The good humour and courtesy both the family and the community showed towards me was instructive.

The family with whom I boarded in July and August of 1971 lived on the A Reserve, on the north shore of South Wabasca Lake. The woman was the post-mistress and had an old house beside their home that they used as the post office. Mail came into the community two days a week then: Tuesdays and Fridays. She would sort all the mail alphabetically and around 4:00 p.m. the community members would line up. She would patiently look through each stack of mail for each person, often adding relatives' mail into the pile. It could take close to

an hour to get to the wicket, only to be told there was nothing for you. If she spotted someone, she would holler at him or her if she knew there was nothing there for him or her. But often it took a combination of her and the person she was serving to decide which letters belonged to whom. This was no place to be in hurry, but it became a nice place to socialize as we stood in the line.

The line-up became a comfortable place to catch up on local news and make contact with people that stood me in good stead as a teacher. In a way it symbolized the pace and patience of the community at the time. It gave me a chance to exchange pleasantries and to get to know who people were. Later these exchanges would allow me to contact parents in private more easily when I had concerns about a student. Contact had already been established.

One morning I was greeted with a bowl of boiled meat, with a few Kraft Dinner noodles and the odd piece of green pepper in it. When I took my first spoonful I tasted the wildest, toughest meat I had ever encountered. I choked it down and asked the father what it was. He told me it was bear meat. In my orientation with the Alberta Service Corps I had been told that it was polite to eat everything I

was offered. So I gulped down the entire bowlful. The man was so pleased he filled it up again from the pot. About then their sons entered the kitchen, looked at the meat, and refused to touch it. They thought that it was really funny that their Dad had gotten me to eat some. Eventually I was able to beg off finishing the second bowl by saying that I was just too full.

Living at their home presented certain technical difficulties for me. There was no running water in the house then, and I kept reaching for taps that weren't there. There was a slop pail under the sink that had to be dumped when it got full and it was full every time I went to use the sink. The slop pail had to be dumped down the outhouse, a chore I wound up doing all summer.

I had my problems with that outhouse too. All the comics were kept there, for obvious reasons. The outhouse was near the post office, with a path through long grass to the door. It was this grass that got me into trouble one day. I entered the outhouse, settling down with a new comic. I had noticed a horse grazing nearby, but never paid it any attention. The horse wandered closer and, leaning against the door, started to munch on the tall grass in front of the outhouse.

I pushed on the door to leave. It wouldn't budge. I banged on it, I yelled. I heard the horse snort then lean more heavily on the front of the outhouse. This caused it to tip backwards. Panicking, I started to holler. This brought out the neighbourhood children. Eventually a couple of boys chased the horse away and I fled the outhouse with as much dignity as I could muster.

This moment became a defining one for me. Up to that point I had tried very hard to get used to my new surroundings. The silliness of the situation became clear as soon as I was outside. I felt that I had made a fool of myself. In fact, the only one concerned about it at all was me. When I started to laugh at the situation, I began to relax. And in relaxing, began to enjoy the home and community in which I was living.

The children extricated me from this predicament with considerable amusement. And thinking about it I realize now that they would continue to do so for the next thirty years. It took me a long time to recognize their assistance but I grew to rely on it. Their assessments of my performance as a teacher were not always flattering. Still the assistance and feedback they provided helped me out of many jams and I became a better teacher when I began to listen to the students and began to learn from them.

I remember how the family would spend at least fifteen minutes every day in conversation with me. I remember the morning I woke up with a dozen dolls around and on me as the little girls were

playing house on my bed. I guess I was part of the furniture and they were a little annoyed when I got out of bed.

I think back to how the boys who slept in the same room with me kept a radio on all night. Being so far from the station, the music would fade in and out. They did this to drown out the whine of the mosquitoes that would consider the room safe to enter about four hours after the boys had bombarded the place with insect spray. That tinny, static filled music worked too, except when the signal faded.

I am not sure how it sat for this family to have me as a boarder, but they did their best to make me feel welcome. I know I interrupted their lives. I know I talked too much about them to my parents on the phone system on which anyone could listen. But this family with their patience and generosity represent my first impression of the community. I could not have asked for better.

Living with this family gave me a chance to observe up close, the students I taught. It allowed me the opportunity to build upon shared experiences and begin the slow and painful journey to understanding that I had to build relationships with the students and build a climate of mutual trust.

The summer prepared me well for my first teaching assignment at Mistassiniy School two years later. But the environment of the school proved to be

different than that joyful summer of 1971 when I was first introduced to the community.

It takes time and shared experiences to begin to understand and appreciate the communities in which we find ourselves teaching. Each teacher's experiences are different, but they lead the teacher closer to the lives of the children they teach.

As Friere (1985) notes:

"As teachers, we learn from the process of teaching and we learn with the students for whom we make possible the conditions to learn. We also learn from the processes that students are teaching us." (p. 17)

Second Journey – Learning to Listen

Listening can be difficult to achieve within the confines of a classroom, but may be the single most important trait that students' value. This was probably the single most important tool I learned to use as a teacher. Listening necessitates acting or changing your actions based on what you have heard. As students are adept at giving you a snippet of the story, active listening requires asking questions that clarify the story and more often than not draw out the underlying problem the student only hints at. Palmer (1998) notes that:

"... Our students want to find their voices, have their voices heard. A good teacher is one who listens to those voices even before they are spoken – so someday they can speak with truth and confidence." (p. 46)

I remember my first year of teaching with a mixture of amusement and dismay. I believe I had some of the most successful teaching moments of my career and even more spectacular disasters. My challenge from there onwards was to reduce the mistakes and find a better balance to the wildly uneven teaching with which I had begun. Implied in these stories is that I learned from them right away. This was not

the case. Sometimes it took months or years for the lessons from the stories to sink in.

I did not discuss what was happening in my classroom with other teachers without feeling that I was revealing my inadequacies as a classroom manager and so these moments often passed without my reflecting on the incident. I careened into the next incident and the one after that. Luckily, I had students who had far more patience with me than I did with them and a colleague who pulled me back on the road and pointed me in the right direction. Palmer (1998) writes:

“... The only way to get out of trouble is to go deeper in. We must enter, not evade the tangles of teaching so that we can understand them better and negotiate them with more grace, not only to guard our own spirits but also to serve our students well. (p. 2)

That sunny morning in September 1973 I walked into Mistassiniy School as a teacher for the first time. I had been hired in late August, just in time to attend the instructive orientation in Grouard. We were given lots of advice, and encouraged to proceed with caution in our new communities.

I can still see my first classroom: a rectangular room with two sets of windows that looked out on the bush that ran behind the school. There was a derelict car there that was once used in Industrial Arts classes. The classroom had front and side black boards, desks in rows and a wooden teacher's desk and chair at the front of the room. The

windows faced northeast so that classroom was bathed in morning sun. The room looked promising as empty classrooms do. The principal told me that my homeroom class would be 7B. Before classes started the students congregated in the gym: girls on one side, boys on the other. The Wabasca students were at the back of the gym. The Desmarais students were at the front. In the middle were a group of boys lazily playing volleyball. One of them smacked the ball in my direction. I ducked. Everyone laughed.

When the students arrived in my classroom they all organized themselves into the desks and waited for me to do something. Luckily there was lots to keep me busy doing the paperwork to get the register started and complete the myriad of forms that would be required. Later on I realized that the students had sat in desks that made talking to their friends more convenient and it was even longer before I realized that I had to do something about it. By then the students had claimed ownership to the desk and its position in the room and challenged any move to place them elsewhere. However, that first day students were attentive, the classes were easy to manage and there was only a hint of the restlessness to come.

I later referred to this initial bliss as the honeymoon period. With experience I realized that the students were waiting for me to set out the classroom routines and expected behaviour. I tried to introduce the course first, and presumed that the students would know how to behave. They did. But because I had not clearly articulated my expectations they correctly understood this to be indecision and took advantage of it. Classroom management became more difficult.

There were more challenges to my authority, especially when I wanted them to stop talking to each other and pay attention to what I was doing. From there, the struggle began. There would be days when the period was used up just trying to get them to follow the routines I was trying to establish. Other days they would follow the directions and quietly get on with the work. I thought that they were doing this just often enough to show me they could do this if they so chose.

I realize now that there were few role models for me to emulate in establishing myself as a teacher, given the high teacher turn over at the school. By trial and error, and often I was a trial as I made error after error, I came to know and be able to work with the students I taught. Through trial and error, the students began to lead me towards the expectations they had for me.

A contributing teacher describes her first day:

In my life I had experienced sixteen first days of school and had survived them all. How different could year seventeen be - except that now I was the teacher? Full of excitement, eagerness and fear I went to face my first class. It was a *Grade Four* class and there were seventeen girls and four boys coming in to learn from me. The desks were ready, the supplies were organized and I was going to show how smart I was and share all my knowledge with them. As it turned out, these children taught me more in a year than I could have ever learned in four years of university.

Her first lesson describes a simple truth.

During a discussion about careers I asked the students to tell me about what they wanted to be when they grew up. After several students provided standard answers one of the boys put up his hand and told me that when he grew up he was going to be a moose hunter. I encouraged him to tell me what his second choice would be. He insisted that he did not want to be anything else other than a moose hunter because then his family would have food to eat and he would not need to leave them. I learned that family is very important to the children and to respect that.

In this situation the teacher also showed respect for the child's point of view by not pursuing the argument any further. Learning to accept answers other than the ones you want to pursue your lesson is an important part of being a learner in the classroom along with the students.

In my own classroom another lesson was brought home one day when I arrived at work not feeling very well.

On occasion I would wind up with a cold and head to work because few if any substitutes were available in the community and this meant that colleagues would lose their prep time to cover my class. I would tell the students I was not feeling well and that I was subbing for myself. I would be a little slower in responding and asked that the room stay quiet.

Part way through one of these classes one of the boys began to talk to a friend. After I had gone over to his desk and quietly asked him to stop he told me that he thought that I was nicer when I was sick. I looked at him in surprise and answered that I thought that because I wasn't feeling well I was more considerate of how other people felt. He agreed.

This was informative. It dawned on me that I had resolved the potential discipline issue, had a meaningful conversation with the student

and had accomplished this quietly and privately with the student at his desk. Considering that this was a generally pleasant student, I took his implied criticism to heart. I was taking everything so seriously that I was losing perspective. I was becoming so strident that I saw everything as a battle of wills. I needed to understand that my best means of gaining control would be courtesy and patience and quietly explained expectations.

We may not always like what students say about us, but it is useful to listen. When I realized that this student's assessment of me was right, I was forced to accept that my classroom management strategies often overwhelmed the situation, creating unnecessary tension in the classroom and undermining my attempts to maintain order.

One of my former students recently told me that he watched me one day take student after student out into the hall. They had been acting up in the classroom, but when they came back they started to work quietly. He got curious as to what I was saying that seemed to settle the students down.

As we stood in the hall I asked him how he was doing, was there something in the lesson he could not do and could I help him with that. I asked if there was something I needed to change within the lesson to get him working. I asked how his day was going. I talked about something he

did in class that I appreciated. I realized that he was paying close attention to me. From there I reinforced the behaviour I wanted to see from him in the class. He agreed, headed in and got to work. The class grew quiet, the students worked until the period ended.

I enjoyed the one-on-one conversations, and noted the natural courtesy of the students when they were taken away from the confrontation and their classmates. It certainly was a better solution than taking the student to the principal's office. Also, I did not need to take every student out into the hall. I selected the students that seemed to influence the behaviour of the rest of the class and talked to them. In essence, I began to create strategic alliances with student leaders in the classroom that were built on quiet one-on-one communication. I began to do the same thing while on supervision and engaged students in conversation wherever I was.

Even though creating strategic alliances and having one-on-one conversations did not end the confrontations I faced that first year, the intensity and frequency of the problems began to ease. This came about through the simple but effective strategy of showing and demonstrating respect for each student. It was more time consuming than raising my voice to gain control of the class, but it was also infinitely more enjoyable and effective.

Some students were willing to help us by interceding with the other students for us. In one contributing teacher's story a Grade seven student's courtesy helps save a class headed for disaster.

I vividly remember my first teaching assignment and my first week with a grade 7 Drama class. I had absolutely no idea what Drama was supposed to be about. The only courses I had been prepared to teach were either math or science but there I was saddled with this 'foster child' of a different ilk. Perhaps the class sensed that I was in over my head as I looked pleadingly at the group of despondent students casually arrayed before me. I am sure that I did not project the confidence to inspire any semblance of risk taking in any of those eager faces and reluctant bodies staring at me in self-preservative defiance.

I am sure that my initial instruction for them to assemble themselves for our introductory activity must have bordered on a plea. This was met with a numbing silence. My mind raced, invigorated with the increased blood pressure from my rising heart rate. My first instinct was to simply demand again that they comply with my direction but this time I would ask in a louder, more forceful voice, "Come on you guys, form a circle around me". Still there was no response and no one moved. I felt confused, stranded, and alone! At the zenith of my frustration while

struggling to maintain my composure an angel - no a saviour - emerged. My rescuer was not announced from the realms of heaven nor did she descend in a pillar of light. She simply stood up from her position on the steps of the stage and took a place next to me. She then *informed* the rest of the class that they were to form the circle as previously directed. "Okay, you guys. Get up!" To my great pleasure and even greater relief, they each took a place in a circular configuration around their newest teacher. They trusted their classmate but the latest addition to the teaching staff was as yet unproven. Trust would take time and effort beyond the few days recently allotted me.

Once the circle was formed there was a definite hesitation as eyes moved from myself to their real leader and then back to me. She simply stood rather erect and with a knowing glance, looked at me as if to then transfer official control. I will forever remember that telltale glance and the unspoken understanding that I was 1) not to disappoint her 2) ensure that the others felt safe and 3) not to mention her contribution.

Sensibly, this teacher allowed the student to take control of the moment. His trust was well founded and as teachers it is useful to remember the students who risked their own standing with their peers to help us out. More often than not, the students we teach will help us out of difficult situations.

This teacher continues:

I have often wondered if she ever realized how pivotal her overture was and how such a simple act of leadership and support could have made such an indelible impression. Next time we run into each other at the store or the post office I think I will break my appreciative silence and thank her for an act I doubt she will even recall.

It is a fact of life in Northland Schools that teachers are expected to be generalists and can be assigned classes for which they have little or no training, especially in the area of options. It is important to ask for help from administration, colleagues and central office staff, as well as the students in the classroom.

Another contributing teacher describes the method he used to approach a difficult class:

My first teaching assignment was in Northland School Division #61. I had been hired just before the Christmas Holidays and I was the fourth teacher that school year for the Grade Seven class. The Superintendent had warned me that this group of children would be a challenge and gave me expulsion letters for three students to be served the first school day in January. I asked if I could hold the expulsion letters until I had the chance to meet the students. He agreed.

That first day back was instructive. The weather was spring-like, above zero, sunny, clear and crisp. I took attendance. All the students

were present waiting to check out their fourth victim. I knew they were waiting to demonstrate their lack of interest in Mathematics so I decided to take a different tack. Instead of getting them to show me what they knew about Grade Seven Mathematics I got them to show me the community instead. We put on our boots and jackets and headed out of the school. The students showed obvious pride acting as tour guides for their new teacher. As we walked along the road the students showed me where they and their extended families lived. We stopped twice for tea and visited with family elders. On the way back to the school we walked along the lakeshore and I was deluged with stories of them fishing, swimming and playing in their lake.

That morning excursion resulted in a useful rapport that allowed me to ask them questions about their frustrations as we ate our lunch back at the school. They explained that this was the first junior high class in that school. Previously all junior-senior high students had transferred to another school in a nearby town. They were the senior students in the school but felt that they were being treated like the elementary children.

That evening I moved a couch and coffeepot into the classroom. We re-organized the timetable and opened the gym to these students at the break. By paying attention to their concerns we went on to have a successful year. I never did use the expulsion notices.

Sometimes it is not enough just to be willing to listen. By demonstrating an interest in the students' community this teacher was able to change the attitude of the children towards him and he was able to begin an ongoing conversation with his students that improved his classroom management and their interest in school. In this instance the teacher built allegiances in the classroom by showing an interest in the community where he chose to teach. He remained in that community for fifteen years.

Learning to Talk With Colleagues

There was the belief, back in 1973, that teachers had to sink or swim in the classroom. So I never told anyone about what was going on. When things got too rowdy, the principal would glare at the class and invite me for a conference in his office after school. These conferences were non-threatening and he did his best to advise me on what I could do.

"Classroom discipline isn't so hard, once you've got them sitting down" he'd confide. My heart sank. There were days where the class would roar in, and roar out forty minutes later, and I could not describe coherently what had happened in the interval.

Teachers were left on their own to work out their classroom management processes. Students wanted me to take charge of the ones who were not working and who were placing other students in danger with their behaviour.

It took me a long time to realize that I was part of the equation and my preparation and attitude towards my students played a significant part in what occurred in the classroom. Featherington (1992) states:

“I have come to feel that self-knowledge is the major fruit – perhaps *the* major fruit – of early teaching experience, that the loudest of the voices urging strict discipline may come from inside the novice’s head and the struggle to manage behaviour is immediately bound up with the struggle to understand and change the self.” (p. 2)

One day a veteran teacher told me that my homeroom grade seven class was very difficult and almost no one could manage them. Then she noted that my classroom management with them was improving. This surprised me. I could not see it. I began to describe the difficulties I was facing in that classroom. Every day I could hear my homeroom class in another teacher’s classroom, with the high noise level, the bleats of the frustrated teacher, the students exploding into my classroom for the next period. I was so tense when I got them that I reacted to the first outburst from a student. From there the classroom became a battle of wills until the class headed back out the door into their next class.

I told her that there were days when my classes went well, students did their work, routines were followed; assignments were turned

in, marked and returned. These days were a little magical and in those illuminating moments I told her that I realized how much I wanted to be a teacher.

She suggested to me that I look at classroom management through the lens of how often the students behaved rather than how often they did not. She suggested that I differentiate the types of misbehavior from total chaos in the classroom to too much noise or one or two students acting out and react accordingly. She insisted that I had to find my own ways of keeping order in these classes and getting students to work. Her insights helped me focus on what the students were telling me through their behaviour. Weisbourg (2003) writes:

“Teachers, guided by coaches, could provide feedback to one another on such topics as earning respect and trust, creating a caring community, dealing with challenging students, and identifying and reversing the downward spirals in which students and adults get caught.” (p. 11)

Learning to talk with my colleagues was another important factor in improving my teaching practice. Looking for good behaviour rather than bad behaviour and responding accordingly helped calm me down and maintain perspective. Responding to good behaviour also meant that I had to listen to the students more closely, and in doing so I found out that they were more than willing to share with me some of the difficulties they were experiencing in their lives.

Learning to Talk with Students

I was having a particularly difficult time with one student one morning. I could not get him to sit in his seat, let alone get out any work to do. In fact all he kept doing was throwing textbooks out the window. I asked him to stop. He continued. I lost my cool and sent him out of class to the office. He did not seem to care. He came back to class a short time later and sat down at the back of the classroom and stared out the window. As he walked by me he told me he'd talk to me at recess.

At recess he came to my desk and told me that he had not gotten any sleep the night before. He told me that he had hidden in the bush all night. He had not had anything to eat for breakfast he decided to come to school, as this was probably the safest place for him. When I started in on him to get to work he just got angry with me.

I did not understand the level of violence he was trying to escape but I do remember feeling like a heel. To rub it in further he produced pictures of his brothers and sisters and talked to me about them.

I had no further trouble from him that morning. He went out and threw back in the books he had tossed and then tidied the shelves. I cannot remember if I apologized to him, but I certainly should have.

Sergiovanni (1994) states:

“Where positive things about the school were noted, they usually involve reports of individuals who care, listen, understand, respect others, and are honest, open and sensitive. Teachers report their best experiences in school are those where they connect with students and are able to help them in some way.” (p. 18)

It took time for me to understand that some of the behaviour that I was witnessing had little connection to me, my classroom or the school. As in all classrooms the students bring with them a myriad of issues and problems that can make learning very difficult for them. Learning to ask them what was happening was one of those moments of understanding that gave me an insight on how to avoid a confrontation with a student. Another critical strategy had been introduced to my repertoire.

Palmer notes that:

“On one level the answer is simple. Our conventional diagnosis allows us to ignore our failings as teachers by blaming the victims. There is a deeper reason for our blindness towards students’ fears and it is more daunting: we cannot see the fear in our children until we see the fear in ourselves.” (p.47)

I believe that I handled student anger very badly. Student anger is always difficult to deal with as it is often triggered unexpectedly. The young boy’s story was one of many. I can remember other incidents where I sat fuming, as the principal described seeing that student the night before crying as she walked down the road. It was difficult for me to see that my words or actions had triggered this explosion from other issues that the student faced. When I would allow myself to be drawn in,

I would see that anger as a challenge to me without ever considering what else might be going on in that student's life. When I learned to apologize and check back with the student after the initial confrontation two things happened. I most often found out at least some issues the child had been through or was facing that day. I also found out that with quiet responses I was beginning to build a relationship that required me to listen to and not just hear what each child told me. Choosing to go back and apologize for my behaviour also forced me to consider my responses more carefully before I lost my cool. I had to consider the immediate stresses in my life and how this was impacting my responses to student behaviour.

Friere (1985) states:

"Teachers should be conscious every day that they are coming to school to learn and not just to teach. This way we are not just teachers but teacher learners."
(P.16)

During the Christmas Concert my first year teaching, I learned an important lesson. The concert began with a power failure just before we were to get started. I still remember the principal standing on the stage in the pitch darkness of the gym, holding a lighted candle, asking the audience to remain seated. I saw him standing calmly in the face of

potential chaos, with literally nothing more than a candle to guide him.

It's been a useful metaphor ever since.

The power came back on five minutes later. My class skit was about a trip to the dentist. (I should point out that Christmas Concerts at Mistassiniy School meant carols sung by elementary students, practically hollering so they could be heard, interspersed with comic skits by the older students.) I had managed to convince my more challenging students to take part. The trouble was that I was very insecure about whether they would actually perform in front of an audience. I felt that whether they performed or not would reflect on me. So I kept pestering them. Just before our turn came, one of them swore at me, then went on stage and played his part. He was terrific. After the skit ended and the applause subsided I found him in the audience where he was trying to avoid me. I signalled him into the hall. He came, fully expecting me to be angry. Instead I apologized for harassing him before the concert. He smiled, and apologized for swearing at me. I complimented him on his performance. Then he whispered, "Merry Christmas, Gibbs" and went back into the gym. We never mentioned it again.

Kohn (2003) writes that,

“Some teachers ... automatically assume that when students act inappropriately, they have a behaviour problem that must be fixed. It is the student who must change and the teacher stands by to help him do so ... [teachers] may need to reflect on how they may need to reconsider their own decisions” (p. 28).

The gift I got that Christmas Concert night was the realization that I could not always blame the student for an incident. I needed to consider how my behaviour contributed to the problem. The student's good grace when I accepted responsibility for harassing him was instructive. It did not undermine my authority. My apology reinforced it.

A contributing teacher writes of a moment when a parent brought back a comment she had made to one child :

All the boys I taught that first year had a twinkle in their eye, and knew how to get to me any chance they could. One boy had a particular knack for finding trouble anywhere.

I would always say to him: “You know I have a soft spot for you so please don't...” He would smile at me and off he would go, trying to behave. I always assumed he knew what I meant.

A few months later his mother came to see me. She told me a story and asked if I could figure out where it came from. She said: “Last week my son and I were outside cleaning the yard for winter. As he was raking he asked what it meant when someone had a soft spot for you. In Cree I explained to him that it meant that someone cared for you very

much and only wants what is best for you. I asked him why he had asked this but he just smiled at me."

I chuckled and told her that I always said this to her son. She smiled and thanked me for caring about her boy.

This teacher goes on to note that she realized how careful she had to be about what she said to each student. They were listening but might not ever ask what the teacher really meant. She realized that she had to try her best not to sound critical.

This teacher also discovered one possible outcome when using idiomatic language with the students. It is worthwhile to check back with students to see if they are hearing the same things that you are saying.

Learning to Pay Attention

Aoki (1991) writes:

"...If we are to take seriously the education of our youth we must not be blind to the circumstances in which we ask our young to live - within the family, within the community, within the peer group, within the classroom." (p. 18)

I found myself teaching courses, that first year, which appeared to presume a lot of outside resources were used regularly by each child, particularly newspapers, magazines and a variety of radio and television stations. A good library was essential to explore further the curricular expectations of the course. None of these were available to the students or me that year. Radio reception was poor. The only

television channel was the C.B.C. The nearest transmitter was in Athabasca and outdoor television antennas a required booster to pick up the signal. Even with these boosters, the signal would fade in and out. There were no local newspapers, and with mail delivery occurring on Tuesdays and Fridays only, subscribing to daily newspaper was considered impractical.

The curriculum guide also spoke anthropologically from the ethnocentrism of an urban white population, particularly at the Grade Seven level. Some of the cultural groups we were exploring were identified for the *different* way they viewed the world. My students appeared to be more interested in the native and non-native worlds in which they co-existed rather than the cultural norms of the Pygmies. The interface between the native and non-native worlds was, for most, the school itself.

Of all the controversies that first year none was more stressful than my teaching the theory of evolution to the Grade 7 Social Studies class as I worked on the unit on Australopithecus Man. How else, thought I, could they see the development of man, through to Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon Man. Explaining that humans and apes may

have had common ancestors, was absorbed as "men come from apes" which flew in the face of their religious instruction, and their credulity. I spent a year sorting out what I had intended to say with any number of parents who were either amused or morally offended, and who wanted to know why I was telling their children that humans came from apes. It finally died down, I suspect, thanks to a lot of hard work on the part of the principal.

This problem was certainly tied to the discipline problems with my homeroom class, my naiveté, and the fact that I did not make myself aware of community values in this area.

The curriculum guide that I relied on did not explain what to do if the topic offended and insulted students and parents. That was my responsibility.

I believed that I was solely in control of what was taught in that classroom. It did not occur to me that I might offend the students or their parents. As one student deftly summarized it, "You may have come from apes, but we didn't." It neatly summed up their attitude and was a forceful reminder for me to pay attention to the feedback I was getting.

As Kohn (2003) states:

“Teachers ... sometimes pay insufficient attention to deficiencies in the academic curriculum. As a result they are forever struggling to get students to pay attention to tasks, that frankly, don’t deserve the students’ attention.” (p. 28)

By not paying particular attention to the community standards, and clinging to the objectives I had interpreted from the curriculum guide on *Australopithecus Man*, I found myself in a forced learning situation - as the learner. From that point onward I would bring my teaching agenda into the classroom, more tentatively, more respectfully, inviting the students to participate. I had to learn to find a balance between what the curriculum guides gave me to teach, and what my students would consider worthy of learning.

Learning to Share

Leavitt (1994) states that:

"Teachers ... need to become familiar with the culture of their students (any students) and to make learning in the classroom as compatible as possible with the learning that takes place outside of it." (p. 183)

During my second year at Mistassiniy School I was assigned Grade 7 Language Arts, a subject that I believe has always placed me closer to the lives my students lead than any other subject taught in the Junior/Senior High. My classroom conversations began to evolve into mutual sharing of the worlds in which we lived.

Friere (1985) argues:

"We teachers must learn how to make a life together with the students who may be different from us." (p. 15)

One morning, students in my Grade 8 class complained that they had been cooped up in their houses for a few days. Considering it was

early fall and the weather had been good I expressed surprise that they had to be indoors. Hesitantly one of the students explained that a community member has seen an evil spirit and parents were not letting their children outside at night. Then the students looked at me carefully to see how I reacted. It was clear to me that I should not dismiss this as "superstition". Instead I listened quietly to what they said and thanked them for telling me.

A Cree teacher later explained that spiritual aspects in Cree can sound "superstitious" in English because English does not have an equivalent language to discuss these issues.

This explained why the students were so restless at school. Houses were small. Families were large and the students were grumpy. I was able to use the information to begin my lesson with a drama-relaxation activity that more effectively settled the class. I began to use information from the students about what was going on in the community to assist me in classroom management and lesson planning.

I did not always understand a lot of what the children told me, but I did learn how to accept what they told me as their understanding of the world. I did not need to make this world mine, but I could learn to realize that there were other perspectives and different realities for which my life and education had not prepared me.

I remember relating a story about subtle differences in the ways things were done that could get me into trouble. One of my favourite stories was about why I was always leaving people's houses so quickly after I arrived.

About twenty minutes after I had arrived for tea and raisin bannock I felt I had to leave again. The family who had invited me got annoyed and asked why I was always doing this. I sat down, quite embarrassed, and stayed for the evening.

When I went back to visit my parents in Edmonton, I figured it out. In my parents home tea or coffee and a snack was served to guests as a signal that the visit was at an end. After the beverage was drunk and the food eaten, the visitors left. In Wabasca-Desmarais tea or coffee is served to welcome you to their home.

Sharing our social behaviours and the reasons why we do things the way we do got us talking and in the end brought me closer to the students.

A contributing teacher describes what happened when he planned a trip to Edmonton for a culminating activity to a locally developed course in which he and his class had participated. He writes:

As a final, culminating activity, we wanted to take our students into Edmonton to celebrate the success of the course with a swimming

session followed by dinner on Whyte Avenue at a fancy restaurant. I was met with a mixed response when I told the students about the trip. This baffled me. I had thought, "What could be better than a wonderful dinner to complete and celebrate the course."

As the day of the trip drew nearer and nearer the students appeared more and more edgy. I just didn't get it. Finally, one of my senior girls, who often brought me into the loop when I was lost, came to my aid. The students had heard that there was a lot of cutlery at a fancy restaurant and some of the students were not sure which fork to use. This hadn't occurred to me. It took only a few moments explanation and we had a wonderful time on our trip,

Luckily a student rescued the teacher and a potential threat to the trip was handled quietly and efficiently. Still this would not have occurred unless the student knew that her teacher would listen to her. Developing an environment of trust helped both students and teacher on this occasion.

Sergiovanni (1994) writes:

"Students desire a network of adults (parents and teachers) with whom they can "really talk about important things" and want to have these conversations about values with one another." (p. 18)

It took a while for me to deliberately connect the curriculum to what was going on in these shared moments of my classes, let alone encourage students to write about what was relevant to and important in their lives.

During the 1974-75 school year Mistassiniy School was selected to receive six published writers whom would each run a writers workshop with the Junior High classes. Alberta Culture coordinated this event. There were some problems with the workshops concerning the book they planned to publish. Alberta Culture believed that only one book per classroom should be published. We asked the students if they wanted their own book to take home. The students agreed so Alberta Culture published class sets for each of the grades involved in the project.

Giving everyone a copy of the resulting book revealed another problem. I approved all of the selections my students wrote for inclusion in the book. I wanted everyone to be in there so I included examples of all students' writing. Several students complained to me afterwards that they were being teased about what they had written.

One student had described an incident where he had accompanied his father to Slave Lake in the ambulance they owned. On the way they saw a vehicle run into a moose. Someone in this vehicle had shot the moose and it lay on the road. Chances are these people were non-treaty because when they saw the lights of the ambulance and probably thinking that this was the police or the game warden, they got

into the car and took off without turning on the headlights, running smack into the rear end of the moose. The boy called me over as he was writing this to help describe what this scene had looked like. It was "helpfully" suggested: "...and the feathers flew!" That's what he wrote down. The visiting writers loved it and the boy won the class award for the best story because of that line. They stressed this in front of the entire school as they handed out the prizes. For months afterwards he kept hearing "moose feathers, huh" wherever he went. He was not amused.

Another student told me that he was being teased for the briefness of the story he had created. He was quite angry with me for putting his story in the class book. I had intended to honour the fact that he had started writing. I found it more difficult to get him to turn in any work until the teasing subsided.

The stories were written in the classroom with continual sharing of ideas between the students and me. Publishing stories that ultimately embarrassed several students undermined both the rapport I was trying to establish and the sense of mutual trust that I was trying to build. I realized that the students were vulnerable and that I needed to treat each student's work more sensitively.

I believe that the most important benefits to my teaching from these writing workshops was the importance these writers gave to the child's own voice. It

was the first time writing on topics brought forward by the children was validated in my classroom. All that talking and sharing could have a relevant outcome, tied to my learning as well as the students' learning. The comments the authors made about the writing, including one where a girl wrote about the death of her uncle, where the published author stated: "I wish I could write like that", affirmed that my students could write powerfully and evocatively. Leavitt (1994) writes:

"Understanding the ways in which it is possible for lives to unfold helps teachers and thus learners, become conscious of the strengths, the resources, the "rightness" of the learner's cultural milieu." (p. 184)

In becoming more effective teachers we learned that we had to pay attention to the lives and stories of the students we taught. Bringing the importance of the child's own world into the learning situation was the key. We began to balance stories from our life experiences, shared in classroom conversations, with the stories our students offered back. These shared moments offered a different kind of balance, between the person in charge, and a fellow member of the class.

Learning to Understand

The need to understand the values of the community was brought home to me forcefully at a school dance during my second year of teaching.

It was Halloween. Several staff members and I had decided to surprise the students. One of the teachers dressed herself up as a vampire, with white sheet, white makeup, drops of fake blood on her chin and the requisite vampire teeth. Several colleagues borrowed the top portion of the jumping horse, and turned it into an open coffin. Four male

teachers, costumed to appear frightening, would carry the vampire in the coffin into the gymnasium where the dance was being held. The plan was to set her down in the middle of the gym floor where she would slowly rise and "attack" students. These teachers figured the students would be very surprised. Boy, were they right.

My job in this prank was to shut off most of the lights and put on a record of spooky sounds as the coffin and bearers entered the gym. Getting into the spirit of things I took to flashing the lights on and off as fast as I could to create a strobe light effect.

I put on the spooky music, fiddled with the lights and watched what happened. As the coffin and bearers entered the gym the children cleared out of the centre of the gym with what I thought were sounds of mock terror. Then as the "vampire" slowly raised herself out of the coffin which had been set down on the gym floor and slowly stood up; all hell broke loose.

Kids ran in every direction. I got knocked off of the stage where the light switches and record player were, by panicking students who were heading for the stage doors. Unfortunately I got knocked down just as I was turning off the lights. This added even more momentum to

the children's hysteria. A teacher patrolling in the hall by the gym door saw students crawling between other students' legs to escape by the gym doors. I scrambled back onto the stage and found the light switch and turned on every light in the gym. Several girls were attacking the "vampire" until she fled from the gym to the staff room. The four "pall-bearers" were also being attacked and could not come to her rescue.

It took a good half hour to calm the students down. When the dance resumed a student took over playing the music and we met in the staff room to figure out what had happened. The "vampire" got out of costume and returned to be seen at the dance. Fortunately she understood that the children had not attacked her, but the apparition she represented.

A teacher who had been in the community for a number of years and who had not been party to the prank gently suggested that we had created the hysteria initially because we might have tripped over aspects of the context that the children lived in within the community. There had been a death in the community recently. No doubt some of the students had gone to the wake, staying up all night catnapping when too tired, paying their respects to their deceased, waiting with the family for

the funeral. These wakes generally last two to three nights. The body of the deceased is usually placed in an open coffin in the living room. Seeing a body rise out of a coffin might have been too much like nightmare to many students and the group panic ensued.

Lauralyn Houle (1994), who at the time was Supervisor of Guidance and Counselling in Northland SD 61, wrote that:

"Young Native people have already had a lot of life experiences that may not seem normal for their ages. An example of this is death. It was found in a recent survey of 30 students aged twelve to eighteen in one of our communities that they had already experienced 235 deaths in their lives. The grief these thirty young people have had to deal with is incredible". (p. 3)

We discussed that dance in my classroom for some time afterwards. The students noted dryly that we certainly had surprised them. The participating staff members and I had learned that we needed to check in with the students and community before playing a prank, even one that we might have considered harmless.

We need to be aware of what is going on in the lives of our students, so that we can better understand their responses, especially when things go wrong. The fiasco at this Halloween Dance was our fault, not the students'. Taking responsibility for what happened that night allowed the dance to continue without further incident. The teachers and students came closer together as we discussed what had gone wrong.

Journeys that Transcend the Classroom Setting

In perhaps the most powerful moments of learning as teachers, there are opportunities to interact with students that will lead to levels of sharing and understanding that transcend the traditional classroom. We can be invited occasionally to journey with students in their crises and struggles.

These moments occur by invitation only from the student, his or her parents and the community. In the following stories provided from contributing teachers, permission to get involved was given by the students themselves, their families and the community at large. In neither case did the teacher cross professional boundaries or presume a special relationship with the student. The stories describe a paradigm shift in the way each teacher thought, about human capacity, about courage, about hope. In one instance community members identified the teacher as someone who might assist a student in difficulty. Permission to continue assisting this student came from that student's mother and from him. In the other instance a hospital visit opened up an opportunity for teacher and student to engage in an ongoing dialogue as the student came to terms with his illness. Permission to continue came from that student as well as his family.

These teachers were given the opportunity to see the resilience, courage and capacity of the students. The teachers found themselves on journeys that changed their understanding, humbled them and allowed them glimpses of real courage and integrity.

One contributing teacher writes:

I have met many interesting kids. My friend was just one such kid.

He was an angelic looking ball of trouble, with rich curly black hair and eyes that sparkled with pure mischief. He had a way of making everyone like him. He was a quick wit, happy-go-lucky, like a breath of fresh air.

I knew that he was an early school leaver. I knew that he had been in a serious automobile accident ten years before and was brain injured. He had fought back hard and had done much to overcome the brain injuries.

My friend had his days. Mondays were always an adventure. Sometimes when he came in, the whites of his eyes were yellow. He had a sickly yellow tinge to his skin. He was in trouble and we watched him shrink to skin and bone. He could not pull himself from the path he had chosen to deal with what had happened in his life. His personality changed more. He lacked the lustre he had once had. He began slipping away from us, slowly but surely.

One Saturday night a frantic phone call came from the Pool Hall owner. My friend was acting strangely and the owner liked the boy and knew I did too. He hoped that I could help. I raced down to find that my friend had disappeared, but the other students that were there, 'ratted'

on him. He had been taking Graval, he was drinking, and they said he was acting 'crazy'.

Just across the way from the Pool Hall was the Creek. Under the bridge I found my friend. He was hallucinating, shouting. Some of these other students had come to help find him. They ran back up to the Pool Hall and called 911 for help.

Seeing someone hallucinating on drugs and alcohol is terrifying. There was this beautiful boy, tied down in his hospital bed. His arms were already worn raw from the bindings that tied his hands to the bedrails. His body arched in seizures, his eyes were wild. The nurse asked me to contact his parents.

His mother said she would stop in. Nothing I could do could spare her from the horror she would see. I sat by his side and held his hands so he would not struggle. He was not with us in any way. His mother came, said nothing. She looked at him as if he were a stranger and said, "I have to go to Bingo now!" I was outraged. How could a mother not feel what was happening? Only later, I remembered how some people numb things through the monotony and repetitive dabbing of bingo.

In this instance the teacher has made an assumption about the attitude of the parent towards her child. She has done so in the heat of the moment, without

considering what the parent had already been through with this child. In admitting her anger towards the mother, the teacher sets the scene for the moment when she is forced to make a shift in paradigm when she finally understands the mother's perspective.

There was nothing the medical team could do to immediately counteract the drugs. They had to just push fluids into the boy and let them work their way through his system.

The wait was long before he began coming around to a few moments of reality. His feet had scraped the heels raw from the constant digging and scrubbing. They now not only tied his arms and legs, they tied his feet as well. He broke the bindings several times in his struggle and strength. I continued to caress his face, and talk to him.

I reminded him of our trips to...the waterfalls...Old Chief Mountain...the buffalo jump we found...and the formal restaurants we went to for a taste of the outside culture. I told him about the times we laughed at the things that happened in class. I told him he would have to get better because we had a contest yet to complete. I told him that he was one of my heroes.

Here was a boy who deflected any show of care with humour...now in some horrible place in his mind. When he surfaced to some few

moments of reality, his wounded eyes pierced me with his panic. He screamed for me to hold him so he would not sink back into that place. He gripped my hand hard. Every muscle in my body was sore from him pulling at me. He begged me to hold him but I could not because when he slipped back into the convulsions, he flailed wildly and his grip was dangerous.

All through that night, we struggled together. When he revived a little he screamed my name for me to hold him.

Eighteen hours later I saw a look of calm returning to his face. We would have to wait until he woke completely to know how much damage was done. His mother never called or came, but I phoned her to let her know when there were changes. She said she could not come. She said she could not watch him die again. She said she did this once when he was in the accident and could not do it again. I did not want to understand or forgive her, but realized she had had enough to bear in her life with my friend. She cried and asked me to take care of "our" boy. At that moment I could not have loved her more.

The teacher is finally aware of this parent's past history with her son and how this shaped her response to this latest crisis. The teacher was forced to change her feelings towards the parent when she finally understood the parent's perspective.

And in doing so this teacher had to change her own understanding of and attitude towards this parent.

Later he began talking. He wept as he talked of the accident in his childhood. He held my hand softly then, but held it firmly, as he began to talk about the things that led him to where he was today. Then he said, "You are tired and I am okay, now." And, I knew he would be, eventually.

He was released on Thursday morning and was in class by afternoon. He could not stay long. He was still too ill. Monday, my friend walked in about coffee break time. He had on some reflecting mirror sunglasses. I teased him about the sunglasses to get in under the barrier they placed between us. He was hiding something and I was determined to get him to 'fess up'. I went over to his desk, leaned down, and touched the frame to start to move them gently off as I said, "Let me see your eyes so I know you are okay." I paused for I wanted him to take them off. He was silent. Suddenly, tears streamed down below the frames. "Do you know why I am wearing these glasses, for real," he asked?

"No!" I said.

"Because I do not want you to know how much I care!"

My friend went on with his life. He healed. And we have a well-known secret. He cared because I cared! We helped each other know service to Creator.

In the New Testament Paul of Tarsus speaks to the heart of teaching when he writes:

“ And now I will show the most excellent way: If I had the gift of being able to speak in other languages without learning them, and could speak in every language there is in all of heaven and earth, but didn't love others, I would only be making noise. If I had the gift of prophecy and knew all about what is going to happen in the future, knew everything about EVERYTHING, but didn't love others, what good would it do? Even if I had the gift of faith so that I could speak to a mountain and make it move, I would still be worth nothing at all without love. If I gave everything I have to poor people, and if I were burned alive for preaching the Gospel but didn't love others, it would be of no value whatever.”(1 Corinthians 13: 1–3)

In this case caring was a lesson learned by both the teacher and the student.

A contributing teacher describes an event most teachers face at least once in their careers: the loss of a student who is close to our hearts. But the story is also about what this teacher learned, about courage and resilience from a student who could have abandoned hope in a community in which this teacher once felt there was no hope.

A spirit of beauty: a young man all of seventeen years and five days who was given a death sentence. It was April Fools' Day 2002. The news of his disease spread like wild fire in our small community not only

with students driving up to tell me of his illness but phone calls informing me of the news, "Leukemia- not the good kind". What does one do with that information? It was only a few weeks ago that I stopped the young man in the hall voicing my concern about his increased absenteeism. His response, "Don't worry, you know you love me anyway and I will graduate. It just may take longer". With his bright smile and cheery eyes I could only agree with those words.

This student has always been a 'man' of his word. Since I met him in 7th grade he ALWAYS did what he said he was going to do. And if for whatever reason he forgot a phone call would come later in the evening "I forgot my books at school but I promise to stay after school tomorrow to do the work you asked of me". He signed contracts that promised him pizza upon completion. He would break-dance when I was out of the room. He played jokes and pranks with apologies hidden under half-snickers. He encouraged others. His favourite saying "Everyone needs a chance to shine". He gave of himself. He was one of those kids you'd never forget. He planned to graduate from Grade 12 in a yellow tuxedo. He knew his goals and the path that he wanted his life to take.

As I drove to visit him at the hospital in Edmonton that snow covered April day I was deeply upset by the sight of an owl on the side of the road. In Aboriginal culture the sign of an owl means death. This young man did not deserve this fate, but, of all the students I knew, he was the only one that would be able to see the silver lining in his present situation. Throughout his short illness the gloom of the owl was ever present. I spotted it three times on the drives to Edmonton. It was a difficult image to shake. But upon seeing him, so thin and sickly in his hospital bed the owl disappeared to be replaced by an Eagle—a vision of strength, power, and closeness to the Spirit: his symbol of hope. After each visit it was not the owl that I would see but the beautiful eagle in all its elegance and splendour.

He lost his battle to leukemia three months later. Yet, on my final visit with this young man, his words of optimism and encouragement and hope will forever remain in my heart. He said, "Family is the most important thing in life. Cherish the small things and act as each new day is a new beginning."

Throughout the course of his illness it was apparent that his short-term goals had changed although his hope remained firm and

strong. When his Grade 12 classmates graduated, they arrived to a gymnasium enveloped in yellow and an honorary diploma presentation to this young man's family. He was a young man who was true to his word.

This teacher learned much during this shared journey, but central to this story is the repudiation of her initial belief that the community was without hope. For her finding hope where she had anticipated that none existed was a profound change in her understanding of the community and the students she taught. This teacher goes on to write:

There have been an exhaustive number of events over the last twelve years that I could draw upon in a heartbeat that would easily reflect the beauty, hope, and love that the community and people have given me. But, perhaps it is this story that is the most profound. The one narrative that has become part of my story and the one upon which I reflect often. It is my testimony that nowhere else would I be granted such a privilege in learning so much from those around me as I did in this community.

These stories contain the most remarkable and often least discussed part of teaching: the mutual sense of belonging for both teacher and student in the most critical challenges of the students' young lives. It is hard to explain why a teacher and student will connect in ways that transcend the classroom setting, but it happens. When teachers and students believe in and trust each other, nothing is impossible.

The most extraordinary gifts we can be given are these shared glimpses of the courage and strength of the students we teach.

Richard Benedict (1992) states:

“So many schools . . . so many teachers . . . so much known . . . so much eloquence in telling it. But, if it is done without love, it does no good. With love, even the icebergs that hold captive our hopes, dreams, and ambitions can begin to thaw, allowing us the freedom we all need to begin to grow.”(Epilogue)

Retraining the University Trained Teacher

Let us return to and answer the questions that drove this project.

1. If a teacher chooses to work in a community he or she is not familiar with, how may this teacher become more effective, be made more welcomed, and be more successful?

One answer is to approach the students respectfully, as a fellow learner, providing relevant instruction and listening carefully for feedback from each student. We have a unique opportunity to be learners in our classrooms as we infuse Aboriginal ideas, customs and culture into the curriculum. The experts are often the students we teach.

2. What stories can be shared that would explain the moments of understanding that take place between the teachers and the students they teach?

The stories come from the shared moments we have in the lives of our students, moments where we gain better insight into the students and the lives they lead. We need to reflect on moments where things begin to change in our classrooms, for better or worse, and begin to respond through the lessons we learn from our students.

And in this reflection we need to consider how we contributed to these changes, through our planning, through our classroom management, and through our own attitudes and emotional states. We need to take responsibility for our errors in judgement and make the necessary changes.

3. How can a teacher become a learner in his or her classroom and community?

To be a learner in the classroom a teacher needs to be a non-judgmental listener. By paying close attention to what our students have to say, we can make better connections between the learning outcomes required in the curriculum and the learning required by the students we teach.

As teachers we need to talk about our teaching with trusted colleagues with the goal of assisting one another improve. We need to pay attention to the feedback we are getting from our students, parents and the community.

In my own case as a result of the challenges and mistakes, the moments of good teaching and the hours of chaos, something was forged between the students and me that allowed us to survive each other and learn together. As I taught the students, they were teaching me. I provided curriculum. They provided context. I demanded obedience. They insisted on respect. When I began to listen, they began to respond, telling me about their community, their values and their fierce determination. When I ran roughshod over their values, they let me know clearly, that I had overstepped. They gave me permission to enter some aspects of their lives, and as we began to trust one another more, I began to see the richness and wealth of their lives along with glimpses of the pain and suffering they might be experiencing. When I look back on

it, the students I taught really did re-train the university-trained teacher, and I am thankful for it.

Marzano (2003) writes:

“If a teacher has a good relationship with students, then the students more readily accept the rules and procedures and disciplinary actions that follow their violations. Without the foundation of a good relationship, students commonly resist rules and procedures along with the consequent disciplinary actions.” (p. 41)

Retraining the university-trained teacher encompasses the philosophy of teachers as learners in the classroom rather than teachers as the sole providers of knowledge. Teachers learn as they teach, paying attention to the cues the students offer them. Some of this learning will come in the classroom, but a lot can be learned in the halls, on supervision and during extra-curricular activities.

As Lauralynn Houle (1994) writes in the Student Expressions: High School Teacher Resource Guide:

... we need to step into each young person’s world and believe that we are responsible for the teaching of that person. Imagine what it would mean if we took that responsibility to heart, if we could give each young person No matter where young people live, who they are, what race they belong to, how they dress, we should use every teachable moment to help them on their way. (p. 6)

The roads we traveled to the students we taught were unique for each of us. Yet the most important lessons were learned on the journey, not the destination. In traveling these roads together with our students we were given rich and powerful teaching experiences.

As one contributing teacher concludes:

If you come to the North as a learner/teacher, you will be amazed to what depth of learning the soul will be taken. The things you

learn and experience will profoundly affect your teaching. When you come out, if in fact you can tear yourself away, you will notice how you much have grown personally and professionally.

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