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Nîhîyaw Awasak: **Validation of Cree Literacies: An Ethnographic Study**

of Children at Home, at School, and in the Community

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

My study is titled "*Nīhīyaw Awasak*: Validation of Cree Literacies"; it is an ethnographic study of children at home, at school, and in the community. This is a study of Grade 5/6 children, varying in ages of 11 to 14 years, in a small northern Albertan community, and their experience of literacy in a cross-cultural situation. This research has several key implications that I suggest will influence the way literacy is viewed and increase Cree children's success in the educational system. One of the implications is the acknowledgement and validation of what I have defined as Cree children's Indigenous representation of literacy: a symbolic configuration of literacy that is expressive of their own language, culture, values, and beliefs. This Cree representation of literacy was reflected in what I considered a personal voice. This personal reflection of Cree literacy has not been noticed and was not obvious, but I found it mainly in artifacts that I considered from school projects shared through what is called *literacy digs* in research. This voice of literacy has been hindered in the school setting by a narrow focus of literacy and a concentrated effort towards achievement.

I conducted an ethnographic study, and I have described different literacy experiences of the children at home, at school, and at school events in the community. I also conducted a focal study of two children in the home and examined their literacy practices in this setting.

This study is significant because few studies have been done that look at the literacy of young Cree children from this perspective. This study in a northern Alberta Canadian setting will contribute to the field of Aboriginal education and will assist

educators who are looking for ways to improve the literacy and educational experience of

Aboriginal children.

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge my Heavenly Father, to give Him glory and honor for the wisdom and the knowledge He has given me to complete this work. I praise Him for what He has done in my life.

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CHAPTER 1:

WÎWÎKINKAN

My Personal Context of Cree Literacy

The first day of school had arrived, and I was both excited and frightened. I got ready very early in the morning and put on my new outfit. Although we were not well off and my father had to work hard to make sure we had enough food on the table, we always had new clothes for the first day of school. I didn't get much sleep that night because I couldn't wait for the day to arrive. Young, naïve, and very trusting, I did not know what to expect. My older sister was told to take care of me and be there to support me. It was her responsibility to walk me to school and bring me home at the end of the day. For the last few days and that morning I had been going over the many fears that I had to help ease my anxiety: the fear of leaving the safety and security of my own home and treading onto new territory, and the anxiety of not knowing what to expect. Because I knew that I could not speak English, all these fears were creating an uncomfortable feeling in my tummy. As we got near the school my anxiety grew. I knew I was moving into unknown territory, and I took a deep breath as we walked in through the school doors.

Memories of my early schooling are powerful and provide me with a lived experience similar to, albeit not the same as, that of the children in my study. The classroom situation that my peers and I entered that day was foreign to us. Our teacher spoke only English, a language to which we had limited exposure because we spoke Cree at home. The minimal exposure we had to English came from teaching staff, health workers, church clergy, and the radio announcer. From discussions with my mother, I

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knew that the first school in the community had been built in approximately 1942. During this time the road to Gift Lake was a wagon road; therefore there was very little traffic in and out of the community. Most travel to nearby communities was done by horse and wagon. Very few people had access to vehicle transportation. Many people listened to the radio in their homes to keep in touch with news of the wider society. This was a routine practiced by many in the community, and my family was no exception. The first television set came into the community in 1962, and it belonged to my Uncle Wilbert; my family did not own one until about 1965. Exposure to the English language at this specific time was somewhat limited for many of the members of the Gift Lake settlement.

My memory of the first day of school may have been frightening, but I also had later memories of learning to read and write that were positive. My early literacy instruction and acquisition were in English. Even though we were fluent in Cree, very few in the community could read and write in our language. Cree texts found in the Anglican Church were written in a Roman orthography and syllabic system quite foreign to us. My recollection of this is, as a young girl, listening to the crisp, clear voice of Olive Anderson, who sang from this hymn book with strange characters. We listened and she sang, because it seemed the rest could not read the Roman orthography or the syllabics.

The first few years of learning at school were quiet years for me. I spoke very little. I was scared of making mistakes; therefore I did not take risks. My biggest roadblock initially was comprehension, being able to understand what I read in the reader. The illustrations were so foreign to me that I could not attach meaning to them. The stories told in the readers seemed like fairytales, and I wanted to live like Sally and her family because they had so much more than I did. Although I was not a risk taker, I

found that the way to achieve success with the teacher was to work hard. Our Grade 1 teacher was familiar with the community, and she knew that the language spoken in the community was Cree. She did not push classroom discussions because she knew that we did not feel comfortable speaking the English language. I worked quietly on understanding my assignments and completed them successfully, and was recognized as a high achiever. The struggles I faced were taken one day at a time, and with persistence I gradually explored my range of literacy practices to accommodate school-defined literacy.

Once I learned how to read and began to make meaning of what I read, I felt as though I had entered another world. I would get into trouble at home because I had my nose in a book when I was supposed to be working on my chores. That little girl who was so frightened that first day made a habitat for herself at school and excelled. I remember that my mother had a hard time keeping me away from school regardless of weather conditions or sickness. I remember running to get to school at -40° F. Many of the children had stayed home, but I refused to stay. I was so drawn to school that I chose to attend school even when I was sick rather than miss a day and stay at home.

My father had a limited education in school but read and wrote English quite well. He was an avid reader. He had his own small lending library for his friends, and he spent hours reading his western novels. My mother was also literate in English and had been in school for a longer period than my father had, but her interest in literacy was of a different form. She was a seamstress who designed and worked from her own patterns.. She taught herself how to make clothing and household items simply by observing, cutting, and sewing; she had not seen a store-bought pattern and did not know how to use

one. I know of this because the first time that she used such a pattern was when she worked with me to make a dress for my future sister-in-law. I did the cutting and shaping with the pattern, and she supervised my sewing.

I was the second oldest in the family, so my older sister and I learned to read and write together. Reading was modeled for us at home. My parents were very supportive, although one would not find them at school to volunteer or attend parent-teacher interviews. We knew the importance of education because we were told openly by both parents frequently, especially by our father.

My experience with literacy was somewhat unique because as a high achiever I received validation from my teachers, which increased my desire to learn. My recollections of many of my teachers were that they were supportive and that I was well liked by them. The validation did not occur with just the teaching staff, but I also received attention from many members of my extended family as well as some of the community members. I was a child who attracted people because of my personality and size, because I was small in stature. This validation certainly influenced my literacy experience in school, and my positive experience planted a seed for my desire and interest in education.

My interest in literacy and Aboriginal education is a passion, and my desire and commitment have been to effect change for Aboriginal students in the educational system. I have felt my passion increase because as a teacher, researcher, and administrator, I have seen the struggles that these children experience.

As an Aboriginal educator, in 1993 I became part of a study team that looked at ways of increasing achievement test scores for the four core areas, which included literacy. The study was titled "A Joint Project: Focus on Student Achievement." This

study was conducted by Northland School Division and Alberta Education for the purpose of improving test scores to promote a higher success rate for Aboriginal children in the school jurisdiction. From this joint study at least 17 recommendations were set out for consideration ;and at the time of the project I thought this was important information for the school jurisdiction but as a school principal I was not even made aware that the project report had been completed. As a school principal I have seen achievement test scores across northern Alberta that show dismal results for Cree children, and I have seen Aboriginal youth continue to drop out and give up on attaining a Grade 12 diploma.

I feel a sense of responsibility to look out for the interests of Aboriginal children because I have experienced and have also witnessed what I would call my outrage at the way that they are taught and the fact that they continue to do dismally in the school system. I also know about the possibilities and the potential of Aboriginal children and what they are capable of when they are given the freedom to develop and grow in a nurturing environment.

Rationale

Battiste (1995), an Aboriginal educator, made the following statement in the context of what she called a redefinition of Aboriginal education:

> It was not enough that Aboriginal students should succeed in the school system and receive diplomas or certificates. It was also important that the educational processes of Indian education should strengthen First Nations languages and cultures, build upon the strong foundations of ancestral heritage and cultures, and enlist the invaluable advice and assistance of elders. The very tenets of Indian education had to change from accepting acculturation and cognitive assimilation as final ends to revitalizing and renewing language and cultural identity and dignity. (p. xi)

This statement reminds us that the condition of Aboriginal education is far from what we hoped it would be for Aboriginal people. There is a need for change, and to promote change there is a need for a better understanding of the education experiences of Aboriginal people, as identified by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Government of Canada. 1997). The commission recommended educational reform based on three broad principles—self-determination, lifelong learning, and holistic education—because the educational system has not met the needs of Aboriginal people sufficiently. In support of this, Jo-Ann Archibald (1995), a key leader in the field of Aboriginal education, suggested that "the historical experience of how First Nations culture was perceived and treated within federal and provincial schooling systems shows what we don't want and what not to do" (p. 346). Numerous educational research studies have been done on Aboriginal children but as Dehyle and Swisher (1997) have noted many of these studies are done from a deficit assimilationist viewpoint. The focus of many of these studies has been towards intelligence and achievement testing and few studies related specifically to literacy. The various questions that we ask about whether the educational system is meeting the needs of the Aboriginal population are mainly just that: questions. We need more answers; therefore we need to do more research.

A statement from Linda Brodkey (1992) about the need for research has inspired my motivation to move in this direction:

> I can think of no more important project for teachers and researchers than studying classroom discursive practices in relation to the part they play in alienating students from literacy by failing to articulate their students' representations of themselves as subjects different from their teachers. (p. 293)

The focus of this study is literacy, and therefore it is important to contextualize it with a discussion on why literacy research is important. In many settings, especially in literate

societies, literacy is used as a measuring tool. As Canadians, we come from a diverse society culturally, socially, and linguistically; therefore we will have different literacy experiences across these cultural and linguistic contexts. Unfortunately, the tools used to measure literacy have been fairly narrow and therefore limit or favor certain linguistic groups as well as specific types of literacy experiences. Cree children who come from a different background from that of children in the mainstream classroom will bring with them literacy experiences that vary considerably. These literacy experiences, rich and varied in their own culture, offer the teacher a unique perspective if they are taken into consideration.

My aim for this research is to call attention to a much broader and wider definition of literacy, a deeper understanding of what it looks like, with the hope that this will empower Cree children in our schools. Historically, we see from various research reports and articles written about Aboriginal children that the system has not adequately met the need for the development of literacy in the lives of these children. Hare and Barman (2000) discussed in detail how dismal the picture really is for Indigenous education, especially with issues centered on residential schools and the complexity of the educational experience of Indigenous peoples. The Government of Canada (2004) made the following statements in its background paper for the Canada-Aboriginal Peoples Roundtable sessions regarding education of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit populations:

> 51% of the First Nation population, 42% of Métis, and 58% of Inuit have less than a high school certificate compared to 31% of the total Canadian population. Only 23% of the First Nation population, 29% of Métis, and 21% of Inuit hold a post-secondary certificate/degree/diploma compared to 38% of the total Canadian working-age population. Approximately 48% of Registered Indians (both on and off reserve) and 53% of Registered Indians who live on-reserve between the ages

of 15-24 are not attending school compared to 37% of all Canadians in this age group. (p. 2)

Although there seems to be some movement, the gains have been minimal because, according to Hare and Barman, the inequity that existed for Indigenous children previously in the school system still existed at the time of their study, and as is evident in the Government of Canada's statistical data presented above, there is still a gap between the Aboriginal and Canadian population. The issues have not been addressed; in fact, Hare and Barman argued they have become even more complex (p. 348). Paulsen (2003) and Battiste (2000) identified education generally, and literacy in particular, as challenges for the Indigenous population because the rationale behind education continues to be one of assimilation/integration, with very little attention paid to the desire of the Indigenous population. Battiste and Youngblood Henderson (2000) pointed out:

> After nearly a century of public schooling for Indigenous peoples in Canada, for example, the most serious problem with the current system of education lies not in its failure to liberate the human potential among Indigenous peoples, but rather in its quest to limit their thought to cognitive imperialistic practices. This quest denies Indigenous people access to and participation in the formulation of educational policy, constrains the use and development of Indigenous knowledge and heritage in schools, and confines education to a narrow positivistic scientific view of the world that threatens the global future. (p. 86)

We know that assimilation and integration for Indigenous peoples has been more detrimental than constructive; therefore we need to view the whole aspect of Indigenous education from another context: that of Indigenous knowledge and how it ties in with the research that I have conducted with Cree children. Indigenous knowledge comes from the Indigenous way of thought and world view and thus cannot be defined from a Eurocentric point of view, which is a contradiction because it does not fit this context or worldview. Battiste and Youngblood Henderson (2000) analyzed Indigenous knowledge and how it

is viewed from a Eurocentric framework and outlined several issues involved in gaining

an understanding of Indigenous thought from this perspective. Battiste and Youngblood

Henderson, in addition to Steinhauer (2002) and Weber-Pillwax (2001), all agreed that to

define Indigenous knowledge is not an easy matter. In fact, Battiste and Youngblood

Henderson noted that there is no "notion similar to 'culture' in Algonquian thought"

(p. 35), this illustrates how different the world views are. As I review my journey as a

Cree Métis person, trying to describe Indigenous thought, the Cree Métis way of looking

at the world, made this task a challenge. As I assessed my work, I discovered that in

trying to define my own Indigenous context within the framework of Eurocentric

thought, I felt a slight violation because I was once more moving into territory that, in a

sense, was asking me to define who I am within a foreign frame. Weber-Pillwax

explained, "Indigenous research methodologies are those that enable and permit

Indigenous researchers to be who they are while engaged actively as participants in

research processes that create new knowledge and transform who they are and where they

are" (p. 174).

The next issue that Battiste and Youngblood Henderson (2000) noted is that

Indigenous knowledge is not something that remains the same throughout the Indigenous

population. Indigenous knowledge is diverse and is understood and defined in different

ways by the many different Indigenous groups. Steinhauer (2002), an Indigenous

researcher from Saddle Lake, observed:

> Although as individuals we are taught to be responsible ourselves, we are
> reminded that we must never think of ourselves in isolation. Everything we do,
> every decision we make, affects our family, our community, it affects the air we
> breathe, the animals, the plants, the water in some way. (p. 77)

Battiste and Youngblood Henderson also contended that Indigenous knowledge is so

much a part of the nation, tribe, and family group and a way of life for the people that one

has difficulty in separating it to codify as a definition because it is part of the life force of

the people (pp. 35-36). The Indigenous knowledge framework to which I am referring

has to be allowed to evolve much like any other new theory, and as Indigenous peoples

contextualize their research in what they define as their own circumstance, then we will

arrive at new understandings and new lenses for research.

Weber-Pillwax, (2001) an Aboriginal researcher, has recommended that

researchers work towards establishing relationships with Indigenous peoples before they

engage in research and she has noted:

> The research methods have to mesh with the community and serve the
> community. Any research that I do must not destroy or in any way negatively
> implicate or compromise my own personal integrity as a person, as a human
> being. This integrity is based on how I contextualize myself in my community,
> with my family, my people, and eventually how I contextualize my self in the
> planet, with the rest of all living systems and things. Without personal integrity, I
> would be outside the system. If I am outside the system, I don't survive. (p. 168)

She added that trust is a crucial part of the relationship between the researcher and the

community and that it is up to the researcher to uphold the trust that has been bestowed

on him/her in every way that he/she can (p. 170). As we become bolder and take the

initiative to look at the issues that hamper and influence learning for Indigenous children,

as Indigenous educators we are embarking on a new path in asking other educators to

become open to new concepts and ideas that will facilitate the learning of our children.

We are looking towards the future for our children; therefore we need to take the

responsibility to become more involved in the educational process for Indigenous

children. Auger (1997), a Sakaw (bush) Cree from the Bigstone Cree reserve in northern

Alberta, expressed how he felt about the ongoing dialogue regarding the efficacy of the

educational system for Aboriginal children. From his Sakaw perspective:

> It is no longer acceptable for someone to make decisions from another part of the
> Land, towards the future of my children as well as the other children in my
> community. We in our community must assume total responsibility for the control
> of our educational systems and we must define our own visions of education in
> our own communities. Only then can a school become a more relevant place for
> students in each particular community situation. (p. 327)

It is clear from the statements of these different Aboriginal educators that the time

is right for us to look towards effective change and movement towards what we think is a

more beneficial educational approach to teaching Aboriginal children. We cannot move

in this direction unless we have adequate research that will guide us and ensure that we

formulate and adopt a perspective that will serve the needs of the Aboriginal population.

Archibald (1995) commented that Aboriginal people can contribute to the understandings

of all public school learners:

> First Nations children need to feel proud, not ashamed, of learning more about
> and sharing their cultures. However, these benefits can be achieved only if First
> Nations people are involved in meaningful ways throughout the curriculum
> processes, and if teachers are adequately prepared and willing to teach about First
> Nations cultures. (p. 353)

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my study is to describe, analyze, and interpret Cree children's

experience of literacy in one northern Alberta Aboriginal school. Literacy and whether it

is influenced by issues of identity, relationship building, Cree and English language

development and variations (dialect differences) are also a part of my analysis. This close

investigation of language and literacy development was designed to examine and offer a

better understanding of the literacy experience of the Cree child. My final purpose in

conducting this study is to show educators how we could work towards a more beneficial

literacy experience for Cree children.

CHAPTER 2:

A SOCIAL-CULTURAL FOUNDATION FOR LITERACY RESEARCH

The foundation of this research perspective begins with Vygotsky's (1978) social

constructivist theory based on the philosophy that all children are meaning makers. The

interaction and transaction with the environment and the discourse tools, as Vygotsky

called them, promote and encourage development of the whole child. Blanck (1990)

talked about the key premises behind this theory of meaning making:

> Cultural influences means that society provides the child with goals and
> structured methods to achieve them. Language is one of the key tools created by
> humankind for the organization of thinking. Language bears concepts that belong
> to experience and to the knowledge of humankind. (p. 45)

Vygotsky, in his discussion on theory, talked about language being one of the tools

available to the child so that he/she can construct meaning and develop higher cognitive

skills. The play between the social environment, internal language, and cognitive

development of the child is recursive. "It is the result of social learning, of the

interiorization of social signs, and of the internalization of culture and social

relationships" (Blanck, 1990, p. 44). Blanck discussed how we as individuals first of all

learn language and social behaviors externally (interpsychologically) from the

relationships we develop with others around us; and second, as we see how people

respond to our language and behaviors, we begin to interiorize these social signs

individually (intrapsychologically) within ourselves.

The social constructivist theory defines caregivers as a strong component of the

formula because not only are they the ones who provide scaffolding for the children as

they learn language, but they are also the key transmitters of cultural and language

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information to children prior to their entering school. In some Aboriginal homes the language of the caregiver has been the Aboriginal language. The recursive development of language learning, intellectual development, and general learning has been interrupted for those children who come from homes where the Aboriginal language is spoken. Learning happens in a cycle; for example, as we learn to read we eventually move to a process to read to learn. The cycle of learning for Indigenous children is not a continuous one and has gaps and bumps that interrupt the rhythm for learning, language, and literacy development because they are being asked to learn another language and develop literacy skills in this second language. If we view language as a key tool for making meaning, then it is certainly important to see how this impacts the Aboriginal child's literacy, learning, and language development.

To place this theory in perspective, it is important to view Aboriginal children as meaning makers, especially because their cultural and social strengths are from their language and culture. In many instances today the language of the home is an Indigenous English, with influences from the Aboriginal mother tongue spoken in the home. The language and/or cultural influence could be considered quite different from the English language and culture of the teacher in the classroom. For teachers to disregard the child as a meaning maker would be a disservice because the child's culture and language would not be taken into consideration. To view children as meaning makers is to acknowledge their culture, language, and literacy development as they enter the classroom. This view of Aboriginal children is crucial to literacy research because we can see how it will influence how well they develop metacognitive skills.

For Aboriginal people the validation of language and culture is crucial to the way that we make meaning. This validation of Aboriginal languages and cultures is important especially because Aboriginal people have been in a cross-cultural milieu that has influenced and interrupted their own language and cultural development. The impact of the school system and the imposition of a second language on Aboriginal children have influenced how they make meaning. This point is significant because research with Aboriginal children has shown that the cultural context represented in the school may be different from what is being learned and developed in the home (Dehyle & Swisher, 1997). "Vygotsky considered the acquisition of language as the most significant moment in the course of cognitive development" (Blanck, 1990, p. 47). As I reflect on this statement I think of how language change has impacted on the Aboriginal population. The loss of their own mother tongue affects the complete development of Aboriginal children as well as their language and cognition. It is evident that Aboriginal people have had to adapt to changes around them, many of which were not of their own choice. Imposed change comes with a price.

The dominant-world languages and their associated literacies (reading, writing, drawing, and representing) are conducive to strong cognitive growth for those who speak these languages as first languages. Many Aboriginal languages, as with small languages and minority languages in many parts of the world, have historically been oral and have not moved towards comparable literacy (reading and writing) developments. According to Vygotsky (1978), language is in itself not only a tool, but also a part of cognitive process; therefore strong language development is desirable. In the school system today most Aboriginal children are expected to learn in standard English, which may be a

second language or second dialect for them. Many Aboriginal children are in various stages of second-language fluency; to use this tool effectively, they have to develop language fluency, which will assist in their own cognitive processing.

Lave and Wenger (1991) referred to Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, a component of his social-cultural theory, as a "cultural" interpretation that identifies the zone of proximal development as the distance between cultural knowledge, knowledge that is taught through instruction, and the everyday experiential base of the individual (p. 48). This cultural interpretation which builds on the everyday experiential base validates and acknowledges the experiences, strengths, and differences that the children bring to school daily. According to this perspective, classroom instruction should be an extension of what the child knows and brings from home. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development builds on the knowledge of the child and scaffolds new learning.

Another way of explaining this interpretation of Lave and Wenger (1991) is to view comprehensible knowledge as knowledge provided by instruction and active knowledge, and experiential knowledge as knowledge brought to the table by the learner. This cultural interpretation is parallel to the whole aspect of making meaning, according to Vygotsky (1978), and is what Rosenblatt (1994) called the *choosing activity* in schema theory. Lave and Wenger and their description of cultural knowledge made accessible through instruction which makes use of everyday experiences could be viewed as parallel to what I have been referring to as validation for Indigenous knowledge. The whole issue of whether the students feel that they own the events associated with literacy will promote success or failure (Ferdman, 1990).

It is important to consider the cultural and social behaviors of children and discover how to connect with their meaning making if one is working to ensure that the higher mental functions are being developed. As school practitioners, we need to discuss how effective the school culture is if it is not allowing children to incorporate their experience to extend and construct meaning. In these cross-cultural situations the Aboriginal children do bring their linguistic experiential reservoir with them. Rosenblatt (1994) reminded us that,

> for the individual, then, the language is that part, or set of features, of the public system that has been internalized through that person's experiences with words in life situations. . . . The residue of the individual's past transactions in particular natural and social contexts constitutes what can be termed a linguistic experiential reservoir. (p. 1061)

This transaction with a new situation is facilitated by what is in our linguistic experiential reservoir. This is truly important for the Aboriginal child because the reservoir may have very different meaning from that of the teacher who comes from a different culture. The most important premises that educators and researchers need to keep in mind are the thoughts about the foundation of the social constructivist perspective for research, the interaction and transaction of the individual, and how one works to share experience and meaning with those around him/her in his/her social environment or group (Vygotsky, 1978). A teacher working with Aboriginal children will find teaching more enjoyable if he/she works from the strengths and knowledge that the children bring from home.

Literacy as a Social and Cultural Construct

Willis (1997) presented an historical overview of literacy and defined the purposes of literacy from three broad considerations that she called "literacy as a skill; literacy as school knowledge; and literacy as a social and cultural construct" (p. 388). The

first consideration, literacy as a skill, is a focus on individual literacy skill development and does not allow one to view literacy as a cultural activity. Willis noted that literacy as a skill does two things that work against certain groups of people and perpetuates a certain attitude:

> First, in schools the operational definition of literacy (as a skill) is often expanded beyond the teaching of reading and writing skills to mean a form of social control by instilling attitudes, behaviors, habits, values, ways of communication, and so on. Second, definitions of literacy that center on skill attainment view failure to acquire literacy skills as personal failure. (p. 389)

Many Aboriginal children have been viewed from this narrow perspective, and because they have not achieved the expected literacy level, the standard set by the classroom teacher, many of them are categorized as special-needs children. Other barriers to their learning have not been considered.

The second descriptor in literacy research is what Willis (1997) called "literacy as school knowledge." This descriptor says that "schools have been used as vehicles for the control and access to literacy and the diffusion of literacy" (p. 390). It has been used to work against those who are unrepresented and to prove that certain groups are more intelligent than others, as well as a justification for denial to access to privileged programs for certain groups. This approach justifies inequities and favors specific types of knowledge. This consideration does not allow for knowledge that is different and therefore disqualifies the knowledge and experiences that Aboriginal children bring to school. According to Willis, there has been some movement away from this view. Yet, these first two descriptors are still the prominent definitions used by educators.

Willis' (1997) third frame of "literacy as a social and cultural construct" (p. 388) is used for the study of Cree children's experience of literacy. The work of Scribner and

Cole (1981) and Heath (1983) influenced the definition of literacy as a social and cultural construct and the purpose of literacy as it is defined by this framework. This consideration looks at the "link between cognition and social and cultural conception of literacy; the importance of cultural and social conceptions of school literacies as indicative of literacy beyond the school doors" (p. 392).

The definitions and purposes of literacy are different in various cultures, as shown by studies done by Heath (1983) with two working-class communities, Roadville and Trackton; and the work of Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) with poor urban Black families. This definition of literacy as a social and cultural construct, according to Willis, looks for culturally relevant teaching and learning. It acknowledges that the social and cultural aspects of literacy are complex and intertwined with the economic and political realities of society. There are always a degree of opportunity and accessibility and roles of privilege and power as defined by the economic, social, and cultural situation of the community. Ferdman's (1990) definition of literacy is also applicable in the northern Canadian context:

> Literacy, I believe, touches us at our core in that part of ourselves that connects with the social world around us. It provides an important medium through which we interact with the human environment. For this reason, a consideration of the relationship of literacy and culture must be a fundamental component of any analysis of literacy and the individual. (p. 181)

Brodkey (1992), whose discussion of literacy was similar to those of Ferdman (1990) and Willis (1997), described literacy as discursive practice: "To think of literacy in terms of discursive practice means trying to identify the political as well as the cognitive and cultural dimensions of literacy in theory, research and pedagogy" (p. 295).

It is crucial that educators consider the political, cultural, social, and economic realities of literacy and how these aspects influence this development for Aboriginal children.

If teachers neglect to view the whole picture, then we will use a narrow definition of literacy and, as Willis (1997) noted, point fingers at individual learners as personal failures. This finger pointing has occurred to a degree in schools that cater to the Aboriginal population. Walter Madonick, an Aboriginal elder (Government of Canada, 1992) commented that "if education was used as the measuring stick of the past relationship between Aboriginal peoples and Canadian society, the perception of Canada promoted internationally would be surely tarnished" (p. 29).

Cole (1990) and Scribner and Cole (1981) reported that the Vai people were literate in their own language, which seemed very useful but also very contextualized. Vai literacy was used for a specific purpose. They described the peculiarity of formal schooling, its organized social behavior, and the mediational form of writing associated specifically with this formal school setting. School-based literacies are a culture of their own. This idea is supported by Shirley Brice Heath (1983), who found that varied types of literacy were being used in the homes of working-class people, yet none of these literacies were being reinforced or developed at school.

Literacy, according to Ferdman (1990), Willis (1997), and Brodkey (1992), is multilayered and multifaceted and should be recognized as such. Ferdman also went further to define how society views ethnic relations and identified three models of group diversity. These views have been noted here because, politically and socially, society's current view of Aboriginal people will influence their literacy development. The three categories are pluralism, assimilation, and melting pot (p. 350). The pluralist tends to

view individual behaviors in terms of group patterns, whereas the assimilationist looks at the individual. The melting pot view asks us to come together, to amalgamate and create a new culture to be shared by all. The assimilationist view is consistent with Willis' statement that the narrow view of literacy allows one to attach blame to an individual without looking at the group patterns and noting how literacy has affected the whole group. Ferdman included culture as a strong component of literacy development: "Literacy, then, in large part, involves facility in manipulating the symbols that codify and represent the values, beliefs, and norms of the culture—the same symbols that incorporate the culture's representations of reality" (p. 187).

In relation to Aboriginal children, specifically Cree children with whom I am familiar, I shudder at how schools have not only interrupted the cultural literate experience, but have also taken away the opportunity for children to codify and learn to manipulate these culturally-based symbols so that they can become literate in their own language and world.

The experiences that Cree children bring from home are based on their own world view that they have constructed through interaction with their extended family members who speak Cree and live the Cree way of life. At the age of five or six, Cree children are placed in a classroom that introduces them to the English language and in a school culture that may be different from what they have experienced at home. They do not have the opportunity to codify, develop, and manipulate the literacy symbols for their own language and culture, and the children are expected to learn a new way of symbolizing and to internalize a different world view that may conflict with the development of their values and beliefs.

The cognitive and literate development of children will be impacted if they are part of a classroom that promotes and facilitates a second language or dialect that is not part of their culture and denigrates or disregards their own language and culture. Many schools have not embraced the perspective of literacy as a social and cultural construct and therefore are using the narrow definitions of literacy to measure the literacy development of Aboriginal students in their classrooms. The schooling experience for Aboriginal children has influenced and interfered with their language, cultural, and literacy development. Schools need to acknowledge the strengths and cultural knowledge that these children bring to school to facilitate rather than denigrate their cognitive growth and the development of higher mental functions. The literacy question and crisis that we face within Aboriginal communities has to be researched with a perspective or consideration that will allow us to show the various dynamics of the social and cultural realities of the students whom one is studying.

Historical/Sociocultural Context of Aboriginal Languages/Dialects
and Indigenous Knowledge

Historically, Cree, one of the Indigenous mother tongues, has been used extensively amongst the First Nations and Métis people, but recently there has been a shift towards less use of Cree. According to Norris (2000), "The use and survival of Aboriginal languages are clearly issues for indigenous peoples in North America" (p. 218). In her analysis she noted that modernization and the use of dominant languages can be erosive. The impact of residential schools and the discouragement of language use has interrupted the transmission of Indigenous languages from one generation to another (Archibald, 1995; Calliou, 1997; Nicholas, 1996; Norris, 2000). The language loss that

many Aboriginal communities face has occurred gradually as a result of colonization and assimilation. *Assimilation* in this context means being absorbed into the system (*Webster's New World Dictionary*, 1996, p. 34). Aboriginal people are losing their language, and the rate of loss seems to be increasing. Educators, linguists, and leaders today are assessing how this is affecting the Indigenous population.

There are four categories of language death, according to Campbell and Muntzel (1989): sudden death, which happens when a group of speakers has been obliterated; radical death, which results from oppression; gradual death, which occurs when there is a shift to the dominant language of the colonizer; and, finally, bottom-to-top death, which occurs when a language shift occurs first in the family and then in social and public domains (pp. 182-185). Blair and Fredeen (1995) stated:

> It is widely believed that a language gives way to another as a result of some greater political force. In the case of sudden and radical death, the external political factors play the lead role; however, in the case of gradual and bottom-to-top death, the factors are interrelated in a more complex fashion. In each circumstance of language death there has been one consistent factor: that of a differentiation of power. One language and speech community is dominant, and the other is subordinate. (p. 30)

Blair and Fredeen (1995) discussed the case of northern Saskatchewan as one of gradual death, which seems comparable to what is happening in northern Alberta. One of the characteristics of this gradual death pattern is that the younger generation becomes more proficient in the dominant language and uses their own language, the obsolescing language, in a limited manner or not at all. The English language remains dominant, given its power and official status in the school system and places of work. As a result, the Indigenous languages become subordinate.

The dramatic shift in Aboriginal communities from the extensive use of the mother tongue to bilingualism and then to a stage of receptive bilingualism is yet another level of language loss and language shift that is evident in many northern communities in Alberta. Receptive bilingualism is defined as the ability to understand two languages, but expression occurs mainly in one language. This is a fairly common situation and occurs in many communities where more than one language is spoken (Kandolf, 1998).

In 1986, as a Native language supervisor I proposed a bilingual program to the Gift Lake community because many of the children spoke Cree. A decade later, when I returned to my community, I was surprised to find many more of the children speaking a dialect of English, with only a small number speaking Cree as a first language. The shift between the languages is usually not recursive but begins with Cree terms being replaced with English terms and complex grammars being simplified. The Cree Elders in northern Alberta have retained the strength of their language and still use Cree as the language of socialization, but English is often used for meetings and other community events. Many adults still speak Cree at home to each other and then speak Indigenous English (Blair & Heit, 1993) to their children.

The choice to use more English and less of the mother tongue is accompanied by code switching between the languages. I have heard members of my family code switch: They incorporate many English words into a Cree sentence and change the words by adding a form of Cree ending to suit the sentence. It sounds funny, and we have laughed at some of the word formations. The other change is to throw a couple of Cree words into an English sentence to make a point. This is an unconscious response that happens over time, and people are not cognizant of changes taking place.

Blair and Fredeen (1995) discussed this phenomenon of code switching and stated

that the implications are contradictory as to whether this is language convergence or

maintenance and that it may depend on the sociohistorical context of the situation. Cree

people in these communities also switch from one language to another depending on the

social situation and the topic of conversation. This phenomenon, according to Blair and

Fredeen, is what Woolard called an allocation of their resources in a bilingual repertoire.

Similarly, Blair (1997), in a case study of a northern Cree community in Saskatchewan

and found the following:

> The language shift over the past decade is obvious to teachers and administrators.
> The teachers in both elementary and high school noticed a good number of
> changes in the quality as well as the quantity of the children's use of the Cree
> language. They reported a shrinking vocabulary among the children, the
> introduction of a great deal of slang and the occurrence of code switching. While
> on its own code-switching is not a bad thing, it can be a sign of a reliance on the
> dominant language. (p. 28)

Tied to this issue of language loss and language shift are the tentacles of

colonization and assimilation and the subtle devaluing of Indigenous language groups

and cultures. This devaluing is a negative message that is sent to the Indigenous

population regarding their own language and culture. It is a message that affects and

violates their identity kit, their discourse, and their way of life. Gee (1989), a well-known

linguist, noted that a discourse is a sort of "identity kit" (p. 7) that is intertwined within

the language and offers a way of being in the world. For Aboriginal children this identity

kit has created some confusion because of the mixed messages that they are receiving

about speaking their own mother tongue and their attempts to speak the second language,

English. He suggested that people from the dominant society will often apply tests of

fluency to non-Native speakers:

Very often dominant groups in a society apply rather constant "tests" of the fluency of the dominant Discourses in which their power is symbolized. These tests take on two functions: they are tests of "natives" or, at least, "fluent users" of the Discourse, and they are gates to exclude "non-natives" (people whose very conflicts with dominant Discourses show they were not, in fact, "born" to them). (p. 8)

In response to this subtle devaluing and the "tests" given by the dominant society, Indigenous people have made several different choices that influence their language development and the literacy of their own children.

First of all, as a colonized group Indigenous people may have unconsciously devalued their own mother tongue, and this attitude has been passed down to the younger generations. As Nicholas (1996) stated, colonized people may seek to escape their oppression by becoming more like the oppressor (p. 62). She elaborated:

Once, identity, meaning, and sense of belonging has been destroyed in a colonized people through all the processes of colonialism, the stage is set for them to desire the culture of the oppressors, and to seek assimilation into that culture as a kind of relief from their oppression. (p. 62)

The subtle devaluing that occurs can be more harmful than outright opposition to the language because the messages that are sent to Aboriginal people create a sense of discomfort with their own language. I say this because I have experienced it as a Cree person.

Second, this subtle devaluing is also evident in the school system and stems from the attitude of some teachers towards children who speak a different home language and come from a different culture. This affects other minority groups as well, as Perry (1998) demonstrated in her writing about Ebonics, the use of Black English by African-American children. Perry reported that teachers' lack of understanding of Black English

(Ebonics) perpetuates negative attitudes towards the language and its speakers and negates the relationship of literacy skills to school.

Educators have asked parents in northern schools to speak English to their children at home and have assumed that the children will advance more at school. These types of requests from educators have influenced change in Indigenous language use in northern communities. As a parent I faced this situation myself when my little daughter was in Grade 2. The teacher commented to her that she should be speaking more English at home so that she could make more progress at school. She was sent home with a note asking me to follow through with this suggestion. This teacher devalued our mother tongue, the Cree language, as well as Indigenous English, and saw both as a detriment and a barrier to my little daughter's literacy learning at school.

Many Indigenous people have chosen to teach their own children the English language in their home with the same belief that many educators hold that their children will do better in school. The struggles that Indigenous children face in schools today are frustrating for parents, and to try to help their own children, they have chosen not to speak their Indigenous mother tongue to them. This choice also comes from the idea that one language gets in the way of learning another; Cummins (1991) called it a controversy (p. 86) and stated:

> It is still common practice in many school systems to discourage parents from promoting their children's L1 in the home and to assume that English language preschool would be more educationally appropriate than provision of preschool experiences in the child's home language. (p. 94)

We need to move away from practices that hurt Indigenous children and begin to look at ways that we can make changes. The above discussion shows that we are still struggling to place these issues into context so that we can deal with them effectively.

Not all issues are negative, and the next complexity that I discuss is one that shows that perhaps we need to be more open to analyzing and discussing the more obvious differences and find ways to address them in the school system.

A complexity tied specifically to language and one that has been overlooked and needs to be addressed is the Indigenous way of making meaning and how we transmit this from one language to another. It is a complexity that may inadvertently help us to shed some light on language and literacy differences and could be addressed in the education system. In my thesis work with Cree elders (Laderoute, 1994), I found that the only way that I could retain meaning for the Cree transcriptions was to translate the data into a form of Indigenous English. The pace, intonation, and pronunciation are Cree, but the language incorporated into these patterns is English. If someone perused my master's thesis, he/she would find the sentences quite unusual and would probably assume that my command of English is very poor. My attempts to retain meaning with standard English violated my work and detracted from what the elders were trying to transmit to the children. The way that we make meaning and transmit it from one language to another is important for this research and for those who work with children who come from a different language base. This discussion shows the complexity with which Indigenous peoples are dealing with regard to the development, maintenance, and revitalization of their Indigenous languages as well as their own cultural identity as Indigenous peoples. The issues are many and varied, and the historical and sociocultural context of Aboriginal languages provides us with a great deal of food for thought and draws us into a discussion of Indigenous meaning making.

The thread of Indigenous meaning making that comes from my Cree language base and culture is important to this research. The language that I speak and the socio-cultural environment in which I was raised as a Cree Métis, as well as my understanding of a Cree worldview and how I exemplify it in my discussions, are part of my Indigenous meaning making and active tools for the validation of Cree children. This thread (*asapap*) refers to what I have specified in my discussion of Indigenous knowledge and the many facets of it and to what Battiste and Youngblood Henderson (2000) emphasized: that it is not desirable to try to place us all in one basket because we have various and different Indigenous knowledge views. I have reviewed and thought about my world view and what I bring to the table as I think about Cree children. In my 1994 thesis "Key Cultural Themes in Stories of Cree Elders," I discussed the foundation, interactionism, sociogenesis theme, and work from Bain (1988), John-Steiner (1983), Steiner (1975), and Vygotsky (1962). This framework for my master's thesis has influenced the foundation that I have used for this perspective. In this previous effort I chose a quotation that I believe is important to the work that I am doing today:

> As members of the human race we have the capability to arrange, remove and create representations for ourselves to reflect our own ontogeny. Our cognitive, linguistic and ontogenetic growth (internal) is continually interacting with society and the environment (external). We engage in the action of symbolizing for the purpose of mediating between ourselves and what is around us. (Laderoute, 1994, p. 17)

Furthermore, the way that we construct and make meaning is based on our own projections, and this in turn will shape our cognitive growth and the way that we manipulate discursive and nondiscursive contextual presentation of symbols that come from our environment and the people who are our caregivers (p. 17). This discussion

shows that this worldview that comes from our representation of ourselves as Cree people is important to how we manipulate symbols to form our own literacy experience.

From a broad social and cultural construct and my perspective of literacy, I have defined it as follows: Literacy is a meaningful configuration of symbols, signs, and representations of who we are based on our language, culture, values, beliefs, and behaviours and how we communicate this to others. The environment and how we interact in this setting and the teaching and learning that come from our familial language and culture will form a strong basis for our own expression of literacy. Throughout my examination of the framework, I have integrated and intertwined my Indigenous perspective on what I consider to be of importance in this research approach for Indigenous children. This is part of the identity kit that Gee (1989) discussed, and it has to be acknowledged as part of this research.

As Castellano, Davis, and Lahache (2000a) indicated in their work, I am forging ahead to ensure that what I bring to the table is crucial to the research that I am conducting. They stated:

> Attempts to create aboriginally defined paradigms, models, and processes of education have shifted attention away from earlier research themes, such as the learning-style focus reviewed by Hodgson-Smith; instead, we have experimentation that takes Aboriginal values and philosophy as the central design principle and a sustained conversation among Aboriginal educators who are motivated to break new ground in theory and practice. (p. 253)

In my evaluation of my experience in the school system, there is a need for active validation. I am searching for this kind of validation as I look for ways to introduce and represent our meaning making to people around us. I have used the term *active validation* to distinguish it from the empty words that Aboriginal people often hear when change is

proposed. Aboriginal people need to be actively validated because of the tentacles of colonization and the subtle devaluing that has occurred for generations.

In the school setting it is important to determine whether or not the children are being validated, approved, or accepted for who they are as Aboriginal children. The students themselves will identify whether they feel part of the community and whether the teacher and their peers are actively validating them. This aspect of active validation is a requirement for Aboriginal children to increase their percentage of success in the educational system. This validation is tied not only to success in school, but also to literacies that are being promoted and developed as part of the learning/teaching environment.

This active validation and determining how literacy is made meaningful and whether it is different from that of other cultural groups is the purpose of this research. The questions remain then : What are Aboriginal forms of literacy? How do they manifest themselves in classrooms? Curwen Doige (2001) presents a synthesis, which she presented from an extensive review of the work of Battiste (1986) and Meek (1991). She defined it in the following manner:

> From an Aboriginal perspective, then, the key importance of Aboriginal literacy is that Aboriginal language and symbolic representations transmit history, cultural knowledge, and tradition, systems of understanding, and education, not whether people did or did not write or have wampum, notched sticks, pictographs, or petroglyphs. (p. 125)

Curwen Doige noted that Battiste "calls for an acceptance of how people interacted with others and their environment as a demonstrable indication of their literacy" (p. 124). If we view literacy as a cognitive experience that is facilitated by teaching and learning, then the next statement that Curwen Doige made is parallel to the importance of being

able to manipulate symbols beyond the realm of functionality and how these symbols

(mark, picture, sign, or symbols) become integrated as part of the cultural behaviours and

histories of Aboriginal people:

> Literacy depends on an existent form of interpretive representation of words,
> either alphabetic or symbolic. A literate person has learned how to read those
> representations in order to communicate ideas clearly and to understand what is
> being communicated. (p. 124)

As we continue to define these literacies, it is important to contextualize that the

way of life and how Aboriginal people have lived off the land is part of their literacy.

This way of life, and in interaction with others and the environment, Aboriginal people

have manipulated and worked with their own signs, symbols, and representations to

project who they are to others, which is part of their literate meaning-making experience.

Literacy defined from a narrow perspective, as "school knowledge" and as Willis

(1997) observed, has dominated the classroom; and although we have recognized artists,

dancers, and musicians who express themselves with very different and distinct literacy

forms, we have not moved to allow for a broader understanding of these forms in the

classroom. Acknowledging and accepting that Cree people bring their own forms of

literacies as part of their way of life is *active validation* for them as well as an

opportunity to embrace a broader and more encompassing definition of literacy.

Aboriginal people transmit their literacy in different forms. They are expressing

themselves in many different ways to communicate to others around them that they too

have developed, expressed, and idealized who they are in the different tasks and

challenges that they face daily. As Vygotsky (1989) would say, it is a developmental

process in cognition much like inner speech and external speech: "Inner speech is for

oneself; and external speech is for someone else" (p. 225).

Literacy and how we express it to others around us cognitively, on a higher plane, is based on our own expression individually and as members of cultural groups. It is time for others to allow us to conceptualize and express ourselves in literacy forms that are beneficial to us as Indigenous peoples. The way that we conceptualize will be based on our experiences and the school's need to be more flexible to build on what the children bring and validate these experiences and their way of interpreting the world. This prospect of creating a broader understanding of literacy will also help to promote the whole aspect of how language and literacy and the identity of a people are inseparable and alert Aboriginal people to the fact that they need to take the initiative to revitalize, maintain, and develop their own Aboriginal languages:

> Despite funding levels that are grossly inadequate for the project at hand, Aboriginal people continue to pursue language revitalization, in part because Aboriginal languages are seen as inseparable from issues of Aboriginal identity. As the bearers of thought processes, Aboriginal languages encode unique ways of interpreting the world. (Castellano et al., 2000a , p. 270)

Tuhiwai Smith (2001) spoke from a Maori perspective about decolonizing methodologies and contended that researchers have made huge inferences and generalizations about how the Maori people function and those elements of their society seem to be restricting their development. She felt that these researchers have missed the point by claiming new knowledge about Maori people and how they live and that much of the research is what she called "crisis research" (p. 174) and a response to solve Maori problems. She identified her own Maori perspective:

> An analysis of research into the lives of Maori people, from a Maori perspective, would seem to indicate that many researchers have not only found 'truth' or new knowledge; rather, they have missed the point entirely, and, in some cases, drawn conclusions about Maori society from information that has only the most tenuous relationship with how Maori society operates. (p. 174)

It is important that research be conducted by insiders, people who belong to the culture and speak the language. This is a perspective that is essential in the research field. The cultural and social context of Aboriginal people is not the same as that of mainstream society, and the meaning making that occurs in the home will reflect how children think and practice literacy within these settings.

Meaning making and literacies vary amongst peoples, and language and cultural information has a bearing on how these literacies are developed. I have a 12-year-old grandson who has amazed me with his ability to work from a diagram on Lego projects or models and how little attention he pays to the actual written instructions. I have asked him whether he reads the instructions, and he said, "No, I just look at the pictures." He has completed many complex and intricate projects on his own. For example, he recently put together a six-foot roller-coaster model with tiny parts, and it took him two evenings to finish it. His conceptual ability to work from a diagram and put together the intricate and tiny parts of the model is a specific type of expertise. I wonder whether the literacy experiences in the home facilitate this type of conceptual development. He has worked on models at home, in his own time, at his own pace, and it is something that he enjoys. I think about what he is doing here as a Cree boy and what he is drawing on from his social-cultural context and world experiences. At home we allow children to do their own meaning making, and they draw from their interests and life experiences. My grandson has an eye for detail and I know that his father does too. His interest in working on models came with his ability to sit for long periods of time and work patiently on a project. As young Cree children we were taught to sit still for a long time, waiting for a storyteller to begin his story. To add to this, Cree people have developed a keen sense of

visual literacy because they have to use landmarks and environmental signs, literate forms, for their way of life.

The life experiences and social-cultural context of Cree people is a unique milieu; therefore we need to be cognizant of the distinctive types of literacy experiences that these children have in their homes to catch a glimpse of their conceptual development. I wonder whether we are facilitating these types of literacy experiences and perhaps need to pay explicit attention to these experiences in the school. These are the discriminating thoughts that I had as I analyzed my data, and they helped to formulate how Cree children construct and display literacy from their own experiences at home and at school.

As a researcher who has used this framework, I realize the effect that this perspective could have on the educational system that serves Aboriginal children. This perspective could validate Indigenous knowledge. Cree people have their own Indigenous forms of literacy, and these forms should be recognized in the school. Recognizing Aboriginal children as meaning makers is part of this process, and acknowledging the Aboriginal language, culture, knowledge, home literacies, and strengths that they bring to school is validation. Validation for Aboriginal people has to be active and a lived experience. Aboriginal people have to be involved to show commitment to the process and take ownership of it and to combat the Aboriginal community's negative responses to research. This type of validation will not only help to change the attitude of the community to research and the researcher, but will also act as a consciousness-raising agent for the educational community.

A researcher who works with an Aboriginal population will find the research more significant if the linguistic experiential information of the community and the

children is acknowledged in the research. As an Aboriginal educator and researcher, my aim was to find ways and means to encourage and support Aboriginal people, especially children. The theoretical perspective that I used for this research with Aboriginal children is built on a Vygotskian (Vygotsky, 1978) foundation, with reference to Rosenblatt (1994) and Willis (1997), as well as my own Cree Métis meaning making.

CHAPTER 3:

SÂPONIKANA ASCI ASÂPAP

Research Methodology

The research methodology I used as an "insider" was an ethnographic case study design that allowed me to look inside and outside the classroom and develop relationships with students so that I could describe the events effectively from this perspective. LeCompte and Schensul (1999), Erickson (1984), Agar, (1991) call this an "emic" perspective.

Wilcox (1982) states that to know what and why something is taking place and be able to describe, analyze and interpret these events and descriptions then one must take into consideration the "relationship between the setting and its context" (p. 458) which in this instance includes the classroom, the school as well as the community. Since I am looking specifically at literacy what happens in the home in terms of literacy development will also be important to this research. I used an *ethnographic case study* design, which Erickson (1984) defined as "a deliberate inquiry process guided by a point of view, rather than a reporting process guided by a standard technique or set of techniques, or a totally intuitive process that does not involve reflection" (p. 51). This definition allowed me to use a specific inquiry process guided by a point of view from which I acknowledged and looked at the children as meaning makers and validated their presence by listening to their voices.

This was a qualitative ethnographic case study in an elementary classroom in northern Alberta. I chose to use an ethnographic case study design for my interpretive research because it allowed for open inquiry into the complexities of this cross-cultural

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context. According to LeCompte and Schensul (1999), case studies and ethnographies are recommended for complex studies in which the problem, context, or phenomenon is unclear, unknown, or unexplored. The field of Cree children's development of literacy has been relatively unexplored and undertheorized. LeCompte and Schensul pointed out the importance of identifying the focus of culture within ethnographies. To narrow my research I made a decision to focus on literacy and the thrust of my inquiry was based on this focus.

As a researcher I know the importance of looking at the big picture, especially when one is dealing with a cross-cultural situation and the dynamics that occur within this context. It is also important to state that I chose to look at literacy from the children's perspective, from their eyes and ears of understanding, because they were the key participants, the meaning makers in the cultural context of the study. Although I interviewed the teacher as well and included her in the discussions, the focus of the study was the children. Erickson (1984) commented on ethnography:

> What makes a study ethnographic is that it not only treats a social unit of any size as a whole but that the ethnography portrays events, at least in part, from the points of view of the actors involved in the events. (p. 52)

LeCompte and Schensul suggested that "we must first discover what people actually do and the reasons they give for doing it before we can assign to their actions interpretations drawn from our own personal experience or from our professional or academic disciplines" (pp. 1-2). As Wilcox (1982) recommends it is important for an ethnographer to develop relationships with the school staff, students and community people to allow for a flow of information and the opportunity to work with the many different participants who are key to the research study.

Access and Selection of Community and Participants

Initially, my task was to find a community and a school that I could use for the study. I took approximately a month and a half to travel to various communities and schools and spend time at each location to find a suitable one for my study. The small community of choice was one in which I felt accepted and the school environment was pleasing and comfortable. The people were pleasant and made me feel at ease since I had developed relationships previously with some of these people at the school as well as some of the community members. These relationships with these people added a sense of comfort and acceptance. My dialogue with the school staff also helped me to make this choice based on my intuition and the sense of belonging that I felt as I sat in the classroom with the children.

Although the community people are friendly and accepting, it was not easy to find parents and students who would be willing to participate in the home component of my study. I was eventually able to arrange this focal home component with two women I had previously worked with. They both worked in the school and were comfortable with my request. The two focal students for the home component are both girls. For these two students I worked around the parents' schedules and was cognizant of events in the community that would affect my home visits. I had to reschedule a few visits to the home and school because of deaths or other tragic events in the community that affected the whole community.

Data Collection

LeCompte and Schensul (1999) recommended that a researcher establish a data-collection plan to carefully consider, describe, and outline the steps in the process to help

the researcher. My data collection consisted of field notes, classroom observations, journal writing, literacy digs, children's photos, group work, a few outside school events, and interviews with the teacher (Appendix A), students (Appendix B), and parents (Appendix C). I also had an ongoing dialogue with the teacher for her understanding of the learning experience of the students in her class. Much of this is documented in my journal writing as well as in field notes in which I documented the students' and teacher's responses and statements. I looked at group work, teacher-assigned or chosen by the students themselves, which revealed various levels of legitimate participation, issues of identity and development of self, and the use of language patterns that are different from those of peers and teacher.

The frequency of classroom observations ranged from one to two days per week at different times of the day, with some observations in language arts, social studies, science, and physical education classes and at other scheduled events that included the whole school at different times. I also chose to do what I call *story-writing reflection* to talk to the students about this experience and gather their own reflections of how they felt about this activity.

For the two focal students and the home component, I collected data in the home: I made appointments for home visits, attended a birthday party outside one of the homes around a camp fire, and visited with the students in their own bedrooms. These data highlighted the aspect of literacy and how it is defined in the home. As a researcher, my task was to analyze and work from what I found. The purpose of this research was to allow the data to speak for the personal experience of Cree children. Their experiences were similar to some of mine, but culture and context are not static.

My initial visit to the home was to establish a comfortable relationship with each child and to allow her to participate in the dialogue and direct my attention to what she felt was important. These home visits were very interesting and gave me data that reaffirmed what most of us believe, and that is the importance of relationship building with students with whom we work. The more we know our students, the more we will understand what is meaningful to them and how they process this information. Willis's (1997) social and cultural construct of literacy and Gee's (1989) definition of discourse guided my data collection within the home. I was open to view literacy from a different perspective. Confidentiality was not an issue, and I found that the parents were eager to talk to me about what they felt was crucial for the healthy development of their own children. My role was one of researcher, and the students as well as the parents came to trust me and believe that what they shared with me was between the researcher and the participant.

I interviewed the parents of these two girls and found it a delightful experience. We discussed the types of activities in which they engage at home with their children, significant data that they wished to share with me, and how they saw themselves in the role of fostering literacy development in their own children. I did not interview the students until January to ensure that they felt at ease with me and that I had developed a good relationship with each child before I asked her key questions about her own literacy development.

The data from the home were pertinent especially because I was looking at literacy as a social and cultural construct, and I needed to understand how this aspect of home literacy influences the literacy practices at school. I collected interviews and

discussions with the two focal students and the caregivers, who in one instance is the grandmother. *Focal* is defined as "of or at a focus" in the *Webster's New World Dictionary* (1996, p. 240). I talked to one mother and met both fathers of the two focal students. I spent some time in their own personal and private space, the bedroom, while we discussed what they enjoyed and what they did with their time at home.

I also spent some time at home observing and collecting data on literacy practices and behaviours. This data collection included documentation of songs they listen to, video games they play, television programs they watch, or the general interaction centering on literacy in the home. I documented field notes and interviewed parents, siblings, and other pertinent family members as they interacted with the student in various literacy events.

Another form of data collection that I used in the home component was photography. I asked the focal students to take pictures of what they considered literacy, and then I interviewed them about those pictures. I did not place any restrictions on this exercise but allowed them as much flexibility as they desired as well as the opportunity to show me what is important to them. These two focal students allowed me to examine the context of home and school for data collection, and the literacy practices as well as the use of Cree and English in the home.

The literacy digs, (Taylor, personal communication, January, 2004) another form of data collection, was carried out to look for literacy in what is considered out of classroom artifacts, items that are personal to the students. Literacy digs with the students at school consisted of looking in their lockers, their desks, the personal binders that they kept at home or in their desks, and a collection of items that they may or may not have

considered school work. Several of the students kept these binders at home and brought them in specifically for the literacy dig. In these binders they collected many different types of artifacts that they shared with me; they consisted of photographs, computer illustrations, poems, notes, lists, drawings, diary types of entries, and so forth. Some of the students kept a drawing portfolio—a collection of art that they worked on at home and during their free time in school. These literacy digs are very important and gave me a great deal of information about what is meaningful to each of the students who participated in a literacy dig with me.

In my interviews with the children, I asked questions about their background knowledge on current school-based topics of study in relation to their world and community. I tape-recorded the students' dialogues and discussions while they were engaged in their lessons or assignments to gain a better understanding of how they negotiate meaning while they complete these tasks. In addition to audiotaping the students, I documented field notes and kept track of their responses to the activities and assignments given to them. I collected student's writing samples, reading assignments, artwork, and assigned journals. I also interviewed the teacher to discover her own definition of literacy and how she approached the task of teaching reading and writing to them.

The home visits were a type of validation for both girls, and I noticed that after each visit they felt more at ease and enjoyed chatting with me. Data pertaining to the issue of identity and whether the children identify themselves with the Cree population or with mainstream society was collected during the personal interviews with various students. It was important to collect data in the home because it gave me an opportunity

to look at literacy from the children's perspective and to examine the literacy events that take place in the home to gain a holistic view. Moll (1992), who conducted research on minority children, commented:

> Thus, the teacher in these home based contexts of learning will know the child as a whole person, not merely as a student, taking into account or having knowledge about the multiple spheres of activity within which the child is enmeshed. In comparison, the typical teacher-student relationship seems thin and single stranded, as the teacher knows the students only from their performance within rather limited classroom contexts. (p. 134)

Data Analysis

To begin my initial analysis process I spent time reading and rereading my data. I did not start to analyze my thoughts until I had spent considerable time going through all of my field notes, journal entries, and all other pertinent data. After this initial process of digesting what was in my data, I thought about what was meaningful to me and stayed in my mind from what I had read. The process I have outlined is the one that I used as my research foundation based on the work of Vygotsky (1978). It is a good approach to use with Indigenous children and is the sociocultural foundation of meaning making. I chose to process my data and work from my own meaning making as an Indigenous researcher, and as I began to write I chose themes and thoughts that were meaningful to me and spoke to my heart.

I perused the pictures that the two girls took that showed me examples of what they thought were meaningful examples of literacy in their own homes. During the school day I listened to the interaction and discussion between various students in class as they engaged in group work. I thought over the dynamics of the class as I read and reread my notes, and I could see the actual scenes in my mind. I contextualized my thoughts and processed the information with thoughts about the atmosphere of the community, the

people, and the school and how they all tied together and supported each other in terms of

what I heard and saw in the classroom. I reviewed my data as a big picture and then

focused on what I thought were significant pieces that showed us what these Cree

children were all about. All of these were statements about who they are as Cree children

and about their experience of literacy in a cross-cultural situation in a small community in

northern Alberta.

My construction of what I have chosen as meaningful comes from my Indigenous

perspective; therefore I have included my viewpoint as an insider/outsider to place in

context for the reader the findings that have emerged as significant to the teacher and

researcher.

Insider/Outsider Viewpoint of a Researcher

As a Cree woman, teacher, university student, and researcher, I have brought

along with me my passion to become a change agent for Aboriginal children. This

passion is what fuelled my desire to conduct this research and look at literacy and

education from the students' perspective. As a result, I bring with me the biases,

opinions, and experiences that I must acknowledge as a researcher. As Agar (1980)

suggested, "Whether it is your personality, your rules of social interaction, your cultural

bias toward significant topics, your professional training, or something else, you do not

go into the field as a passive recorder of objective data" (p. 48).

I was a participant observer, and I chose to keep a low profile so that the students

and staff would see me as someone who was in the classroom but would not be taking the

teaching role at any time during my study. I chose this approach because I have some

experience with the school jurisdiction and I did not want to fall into a teacher role. I

remained mainly as an observer for most of the time, but I was open and ready to become more of a participant to answer the students' questions to make the data collection process more beneficial. As an Aboriginal teacher I had to be sensitive to how much of a teacher/helper role I could play because my presence was comforting to the students, and they made comments such as "Why doesn't Ms. Laderoute teach us today?" I had to be careful not to create a situation that could be uncomfortable for the teacher and for me, so my response to this was to laugh with the students, and they left it alone. I established a good working relationship with the teacher, and we discussed my data-collection process and what I proposed to collect for each day.

After having made this point, I need to elaborate on "making the familiar strange" (Wilcox, 1982, p. 458) which means I need to notice what I previously took for granted as an Aboriginal person who spoke Cree. As a participant observer, an insider and an outsider, the implications are somewhat unique. I was considered an outsider because I am from another community, but I was considered an insider, a part of the cultural group, because I am Aboriginal and I speak Cree. The relationship building was somewhat easier than it would have been if I were from another culture, but the expectations, the responsibility, and the accountability from the Cree people are high. For the focal part of my study, the home component, it was a challenge to find people who felt comfortable enough to allow me into their own homes, their personal and private space. A previous working relationship in a different work situation with two mothers who worked in the school gave me the opportunity to include this home component in my data collection. As an insider of the cultural group, I had to be aware of the cultural bias that I brought to the

situation. Agar advised, "Think about what you are doing, force yourself to look at the same material in a completely different way" (p. 49).

As a researcher I found this role very different from my previous roles of teacher, administrator, and consultant; and this opportunity to view things from a different lens was an exhilarating experience for me. Agar (1996) suggested that ethnography is not just about shared knowledge, but it is also about life, the way we live, and what is relevant to us. As a researcher it was my job to describe, observe, interpret, and report what was happening and let the data speak for the Cree children's personal experiences of literacy.

CHAPTER 4:

NÎHÎYAW PIMATISOWIN

Context: *Taniti? Tanisi? Ki-nîhîyawan cî?*

To contextualize my study I will describe my perception of the community, the people, the students, and the school staff and describe the school and its atmosphere. The following is a picture of the unfolding of my journey as I traveled the gravel road of data collection to this small northern community twice a week for nine months.

As I drove in each morning to conduct my research, I thought about this small northern Albertan community, typical and very much like the community in which I grew up as well as others that I had visited in my early years as a child in a small Métis settlement. The road has been upgraded and maintained with good gravel, and the road into the hamlet has recently been paved, which has eliminated much of the dust with which the people have had to struggle in the past. This community is not officially recognized as a reserve or a settlement, although it is comprised of almost all Cree-speaking people. The people have been working hard for many years to reach a land settlement from the federal government and are still in negotiations.

As I drove in I looked around and saw homes that I would typically see in my own community: the two- or three-bedroom frame houses built on one level with most of them still using frame lumber for their siding, as well as an assortment of trailers sprawled alongside the road. To get to the school I passed an old church building, no longer in use and abandoned, which informs me that the Roman Catholic church had been a presence at some time in this community. The homes are close together in one cluster in the area around the school, and other homes are alongside the main road, easily

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accessible to those who need to stop by to see family. From what I know historically, in discussion with some of the people, most of the homes were built near the school so that their children could walk to school. This is also the case in many other northern Aboriginal communities. As I looked around I saw old, abandoned buildings being replaced with new, frame-built homes. It was early fall, and the community was green and colorful and the yards were clean and well maintained.

As the hub of the community, the school building has many trailers alongside it to house the teaching staff. The school is typical of other education structures and is mainly a rectangular building with tan siding and blue top, with the gymnasium being the most obvious structure. The playground equipment is colorful, bright, and appealing to the eye. Around the school I noticed other educational buildings such as the adult upgrading center; the health center is just a few feet away, and on the other side of the schoolyard is the community's gravesite. It has some of the little house structures built around the graves as I have seen at many Aboriginal gravesites. In another location in the community I saw an outside ice rink, and close by is the band administration office. Surrounding these offices is another large building, most likely used for community events and equipped with a kitchen and a large space for meetings. The community is spread out away from the school, but close enough to allow easy access, and this has become the heart of the community.

The population of the community is approximately 500 Cree people (Northland School Division No. 61, 2005). This community would be considered traditional because many of the members still trap, hunt, and fish for their subsistence; unemployment is high; and the major employers for the community are the school, band, and oil companies

in the area. The oil industry has devastated the community, and moose, which are the staple diet of most Aboriginal people in the North, have fled the area because of the oil development (Brown, 1997). The only people in the community who may come from different racial or cultural groups are the service employees in the community, a community nurse who was hired from the outside, and the teaching staff at the school. The other employees who serve as health workers in the community are Cree members. The nearest town for major services is about 60 minutes away—roughly 110 km. The community is served with a small convenience store in the next hamlet, which is approximately 10 minutes away. An old, abandoned store sits alongside the road, which reveals that the community previously had its own convenience store. This small northern Cree community is very much like many others in northern Alberta.

This community, very much like my own, is a Cree-speaking community, with Cree being the language used at social and community events. During the last 10 years we have experienced a dramatic change in my community that influences how much Cree the children use in socializing, and the use of Cree is not as apparent in the schoolyard as it was when I worked for Northland School Division as a supervisor of Native programs. It seems that a similar change is taking place in this community of Apisimosos Road. As I listened and observed during my data collection, I heard very little Cree being spoken by the children on the playground during recess time, which was disheartening for me as a language activist. However, because I was unable to attend any major type of community gathering outside of school events besides a family wiener roast, I am not sure how much of this language change has taken place outside of the school perimeters. I gathered from discussions with school personnel that the community people have been

steadily moving to greater use of English within the past 10 years. The adults to whom I listened in the school conversed in both Cree and English, with English being the more obvious language of choice, especially in the midst of staff members, including teachers. The women at different times of the day chose to speak Cree to each other in the staff room and also spoke Cree to me. People aged 30 and older are still speaking more Cree, whereas the people younger than 30 are speaking a dialect of English. The elders still prefer to use Cree and continue to converse with others in the Cree language.

To facilitate my discussion of the status of Cree language use in this community, the work of Blair and Fredeen (1995) has allowed me to place it in context for those who want to gain some understanding of the state of the Cree language in this community from a theoretical perspective. The community of Apisimôsos Road, as Blair and Fredeen described in their work, is experiencing the gradual and bottom-to-top death of its language. Many of the students do not speak the mother tongue, Cree, and are becoming proficient in the dominant language, English. I spent considerable time outside on the playground at morning and lunch recess at school, as well as at social activities inside and outside the school, listening for use of the Cree language, and I heard very little by the children themselves. The parents are still fluent in Cree but converse mainly in English at school and during school events.

In my interviews with the parents, many of them commented that they chose to teach their children English, believing that it would be more beneficial to them in the school setting. This is the misconception that Cummins (1991) identified in his work: that people believe that the use of the mother tongue gets in the way of learning another language. The minority language is pushed to the back, and as a result, the members of

these families experience the loss of their own mother tongue. During my data the parents and students used a smattering of Cree, but it was usually expressions that were used to reinforce a statement or show disgust, excitement, or delight.

The response that I received from the community people regarding my study was very positive. As a supervisor of Native programs for Northland School Division, I had become acquainted with many of the community people, and I was especially close to an elderly couple who also were storytellers who contributed to my thesis work (Laderoute, 1994) for my master's degree. This couple became my mentors as well as friends, and I kept in close contact with them for many years. Ed has passed on, but Josie is still in the community. I was able to visit this special friend once more as I worked on my data collection for my dissertation. The relationship that we had built previously was good for me and certainly helped me with this new project. I knew the extended family connections from this earlier contact and was able to tie people together based on my knowledge of elders in the community. I felt at home in the community, and I was also embraced by the school staff. I enjoyed my visits and looked forward to them each week.

The school has a population of about 140 Aboriginal students from K to 12 and a total of about 16 staff members, including the support staff. During my observation I did not see any students who were not Aboriginal, and therefore their school population was 100% Aboriginal. Many of the classes were combined, with a 2/3, a 4/5, and a 5/6 split to make up for small class sizes. The class that I observed for my study, the 5/6 split, had 19 students, with a consistent attendance of approximately 15.

The school is a conglomeration of trailers strategically placed in such a manner that they are joined together in one building. The size of the school seemed large viewed

from the outside, but it is actually very different inside. The first thing that I saw when I walked in is the staff room, which is opposite the boot room. The principal's office is on one side of the boot room and the secretarial office and work area on the opposite side. Just off the principal's office is the liaison worker's office, which seems to be the hub of activity regardless of the time of day.

The woman who was the liaison worker during my data-collection period is a woman whom I have known for many years and consider a dear friend. We have spent considerable time together as a result of her previous employment as the Native language instructor at this school when I was the supervisor for the school division. She is an open, friendly person, and I discovered early in the school year that everyone, including students, gravitate to her office as soon as they walk into the school. I was no exception. Many of the paraprofessionals also used this office to do preparatory work or to work one-on-one with students, and this office was the hub of daily activity.

The staff room was perhaps the next busiest room, and if I was not working in the liaison worker's office, I often found myself either sitting there quietly, thinking and organizing my day, or chatting with a staff member who was on preparation time.

Just off the boot room, the entry way into the main area of the school, a large open area, was also a busy place, especially during recess time. If the weather was too cold for the students to go outside for recess, this is where they congregated to watch movies, play board games, or snuggle up with a friend or a book. It was also the ideal place for socializing with friends as they talked about their day. This area was reserved for the little ones while the older children were usually in the classrooms or in the gym for recess if they had to stay in as a result of cold weather.

The atmosphere in the school was relatively informal. There was always someone with whom to chat because just left of the staff room at the entry to the school is the workroom/library/special-needs room. The support staff could be found in this room and very often would work and chat with each other as they completed assigned tasks for a teacher. Just down the hallway from the entry I could see the gymnasium doors, and this is where all of the main events of the school take place. During class-time physical education, I could see the students involved in some sports activity. All over the school are artifacts of children's work, and the first day that I arrived, I spent some time reading and looking at the artifacts from each class and gaining a sense of what was taking place at this little school.

The hot-lunch kitchen is also another important part of the school. The staff are comprised of multi-tasked people, and on different mornings one of the support staff could be seen pushing the snack or lunch cart to help the kitchen staff if someone happened to be away that day.

The school's atmosphere and activity were such that I became part of the school community, and what I was doing became an accepted part of the routine. I was expected to arrive each week and was asked immediately if I had had a change of plans if I did not arrive for my scheduled visit. I felt at home, part of the school, and an accepted member of the class.

The students in the school are very friendly and accepting. My experience during my nine months of data collection was positive and enjoyable. I formed good, strong relationships with the children and the staff, and I was saddened when the data-collection period came to an end. The students are Cree, but most of them speak Indigenous

English, and very little Cree is used inside and outside of the classroom. These students are unique, and their individual personalities gave the classroom a very different dynamic.

There was a considerable amount of traffic throughout the school year, with new students moving in and out. Some of the families in this community are fairly transient, and students would come in and stay for about a month and then move out. Some of the students in this class also moved back and forth between this school and a neighboring band school, but many of them returned after a short stay in the new school. Some students on the class list did not attend school, and in this class we had one young gentleman whom I had met initially but did not see for the rest of the school year.

The classroom where I spent most of my time was a large room with white walls—a typical school classroom. It was situated down the hallway from the office and across from the computer room. The small hallway immediately before the classroom housed about 12 to 15 lockers for the students in the Grade 5/6 classroom. The classroom is a long rectangular shape, with the longer walls directly on my left and right, running north to south from the entrance, and the two shorter walls running east and west in front of and behind me. The room has two large windows, and the bottom window swung open to let the wind blow through. The one window at my back (the north-south wall) is immediately beside the bulletin boards. The other window is on the east-west wall close to the teacher assistant's desk and near the bulletin board that extends off the blackboard.

Standing at the door, I found a small walk-in closet immediately to my left, a large bulletin board at the back of the classroom, and blackboards at the front opposite this bulletin board. Near the door, which was immediately to my right, is the teacher's

file cabinet with her computer nearby. Alongside the other end of the blackboard and in front of another small bulletin board is the teacher's desk. The classroom has a conglomeration of about 20 desks and six hexagonal tables that fit together near the front beside the blackboard. The seating plan has changed several times throughout the school year, but the desks have been placed either in a semicircle or in rows facing the blackboard.

The atmosphere in the classroom reflected the easygoing nature of the students and the teacher. On one side is a shelf that houses library books—a conglomeration that the teacher has chosen to make up the classroom's own library. There is no library in the school because a portable had to be freed up for classroom space; as a result, each classroom has taken an assortment of books for its own use. The books are arranged randomly; they are not specific to any category and are there for students to peruse when they have finished their work.

The teacher for this specific group of students had worked with this class for three years. She taught them initially in Grade 2 and then worked with them in Grades 4/5 and moved up with them into the 5/6 class, where I collected my data. The students ranged in age from 11 to 14 in this Grade 5/6 split classroom, and there was a good mix of male and females in the class, with a ratio of 12 boys to 7 girls.

The students felt comfortable with their teacher. Miss Ross is a teacher with commitment, and she worked hard with her students. She talked openly about her many experiences to try to find meaningful content for her students and reported that some of these experiences made her laugh because they were inappropriate. She has an easygoing personality, but the students knew the boundaries and complied quickly with class

routines as soon as she formally declared class in session. The environment and the relationship building in the classroom allowed the students the opportunity to be risk takers and develop their own personalities and uniqueness as individuals. This relationship building is an important component of the learning and teaching situation, and the data analysis will show how crucial this is in any classroom setting.

I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know each one of them individually, and when it was time for me to leave, I was surprised at how attached I had become to them. I chose not to say a formal goodbye and lingered at the school until the bus had left.

I found the personalities of the boys to be so unique because each child was so special and each one of them offered something to the classroom. Whenever one was away for the day, I noticed how this affected the whole group. The girls were also delightful, and I grew fond of them. As they got to know me, they were curious about the work that I was doing and why I was recording their activities. After a period of time it seemed that I was just one of them, and they saw me and said hello but carried on with whatever they were doing. However, they were always happy to see me. The personalities of some of the students will emerge in my discussion of their meaning-making experiences and my descriptions of them.

Nîhîyaw Awasak

The students were the center of my study, and I want to introduce some of the students who will be discussed to give the reader some background information from which they can draw as I present my data. The students, the youth of this classroom, affected my emotions deeply; and I remembered and thought of them fondly as I wrote and described them.

I will begin with some of the boys who stood out for various reasons and explain how they added richness to the dynamics of the classroom. Freddie, who was 12 years old and in Grade 6, is a slim and striking young man, with a sense of humor and a jovial and pleasant personality. Freddie was the student who initially stood out as I observed the class. His good-humored manner and his inquisitive comments and the questions that he asked to validate himself were amusing. He is a young man who had found a niche in the classroom by displaying humor and funny behaviors in whatever he did so that people would laugh and pay attention to his behavior. Freddie had found a way to draw the negative energy away from him by relying on his humor and cheerful personality when a situation became somewhat uncomfortable for him.

Freddie comes from a family of six and is the second oldest boy in the family but seems to have taken the role of the oldest male member of the family, accepting it and playing it admirably. According to his mother and in discussion with Freddie, I discovered that he spends a great deal of quality time playing and being with his siblings at home, which he seemed to enjoy because he talked about it with pride. As I observed the class, I noticed that Freddie can be rather distracted, and at times his teacher told him to calm down.

Sam is another young man who stood out; in fact, he was the first one to volunteer to talk with me about school. He was curious about why I was there and seems to be a very inquisitive young man. It is interesting that throughout my study I found Sam in the midst of females. He socialized with them extensively outside during recess, and he was typically surrounded by girls in the classroom because he placed himself strategically to gain this attention. Sam was 13 years old and very aware of himself as a male.

Throughout the data collection he was quite flirtatious which I noticed because of the types of comments that he made to the girls or peers in his class. I did not interview Sam's mother, although I did spend some time talking with her before I started my data collection in the school. Sam, like Freddie, enjoys playing and spending time with his siblings, especially the baby, and he told me that this is his favorite activity at home. Sam has a delightful personality and with an interesting and quiet manner ensures that everyone knows of his presence. There were times when he remained quiet and working throughout much of the day. One of his comments to me one day was that "I know your name, but I don't believe you gave me your phone number." This is Sam.

Tommy and Randy, who are siblings, are in Grades 5 and 6 respectively, and live with their grandmother. Randy, who was 14, is one year older than Tommy.

Shortly before I arrived to collect my data, their grandfather had passed away, and these two boys were learning to adjust to life without him. Their grandmother told me that her husband had worked with Tommy, whereas she spent more time with Randy. Randy speaks and understands more Cree than Tommy does. In my journal notes I wrote the following about the boys:

> Tommy is eager and likes to please the teacher. He is keen to develop a relationship with her. Randy is more confident in his own strength and knowledge and will offer as much information as he can when he is asked for it.

From my observations Tommy seemed to be a good listener, a strength that he learned to build on because it brings a favorable response from the teacher. Tommy had been ostracized to some degree by his peers in this classroom.

Ray is a young man who sat and watched quietly when I arrived, but as I observed, I saw that he had a commanding presence in the classroom because of the

various types of relationships that he had formed with his peers. I saw a fairly aggressive

exterior in class, and some of the students stayed away from him.

Ray is an interesting young man, which I discovered when I interviewed him one-

on-one. He has a strong desire to do well in school. He was 13 years old, in Grade 6, and

is the middle child in his family. I interviewed his mother, who told me that school has

not been a positive experience for Ray, which is probably one of the many reasons that he

struggles with issues about himself. She reported that his reading and writing skills are

below grade level, and he has not established a strong foundation of literacy skills from

which to build to excel in school. When I interviewed him he told me that his interests

included cartoon characters and vehicles such as quads, "cool" cars, and trucks. He

seemed to be a very different person when I talked to him alone from what I had seen in

his interactions with his peers.

Ron is another young man whom I observed, and when I interviewed him I found

him to be delightful in the way that he answered my questions. Ron was more tolerant

than the other boys were, and therefore the teacher had a tendency to put him into groups

with boys who were most likely to be picked on, such as Tyler and Tommy. He was not

immune to picking on others or being picked on but I sensed that he did not accept it as

much as some of the other older boys in class did. He spent some time in the same house

with Tyler. There were times when he, along with other boys, picked on Tyler, who was

one of the oldest and smallest boys.

Ron lives mainly with his grandfather but also stays with his aunt for some part of

the year. On awards day his grandfather came into the school with him to support him.

Ron sat with him and talked about the event as I listened in. His grandfather spoke only

Cree when he talked with others; which indicated that Ron has a good understanding of Cree. Their rapport with each other was obvious to me, an observer.

Carl, another young man in the class, had recently experienced the death of his father, before I arrived to collect my data. His father had died in an automobile accident the year before, and Carl was grieving. I did not know who his father was, but Carl asked me if I knew a specific lady from my community whom he named. When I replied that I did, he told me that he had spent some time in her home before his father died. This was important information for him that allowed him to relate to me. I spent some time interviewing him, and after the interview he would tease me from a distance to show that we had developed a relationship. It was as though he had accepted me and wanted to be part of what I was doing. I saw so much potential in this young man, and I was disappointed to hear when I went back for my follow-up visit in September 2004 that he had dropped out of school the following year.

Tyler, as I mentioned earlier, was the oldest and smallest member of this classroom. I know that he was the oldest because he told me one day in class. Tyler was 14 years old and in Grade 5. He is a shy, quiet young man who is gentle in spirit and easy to get along with. Unfortunately, because of his small stature, the boys in the class had a tendency to pick on him, and at times the aggressiveness of the other boys was somewhat fierce. I saw the boys walking by and slapping Tyler's head or pushing him around during class. He somewhat withdrew inside himself, which was his way of diverting attention away from himself. He did not succeed because I observed many of the boys picking on him, which, as I indicated in my journal entries, happened frequently. I felt rather uncomfortable for Tyler, and I can imagine that it was difficult for him. Any kind

of aggressive behavior, especially directed towards children by other children, is offensive to me because I had been picked on when I was in junior high. It was not aggressive behavior that I had experienced, but more nasty teasing, which made me feel insecure and unhappy. I did not fit in because of my size and age. I was 12 years old in Grade 9, and the rest of the students were young adults of 15 and older. I sensed that Tyler felt ostracized because of his size, and I am sure that at times he probably wanted to simply disappear. When I interviewed him I saw the quiet, gentle nature of a young boy who wanted to fit in and was struggling to be accepted by his peers.

David is the last boy whom I will describe. He was a happy young man and he had a good sense of humor. He is boisterous, says what he thinks, and allows people in to his world fairly readily. I know his mother, whom I taught in Grade 1 in 1990 at a neighboring school. I saw some of her personality in her son. David is a good worker who tries hard to stay on track, but occasionally becomes sidetracked by his peers. He is well liked by most of his classmates, and some of them—especially Sam—fondly used a nickname for him. Sam would often look over David's shoulder to make sure that he was okay, and I believe that this is because they are second cousins because David's and Sam's mothers are first cousins. I sensed a great deal of contact between the families. My journal entries and the group work activities revealed that David and Sam get along well and work well together. David and Freddie also seemed to be good friends and ended up working together on many projects.

The girls in the class are quiet and eager workers who attended to tasks and stayed on task most of the time until their work was done. I will begin by describing the two girls with whom I spent more time: Marie and Laura. Marie was the youngest in the class

and an achiever, as her mother told me during an interview, who worked hard and stayed on task. She is the youngest in her family and has a very close connection with her father, who dotes on Marie who shared this information with pride.

Marie is a quiet young girl with high aspirations. She was eager to please her teacher and tended to her work to achieve good marks in school. She paid attention to the assignments and kept people on track during group activities. Marie was somewhat younger than the rest of the girls, which was reflected in her attitude and interests. Some of the other girls in her class paid attention to the boys, whereas Marie was more focused on her work.

Laura is the other young girl whom I included in the home component of my study. She lives with her grandmother but visits her mother on weekends; when I returned for the follow-up visit in September 2004, I discovered that she had moved back home with her mother.

Laura is a very quiet and soft-spoken young girl who did not offer any verbal response during class unless she was asked to read out loud by her teacher. At home she is also quiet, and many of her activities involved her cousins; they tended to stay around the house and not to venture outside of the yard. She was the leader of the small social group at home and directed the activities with her cousins, deciding what and where they will play.

She often commented that school and home were boring, and I wondered whether she was more lonely than bored. She told me that she wanted to stay at this school because she liked her teacher and she did not like the school in the community in which

her mother lived. She also wanted to stay with her grandmother because her two siblings live with her.

Laura did not speak unless I asked her for specific information. She did not initiate conversation with me, but waited for me to talk and answered my questions.

Chelsea was the popular girl in the classroom, quiet, soft-spoken, and a good worker. She was well liked by all of the boys and the girls and was the one whom the boys liked to chase at recess, along with her friends Linda, Marie, and Tessa. Chelsea received much of the male attention in the classroom even when she did not ask for it. Her peers also recognized her as the achiever, the one who would do well in all of her assignments.

After school and during the summer, Chelsea spent a great deal of time doing school-like activities at home that involved drawing, writing, and coloring. She and Marie spent time together outside of school hours and slept over at each other's house during weekends.

Linda and Tessa, who both paid attention to their appearances, were well dressed and very quiet, although at recess time they were boisterous when they were in small groups. These two girls liked the insulation that their small peer group provided, and they were seldom alone. They attended to their tasks in class and made an effort to do the work as well as they could.

Jean, small boned and small for her size, reminded me of myself at that age, but Jean made up for her size in attitude. She was a confident girl who did not mind being alone at times and even spent time with the boys on her own. She got along well with Sam, Carl, and Ray, and during our literacy dig I saw a few of the drawings in her binder

that the boys had made for her in the computer lab. She was likely the youngest in her family because she received a great deal of attention from her parents, especially her mother. I say this because several times during the year she left the classroom to travel into town with her mother, and I remember that the youngest ones—the babies of the family—often went on this type of excursion.

These are some of the students who were in this class, and I have described what I saw and how I came to know each one of them. I have not described every one of the students because some were not included in the study, but I have portrayed enough of the class to provide a sense of the dynamics of this group.

Data Interpretation

My interpretation of the data will show how literacy was defined in the home and in the classroom according to Willis's (1997) three definitions. To determine this literacy focus in the classroom, I present documented data from the children's various literacy activities and explain how they responded to these activities. The analysis will reveal the children's meaning-making process and how it is viewed holistically and will address the social and cultural constructs of literacy.

To place my interpretation in context, it is important to note some of the events in the classroom and to describe the environment. The classroom atmosphere was relaxed and conducive to dialoguing between the teacher and the students and there was a good, consistent pace to the lessons. Many of the interactions during the day demonstrated a different understanding of the literacy events and how the students chose to make meaning. At times this meaning making was very different from the set objective of the lesson. The teacher was flexible and facilitated these discussions, which took the class

down a different path and then back to the topic. The students were comfortable in initiating discussion that they knew was off topic but meaningful for them. My analysis will show how the recursive nature of making meaning can show literacy development towards a different understanding.

In terms of my worldview as an insider, I analyzed the ways that the teacher and students validated each other and how it impacted their sense of community. I looked at what I call *active validation* of Cree children in the classroom. I have used this term to correspond with the healthy relationship building that takes place in a nurturing environment. The active validation that occurs in the classroom encourages students to develop a good self-image and become eager and motivated risk takers, and it supports the development of the students' potential. As an Aboriginal educator, I have interpreted this validation from my perspective and have noted when and how the teacher built on the strengths of the children and how they responded to this pedagogy.

As a Cree speaker I recognized this significance as I worked on my analysis and interpretation of data. Since I was familiar with many of the cultural behaviours and spoke the Cree language I understood many of the discourse patterns, (Gee, 1989) unspoken messages which came from the students as well as the parents. This type of interpretation of data was also important to the work I did previously with my Master's thesis which also took into account the body language which was a part of my analysis and interpretation. I know that being Cree there was an exchange, a shared cultural understanding between the researcher and participants which is internalized and would not have been obvious to someone from a different culture.

I was not surprised to find the themes which stood out for interpretation were ones that I was familiar with from my previous work with elders for my Master's thesis. These themes listed below in this interpretation were also mentioned in my work with elders (Laderoute, 1994) and shows although the use of Cree language is not as obvious in the school the behaviours and values which were reflected in the data from the students was a reflection of being Cree.

CHAPTER 5:

NÎHÎYAW NÎYA

Being Cree

The social-cultural construction of being Cree and how the children saw

themselves in terms of their language and culture influenced their literacy experiences

and was reflected in their literacy practices Although there was very little explicit

discussion on what are strong influences in the lives of these students, the unspoken

knowledge of where they came from and who they represent was reflected in the data.

Bruner (1986) explained:

> Language not only transmits, it creates or constitutes knowledge or "reality." Part
> of that reality is the stance that the language implies toward knowledge and
> reflection, and the generalized set of stances one negotiates creates in time a sense
> of one's self. (p. 133)

The data show clearly the constructions of themes that belong specifically to this

community and for the most part reveal glimpses of the cultural beliefs of Cree people in

the North. The constructions of being Cree, interpretation of themes that I found in the

personal and private voices of literacy, focused on expressions discussed in the literature

regarding cultural and social behaviors of Aboriginal people (Battiste, 2000; Laderoute,

1994; Tuhiwai Smith, 2001). The themes which were a part of the literacy artifacts as

well as the personal interviews include the importance of extended family, the roles and

responsibilities of siblings and family members, and the importance of naming. These

themes are based on a cultural construction of who the children are as people, and this

was a continuous thread throughout the data. The *spoken tongue*, a part of the literacy

context has to be discussed since language is a key transmitter of knowledge and culture.

It is important to discuss how assimilation has impacted the use of the Cree language in this community to gain an understanding of the changes that have taken place and how they affect the literacy development of the students in the school.

The Spoken Tongue

One aspect of being Cree is the use of this language and how much the students actually speak it and hear it in the community and school settings. I asked about this during my interviews with the students and the parents. The query about whether or not the children spoke Cree brought with it a discussion about who spoke Cree and where it was spoken, and there was considerable reference to *Kohkom* and *Mosom* and extended family. The two boys Randy and Tommy, brothers in the same classroom, are raised by grandparents, which is common in many families and a reality in many Cree communities. The strong connection to the extended family mean that even though many of these students do not use the Cree language as extensively as their parents do, they hear the language and identify with the family relationships. Many of the grandparents still use the Cree language fluently and converse daily with family members and socially in this language. The students are aware that the language is still being used extensively; they do not seem to be bothered by the fact that they are not developing fluency and are using only a smattering of Cree throughout their day and with selected people.

The reality of grandparents raising grandchildren was evident in this community. In Cree culture the extended family has always played a key role in child rearing and many of us grew up with grandparents actively involved in nurturing role which includes discipline and instruction. I grew up with this type of teaching. This cultural arrangement has changed to some degree but the role of grandparents raising their grandchildren is

still happening in some Aboriginal communities. This is happening in this community.

Out of a class of 17, with 15 children who had permission to participate in the study, 5

lived with their grandparents.

Ron, a member of the Grade 5/6 class, lives with his grandfather, whom I met at

the end-of-the-year celebration for the Grade 6 students that signified their departure

from elementary to junior high school. The event was a family affair, and although it was

informal, as an observer I recognized that it was an important and enjoyable event for

everyone involved. Ron sat with his grandfather and talked with him continuously. I

listened in and heard the grandfather speak in Cree to Ron, who would respond in

English, which conveyed to me that they had developed a communication style that

satisfied both of them and that Ron is a receptive bilingual because of the way the two

communicated back and forth.

Randy and Tommy live with their grandmother; their grandfather had just

recently passed away. The use of Cree language in the home shows how elders still use

Cree extensively for socializing and conversing with their family members. The

following is part of my interview with Randy:

> B: *Do you speak Cree?*
> A: *Some, yeah..*
> B: *Apsis?*
> A: *Yeah..*
> B: *Do you understand Cree?* Mistahi?
> A: *Yeah, . . . my* mosom *used to talk to us in Cree.*
> B: *Mm-hmm. Does it make sense to you?*
> A: *Yeah.. . . . . It's hard for Don..*
> B: *Mm-hmm. But you understand it more, hey? So where do you speak Cree? Who do you speak Cree with?*
> A: *My* kohkom *sometimes. . . . See, like, we play games, like all the animals. . . . She names them in Cree and I have to name them in English.*
> B: *Is there anybody else you talk Cree with—your friends? Any of your friends?*
> A: *A lot of people in Dog Creek. . . .*

B: Oh, Dog Creek... So you have friends in Dog Creek and you speak Cree with them all the time, hey?
A: Yeah, they talk real Cree . . . real good. . . . They don't go to school early, and they learn Cree real fast—when they're small..
B: That's good. . . . Are you glad when you go over there?
A: Sometimes.

Randy was the only one in class who admitted that he had sufficient command of the Cree language to be able to speak it, and throughout the study, whenever Randy was asked to participate in discussions or during recess or lunch breaks he chose to intersperse his statements with Cree words and expressions. It was interesting to see Randy's excitement about how his friends "talk real Cree . . . real good," which shows that he values the language. Randy seemed to be aware of the shift in language use in his own community and that it was changing dramatically, and he was soon finding it difficult to converse with friends in his own community. His response when I asked with whom he spoke Cree was an immediate reference to people in Dog Creek, a nearby Aboriginal community. Randy was also aware that school has a strong influence on language loss because he mentioned that his friends did not go to school "early" and that they learned Cree real fast when they were small, which indicated that they had been immersed in the Cree language as babies and young children. I believe that Randy's comments reveal the depth of wisdom of a young person and the power of the unspoken message from the education system and mainstream society.

In one interview one of the girls, Linda, talked about her level of understanding of the Cree language and noted that she and Marie spoke Cree to each other outside of school. They both have parents who are fluent in Cree, and therefore much of the language would be spoken in the home. It seems that many of the children, members of this community, have some receptive understanding of the language and are able to

understand some very basic commands and questions. The older people in the community still speak Cree and use it in the presence of the children. The students have an auditory receptivity to the language because they hear it at home and in the community but do not speak Cree to each other at school. This condition of passive or receptive bilingualism is common in communities where languages are being lost.

It was also very interesting to hear the parents during the interviews in the privacy of a small office at school revert back to Cree for more expression or to discuss something personal. Sarah, Ray's mother, used Cree words that spoke of what she thought, *nitîhtîn*; joining words such as *ikwa* and *ayâ*; and expressions such as *mitoni*, a qualitative word that expresses something that we like. In one sentence she reverted back to Cree to tell me that she thought her son Ray had not been given the extra help that he needed in class during elementary school.

Sarah used Cree in this context to give her a sense of privacy and the opportunity to show her love for and commitment to her son and his well-being. This is code-switching, and the parents in these interviews chose to use Cree terms to express their deep feelings.

Molly, Marie's mother, also used Cree at different times to express herself, and her use of Cree was very similar to Sarah's. She used joining words in reference to her own training and what she had completed (*asci ikî otinâman*), and both mothers used the expressions *wîya, ayâ, mana*, and *asci* several times. Mable, Chelsea's mother, spoke Cree only once throughout the interview.

It seems that the people have learned to identify the place and time for Cree. The school does not seem to be that place, and even the parents have limited their use of Cree

in this environment. Using the language has become more of a personal and private preference and conveys the sense that Cree belongs more in the home. Decisions such as these are part of the complex and interrelated factors that affect language loss, according to Blair and Fredeen (1995), and the attitude and beliefs that speakers have towards their own mother tongue will affect its use and pattern.

The decisions that this and many other Northern communities are making about their own language have accelerated the level of assimilation by limiting the use of Cree to certain settings. I offered the opportunity to parents to speak to me in Cree during the interviews, but no one took up the offer, and they all seemed to feel more comfortable conducting the interviews in English.

These children in this study bring with them their construction of what it is to be Cree, which includes the connections to the extended family, the use of Cree terms, and the relationship building in families. Their construction includes the language and the terms "*Kohkom*" and "*Mosom*," the Cree terms for "grandfather" and "grandmother," respectively, that the students use; not one referred to his or her grandparents in English. Their construction of what it means to be Cree seems to be internalized, but the use of the Cree language has been left outside the school setting, as was evident in the interview with Linda in which she said that she and Marie speak Cree outside the school. I have heard elders tell young people to speak English in the presence of those who do not understand Cree to be respectful.

The Aboriginal Extended Family/Work at Home

Taylor, (2000), Taylor and Dorsey Gaines, (1988) Heath, (1982), and Moll (1992) all discussed the importance of family in their work on literacy and concluded that much

of what happens in the school setting does not facilitate or develop what is seen as meaningful literacy in the home. The significance of family for Aboriginal people is perhaps slightly different from that of mainstream culture in terms of the roles that people play within the home and the extended family. Roles and responsibilities assigned in the home are also imperative to these children. Weber-Pillwax (2001) reminisced about her own upbringing as an Indigenous child and recalled the strong sense of family and closeness from her own childhood experiences:

> In later years I could realize and understand that such powerful family closeness was built on and reflected a vital integration of values and cultural aspects of both European and Indigenous ways of being and knowing. From these personal experiences have come many of the messages to my students. I believe that without a strong family and/or community base, as individuals we are weakened psychologically in our abilities to situate ourselves respectfully and comfortably in a world of many cultures, societies and nations. (p. 168)

Steinhauer (2002), added with regard to this Indigenous way of being that we "must never think of ourselves in isolation because everything we do affects others in our world" (p. 77). The role of the extended family has always been important to Aboriginal people and continues to be a strong part of who we are.

Battiste (2000) reported that the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples has responded to the dialogue on Indigenous knowledge:

> The commission reported that Aboriginal people should define the content of their Indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage. Culture, in the report's view is dynamic; it is grounded in ethics and values that provide a practical guide and moral compass, enabling people to adapt to changing circumstances. It described how contemporary Aboriginal peoples reach into their traditions for wisdom and strength to cope with the diverse responsibilities of modern environments. It discussed how the traditional wisdom at the core of Aboriginal culture often transcends time and circumstance, but the way it is applied differs from one situation to another. It also affirmed the role of kinship—that is, the extended network of kin and community—to demonstrate how traditional teachings are applied to everyday life. (p. 274)

The importance of the extended family unit and our roles and responsibilities within the family were the more predominant themes reflected in the literacy digs, the interviews, and the home artifacts of these children in a small Northern community in Alberta. Taylor (1998), in her study of family literacy, described how it occurs in the home and what makes it different from what happens at school: "For these children, literacy evolved as an interpersonal process of functional utility, but with the advent of school and the social expectation of learning to read, literacy also became an intrapersonal process" (p. 77). Taylor found that the children's activities at home were meaningful and very personal and that they "never lost the intrapersonal characteristics; rather, interpersonal characteristics added another dimension to literate endeavors" (p. 77).

A subtheme is the roles and responsibilities of family members and siblings based on the family's strengths and expectations. Many families have role expectations that are assigned to each child in the family, such as taking care of siblings and entertaining them by playing school or store or reading to them. Many children are proud to play these roles. In her interview Freddie's mother talked about the importance of Freddie's role at home and explained that he plays with the children and helps with housecleaning. Chelsea explained that one of her most interesting activities at home is taking care of her little sister, who is two years old. She expressed her feelings of genuine care and consideration. Her mother was pleased that her little daughter always plays school with the other children and saw it as a form of socializing the little ones so that they will be ready for the school environment. Linda received little notes from her siblings and her mother, who suggested that being more helpful would help her and everyone in the

family if everyone did what they were asked to do. In his interview Sam mentioned taking care of his little brother, who is one year old:

> B: *What are some things you do at home? What are some activities you do?*
> S: *Keep my little brothers, . . . watch TV, . . . feed my little brother.*
> B: *How old is he?*
> S: *He's one.*
> B: *Is he walking yet?*
> S: *He's walking.*

The role of being responsible for siblings does not fall exclusively to the females, but it was clear in the interviews and my discussions with the students that both males and females play this role at home.

The girls too have some specific responsibilities, as Molly, Marie's mother, explained when I asked her what some of the things that she expected Marie to do were. She replied that they include anything that is done at home, from making her bed to washing the dishes. She is responsible for her own room and spends considerable time rearranging it and organizing her possessions in her dresser drawers.

Randy, who is raised by his grandmother, described going into the bush on the weekend and hunting. He has killed deer, ducks, a beaver, and a goose. I asked him whether he had learned to dress these animals, to prepare them for cooking or for processing the fur, and he told me that he has helped but has not done this preparation by himself. He has watched his *Mosom* and is learning by observation, a method that Cree people have used for many years.

The many activities in which these children are involved are part of the Cree way of life. As children we had roles and responsibilities very early in life, and we knew the routines and what we were expected to do to help in the home. When I was growing up we did not have the luxury of running water, and we had to haul snow and melt it for

many different uses. We also had to help with other duties such as cutting wood and hauling it in, and every weekend we had to clean the house. Everyone had specific chores to perform.

In many homes today the care of siblings is a shared responsibility, and I see this with my grandchildren when they are asked at different times of the day to help with their little brother. They all participate in some manner in the maintenance of the home and perform certain chores to help alleviate the workload for their mother. Mikayla, my granddaughter, loves to take care of her little brother, Noah. She had longed for a little brother or sister for some time, and when Noah was born, she became her mother's little helper. Mikayla does not mind helping with Noah and prefers it to other duties. Chelsea mentioned in her interview that she too prefers taking care of her little brother to doing other household chores. My daughter Erica depends on Mikayla to keep Noah amused during road trips while she drives. Theoren and Alvin have also helped with the care of Noah and will play more of a key role as Noah gets older. Taking care of her little brother was one of the first activities that Linda mentioned when I asked her what she did at home. Many of these young people have taken an active role in taking care of their siblings while their parents are busy with other duties in the home.

In my interview with Sarah, Ray's mother, she mentioned that Ray spends considerable time in the bush with his *Mosom* or his father hunting moose. Ray is learning about traditional culture, how to cut up meat and prepare it. Traditional culture is usually passed down by family members; the grandparents are usually the ones who are involved in activities with the young people. Marie agreed, and her mother, Molly, stated

that learning to tan moose hide is more of a family event because the aunts are also involved.

Jillian, Laura's grandmother, is directly involved in raising her grandchildren; three of them were residing with her during the data-collection period. This is not uncommon in Aboriginal communities, and this pattern of extended family members playing a key role in the day-to-day activities of the young people is still evident today. As we can see, there is still strong Indigenous knowledge in this community, and the students are being exposed to many of the traditional lifestyle skills. This is literacy and must be acknowledged as part of the strengths that the children bring to the classroom.

These activities are part of our Indigenous way of life, and the chores that we do at home or at events offer a form of literacy that we express in many varied forms. Negotiating and performing tasks in the home give children an opportunity to learn skills that they can use in the future.

These strengths that children develop early in the home as they become interested in specific types of activities can be facilitated and encouraged. My sister Cindy has established certain roles for her own children. Elisha, who loves to play hockey and participate in outdoor activities, is usually the one who is asked to run next door to my mother's house to pick up an item for my sister. Sam, the only boy in the family, was a big help to his mother during a move because he organized his own toys, hauled them next door on his sleigh, and arranged them himself in their new location. Both children are asked to perform tasks that they enjoy and are motivated to do. Elisha has not been asked to wash dishes or perform household duties other than to maintain and clean her own room, but she is asked to do tasks that allow her to go outdoors, which is what she

enjoys. As he made several trips back and forth, Sam thought of moving and sorting his toys in his new room as play rather than as a chore.

The home component that involves Marie and Laura has been all about family and very little about other people. The events that take place are family events, with extended family members a part of each gathering. Cree people come together to congregate, socialize, and eat at the celebrations, birthday parties, and other social events such as hockey games. Laura and Marie are learning these behaviors early and are being socialized to engage in these types of events even in their playtime. Laura and her cousins (friends) spend time outside and have learned how to build their own fire and roast wieners, and this happens frequently. On my first home visit she and her cousins had gone inside to get some wieners, and two of them were trying to start the fire. The cousin who is usually good at starting the fire was not there that day. *Kohkom* mentioned that this was the girl's specialty and wondered whether the girls would be successful without her.

From a social and cultural perspective, much of what these children do at home would be considered a form of literacy (Freire, 1993) or a context for literacy (Moll, 1992) and teaches them survival skills that allow them to excel in something and feel liberated as they learn to survive and take care of themselves. If this personal and private expression of literacy is reinforced in the home, it becomes meaningful to the students. Moll (1990) discussed a student, Elena, who used "literacy not only to communicate with others but to communicate with herself—to mediate and regulate her own actions" (p. 335). Literacy can be very narrowly defined as specific to reading and writing informational text, or it can be very broadly defined in a social constructivist frame as

participating in social activities in a social-cultural context associated with but not limited to or even requiring the presence of text or text forms (De Temple & Snow, 2001; Freire, 1993; Willis, 1997).

The following is a discussion of the literacy skills that are important to the Cree people. The literacy events are different from what is being taught in the classroom, and, as Moll (1992) noted, they would be recognized as funds of knowledge for the Cree people. They can be considered Indigenous forms of knowledge that come from the Cree way of life and represent who we are as a people. The skills that young people develop and model are part of the way of life in our communities, and the events become part of their everyday literacy development. Children's ability to build a fire on their own without an adult present is a form of literacy for the Cree people because building a fire is difficult if they cannot ensure the right conditions to start it. Moll and Greenberg (1990) commented in their work with Hispanic, predominantly Mexican children:

> For most classrooms, this infusion of funds of knowledge would mean reorganizing the context of literacy instruction from a passive recitation model to an interactive, more holistic approach that would make full use of student and parental experiences. To be successful, the introduction of funds of knowledge into the classroom must facilitate the development of new, more advanced literacy activities for the students. (p. 345)

As I analyzed the data from the Cree children and was able to understand how they communicate using symbols and text, I believed that these children were experimenting and showing me forms of literacy that make us rethink and reconceptualize literacy for the benefit of the Aboriginal children with whom we work. Willis (1997) offered the following insight when she examined what is being done to prepare teachers to look at literacy from a critical stance: "In these programs, preservice and inservice teachers are rethinking old definitions and purposes of literacy and

reconceptualizing literacy as they observe children's literate behaviors, talk with children and parents, and plan for future individual literacy growth" (p. 394).

The funds of knowledge and the home literacy practices that help children to develop important skills revealed different forms of reading and literacy-developing behaviors that have helped the Cree people to survive in the bush and take care of their needs. I know this because as a child my parents and others in the community knew how to read the forest in their search for dry spruce or other types of firewood because it was so difficult to find firewood when it was -40° F. outside. This skill is not learned unless the situation calls for this particular type of knowledge.

It was interesting to see that reading the wood is still taking place, that some of the younger generation are actually learning how to do it, and that this literacy behavior had been passed on by their caregivers. Although the literacy behavior in building a fire was more for entertainment for the young girls, it is the same skill that my parents learned. Jillian's granddaughter had learned how to read the wood and understood the conditions required to start a fire. She knew what to do and the types of twigs that she had to gather as well as how to pile them together to make the fire.

Laura's two cousins seemed to do all the right things but were not as successful. It took a long time for them to start the fire, and they had just begun to get a small fire going by the time I left. I sensed their frustration, and then a dog ran off with their wieners because one of the girls had placed them within the dog's reach.

Finding the right kinds of twigs and arranging them to create the right conditions for a good fire is a form of literacy. One has to read the wood and learn the steps to start the fire. These little girls had to learn how to start their own fire because the person who

had developed this skill was not available. They also had to learn the hard way not to leave food in an open area; otherwise, the dog was fed before they were. As I have stated previously, some people are able to develop these skills to a higher degree, which was as apparent with Jillian's granddaughter; this is the same as it is with computer literacy skills today. There is a great variation in literacy computer skills, and some have better skills than others who do not desire to achieve at a more competent level, but are happy to learn the basic skills.

Laura's grandmother, Jillian, who is the girl's caregiver, talked about home literacy including the socialization in which children and families engage:

> *J: Language, probably I think language is important. . . . That's what I think. . . . And . . . language and communication, . . . verbal . . . is important. . . . Myself, . . . I don't do enough of that, I think. . . . And play, . . . to me play is important. You know, getting together with family. . . . You know, we try and have little get-togethers, really informal get-togethers. . . . I think that's important, for kids to know their families.*

These statements reinforce my view that literacy from a social and cultural perspective is about family, gatherings, and the events that take place inside and outside the home. Laura has learned these socializing skills, and she has been following through with what is expected of her by her grandmother.

Marie's mother Molly explained what she thought home literacy is:

> *M: Probably anything and everything that's done at home, . . . from fixing up her bed and looking after herself and doing dishes; . . . everyday life; . . . playing, . . . socializing.*

Marie in her interview talked about making doll clothing from pieces of cloth. I asked her whether she worked from a pattern, and she said no, that they would find an old piece of clothing, tear it up, and then cut it up to make clothing for the doll. The girls do all of this

by hand, and they are left to experiment with very little interference from the adults. Although one would define this as play, Chelsea and Marie are learning how to sew and make doll clothing, which will help them to develop a skill that they can use later in life. Their mothers give the girls the freedom to do what they want, experiment, and negotiate with each other to make it work. As the girls experiment, they learn the type of cloth that is appropriate for doll clothing as well as which cloth is easier to cut and sew, and they too are learning literacy in a different form and for a different purpose.

As a young girl I grew up with hand-me down-clothing that my mother tore apart and then shaped to fit me; this was all done without a pattern. My mother is recognized as a seamstress in our community, and she has sewn for many different people on various occasions. She has taught herself this skill by experimenting and watching other people and has not depended on a store-bought pattern. She knows how to fashion a quilt, a blouse, a skirt, a shirt, drapes, and even toques from just observation. This is certainly literacy and is one that has paid off for my mother. I know that if Marie develops this skill, it will help her to meet the needs of her own family when she becomes a mother.

Marie is also being taught how to train her own horse so that she can ride it. She explained that she could not ride Sally, her first horse, because she did not train her when the horse was smaller and that she was currently training Sox. She puts a saddle on her and walks around the field with her to get her used to wearing a saddle. She told me about an incident in the community in which a woman was bitten by a horse several years ago, and Marie was afraid that the horse might bite her. We laughed about this, and she knows that she has to conquer her fear. There is always an adult present when she works with her horse.

Molly, Marie's mother, talked about the importance of hunting and trying to involve the whole family in this activity. Parents and grandparents are passing down this Indigenous knowledge to the children.

Molly described an experience that involved her four children, including Marie when her husband killed a moose. Much of her discussion was about Marie, in particular about the drying rack that they planned to make for her. The "she" to whom she referred near the end of this conversation is Marie. In many Cree conversations the person is not named, and this same practice occurs in a conversation in English; it carries the same type of cultural language pattern. Because the conversation was about the family, Molly assumed that I would know who she was discussing:

> M: *The hunting thing was quite important, because . . . a couple of years ago my husband shot a moose, and we didn't have anything. . . . All we had was a gun and a knife, so we had to—but it wasn't too far from home so . . . he. . . cut it open so it wouldn't spoil. . . . And we came back to the house, and we fetched some plastic to line up the truck.. And what was it—an axe and garbage bags to put the insides in.*
>
> B: *So were all your kids there?*
>
> M: *Yeah., they were all there.. You should have seen them all scrambling. . . . They wanted pop, and they wanted to make juice; . . . they wanted a snack. . . . You know, . . . packing all this stuff into an IGA bag.*
>
> B: *Mm-hmm.*
>
> M: *They were making a real big thing out of it. . . . So we went back, and they helped us with cutting up the moose and stuff, holding the legs. And . . . this was about two years ago, and it was in the summer. Ikwa—bees—they were quite busy, hey?*
>
> B: *I bet. they were buzzing around there, . . . hey?*
>
> M: Ni-kitimakinawawak askaw. *[At times I felt sorry for them.] They'll hold something, and a bee would come and they would let it go, and then they would get it again. . . . They were persistent, . . .* ihi *[yes].*
>
> B: *They're like. . .ah, yes, . . . but they were learning that.*
>
> M: *Yeah, they were learning, and they would say, "What's that?" . . . they wanted to know the parts, the names of parts, organs . . . and what we eat and why do we eat that. . . . "You mean we eat that? . . . You mean, that is what that is?" . . . They had never seen it..*
>
> B: *Well that is literacy too . . . because they have to learn how to cut the moose apart too.*

> *M: So . . . last year she [Marie] wanted her own dry meat rack, hey? We never got around to making it; we didn't even finish ours—mine.*
> *B: Mm-hmm*
> *M: So hopefully this year we'll make hers. . . . Then she'll do her dry meat, . . . and . . . once we make our dry meat., then I'll make iwahikanahk [pemmican] because she likes doing that, . . . and she likes those.*

During one of my visits Marie talked about cutting up moose meat and explained that her mother has her own drying rack and that they were going to make her a small rack as well. To learn to cut up moose meat and make dry meat is a skill that apparently Marie's mother had taught her. Molly told me that Marie begins with a dull knife on a small piece of meat, and she will eventually graduate to being able to help her mother with the moose when she is able to handle a sharper knife:

> *B: So do you make your own dry meat?*
> *M: Yeah.*
> *B: So are you teaching Marie any of that?*
> *M: Yeah, uh-huh.*
> *B: And how is she doing with that?*
> *M: She's doing okay. . . . She watches me when I do it, and she'll try. . . . But I really don't want her to use a sharp knife because she'll cut herself, . . . so she has to get used to using a dull knife and a small piece of—*
> *B: Right..*

In my interview with Molly she also mentioned that Marie had begun to learn how to make moose hide and that they might try it again this summer. Molly laughed because Marie's first experience had been with a small hide, and it was hard for the two little girls to get the rhythm required to remove the water from the hide, which is one of the procedures for tanning hide:

> *M: Yeah, I used to make moose hide, but I don't any more. . . . I get tired; I get tired out. . . . But she seen my sisters make the hides, and I had a little one, a baby moose one, and I had it. . . . My sister's got a daughter—she's younger; she's in the Grade 2/3 classroom—and they wanted to try out this hide, you know, . . . so I showed them.. I told them what they were supposed to be doing. . . . They didn't finish drying it though..*

B: But they started it.
M: They started it though. . . . They were just pulling. . . . They had fun; . . . they were just laughing. Pîsk ikwa *[finally] they were crying..*
B: Imâ-moskwâpitwaw *[laughing until they cried].*
M: Ihî *[yes], because one would pull and then the other one would pull because you're supposed to pull at the same time, and they just couldn't get it.*
B: They couldn't get the rhythm, hey? because there's a certain way you have to pull it. . . .
M: And it was quite wet, and so they would kind of splash, and they would grab their face, and oooh, . . . it doesn't smell very nice.

From a cultural perspective this is a form of literacy that the parents of this young girl recognize as important. She willingly participates in this activity because of the scaffolding and the way that the event has been presented to her as a child. She has taken ownership of what she is being asked to do because her mother shares and offers her a small portion of meat, the moose hide, and the experience.

The above discussions on defining literacy for different purposes provide us, the educators, with an understanding, a new perspective from which to view our routines and activities, and recognition that most of these literacy behaviors are established with some sort of plan, map, or pattern—a way of thinking that allows us to successfully achieve our goal. Literacy defined from a narrow perspective as reading and writing is the recognition of a pattern, a row of symbols arranged in such a manner that they form words, sentences, and paragraphs. As we review what took place with these children and the routines and literacy behaviors in which they engaged, we know that what they are learning allows them to build their own cognition and conceptual skills. From a social and cultural perspective, according to Scribner and Cole (1978; as cited in Willis, 1997), "literacy is the emergence of a link between cognition and social and cultural conceptualization of literacy" (p. 392). I may be bold in declaring that we need to be more open to different

forms of literacy and accept that these funds of knowledge and these reading types of behaviors are forms of literacy for these Cree children. Ferreiro (1994) noted:

> We continue to collect evidence of the fact that literacy development is better characterized as a "conflict solution development" than as a sequence of abilities and skills that could be added one to the other. In our first book on the subject (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1979) we show that children approach that particular object, i.e., the socially constituted writing system, as a cognitive object, elaborating complex systems of interpretations that are not the mirror image of the information provided by the social environment (including the school environment). (p. 226)

It is important that we define literacy from more than one perspective to acknowledge, facilitate, develop, and reinforce different forms of literacy. From his own journey through the history of literacy, Graff (1994) proposed analyzing history based on a list of lessons that we should have learned:

> In airing a series of key legacies and myths in which the history of literacy resonates and culminates in present-day problems and questions my goal lay in showing the benefits of historical perspective. Historical analysis and interpretation, applied carefully and knowingly, often have great power in stimulating fresh views, novel questions, and new understandings. (p. 53)

According to Bainbridge and Malicky (2000) the social constructivist model of language learning I have been building on as a foundation for this study promotes ownership and internal motivation. This social constructivist perspective also corresponds with the broad social and cultural construct of literacy (Willis, 1993). The broad definition of literacy as well as the social constructivist approach is appropriate for use with the teaching and learning styles of Aboriginal people.

When I think about how my siblings and I learned in our own home, I realize that we were allowed latitude and a learning environment that facilitated ownership and internal motivation; As a result, all 10 of us in our family play some type of specialized

role to meet the needs of our families. One of my brothers is detail oriented and creative, and he often surprises my mother with gifts such as picture frames with the grandchildren's names engraved on them. My oldest brother has been asked to bring moose meat home for the family, and although he has been away from hunting since my father died, he would like to hunt moose again. Each of us has a specialized skill to offer the family, and we are all asked to participate in activities that help us to develop our skills to meet the needs of our family.

The Importance of Naming in the Aboriginal Community

The third component of this personal and private voice of literacy is the importance of pet names or nicknames in Cree or English, which is common to many Indigenous communities, as it is to this northern Cree community. The use of nicknames has crossed over into the classroom, and some of the students openly use nicknames to address each other. One morning in class after a switch to another story during language arts, Freddie had left to go to the washroom and returned with the following question: *"Were we supposed to read this to ourselves?" And the teacher tells him, "No, you listen"* (field notes, 11/12/6). The students were taking turns reading this story of Little Kay to the class. As the teacher asked questions throughout this story, the discussion turned to pet names, and Freddie became involved in this discussion immediately. He told the class, "I'm sour milk" and laughed at himself. The discussion did not go any further, and the class continued with the assignment.

I immediately thought that this was funny, and when I talked to Delia, Freddie's mother, about "sour milk" during my data analysis, she laughed hilariously and told me that this was not Freddie's pet name or nickname, that she did not know how he had

come up with this name. We laughed and saw this as one of Freddie's humorous attempts to draw attention towards himself. Delia told me that her pet name for Freddie is very intimate and that she is the only one who uses it. It is *nibîbîm*, which means "my baby" and is an English word embedded in Cree. The Cree stem *ni* implies "my," and the *îm* ending shows possession. Delia explained that all of her children have had pet names or nicknames, but no one was called Sour Milk.

Pet names are common amongst Cree people, and we have some in my family. My grandfather gave each child in the extended family a Cree name that was a description of how a child looked or of his or her behaviors, a connection to someone he knew, or the personality of the child; or perhaps it was a translation of the English name into Cree.

My grandfather used great forethought in naming all of his grandchildren, and they are names that have been self-fulfilling for many of us. For example, my Cree name *Cîki-nîkan* translates into "always close to the forefront," and I am named after a female elder who was well respected and admired for her determination and effort. She became known as *Cîki-nîkan* because even though she was alone, perhaps a widow, she was always at the forefront when the Cree tribe moved camp, she was usually the second person to set up her teepee, and she did this on her own. I know that the name *Cîki-nîkan* has influenced how I feel about myself, and the affection that comes with this name giving is very intimate. The connection that we all had with our grandfather was special, and both the giver and the receiver benefited from it.

Some of the elders view giving Cree names as empowering. Lipka and Yanez (1998) discussed the importance of relationship building in the Yup'ik culture and used

the example of the nickname for Yanez, who was a teacher in the study. The kinship term between teacher and student in Yup'ik is *Al'i*, which is a variation of the word for *sister*. Yanez describes that "this nickname is like a pet name and was made up by a village youngster years ago. Now many villagers address her by this name, including the children in her class" (p. 128). It seems the Yup'ik culture uses these kinship terms to identify and empower their people, including children. An elder of the Yup'ik culture, William Gumlickpuk, told Lipka and Yanez that this is a way of creating a comfort zone for students and of highlighting the importance of social and kin relations in the community (p. 128).

The students in this classroom openly used pet names to address each other, one of which was *Chooch*, a Cree word that means "breast" or "bottle nipple." I spoke to this young man's mother, and she told me that he enjoyed being breastfed and the closeness that came with the feeding. Apparently, he had been breastfed for some time as a baby and did not want to be weaned, and he still enjoys snuggling up with her and is close to both his mother and his father.

Many young people in various Cree communities are teased with the pet name *co-cos* (pronounced *cho-choos*) because many babies do not want to be weaned from their mothers' breasts. We tease one of my siblings about this at home. The intimacy that comes with breastfeeding is a strong bond, an "active validation" between a mother and a child. This young man enjoyed feeding time, and his nickname has stayed with him throughout the years and is still being used by the family and some of his peers.

Most of the nicknames that I heard were in Cree, although several that were used in the school for the older students were in English. Marie shared her own nickname with

me, a nickname that her grandfather had given her. It is a Cree name, and the following is an explanation from my notes on the interview: *"She told me her* mosom *gave them all names, and her name is* panisawîs, *which means "a little person who cuts up meat and dries it" to make* panisawan *[dry meat]."*

In her literacy dig, Jean talked about the Nicknames that her family use for her siblings, and she has one as well. They call her younger sibling Cîmin, a Cree word that means "smaller sibling" for either male or female:

> J: Cîmin, that's her nickname. That's her middle name, but her real name is Veronica..
> B: That's your nickname . . . ?
> J: Mm-hmm.
> B: What is it?
> J: Little J.
> B: Little J.

The only reference I heard in the school to a nickname in English was for an older sibling, a young man who was in junior high. In his interview Ray shared his brother's English nickname with me—Knot—and I have heard the other students call him by this name at school. This was the only instance where I heard the use of an English nickname that was used consistently and the individual answered to it.

Although Freddie wanted to share his nickname and tried to encourage a discussion in the classroom based on nicknames, the teacher did not respond to this attempt to initiate discussion from Freddie. The only acknowledgement that he received from the other students was laughter, and perhaps in his own humorous way this was as far as he wanted to take this thought.

The construction of being Cree and the discussion of the extended family, roles, responsibilities, and the use of nicknames has been left in the home; very little of this

voice is heard in the classroom. The students and the parents shared much of this information with me during the personal interviews.

The unspoken, subtle message is that, with regard to content and curriculum, the teacher and students focus on specific content for learning; and the themes that came out as strong, personal, and private components of the children's identity are left in the home. It seems that the students themselves have made the choice to separate this kind of learning from the school environment, and it has remained in the home and away from the scrutiny of educators.

Yanez, a member of the Yup'ik culture who taught about survival, subsistence, and ways of behaving, noted that teaching the Yup'ik culture in the classroom felt like entering contested space. Yanez was struggling to find acceptance for the Yup'ik way of teaching, a cultural knowledge approach, and over what they referred to as "cultural primacy of schooling" (Lipka & Yanez, 1998, p. 112). Perhaps the unspoken message of an Eurocentric approach in the school system is stronger than we realize. Yanez is a teacher and a member of the Yup'ik culture and this was a school in her own community. It seems that what Yanez experienced in the school in her community is something that these students from this small northern Cree community school sense and they understand that their meaning making based on their own cultural representations is better kept at home and away from school.

The parents, grandparents, and students were willing to share this information with me because I am a member of their culture, and they felt comfortable in sharing what they saw as literacy in the home. The tacit commonalities, the experiences that we share created a bond, an openness, because I was raised in the same type of home

environment. I have participated in many of the events that they discussed, although perhaps not as extensively, and I have been in these types of learning environments.

Home literacy, or as Moll (1992) defined it, funds of knowledge, and what is meaningful to the children have not been adequately addressed in the school system because we have defined literacy narrowly according to what we think is crucial and important for them to learn. The curriculum allows for flexibility and adaptation, but this personal and private voice of literacy is one that we will not be able to access unless we take the time to develop relationships with the children and provide the opportunity to build on what they bring from home. Although there is some mention of community and family in school, it is fairly limited, and the artifacts from the personal discussions with the students reveal what is crucial, personal, private, and meaningful to each one of them. Family and extended family and their role in the lives of these young people are vital to them.

Nitohtawâtanihk Awasak

Voice of Cree Children: Patterns, Images, and Symbols

As I reviewed the data, I began this part of my journey by dialoguing with myself about what is really important to Cree children and by asking whether I think their literacy experience is different from that of other children and what makes it different. To contextualize the distinct voices of literacy that I have presented, it is important to keep in mind the cultural constructions of being Cree that have influenced these students and their distinct voices of literacy. I was surprised by the understanding that I gained as I reviewed my data and analyzed the information before me, because it revealed two distinct expressions of literacy: an expressive voice in the school setting and a personal

and private expressive voice in the interviews, home visits, and literacy digs. The distinct voices of literacy that I heard from these children is like a kernel in a seed. The covering of the seed, its protection and how it is watered and maintained are the cultural constructions of who they are. The children come to us with their language and culture, the kernel that has been planted by their families and the social group with whom they interact, and the watering that occurs should correspond with who they are as Cree children. Are we perhaps neglecting the seed? Are we perhaps attempting to water it by transplanting the seed and changing the environment? Are we perhaps cross-germinating these seeds without giving them a chance to grow into the plants they were meant to be?

To be validated, it is crucial for these children to be given the opportunity to share and show others who they are and what they are all about, and it is clear from the data that I have presented that the construction of who they are as Cree children still remains strong.

The data that I analyzed and interpreted came from two distinct expressions, and it was interesting to see how each expression differed, where it crossed over, and which children took the initiative to empower themselves to make the school literacy experience more meaningful to them. The levels of participation fluctuated for each student, and they all either made the experience work for them or allowed themselves to be disempowered and drawn in by the dynamics of the group. For some of these students we will see the survival mechanism or the creative response or the resiliency in the different literacy events and how they found ways to remain part of the group. Some students became passive and silenced. Taylor (1998) commented, "We need to know more of the learning styles, coping strategies, and social support systems of the children we teach if instruction

in reading and writing is to be a meaningful complement to their lives" (p. 93). The

sociocultural foundation that Vygotsky (1978) noted is that experiences need to be

meaningful and that we should pay attention to students who become passive and

silenced during literacy events and find ways to draw them into the group.

The Personal and Private Voice of Literacy at Home and at School

The construction of who we are as Cree people is very much tied to text forms

that highlight behaviors or survival skills that we learn and develop based on what is

considered important to our contribution to the extended family. In the Cree culture much

of how we are taught occurs with observation, hands-on experience, and limited spoken

instructions; we are expected to be observant to learn how to develop the skill we are

being taught. Visualization is very much a part of the training practice, and the Yup'ik

people use many of these same teaching/learning methods.

> In a Yup'ik math workshop, an elder, Lily Pauk demonstrated tailoring and
> Yup'ik ways of measuring. Pauk asked one of the Ciulistet members to stand, and
> in less than a minute, she visually "measured" the person. She made a paper
> parka, using scissors, no ruler or pencil. She made a paper hat to accompany it.
> Both were accomplished in a few minutes. (Lipka, 1998c, p. 159)

Cree children have the opportunity to develop, maintain, and celebrate certain skills

based on their strengths or motivation, and as they engage in these types of literacy

behaviors, they develop higher levels of thinking and conceptual abilities tied to the

skills; as a result, they become highly specialized in a specific area.

The personal and private voice of literacy, the literacy digs which I categorized as

personal and out of school artifacts, shows text forms that are meaningful and important

to these children, came from the literacy digs, the personal interviews, and the home

component of my study. These literacy artifacts—the pieces of data that I collected from

the literacy digs—were the most interesting and prompted many questions for me regarding the way that these students make meaning and how different they were from the school literacy artifacts. Most of the literacy artifacts that the children saw as significant came from their own private and personal work. I found something about each that was fascinating and, I believe, telling about their literacy practices.

Two things were consistent in the literacy artifacts that I collected from the students. First, they used intricate and detailed illustrations such as hearts, faces, drawings, and other symbols with the written symbol. In many of these pieces the illustrations were complex and required a great deal of detailed work, whereas the written symbol was usually sprawled across the page in big print. One little girl wrote her name symbolically with triangles and rectangles, and they formed the letters of her name (Figure 1). I did not recognize the name immediately.

Figure 1 shows that although the student used the written symbol, she illustrated it in such a manner that it looks more like a non-symbolic representation, and you would more readily see the triangles and rectangles if you did not look specifically for letter and numerical representations. This girl liked the number 77, which is written under her name. These types of symbols and designs are found in the children's environment, and they are exposed to them daily; therefore the symbolic representations have influenced their literacy development and can be viewed as a type of abstract symbolism.
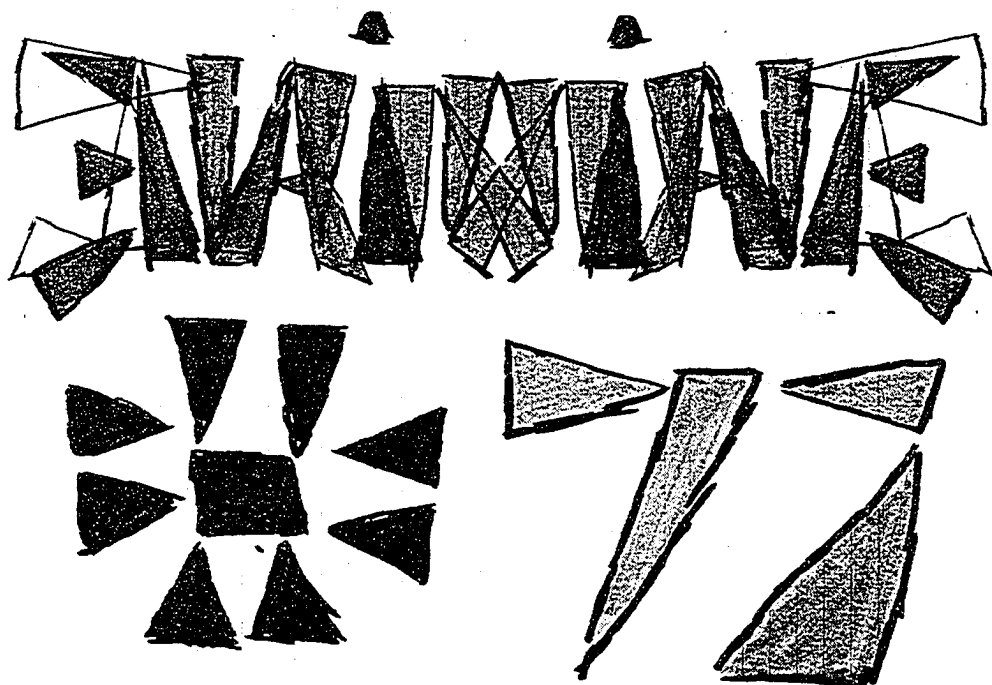
Figure 1. Symbolic representation of name.

One piece that I examined for a period of time was a frame that one student made with small intricate hearts that are not immediately apparent until you take a second look (Figure 2). The detail and design of this frame would have taken her some time to complete. This frame housed a list of friends and shows the type of meaning making that she is doing on her own time at home and away from the school.
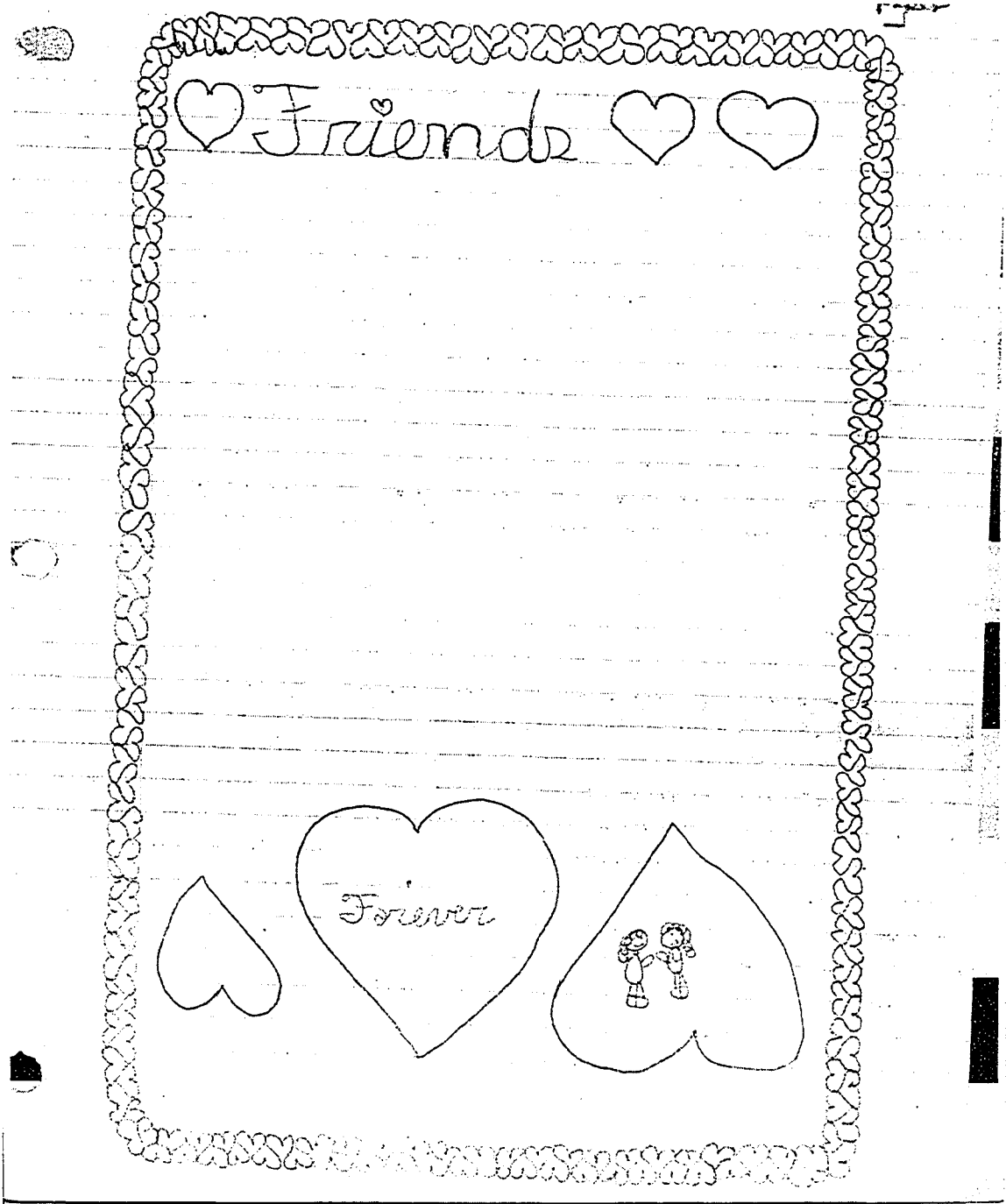
Figure 2. Detailed heart frame.

The boys' work included detailed drawings of cartoon characters (Figure 3), and it seemed that they were drawing these same characters over and over again. However, as one boy noted, they are not the same character; they just look similar. But their hair is different, and he knew the differences between the drawings. The same person drew the two pictures, which are *Dragon Ball Z* cartoon characters. The large illustration is a drawing that he did at home on his own time, and he drew the two small, cartoon-like characters with two different poses for a friend.

The meaning making that these students do at home is more of an illustrative nature rather than the written word. Figure 4 is a birthday list with written words and illustrations. One of the girls was planning a birthday party, and she had written a list of the party items required: the games and events that they would play, the decorations that she wanted to use, and a list of the presents that she wanted for her birthday. This artifact served a very functional purpose for her as she organized the event. It was meaningful and served as a device to remember details for the event.

The literacy digs I did with the girls resulted in a collection of many artifacts that were lists of names of friends, family, and extended family with little notes from or for different members of their families. Figure 5 is a sample from one of the girls. The literacy dig was a very personal, exclusive sharing. I was being permitted into her own personal and private space and as she went through her binder, I knew that this was certainly a special moment for me. She had decided to let me into her very personal space and trusted me with her work. She gave me permission to hear and see who she was as she went over her literacy artifacts with me. This binder showed me what was truly important and meaningful to her, and it seemed to be her most prized possession. She
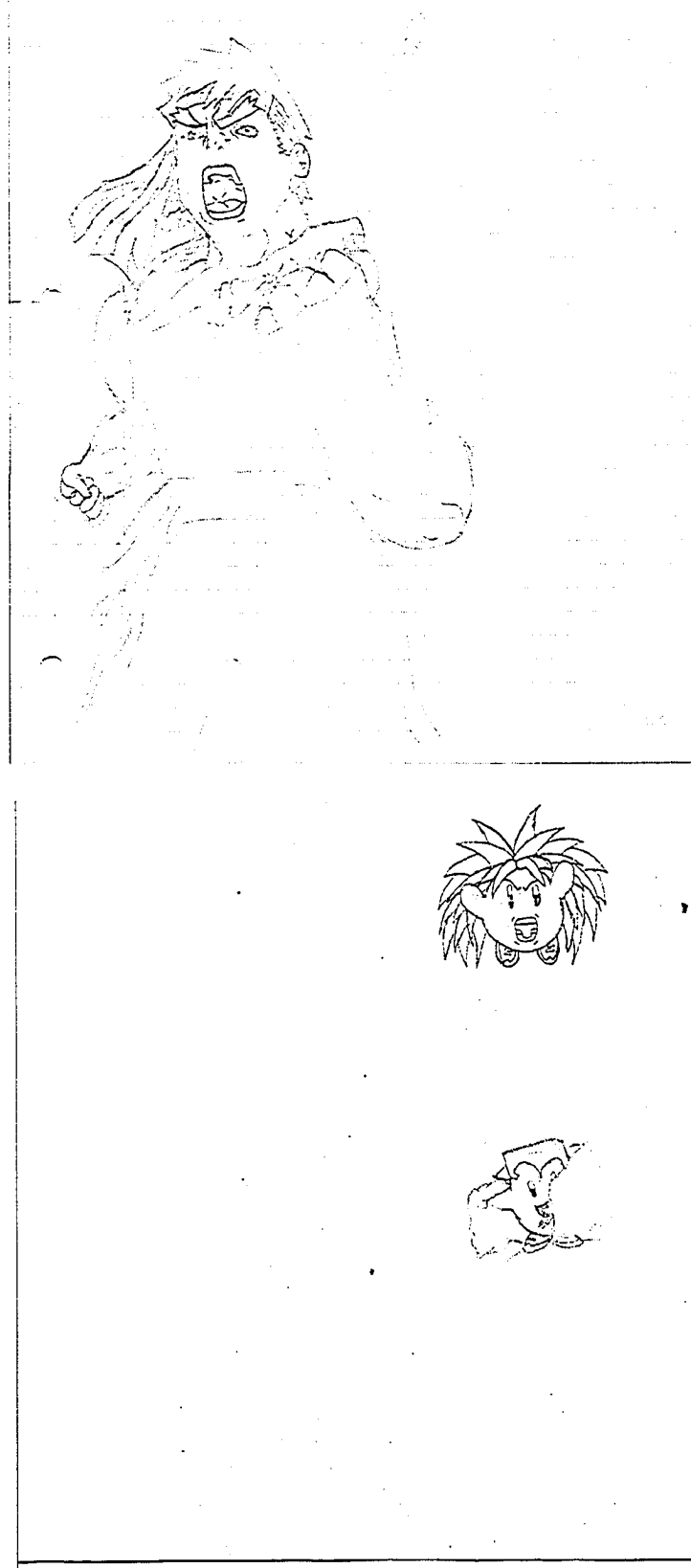
Figure 3. Dragon Ball Z characters.

Decaoration

Shirens→
Balloons→ Light blue and white

Tape

Takes

Presents

CDs=Coyote Ugly, Decneys Chid

Ten bucks
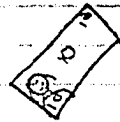
Prizes

Pencils   Balloons

Little note books   Pizles

Play doodow

Walsols

Cake

Wipe cream

Murble

Choclate pudding

Picter of

Food

Hamburgers

Pizzas

Rurgler chips

Party mix

Ketchup chips

Pickle dip

(Mug)
Pop=Pepsi, Root beer and Coca Cola

Candy

Juices=Berrie blast and Grape
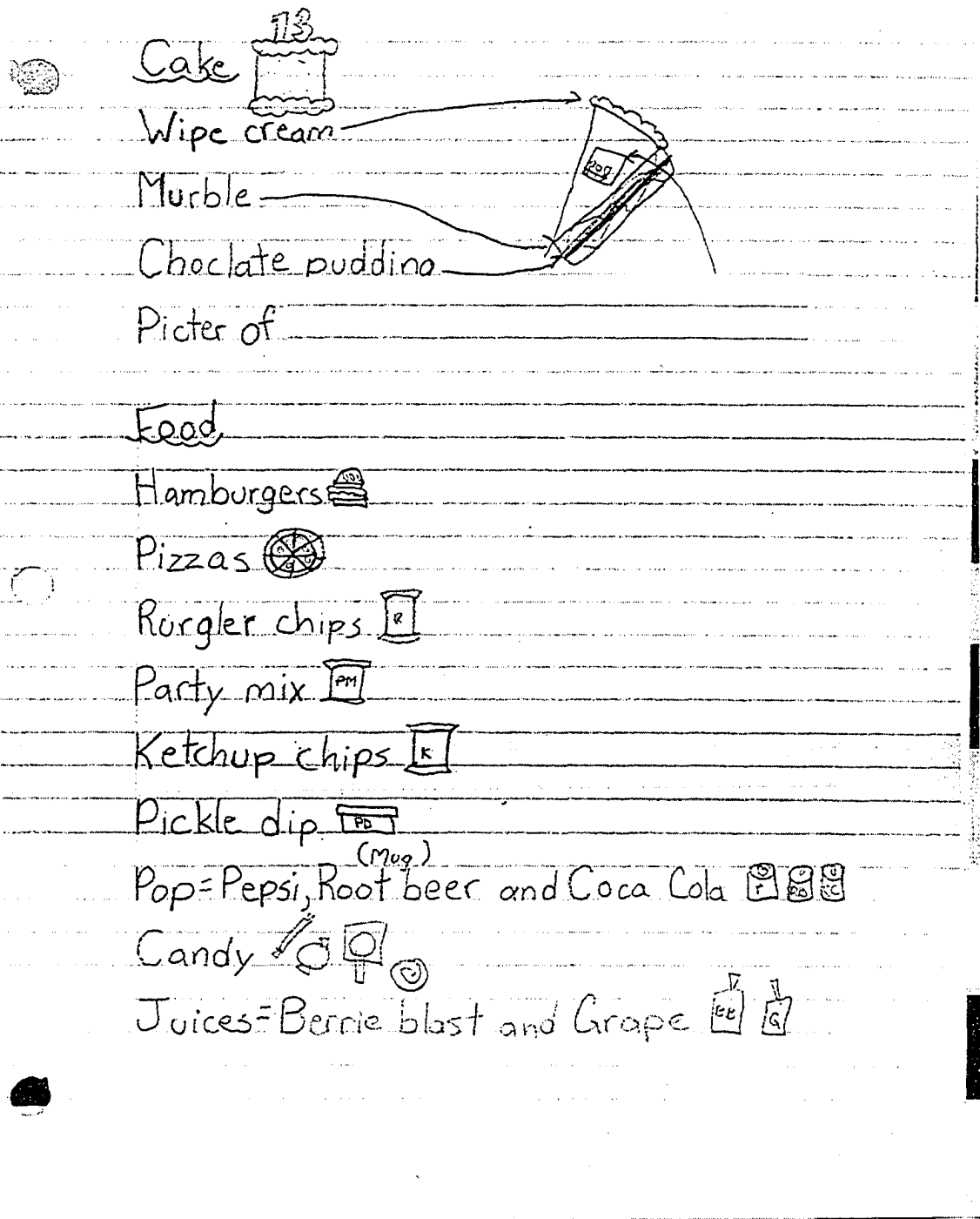
Figure 4. Birthday list.

carried it with pride much as a businessman does with his briefcase. This piece I have

included as a sample is what Chelsea talked about as we discussed the pictures in her

binder. I have called it "nightgown art" because she took the idea from her mother's

nightgown and drew a picture for February to include in her personal portfolio of things

that she kept at home. The illustrations include many different types of symbols, and she

used hearts to a great extent.

Figure 5. Nightgown art.

C: This is my drawing paper. . . . This is what I mostly like doing..
B: Oh, you like to draw?
C: This is new year's, . . . but—
B: And who are these? Just little kids that you made, or are they specifically—?
C: Those are specific.
B: Who are they?
C: That's me, Joe, Wayne, and Sally.
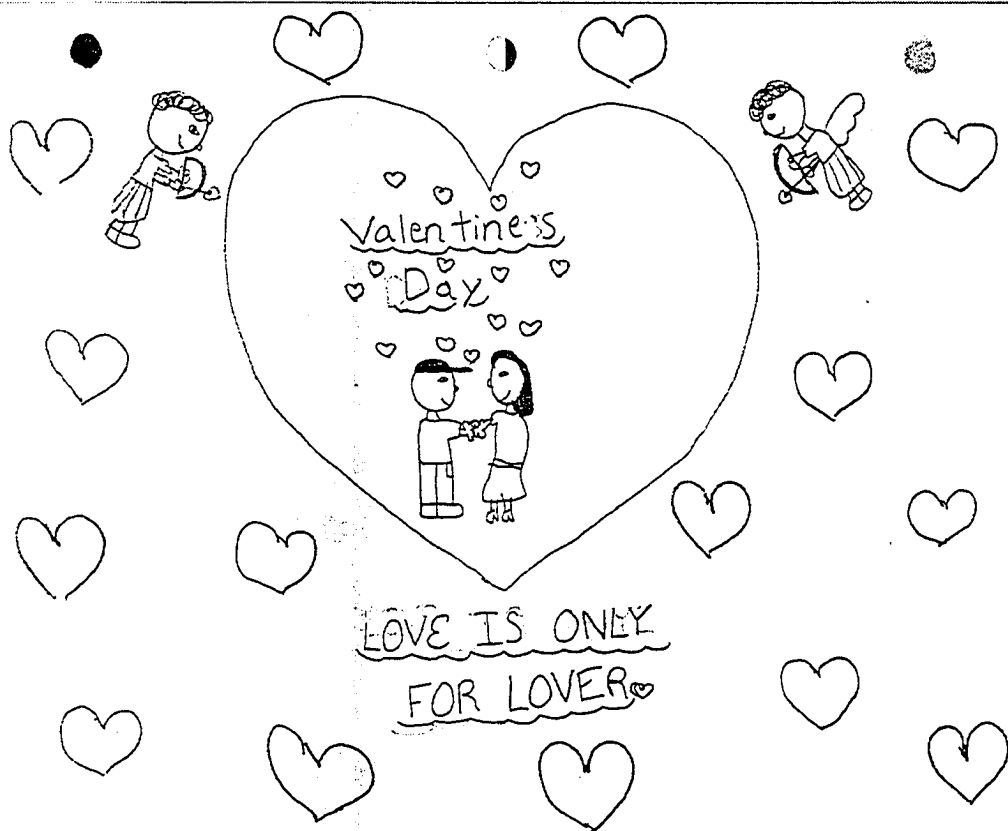*B: And are they members of your family?*
C: Yeah.
B: That's beautiful; that's a cute little drawing.
C: This is for February, Valentine's Day. I got this from my mom's nightgown.
[Laughter]
B: "Love is only for lovers"; . . . that's cute.
C: . . . This is my favorite month.

As Chelsea and I discussed her personal literacy artifacts, I could see the importance of the validation that she received from her mother and her siblings. The drawings of herself with her siblings showed how much she cares for each one of them and that she wanted to keep and cherish this in her binder. Her reference to getting the February Valentine's Day idea from her mother's nightgown brought chuckles from both of us. She thought that this was funny and wanted to share the information with me. I recognize this as a form of validation of her connection and relationship with her mother.

I interviewed Chelsea's mother, Mable, and she told me that her daughter likes to draw, listen to music, color, and play with her siblings:

> *She does a lot of that at home. . . . She writes stories, she draws, she likes reading. I think . . . everybody, most of the kids, read and draw at home. . . . They don't just sit in front of the TV; they like drawing and stuff like that, and . . . I have Chelsea to thank for that. . . . She is always playing with the kids.*

Chelsea receives validation from her mother, and Mable stated that her children can come to her and talk about whatever is happening in their lives. She commented they do not have to fear criticism or a negative reaction and that they do not have to try to hide anything from her.

Chelsea talked about her little sister and how much she enjoys taking care of her,

and she was proud to report that her sister is learning to talk and that her favorite place to

visit is *Kohkom*'s house:

> *C: What's my favorite thing to do at home? That would be keeping my baby sister*
> *because . . . when we clean up she keeps me company, so I don't have too— [She*
> *laughs; perhaps she does not like housework]*
> *B: How old is she?*
> *C: She is going to be two this April.*
> *B: So she is starting to talk.*
> *C: She knows how to talk real good.*
> *B: Oh..*
> *C: And she walks. . . . She's trying to run, but she keeps falling.*
> *B: So she talks to you about all sorts of different little things?*
> *C: Mm-hmm. She comes to me; . . . she comes crying, . . . and I say, "Who hit*
> *you?" because she knows how to say their names.*
> *B: Mm-hmm.*
> *C: It just pops up out of nowhere. . . .She can't hide from Sally. . . . Candy can't*
> *hide from her because she knows how to say her name real good.*
> *She loves going to my* Kohkom's. *. . . Every time we are driving away, she thinks*
> *we are going to my* Kohkom's. *She goes, "*Kohkom.*"*
> *cause she has a friend over there named Katie. . . . She's two.*

As I analyzed the artifacts, I began to ask myself some key questions about

whether this method of making meaning is specific to home and conducive to their

learning and how and why illustrations seem to be a large part of what they do. They

seemed to write words and use letter symbols in such a manner that they had intricate

patterns or were lined up in a pattern. These children enjoy using illustrations, and

somehow illustrating complements their definition of their literacy experience and the

way that they make meaning for themselves. As I reviewed the pieces, I saw many

patterns that are apparent in beadwork across northern Alberta as well as evidence that

the environment has influenced their literacy artifacts.

Figure 6 is another sample of the designs and illustrations that other students in

the class used, and they also worked on these pieces at home. The heart symbol is once

again used in this drawing, as well as the cross, the written symbol for Jesus, and the

acronym "WWJD?" which seemed popular with the students in this school. Tommy

showed me his bracelet with this acronym on it, and he asked me if I knew what it stood

for. I did not, and he told me that "WWJD" stands for "What would Jesus do?" He had

been given the bracelet when he attended a Bible camp for young people over the
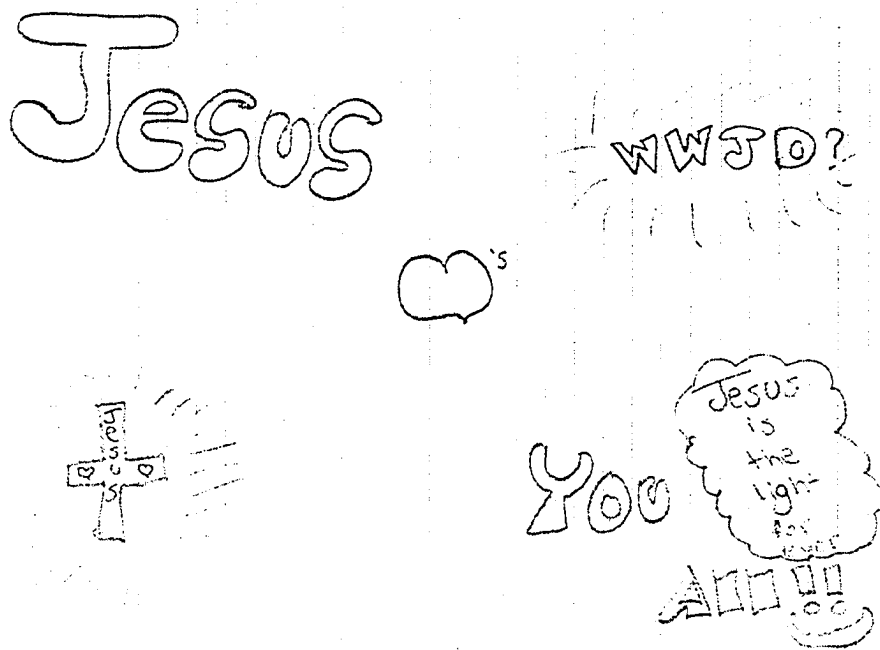
summer.

Figure 6. Jesus art.

The young woman who drew this piece has once again used geometric shapes in this work. She is the same child who wrote her name in triangles and rectangles. She seemed to be drawn to these types of symbols in her work. The little drawing on the bottom of the page shows a smiling face and geometric shapes. These children have drawn from their environment, and they show this influence in the way that they make literacy meaningful.

This ethnoliteracy of the Cree people is a symbol form, a system that may not be recognized as text, but rather a text form that contains the patterns and forms of literacy. These text forms, symbols, and patterns are tied to the survival and functional needs and behaviors of Cree people and are considerably different from the text print used in classrooms today. These forms could be described as illustrations or art.

School Literacies

The second distinct voice that I heard in the data was the expression of literacy in the school setting, which was different from the home literacy, although there has been some crossover, with familiar content in class that includes community people, events, and family members. The teacher in this setting is to be commended for her efforts to make the curriculum content meaningful for the children.

As I perused the novels that the children had studied over the year, I saw glimpses of cultural relevance to the family and children and to the field of science fiction and the strange and unknown to capitalize on the students' fascination with these topics.

The predominant voice I heard was in the classroom discussions and in some of the school artifacts with regard to the students' fascination with science fiction and the connection to videogames, *Dragon Ball Z*, movies, and cartoon characters. The students

have used these interests to make the content meaningful for themselves, and many of them wrote stories based on their fascination with science. *Holes*, written by Louis Sachar (1998), one of the novels that they read during the year, was the most popular amongst the students, and for their final assignment many of them chose to do a comic strip to show their understanding of the novel. *Tuck Everlasting* by Natalie Babbitt (1975) was another novel that they found interesting, and it was a treat for them to be able to watch the movie. The idea that one could take a drink of water from a spring and live forever was awe inspiring for some of them.

    As I reviewed my data I realized that school literacy takes place in a community that is very different from that of the personal and private voice of literacy. School is a contrived setting, a place where students learn to play assigned roles and specified behaviors. As I listened to the students and observed them in the classroom, I saw them play the roles and fulfill the expectations the institution had set out for them, but it was like a game; it seemed so superficial. The students' mindset was to keep this school behavior separate and play this role until it was time to go home. I say this because as a child I saw school as a contrived setting, one which was fascinating to me. It was so different from what I experienced at home. On weekends and after school I would play school at home, a behavior set apart for the school, and found it entertaining. We did this often at home, the neighborhood children would congregate at our house and play school and as a result some of us developed school-like behaviors. My in-school discussions with the students took on the characteristic of the school and were somewhat superficial whereas the quiet conversations at home outside of the school setting with the two girls I

interviewed showed me a very different side of each of them. At home I saw depth and an opportunity for them to be real and to tell me what was truly important to them.

Laura, the quieter of the two girls, knew that she did not have to let me into her own little world, and we had plenty of quiet, serene time as we both contemplated in her private bedroom space. Marie, on the other hand, talked about all the things that were important to her. This was her time and space with me, and she capitalized on it.

In the privacy of the small office at school that I had borrowed for the interviews, I saw a different side of the students as they talked about their interests, and I watched as they relaxed and discussed their experiences at home. As I listened I recognized a vast gap between what they did in school and what they did at home. There was very little mention of doing school kinds of activities except for the times when they were involved in play situations, and then they would ask their siblings to draw or play literacy types of games at home. Ron described one of the games that they played, which was a spelling quiz. He played either the teacher or the student, and they had a race to see who could spell the most words correctly. Sometimes his aunt played the game with them. I understand that school is a contrived situation for all children including mainstream children, but I am particularly concerned about Cree children because I can see how the loss of our language is placing them at risk for failure. How can we make school more relevant to Cree students so that they will appreciate what they learn and be able to apply this knowledge to real-life situations?

Making Meaning Through Writing

I realized as I analyzed my data that the classroom activity that was most constructive to the Cree students' meaning making was the writing component of their

daily activities. The writing assignments allowed them some latitude and flexibility. I

examined the classroom writing artifacts and found that the students personalized much

of the material and attached their own meaning to it, regardless of the topic. They were

able to make meaning by talking about events and incidents in their own lives as they

completed these writing assignments. This information pleasantly surprised me and

showed me once more the resiliency of children and how creative they can be with what

they are being asked to do. These students had been given the opportunity to make

meaning, and they took advantage of it within the range that the teacher had permitted

them with these writing assignments.

Moll (1990), in his writings about Vygotsky, described what he meant by "whole

activities" (p. 6), which has been modeled by many whole-language educators who

provide the environment for students to participate in activities that he called "authentic"

(p. 8) or socially meaningful. He elaborated:

> Consequently, whole-language educators emphasize that reading comprehension
> and writing expression must be developed through functional, relevant, and
> meaningful uses of language. One of the major instructional recommendations is
> to make classrooms literate environments in which many language experiences
> can take place and different types of "literacies" can be developed or learned.
> Teachers who follow this approach reject rote instruction or reducing reading and
> writing into skill sequences taught in isolation or in a successive, stagelike
> manner. Rather, they emphasize the creation of social contexts in which children
> actively learn to use, try, and manipulate language in the service of making sense
> or creating meaning. (p. 8)

The teacher assigned an assortment of writing assignments specific to this analysis.

Throughout her lesson delivery she helped the students with brainstorming and a writing

plan to help them to get started.

Rosenblatt (1994) explained that students have a difficult time working from what

she called a blank page in their linguistic reservoir because the to and fro with text does

not occur until they start the writing process. Thus brainstorming and developing a writing plan seemed to be a good technique used by the teacher because it gave the students something with which to work. I observed and listened to their discussions during this attempt at story writing, and they appeared to need this dialogue with their peers to begin their writing. In this process the teacher was acting as a social mediator rather than providing structured cues that could be inhibiting. This exploratory talk and social mediation facilitated the students' taking control of their own learning and making use of the everyday-activities knowledge that is instrumental in developing higher levels of thinking. The dialogues they engaged in seemed to help develop a flow of information from which to draw from so they could start their story writing.

Moll (1990) identified this as a mediation that develops meaning making, the goal of which is "to make children consciously aware of how they are manipulating the literacy process and applying this knowledge to reorganize future experiences or activities" (p. 13). The talk in the classroom gave the students the opportunity to work with what they knew and to make sense of it in their own writing. Oftentimes as teachers we demand a quiet classroom and ask the students to stop chattering and pay attention. According to the strategies used in the writing process (Atwell, 1998) and taught in writers' workshops, it is good for students to dialogue as they write to help them to develop and clarify their thoughts.

Jean, a young woman in Grade 6, seems to have a great deal happening in her life, and it came through in her written stories. I was saddened by the content and theme of what I read in her stories. Jean has a nurturing personality; she displays a deep consideration for others that was evident in the classroom. I believe that the teacher has

capitalized on this strength because she asked Jean at various times throughout the school year to work with students who had been ostracized by others. Her caring nature and what she wrote showed her depth, and her stories were so real that she seemed to be describing real events that have occurred around her.

Jean's writing caught my attention in the first assignment, which was to write an ending for the novel *Holes* by Louis Sachar (1998). She described in detail the events in which Stanley Yelnats was involved, and in greater depth she wrote about Stanley's being teased and ostracized by the other boys. She wrote her story as follows:

> *One day a boy named Stanley had a choice to go to jail or camp. Stanley thought that camp was like a summer camp so he picked camp. Not long after a bus came to pick him up to leave for 18 years. That camp was called Camp Green Lake, but there was no lake. There was just dirt. When he got there he had to work all day long.*
>
> *When Stanley started to work one of the guards asked him, "Are you thirsty?" Stanley said "Yes". The guard said, "get used to that and live with it for the rest of your life. Then Stanley went to work and one of the boys came to him and started to call him names. Then Stanley said, "Can you please quit teasing me?" Then the boy was quiet for a while and then he said, "Why? Will you cry?" Then one of the boys friends said, "Come on, leave him alone! He is just a little boy". Then he did, Stanley was very scared of that boy and then he started to miss his home. He just kept working and crying at the same time.*

Jean wrote another story about a little boy named Rick and I found in her own personal writing one of her little brothers is named Rick. This is her second story:

> *Once there was a boy named Rick. Rick is 10 years old his mom Sandy is 33 years old and his dad Kent is 38 years old. Rick's dad is very mean he sometimes gets hit. Kent is always telling Rick to go visit and if he goes his dad will beat up his mom.*
>
> *The next day Rick went for a walk. Kent was upstairs then he called Sandy to come upstairs. Sandy walked upstairs then when she got there he throw her on the bed. Then he started to hit her. Sandy called help someone please help me but no one can hear her and Rick had went for a walk. Then Sandy screams real loud then Rick heard her and ran as fast as he could home. When he was home he phoned the cops to come get Kent because he is hitting my mom Sandy please*

come I am so scared. Then they came to get Kent and Kent was put in jail for the rest of his life. Then Sandy and Rick had a good rest of their life without Kent.

As I read this story I was surprised by the details that Jean gave, especially regarding the ages of the characters in her story. The events are written in such a manner that the story draws the reader in because they seem so real. Both stories were filled with pain, and it was this theme that saddened me. Goodman and Goodman (1990) stated that "when children are immersed in real reading and real writing, they can read and write for purposes of their own and they are empowered" (p. 226).

A third story that Jean wrote that I will mention briefly was about twin girls who had to raise themselves because their parents had been in a car accident. The storyline is developed from the "Snowed In" story that they were asked to write. In this story the girls were snowed in together in a barn and could not get out. They tried to open the door but couldn't, although they worked at it together. Jean's resolution for this story is that the snow finally melted and the girls were able to get out.

Ray is the next student whose samples of meaning making in the classroom writing voice I have chosen. In the following story Ray has drawn on his own personal experiences with hunting and actual events that could have happened in the community. His story is called "Bear Trap Road," which is one of the assignments that I collected:

On Thursday, October 31, 3:30 p.m., 2003 a guy named Tom Laboyin a 20 year old saw a bear at [Apisimôsos Road] on Beartrap road. It was his first bear sighting the bear chased him. He got bet a nerly got fadil brosis and cuts. He was picking cans on beartrap road. And came to this guy hous and fantid and got takin to a hospital. This locky man nerly ecsapt death. Tom just movde in [Apisimosos Road] he was going to work as a teacher assistan. Tom, "I'm glad I lived now I have to be in a weelcaher for cevril moths if I did it do what I did I could of diad"! Tom's winnks Bill "Will I was passing on my chevyblazer I was going to fast to stop because by the time I stop He was all redey nerly baed."

The story came from Ray's notebook just as he wrote it, with many words spelled phonetically (invented spelling), and although the words would be difficult to read without the story context, I was able to make sense of his story and understand the content. In this story Ray related that Tom was going to work at the school as a teacher assistant, which is interesting because his mother works at the school in this type of job. Ray seemed to write from what was familiar to him and from his own experiences and what he thought could happen if someone ran into a bear unexpectedly. Ray has been on several hunting expeditions and understands the dangers of wildlife, especially bears. He was participating in an authentic writing experience because he could write from what he knew about bears. As Goodman and Goodman (1990) suggested, we learn to read by reading and we learn to write by writing, and we are using literacy for purposes that are important to ourselves (p. 227).

In the second story Ray wrote about two friends, Ray and Ross. Ray developed a relationship with a girl, they fell into a sewer, and Ross saved them. At the end of the story Ray and Jill have babies:

> One afternoon Ray and his Friend Ross were walking and talking. "So what are you going to do after school Ray?" "Well I'm not so sure hey? "What" Do you want to shoot some houpes today afterschool?" Sounds good okay but frist Im hugery" "Burger King" "Sounds good" "Cool". As they were walking to Burger King Ross bumped into someone. "Oh no". Ray said' "Hey you watch were your going". Ray said again, oh.. . . .
> I am so sorry" Hi my name is Ray. Here let me halpe you up" Ho, thankis. My name is Jill. "Here let me make it up to you how about a nice berger" "okay". Hey man what abuot me" Ross side "will you sould go to school". Will are friend ship is over" "fair". "Come on Jill let's go, okay" after they were gone they went for a walk under a brige by a little house. They stardid to kiss. Jill was licking his eure. Jill and Ray fall in to the suer's they were stuk wathing a turd flow by every minit. I'm comeing Ray, Ross side to Ray. Ross nerly saved Ray and they both pulld out Jill. A few more years later Jill and Ray had babys.

This storyline highlights what many young boys like to do, and that is to "hang out" and "shoot hoops" together and then go to MacDonald's or Burger King for a hamburger. What comes through in this story, as well as another story about Santa Claus, is the use of some form of aggression to deal with an issue.

I chose to comment on Ray and his theme of aggression in his stories to draw attention to the reality that many young people face, as Nancie Atwell (1998) so aptly stated: "The thorns of adolescence are real and cause real pain" (p. 55). She explained that the ages of 12, 13, and 14 years are very unpredictable times in the lives of adolescents, and their sense of who they are, "the world, and the relationship between the two is challenged every day by their own needs and by the demands of new roles, and all of it is played out in public" (p. 55).

Gilbert and Gilbert (1998), prominent Australian researchers in the field of gender and literacy, lamented that "the 'doing' of aggressive and violent forms of masculinity in and around the school has become a feature of school life" (p. 13). This ties in with academic expectations and inclusion in or exclusion from the literacy club, according to Smith (1988) which, combined with the need to fit in, can make it hard for those who cannot excel, and they become disruptive. The plots in Ray's stories contain a great deal of aggression and may show his level of frustration. It is very realistic to Ray and may be his way of making meaning based on his own experiences. The teacher allowed him to write about what he thought was relevant, and using this knowledge allowed him to mediate his own learning and bring in issues that he felt a need to address. As a result, he wrote about events that included aggression because he probably needed a release

because of his level of frustration with the literacy assignment (Goodman & Goodman, 1990, p. 228).

Marie is one of the girls whom I visited for the home component of my study, and I came to know her better than I did the other girls in the class. Marie was the youngest of her peers, in Grade 6, and she had just turned 11 on January 31, 2003. She has good support from her parents, is experiencing success in school, and feels good about who she is. She wrote positive things about another little girl named Nola, who sounds very much like Marie herself. This is Marie's story:

> *In a peaceful little town in British Columbia by Victoria a sweet little girl named Nola Rose John was on her way home from school. Nola was like a perfect little angel who doesn't get into any trouble at all. She was known as a very talented girl. She won the spelling bee contest 3 times in a row. She was a junior scout and received all of her bages and wins all of the swimming competicions. Every one loved her for her kind and junerosidy and when Mr. Rose's cat was stuck in a well with no water Nola helped to get it out. Then the mayor rewarded her with a trip for 3 to Hawii. On her way home she finds her dad in a tiny cave in a bush wall covered with vines. What are you doing dad? she asked. Her father was to bussy to answer her. He told her he found a cave in the bNick wall and he is egzaming it. "Tell your mother I'll be in by supper", "Yes, dad." Just when Nola walked to the house she heared her father yell. She turned around to fine dust everywhere. Nola ran inside to get her mother. "Mom! Mom! Dad is traped in a little cave! Her mother ran out they both ran towards the cave. Her mother was shocked by the accident. They didn't know what to do. They tried everything but they just can't get him out. Nola got a flashlight and decided to go check it out. She got on her knees and started to crawl. Nola came to a bend and "Dad" she yelled and hoped he will hear her. "Nola, Nola are you there?" "Yes Dad I'm here." "Nola you have to haul the rock out for me to get out, can you do that?" "Yeah, I'll try." Nola ran out to tell her mom but it will take days to haul large rocks like that. Nola was thinking very hard and harder every minute. "I got it." Nola phoned her friend to come and help it was working like planed. Every thing was going as it should be. Nola was at the spot where she heared her dad. She passed the rock to her mother and then another and on and on.*

In our discussion on her expectations of herself, it was evident that Nola is a reflection of Marie and of how she sees herself. She is a young woman who at this time in her life receives a great deal of attention from both parents. She talked fondly about her father

and mother and admitted being pampered by her dad. He buys her things, and during one of my visits to her house, she told me that on one of his trips to Edmonton, her father had bought her a sheet set with curtains and pillow shams. I asked her whether these were gifts for a special occasion, and she said "No." When I asked her why he had bought her the gift, she replied that it was because she is "Daddy's little girl." She told me that she is spoiled and described herself and her friend Chelsea as "spoiled brats."

I was very much like Marie, and I too was Daddy's little girl. My father and I had a special bond too, and I can relate very well to her image of herself. This theme of family and the importance of relationship came through in Marie's story, as well as her desire to be recognized as a heroine who had saved her father. She saved the cat that was stuck in a well and went on to save the day when she found a solution to free her father from the cave.

In the "Snowed In" story that Marie wrote, an assignment that the teacher gave the students, Marie carried on with this theme of being a heroine. This time she is named Marina and is 11 years old. Three children are involved in this story, and they were admired and viewed by the others as the smartest in the school. Maria's own family has three school-aged children—two brothers and Marie—and an older sister who lives away from home on her own. To add to this meaning making, Marie rides the bus to school every day.

> On an ordinary school day the bus driver was taking seventeen children to school. The bus driver just picked up the three best friends. Eleven year old Marina, nine year old Wally and twelve year old Gerald. Everyone admired them and say there the smartest kids in the school. All the younger children are afraid of them cause they always think they'll hurt them very badly. But the little one aren't afraid of Marina cause she is so pretty. On the way to school a big snow storm hit the high way. When the driver los control he jumped out leaving the children alone. Gerald ran up to the steering wheel then they hit the ditch very heard. On the

little hill was a big tree with lots of white snow. All the snow fell on the bus when it rocked covering a little bit of the door. The bus driver just ran to the nerest shelter not caring for the children. Then the storm was getting worst and worst, then the snow was falling very heavy. Gerald knew how to drive but the tires were stuck in a big rut. Wally was getting very horafied then he started to yell very loud. Then Marina slapped him, "Why don't you quit yelling you big baby?" she also added. Marina ran to the door of the bus and tried to open it as hard as she can but it was jammed. She tried to open the emergency exits but they were jammed also. Then she started to panic then she ran to the door she jumped. Gerald pulled the handle very gently to open the door then it opened and Marina fell out the door and fell into the snow. Then all the kids ran to the door and were saying, "thank you" they were all safe went to the nearest shelter to where the bus driver was and went home. The bus driver was fired for leaving the kids and Marina, Wally and Gerald were rewarded by the Mayor of the town, superintendent of the school and there parents were very proud of them and they rewarded them with hugs and kisses.

Once more the hero in the story is a female. Marie made meaning in her stories by personalizing the content and talking about events and people who mean something to her.

Another story that Marie was asked to write did not come together as well as the first two. This assignment was handed out with the instructions that the students were to choose one of the following activities for one of the novels that they had read that year: (a) write a summary in paragraph form, draw a comic strip, give an oral presentation, or act out a skit; (b) answer questions from a list that the teacher gave them; or (c) complete a writing activity, which could be a letter to the author, an alternate ending, a sequel, or a journal entry; for one of the novels they had read for the year. They were to work on a plan and hand in the final draft a week later for assessment. Marie chose to do the writing activity—an alternate ending for the novel *Holes*. The following artifact is the work that Marie handed in for assessment. She wrote a good, descriptive beginning and provided many details, but she seemed to get somewhat confused with the change in events as she wrote an alternate ending to the novel. Marie strived to change the storyline after Stanley

met Mr. Sir and they discussed what it would be like at Camp Green Lake. The events for

this story did not flow as well as they did in her personalized stories. Her sample follows:

> *Stanley is on his way to Camp Green Lake and is excited. He daydreams about having lots of friends and swimming in the lake. The bus stops and he bumps his head. When he got off his mouth droped and looks everywhere but no lake or happy children in site. Nothing but a blazing sun. The guard takes him to a cabin out of the sun. Straight from the door was a desk and someone like a ranger very relaxed with his feet on the top. The ranger looks at him then the guard takes his hand cuffs off and walks out the door. Then the man walks toward hi and he said "call me Mr. Sir." Stanley was nurvos at first then a nod came out. Mr Sir took him outside in the boiling sun again. Mr Sir asked, "Are you thirsty? Well better get use to it cause your going to dig holes for the next 18 months." Mr. Sir said once more. Then Stanley looked far into the lake and saw boys walking into their tent in orange clothing. The Mr. Sir asked, "Do you see any guards?" "No, Mr. Sir" Stanley said nervously. "Do you see any barbwire fences anywhere?" Stanley looked around. "No, Mr. Sir" like nothing happened. Mr. Sir said one last time "So you can run away but you would be dead out there in 3 days." The next day Stanley run's away at daylight in the very hot sun with very little water. Stanley was gone for 2 days now. "I have one more day" Stanley said to himself. It wasn't even 3 days and Stanley made it to the river. He just needed to cross it then he's home free. All of a sudden he falls passing him was a spotted lizard he thought he passed all of those before. But he doesn't die just like that he is suffering. Back from the camp Mr. Sir finds him. He is coming to him in a jeep and taking him back. Mr. Sir takes him to a nurse and Stanley survived. He is staying there for 18 months and he wants to. Stanley is deciding to stay for 18 months instead of going to die in a hot desert. If it wasn't for Mr. Sir he would have been there. The next day he walks to Mr. Sir's office and thanks him. Then he thanks the nurse and gives her a kiss on the cheek. "I would rather dig holes than dying by a spotted lizard" he tells the nurse. She gives Stanley a little chuckle "That's a promise."*

Marie's writing was so much better when she was allowed to personalize and

make meaning from the topic and to think of past experiences and draw them into the

stories.

Carl is another student whom I came to know a little better while I was in class,

and I had several opportunities to talk to him alone. On one occasion I was able to sit

with him outside the classroom setting when the teacher asked him to work on an

assignment on his own. This time alone with him helped me to develop more of a

relationship with him. After this short interview he would get my attention by teasing me. He threw a snowball close to my feet during recess just to let me know that he knew I was outside. He had a small grin on his face when he saw that I had noticed him and knew that he had thrown the snowball.

Earlier in the school year, during my data-collection period at the school, Carl had experienced the loss of his father in a car accident that involved an explosion. His second story is about someone dying in a fire, and he wrote about death in two different stories. Carl very likely thought about death a great deal because of the loss of his father. His descriptions of death are dramatic. It is a very traumatic experience for a young man, and Carl found a way of dealing with the issue by writing about it in his stories. His first description of death was in the teacher-assigned activity, and Carl also chose to do the alternate ending for the novel *Holes*, similarly to Marie. His ending is as follows:

> *Once there was a boy named Stanley Yelnats. He was sent to Camp Green Lake. It was like boot camp. Each day Stanley digs holes for eighteen months and if people try to run away they would be buzzard food in three days. The next day Stan was thinking of running away. As he was digging he found a gun. When he saw it, he grabbed it and put it in his coveralls. He was going to escape tonight. Stanley went to sneak into Mr. Sir's fridge and stole eight sodas and ten muffins. When he started walking he tried to get as far as possible. When it turned morning, Stan tired to shoot a yellow lizard but the clip was empty. He was terrified. He started to run and a yellow lizard fell on his neck and bit him. He died instantly. Mr. Sir found Stanley face down and the buzzards were eating him. Mr. Sir said, "lost another one."*

In the actual story of *Holes* a lizard crawled up on one of the boys, one of Stanley's friends, but he was able to get away without being bitten. However, Carl chose to have Stanley die. He added buzzards, a bird with which he would be unfamiliar, but he may have heard the word used in reference to whiskey-jacks, ravens, or crows.

Carl's second story was about Jack and Tom, two dinosaurs, and in this ending

the hunters tortured Tom, threw him into the fire, and watched him burn. But Tom joined

Jack in heaven:

Along time ago there were two friends named Jack and Tom. They were dinosors.
On one hot jungle morning Jack went to go eat some bananas and Tom asked if
he could join. But Jack said no. As Tom was walking home he heard a gun shot.
Tom hurried to the gun shot. Jack was getting dragged away. Tom ran to the
hunters but the hunters didn't see Tom. Tom was so terrified, seeing his friend
dead. The hunters shone a light at Tom. Tom tried to blend in but his blender was
broken. Tom tried to run but he was captured. The hunters tortured Tom and they
threw him in the fire and watched him burned. Now Tom joined Jack in heaven.

Although Carl talked about hunters in this story, the context is not about the actual

lifestyle in the community of hunting for moose or other wildlife. This context seems to

be very much like a storyline in a fantasy or science fiction movie, especially because it

is tied to dinosaurs.

It is sad that a child at this age has to deal with the issue of death, and as I

reviewed the students' meaning making, it was obvious that they were tying their own

experiences to their story writing. I have discussed the importance of working from what

the students bring to school and then engaging them in dialogue to ensure that they have

the opportunity to share these experiences.

In 1991 I lost my little daughter in a car accident, and the students whom I taught

in Grade 1 experienced grief with me; they did not hesitate to discuss in class people in

their own families who had died. One mother became very concerned about these

discussions and came to the school to talk to me about it. I told her that the children knew

that I had experienced this loss and that their way of helping me through it was to talk

about it. It is also apparent that Carl needed an outlet to talk about the grief that he was

experiencing, and he chose to address it in his stories. In my follow-up visit in 2004 I

discovered that Carl, who was 14 years old, had dropped out of school early in the fall. He apparently attended school for the first few months and did not return after that.

Laura, the other girl who was a part of my home study component, lives with her grandmother, one cousin, and two of her siblings. Her aunts and their families live close by, and therefore she has a number of playmates, many of them very young children. Her best friends, are all younger than she is. In one of her stories Len and his friends, Mike, Dan, Kathy, and Brad, wanted to play hide and seek in the forest, which is a game that Laura and her friends play because they live very close to the forest. At home four of them usually play together, and her story has four characters, including herself. This is Laura's story:

> One morning it was warm and cloudy when Len and his friends, Mike, Dan, Kathy and Brad went to play hide n seek around the forest. Len was the one who got picked because he was the smallest. Len counted up to 50. When Len finished counting to 50 he went to look around the forest. Len couldn't seem to find any of his friends, but he saw a cave with lots of trees and rocks on the ground. Len went in because he thought he would find some one. Len's feet got wet as he walked across the cave. When Len was in the middle of the cave he thought he heard Kathy and Len called out "Kathy" but no one heard. Before Len got out of the cave something big grabbed him while he wasn't looking. Later Mike, Dan and Brad got tired of hiding and went back home. While they were walking Brad said, "I wonder if Kathy got found?" So they turned around to the forest and Dan saw a cave and he said "let's go there." When they got there they seen a big animal that looks like a dinousar. The three of them started to yell and they ran away as fast as they can. The next day it was sunny. Olwen seen Len trapped in the forest. She helped him and asked Len who trapped him. Len said it looked like a big dinousar. Then Olwen said "that is Hobbit." Then Olwen asked if Len wanted a walk home. Len said, "OK." When Len got home everyone was happy to see him and they were asking Len where he was. The next time they played hide n seek they decided to play around the house and not go far.

Laura drew on her play experiences outside her grandmother's house. I know from discussions with her and her grandmother that the children play many different games in the bush near the house. It is interesting that Laura tied a novel character to her

story, Olwen, from a trilogy written by Monica Hughes (2000); this particular novel is called "The Keeper of the Isis Light." It is about a remote planet, Isis, and the heroine Olive lived on this planet with her guardian, Olwen.

Laura drew on other texts and incorporated ideas into her own past experiences in her writing. From the whole-language perspective, Goodman and Goodman (1990) called it "learning literacy in the context of its use" (p. 225). They commented that language learners use language for a purpose, and when they use language authentically, they develop control over the process: "In authentic literacy events, events that have personal and significant meaning for the language user, there are transactions between the reader and the text in which the reader is continuously solving new problems and building psycholinguistic strategies" (p. 225).

Laura mentioned numerous times that she was bored, and she talked about this in the next story, where she wrote about Olwen once more, as well as Lila and Matt, who were best friends who walked around in the woods because they were bored. Laura talked about being bored at home, outside of school, and during school. She tied this in and expanded her story by drawing in Olwen and the Isis light in the second story. This storyline is different from the first story she wrote. It was a writing assignment that the teacher gave in May from a novel that she had been reading to the students in which she asked them to write and include a setting, characters, the problem, and a solution in their stories. Laura's assignment read as follows:

> *One morning there was girl named Lila and a boy named Matt who are best friends. They were walking around in the woods because they were board. When they were talking Lila said, "let's go to the lake". And Matt said, "OK." When they seen a shiney light Matt said let's go to the boat and look at the light. When Matt and Lila got on the boat they swam to the bright shiny light in the middle of the lake. Matt asked "what is that"? Lila said it looks like a light. Later Matt said*

let's go back it's getting dark. Lila said "OK." So they started walking. Later they seen Olwen walking by. Olwen went to the Isis light and seen Lila and Matt at the lake looking at the light. Later Olwen and Matt and Lila went home. And they became friends. The next day the three of them were playing together on a sunny day at the lake.

Laura's story seems to have all of the components that the teacher required: the setting in the woods; the characters, Lila, Matt, and Olwen; the problem, which was the source of the light; and the solution: They searched for and found the source of the light. In this effort to make meaning, Laura wrote in a remarkably different style from that of her first story.

Tyler wrote two stories about Billy, who must play a key role in his life; perhaps Billy represents Tyler himself or an older brother. Tyler's first theme was hunting and camping, which is something that many of these children experience. Children from this community travel seasonally to cabins in the bush and hunt for wild meat such as moose, deer, ducks, and chickens. This is Tyler's story about hunting:

There once was a guy named Billy. He was a sholder. Bobby asked him to go hunting with him. So they went hunting. When they got to the forest they started to hunt. When they got back to the camp they started to cook moose meat because they had killed a moose. The next day they went hunting again. When they cheacked on there rabbit snare they caught a rabbit but it was all ripped up. When they cheaked the wolf chrap the wolf was ripped up too. Then they herd something. Then they looked up and there it was. The biggest beast they ever seen. It was hairy and black and looked like a sasquatch, but more scary. It looked at them. "Run for your live!" Billy skremed. So they took off running. Billy was in front of Bobby, that why Billy did not see Bobby trip. The moster got bobby and ripped him up. When Billy got to the camp he didn't see Bobby. He went looking for Bobby. Billy seen bobby's arm. He went back to the camp and got all his guns and went to go look for that moster. He seen it, so he got ready. "Die" Billy yelled and started to shoot. When he ran out of bullets he looked at the moster. The moster got really mad and picked up a huge rock and throw it at him. The rock crust him and killed him.

Much of what Tyler wrote was from the life experiences of people who live in this community. They still hunt and trap, although the oil industry has affected many of the areas around the community, and they still snare rabbits for food and squirrels for fur in many of the northern communities. One day in early February, while the students were discussing a news article that they had to write for that day, Sam talked about skinning squirrels and putting them on stretchers. Snaring squirrels is part of a lifestyle with which many of us are familiar because many of our fathers trapped to make a living. Sam is learning to do this as a young boy. My father told us that he had been sent into the bush at the young age of 12 to snare squirrels so that his mother could sell the fur to pay for her Christmas shopping, which she did by catalogue.

Snaring squirrels is usually the first thing that young boys are taught so that they can earn their own money or help with the family finances. Later they are taught how to trap larger animals such as muskrats, beavers, lynx, and fishers. I watched my father trap animals for fur until the fur price went down so much that he decided that it was not worth it to go out on his trapline. We still have my father's trapline, and my first cousin travels there to snare and trap animals for additional income.

The second theme that ties in with Tyler's meaning making is suspense, which many boys prefer in their stories. Anne Haas Dyson (1997) noted that young people are drawn to media culture, movies, commercials, and videogames and create from this imagery; they then become superheroes in a (pretend) danger-filled world. Furthermore, most youth write stories that carry the patterns of chase-escape, attack-defend, escape-capture, which are represented in some fashion in Tyler's theme of suspense (p. 14). His storyline comes from his imagining what is scary, and to him it is the big, black, hairy

Sasquatch. Many of these children watch movies and discuss them daily in class, and they attempt to be heroes based on different characters they admire. For example, there was a great deal of discussion and drawing of *Dragon Ball Z* at the beginning of the school year, and many of the boys in the class drew the different characters associated with this popular culture superhero. Randy wanted to be like Sibby, a name that he chose for a wall chart that shows points for class assignments that the students have accrued over a period of time. I gathered from a conversation between Sam and Randy that Sibby is a movie character who seemed to be popular with the boys in the class because they referred to him more than once.

Linda wrote about camping in her "Snowed In" story about Carelle, Sturit, Simin, and Joe:

> *One sowey morning when Carelle, Sturit, Simin and Joe were going camping in the bush. It was the frist time they went, and it is just snowing, something tedrild happind when Sturit was triding to ge out and that when he new they were snwed in. They trid hard to get out but it was to strong to push. Carelle and Joe were horafid because they seen a moos coming. Simin, Joe, Carelle and Sturit therge the moose was going to kill them thay hrde skahing and band. Carelle seid, "he is truing to get in". The moose was not going to kill them he was just plowing the way. When he was done he went away Joe seid, "that was close. Simin yelled, "Thank you". When they went out they seen the snow 10 times as there but they war happy to be out and so they went home and befor they rerod him with a can of bens.*

Linda wrote much of her story phonetically. The size of a moose can be very threatening and Linda has contextualized this in her story. She has probably seen a moose more than once and has thought about how intimidating it could be. The moose's reward of a can of beans is a humorous one indeed!

Chelsea enjoys school and is well liked by most of her peers, which is evident from the attention that she receives from her classmates. She works hard, stays on task,

and attempts the assigned work as expected by the teacher. The last assignment for the year was to choose a novel that the class had studied for the year and either write a letter or a paragraph or illustrate with a cartoon or drawing to show their understanding of the story. Chelsea chose to write a letter to the author:

> *Dear Louis Sachar,*
> *I just recently read your novel and I love the idea that friendship counts in any situation. Like when Stanley was determined to make sure Zero was alright. When I started to realize the lesson of the novel was about punishment I think that was weird because I thought Holes was about friendship and hope. I wonder if you like to answer some of my questions. I wonder altrough the novel if you went to a camp like this? The god's thumb in the novel really looks like a thumb? Thank you for reading my letter and I hope you write back.*
> *Yours truly,*
> *Chelsea Grandin*

Obviously, friendship is truly important to Chelsea, which was also evident in the pieces that she chose to share with me during the literacy dig. She has brought this concept into her writing and talked to Louis Sachar about her surprise that the novel was more about punishment than about friendship and hope, which is not what she had originally thought. In the development of Cree children's identities, the role of family and friends is crucial to their identity building. Many of the children are tied closely to relatives and consider the children to be their close friends. Chelsea seems to have moved to a higher synthesis level than basic recall and comprehension in the discussion in her letter that is tied to what she considers meaningful and important. During a discussion with Mable, Chelsea's mother, I had the impression that they are also friends and that they have learned to discuss many things openly. Mable talked about her daughter Chelsea with pride and admiration, and Chelsea reciprocally shares this sense about her mother.

As I reviewed the written artifacts, it was exhilarating for me as the researcher to find unique pieces of personal meaning making and to realize that each piece spoke of

what was interesting and meaningful to the student. These data reveal the resiliency of students and their willingness to find an opening to make meaning if they are given the opportunity.

The students have shown this resiliency and meaning making in two ways. The first one is through connecting to Indigenous knowledge, events, and daily activities that reflect their Indigenous way of knowing and being. The development of Cree children's identities was discussed in a previous chapter as well as to my statements about Indigenous knowledge and how it pertains to this research. The second one is through the students' use of illustrations or symbols—Indigenous forms of literacies—in their own personal and private voice and crossing over into the school voice when the teacher offers a choice of activities for an assignment. Each piece that I have included demonstrates that each student has taken ownership of the story-writing assignment and has reflected on his or her own meaning making by connecting to their personal Indigenous knowledge. The Indigenous knowledge presented in these stories includes connections to extended family and friends, personal daily events (happy or tragic), and traditional lifestyle events and way of life.

As I examined the pieces, I saw that Tyler, Ray, and Linda wrote more about traditional lifestyle events more than the other children. Some of these events also that include eating traditional foods or hunting for moose or bear. This Indigenous knowledge is familiar to these students, and they draw from what takes place around them to make meaning in their stories. Carl also talked about hunting, but in his story he was hunting for dinosaurs.

Laura, Marie, Jean, and Carl focused on extended family members and friends who are linked to personal events that they discuss in story form. Although Carl and Jean wrote fictionalized stories, the information that they share in the stories and the specificity of the details and events reveal that they drew from a personal knowledge base. Carl had experienced the tragic death of his father and therefore chose to talk about death in his stories. Jean revealed an unhappy home life in one of her stories, and she seemed to have personalized the characters with specific details in the story.

The data were derived from assigned pieces of writing in which the students were given the freedom to create their own storylines. The novels that they read during the year were all suitable for and interesting to this age group, but the stories focused mainly on their interest in science fiction. They read *Tuck Everlasting* by Natalie Babbitt (1975); *Holes* by Louis Sachar (1998); *Morning Girl* by Michael Dorris (1992), *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis (1950), *Shadow of a Bull* by Maia Wojciechowska (1964), and *Keeper of the Isis Light* by Monica Hughes (2000).

The second method that the students used to make meaning was by drawing on their Indigenous forms of literacy to show their comprehension of the novel *Holes*. The symbols I am referring to as Indigenous forms of literacy are those which are tied to an illustration, a pattern rather than the use of text to show understanding of a concept. These four examples show that each student chose to use more of an illustrative method to show understanding although there is also text in each artifact. The first figure of the truck driving illustrates a pattern of tracks, boot/shoe tracks, to a certain point on the road which shows the person then got into the truck. The second figure also shows these types of boot tracks although the drawing is smaller in scale the text that we see is written in

word balloons. The illustrations in these two pieces are predominant, and there is a limited amount of text, but those who have read the novel *Holes* would be able to see the key events illustrated in these two artifacts. Figure 7 shows two examples from two different students.

These artifacts show that the students preferred to draw than to write to show their understanding of a concept. In this assignment they were allowed their choice of activities, and the majority of the class chose to draw their understanding of the novel *Holes*. They were also asked to choose from the selection of novels that they had read during the year, and many of them chose *Holes*. The creativity that comes with personalizing their understanding through illustrating seems more effective than if they had been restricted to a writing assignment because it reveals their personal style.

In the last two samples (Figure 8), the first illustration shows us what the student remembered from the novel. He has noted in sentences what he thought were the key points to correspond with illustrations he has added to his work. In his illustrations he has shown several different objects such as shovels, lizard, mountain illustrating God's thumb and the truck that Stanley took when he tried to escape the camp. The last sample shows the student organizing the events in chronological order with illustrations and short sentences in word balloons. He has highlighted what he considers to be the key events in order as they happened. Each student's artifact is personalized and shows his or her comprehension of the novel and what he or she considered meaningful. This assignment and the flexibility that was offered by the teacher shows that the students prefer to draw their understanding rather than write.
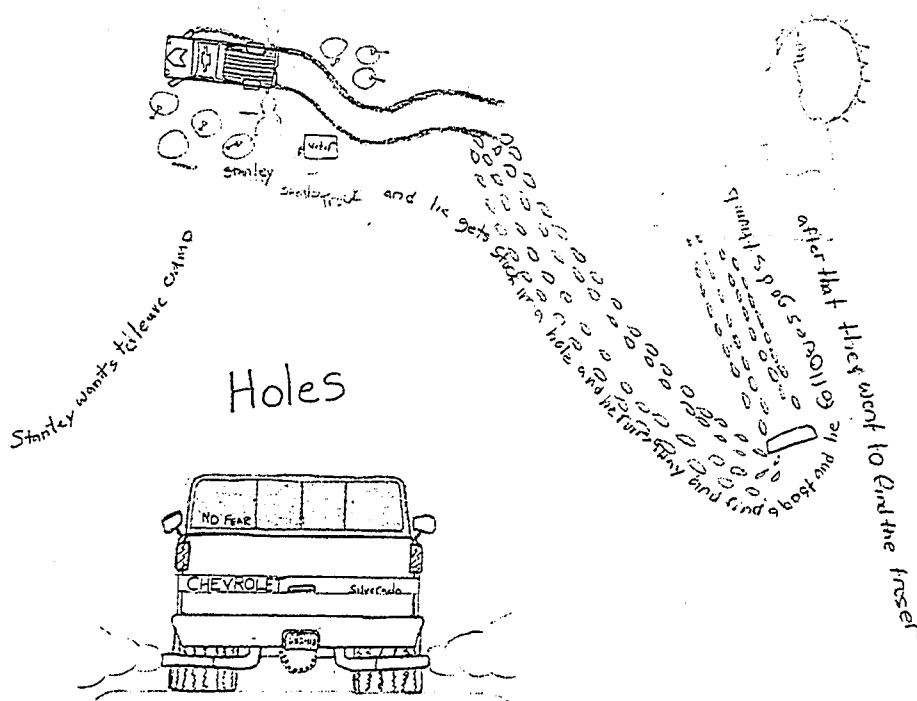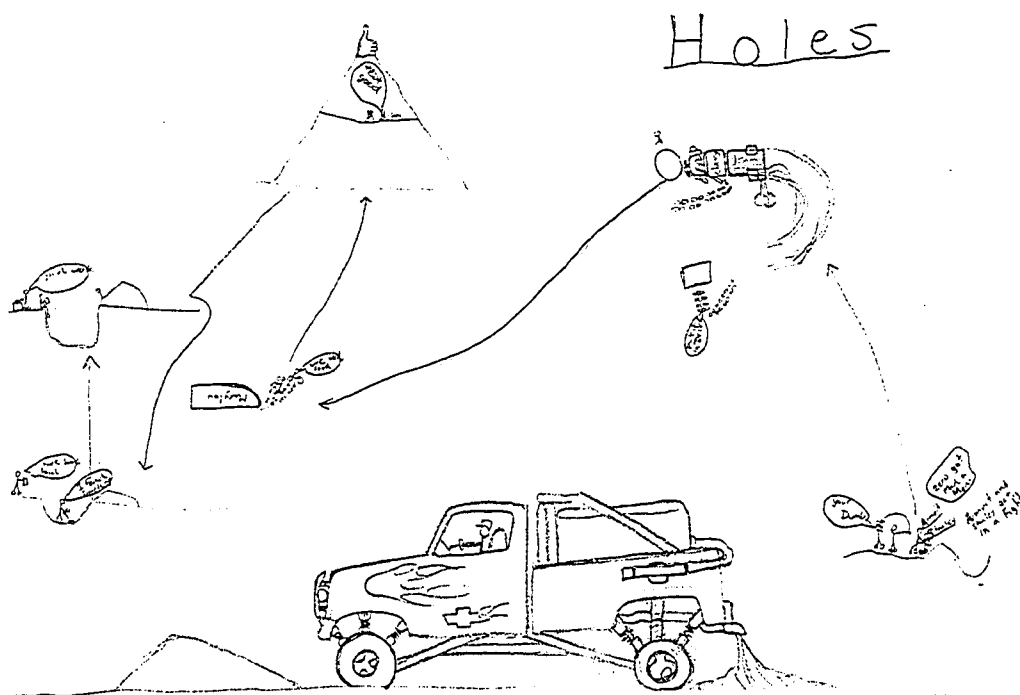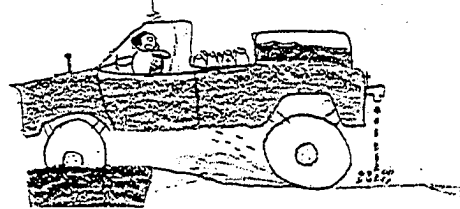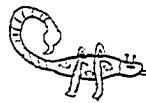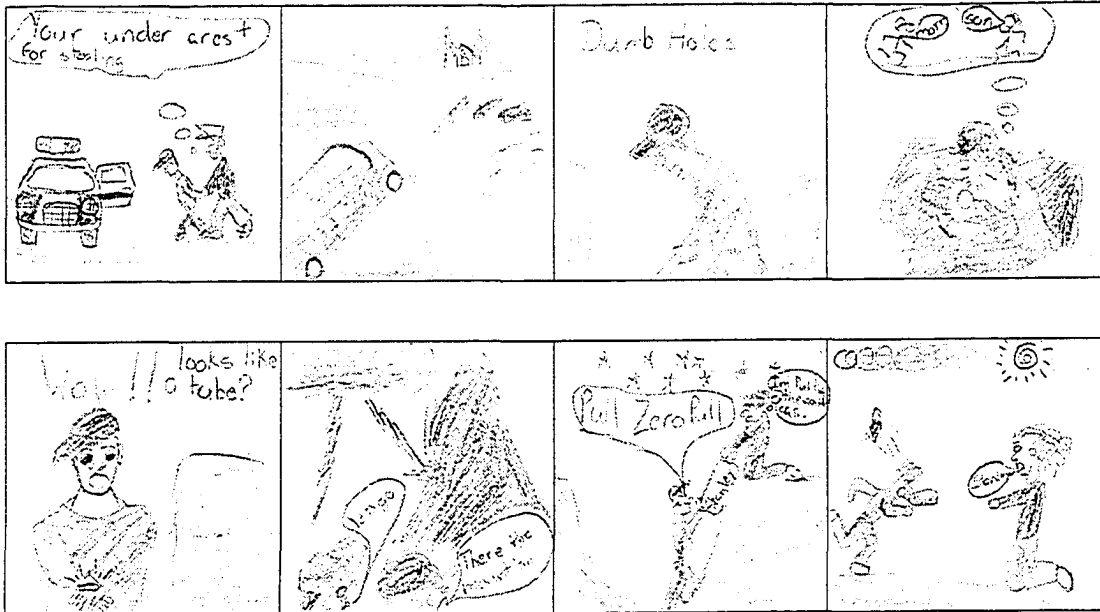
*Figure 7. Holes/*tracks.

Figure 8. Holes/shovel/cartoon.

Gender and Power in Literacy: Peer Interaction

> Gender is not only a category of individual identity in the focus of symbolic constructions, but also a dimension of social relations and social organization. I have traced the weaving of gender in the creation of groups, encounters, and, at a more abstract level, institutions. The organization and meanings of gender vary from one social context to another, from families, to neighborhoods, to schools and within schools, from foursquare to scenes of chasing to classrooms and lunchrooms. Gender varies in degree and mode of relevance. (Thorne, 1993, p. 158)

The other expressions of literacy in the school setting that need to be mentioned pertains to the gender roles and the male/female response to literacy. As I reviewed the data I quickly became aware of the different roles that the male and female members of the class were playing during literacy events. It was clear that each gender viewed literacy from a different perspective, and it was obvious which role belonged to each gender. These roles are more evident in group work, although they can also be seen within the classroom.

As human beings we construct who we are in the context of where we are and who influences us. Social constructions are usually determined by choice and our own creation. According to Blair (2001), "In urban middle-years classrooms, children are involved in the daily process of constructing their identities" (p. 63). She explained that ethnicity and gender are two very important parts of these social constructions. We not only choose who we want to be for that moment, but we often choose the tools that work to our advantage to construct the identity, gender role, and culture that accommodate us. This gender play, a social construction of masculinity and femininity, is obvious in the many different institutions in which we are involved, including the school (Gilbert &

Gilbert, 1998; Thorne, 1993). To add to this, we not only construct gender and culture, but also our own identity and which hat we choose to wear based on the context.

A historic event took place on November 13 and 14, 2004, at the Radisson Hotel in Winnipeg that brought together a collection of Indigenous peoples at an Aboriginal roundtable session organized by Indian and Native Affairs Canada. I was a participant, and my experience at this event heightened my awareness of how important it is to be conscious of our own social construction, especially as it relates to gender and culture. Our consciousness of being Indigenous was sensitized when we were chosen to participate at these sessions. We started at a large-group session with introductory statements by key officials, and then we moved into different rooms designated to the three Indigenous groups—First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. Some participants who were non-Aboriginal and obviously not from these Indigenous groups were assigned to each room because of specific associations with a particular Indigenous group. Each group had two facilitators, a defined process, and an agenda with four key questions that had been agreed upon by a working committee. These working questions were designed by this working committee designated by Indian Affairs. The questions were designed to guide us in arriving at a consensus on what is important for the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis groups.

During the process we were asked to socially construct who we are as Indigenous peoples, work from these social constructions of culture and identity, and arrive at some key recommendations within the confines of an established agenda. The experience was frustrating, and the defined process was our first barrier to dialogue. The second—the social construction of being Métis and the terminology that was used in the discussions—

was a hindrance in arriving at a group understanding. The specific social construction of

being Métis and tied to an institution or legal entity caused some concern and stifled our

discussions, and we struggled with simple words such as *nation*. It was apparent to some

of us that some people were still formulating their identity, whereas others were so

confident of who they are that they were oblivious to the definitions and participated in

more than one session. The social construction of who we are and how we define

ourselves plays itself out in our social context and can be a liberating or oppressive

experience depending on the outcome of the event. Children constantly construct these

identities for themselves and engage in what Thorne (1993) called *gender play*.

During my research I saw an obvious display of gender differences and was

fascinated by and curious to view these interactions through the gender lens. This was a

new lens to me because I had not been previously aware of these differences as a

classroom teacher, and the role of researcher gave me an opportunity to view literacy

from this new lens of gender difference. There were clear lines of masculinity and

femininity in this classroom and how the students attended to literacy tasks. Research into

the field of gender study and how gender affects literacy suggests that we need to try to

understand the gender construction of masculine and feminine roles and how they

influence each other and affect configurations of literacy. These gendered practices will

impact and affect how young people attend to events, curriculum, school participation,

and even academic achievement (Blair, 1998; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Thorne, 1993).

The gender differences in this Grade 5/6 classroom were certainly noticeable

during group activities or partner assignments. It was amusing to see the girls in each

situation taking charge of the activity to ensure that the required tasks were done by

going so far as to do the tasks themselves while ignoring the boys or by expressing their distaste for the boy's lack of involvement while the girls themselves completed the task. The boys, on the other hand, bantered with the girls throughout the activity and offered some input while the girls completed most of the task.

Bohan (1997) maintained that gender is not an inherent trait; rather, it is qualities or behaviors that appear and "are usually seen as sex related and are in fact contextually determined" (p. 39). She added that we seem to have arrived at a consensus that gender is the term that we use to describe a set of interactions or behaviors that we have come to expect to take place in this context. As I analyzed the interaction taking place between the boys and girls of this class, it seemed second nature for them to move into these roles and play them out according to social and contextual expectations. In other situations in which the boys had to work alone, they attended to their tasks diligently and kept each other on task as they worked to complete the assignments. Thorne (1993) called this a *gender dance*, one that is choreographed and in which the patterning is a display of boys' and girls' behavior that separates or integrates them (p. 36).

Throughout the school year the teacher arranged the class in several different seating arrangements to facilitate a healthy working environment. She chose to seat the students in what Thorne (1993) called a seating arrangement that downplays and then emphasizes the significance of gender. She allowed the students to choose their own seating arrangement at one point, but this did not last long because the students who chose to sit with each other became loud and disruptive. At this point she then separated these students.

One group activity that I observed involved three students who called themselves

"The Mad Team," a name that they chose for themselves for group work on a social

studies assignment. The Mad Team was asked to choose a chapter in *Tuck Everlasting*

(Babbitt, 1975) and to discuss, highlight, and list the following information: chapter

title/setting/characters/main events. The following dialogue took place among the Mad

Team members Randy, Marie, and David.

Mad Team

The students work quietly rereading Chapter 18, a short chapter (pp. 89-92).
They are discussing items other than the summary. David decides to do the
writing.
A: You get the hard part—you get to spell and stuff.
The boys show each other their coats and compare them. The coats are almost the
same, but they do have some differences.
M: says, "Are you guys going to write or should I write?"
The students discuss their group names. David puts on his hood, Randy and
David continue to talk, and Marie tries to get them back on task.
At 9:35 David writes the chapter title, Chapter 18, on his paper.
Setting is in the Tuck's house.
Characters are Myles, May Tuck, Jesse, Winnie, and Angus.
Marie reminds the boys that they need to work on the main events. She picks up
the paper to check David's work. She adds commas. "There—write the main
events. Hey, you guys write the main events." She starts to list the main events as
boys are off task.
D says, "Go ahead, you write the main events." The boys discuss coats.
A asks, "What do you all got?"
Marie shares her sentences with Randy.
David continues his conversation about coats. "How come your coat looks
thinner than mine?"
Marie continues to write down the events while the boys discuss other things; they
talk about a chandelier and a jack-o-lantern.
Randy goes over to see how much Marie has done; David checks their work.
The main events that Marie has listed are:
1. They all had flapjacks for breakfast instead of fish.
2. When Jesse got up he started to tease Myles because he did not catch any fish.
3. Everyone ate in the parlor.
At 9:55 the students are given scribblers and asked to return to their groups.

As we look at this event, it is evident that the girl took on the role to organize and keep the boys on task. Marie continued to do this throughout the assignment, and Randy and David continued to be off task. I noticed that the boys' role seemed to be a choice to observe and make sure that the task was completed. Randy and David both checked the work that Marie did for the assignment. This event exemplified numerous classroom interactions during group activities. During this activity Marie has done most of the work by herself while the boys talked about things that were off topic but apparently important to them. This talk between the two boys is a pattern that fits with research that stated that during classroom interaction "male students tend to talk more than female students" (Thorne, 1993, pp. 38-39), although Thorne was quick to point out that this was based on statistical research rather than on absolute differences. The two boys had the same type of coat, but the brand label was different, and this was the topic of conversation throughout the group activity. The boys seemed to have developed the attitude that they were in control and that it is the girl's responsibility to do the work, although from the data it is obvious that Marie was the one who made what I would call literacy decisions.

Bohan (1997) noted that women are far more likely to be in situations in which they are in a subordinate role and men in a role of dominance and that this is what is expected by society (p. 39). The following is another example that demonstrates gender roles in a literacy event with Freddie and Linda:

Oilers Team

At 10:05 Linda is working alone. Freddie arrives at this time to work with her on a display. I ask them if they know what their display will be all about. They seem to be lacking information about this task. I ask them what question they are focusing on, and they say, "How is our council organized?"

Freddie leaves Linda at 10:10. Are the instructions not clear enough? They don't seem to understand how to move from step 1 to step 2. It seems to be difficult for them to come up with a plan.
They have the steps for the election process listed in their books.
Teacher: Draw me a picture of what you will put on your display board.
Linda: To make people with Popsicle sticks. We are going to make seven councilors voting for a reeve.
Freddie: How are you going to make them talk?
Linda: We will make speech bubbles, speech balloons.
Linda is making the decisions. Freddie draws quietly. His drawing is not the same as Linda's, but she is hesitant to share her drawing with Freddie.

Linda made the decisions during the partner activity, and Freddie once more took the role

of leaving Linda to do the task alone. When he returned she informed him about what

they were going to display and how they were going to proceed with the assignment.

Another group assignment with two boys and two girl moved along the same way,

but in this group there was obvious banter from one of the boys as he continually made

statements about what he thought about girls.

[First segment]
Sam: I'll do it. How do you do this?
Randy: Let's see..
Randy: Okay, . . . atoskihk . . . mitoni simak.
Sam: We don't have our kit ready yet, man. . . . Here, Linda, you cut.
Randy: Go ahead.
Sam: You may be the cutter.
Randy: It's big foot. . . . Cha! Go ahead, you'll be the Big Foot.
Linda: Why do I have to be the cutter?
Sam: Well, here, I'll cut.
Tessa: I cut, I cut, I cut.
Randy: You be Sasquatch.
Sam: Shut up! . . . You'll be doctored. . . .
Randy: The mountainous baloney Sasquatch.
Sam: Shut up, baloney.
Randy: Sasquatch.
Tessa: Big Foot.
[Second segment]
Linda: Now I cut it right here?. . .
Sam: Yeah, you cut those blocks out. . . . It shows that . . . oh, . . . bring it; . . . I'll cut it.
Randy: Cut those lines; . . . cut those lines.

Sam: So lazy, . . . girls.
Randy: The dotted lines.
Sam: You know what? . . . I think girls are the laziest ones on this planet.
Randy: Those are those choppers, . . . hey?
Sam: I believe so. . . . I see girls on TV . . . being real lazy. . . . See, . . . look at her!
Randy: Maa . . . wacistakac. . . . You have to do that?
Linda: I'm not lazy; . . . I work.
Randy: We play with those a lot.
Sam: You're lazy.
Linda: I work.
Sam: Sometime.
Linda: No, . . . I work.
Randy: We have to play with those? . . . That's not going to be fun.
Sam: Once a year, . . . yeah. . . . You do?. . . It's hard. . . . Bring it—geez! Here, . . . hurry up, . . . You—geez! . . . Say, who has a pencil?

Throughout this group activity there was banter. The boys were off task, and the girls were doing the work while the boys directed. This was evident all the way through the activity, and the girls did most of the work until the teacher came to check on them; then the boys made an effort to become involved. According to the research, we legitimize certain prescriptions and proscriptions and reinforce and reproduce these types of gendering in various situations (Bohan, 1997, pp. 39-40). Bohan contended that masculine and feminine roles become circular processes and self-maintaining. We become so familiar with these roles that we come to expect them, and "we perceive ourselves as intrinsically gendered" (p. 40).

Freddie's social-cultural construction is one of masculinity as well as his fascination with science fiction; specifically, a games culture that involves a specific desire to live out a hero's life through the imaginative world of videogames (Dyson, 1997; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Freddie fed this interest at home by playing videogames with names such as *Resident Evil* and *Supersmashberg Rush*, reading comics that he had borrowed from an uncle with titles such as *Spiderman*, *Xmen*, and *Ironman*, and drawing

cartoons about some of these characters. As I listened to Freddie during his interview, he commented that he liked "zombies, shooting, and fighting and all that gore. . . . The gore, . . . all that stuff, . . . that bleeding and showing guts." Many of the movies that he watched were of this nature, and he especially liked to watch the movie channel, with his selections based on this theme. He talked about *Resident Evil*, a movie about zombies as well as the name of one of the videogames that he liked to play. Gilbert and Gilbert discussed this type of behavior in a construction of masculinity:

> The video games position boys in an ideology, a social practice, a set of social relationships, and an embodied sense of self, all involving what they see as normal and desirable ways of being male, and how they see themselves to be. (p. 50)

Freddie is an example of a young man who has not only constructed himself as the hero in his stories or discussions, but also entered the imaginative world to which Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) referred as "a social and cultural practice constructed around game culture" (p. 50). For a writing assignment, the teacher asked the students to find a location for a "Snowed In" story. She brainstormed with the class a list of places and asked them to decide on their own location. Freddie piped up with, "What about West Edmonton Mall?" I could see that his mind was churning out ideas about being snowed in and having to spend time inside West Edmonton Mall, which would be an ideal location because being snowed in at the mall, with all of its attractions, would hardly be considered a hardship.

As the students began to write the story, Freddie asked the teacher whether the story had to be realistic or whether it could be fantasy. The students discussed their ideas, and two other boys talked to Freddie about their ideas and about the problem in the story. Freddie informed his peers that in his story, "Everyone dies except me." As he became

involved in the story writing, he asked the teacher about a sequel to a story and whether somewhere in their writing they had ever written a sequel to a story. The other students did not know the meaning of this term, and the teacher explained that it is a continuation of a story.

Among the artifacts that I collected from Freddie was the story that he wrote about being snowed in, which he titled "Santa Claus Goes Bad." His storyline began as follows:

> *In the year 3000 a man was in a mall called Supermall. That man's name was Freddie, a strong, smart and fast person he could lift two hundred pounds with one hand. He was always calm and he was 24 years old. There was also his best fried his name was John. They both were shopping for Christmas presents. They went to test out some beds and they fell asleep.*

It's interesting to note that Freddie mentioned in this story that he was calm, which is not the only time that he has made this statement. He seemed to have a desire to be calm and did not understand the energy that he emitted. His story began to take shape, and his first mention of Santa Claus came when Santa called from the top of the mall that he was going to kill Freddie and John. The story had now become evil and would certainly involve gore, as Freddie called it. His story continued:

> *Then Freddie said, "How could this happen one minute we are trying out beds the next minute Santa is trying to kill both of us. Then Santa Claus went down to go kill them. John said to Freddie, "Freddie we got to go hurry up you shit head." "Ok, just hold your horses" Freddie replied to John. When we saw Santa Claus didn't look like himself. He was pale and his eyes were filled with evil. It was tarrfiing Santa was evil. Then John and Freddie went to the door to get out but they were still snowed in. They cecked the back door but still no luck. Then out of nowere Santa cut off John's head with a light saver. Then Freddie ran fast as he could. Then while he was running he saw a light save and then he went in and took it. Then he faight Santa with his light saver. It was a horrible battle Freddie cut off Santa's arm the Santa fell down. Then Freddie said "I'm sorry." Then Freddie kill Santa Claus. The he used the light save to brake throw the plastic window then he escaped.*

Freddie's snowed-in story reflected his interest in the unknown and perhaps followed the storyline of one of the movies that he had watched that involved light savers in a battle. These light savers were probably used in a hi-tech digital videogame that became part of Freddie's construction of his world.

Another group whom I observed was comprised of Randy, Marie, Laura, and Chelsea. The teacher asked them to create a KWL chart on China to record what they know about China and what they want to learn about China. As the only boy in the group, Randy decided that the role that he would play was to provide information while the girls did the writing. He did not actually tell the group that this was his intended role, but it became obvious as I observed and listened.

Chelsea began by asking who wanted to write first, and Marie volunteered and wrote the word *farmers*. Randy declared that the Chinese also speak Japanese and that they are not ninjas. The teacher paraphrased for Randy, and he continued to chatter about what he believed should be listed. He stated, "They're monks . . . cha." Marie responded, and Randy continued to talk. He told the others that the Chinese have "fat faces, . . . and they have oldtimer fiddles." Marie asked, "Fiddles?" Randy replied, "The one with two strings or one. . . . Ding, ding, ding, cha.." Marie told Randy, "You can write down if you want . . . . Okay, what else? I only got one thing; . . . anybody else?" Randy answered, "Just put down *fiddle*," and Marie replied that she did not know how to write the word. Chelsea and Randy both offered their versions of the spelling.

Throughout the whole-group activity Randy talked while the girls wrote the information down on paper. He bantered with the girls, making funny statements or rephrasing the information that he had just given them. Randy seemed to need to show

the girls that he had the knowledge and was in charge, whereas they were the ones who needed to record what he said. Although there were four people in this group, Randy kept up the talk throughout the activity with different female members.

Marie finally asked Randy to be accountable because she had been doing most of the writing for the group. She insisted that he take his turn at writing next, and Randy continued to talk and did not take the marker that Marie offered him. Although Chelsea asked him to write down his own ideas about what he wanted to learn about China, he resisted taking this role. Chelsea took the marker from Marie, offered it to Randy, and said, "Randy, it's your turn." She instructed, "Okay, Randy, you get down here, and you write something." Randy's response was, "First I gotta think of one." Chelsea replied, "You had enough time," and Randy remarked, "I know, but I don't know what to write." Sam, in another group, commented that Randy had not written anything, but Marie retorted, "But he gave us ideas." By the end of the group activity the only thing that Randy had written on the paper was his name. Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) offered the following suggestion as beneficial to teachers as they try to provide more ways for kids to enact gender in classrooms:

> The more that all of us know of how masculinity is built and practiced in social contexts—particularly in home contexts—the more we might be able to offer boys different contexts, different interactions, and different ways of "being" masculine. (p. 103).

It is important to consider aspects of gendered response to literacy and how it can hinder or help students. As teachers, if we continue to disregard gender issues in literacy, then we will be ignoring an important aspect of literacy development that creates a different dynamic in the way that students construct their literacy in the classroom.

It is also important to take into consideration gender roles as they are played out in Cree culture and how much they influence the literacy gender patterns in the classroom. Many of our activities are gender specific, and the roles are reinforced in what the girls and boys are asked to do at home and elsewhere when the girls are asked to do what we consider "girls' chores." In one example of literacy, Marie has been taught how to prepare moose hide and cut up moose meat, which is readily recognized as part of the women's role in Cree culture. The men hunt, and the women prepare the meat and hide.

To help students to understand their socialization into gender roles and that the culture can restrict movement and the interpretation of roles, then teachers will have to take the initiative to research and analyze how gender roles are established in the Cree community and their relation to gendered literacies.

CHAPTER 6:

ISI-NISTOHTAMAN NÎSTA

The Voice of Literacy in the Cree Community: Synthesis

As I synthesize my findings and listen for the voice of literacy from this Cree community I am excited about what I have found, even though the journey has been long and arduous. I want to begin by sharing my foundation for this synthesis and by underlining the most crucial findings which are important to all educators but especially for those who are working in a setting that caters to a large Aboriginal population.

First and foremost the synthesis and the foundation of my understanding will show how I have arrived at the implications I have suggested to those who work with children, more specifically with Indigenous Cree children. To begin, I base my understanding of child development and growth from a Vygotskian (1978) foundation, an interactionist view (Steiner and Tatter, 1983) of language acquisition. This view defines child development as a reciprocal process, intra-psychological and inter-psychological development (Vygotsky, 1978) between the child and the environment which clearly shows that the language we speak and the culture we grow up in is crucial to our development as human beings.

In the context of this research the children develop and draw on their Cree language and culture for their own identity development and growth. These children are immediately and directly validated, acknowledged and influenced by their parents, siblings and extended family for the first five years of their lives. At the age of four or five they arrive at a Headstart/kindergarten program or at the school which then adds a periphery of peers and teachers who will also affect and influence their growth. Society

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outside of the community will introduce the Cree children to different languages and cultures and this new influence will introduce them to assimilation of a new language and culture. The television set in each home will bombard the children with the English language and the many messages that come from advertising and what is promoted through this medium.

All of these are factors which affect the growth and development of Cree children and certainly this basis is the foundation I draw on to highlight the implications I have noted for educators and researchers. The messages that these children receive from their own family, extended and immediate, peers, teachers, community people and outer society will influence their growth and identity building and whether these messages are negative, positive, empowering or disempowering will show in their growth process as individuals of society. The power of these messages will influence the identity building of the children and how they symbolize and represent who they are and how they see themselves.

The research study focuses on literacy, a tool that the children have learned to use and develop in the school setting as well as the home. According to Vygotsky (1978), language is a tool, and I have come from this view to note that not only is language a tool, but so is literacy, a form of meaning making we use to represent ourselves to other people. Cree children are developing language and literacy tools daily and some of these are from their own home environment as well as other skills required for survival. The children have internalized Cree language, literacy, and culture and will continue to use, develop, and share these tools if the community, school, and society respond favorably to the use of these practices. The literacy forms the children bring from home will vary

since they are a symbolic representation of a Cree language and cultural understanding as opposed to what is promoted and validated in the school since many schools still come from a Eurocentric western perspective.

The focus in many classrooms today is English as the language of status as well as a much narrower view of literacy. The messaging from the community, school, home and society will influence whether the children will continue to develop and use the literacy forms from home in the school setting or whether they will choose to use these tools outside of the school. The influence and attitude of society towards what they bring from home will impact on how much they actually use and develop their mother tongue, home literacy practices and cultural values, beliefs and behaviors. This is the foundation of my synthesis and the implications I have put forth come from this basis of understanding and why these recommendations are important for those who work in an Indigenous school setting.

The first implication from this research is to invite those who are working in a First Nations context to listen and hear the voice of First Nations or Aboriginal children, perhaps the most neglected aspect of the educational system to date. The lack of acknowledgement of the identity building, language, culture and strengths that these children bring from home to the school system is to negate their voice and their development of who they are. I celebrated this finding because it validated my research to know that the children I sat and dialogued with felt valued through these discussions. Then secondly, the other crucial aspect of this is the development of literacy and literacy forms which come from their Cree language and cultural understanding. There is a need to acknowledge that the literacy practices and experiences of First Nations children will

vary and therefore encourage educators to move to a much broader social and cultural understanding of literacy.

As an Aboriginal researcher, a Cree speaker, I brought with me a cultural understanding and an intuitive sense which directed me to actively listen to the children. The surprise from one of the students when I asked him to bring in his own drawings as well as the question from another one who asked me, "you mean you want to talk to me?" demonstrated the desire that all children need to be validated as individuals, as meaning makers in the classroom. The relationship building which happened from the short personal interviews with the students show how much this active listening was crucial to all participants including the researcher.

Children have a voice and through this research I was made aware of how important this is to the dynamics of any teaching situation. The student voice was strong and because I listened with the right intention I was able to hear what the students were saying through various forms of data including interviews, literacy artifacts, and personal acknowledgement during the school day.

First Nations, Indigenous children have not had much of a voice in the educational system and we need to reassess how and why First Nations children are not achieving success in the school system. This research has drawn attention to the fact that there is a need to look at more conducive ways of meeting the needs of Aboriginal children through an in-depth understanding of the literacy experiences of Cree children. It is imperative to listen to the voice of these First Nations children and acknowledge their language, beliefs, culture, way of life and the strengths they bring to their classrooms and schools. These children come with their own "identity kit" as noted by Gee (1989). The

need for validation, what I have called "active validation" is certainly essential if these children are to develop a strong identity in their own language and culture and achieve success in the educational system.

Indigenous people come from a culture that has been subordinated in Canadian society and as a result we have experienced the colonization of dominant society and assimilation has not been easy on First Nation people particularly the children. It is important for the Aboriginal people to begin to take more of an active role in the school, even if they see the school as a foreign institution in their communities, to encourage, validate and increase the success rate of their children in the educational system. Lipka (1998) in his conclusion with the Yup'ik culture made the following observation:

> There are signs that local communities are increasingly taking the initiative concerning schooling, language, and culture. These initiatives are developing between some of the Ciulistet teachers and their local communities. If this trend can continue and increase, then the prospects for a negotiated school become brighter. A negotiated pedagogy would alter sets of relationships between the dominant and subordinate groups. (p. 195)

As Lipka (1998) has stated in his work it is time for local communities, Aboriginal in this context, to take the initiative and become more involved in the education of First Nations children. Indigenous people have an opportunity to show that we too, according to Ferdman (1990), have literacy experiences which are meaningful and contextual to our language and culture. Ferdman (1990), in his work on literacy and cultural identity, states that it is timely "to view literacy as meaningful in the social context of particular communities" (p. 186). This type of validation and acknowledgement would give voice to the First Nations children and people in Aboriginal communities.

Another implication is to encourage that non-First nation people pay attention to literacy practices that are not coming from a western perspective and make a place for a

new voice which will validate and acknowledge that culture and language are important to the personal growth and development of Indigenous children. The literacy voices which come from the home are important to their growth and development as human beings and validate and strengthen their opportunities for success in society.

The two voices of Cree literacy I found in the home and in the classroom are a helpful way to begin listening to these new voices which are somewhat different from what is currently promoted and valued in many classrooms today. The first being a personal and private voice, one that I have recognized as the community voice belonging to the Cree children and the school voice, which Willis (1997) suggested would be categorized as *literacy as school knowledge*. The voice I would like to discuss is the personal and private voice, the Cree voice which came from the literacy digs and the data I collected from the home. The literacy digs that I did with the students showed exquisite forms of illustrations and diagrams, text forms, visuals which came from the students own expression of what is meaningful to each of them.

The context I have worked from is what Willis (1997) called "literacy as a social and cultural construct" defined by her as "purposes of literacy to include the influences of social and cultural contexts" (p. 391). My own working definition of literacy is to recognize that literacy and language are tools we use to represent and communicate to others who we are as individuals set in the socio-cultural context that we live in and what we are all about with the use of symbols and signs (Vygotsky, 1987, Bain, 1988). Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) in their work with inner-city families in "Growing up literate," made the following observation after completing their study:

> To be literate is a uniquely human experience, one that enables us to deal with ourselves and to better understand one another. It is never a mechanical process that is solely dependent upon skills that are taught. (p. 201).

Scribner and Cole (1981) in their work regarding literacy made the following observation based on work which had been done by Vygotsky:

> Vygotsky brilliantly extended this concept of mediated human –environment interaction to the use of signs as well as tools. By "signs" he referred to socially created symbol systems such as language, writing, and number systems which emerge over the course of history and vary from one society to another. Mental processes always involve signs, just as action on the environment involves physical instruments (if only a human hand). (p. 8).

The literacy behaviors exhibited by the Cree students in this study are lived experiences and for the most part are unexamined. This implication of literacy practices shown here demonstrate how these students express themselves and make meaning of their classroom literacy events. They have found ways to represent their symbolic understanding of who they are with literate forms which come from their own Indigenous environment. These are literate forms that have been internalized and these Cree students presented these literate forms in a context which facilitated the sharing of this Cree voice. In this research I have defined literacy from a broad social and cultural perspective of a Cree Métis, which is as follows: Literacy is a meaningful configuration of symbols, signs and representations of who we are based on our language, culture, values, beliefs and behaviors and how we transmit this to others. The students are showing us who they are through these literate forms and they are communicating this representation, their own meaning making that comes from their language and culture.

To add to this context we must take into consideration how assimilation by the educational system has influenced the Cree children's development of their own literacy

behaviors. These children have been exposed to two different languages as well as different ways of being based on their Cree culture and exposure to mainstream culture as it is expressed by television, the educational system and the other daily influences that occur in their lives. We must also keep in mind that the promotion of literacy in the formal education system, was intended to assimilate and elevate the Indigenous population to insure peace, prosperity and social cohesion (Graff, 1979, p. 27). In his writing Graff also noted that

> literacy was both an act and symbol; it was neither neutral, unambiguous, nor radically advantageous or liberating. Its value, in fact, depended heavily on other factors, such as ascribed social characteristics such as ethnicity, sex, or race, to the institutional, social, economic, and cultural contexts in which it was manifest. The role of literacy in the life of an individual and society is contradictory and complex (p. 19).

These Cree children and the way they are making meaning with the use of signs and symbols, the illustrations I have included as artifacts show inspiration from their own culture and the way they see themselves. The evidence from the literacy digs demonstrates these very personal ways of making meaning and shows the real picture of what these children have chosen to use to represent themselves to others. The literate forms that were predominating in the classroom assignments which allowed flexibility for their own representations were mainly illustrations of different text forms. They chose to use illustrations when the teacher gave them an opportunity to choose their own format to show their understanding to her. Some of the literacy artifacts that I have included are mainly illustrations such as comic strips, drawings and a combination of both from some assignments in class whereby they were allowed to choose their own method of showing their understanding. Lipka (1998) in his work with the Yup'ik culture made the following observation after collecting data on a collaborative research project for two decades:

We began to intuitively grasp not only a Yup'ik way of teaching, organizing lessons, spatial relations with students, and ways of communicating, but we also began to see the vague outlines of a distinct cultural system of meaning and cognition. Because culture is a unifying concept it enabled us to shift the discourse of schooling from deficits to existing assets. (p. 25)

These are literacy behaviors of Cree children as exhibited, developed and maintained in the home, personal meaning making that is taking place with each child as an activity they have chosen to engage in without school initiation. As I have noted previously in my discussion I saw the patterns and the way the children made meaning in their home literacy as different from school literacy. These are things that need to be continually probed to find more ways to develop, and enhance these literacies and to facilitate the development of school literacies in order to achieve more success for Aboriginal children. As Scribner and Cole (1981) discussed, the use of symbol systems and how they influence the psychological processes are related to the nature of the symbol signs available to the epoch or society (p. 9). This suggests that we need to consider the way that other language groups and cultures symbol-sign their meaning because what they reflect and represent will be developed within their own cultural group.

Lipka (1998) in his research with Yup'ik Eskimos defined what he has called *ethnomathematics*, a reference to the development of literacy in similar contexts as I have outlined in my work. He has noted the rich oral tradition of the Yup'ik people as providing a rich environment for development of oral and written literacy:

The oral tradition recognized by the Ciulistet as a central feature of Yup'ik knowledge and cultural transmission has led to development in literacy, mathematics and science. The oral tradition, rich in its explanation of the relationships among people and between people and the environment, offers teachers numerous possibilities for developing oral and written literacy. (p. 193)

Much of what I have presented similar to Lipka (1998) is meaning-making done by Cree children to reflect their Cree way of being, their Indigenous knowledge which is their strength. They also show how they symbolize and this literacy form represents what they are exposed to in the home and is a part of the rich tradition of the Cree people.

The artifacts from the personal and private voice of literacy showed a definite leaning to shapes, forms and patterns although some of the written text form was also a part of these pieces. The students chose to express themselves with this form of literacy and it was interesting to see that most of these pieces were done at home and not in the school environment.

For example, the specialized skill developed by the two girls to make doll clothing from scrap pieces of cloth is literacy. They have to visualize the actual doll clothing item they desired to make and I am assuming they would have drawn an illustration of the items they wished to make and begin with this as a guide. The girls have to learn to read the types of scrap material appropriate for each clothing piece and then consider the combination of materials which will meet their needs.

The girl who has learned to read the wood and set up the right conditions for building a fire has learned to establish the proper criteria for ensuring the fire will start and this is a specialized skill and not every child will be able to do that. Melinda and her moosehide tanning experience as well as the preparation of moosemeat for drying is also literacy. It is literacy for the Cree community because there are certain behaviors that occur with these tasks and the way a child learns and how successfully will determine whether the moosehide tanning process will bring out beautiful and useful tanned hide and whether the dry meat that she makes is the type that is edible and others would want

to take it home for their supper table. Mario and his trapping of squirrels and skinning

process and how effectively he does this will determine whether he would be able to meet

his own financial needs for himself and whether one day he could use this to supplement

his own economic needs for his family when he is all grown up.

All of these functional behaviors are tied to what Moll called funds of knowledge

(1993) in his research with Hispanic people in the southwest United States. I have called

these literacy forms rather than a context for literacy as Moll has in his research. I have

recognized that literacy from a social and cultural context does not necessarily have to be

tied to text but rather the use of symbols, illustrations, visual forms and diagrams are all

forms of literacy and are a part of what takes place in the Cree home. I would like to note

that these symbol forms are very much a reflection of the Cree child and it is expressed

daily in school literacy but is usually not valued as much as school text literacy and

therefore the expression of it may not occur. I am coming from the view as Ferdman

(1990) notes in his work that in a multicultural society one may be faced with an array of

various methods and contents representing different views of literacy. "The value placed

on behaviors that are construed as literate in one context of one group will not be

equivalent to the value given them by a different culture" (p. 188).

The suggestion that one work from a broad social and cultural construction of

literacy will enhance the relationship building that needs to happen in the community

between teaching staff, students and community people. The acknowledgment of

Indigenous children and the way they make meaning is active validation and can

influence change if this is what the educators and parents desire for their community.

Given these discussions there is potential for the transformation of school literacy practices for Aboriginal children. However, as Lipka has noted in his research the attitude towards this way of thinking and doing school differently could face strong resistance since many still hold the colonial view of education for Aboriginal children. The resistance for change not only comes from the general public but also from the Indigenous people who have been neo-colonized (Bear Nicholas, 1996) to believe the practices of mainstream culture is what they need to be successful in society. The resistance will be twofold; towards a different philosophy of literacy practices as well as the implication the system has to acknowledge there are different ways of knowing and learning which includes a broader understanding of literacy.

Implications for Educators

The implications which arise from this study provide directions that could be taken by educators or administrators working in schools that cater to an Aboriginal population. These findings talk to us of the importance of paying attention to the audience, the Aboriginal children in schools in northern Alberta in order to meet their distinct needs.

Ethnoliteracy, the personal and private voice of Cree children making meaning in their everyday literacy practices in the Cree community in which they live certainly has implications for educators in school, home and society. The educational experience, in small communities, rural centers or large cities, has certainly been quite dismal for Aboriginal people, including Cree children. The pedagogy and the lack of openness to new ways of thinking and approaching the literacy development and schooling experience of children has restricted, frustrated and hampered success for Cree people.

Much of the teaching philosophy that occurs in many First Nations classrooms, still exhibit a transmission model, a learning theory that came from the 1950's but is still alive and well in many classrooms. With this philosophy the teacher is the expert and the students are expected to sit quietly and passively while the expert fills the students with knowledge (Malicky & Bainbridge, 2000). This conceptual framework I have used for this work is based on the more recent and more supportive learning philosophy of the Social Constructivist model and Vygotsky's definition of mediating experience from a meaning-making stance. Philosophically this position suits the Indigenous population because much of what it notes as a part of its orientation corresponds quite well with how we handle teaching/learning in the First Nations context and is a more useful approach for Indigenous Cree children.

Based on this research the findings show that educators that work with Aboriginal children should move to a social constructivist philosophy of learning. A great deal of research in other cross-cultural contexts shows this is the most conducive approach for teaching and learning. However it appears there is still a huge gap between theory and practice in this context and many educators still rely on a transmission model. In this classroom the teacher tried different strategies and the flexibility she provided during her writing assignments was quite successful but there was still a gap between the literacies lived by the children inside and outside of school.

What is being mentioned in research as the most favorable approach has often been overlooked because teachers directly involved in the teaching/learning environment may not know and may not have the time to research new theories to help them make the learning/teaching experience more effective for the students they serve. It has to be more

than lip service since many educators will interpret their philosophy from what Lipka (1998) calls a thorny problem.

> The danger always exists that outside researchers and writers may transform and interpret what is told to them from their own cultural frame of reference, mitigating the power of local voices. Central to changing the context of education is moving out and away from neo-colonialism and its inherent cycle of dependency. (p. 195)

This implication is manageable and those who make the change will see how beneficial it is for the Indigenous students and as well as the teacher since this learning philosophy promotes ownership of learning which does not readily happen in a classroom that relies on a transmission model. Ownership of learning will also present the opportunity for a teacher to ensure the educational and literacy experience is meaningful and authentic for the First Nations children.

The other encouraging foundation of this approach is the opportunity for students to be heard as authentic active participants with a voice that has sadly been constricted in many classrooms. The apathy and stereotype of viewing Aboriginal children as passive and unresponsive in many schools is a stereotype and has hurt the Aboriginal people. This is a dilemma which continues to be perpetuated by lack of information about Aboriginal children. Many students, regardless of language or culture will be viewed as passive and unresponsive if the teacher is using the transmission model of teaching/learning and does not accept the views of the students or is struggling with valuing what the children bring from home. As I stated earlier what I found the most surprising when I analyzed my data was how thirsty the children were for active listening and this informed me that teachers need to make and find the time to listen to the

children. The social constructivist model recognizes them as active participants, meaning-makers with decision making opportunities in the teaching/learning environment.

The second most important characteristic of this model is that it encourages the teacher to develop good strong relationships with the children because if one is encouraging the children to be meaning-makers then one has to understand the meaning they bring from the home which maybe different from the teacher's own experiences. Allowing the children an opportunity to be heard and validating and strengthening the knowledge they bring from home will certainly give the students a different sense in a classroom that uses this philosophy. In this aspect of relationship building the children will feel valued and validated by the teachers who work with them if their own language and culture is being acknowledged in the school and classroom.

This approach will not only strengthen the relationship building with the students but it will snowball into greater opportunities for relationship building and support from the home. The parents will see that their children are happy at school and are experiencing success therefore they will want to establish and acknowledge the people that are bringing about this growth in their children. As relationships are strengthened and validation occurs in the Aboriginal communities the opportunity to provide the students with meaning-making which facilitates the cultural strengths they bring from the home will heighten awareness and may increase participation and decrease resistance from the Aboriginal people.

As the school is viewed as a foreign institution by many Aboriginal parents the initiative has to be for the educators to reach out and bring the parents in. One of the celebrations the school had for the grade 5/6 students was an informal gathering with hot

dogs and juice held in the front entrance of the school and this was a success. We had

many of the parents come and attend this small informal gathering. The school invited the

parents and provided all the food and the principal gave a short address and the students

were the ones who were celebrated during this event. This is one example of the school

reaching out to bring the parents in. As the school is the institution that has been placed in

the communities to provide an educational experience for the Aboriginal children then it

should be the responsibility of the school to take the initiative and work hard towards

establishing and encouraging relationship building between the staff and community

people as well as the students they serve.

Finger pointing continues to occur whereby school educators coming from a

deficit view usually blame the parents for lack of participation in all aspects of education.

Active validation means one has to ensure the community is involved in all facets of

decision making otherwise the ownership to the educational process will not happen and

the schools will continue to be viewed as separate and apart from the community and

exist and operate as small islands. I speak from the voice of experience and I know this

continues to happen in many Aboriginal communities. The celebration that occurred for

the grade 5/6 students was only one event and I saw that this school, as well as many

others that serve an Aboriginal population, still exists more as a small island, separate and

apart from the community. I would encourage schools to invite community people into

the school for more celebrations and gatherings so they become an integral part of the

school and accept ownership of this process with the school staff.

The teaching/learning philosophy of the social constructivist approach also

facilitates the use of reading and writing workshops which allow for individual meaning

making and flexibility towards ensuring that students are given the liberty to learn about things that are crucial and important to them as human beings. This is also a way of ensuring the voices of the children are heard. Atwell (1998) in her work with junior high students wrote:

> The workshop offers every student unlimited possibilities as a writer and a reader. In each class meeting they see and experience an array of the uses of literacy. Reading becomes a whole, sense making endeavor, and texts are open books-wide open to kids' opinions, questions, interpretations and enjoyment. Writing becomes purposeful, personal and world changing-not the turf of the talented few but the domain of everyone who has something to say and someone to say it to. (p.147)

I have seen, through this research, although the approach was not specifically the writers' workshop, how much more motivated the students were when they were able to take ownership of the learning process. As I stated earlier, the writing sessions offered more flexibility for the students and this is where they excelled with their own meaning making. The readers and writers workshop approach provides a supportive environment for the students voice to be heard and an opportunity to be involved in decision-making. The readers and writers workshop offers the learner a chance to work on projects that are meaningful and important and will make the teaching and learning experience more fulfilling for all.

The other implication which I feel is important for educators to consider is to examine literacy from a broad social and cultural perspective. Many Cree children use illustrations, text forms to express themselves and this expression should be valued and acknowledged and this would be a form of "active validation" which is important for all children to receive but more so for those who come from a colonized culture. Aboriginal children come from a language and culture that is different and therefore it is important for teachers to acknowledge that we all make meaning differently and be more open to

various literacy forms. Different forms of literacy are evident more and more in all the classrooms as we see other visual forms being adopted and valued such as the technological form used in computer literacy. In the field of literacy education it is important that we begin to acknowledge the literacy experiences of Cree First Nations children from a broad perspective in order to facilitate and strengthen the cultural understanding the children bring to school.

At this time it is important to add not only that literacy defined from a narrow perspective is limiting, but also that these inequities disqualify different ways of knowing such as the Indigenous world view and how this influences learning and research in Indigenous communities. As educators and researchers it is our responsibility to introduce and validate different ways of knowing and recognize that for these ways of knowing to be accepted by the various stakeholder groups, then the onus is on us to share this information. Otherwise, if educators continue to view literacy from a narrow perspective this will continue to hamper success for the Aboriginal child.

Another implication is to be aware of gender in literacy; how boys and girls perform in class to literacy events. The differences in how the boys responded to literacy assignments as opposed to girls became obvious as I observed in class. As a classroom teacher I was not aware of these differences previously although they may have been obvious. It was the opportunity to be a participant observer, a different set of eyes as a researcher that gave me this new lens. Gender in literacy is also socially constructed therefore we need to be cognizant of this so we can work towards establishing a conducive working atmosphere for the boys and girls in the classroom so we do not hinder or unintentionally exploit or promote one gender over another. Boys and the way

they approach literacy events as opposed to the girls in this class gave a sense that the girls were more in control and that they were therefore learning more. The gender difference and the way they approach their literacy assignments, is a learned behavior and the boys and girls are actively making choices to participate in this manner. It is a misconception that one gender is actively learning more because they exhibit more school like behaviors which are desirable to the classroom teacher. The boys approach to literacy is different and the classroom teacher should be aware of this and accept this difference so he/she can facilitate learning for both genders.

The last implication is to be cognizant of the fact that literacy is a political force and a form of power and not an isolated event in the school. This broad understanding, as Lankshear and McLaren (1993) shared, is to acknowledge that all literacy is critical literacy. They conceded in their writing that

> scholars have paid increasing attention to the connections between literacy and power. We are now much more aware than previously of the nature and role of extant literacies within established configurations of power and advantage, of centers and margins, and how literacies impact on the satisfaction of human needs and interests. (p. 4)

As we move towards more favorable ways of meeting the distinct needs of First Nations children, we need to understand that there is a political force in play and that much of what is called colonization and the move to assimilate the Aboriginal population through various means including the school system is a power force. As Lankshear and McLaren noted, to view literacy from a critical stance requires a connection between literacy and power, and this broader understanding offers the educator a different perspective, one that could be more empowering for the Indigenous children.

Implications for Researchers

An implication for research in Aboriginal communities is to encourage more researchers to participate as "insiders" of the Aboriginal community. I found this research experience very rewarding and has encouraged me to look towards the future and perhaps engage in another study which would provide us with more information about the literacy experiences of Cree children. The field is wide open and the research focus has been more with Indigenous adults in the field of education and very little with children especially from an insider's perspective.

I believe this insider perspective is greatly needed since it gives the research another viewpoint which adds richness in the style and presentation of research information. This richness is what Pratt (1986, p. 33) called personal narrative within ethnographic study and guides the description from what she calls authority of personal experience tied to the ethnographic text. This richness is shared knowledge, language and cultural understanding and an unspoken acceptance from the community people. I noticed this when I began my research with the community people and how accepting they were when they knew I spoke Cree and this alleviated stress for both parties. I also understood where the boundaries were and which people would be more willing to participate in the study. This type of information comes from a connection, an unspoken bond, a kinship to the community people which helped facilitate my research. These people cared about my requests and provided as much information as they could; as a result my experience was positive.

Indigenous people have been studied by outsiders for many years, and as Kana'iaupuni (2004), a Hawaiian researcher noted, it is time for Native people to do their

own research and have a voice in this field. He notes, "we must not only be evaluated, we must evaluate. We must not be researched, but research. By cementing our presence in the production of knowledge, we can be vigilant over how it is used and the power that knowledge confers" (p. 28). Much of the research that has been done in Indigenous communities regarding education has been directed towards achievement results and as Kana'iaupuni (2004) has noted this construction of knowledge has been damaging to the Aboriginal people. It is time for the Indigenous people to construct their own knowledge regarding what is taking place in our communities and share this information from our perspective as insiders. We need to be bold and declare to be heard in the research field, so that our perspective and the ethnographic authority we bring is validated and accepted in research to help educate our own children.

Throughout this research process I struggled with validation for my own Cree perspective, as an insider to the field of research. Since the Indigenous perspective is relatively new to the research field, as an insider, I was being asked to show that this is of value and should be validated because, once more, as a part of the colonized group, throughout the theory and readings I was being asked to define this perspective through Eurocentric eyes and this is a contradiction as noted by Steinhauer (2002), Weber-Pillwax (2001), and Battiste and Henderson (2000). As researchers, it is important for us to be more open to new perspectives and different ways of knowing rather than attempt to cloud everyone's eyes with how we see things. We need to allow for new perspectives in research and validate these different lenses and we will be richer through these experiences.

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APPENDIX A:

TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

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Appendix A: Teacher Interview Questions

1. What is your definition of literacy?
2. How would you describe the literacy experiences of your students
3. What are some literacy achievements in your class?
4. What are some literacy challenges?
5. Do you think their home literacy is different from their school literacy?
6. What are some factors which affect their literacy development in a positive manner?
7. What are some factors which affect their literacy development in a negative manner?
8. Do you think their home experiences are reflected in the material/content and curriculum?
9. As a teacher, what type of adjustments and adaptations have you had to make to the curriculum to meet the needs of your students?
10. What are some reflections you have as a classroom teacher about literacy you feel are important to share?

APPENDIX B:

STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Student Interview Questions

Introduction: You know that I am at the school observing in the classroom and asking about your reading and writing and what we would call literacy. I would like you to think of reading and writing in a broad way including what you do at home and different types of activities you do which may include the computer, video games, magazines and any thing else you think would be called literacy.

1. What's your name?
2. How old are you?
3. What grade are you in?
4. Are you a good reader? What makes a good reader? How would you describe yourself as a reader?
5. Do you enjoy reading? What do you like to read about? What type of reading do you dislike?
6. What are some activities you do at home?
7. Do any of these include reading, writing, or drawing?
8. Do you enjoy writing? Do you make time to write during the day/week?
9. Why do you write? In school? Out of school?
10. Are you a good writer? Why do you say so? Are you getting better at it?
11. What do you like writing about? What was the last thing that you wrote that you liked? Tell me about that.
12. Do you have a writing folder in your class? Do you ever have to talk about something you have written?
13. Do you share your writing with anyone?
14. Do you speak Cree?
15. Do you understand Cree?
16. Does it make sense?
17. Where do you speak Cree? (outside school, inside school, with your friends)
18. What can you tell me about people who speak Cree?
19. What does it mean to speak Cree or not to speak Cree?
20. What in your world makes you a Cree person at school and outside of school?
21. Can you write Cree syllabics or roman orthography?
22. Do you think things you read in school are like your own life in any way?
23. Do you see examples of your own life at school?
24. What is familiar to you at school?

APPENDIX C:

PARENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

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Parent Interview Questions

Introduction: I have been at the school observing and collecting data about reading and writing activities in the classroom; what we call literacy. I would like you to think about your own literacy experience and think of it in broad terms so it will include the many different activities you do at home. Remember what you did as a child and how this compares with what your own children do at home and what you do together. The literacy activities include video games, computers, magazine reading, and any other events which your children do at home and with the family.

1. How many children do you have at school?
2. Do you think your children like school?
3. How are they doing in school?
4. How would you describe Child B's education experience?
5. How does your child's experience compare with your own schooling experience?
6. You know your child's strengths, do you think his/her strengths are being recognized in the school?
7. What does home literacy mean to you?
8. What do you do at home that you would call literacy? Do you do this as a family?
9. What type of activities does he/she do at home? Are they done alone or with others?
10. What activities does he/she seem to enjoy?
11. Do these activities include reading, writing, drawing, computer, video/games and movies?
12. What do you think of reading and writing?
13. Do you think it is important for your children to be in school?
14. What types of things do you do with your children to show your support?
15. What type of activities do you do with your children at home?
16. Do the activities include reading, writing or drawing?
17. Do you have any suggestions for the school so your children will achieve more success in their reading and writing assignments?
18. How much Cree do you use at home?
19. Do you know how to read and write Cree syllabics or roman orthography?
20. When do you speak Cree and with whom?