RESEARCH REPORT

The Journey of an Aboriginal Teacher: Imagining and Living the Potential of Excellence Through Service

Sherryl Maglione

As an Aboriginal educator, teaching Aboriginal students has, over time and very simply, become my focus, passion, and life’s work. My life’s journey as an Aboriginal educator, through service to others, has been professionally and personally fulfilling, and is yet evolving. For instance, as my intertwined educational and life’s journey progresses, I become more aware of the magnitude of wrongs that exist in the history and in the ongoing legacy of Aboriginal education in Canada. There is no doubt that these wrongs and deleterious effects are still evident today. These effects are most quantitatively and visibly demonstrated by the gap between Aboriginal and mainstream high school student graduation rates, post-secondary attendance numbers, and high unemployment figures among Aboriginal populations in Canada. As an Aboriginal woman whom the teaching profession has chosen, one of the critical wrongs that I am attempting to change, through my past, present, and future actions, is the legacy of residential school Aboriginal education.

I approach this task in the most humble and grateful way that will bring honour to the teaching profession and to Aboriginal youth and their education. Through engaging in positive action, creating harmonious relationships, understanding and encouraging development of their Aboriginal identity, and indigenizing the English Language Arts high school curriculum through the use of extensive First Nation resources, I am actively dedicated to facilitating hopes in my students’ lives. As an Aboriginal educator, I can do no less than reaffirm my commitment, every single day, and with every interaction with students and staff, to providing the Aboriginal youth I serve and teach with positive choices that will help to build their skill set as they move past high school into adulthood. In the ethnography that comprises my thesis, I also explore the importance of relationships between the Aboriginal teacher and Aboriginal students and how The Seven Teachings have influenced my worldview as a Cree/Italian woman and an Aboriginal educator.

As an Aboriginal educator, I have taken and continue to take up the Creator’s challenge with a dedicated heart and lifelong commitment to facilitating success for my Aboriginal students. However, my role is not only that of the teacher, but also of a student, as the students that I have met along my journey have also been my teachers. My teachers have taught me the embodiment of The Seven Teachings: Wisdom, Respect, Bravery, Honesty, Humility, Truth, and Love. In addition to teaching me patience, humour, and empathy, my teachers have also taught me how to understand and deal with their stress and frustration though encouraging them to try their best, approaching each challenge with a humble heart, and remaining courageous in the face of obstacles. My hope is that, through my stories about their perseverance, the reader will come away from my thesis with his or her own sense of hope for the future of Aboriginal education and Aboriginal youth in Canada.

The way that I chose to write my journey is through a series of stories that work within the First Nation paradigm of The Seven Teachings. The purpose of the journey, or itoh téwin, is not about the finished product, as my story does not necessarily follow the pattern of the traditional academic university thesis. Indeed, it can not be so and remain true to the nature of a journey, because the spirit of true storytelling is not logical and analytical in nature. First Nation people tell stories that wind their way here and there, around and about, and under and through. What one person learns from the story may not be what another person learns. Storytelling is an ancient oral and cultural tradition throughout the world and a way that First Nation people were
able to perpetuate and strengthen their culture before written traditions became available to them.

What I want my readers to understand is that to know my story is not enough. What is important to me is what the reader does with that knowledge. It is how the reader comes away from the story changed in some way that matters to me. It is what the reader can share with others about my story that matters to me. The stories that I share in my thesis reflect and represent the nature of traditional storytelling and the nature of Aboriginal learning itself.

Through the narrative inquiry that is framed around my experience, the nature of story and The Seven Teachings, I discover, reflect, and discuss the process of finding my own fit as an Aboriginal woman and educator. In my thesis I also write of the challenges inherent in the journey of being an Aboriginal teacher whose main purpose is, through miyopimatisowin, which means practicing a good way of living. Living in a good way means serving my First Nation students by helping them to create hope and build dreams for their future. It is my dedicated intent as an Aboriginal educator, through service, to help my students uncover and discover their dreams in order that they will be able to live a wonderful life for themselves and their children and grandchildren. Ekosi!

In the last chapter of my thesis, I describe what an excellent teacher should look like and should do, with the understanding that no one can be perfect and that we all have flaws and outside pressures that may temporarily derail us in our lives. The following list describes the teacher I am striving to become:

- Have a clear personal philosophy and understanding that students should always be the first priority in a school.
- Enter the school each day with a willingness to work with parents/guardians in the best interests of their child.
- Acknowledge the importance of recognizing and respecting the dynamics of First Nation culture and language.
- Remember not to judge students and their families and life conditions.
- Be there for your students, colleagues, and administrators every day, and be on time so that they can rely on your stability as their daily touchstone.
- Provide support for Aboriginal cultural knowledge in purposeful, meaningful, and practical ways.
- Help students to plan ahead for what will happen after high school.
- Operate from the vantage point of heartfelt service for your students. This part of their lives is critical to the success of their adulthood.
- Do not be afraid to show your own humanity. Be an advocate for your students and never stop trying to help them find the best solutions for their challenges.
- Realize and transmit the concept that “schooling is a vehicle for social justice” (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 1998, p. 19).
- Demonstrate a willingness to accept your own flaws and work to improve them.
- Realize that a sense of humour will go a long way toward developing and sustaining relationships.
- Understand that you have a true commitment to providing your students with a quality education.
- Set behavioural guidelines and follow up with loving, humane, and kind consequences.
- Constantly learn how to become a better teacher by taking advantage of professional development opportunities and sharing this information with colleagues.
- Develop a sense of empathy for each situation that you encounter.
- Develop the ability to take constructive criticism from supervisors and colleagues in order to better your performance.
• Understand and communicate the commitment to protect the safety of the students in your school through anti-bullying initiatives, conflict resolution, and anger management workshops.
• Help students and staff with cultural education.
• Empower First Nation students through success.
• Learn from elders and community members.
• Validate and support First Nation culture.
• Become more culturally sensitive and aware of First Nation history and First Nation issues.
• Help to create a community of learners in the school.
• Be accountable through complete familiarization with how the provincial curriculum is structured, and be creative with how it is implemented.
• Promote positive attitude toward school and learning. Get excited about learning!
• Increase student self-esteem in creative ways.
• Increase literacy rates for First Nation high school students.
• Increase retention rates for First Nation high school students.
• Increase graduation rates for First Nation high school students.
• Support the proliferation of future First Nation authors.

Reference


About the Author

Sherryl Maglione completed the M.Ed. program at BU in 2012, with a focus on indigenizing the high school ELA curriculum. From the Saddle Lake Cree Nation, “Miss Mags” has always taught in First Nation schools. Her interests include laughing, traveling, reading, shopping, and supporting the Sioux Valley Eagles senior high school basketball team.