

DÄNOJÀ' HWĒDĒK GHÀ HÄW'ON'ĒKTÄN ATR'OHOAY



OUR STORIES ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING

*Culturally Responsive Teaching in
Yukon First Nations Settings*

LETTER FROM TR'ONDĚK HWĚCH'IN CHIEF

How we learn is as important as what we learn. Realizing our children's potential means matching the right teaching style with each student. This publication was designed to help with that task by introducing educators to our community, our aspirations and ourselves.

On behalf of all Tr'ondĕk Hwĕch'in, mǎhsi cho to everyone who played a role in producing this valuable resource. Your efforts bring us closer to increased success rates for First Nations students and a broader understanding and appreciation for unique learning styles.

Eddie Taylor

Chief, Tr'ondĕk Hwĕch'in

March 2014



A debt of gratitude is owed to the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Elders and citizens who participated in this publication. Their input, guidance, and wisdom guaranteed the success of this project.

Thanks also to the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Government, especially TH Education staff, who saw the value of conducting this research. The end result might advance academic understanding of this subject, but it is also a worthwhile community resource that will meet our desired goal of better education outcomes for our children.

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April 2014

This document has been made possible through a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). The grant is entitled "Culturally Responsive Teaching in Yukon First Nations Settings." The contents of this document are abbreviated comments made by community members of Dawson City, Yukon, most being citizens of Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation. The researchers undertaking this project acknowledge the involvement of the First Nation and other communities in this project. Such open involvement affirms the community's desire to move towards an education in the community that is of benefit to all.

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28 February 2014

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INTRODUCTION

The What, Why and How of Education

There are big questions that need to be asked of us as teachers. These questions and, more importantly, the answers to these questions are significant because they influence our practice as teachers. Without thinking about them, our teaching never changes. For many of us, these questions are rarely considered. Our own experiences as learners in formal education include observations of the practices of teachers that we are likely to adopt and follow without questioning. Our teaching is often simply a product of our school experience. As such, we carry out our work without considering deeply that the core of our belief system about students and teaching determines our behaviour throughout our teaching day and, ultimately, our teaching career.

As teachers, we are likely to think most about what we are teaching—that is, the content of our teaching. Questions that we ask ourselves are similar to those that follow. What is it that we believe is important for students to learn? In the lesson today, what do I want my students to learn or master? What are the big ideas and habits of mind we are learning? What do I assess students on to determine if they have learned? What do I see as essential learning? It is probable that what we emphasize as important learning for our students is dictated by the curriculum guidelines that are prescribed by the territorial government. If we move from one part of Canada to another, the content of what we teach is likely to change little. The concepts are basically the same. For example, what is to be learned in a classroom in Orillia, Ontario, is often not significantly different from what is taught in a classroom in Ross River, Yukon.

Although we spend ample time thinking about what we teach, as teachers we rarely stop to think about why we are teaching what we are teaching. That is, what do we consider to be the purpose of education and, thus, our role as a teacher? What are society's reasons for ensuring a Kindergarten—Grade 12 education for all? The focus of why we teach is likely to be a reflection of our experience as students and what we assume to be the reason for schools and education in general. It is possible that many of us in our current role as teachers have never taken time to determine what we identify as the real purpose and

intention of education. Is it only about learning facts and developing skills so students can experience success at the next grade level and ultimately post-secondary schooling? Do we see our role as contributing to the development of individuals who can contribute economically to our community and society? Is there something more than economic contributions that we want students to learn so they can be successful in future careers? Is career education the aim of elementary and secondary school? Is there a goal greater than career development that we identify as essential to our role as teachers? Are our beliefs about education the same for every child? Do we perceive some students as benefiting from education more than others?

Further, we rarely think about how we are teaching. Why do we teach the way we do? How do I explain things? How do I organize my classroom to optimize learning? How do I communicate to students? How do I question students and get students to communicate their learning? Possibly our teacher education experience at university or the experiences we have had as teachers over the years has brought adjustments to our teaching, but it is still likely grounded in a belief about what good teaching is. It is likely our teaching practice has not changed significantly during our years as a teacher. We have a sense of what works best and use these strategies without appraisal or doubt.

What, why and how we teach is rarely questioned. As professionals, our actions are seldom challenged—either by our own evaluation or the evaluation of others. We go about doing the best job we can. We make adjustments to improve our effectiveness as we see a need. Our responses are based upon our considerations of what is best.

This document seeks to add an additional voice to considerations of what effective teaching is. It focuses on bringing a voice that, for too long a period of time, has been missing from the discussion. That voice is from the community members of a local First Nation. As teacher professionals, we make the decisions about what is best. But, what does effective teaching look like when it responds to the voices of community members?

“Culture-based education” is identified by Yukon Territory Government (YTG) and its Education Act as one of the foundational principles for school development in the Yukon. YTG policy requires that the activities of organizations in Yukon communities create, preserve, promote and enhance their

culture, including arts, heritage and language. This policy is based upon the principle that culture, in all its expression, provides a foundation for learning and growth, and that YTG should support individuals, organizations and communities to promote, preserve and enhance their culture (YTG, 2005). The educational experiences should be reflected not only in the management and operation processes of the school, but also in the curricula and programs implemented and the pedagogies used in classrooms.

The purpose of this document is to make explicit, through the voices of community members, their experiences with learning, both through formal learning at school and informal learning at home, in an effort to assist us, as teachers, to reconsider what, why and how we teach. We suggest that you use these narratives as a foundation for your reflection and discussion with your colleagues. As a third year teacher suggests:

I know I am a better person because of this experience. You come to a school like this to teach and you want the experience to be different, especially in the classroom. Somewhere along the way I realized that the real [positive] experience here was to be gained by not living my same life here, but instead responding to the opportunities [this school community] offered. It was the same in my classroom. I wanted it to be different, but I had to be the one to respond. I knew the education would be different. It had to be. I wanted it to be more reflective of this school community and the students and their lives. I have made some progress. I challenge myself to, but it needs to be the focus of [the schools' teachers] conversations. How can we respond better to what our students are telling us about their schooling and learning? I know we don't ask that enough. If we did, we would be making much more progress.

SOME INITIAL THOUGHTS

Begin by asking yourself the following questions related to your classroom, teaching and learning. Write down your responses to the questions asked.

*What are the priorities in my classroom?
What are the most important messages
I am communicating to my students
and their parents about learning and
schooling?*

*What are the patterns of communication
when teaching and learning that are
occurring between teacher and students
and among students in my classroom? If
the conversations were observed, what is
the pattern observed?*

*When I am teaching, how do I teach?
What strategies do I most commonly use
to assist students in learning? What do I
believe causes learning?*

*What do I emphasize as the content to be
learned? What is important to be learned?
What is the source of this content? Whose
voice does it represent? Who and what
does it value?*

*What are my beliefs about my students?
How do I see myself in comparison to
them? Do I see a classroom of students or
students as individuals? Do they all have
the same potential?*

*What do my classroom organization and
management say about how we learn and
what is important in learning?*

*What are the patterns of relationship in
my classroom based upon what I believe
my role is as a teacher? What do my
relationships with students say about
how I believe learning occurs and how I
perceive them as learners?*

*In what ways is my classroom
representative of the community in which
the school exists? How is it different from
any other classroom in Canada? What
makes it different? Should it be different?*

CASE NARRATIVE ONE

In this narrative, an elder looks at the education brought to his community.

For many years we have watched this thing you call “education” occur in our town. I know there is much that can occur in the school that is good, but it does not make a person wise. In our culture there is nothing more important than the learning that makes a person wise. The main thing the southern culture wants from school is “head knowledge.” That is what it has always emphasized. I do not know why. It intrigues me. Your focus is mainly on the gaining of a kind of knowledge that seems to have little value in understanding the world and to make us wise people. I see it has some value, but maybe this value is only to make someone seem better than another. I think that schools can become focused on this. I think this is why many of us in the past questioned the very purpose of schools. It seems to focus on the individual and their future, not the



future of the community.

Our community would say that is only a small part of what schools should be about—it is about “making a human being” that can contribute to our society. There is much to learn from our culture, not only our knowledge of the natural world, but, maybe more importantly, how one should live in this world. It is most important this learning about how to live in the world. This is not seen as important. Without this, things will not go well, both for the person and the world as a whole. In our culture, the wise person has qualities like being innovative and resourceful for the benefit of others or a willingness to persevere and not give up easily or contribute to the welfare of the group. All of these have not had much value in school, but now I hear it is becoming that way. This must happen.

I notice now, we are being asked our stories more these days, just like you are asking now. People from the South seek our understanding, not just about the natural world but how we can make the future better, even in the schools. It is like this book knowledge has not been the only important thing because it does not have answers for the things that are really important. I know we all wonder about the future—all over the world. It is like the people of this Earth are young, but we are also very, very old but lacking the wisdom we need that older people usually have.

I think about what school would look like if we had worked together from the beginning to make the learning better for our younger ones. I look to the future in believing it will be more on our terms, where both worlds can be combined. It will be not just about knowledge, but how to behave and be wise, not just knowing. This is what is happening now, but we have a long way to go.

CASE NARRATIVE TWO

In this narrative, an elder presents a picture of what is important in life and he uses this to think about education.

When the Gold Rush occurred, and for many years after, logs and wood were very important. Because there was not much timber in this area, the logs needed to be brought from far upriver, mainly from the Stewart River area. The logs used to be put together into huge rafts that were then navigated down the river. [They could be larger than five school gymnasiums put together.] The raft was guided by someone who knew the river. He would use a “tato,” a long 65-foot log paddle, as a rudder to keep the log raft in the current. Without the tato, the log raft would crash up against the canyon walls. He had to be a good navigator. The navigator did not work alone. Others helped him and assisted him in identifying the hazards so to keep him in the right channel.

Everyone in their life needs a tato, a guide that can help them move through life without being in trouble. Without a tato, a guide in our life, we are likely to lose our way.

This tato might be our language, our culture, our faith, our sense of who we are—what makes us feel important and worthwhile. It is what is in us. We need to know who we are and believe in ourselves. Without this, things will not go well. We must find this, and then we will travel well.

Encouraging each other is important. Everyone has a role to play. Parents and teachers, all members of the community, we all help in guiding a person.

It is the same in life, even at school. We have to be helped to find our way and feel good about ourselves and see each other as important. Everyone can contribute. Everyone has value.

CASE NARRATIVE THREE

In this narrative, an elder looks at the education he has experienced.

When I was three year old I had tuberculosis. There was screening done for TB all across Canada for Indians and Eskimos, and I had it. I do not remember this, but my older sisters and brothers said one day I was just taken away from the Yukon to the treatment centre in Alberta. I stayed there for two years, and then when I was better was told I could go home. I could barely remember home.



I remember going “home,” but instead of going to my home, I remember walking into another big building that was like a hospital. It was dark when I arrived, and I recall going into a room with many, many beds. In the morning I remember seeing all of these kids in the dormitory, and one of them was my brother. I was so excited. I came to realize I wasn’t home but at Choutla, the Carcross Indian Residential School. There were kids from all over the Yukon.

It was a very isolated place. It is filled with

bad memories for me. We could not speak our language, and it was very, very strict. I was abused many, many times, usually by those who were God's servants. That is something very hard for me today. I could not learn. Some children ran away and never made it to their home. I could not learn. There were some people that tried to make things better.



I had eight brothers and sisters, and they were all taken away and sent to Carcross. I never was allowed to talk to my sisters. My language was pretty well gone. In the summer we stayed at Carcross. We were told our parents were drinking and that our home was unfit for us to return. I resented my parents for this, but now I understand.

There were some things we learned there that were valuable, like trying to read. But mostly I just cut wood and cleaned, things I could have done at home. There was little I learned that was of value. What I did learn was more about how my culture was not important and I was not of value.

I finally went home after twelve years. It was foreign.

I was angry all the time. Bitter. My years after that were not good. I found it hard to learn and get a good job. It took a long time, but now I have become something I am proud of.

I look now and see that they tried to take away everything I was. I was made to despise who I was. But today, what makes me proud is being Native. I want that for my children as well. Being proud of who you are, not to be shameful.

CASE NARRATIVE FOUR

In this narrative, a community member looks at education in her community today.

Really education hasn't changed much. My parents had no say in whether we went to Carcross or not. They had no choice, and the decisions were made for them. The government decided what was best, and we had to accept that. Today it is not much different. We really have no say in what is being learned. We send our children to school and want them to get a good education, but we don't have any say in what that education will be. As a parent, you want your children to be successful, and I want to believe they can be. But we don't have much say in what they will learn. It is all decided for us. We put that trust in teachers and the school to do their very best with our children. We want them to do well, not just in the school learning but to be good people.



CASE NARRATIVE FIVE

In this narrative, a community member considers the educational opportunities available in her community today.

For young people I think there's so much out there nowadays. There's money for education. There's no reason why they can't finish school and pursue whatever they want to do. Maybe there is a young girl here, maybe she wants to be a teacher some day. There's help for her. She can do it, if she has the help and encouragement.

You'd be worried if you had a son or daughter that had problems, in and out of jail, or alcohol and drug problems, and you have to leave this world and leave them behind. Parents want to see something good for their children, and there's so much more opportunity today than there was twenty years ago, if they just take advantage of it. I see there are still a lot of people here that could benefit from this. Just having confidence they can do it. There's so much they could do, so much available.

I think everyone wants to succeed. Everyone has an idea of what they might want to do. But young people, they need a lot of support. They need encouragement that somebody is behind them. That they are believed in. Then they can go ahead and learn. But, they must work towards these goals. You're setting your children up so that when you leave this world you know they're okay. You don't have to worry about them. We have a real responsibility to be that support and encouragement.

We are not here working for ourselves. Especially as adults, we have to live beyond ourselves. What we are here for is working for the future generation and our grandchildren, so when they come and stay everything should be set up for them. This is what we're working towards, I hope. And we have to work together. We can't be fighting. We can't be divided. We can't have bitter feelings. We're working towards something good, I hope. People sometimes forget this. They get too involved and let issues get in the way of the big picture. You've got to focus on what we are setting up for the future generation.

CASE NARRATIVE SIX

In this narrative, an elder questions whether the school is serving First Nations students' needs.

If kids come out without math or spelling, then that's the school's problem really. They're not teaching kids the proper way to do stuff. And it makes more government spending if the students have to go back again and do math or English after they've graduated. The government is wasting money twice: in school and after school. I talked to this one guy. He says, "It's funny, making these kids come along, always set up for failure." They don't care if they fail or pass.

I think what is missing in schooling is patience. You've got to have patience with First Nations learners. They don't have a learning disability. You just need patience when teaching them. Giving them time to learn and have success. Lots of time, a bit of learning at a time. If it's too rushed, they will feel defeated. There has to be a feeling of success.

And when you talk to the kids to correct them, you shouldn't do it in the classroom. You should take them aside and sit down and talk to them in their own spaces. They are good kids, just needing advice along the way.

I think these kids should learn more of their own history, like their heritage and the gold miners. This is helping students to see the strengths of their culture. But do teachers know the strengths of our culture and the story of our



culture? We know the language is not strong, but what priority do we place on teaching First Nations language and culture? Helping them to see strengths is really important.

CASE NARRATIVE SEVEN

In this narrative, a First Nation teacher considers the impact of marginalizing students into specialty First Nations' Studies classrooms.

When I worked at the school as a teacher, there were certain students I felt were being marginalized. Do they have to be marginalized just because of their learning? It is like schooling favours only some students. Does it really invest in all students the same? I was teaching a First Nations year 11 and 12 class, and they were marginalized

in their First Nation Studies course because it wasn't meeting the graduation requirements for social studies. It was treated at a different level, similar to how you have different math, that if you take this lower level math it wouldn't necessarily meet the requirements of graduation. And if it would meet the requirements of graduation, it wouldn't necessarily meet the requirements to be able to apply to post-secondary education.

I felt these students were pushed off and



encouraged to take this First Nations course because they wouldn't be able to succeed in a regular Social Studies class. Sure, there weren't strong reading and writing skills there, but you had to look at different methods on how to accommodate those styles. For instance, when we were reading from books, we wouldn't look at the book because the book was an intimidating factor. We would print it out and I would remove some words and we would fill in the blanks as we were reading through. Some of the students did fine in some of the exams. There were a couple of students that didn't pass, but the majority of the class did pretty well.

Yet students often feel they have no ability to move on to post-secondary education because they have to do a lot of upgrading, and that tends to bring down their confidence and their self-esteem. Some students persevere, but there's very few students I see around the community who I taught in high school that have moved on to post-secondary education. The upgrading is a barrier because they feel they have no confidence.

Having the confidence in yourself to be able to do well at school is an important factor. I think of when I was going through school, in Grade 3 or 4, I did really well. I was really engaged. But those things changed as I started going into older grades. I don't know if it was because of school or things that happened in my personal life, but I became less interested. I wasn't doing as well, and it was a turning point in how I felt about school and the confidence that I had in my abilities as a student. I think even if we are not good at something, but have an interest in trying it, it is important to support this as well. There's a lot of things that I wanted to try, but didn't. I was apprehensive about trying it because I didn't think I was very good, so I wouldn't even give it a try in all those years of schooling.

And there are still some students that are a little older now who I see at college or at other places, who still are trying to work through that. It's a totally different learning for them. Some of them are doing math from a Grade 9 or 10 level, and they're at college and they've been out of high school for four or five years and they're starting it, but many won't finish the course. They'll drop it, and they'll try it again and they'll do it again and they'll drop it. It takes them a while to overcome that. They may have done really well, but I think their confidence level tends to drop. Having that confidence is so important.

CASE NARRATIVE EIGHT

In this narrative, a community member considers the problem of attendance for First Nations students.

There were some kids that struggled with the structure of it all, being there everyday and having to be there on time. But if they're not there, then they're missing a whole lesson. I wonder what percentage are they missing by staying at home three mornings a week? For the exams, they may only know 40 per cent, and how do you pass with 50 per cent if you only know 40? It's so lax. They're hardly ever there. When we were growing up, government people would step in and cut your family allowance off. There was an incentive to make sure your kids went to school. There is no incentive now. There's nothing. It doesn't matter. We were always told growing up that we should have an education at least to Grade 12 if you wanted to be something.





The First Nations community wants them to get there, but they're not encouraging them along the way. I think it is because of certain circumstances that they're not pushed. Like I had one girl say, "I don't need to go to Grade 12, I can be the Chief." I said, "Well, I don't want a Chief that's not educated." You know, that was her mentality, it doesn't matter because all these Chiefs that you've had so far haven't finished Grade 12. That was her perspective. And I said, "Well, I wouldn't vote for you." But that was her saying it, and she was right on.

The kids have the support and encouragement from their parents to do well at school, but because of that past experience of corporal punishment in the Residential School, it makes a difference. I think education is there for everyone, and I think it's the way you perceive it, and how you use it. If you have had a battle in your life with school, it continues on with your children. If the parents weren't pushed to get to school on time, then of course there are some that will say, "You don't have to finish school. You can always get a job." But it does make a difference. There has to be consequences to what you're not learning. In the home they may get everything, because money buys everything, except for helping them on an exam in school. It has to be priority, and you have to work to see that priority met.

CASE NARRATIVE NINE

In this narrative, a schoolteacher notes the problem of attendance in First Nations students.

Absenteeism rates are a huge problem. Huge. Why? Is it because parents don't want their kids to be successful? No. Is it because the school is not welcoming them? I'm hoping not. So why does it continue to happen? We talked about it as a school group, and we said, "We need to explain to parents why it's important for kids to come to school." And it's like, "No, we don't need to explain to them, the community needs to understand why it's important." And they need to learn within themselves.

It's about knowledge. It's about understanding where the other comes from, being able to have someone else's stream in their head. Where does the community's information on schooling come from?



How many parents know that we have curriculum PLOs or ILPs? How many teachers feel that they have to teach to a test in order to be successful? Because otherwise, they're deemed "Oh, the Grade 3 teacher didn't do his or her job." How many people understand that if your kid doesn't go to school, when they come back the next day or three days later, they're lost. It's not like they can just walk in. It's all a lack of knowledge of other people's reality, I think, that causes it. We need to work as a community in schools.

CASE NARRATIVE TEN

In this narrative, a teacher speaks about what he sees as his role.

When I was interviewed for the job, what came through the most was that the principal was communicating that I was working for the community. It was like working for the education council was less important than working for the community. I now understand [after 2 years] what that means. She is committed to seeing these students develop as members of the community. She communicates that they all have potential and they all have capabilities and strengths and that this school has to represent them and their culture. It [school] can't be a foreign world, and although I may be teaching certain subjects, I first need to see them as human beings and they are in the process of being community members.

When we arrived in August, a member of the First Nation was at the airport and met us. He said he was glad we were here to help in the raising of their children—serving the community. Right from the beginning I felt I held a responsibility greater than just being a teacher of subjects.

I think that has had a big impact on me and the way I approach teaching. I work to respect every student as an individual. They may do good in science or mathematics or do really poorly in mathematics or science, but that doesn't change the way I should see them or treat them.

That means when I am out of school and around town, I am respected, but that is because I gave them respect. You work with them more personally because you believe in them and they know that.



CASE NARRATIVE ELEVEN

In this narrative, a teacher looks at her role as a teacher and the experiences that she provides for her students.

Bella [an elder who often comes to the school, classrooms and meetings] always talks about how in the past they let go of their culture in the schools, both in what was learned and how it was learned. This can't happen anymore, she says. It's a message she wants us to have, and the principal encourages that conversation at our meetings. We've all picked that up. I think the school walks that message. We want to. I could see it when I was here first [for a term position]. If I look back at my first year here and compare it to how I teach now (at that time after 2 years), I can see that my students haven't changed, but I have. In fact, the way I teach now is the way I think I saw myself teaching. I want them to know I care about them, but also really care about their learning. I want them to do well and to do it well. I'm not easy on them, but I also show I care. My approaches have changed. I try to give each student care and concern and let the class know we need to work together in our learning and that learning is really important. I'm more focused on them, not just what they do. I think they know that, and that's why it works.

I think it starts on day one. I know the students know me around the school, but that first day and the message I give is important. Students may know you and of you out of the classroom and the school, but until they are in your class they don't really know what you are all about. That can make the start of the year difficult. There have to be routines and expectations, but it's not just on my terms. I focus on them telling me what they think my responsibilities are, and them telling me what their responsibilities are. We write these on a wall poster. We always return to these. We try to live by these. They know what I should be like as a teacher. Our list is pretty detailed, and it's about expectations. [She talks about how she isn't supposed to take her mood out on students—it's on the list!] I have to be really true to myself. I know they'd figure that out pretty quickly if I didn't.

A big part is realizing that each student has something to contribute. Without expecting it, you'll be doing something and then, suddenly, they [referring to a quiet student or students] would have something to say and you would just sit and listen. I try to get to know each of them really well. I would say my First Nations students, overall, are very cautious learners. Many of my students are. They are cautious about me, school, and their learning. I really work hard at that. It largely requires me to give attention to students. Really just being with them and encouraging them along. Providing them with the opportunity to show me how they are doing and just being there and making suggestion along the way. I don't invade their space. I just try to give them space to respond. A lot of our time is on essential skills: reading, speaking, commu-



nunicating, expressing. It requires opportunity for them. You can't do it for them, but they must have some initial success and persevere. We worry about students that are too depending on us, but that can't change overnight. Once they see more success in themselves, they are willing to do more on their own. It's like blooming. If we feed them encouragement through their little successes it gets better.

Lots of effort is placed on what might be of interest to them and identifying what opportunities to learn can come from those areas. One thing that's working now, especially with my Aboriginal students, is a unit on early history in this area. It's really an integrated unit focusing on change as a result of the [Klondike Gold Rush] and how that

impacted local [Aboriginal] people. The students are most fascinated by the people stories. We actually have few stories, but we have lots of [photographs] and these images create conversations and we write and illustrate stories based upon what we see and read in the history. The stories of new people coming to the goldfields, the hardships they all faced and the impact this had on the First Nations

here and throughout the territory. Bella came in to talk to them about her parents' experiences and how they were impacted by the Gold Rush—good and bad. Her father had a part to play in the rush, but you don't hear those stories. These lead into further questions, and the students can relate to it. We look at the story-books and look at their accuracy. They take pride in their completed work, trying to think of



what to say about people in a personal and accurate way. In Language Arts we look at forms of communication, and this context has allowed us to read and express our ideas in many, many ways. I model formal writing for them, or we work together on a formal piece first and then they work in small groups. We use illustrations and images of people as prompts for conversational writing. They want to do a dramatic presentation about life here for spring concert. We could set up a table at the community centre showing our written stories of that time period. They are personal. I know the learning is significant.

CASE NARRATIVE TWELVE

In this narrative, a former schoolteacher questions the rightfulness of imposing strict English language teaching on First Nation learners.

When I watch the TV and see the reservations and so on, I see how there is still so much prejudice against First Nations. But when you're immersed in First Nation culture, and you're the odd guy out for a change, then you realize you have no right to be forcing on them this perfect English language pattern with articles and nouns and verbs and adjectives and so on. Their words are expressive in their own way because they say so much with so little. We talk too much. In fact they'll tell you, "You talk too much."

But I also find it more and more difficult when First Nations say, "We want to go back to old nature." We can't go back. You have one foot in your culture and one foot in white man society. This is why they're struggling here to teach First Nation language. And yet, to be honest, as a teacher, I look at it and think, "Where are they going to use that?" There's no parent at home they can practice that on. I think there are only two elders in town that speak it, so consequently they have to teach. And we're hanging on to them for dear life. To me, I think it should be more culturally related, where it's a cultural program in which the language is attached. But that is what must be decided. Whatever is decided, it must be followed through, and the school will support it, whatever the decision is.

CASE NARRATIVE THIRTEEN

In this narrative, a community member talks about her school experiences.

My First Nation is Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, Dawson City, Yukon. We used to be called the Dawson City Indian Band. I was raised in a home where we were encouraged to get a good education. We had to read on Sunday afternoons. We had to be quiet and read. I liked that. I never thought myself to be Native until I got to school (in 1960s). There were about twenty of us in the class. We all knew each other and played together.



Mrs. Thomas [pseudonym] made me sit in the middle of the class with Walter [pseudonym] and Fred [pseudonym]. It was pretty obvious how the class was structured. Indians sat on one side and white kids on the other and us three in the middle. I had good friends on both sides.

Not long into the year most of the Indian kids didn't come to school. I found out they all had been sent to the Carcross Residential School (about 12 hours away). About eight went. I remember the day they weren't there and wondered why. I asked mom about it, and she said just the full-bloods went. I didn't go because I wasn't a status Indian. I saw some of them again in the

summer, but some did not come home for several years.

I never remember a teacher showing real interest in me. I wasn't raised to ask questions, but I liked to learn. I think because I was quiet and didn't ask questions, teachers thought I didn't care. I knew they gave more regard for the more vocal students who tended to be white. I did care though, and my parents made sure I went to school and did well. I was never made to think I was smart. I learned from this that I have to work very hard to overcome what others might think. It's hard not to think otherwise.

When I was 26, well after finishing university, I got my status back. By that time I referred to myself as First Nations. Our band was no longer called a band and was a First Nation. I call myself Indian or Native but feel better about myself and my people if people refer to me as First Nations rather than Indian or Native. There is something strong in saying "First Nations." That is important because of everything that has happened.



CASE NARRATIVE FOURTEEN

In this narrative, a community member reflects upon her school experiences.

I have memories of my early days at school. I look back at it and know I enjoyed it, and I was a good learner. That changed when I was in about Grade 5 or 6.

I remember days at school where I felt all I was doing was numbers, letters and words, things I was not that used to. If it wasn't from a textbook, it was from a worksheet. And one sheet was followed by another, and one page was followed by another. I recall days where it seemed like me, alone, with just words and numbers, and I was supposed to be able to something with all of these words and numbers. I know that this was the time I did not feel like I was any good at schooling. I say schooling, because I know now that not being very good at schooling was what made me think I was no good at school. I understand that now, but I did not understand that then. I understand now, that success was all about how well I could use the numbers and words. Do this with them, that with them. That was the schooling part that I was no good at. I shouldn't say no good at it because I could do some of it, but not as fluently as some of the others in the class.

We supposedly had good teachers, but I don't think so. In those two or three years what was expected was a very narrow road on what was important for learning. It was a very narrow view on what a good student was. I mean a good learner was. It all seemed to be about working with those numbers and letters. One teacher was very nice, but the focus was all about us working alone with numbers and letters and how well we did with these was used to find out if we were good students.

I know about this time I decided I wasn't a good learner. I fell behind, and at the same time I was deciding I wasn't a good learner, the teachers were coming to the same judgment about me. I don't remember anyone telling me otherwise. I guess that was the beginning of the end. My friends seemed to be the ones also not being good at schooling, and pretty soon I just stopped going to school. Grade 8 or 9, I think.



I figured out when I was in my early 20s that I was very smart, but I just hadn't been good at one part of schooling. Once I got that in my head, it wasn't that difficult to understand that I could have been better at school if schooling asked more of me than to just work with letters and numbers. I used that as a motivation to learn those things that, I believe, are still what determines if young children will be successful at school. As a teacher, it is not easy to shift away from that emphasis. It is important, but it can't be the only measure of success.

CASE NARRATIVE FIFTEEN

In this narrative a First Nation teacher recalls how she learned through doing things with her parents.

When I was growing up, I learned mostly from eldering from my parents. Like when we were little children at fish camp across the river. My dad would go through all the fish he had caught, putting aside the really good ones, and my mother and her sisters would start cutting them. All of us were camped out across the river, all fish cutting. And they would share it out. My dad would cut the good ones, clean them, put them in salt water and take them into town and sell them. And we'd watch him. Then they would give some to us. My dad built us a little tiny cutting table, and they'd give us the small little fish, and we would copy them. It was all fun learning. It wasn't like we had to do it. We wanted to do it, and they let us. We learned by doing. It's like, "show me." I heard that all the time. You'd get frustrated and say, "Show me" and "I can do it."



So now when I teach, I sit with the students on the floor and teach them. We sit in a circle, and I sit in the same type of chairs they do, and if we sit on the floor, I sit on the floor with them. I never stood over them, because when you're little,

the teacher looks powerful up there. I didn't want that. I guess it's just from my experience. I know that from my school experience at Residential School.

So I think it's better to respect the students and not tower over them. Sometimes I'll become verbal in staff meeting if I think a student is being disrespected, with staff talking openly about them, even if I don't know this



particular student. I will get up and say, "When you're done talking about this particular student, let me know and I'll come back in." Just because one particular teacher has her own opinion on this student doesn't necessarily mean that others should prejudge him.

This one particular student always thinks that if he acts up, I'll take him to the office and the office will call his parents. But I said, "No, no no. That is not going

to be what I'm going to be doing with you. You save that for when you go back to your class. I'm right here." And he's okay with it. I say, "Right here, you're here for our [Hän] language, and you can go back to class if that's what you want to do, then you can do it there." You want to communicate your belief in them. They're very intelligent kids, but it's just sometimes their behaviour lets them down. And you know what? I still get to say, "Hello" to them, and they always say "Hello" to me.

CASE NARRATIVE SIXTEEN

In this narrative, a First Nation heritage worker discusses the involvement of elders in education.

We're just finishing up a very large multi-year project that we did, and it involved lots of elders from the community and other communities. These kinds of things don't happen without the support of the people. So you have to be able to give them the time of day because they've contributed to something. It's not just like, "Thanks for your information. Here's your money," or "Here's your gift, and we'll see you later" kind of thing. They remember those moments you have spent time with them, and those are the kind of things that seem to be of value in their lives. And it brings them value because it helps them to build confidence in their ability as an elder, getting to a point where they are getting some recognition.

People for a long time didn't have that role as an elder, so it's taking some time to be able to take on that role. People are still working out what the role of an elder is. It could involve influences from the Residential School period or demographic changes in the community. They probably lived a pretty poor lifestyle before. They could have had issues in their own families that have impacted how they



are today. All those things could be factors. So it's important to acknowledge those things. If you have that background information and are approaching these elders to want them to talk about something, you do have to work towards building a relationship with them, and making them feel comfortable and relaxed. It definitely has to be a relaxed atmosphere.

So when they're here, you try to take the time to spend time with them, even though your day could be busy and you have lots of things to do, and you have deadlines and you're thinking about things at home, or whatever. I think it's important to have that relationship with elders and making the time to spend with them. And I think it makes them feel more comfortable with you. I don't know if it is considered a teaching style or not, but I've had relationships with a lot of elders in the community here and in other communities over a long period of time, and for a lot of them I've just reached a point where we could talk about pretty much anything in any kind of setting. And I do notice that I have different ways that I do approach different elders, whether they're male or female, or if they're ones that have been involved in, say, the land claims process over a long period of time and some who are not. I tend to take those approaches. I think it is because in my work I work with that kind of knowledge on a daily basis; I tend to take up those different approaches.

In the programs that have been developed for First Nation heritage workers, there is that aspect of engaging the students into the process and not worrying so much about the outcome. They are bringing more of those elements in, so the instructors are not so dead set on deadlines because a lot of our students have a challenging time with deadlines. It's important to have structure there, but I think if there is a little bit of flexibility, and that the student has a chance to be able to talk about such things, then it seems that it's working towards meeting the needs of that student.

CASE NARRATIVE SEVENTEEN

In this narrative, a community member reflects upon her different learning experiences within mainstream and First Nations contexts.

When I went to school, basically the teacher stands up at the front of the class and talks about their subject. It was hard because they're up there and you're down here, and you're sitting there and there are lots of other students, so there are lots of distractions. They get their twenty minutes up there, and they start getting you to do your work, and there's so many students that if they make it to you, they make it to you, and if they don't, they don't.

I felt like the teacher was up here like a judge, and you're down here like you're guilty or something. That's kind of how I felt. Or, you know, "You're just a little person. What do you know?" It's like "Well, I'm an empty vessel. You're supposed to give me knowledge." But it was a little bit harder learning that way



because you're being told what to do and not being shown really how to do it. It was easy for me to just go daydreaming because it was my good luck to be in the back of the class.

For me, and I notice for my peers too, it's easier to learn when the elders are telling me stories, and then we get hands-on experience right there. So, for example, with something like "First Fish" we're told stories and then we get to help and learn and there's always someone there to help you. You go through the whole process. Just being told what to do doesn't work for me. I don't have the comprehension. I need to see it. I'm a visual learner. And the assistance and supervision of the elders helps. They work with you and watch with you. If they see you make a mistake they'll come over right away and say, "This is the proper way" or "This works safer this way."

When I got older, I went and did my first year of Indigenous fine arts at a First Nation college on the reservation. Their set-up was not like a regular school. Their teaching manner and style was hands-on, and you're more involved, and it just seemed way easier to learn. I was told that the teaching style goes in a circular pattern, just like our stories, like our life cycle. Everything is always in a circle. So, for example, if an elder is telling you a story about something important and then they bring something else up, they'd spin off on another little story, but they'll always go back to the main story. And we'd be in a talking circle, where the teacher would ask us how we felt, and we'd take our turns expressing. So rather than them saying, "You should see this" or "You should do this" where we don't have a say, we were given the opportunity to contribute. We had a say where we could ask questions so that we could understand the process better.

For me, it seemed to work. We worked together or we'd help each other with other students and stuff like that. It was encouraged. It was very helpful because everyone has an individual view and perspective and opinions. And if I didn't understand something, maybe somebody understood it, and they'd be able to explain it to me in words that I understand. I found that really helpful that we were able to interact that way. That never happened to me before at school. Basically it was, "You stay at your desk, and you don't talk."

CASE NARRATIVE EIGHTEEN

In this narrative, a post-secondary First Nation student discusses how she best learns through a conversational teaching style.

The best way I engage at college is when the teacher addresses the students in a more informal way. Sometimes it seems as if there is pressure on teachers or instructors to have this formal student-teacher relationship, and I get a sense from some of the teachers that they think they have to fit that mold. But this may not necessarily meet the needs of the students in the classroom. One teacher I had for a previous course was very informative, and it seemed like it was a very relaxed and comfortable setting. It was almost like he was conversing with us without actually feeling like he was teaching to us. It felt like he was just sharing information. Like, “Did you know that this happened at this time?” and “What do you think about that?” He would approach it in that manner.

Another teacher I had was very rigid in terms of the style of addressing the class. There was the lecture; then there were questions. I think the questions were meant to be for a period of discussion, but it wasn't as fluid as it would be through a conversation. I tend to have a hard time for my ideas to come up like that, and it's easier for me to have a conversation throughout the lecture. That happens in some cases, but in other cases, I just tend to shut down if all of a sudden the pressure is put on us to have to carry out the discussion, not to be prompted by the instructor getting us all involved in conversation. It's kind of an uncomfortable silence sometimes when the question is asked, and it's like, “No, nobody has any questions?” Well maybe I do, but I'm not going to ask them like that.

One commonality I've seen with First Nation students is that sometimes we want to ask a quick question to get the answer, but when we're not getting the answer, we don't know how to ask the next question. For instance, when we're given an assignment we try to read between the lines on what the teacher is asking of us, and I've noticed that we tend to ask the instructor, “Can you clarify this for us?” But I think all of us have struggled with trying to figure out exactly

what it is that we need answered. We're like, "Oh, okay. This isn't quite answering my question, but I don't know how to ask it any other way because I don't want to ask any more questions." I've run into that a number of times in class when students ask questions. We're not sure how to ask the questions so that we can get a clear enough answer. So there's not a lot of questioning in the classroom.



Another way of helping students engage is to give specific personal examples rather than relating the questions at the general level. That tends to help some students really get a picture of the idea, or to visualize it. For instance, last night I was presenting on a project to my class, and I shared some of my personal experiences about the people I had worked with on the project. The class started asking questions about wanting to come to this or that, or wanting to be part of the project. They asked about specific things I had said generally, and they showed they had learned about things that were not necessarily part of the project, but they were building connections from things that were previously said.

CASE NARRATIVE NINETEEN

In this narrative, a First Nation health worker recalls her post-secondary training.

We studied diabetes from a book. We talked about it, and then it went right out of my head. No clue. That is, until I got out and worked with it myself. Then I began to understand when you do the test, you do the blood work, and then you understand how the body works with insulin and all that. But reading it out of a book didn't work for me. I know we have nurses like that. They're smart, they can quote from books, and they can know everything in the book. But when it comes down to practical work, they're totally lost. I see that's so often true. It's good to know your books, yes. But you've got to have the hands-on patient work.

Nowadays nursing is getting away from the patients. It is getting way more focused on book knowledge. No more hands-on, no more back rubs, which were from the old days. I used to give back rubs before they were banned. "Oh no, you



don't touch your patients nowadays." I could see the gradual change. I don't like that change. I like the hands-on work knowing the people, knowing the person. Now you're just number 35, no more. I'm not just a number; I'm here for your health. And that way too, I know you're in here for diabetes, but then you find out other things that they've had for years. They've had a big sore or something, but nobody ever paid attention. So they come with all kinds of other things that you didn't know about, but once you talk to them they open up and realize that you take an interest.

In our student group, we had tutors if we didn't understand. We had support. I don't know if we would have done well without that. There were times when we were struggling though. I'm not saying it was easy. It's not an easy program because you're just moving so fast and you're covering so much in a short time. You only had a certain length of time to do all this, and it is hard. It took a toll on me, it really did. I lost a lot of weight and got sick, just from trying to do too much. So I think if you can get support from your community that really would make a difference.

If I want to do something and I know I've got the community support, if they're looking to me to finish this, then I really would work hard, so that I can come back and work at the job that the community wanted me to do. But if I just went into something and I didn't like it, and I think that happens a lot. They go into it, they don't have the support, and, well, then they try something else, and end up with a labour job when they could have had electrical training if they would have had the support. But if there were somebody from the community there, then maybe they would have kept going. I can see now where that is important.

It is also because you're always from a smaller community, and this bigger facility is already intimidating to you. But it's okay if there's someone else who is going to connect with you there and might bring support. I think they should have somebody there, just to give them that little boost, to keep going. Otherwise they might say, "I don't understand. I'm going to quit. I don't like it." They don't like it because they can't grasp it, so they give up, and I think that's a big problem today.

CASE NARRATIVE TWENTY

In this narrative, a First Nation teacher questions whether the mainstream education system is appropriate for northern communities.

There's something wrong from yesterday's teaching to today's. It's so stressful for kids. How do they learn? There's too much pressure on them. They're in a semester system, which I guess in a sense is okay, but is it suitable with their lifestyle up here in the North? I don't know. We have other activities.

So I'm not sure about the method they do today. If you're a good student then you're a geek. You can pile lots on here and remember it. Is it something you go through, or is it a part of you? I don't know. But there are other kids that really struggle and barely pass, or don't make it. But still they're going to move them on. I asked the vice-principal once. She said, "They only graduate once from high school."

The First Nations kids used to have their own special classroom downstairs with the primary elementary classes. They should be upstairs. That's what I told them, and I pushed it. I said, "You know what, I don't like this picture." I said, "They shouldn't even be down here. What are you telling these kids? You should find a classroom upstairs." And they finally did.

I had a couple of teachers who would say, "Oh, our principal wouldn't want to touch you with a ten-foot pole." Like they're scared of you. Scared of First Nations. So I went to one of our staff meetings and said to them. "I'm hired as an instructor. I'm employed just like you are here. What's this treating me different?" I said, "I have the same employment status you do. You're not anything special, and no better than I am, as I am no better than you or anything." I said, "I'm employed here just like you are. I have a job to do."

CASE NARRATIVE TWENTY-ONE

In this narrative, a community member observes that school teaching can sometimes be too complex and too abstract for the learning needs of its students.

There was a lot of encouragement within my family about the importance of getting a good education. The encouragement helped me to be determined to learn, but also fostered a confidence in me that I could succeed.

I sometimes was frustrated that the school education was not particularly relevant to my life. A few teachers oriented the material to the local context. The classrooms tended to be very teacher dominated. As I got older, I wanted to see a classroom environment that respected me more as an individual and the fact that I could make decisions on my own and that I could work through things.



Because I did not receive this in my own schooling life, it is now my desire for the classroom environment to change for my children's generation. I want the current work to move towards a classroom environment where students are able to give some voice to their own learning and be able to

communicate openly about their concerns and their interests. This is really important. Young learners cannot be suppressed because if we are going to see young people develop into learners and leaders, it is really important that their

voice today is considered.

For my children, they become frustrated as learners when the directions given out are not very clear. Often the words that are used to communicate an idea are too complex and just need to be simplified. Even the names that are used can unnecessarily complicate the concepts. This means that when students read something, they're often just trying to figure out through the words what it means, rather than being able to work towards solving a problem. I believe it is really important that what is said be crystal clear in terms of what is required.



The social learning environment has to be one that fosters the development of the whole child, not just the development of an academic knowledge. Often what is learned in school is disconnected from the wisdom that is necessary in everyday life. I want the emphasis on kids having the confidence to be able to work things through in their own mind and realize that a lot of the book knowledge if applied to everyday life can be very important.

My desire to support my children to get a good education comes directly from my parents' encouragement for me. Some students are just not engaged or confident in their own learning. For some, every period they go to and every class they do just perpetuates their belief that they're not capable learners. It is important to realize that they are bright and they can learn, but that often the way in which their teaching is approached is overly abstract and not allowing them to learn. A strong sense of identity is an important factor here, for it is this foundation that gives kids the confidence as learners to work successfully through their schooling.

CASE NARRATIVE TWENTY-TWO

In this narrative, a First Nation teacher discusses the importance of consistency, expectations, discipline and attainable goals in the classroom.

I don't know how you could survive without being consistent. The kids want to know the boundaries, and they want to know you're going to stay within those boundaries. For some kids, I'd say the only routine in their life was coming to school because they knew what was going to happen. They loved the routine. They knew that there was nothing unexpected. I'd go in and say, "Well, you guys are going to set the tone for the year. If you do your homework, then we're going to have a great time. If not, you're not going to like me. I have expectations. I'm not your friend; I'm your teacher, and I'm going to get you through Grade 5."

You always want to let them know your expectations. "It doesn't matter if you only do two and you do six, I expect you to do those two," and "No, you're not going to not do them." Expectations. They know it, and they're capable. Yes, help each other, but don't interfere. You have to do your own thing, and the kids understand the expectation. That was my class code: respect yourself, respect others, and you can solve your own problems. You have the ability to solve your own problems. You don't expect them to solve the world's problems, but they can certainly solve their own, and that was my expectation.

Very seldom would the kids come without their homework done. They might at the beginning, but when they found out that they had to spend time after school or at lunch, all of a sudden, their homework was done. What they found is that it's easier to do the homework. That's why I used to get so mad at some of the kids I'd keep after school. "Do you really think that I want to be here for detention?" I said, "The only reason I'm here is because I know you can do it. And I like you. And you're going to do it." It would be far easier for me just to say, "Go home," because I'm not there for myself. And the kids understood that I think.

I don't think I've met a student that hasn't been pleasant. It's always been the circumstances and things around them that have caused problems for

them. And I personally believe that kids get into trouble when there is no discipline in a classroom, because when there is no discipline, the kid that is going to get picked on is going to get picked on. That's when kids will do things that should never happen when the teacher is in the room. I don't think you can teach without discipline, and you can't learn without discipline. You're going to get angry. Of course you're going to get angry because you'll get so frustrated. But if I didn't care for you, I wouldn't be angry.

The students also need to know that you're human. I always told the kids that I'm a horrible speller. I said, "I have a dictionary." I used to get dictionaries for Christmas, and I said, "If you see anything that is spelled wrong on the board, let me know, and I'll go check it." And I always said, "Don't be surprised if I spell something wrong, but as long as you know the first three letters of a word, you can find it in a dictionary." And they would see me doing that. Anybody who underestimates kids are fools. They can be very astute. Of course they are.

And you always want to make sure they can attain the goals set for them. I know with some special spelling, we used to have some parents say, "I want my kid in the regular spelling group," and it was like, "Well, no, I won't do that." Because I know that child is only going to get 20 wrong or 15 wrong or 10 wrong, it doesn't matter how many you give them—they're always going to be wrong. Why not give them 10 where he's got a chance of getting 8 out of 10 right? It doesn't matter; it's still a unit one to the student. I can understand a kid that says, "I'm not going to study anymore for spelling" if you're constantly getting Fs. Why would you? You want something that they can say, "Hey look, have a look at this." They have to be attainable, but they have to work for them. They're not all going to be superstars, of course not. But if they're improving, that's all that counts.

CASE NARRATIVE TWENTY-THREE

In this narrative, a former teacher reflects on her early career teaching experiences in a First Nation community.

Does school work for you or against you? I felt my priority as a teacher was to make students feel welcome and valued. Valuing someone means that they are worth your while. Kids come to school, and they are really cautious in this new environment. I think that it is because of their parents' experiences.



You need to create a welcoming environment for the children and their parents. Tell them about how their child is progressing and show real interest in their development. It can't just be on the academic side of things. I try to emphasize that we are a family and if they stay in this community all their lives, they will be friends for life. They need to be kind to each other, honest with each other and help each other because that is what happens in a community.

CASE NARRATIVE TWENTY-FOUR

In this narrative, a community member recalls her learning experiences at school.

The history I learned at school was all about dates and figures and facts, and it was primarily associated with a very dominated form of a classroom environment.

It changed a lot in Grade 8. This teacher was more informal in his style and tried to personalize the history so it was relevant to students' lives. When he looked at historical events, he made a point of really personalizing them in a form that allowed students not only to understand, but also to relate to them. So it became something that was really quite meaningful for students, and it was something that they could apply to their own lives.

At an early stage, often within a classroom, the learning encouraged was quite narrow and book based. All it required was memorization, without relevance, and though I was really determined, I was quite frustrated by this approach. I wanted to think and talk about the importance of being able to think about these events and being given the opportunity to apply them to my own life so that they actually became real learning experiences.

By looking for something that was more relevant for my own life meant I didn't give up on myself as a learner. As I got older, I wanted to see a classroom environment that respected me more as an individual and the fact that I could make decisions on my own and that I could work through these things and that, with encouragement, I would have insight into situations. Few teachers had this kind of orientation, and generally the schooling I received tended to be very teacher dominated.

CASE NARRATIVE TWENTY-FIVE

In this narrative, a teacher recalls her positive experiences engaging with students beyond the classroom.

I think what is most important is establishing a relationship with every student. There is nothing more important than making connections. They need to know you care. It starts right away, just by the way you respond to students in the hall, even before they are in your class. Each one is an individual. Every kid is special. They really are little people, and you need to treat them that way. I want to make a difference in their lives. You have to have empathy and genuine concern. You work to understand them. In time, they will be adults, and I want to have a positive effect on this. By spending time with each one and developing an understanding of each child, you are in a position to be more compassionate and respond.



As a teacher, I am not here to be a friend, but I have to show I care. At the beginning of the school year, it starts by doing lots of little things that show I want the students to know I am interested in them and that every person is valuable. You give them time to tell the class about themselves and everyone listens. They understand that they have to listen, and listening is probably the main way we show someone respect.

I just give them room to talk about themselves. In those first days, we talk about what a good classroom should look like. What do they think I should be doing? What do they think they should be doing? In this classroom we can all be successful learners. We can all make progress, and we can help each believe in each others' capabilities.



Most importantly, they have to be able to work through challenges and persevere. They have to be problem solvers; that is what life is all about. I don't want them to see that things are too easy. They have to be able to work things through and figure things out. Even when they are working on the small things in the academic subjects, they need to have opportunities to work things through. Just working it through in their own mind is important. That means showing them encouragement and believing in their capabilities and having expectations for them.

Over time you see classrooms that just work so well. But, not just in the academic learning. These are classrooms where students are believed in and are working towards goals that will allow them to be successful throughout life. It comes from within them to become the best they can be. It starts with how they see themselves. Above all, this has to be the priority. Nothing else is as important.

CASE NARRATIVE TWENTY-SIX

In this narrative, a recent graduate recalls his school experiences.

I don't recall that much of what I learned at school had anything to do with my culture as a First Nations citizen. That came more from home. I was encouraged to believe in myself and be proud of my heritage. I think that helped me to be confident. I know my parents encouraged me lots and believed I could do well. I don't think all the cultural stuff should be a part of school, but it should be encouraged. I think what we study should make us all more aware of our heritage. This is a pretty special town we have here, and we should know about the people that are a part of that heritage.

School starts to change when you're in Grades 7, 8 and 9. It starts to get more academic and this is where things start to be divided. Something that always bothered me was how school seemed to not want everyone to do well. Pretty soon you have friends saying they don't want to be there, and it's because they start feeling stupid. They don't feel they belong. They have to go to the [special class] and are on special programs.

When the classes are more informal and the learning is with a partner and you can freely ask and get help, that's when it seems to work. But when you're all alone and it focuses just on tests, that just doesn't work for lots of people. If it's all about the test and that's all that matters, it just doesn't work. I think a lot of it is about what the teacher is like and how the classroom goes. Rules are important, but we are all good kids and we can be trusted. If they just see you as an F student or an A student, that makes the difference. They have to see you all the same no matter what the score. You have to have someone believing in you.

CASE NARRATIVE TWENTY-SEVEN

In this narrative, a teacher reflects upon her community and teaching experiences.

I know I am a better person because of this experience. You come to a school like this to teach, and you want the experience to be different especially in the classroom. Somewhere along the way I realized that the real [positive] experience here was to be gained by not living my same life here, but instead responding to the opportunities [this school community] offered. It was the same in my classroom. I



wanted it to be different, but I had to be the one to respond. I knew the education would be different. It had to be. I wanted it to be more reflective of this school community and the students and their lives. I have made some progress. I challenge myself to, but it needs to be the focus of our [schools' teachers] conversations. How can we respond better to what our students are telling us about their schooling and learning? I know we don't ask that enough. If we did, we would be making much more progress.

CASE NARRATIVE TWENTY-EIGHT

In this narrative, a recent graduate reflects upon her community and teaching experiences.

I don't know if teachers know how much impact they have, good and bad. Like, you can really tell if a teacher believes you can do ok [at school]. I guess because I was always fairly social, teachers saw me as having potential. But [my friend] thinks that because she was really quiet, she wasn't seen as being interested. I would get more attention than her even though we were both interested. I just showed it more. I would be one of those to press and ask, and she would be more quiet; but it didn't mean she didn't care. Then, when I began to get lower grades, it was like this was expected. I don't remember anyone really challenging me [at school] to do better. I still wonder if they just expected I would eventually begin to not do as good [because I was First Nations]. My mom really would chew me up though if I wasn't doing well and tell me to do better. She would be bossy, but, at the same time, encouraging. Then, in Grade 11, I felt [two teachers] really believed in my potential. That was the difference. I think they saw everyone had potential. It didn't matter who you were—you had potential.



CASE NARRATIVE TWENTY-NINE

In this narrative, a parent talks about effective teachers.

I think what is interesting is how I see my children react when they see teachers around town. They'll walk by one teacher and not say anything and then walk by another teacher a few minutes later and say something. I know why this is. I think some teachers see all kids the same—they see them as people first. They respect them for who they are and don't put them in a category. When [my children]

don't like a teacher, I think it's because the teacher doesn't see them as people first. When the teacher puts their subjects (like mathematics or science or English) first, and not the student, the problems begin. I don't know how you can teach a subject if you don't respect each person first, just for who they are. If you see them



for something else first, like if they are no good at your subject, you will have an opinion of them. We shouldn't judge just based on how they deal with the subject.

I know one time [one of my children] was doing really bad at a subject, but he would still be really friendly to the teacher. He would try hard because the teacher had respect for him and believed in him. He always struggled with it, but the teacher believed he could make some progress and he did. He worked with him, making him try and believing in him. He treated him as an individual. He saw him for who he was first.

That is the way it should be.

CASE NARRATIVE THIRTY

In this narrative, students talk about effective teaching practices.

He speaks fast. He is kind of mumbling too. I don't know why he doesn't speak so we can listen and learn. — Wally

It's like he tries to make us not learn. I want to learn, but I can't learn because I can't listen to what he says. — Joel

She shows us what to do rather than just telling us. The words are there, but when the words are with the thing we do, it makes sense. She doesn't go on and on. — Esther

I can follow the books we use in science. I like the pictures, because you can see what it looks like. Then the words she says make sense. — Thomas

We had done it [made the telephone] but didn't know how it worked. She showed the picture of the things moving [vibration] and how the sound travels. We did the acting [role play] and you could see how the sound goes through [the string]. She made us draw this our own way, and I could explain it to another person. — Simon

Sometimes it's hard to understand what we read and hear, but together with the pictures and other things [role plays] we can get it. She wants us to get it. — Joel

She'll show us how to do it. Many times she'll show us. Then we try. She'll help us, or we help each other. It will take time. She makes us do it on our own, but first she will show us how. She can explain, but showing me is better. She can go away then. — Tanner

In math, we mainly work alone or in groups after she has shown us how to do it. I like it when she shows us first and then helps us, as I need help. You can get mad when it doesn't work, or you just want to stop, but she can be there to help. — Wayne

I read a story about my uncle today. I was proud to hear about him, and how he had made [broken flashlight] work [by knowing how the internal mechanism of a circuit operated]. [As a challenge from the teacher] I knew I could make it work too, and we worked [together] to make it work with lots of light. — Tanner

It is like they [the elders whose stories have been written into narratives] want you to be able to do things [that are challenging], and you want to try your best. It feels good to try hard to show them [you are able].

[Our teacher] knows we can all do things [some better than others], and he'll get us to show the others or help each other. [Another student] helps me in math, and I help him with the words. We know we can help each other. He'll get us to help, and we don't just need to use him. — Wayne

We work hard in her class, and we don't expect anything. But she does these things that she doesn't need to do for us. I know she cares. — Elizabeth

We sometimes wonder if she's planning something. She always lets us know when she's proud of us, but then she brought a cake. We felt proud. — Rebekah

CASE NARRATIVE THIRTY-ONE

In this narrative, a teacher gives an account of fostering literacy.

I have noticed over time that students are most engaged when they are creating something—when they are expressing their ideas, especially through combining oral, visual and written form. There has to be learning through, or while, doing. The process [of teaching to cause learning] is really important. They are more attuned to the visual form, especially when they are working towards a



product collaboratively that requires them to express and communicate ideas. If they are working with the written form, it has to be in a supportive manner; process is really important. As an example, if they can generate ideas as a group, write with someone or seek advice and share ideas with someone and

then read or display their stories to the class or members of the community, that seems to work well. These seem to encourage their engagement. A few years ago, students worked on autobiographies. We discussed approaches to presenting information in their autobiographies. In the end, we had an afternoon tea and the children shared their stories with family members. Products must have a purpose, especially something that is in their mind, and this becomes the communicated story to an audience; they have to have that initial idea in their mind. I can see why students can be disengaged with the learning process if the products are for just marks and they don't have that clear sense of what or why they are to communicate an idea. It can't just be abstract working. It has to be something they want to work towards.

I note the younger students are not inhibited and very individual thinkers. They have a sense of humour and playfulness. I love their curiosity about the world. As they get older, they are less inclined to volunteer answers as a group, but will do so willingly if with a friend or group they trust. I get the impression our First Nations students do better in a more interactive setting, where the classroom is more informal and student centered. They are less likely to volunteer answers in a whole-class setting, especially as they get into older grades. This becomes increasingly apparent because I think as students get older, their classes become less interactive, more teacher directed and less learning by doing.

I believe it is essential we engage families more in learning. The local [First Nations] culture is a fascinating culture. It needs to be visibly represented, and we can do that through working with the families of our children. Their stories and lives are important. These sometimes can be two separate camps, but there are several ways I have worked successfully to have both school and family working together for the child. Ultimately, the families have the greatest hope for their children. I only am a part of trying to make that occur. I want there to be strong bonds between what is happening at school and what is happening at home. These links are important. I think parents will be cautious of being involved, but we have to welcome that involvement. We have to encourage that involvement

WHAT ARE COMMUNITY MEMBERS SAYING?

Based upon what these community members are saying, respond to the following questions again. Write down some comments that answer the questions asked. Note how they may be different from your initial comments.

What are they saying about the priorities in classrooms? What are the most important messages I need to be communicating to students and parents?

What should be the patterns of communication when teaching and learning is occurring between teacher and students and among students in my classroom? If the conversations were observed, what should be the patterns observed?

What should the patterns of relationship be like in my classroom based upon what I believe my role is as a teacher? What do my relationships with students say about them as learners and how I believe learning occurs?

What should I emphasize as the content to be learned? What is important to be learned?

When I am teaching, how should I teach? What strategies should I most commonly use to assist students in learning? What should I believe causes learning?

What should my beliefs be about my students? How should I see myself in comparison to them? Do I see all students the same? Do they all have the same potential?

What should my classroom organization say about how we learn and what is important in learning?

In what ways could my classroom be representative of this community? How could it be different from any other classroom in Canada? What could make it different? Should it be different?

WHAT THE COMMUNITY IS SAYING ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING

What can classroom organization say about how we learn and what is important in learning? Classroom routines are very important. Expectations are clearly communicated. Opportunity for negotiation as a structured learning environment is established. Organization provides time, opportunity and support for students to learn and show learning.

What is being said about the priorities in classrooms? Learning is the priority of the classroom. Focus is on the development of individuals who believe in themselves as culturally located individuals who are contributors to their classroom and community. Although academic knowledge is important, the learning must be broader, focusing on the development of life tools such as perseverance and self-sufficiency, as well as interdependence and respect.

When I am teaching how do I teach? Modeling and demonstrating are common. Visual images are commonly used. Repetition and focus on mastery are emphasized. Time provision is made to gain mastery and think things through. Students show learning in a variety of ways and are given feedback to support next steps in learning. Collaboration and reciprocation in learning are important. Storytelling focusing on local context is frequent. Strong emphasis is placed on connections among learning areas. Lots of examples provided to support learning.

What should my beliefs be about my students? Each student has potential to achieve. Each student will come to a confident view of himself/herself through experiencing success as a learner. What is taught is achievable with effort and encouragement. Each student has capabilities that can contribute to the learning in and success of the classroom. Learning success is honoured and collectively celebrated.

What do I emphasize as the content to be learned? The formal curriculum becomes the vehicle for the development of personal attributes deemed as important. Learning is not abstract. It focuses on and is located in local context and connected to students' lives. Academic ideas are embedded with contexts and enriched through "working to end" type of projects involving tangible end products.

How can my classroom represent this community? Through the learning experiences provided, students are drawing from their lived experience. Learning affirms local context, especially values and personal attributes seen as important to the development of a functioning individual. Members of the class and community can all contribute to learning. Learning focuses on topics specific to events in the community.

What patterns of relationship contribute to learning? The teachers' role is to cause learning. Establishing a learning environment is the priority. Manifest in the relationships is a priority on caring. Caring manifests itself in actions—it expects, it challenges, it affirms. To do this, classroom routines are very important. Expectations are clearly communicated and upheld. There is little compromise on established priorities, especially in regards to learning. Families are on board with these priorities and support these priorities. There is opportunity for students to contribute to decision-making. Classroom allows for student voice in establishing consensus.

What should be the patterns of communication when teaching and learning is occurring? The communication patterns are dialogical rather than univocal, voluntary rather than involuntary. Listening is as important as talking. Under talking is more common than over talking. Students communicate their learning through a variety of modes, not just in writing.

AS A TEACHER IN THIS COMMUNITY, WHAT SHOULD I DO MORE OR LESS?

The table below identifies teaching behaviours emerging as significant influences on learning.

MORE OFTEN

<p><i>Communicate to students that you care about each student equally. Your caring should be evident for each student in actions such as high expectations, encouragement, challenge and time spent with each student.</i></p>
<p><i>Have well-defined and consistent expectations for student performance and behaviour.</i></p>
<p><i>Connect learning to students' lives, with special emphasis on those cultural/community elements that affirm local culture/community.</i></p>
<p><i>Make the learning focus crystal clear. Re-emphasize this focus through the lesson and at the end.</i></p>
<p><i>In teaching for learning, start with clear modelling of expected learning ("I do") using a variety of strategies, then move to "we do" learning and finally independent ("you do.") In so doing gradually enable autonomy in learning.</i></p>
<p><i>Emphasize feedback as students learn. Make clear next steps in learning. Also, allow students to peer-monitor learning by working together and seek/provide assistance.</i></p>
<p><i>Strongly emphasize literacy and numeracy development, especially with emphasis on mastery.</i></p>
<p><i>Learning tasks that are "working to end" type examples—working through processes as we work towards products.</i></p>
<p><i>Engage community members and community resources in learning.</i></p>
<p><i>Celebrate learning achievement.</i></p>

LESS OFTEN

Complex learning tasks that are highly dependent on language and numerical fluency – especially textbook based.

Lengthy oral explanations and univocal teaching that make the discourse of classrooms formal and univocal rather than informal and discursive.

Abstract learning with no concrete connections, contexts or examples.

Inconsistency in student expectations including all aspects of behaviour and values.

Students working independently with no opportunity to seek support from others. The lesson focus is not distributed across gradual release, potentially being only student-directed or teacher-directed.

Assess student learning on summative assessments and provide minimal feedback on what students need to do in order to achieve learning goals.

Occupy students' time with tasks that have little learning intention.

Allow some students to be impediments for other's learning. Tolerate inappropriate performance and behaviour.

Dismiss opportunities to acknowledge student success .

Assess students learning in only the written-symbolic form.

CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

First Nations people make up approximately 25 per cent of the total Yukon population. There are 14 First Nations in the territory. Although all YFN languages face extinction today, historically each First Nation community, with some exception, was a different language group. As examples, in the northern Yukon where this project is situated, Old Crow is the home of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation who speak Gwich'in; Dawson City is the home of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation who speak Hän; Mayo First Nation is the home of Na-Cho Nyak Dun who speak Northern Tutchone; and Pelly Crossing is the home of the Selkirk First Nation who also speak Northern Tutchone. Typical of educational data commonly cited nationally, YFN students are less likely to remain in school and achieve academically than their dominant culture counterparts (AUCC, 2013; Friesen, 2013; Kanu, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2008), especially in science (CCL, 2007; CMEC, 2006).

YFN are in a situation currently seen as similar to that identified more recently in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Within the New Zealand education system, the realization that Te Reo Māori (the language of Māori) was in the “last throes of language death” provided the impetus for Māori to prompt radical action to defend and validate their language and culture in an educational system that perennially was essentially designed to reproduce and perpetuate the aspirations of the status quo of Pakeha (white New Zealand) dominance (Smith, 1997, 2003). The developments that have occurred in Aotearoa-New Zealand since then appear to be resonating with tensions perennially surfacing within the Yukon context among YFN, especially within the context of schooling.

It is likely that this tension is more evident today because of the recent actualization of policy developments occurring within the Yukon over the past three decades. The negotiation of Yukon land claims started in 1973. An agreement in principle for land claims settlement was reached in 1989, following 16 years of negotiations. The Umbrella Final Agreement (UFA) was signed in 1993. The UFA provides a framework for Yukon First Nation Final Agreements. First Nation Final Agreements are complex and wide-ranging, and include financial

compensation, land, harvesting rights, heritage resources and governance structures in areas like education and justice, among other things. A First Nation Self-Government Agreement (SGA) was negotiated at the same time as the First Nation Final Agreement. The Self-Government Agreements, which are unique in Canada and have come to finalization within the last decade, set out the powers of the First Nation government to govern itself, its citizens and its land. Self-government agreements provide self-governing First Nations (SGFNs) with law-making authority in specific areas of First Nation jurisdiction, including education. For example, the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in SGA provides for delivery, design and implementation of education programs with the support and sanction of the Yukon Territorial Government (YTG). With the establishment of SGFNs, each FN with the required co-operation of YTG faces the challenge of reversing assimilation and regaining a sense of identity, especially within the processes that influence the education of their children.

Typical of most Aboriginal peoples, YFNs presently participate in a school system that has been drawn from the dominant culture, in their case southern Canadian school system models. Because of this, school processes and practices such as decision-making in regards to the content of curricula, pedagogical practices and language of instruction have both intentionally and unintentionally denied the inclusion of those aspects of [YFN] culture that have value and are important to [YFN] children (Bishop & Glynn, 1999). Paradoxically, “culture-based education” is identified by YTG and its Education Act as one of the foundational principles for school development in the Yukon. YTG policy requires the activities of organizations in Yukon communities to create, preserve, promote and enhance their culture, including arts, heritage and language. This policy is based upon the principle that culture, in all its expression, provides a foundation for learning and growth, and that YTG should support individuals, organizations and communities to promote, preserve and enhance their culture (YTG, 2005). The educational experiences should be reflected not only in the management and operation processes of the school, but also in the curricula and programs implemented and pedagogies used in classrooms.

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RESOURCES

Centres for Research in Youth, Science Teaching and Learning (CRYSTAL)
website at the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Education:
<http://umanitoba.ca/outreach/crystal/yukon.html>



DAWSON CITY, YUKON MARCH 2014