Abstract

Through exploring the lived experiences of twelve community people who gathered together for a dialogue circle on a busy Saturday in March 2012, a research question that focused on Aboriginal student achievement was presented. Consisting of elders, leaders, parents, and teachers, the dialogue circle took place in the community of Ndilo, a small Aboriginal community in the Northwest Territories. The process unfolded in the telling of stories about Aboriginal people in the education system, and about the community’s local school, Kàlemì Dene School. The stories explored the transformative factors in this Aboriginal community school that was striving to achieve successful Aboriginal education for the students, families, and the community of Ndilo. Overall, the dialogue revealed wide and varying worldviews within a common aspiration to improve education for Aboriginal students, be it for their own children, grandchildren, or community children. Their different perspectives allowed participants to explore the issue with a powerful and creative force leading to contextualized depth and shared meaning. Community participants explored the root causes of the achievement gap between Aboriginal students and other students, and in so doing worked towards possible solutions to this complicated issue.

Key Words: trauma; achievement gap; dialogue circle; transformative factors

Introduction

Spring sunlight, shining through the tall windows, lights up the spirits of the participants who have gathered on a Saturday afternoon to take part in a dialogue circle at Kâlemì Dene School (KDS), the community school of Ndilo. Beaded sun catchers made by the children hang on the windows creating a kaleidoscope of colour in the room. The anticipation of a special occasion mingles with the thoughts of these community elders, leaders, parents, and teachers. The beginning of something remarkable is in the air. They know that the event has been called a dialogue circle and the topic is on Aboriginal education, but they do not know the unexplored territory that the dialogue may cover. The hope for change in the lives of the Aboriginal children and youth plays a huge role in their decisions to be at this place on a busy Saturday, especially one that coincides with the local spring carnival (Long John Jamboree) taking place on the same day. Their presence at the school shows their commitment to the education of Aboriginal children. As Senge (1994, p. 260) notes, “deep down there is a longing for dialogue, especially on issues of the utmost importance to us.”

The people gather in the culture room of the new school, a three-year-old facility that shines equally bright in the centre of Ndilo, an Aboriginal community on the north shore of Great Slave Lake,
Northwest Territories (NWT). In this northern territory, the school is known as a model Aboriginal community school that honours, advocates, and celebrates the heritage and culture of its people by integrating them into the school programming.

After an opening prayer by the school elder and a late lunch, the participants gather together in a circle. The circle expresses the shared responsibility of the community people who were able to be present for the dialogue event. Aboriginal people have always gathered in a circle; it represents the cycle of life, seasons, and spirituality. The power of the circle hails back to ancient tribal rituals at which Aboriginal people gathered to celebrate time-honoured familial, seasonal, and spiritual ceremonies that strengthened their values, beliefs, and traditions. On this day, the circle is not only to honour the tradition, but also to create a forum for dialogue on Aboriginal education. Many dialogue theorists espouse the power of the circle to bring forward dialogue. “A circle is the only configuration that manifests equal participation.... In a circle there is no ‘head of the table’” (Dixon, 1998), and “The circle is the fundamental geometry of open human communication” (Owen, 1997). In the spirit of the circle, the dialogue participants come together to discover the relational power of their knowledge, their experiences, and their stories.

**Context**

Ndilo is an Aboriginal community located on Latham Island, a large island surrounded by the waters of Great Slave Lake. Ndilo literally translates as “on the point of the island” in the traditional Wiliideh language of the people: ndi is “island,” and lo is “at the point of.” Separated from the busy capital city of Yellowknife by a region fondly known as “old town,” Ndilo is home to approximately 250 Dene people. Dene is the word meaning people. This particular group of Dene belongs to the Yellowknife Dene First Nation, one of the four First Nation communities who are part of the Treaty 8 Akaitcho territory, whose region is situated in various settlements around Great Slave Lake in the NWT.

For many years, the Ndilo families had to bus their children to “uptown” schools to receive their formal education. The travel was difficult for the families and children who suffered daily racism, inferiority, and anger. For over three decades, the people fought for a school in their community. As far back as the late 1970s, discussions were held among chiefs, band counselors, and community members about the state of education for their children. The echoing tragedies of residential school experiences were still in the memories of these community people. Many of them had attended residential schools in distant communities, such as Fort Resolution, Fort Providence, and even as far away as Inuvik, NWT, and they wanted their children to receive an education closer to home in ways that valued the language, traditions, and culture of the Dene.

In time, the voices of the Ndilo people were heard. The continued failure of the uptown schools to influence more positive lifestyles, the low attendance of Ndilo children at these schools, the high drop out rates, and the ubiquitous problems of illiteracy finally made the Government of the NWT sit up and take note. After years of lobbying the territorial government, the community received the capital funding in 2007 to begin the construction of a brand new $8 million school building. What a day of celebration! The students and staff moved into their new state-of-the-art building just in time to begin the new school year in September, 2009. The First Nation’s dream to have their own community school was realized.

**Background to the Issue**

A brand new school building was only one leg in the journey of these First Nations people to begin the healing process of many generations of colonization and residential schools. The Ndilo families were at different stages of healing with some people leading healthy and contributing lifestyles, but most not. Unfortunately, the horrendous problems of alcoholism, family violence, suicide, and trauma still besieged many people. Overall their school held hope for them. It was this hope and love for their children that drew the participants together for a Saturday afternoon dialogue circle to discuss a phenomenon that only dialogue could begin to unravel. As Freire
(1990) noted, “we attempt to analyze dialogue as a human phenomenon, we discover something which is the essence of dialogue itself: the word.” It was the word, the opportunity to tell their stories, that pulled these people together talk about a very complicated issue: Aboriginal student achievement.

One does not have to go very far in Canada to realize the serious achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. This achievement gap was first identified at a Council for Ministers of Education (CMEC) summit on Aboriginal Education held in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in February 2009. This summit was the first-ever national dialogue to discuss priorities for eliminating the gap between the educational achievement of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in Canada (CMEC, 2010). As a result of the NWT Minister of Education’s participation at the CMEC Aboriginal summit, a NWT Aboriginal Student Achievement Initiative (ASA) was formulated. The initiative was front and centre in a series of ministerial forums that took place across the NWT to listen to the voices of the people. Six regional forums were held in community centres in the NWT with the main focus of identifying the root causes of the achievement gap, and discussing ways to eliminate the gap between the education achievement of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The priorities, elements, and actions of the regional forums were compiled in an ASA Education Plan (Education, Culture, and Employment [ECE] 2011), along with a Partnership Declaration signed by Aboriginal and educational leaders in the NWT. As Minister Jackson Lafferty emphasized, “It is the first time in our Territory’s history that this important and influential group acknowledged, in one strong voice, that education is the key to success for our Aboriginal youth.” (ECE, 2011, p. 1) The commitment to help Aboriginal students and families was firmed up in this report. The ASA Education Plan was a shared responsibility of all northerners to make the education system better for Aboriginal students.

Many participants in our Saturday afternoon dialogue circle were also present at their local ASA meetings held in Dettah, the sister community to Ndilo, on the northwest shore of Yellowknife Bay. They knew the issue and were intent on being a part of the solution, to benefit the children. However, the issue of Aboriginal student achievement is a complicated one fraught with the historical trauma still suffered by the people who endured an era of colonization and residential schools, and the ensuing social implications, which left many lives smoldering in dysfunction, addictions, lateral violence, and desolation. The intergenerational effects of this era left the people still bearing the many societal ills that deeply affected the state of their children’s health and education. Many renowned educators of Aboriginal peoples including Goulet (2001) state that the losses suffered in Aboriginal communities across Canada, as a result of colonization and residential schools, were so great that communities still suffer from the effects. Problems of poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, violence, and racism affect schools. The community of Ndilo knew that they were in this same disheartening state, and they wanted their community school to do something different! They wanted change. This strong energy brought people together on this Saturday afternoon to explore the issue through their own collective lens. As Isaacs (1999) states, through dialogue, people seek to harness the “collective intelligence”; together they become more aware than they are on their own. These people met in the atmosphere of trust, goodwill, and hope for better lives for their children and the future generations.

**Research Question**

The research question focused on having this group of community stakeholders telling the story of Kàlemì Dene School. Each one came to the question of Aboriginal student achievement from wide and varying vantage points, yet they still shared the common aspiration to improve education for Aboriginal students, be it for their own children, grandchildren, or community children. Their different perspectives allowed them to explore the issue with a powerful and creative force leading to potential solutions and shared meaning. The question was:

What were the transformative agents (factors) that made a difference in this Aboriginal community school (KDS) that strived to achieve suc-
cessful Aboriginal education for the students, families, and the community of Ndilo?

The ensuing dialogue centred on the essential aspects of the question, building on the lived experiences of the participants as they interacted with three dimensions of dialogue as outlined by Shields and Edwards (2005): relation, understanding, and ontology. The image of dialogue as centrally situated in a circle with relationships and understanding surrounding the question provided an excellent context in which to begin the exploration of meaning.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

The group consisted of twelve people varying in roles. It included two elders, one former chief of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation, two Ndilo Education Council members, the Kàlemì Dene School (KDS) principal, two KDS teachers, the former school counselor, two parents, and myself, as the researcher. Of the twelve people, seven were Aboriginal, and five were non-Aboriginal. They engaged in dialogue for two hours from 2:30–4:30 in the afternoon on Saturday, March 24, 2012. The participants agreed to be audiotaped and videotaped. (It was actually quite funny in that when I told them that they were on camera, many of them started fixing their hair, and fussing with their clothing — we all laughed!)

All of the participants knew the issues faced by the community in regards to Aboriginal student achievement. In their own way, all had a vested interest in the success of the Aboriginal students in the school ranging from wanting the best for their own children and grandchildren to the overall benefits for society, in terms of higher education associated with higher income, lower unemployment, lower chances of criminal involvement, and better overall health and well being.

As well, the participants knew that I had recently left my position as the school principal to take on a position as the Aboriginal Student Achievement (ASA) Coordinator with the Department of Education, Government of the NWT, and also to pursue a doctoral study on the topic of ASA in the NWT, by concentrating on the stories of ASA at Kàlemì Dene School. They were all committed to helping me advance the study in the quest to help more Aboriginal students find success in their own ways in the North, and potentially bring about lasting change for Aboriginal students and families. All the dialogue circle participants had a close and trusting relationship with me; they knew of my strong compassion and commitment to creating conditions for success for Aboriginal students. They had spent the past twelve years with me helping KDS towards its vision: “Building our children’s education today by teaching and learning the Dene way.” (KDS Information Handbook, 2011).

**Procedure**

At the beginning of the dialogue circle, I asked the school elder to say an opening prayer in the Wiliideh language, then I added to the prayer by asking the Creator for guidance, strength, and open-mindedness in telling the stories of Kàlemì Dene School. As the participants had lunch, I presented a short power point presentation to provide context, purpose, and parameters of the dialogue. I presented the power point while the participants were eating, to maximize my time with the group. I introduced the participants to my qualitative research project that would begin with this dialogue circle. I explained that narratives and dialoguing were the most powerful methodologies to gain insight into an issue as complex as ASA, and added that I would be a part of the circle. I felt my participation was an integral part of the process; my lived experiences interconnecting with theirs would enrich the dynamic whole. They agreed.

To begin the dialogue circle, I introduced three core conditions of dialogue as suggested by Yankelovich (1999) to set the tone of the meeting: 1) emphatic listening, 2) equality of standing, and 3) nonjudgmental sharing of assumptions. I went through the power point presentation, which took about ten minutes, and then the dialogue circle started.

The lived experiences of these twelve people and their subjective perspectives provided many rich layers of understanding and even some startling pieces of information that impacted the process to an unexpected degree during the dialogue circle. The discursive dimension in the circle allowed a respect-
ful interchange of experiences, sometimes building from each other and sometimes going in completely different directions, adding more layers of deep meaning and understanding. Their words flowed as naturally as the tears; the emotional connections to the stories were palpable. The power of the dialogue shaped the experience; time no longer mattered as the participants moved towards reflective and collective synergy. It was as if the more they shared, the closer they would get to significant and lasting change. The qualitative method of inquiry and deepening understanding proved profound in the exploration of the central phenomenon of Aboriginal children and their success in school.

**RESEARCHER**

My role in the dialogue circle was as a facilitator and a participant. I had worked at KDS for twelve years previously, and then left the school for another position. I wanted to influence change at another level of leadership in the proactive movement towards improved Aboriginal student achievement. As I have mentioned, the participants knew that I am pursuing an EdD degree. They knew my drive, dynamism, and dedication to Aboriginal students. My overall goal has not changed: it is to do my part to create the conditions for more success in schools for Aboriginal students. In this dialogue circle, I was inseparable from the group. I was co-investigating my research question with the group in a relational inquiry exploring the multiple layers of complexity in this problem. The personal meaning that this issue has for me is the motivating force that keeps me searching, researching, learning, looking for answers, pleading for people’s time (even on a busy Saturday), rallying their support, and continuing this study. This study is the reason I left my beloved school. I promised my kids that I would always work for them, always love them, always be there for them, and I aim to keep my promise.

**REFLEXIVE ANALYSIS**

**OVERVIEW**

This analysis begins by examining the many lived experiences of the participants and the dialogue that they used to share their stories. All of the participants agreed to engage in the dialogue towards a specific research question, but of course, many veered off topic. However, in doing so, their “random” dialogue provided the essential historic, cultural, social, and political contexts that added to the meaning making in the dialogue. They spoke not only about their children and youth at KDS, but also about their own school experiences, some in residential schools, with the overwhelming ordeal of being raised away from their families; others about being in “uptown” schools experiencing the pain of prejudice and name calling; and others focused on the positive factors of school life that help Aboriginal students. The participants were united, as caregivers of the children and youth, towards meaningful sharing from their different perspectives as elders, parents, grandparents, leaders, community members, and teachers. Touchingly, Bakhtin’s (1973, p. 62) words described the circle: “The voices were not self-enclosed and not deaf to one another. They constantly hear each other, call out to one another, and are mutually reflected in one another.” The engagement, sharing, and wanderings of thought and memory were incredible. An atmosphere of relational connectivity was set: the participants were free to express their stories, willing to listen attentively, to practice respect, to take risks, to trust, to be open to others, to suspend their judgments, and to find their voices. All the perspectives seemed to find their way like magic into the circle on that Saturday afternoon.

Many spoke with clear expression, resolute opinions, and strong emotion; at times tears were shared as the dialogue entered into the zone of Buber’s “Holy Insecurity” (Scott, 2011), in which the participants roamed into openness, sometimes even ambiguity. Trust allowed them to share topics that were very close to their hearts. The flow of utterances followed no pattern yet stayed, for the most part, on the topic of children and education. It covered the gamut of memories, moving beyond the single story into understanding and meaning that reached the reverential levels of I-Thou interactions (Buber, 2002 [1947]).

Overall, the dialogue categorized itself into two sections that will be outlined below. The first set of excerpts from the transcribed audio recording included comments from all dialogue partici-
pants that stayed on the research question topic in describing the transformative factors that brought about success for the Aboriginal students at KDS. Such comments included:

To me, respect is huge in this school....
A lot of our students, they need counseling, and they need help ... we're looking at the healing component ... and make it a part of what we do....
The climate here is conducive to learning for Aboriginal students....
Kids were reading....
Realizing that kids need more time.... We have kids coming in that are two years behind on their oral language development.... They can learn at their own pace, and making that okay, and respect that....
There is love in school for our children.... They feel special.... They feel they're wanted....
Our kids mattered....
The community protects the building.... They know that when their children come here they're taken care of....
Kids are happy, they're smiling, they're excited....
Teachers who understand, who respect us as First Nation people, and to respect how we lived and how some of us continue to live on the land, and to care about the environment....
Giving students a chance to pursue what they're interested in but still learning all the academic skills at the same time really helps them make progress forward.
If they get choices they really go far that way....
Holding kids to higher expectations, that's so important....
Because a student maybe comes into school with delayed reading level, it doesn't mean that they not intelligent and that there's lots they can do....
They rise because they knew that you loved them, that you cared about them....
Have such beautiful teachers that love kids, that want to teach the students....
It's how to involve community, it's how to work with parents, it's how to empower those relationships....
It's the relationships....
And that's the art here....
The key is relationships....
And it's because of the constant theme of love....
There's a real honouring of us as First Nations people.... That's the circle of learning....

This part of the dialogue centred on the positive components of the school's success: it concentrated on the things that worked, and continue to work, for the school to help students connect to their learning, to their teachers, to their school. However, these exchanges can be overemphasized, as the overflow of their expression seems to communicate that everything at the school worked out so easily. Definitely not. These dialogue participants know first hand the “blood, sweat and tears” — and years — that it took to gain the confidence of the parents, families, and community of Ndilo to trust the school as a place of love, safety, and belonging: a place of celebrating the language, traditions, and culture of the people; a place of good teachers, a place of learning! The paradoxical quest of teaching the parents and community that the Aboriginal community school was the better school for their children meant changing the historical mindset and belief system in the superiority of the “uptown” system. After all a whole generation of Ndilo students received their education in the uptown system, so it was going to take a lot of effort to change the institutionalized convictions of past school experiences. And effort it was, especially in the form of relationship building.

The themes of love, relationships, and excellence in teaching were the constant and consistent messages delivered to the parents. Finally, when the doors of the new school were open, the principal won a national award for school leadership (2009), the first set of graduates celebrated their high school graduation (2010), and one of the teachers won an award for excellence in teaching (2010). Only then, was the community finally convinced that the “little school with the big heart” was the school of choice.

**Contextual background**
As the dialogue perspectives expanded into topics unconnected to the research question, I began to notice the dialogue tone change at times. The words
became harsher, more realistic, unsettling. In this second section, the dialogue participants moved into describing their realities that provided contextual background, expanding as the words began to reveal more critical issues. Participants not only told their stories of how the school made a difference in the lives of children, but also veered into the societal ills of the community. Georgina began to tell stories of her “tough life” of addictions and recovery, the state of alcoholism and “bootleggers” in the community, the “hatred” of her children towards the bullying that they experienced in uptown schools from the “bastards” of prejudice. Regina gave a first-hand account of racism and discrimination in uptown schools in which teachers blatantly disregarded students because they were Aboriginal, and her ensuing feelings of helplessness and inferiority when they ridiculed her pleas for help, in addition to questioning her own education and capacity. Florence moved onto the flagrant admonishment of parents who couldn’t provide for their children as a result of substance abuse and neglect. “Forget the parents,” were her words for supporting the teachers who took on the role of the parents when the parents were not able to. Daniel described his own life as an Aboriginal youth in which he was on his own “to make decisions,” some of them difficult, others more routine in nature, such as whether to stay up to watch a late movie, or go to sleep early and be ready for school. Ears listened closely as Charles spoke of the street people who suffered from addictions; they were known as “post office people”: their powerful display of how low the human spirit can get when plagued by booze and drugs. Charles reminded the participants that some of them, when sober, are “professors” on the land, and would put us all to shame with their bush skills, prowess, and pride. Powerfully, Florence went out on a limb to state her views on “the residential school effect.” She shared pieces of her own residential school experience from age four to twelve years. She experienced the hardships of being without her family at this young age, and certainly her own share of internal abuse. But her words shook the audience when she quietly advised people not to dwell so often on residential schools, to quit blaming and “move on.”

Lastly, Mrs. June’s simple account of her work as the school elder, her love of her traditional life, her family, and her time-demanding skills as a crafts-person making moosehide beaded jackets for all her family.

These stories echoed Chimamanda Adichie’s expressive words (TEDtalks, October 2009): “our lives, our cultures, are composed of many overlapping stories.” Indeed the stories overlapped and added to the richness of flow and meaning, as the voices explored the different perspectives. The intentions behind the spoken exchanges revealed the wealth of experiences, convictions, and worldviews of the dialogue participants, and demonstrated the power of dialogue to reach heights and depths far beyond the spoken word. After every illuminating exchange interspaced with stammering “uuhs,” “uums,” “ands,” and “y’knows” the room reverberated with emotions, feelings, thoughts that made up inner dialogue. The impact of the dialogue resonated throughout the free spaces (Bohm, 1996) in a flow of meaning (Isaacs, 1999) that touched the heart and spirits of the participants as they digested the words, making them all think about the way that we think (Bohm, 1996). As the dialogue drew to a close, it connected with the last bit of sunrays setting in the west and the colour of the sun catchers fading as the afternoon wore on.

CRITICAL REFLECTION
The dialogue definitely added richness to the research question that I had introduced at the beginning of the dialogue circle. The dialogical voices enhanced the depth and meaning of the question, along with revealing some sensitive connections that I had not expected. Through this dialogue circle of caring and contributing relationships, my learning was expanded. I had to connect my new and developing understanding of dialogic theories with my comprehensive knowledge of educational practices in an Aboriginal community school. Indeed some extraordinary moments of collective awakening took place that touched me and will guide the development of my research study.

Holistically, the many stories contributed to my knowledge base; however, there was a piece of the dialogue that shifted my educational philoso-
It was a piece of information that I’ve known for a long time, throughout my life, in fact. It came into the dialogue circle at the beginning, but it was only when I began digesting the words during the long transcription process that the deeper meaning started to take shape. As I transcribed, I kept on going over and over the dialogue, coming back often to the words that Elizabeth spoke in describing her time at the school as the former community school counselor. She spoke with strong emotion, crying as she recounted her work in a paper that she wrote for her master’s degree at St. Francis Xavier University in Halifax, Nova Scotia (2006), entitled, the “Little School That Can.” She said:

*I recognized the climate here. The climate here was conducive to learning for Aboriginal students.... There was an amazing relationship between students and staff. I saw staff, principal, everyone working at the school being those aunties and uncles to the kids, but knowing when to draw the line. And that’s what was making a big difference ... because those relationships were amazing, then healing, then hard work could happen because there was that relationship built. It was very much a family school.... Those were the important things. And there was always the recognition that the students were traumatized, not all of them, but lots of them were traumatized.

And that was when it hit me. Yes, so many of our kids were traumatized! Teaching them had to be different, if you were to reach them, connect with them, and if you could, connect them with learning, as schools are supposed to do. This was what was happening at KDS: the recognition that many of the children were traumatized, and adjusting the teaching strategies to meet the needs of the students, at their level, at their pace, honouring their identity, according to their interests. These were the underlying structures of teaching that were necessary to establish before any form of academics could be taught. Trauma debilitates learning, so for effective teaching to take place, the trauma has to be dealt with first.

According to Wikipedia: “psychological trauma may accompany physical trauma or exist independently of it. Typical causes and dangers of psychological trauma are sexual abuse, bullying, domestic violence, indoctrination, being the victim of an alcoholic parent, the threat of either, or the witnessing of either, particularly in childhood.” Indeed, as was revealed at the dialogue circle, these were some of the forms of trauma that the Aboriginal children of KDS have experienced, and then some.

Elizabeth is well-respected NWT educational leader, a former 23 year veteran principal of another Aboriginal community school, adjacent to Yellowknife. Elizabeth worked as a counselor at KDS for two years from 2004–06, connecting naturally and closely to many KDS kids. Elizabeth, along with all the dialogue circle participants commented, “we were aware that many of the KDS children experience varying levels of trauma in their lives, whether it be alcoholism in the home, witnessing violence, experiencing neglect and poverty.” This “recognition of trauma” that Elizabeth referred to in the dialogue circle entered my meaning-making system and allowed me to concentrate on the many implications of the teaching that was taking place at KDS.

As I spent an unexpectedly exorbitant amount of time transcribing the two-hour dialogue, I kept going back to Elizabeth’s words. The meaning got brighter, as I critically reflected on her words. Then I read Jack Mezirow’s article on “How critical reflection triggers transformative learning” (1990), and went through another click experience. Indeed it was the part of the dialogue that caused my emergent “perspective transformation” to form. As Mezirow explained:

*The term critical reflection will here be reserved to refer to our challenging the validity of presuppositions in prior learning.... An example is the time honoured definition of what it means to be a ‘good’ woman, which was questioned through the consciousness-raising of the Women’s Movement. Challenges and negations of our conventional criteria of self-assessment are always fraught with threat and strong emotion.

With these words from Mezirow I began to question my “meaning perspective,” my presupposition of a “good” teacher. To many, a “good” teacher is one who gains knowledge from the appropriate curriculum, designs complementary educational activities, develops instructional practices to teach students,
and then uses appropriate assessment techniques to determine the students’ progress. A “good” teacher also establishes a rapport with her students, creates engaging lesson plans, guides her students through learning, participates in some extracurricular activities, and then goes home at the end of the day. Of course, the “good” teacher also participates in professional development learning, and partakes in the occasional professional learning community to keep current with the latest in the educational field. A “good” teacher is one who cares for her students.

However, a “good” teacher of Aboriginal children of trauma is quite a different story. Yes, this same “good” teacher prepares for the teaching job in much the same way as described above. However, this is not enough for the teaching of Aboriginal children of trauma. To reach any level of success, the “good” teacher of Aboriginal children of trauma has to do so much more, and unremarkably, there are only certain teachers who can commit to this level of connection. A “good” teacher of Aboriginal children of trauma has to give that extra about which Elizabeth and all the other dialogue circle participants spoke so emotionally. A “good” teacher of Aboriginal children of trauma does more than care for her students — she loves her children.

I question the underlying structure of the “meaning perspective” of a “good” teacher and my own emergent “transformative perspective” of a “good” teacher of Aboriginal children of trauma. Many more questions arise, and indeed much more research has to take place, but I believe this topic is an opportunity to add to the body of knowledge pertaining to Aboriginal education, more specifically researching the teaching of Aboriginal children of trauma.

Overall, this reflexive analysis has provided me with a lot of food for thought, and a clarification of my research question. With the epiphany of realizing the effects of trauma on Aboriginal children and youth and the kind of teaching that needs to take place with them, I am catching glimpses of a deeper territory of new concepts unfolding as a result of this beginning dialogue circle. Senge (1990, p. 146) guides my efforts in his words: “Truth spoken directly from the heart and skillfully illumined by the mind has power that cannot be eliminated even in academic settings.” My dialogic journey continues in the hopes of further clarification and enlightenment into ways to create the conditions for increased Aboriginal student achievement in the northern school system and for Aboriginal students to find their own unique paths of success.

REFERENCES


**Angela James** is a Manitoba Métis who has called the Northwest Territories home for over 30 years. She recently began her doctoral studies through Simon Fraser University in 2011 and this article reflects her very personal journey and deep caring for northern Aboriginal children. Her research interests are centred on gaining deeper understandings of education through the lens of Aboriginal children and communities. She married into a Chipewyan Dene family and has learned the many similarities between her own Métis kin and the Dene people. Angela and her family care for 20 sled dogs, raising puppies, training and racing during the winter season. In 1997, she and her family started Trapline Tours, an educational tourism business. They operated Dene Cultural Camps for schools in Yellowknife. In their last year of camps, over 2,000 students from Grades 1–12 participated in the learning adventure of experiencing the heritage, culture, and languages of the Northern/Dene and Métis people. Angela went on to become principal of Kàlemì Dene School (KDS) in Ndilo for 12 years where she worked with a team of community leaders and teachers to fund and build new $10 million school building. She is currently the Director of Early Childhood and School Services for the Department of Education, Culture and Employment.

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