

## Teacher Mentors: Teachers in Conversation

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This project was built on a network of teachers and university researchers that was formed during a previous McDowell Foundation study. Committed to building a Saskatchewan education system that is a learning partnership between Aboriginal peoples and mainstream society, members of the network sought to extend their exploration of the cross-cultural nature of educational work for Aboriginal teachers and their non-Aboriginal colleagues.

In this study, the network consisted of five teachers who were of Aboriginal or Métis ancestry or from mainstream backgrounds and teaching in cross-cultural classrooms that had a high number of Aboriginal or Métis students and three university teachers experienced in naturalistic research in multi-ethnic classroom settings. With support from the university teachers, the teacher members of the network mentored ten pre-service teachers, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, into cross-cultural classrooms.

In the fall of 1996, the five teachers and three university teachers met once a month to discuss the research question “What does it mean to be a teacher in a cross-cultural environment?” and to make plans for the inclusion of the education students after Christmas. At the first meeting of the large group, student/teacher cross-cultural teams were organized. Most teachers had 2-3 education students to work with them once a week at a mutually convenient time. To ensure that leadership for the project was a shared responsibility, each teacher-led team was left to plan its own activities supportive of cross-cultural teaching. The monthly meetings of teachers, pre-service teachers and university teachers continued, usually in a participant’s home, until the last “wrap-up” meeting in May, 1997.

Conversations provided the research methodology for the project. At each meeting of the network, participants recounted and reflected on professional practices using a discourse similar to a conversation between friends. A talking circle, a participant structure in the Aboriginal tradition of contributing from East to West, was a way of organizing and initiating the conversation and ensuring that each participant’s voice was recognized. The network’s times together were documented by audio-taping the conversations in the talking circle. These audio-tapes were transcribed and distributed to network members for their comments, additions or deletions. Repeated reading and sifting of the data assisted the university researchers in the identification of recurring themes. The teachers were asked for reactions to emerging themes and interpretations, and a representation of their voices was negotiated as fairly and critically as possible.

A number of methodological issues were recognized during the project, including the appropriate degree of teacher responsibility for the initiation and implementation of action

***“In the process of sharing their professional teaching stories and stories of themselves, the teachers and students were learning to dig up bones, the implicit knowledge they had about teaching, cross-cultural teachers, learners and edagogy.”***



Network participants talk about their project at the 1996 Learning from Practice Seminar.

research, the danger of appropriating teachers' voices to academic purposes, and the relative benefits from the project for those involved. However, discussions indicated that most issues related to methodology were resolved as far as they could be, and both teacher and university teachers were satisfied with their roles in the project.

The study provided two general findings regarding mentorship and the exploration of identities:

1. **Mentorship**

Although it had been assumed the teacher-mentors would play a role like that of a coach, this did not happen. Instead the teachers and the pre-service teachers became collaborators. In the conversations of the network, the role of mentor shifted from person to person according to the purposes, topics and contexts of the discussions and activities.

2. **Exploration of Identities**

Many network conversations involved the discussion of personal and professional histories. Aboriginal teachers tended to take the lead in these discussions, perhaps because, as a marginalised group in mainstream society, they had been forced to examine issues of cultural identity. The other network members stepped back from these conversations to listen and empathize. In later sessions, mainstream teachers began to discuss their own cultural backgrounds as they related to their teaching histories.

## Grand Themes

The study also identified grand themes from the analysis of the transcribed conversations for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal team members. The Aboriginal teachers offered candid stories of experiences of the inequities of teaching within a school culture, their struggle to succeed while maintaining their personal identities, and their consequent doubts about the direction of schooling. For Aboriginal members of the network, the major themes that emerged in conversation were isolation, alienation, assimilation, whole-heartedness, respect and solidarity.

*“We found that Aboriginal and Métis teachers put two selves together; the professional self which is patterned on a mainstream model of teaching and knowing, and the personal self, a more culturally bound identity, which is kept separate from the school identity.”*

**“What we really want to do is to affirm children, whatever culture they have, we affirm them and encourage them. Hopefully we know how to teach from a multifaceted, interdisciplinary approach instead of the dualistic one; this way or that way.”**

For non-Aboriginal members, the major themes were respect, solidarity, empathy, open-mindedness and whole-heartedness. The mainstream teachers of Aboriginal and Métis students were concerned with creating a school environment in which the 3Cs (caring, concern for others and connection) are added to the 3Rs.

*“Although their professional and personal selves are more congruent with mainstream culture, [mainstream] teachers are...trying to build safe pathways into the Aboriginal and Métis culture of their students in order to create an environment in which democratic principles of equity, fairness, and justice are present.”*

From their year of reflection and discussions, the researchers reached one major conclusion: there is no single way to become a teacher sensitive to the socio-cultural issues of cross-cultural environments. The teachers in this project, who have all worked with deep care and affection for students of diverse backgrounds, did not provide a list of activities that would meet the needs of a cross-cultural classroom community. Rather, becoming a cross-cultural teacher requires hard work of a different kind. Part of the nature of this work was demonstrated in the research network itself, which provided a forum for understanding the tensions between personal and professional identities encountered by teachers and pre-service teachers who are not part of the mainstream culture. It was notable that all network participants, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, expressed a desire to respect one another and wanted, in turn, respect for their uniqueness as human beings. The fact that network conversations continually centred on the affirming of personal identity for all suggests that preparation of teachers for cross-cultural environments must involve a painful examination of one’s cultural assumptions and one’s own identity formation.