

**SCHOOLS AS PROTECTORATES:  
STORIES TWO MI'KMAQ MOTHERS TELL**

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In 1965, Memmi introduced the concept of a protectorate. “Whenever the colonizer states, in his language, that the colonized is a weakling, he suggests thereby that this deficiency requires protection. From this comes the concept of a protectorate” (pp. 147-8). While this concept is 45 years old, it is an apt metaphor for thinking about current school landscapes, and about how educators are positioned on those landscapes to use their professional knowledge of teaching and learning as protectors of children and parents. We assert that while all parents experience “protection” in their children’s schools, such protection plays out more strongly with First Nations parents because of historical, societal, socioeconomic, and political divisions (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005). As we inquire into stories two Mi’kmaq mothers tell of their experiences with teachers and administrators, we pull forward narrative threads that make visible how parents are marginalized when schools are structured and administered as protectorates. We invite a reconsideration of who is seen to hold knowledge on school landscapes and whose knowledge counts.

**Seeing Schools as Protectorates**

In 1965, Memmi introduced the concept of a protectorate. “Whenever the colonizer states, in his language, that the colonized is a weakling, he suggests thereby that this deficiency requires protection. From this comes the concept of a protectorate” (pp. 147-8). This concept continues to be poignant. When we use it as a metaphor to think about current school landscapes, we see how educators are positioned to bring their professional knowledge of teaching and learning into a community with the intention of enhancing children’s education and enhancing

parents' ability to support their children's education. Living within the protectorate structure, educators assume ownership for the school, and establish policies, procedures, and routines for children and parents—policies about discipline and homework, procedures for reporting student progress and communicating with parents, routines for the entry and exit of individuals from the school building. Educators determine the school program, including the philosophy to follow, texts and materials to use, groupings of children, and use of physical space. Educators then hold parent and curriculum sessions to orient parents to their way of thinking, to share their knowledge, and to teach parents how to support their children both at school and at home. Wearing a *badge of difference*—their professional knowledge of teaching and learning—educators act as protectors of parents and children (Memmi, 1965, p. 46).

Educators enter a community with expert knowledge of teaching and learning, which they possess over that of parents. It is this knowledge that positions educators to act as protectors within a protectorate. “It is in the colonized's own interest that he be excluded from management functions, and that those heavy responsibilities be reserved for the colonizer” (Memmi, 1965, pp. 147-8). In school terms, educators' expert knowledge of teaching and learning places them in a superior position over less-knowing parents. Acting as protectors, educators make *heavy* decisions (Memmi, 1965); they decide about things such as class placements, curriculum, and physical environment with little, if any, input from parents. Parents are invited to participate in *light* decisions about hot dog days, school t-shirts, and fundraising activities. Further, parents are taught by their protectors how to parent more effectively and how to help their children achieve more in school. Protectors look at schooling through the lenses of a system, from their vantage point of power, through the structure of the protectorate.

This scripted story of school is an historical one. Educators claim their position with the best intentions to enhance student achievement, provide a safe and caring place for children, and prepare children for their roles as citizens in broader society. These good intentions enable educators to act as protectors within the structure of a protectorate. They also perpetuate educators and parent complicitness with respect to how the story is lived out. By accepting the taken-for-grantedness of their positions as protectors and protected in this structure, educators and parents reinforce, and are constrained and shaped by, conditions imposed upon them (Pushor, 2007).

In this paper, we inquire into stories told by two Mi'kmaq mothers of their experiences with their children's educators. We attend to the mothers' experiences in terms of how the protectorate ways of schools shape their experiences. We pull forward narrative threads that make visible how parents are marginalized when schools are structured and administered as protectorates. We invite a reconsideration of who is seen to hold knowledge on school landscapes and whose knowledge counts.

### **Seeing Schools as Protectorates in Relation to Aboriginal Parents**

Debbie's doctoral research on the positioning of parents in relation to school landscapes (Pushor, 2001) and our experiences as parents within public school systems has brought us to this metaphoric conceptualization of schools as protectorates. We have observed and experienced the power and structure of the protectorate in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia schools, in both urban and rural areas, and in both core neighborhoods and predominantly white middle class communities where the parent population is of similar status and class to the educators acting as protectors. The sense of the protectorate within these school landscapes is apparent in

parent/teacher conferences, where there is only time for the teacher's voice to be heard. It is apparent in School Council or parent meetings where *light* agenda items continue to predominate: discussions of a school-wide fluoride program or a brainstorming session on ways to raise funds for upgrades to the playground. It is apparent in the control within school notices sent home to parents asking them to enter and exit the school through the front doors only and to check in at the office before proceeding. When we, as parents with supposed cultural capital, experience *protection* in our children's schools, consider, then, how that protection plays out for First Nations parents who experience historical, societal, political, and sometimes socioeconomic division from the dominant school culture.

“Given that we are in part products of the people, institutions, and governments that came before us, there is a direct connection between the past and the present” (Cleary & Peacock, 1998, p. 63). Before we share the Mi'kmaq mothers' stories, we first look at historical positioning of First Nations people in school contexts to help us understand present realities for First Nations learners and their families in schools; this will enable us to consider what might be needed to situate First Nations parents on school landscapes as knowers and knowing.

### *Looking Backward*

For First Nations people, education has historically been an experience of paternalism and assimilation (RCAP, 1996a). First Nations children were removed from their homes, taken away from the influence of their parents, their Native language and their culture, to schools where they could learn to be *white*. “As early as 1814, a system of ‘planting out’ was established which took children out of their homes and apprenticed them in nearby white homes” (Upton, as cited in Battiste, 1983, p. 149). Efforts to assimilate Aboriginal children were reinforced through

the legislation of the *Indian Act*:

Everything connected with the Indian Act was intended to teach Aboriginal people how to fit into the larger society... Residential schools were very much a part of that policy. The attempt was to remove the language, to remove the influence of the Aboriginal culture, and to indoctrinate young people – to “save” them, to deliver them to a new civilization with completely new values (Erasmus, 1999, p. 87)

According to the *Indian Act*, parents were seen as “unfit” (RCAP, 1996a, p. 338). To capture the powerful significance of this theft of children, Andrea Bear Nicholas (2001) retold an Elder’s story of a “great white bird who regularly stole children by luring them away from their parents with a spellbinding call” (p. 9).

In *Out of the Depths*, Knockwood (1992) wrote personal accounts (hers and others) of humiliation, hunger, deprivation, punishment, loneliness and degradation. In the film *No Turning Back: The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (1997), a First Nations man spoke through his tears during a community consultation, “I lived with anger, humiliation, abuse and disregard. And I brought that to my own family.” And yet, how quickly did Canadian society learn from these experiences?

The federal government issued a 1969 policy statement known as the *White Paper* that “called for the political integration of all ‘status Indians’ as full and equal citizens of Canada through the termination of all treaties and the transference of responsibility for ‘Indians’ from federal to provincial governments” (Bear Nicholas, 2001, p. 15). The *White Paper* was swiftly denounced as a “policy of cultural genocide” (Bear Nicholas, 2001, p. 15). In 1970, the *Red Paper*, a response to the *White Paper* by First Nations across Canada, called for an Aboriginal perspective within, and Aboriginal executive control of, all federal government programs, particularly education (Battiste, 1983). Recognizing that many First Nations children continued to be integrated into public schools, in their 1972 policy statement the National Indian

Brotherhood called for a greater role for Aboriginal parents on non-Aboriginal school boards, incorporation of Native language instruction in public schools, curriculum changes that reflect Aboriginal history and culture, certification of Aboriginal educators, and hiring of Aboriginal counselors and teacher assistants within public school systems. With this policy as a contextual backdrop, we turn our attention to the present reality of school landscapes for First Nations learners and their families.

### *Looking Around Us*

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996b) stated that 57 % of Aboriginal students drop out of school before graduation, compared to 15 % for non-Aboriginal students. The Commission (1996b) declared that large numbers of Aboriginal individuals remain functionally illiterate for life. It highlighted the disproportionate number of Aboriginal students who are labeled as "special needs" and are placed in resource rooms or special classes, streamed into less-academic programs, and prescribed drugs for "behavior disorders." Ten years after the Royal Commission's report, the Nova Scotia Department of Education (2007) stated the following goal: "Over 10 years, starting in 2005, close the achievement gap between FN learners and public school system student population" (p. 5). Currently, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (n.d.) website states, "Only 30% of First Nations and Métis peoples aged 15-24 years have completed at least high school education. First Nations and Métis students have a higher dropout rate and lower high school completion rate than non-Aboriginal K-12 students" (para. 3). "The process of colonization, ... and the 'civilization' of the indigenous people in this country continue today to affect both the colonizer and the colonized in more ways than we at first discern. Remnants of oppression still affect the daily intercourse of the two peoples" (Cleary

& Peacock, 1998, p. 60).

The historical education gap between First Nations and non First Nations learners continues to present day. Graduation rates provide evidence that the protectorate structure of schools is not working for First Nations students. Educators, positioned in the protectorate structure to wear their *badge of difference*, their professional knowledge of teaching and learning, continue to make *heavy decisions* regarding Aboriginal students, placing them in special classes and lower stream programs, making referrals for assessments and interventions to address their perceived deficits in learning and behavior. What are the implications for parents and their positioning in these decision-making processes? How are First Nations parents, too, being “protected” by educators as they make and enact their professional determinations? To consider these questions, we turn to stories two Mi'kmaq mothers tell of their experiences with teachers and administrators in their children's public school in Nova Scotia. From their stories, we pull forward narrative threads which deepen our understanding of educators' views of knowledge, shaped and sustained by school landscapes lived as protectorates.

### **A Narrative Inquiry into Mothers' Stories**

The field text we inquire into was gathered during Bill's master's research, a narrative inquiry of three Aboriginal mothers who told stories about their interactions with educators in their children's school system. Bill attended to the voices of these parents, foregrounding in his inquiry parent perspectives regarding the school system structure and educators' attitudes toward/practices of parent inclusion/exclusion in decisions affecting their children's schooling. Narrative inquiry was:

...a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and

participants, over time, in a place or series of places and in social interactions with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories and experiences that make up people's lives...narrative inquiry is stories lived and told. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20)

Bill's inquiry began in spring 2003. The three participants in his study were women whose children Bill had taught in years prior, and with whom he had developed a close working partnership. Bill met with the mothers to engage in taped conversations on the Reserve, either in their homes or places of employment. These were spaces of comfort for them, spaces in which they were accustomed to meeting with him in the past. Bill had developed relationships with these women during his career as an elementary teacher and in the midst of their lives as mothers of school-aged children. A few years later, Bill redefined his relationship with the women when he invited them, as researcher, to tell stories of their continuing interactions with the school system and to inquire with him into teaching practices which offer possibility for parent inclusion. A number of years later we return to the mothers' narratives, interested in their educative value with respect to interrupting educators' views of knowledge that are shaped and sustained by the protectorate structure of school landscapes and that dis-able us from attending in new ways to the First Nations achievement gap.

### **Stories of Two Mi'kmaq Mothers**

#### *Stacey's Story*

Stacey, a mother of three children, was one of the first Mi'kmaq mothers Bill met when he began a home visit program in the rural Nova Scotia community where he taught. Stacey lives and works on the Reserve served by the public school in the greater community. She is a community leader in her role as manager of one of the larger service providers on the Reserve.



Darlene, Stacey's youngest child and Bill's student, was storied to Bill by teachers and administrators as a discipline problem. Stacey, too, was storied to Bill as a “difficult parent, one to watch out for.”

While engaged in conversation with Stacey about her experiences as a mother of school-aged children, Bill asked, “Do you think school is a positive place for your kids?” Stacey responded:

I don't think so. Do you know why? ...I have always told teachers... like, I give them my home number, I give my phone number at work... they [are to] let me know.... And I'm so shocked when I open the report card and it's like... your child is in danger of failing. Like... to me, if there's a problem, they should let me know... and it seems like, they say, “Well, we'll do it in the school.” No, that's not what it's all about because... For example, this year, my daughter almost got kicked out in October. They told her that if her behavior didn't change they were going to kick her out of school. So I had to have a meeting with the teachers and the principal and the vice principal. And I was pretty upset because I said, you know, “Why did you let it escalate that far? All you had to do was give me a call at home or give me a call [at work] or come over to my house.” You know what I mean?

It's like [they] have so many students [they] can't concentrate on one child. My daughter tells me, “Mom, I try asking for help.” To me, why can't they take that few extra minutes and, like I said, [Darlene] barely gets by now.

I was called into a meeting about Darlene because she almost got kicked out in October. And the teacher started going on about the negative things that were wrong with her. So I took Darlene home and I asked her, “Why are you doing this? She *knew* she could get kicked out of school. I was so mad. We came back to the school the next day. I told the principal, “You know what? My daughter is doing this *so* she can get kicked out of a teacher's class.” I see my daughter struggling. Why? Because they don't have no time for her.

... I see a lot of parents here in the community that feel [frustrated]. And what I always tell them is you go talk to them at the school. ...[T]his mother, her daughter is in junior high... I told her, you gotta start standing up for yourself. ...[S]he has six children. Her kids are continuously getting thrown out of school—thrown out of school. And I told her, “Why don't you go back to the school, like I did with my daughter? You're not throwing her out! Let's use some positive strategy... so she's going to be able to learn. Because you keep on throwing her out, or you keep on suspending them, they're gonna care no more.

Why should my child be affected by the school system? I'll give you an example. Last week, my son was suspended for three days because of foul language. It was something so simple—it happened in the gym—if it was something so simple, it could have been dealt with, between the student and the teacher. It seems like something so small escalates into something so big. The child is always wrong anyway. It's never the teacher's fault. So I told the vice principal, "Thank you very much. You know, MY son got suspended." Out of school for three days, while this teacher probably gets, you know, no fault at all. I'm kind of tired of it.... That's how I'm starting to feel... ..People got to learn that they have to take a deep breath and learn to calm down, you know what I mean? ...[I]t seems to me that some teachers don't take the time to just settle down. (June 5, 2003)

### *Jane's Story*

Bill also met Jane in September of 1996, his first year teaching in the rural Nova Scotia community. Jane and her family live on Reserve and her children attended the local public elementary school. Jane is a leader in her community and has worked in various capacities serving families who live there. She also manages a family business on the Reserve. Gerry, Jane's son, had been storied to Bill as one of the most difficult children in the school and certainly one of the most challenging students in his Grade 4 class. Gerry's mother had been storied to him as someone to be careful of, and as a vocal woman who would actively defend her children. In Jane's experience:

One of the things that used to come up from a lot of parents when I was an education counselor was, "I hate going to parent-teacher... because all the teacher ever does is say, 'Well your child doesn't do this, doesn't do that.' It's never really, 'Well, these are the strong points and these are the weak points and we're going to work on the weak points.' And they're like... how do you say? ...they're confused about it. They're confused as to what parent-teacher is really about. They look at it as an opportunity for the teacher to complain about the child. That's how they look at parent-teacher night. That's why you have very few Aboriginal parents that will go. I don't need to go and have them tell me what's wrong with my kid when I KNOW what's wrong with my kid.

Jane talked about her belief that the school makes judgments about, and has certain expectations of, Aboriginal children:

You know, the school would have this expectation, and my child would be down here already upon entering into school. Number 1, we were Aboriginal. Number 2, we were segregated. We were in this little community called a Reservation. So, therefore, we're really cut off from the rest of the community surrounding us.

Jane discussed how her son was labeled a difficult child and how he experienced problems with the school system from an early stage:

Do you know this boy here? He sat outside of his classroom for seven months before we realized that's where he was sitting. And I went into parent-teacher meetings, and I was not even told by the teacher. Finally my daughter mentioned it one day and she said, "Do you know what's really hard?" She said, "What's really hard is seeing my brother sitting outside the classroom every day." I'm looking at her... "What are you talking about?" I said. Then we find out he was sitting outside the classroom. And, oh my God! I said, "What's going on here?" And then [the teacher] said, "Oh... He's a disciplinary problem." "Disciplinary problem?" I said. "I'd be a disciplinary problem too if I didn't know how to do the work."

Jane spoke about a meeting with Gerry's classroom teacher and resource personnel when Gerry was in Grade 2. On one particular day, Gerry refused to put his boots on to go outside:

Well, usually when they're calling with a problem... I usually come in. ... I don't go in there with a perception that the teachers know it all. I don't even go in there with a perception that a doctor knows it all. I figure that we're all educated in a different field. Everything else is a guessing game. So, the only way you're going to work around a guessing game is to talk to the individual and get whatever problem out-talked about, you know.

The choice they gave him was to put his rubber boots on and go... he could go outside, or he could stay in. And he really wanted to go outside... and he couldn't put these boots on. They kept saying, "You put the boots on and go outside, or you can stay in the classroom at recess and lunch." As the teacher explained it, "Gerry just stood there crying and wouldn't put the boots on. He had to stay in because he was not allowed outside wearing his indoor shoes." He didn't get to go outside and play that day. He was in Grade 2, and the teacher was new. I don't know who she was. I can remember thinking, "You do not know my child."

And so I said, "Is everybody finished? I'm taking in ALL your advice."

So I brought up this bag and I put the boots on the table and I said, "See these boots?" I said, "Did it ever occur to you to say, 'Gerry, why could you not put these boots on? You came here with them on this morning.'" I said, "Did you ask him?"

She goes, “No.”

I said, “I did. When he came home I asked him, ‘Why did you not put the boots on? What was the big deal with the boots?’ He goes, ‘Mom, they’re too small. They’re not mine.’ I said, ‘Oh, okay.’ I looked at the boots and said, ‘No, they’re not yours, but they’re brand new like yours.’”

That’s how unobservant teachers are of certain students. I don’t know whether it’s just Aboriginals, or just blacks, or poor, or kids they don’t know or if they’re just overwhelmed by 23 kids in the classroom. I don’t know. If that wasn’t my child, and if I was the teacher, I know I would have asked him, “What’s wrong with the boots?” That would have been my first question. He came in with them this morning. Kids get mixed up. It’s as simple as that.

Jane moved outward from her story of Gerry’s specific school experiences:

It’s the parents and the child who get blamed when the student has difficulty. And the child has to suffer because you’re there getting ANGRY with him because [he didn’t do better]. Like, my nephew comes home, and he’s got a poor card. And I look at it, and I go, “Oh wow, you did good here, you did good there. Oh, that’s up! ... You’re doing okay, keep going!” That’s the thing too – positive reinforcement.

As parents, we have learned to be SO negative to our children because the school feeds us negativity. So we take that and we put that on our kids. I made my son suffer, because he wasn’t “up to par” like everybody else. I felt he should be up to par. It took a while for the light bulb to come on. But when it did, I took care, I took care. But that’s not the point. For a lot of people, the light bulb doesn’t come on. Parents get tired and they get frustrated. (June 17, 2003)

### **Unpacking the Parents' Stories of School**

As we read and reread the parents’ stories, we were struck by how aspects of the parents’ current experiences with their children’s schooling reflected the paternalistic and exclusionary nature of residential schooling. In their words we heard parents’ feelings of being kept away from their children and outside of their schooling. Regardless of their requests to be informed, they were not contacted or called to the school until after decisions were made about academic or

behavioral interventions for their children. We felt their hurt as they told stories in which their children were humiliated by sitting in the hallway day after day, punished through suspensions from school, or disregarded in a classroom where they were in need of academic assistance. As we moved backward to the time of residential schooling and forward to the time of the mothers' stories, we found ourselves reflecting on the Prime Minister of Canada's apology, on behalf of the Government of Canada, for the residential school system and for its profound failing of Aboriginal peoples. "Today we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country" (Harper, 2008, para. 1). Prime Minister Harper apologized for a policy of assimilation, one of taking children away from their parents. But how do we as educators ensure that we do not, or are not, repeating these same mistakes again in our schools, just in the form of new policies or practices in schools that reflect the same underlying attitudes of paternalism or assimilation? As we unpack parents' stories of their experiences with the school system, we pull forward narrative threads that help us to think about this question. How are educators' views of knowledge within the protectorate structure also at play in perpetuating attitudes, policies and practices of paternalism?

*Badge of Difference: Professional Knowledge*

As we attended to Stacey and Jane's recounted of stories of exclusion from making decisions that affect their children, we were drawn back to the Aboriginal Elder's story of residential schooling and the great white bird who stole their children. When Darlene was failing in her school program, no contact was made with Stacey. Stacey only learned about difficulties Darlene was experiencing three months into the school year through mandated communication in report cards. Although Gerry's teacher was excluding him from the classroom because she was

unable to deal with his behavior, she did not make contact with Jane. It was only by accident, through her daughter's disclosure, that Jane learned how Gerry was spending part of his school days. These instances make visible the educators' view of knowledge in a protectorate structure, a view in which their professional knowledge was interpreted as legitimate knowledge. As the *badge of difference* they wear, their professional knowledge appeared to be what enabled them to make decisions without the engagement of the children's parents:

However you define a professional, that person's training makes clear that there are boundaries of responsibility into which "outsiders" should not be permitted to intrude. Those boundaries are intended to define and protect the power, authority, and decision making derived from formal training and experience. (Sarason, 1995, p. 23)

Even when Stacey asked the teachers repeatedly to let her know what was happening with Darlene's behavior, their lack of contact caused her to assume they believed, "Well, we'll do it in the school." Living out their role as protectors, the educators made decisions regarding the children, then told their parents what they had decided.

### *Asserting Power, Authority and Decision Making*

In Stacey's parent-teacher meeting after the receipt of Darlene's report card, in Jane's meeting to find out why Gerry was being excluded from the classroom, and in Jane's meeting regarding Gerry's difficulty with the boots, Stacey and Jane were talked to, rather than with. Jane's comment, "So I find out all these things ...," references the amount of educator talk in the meeting. Stacey and Jane did not get asked why they thought Darlene or Gerry were acting out; they did not get offered an opportunity to explain their perceptions of how their children were using behavior to get out of academic situations which were frustrating and defeating them. Stacey expressed, "...you know when you get to situations, you do get frustrated because they

don't, they don't seem to care what you have to say." We hear this frustration in Jane's interjection, "Is everybody finished? I'm taking in ALL your advice."

In the mothers' stories, we see that educators, living out school as a protectorate, assumed the ownership which they believed their designations and formally appointed positions afforded them. They determined what should happen in the face of Darlene's and Gerry's misbehavior, poor performance, and refusal to make good choices. They made the *heavy* decisions and then met with Stacey and Jane to explain their decisions and the knowledge and thinking underlying them. The educators' intentions seemed to be to inform the parents of, and to solicit their support for, the decisions they had made.

#### *Denying Parents Hold Knowledge*

In positioning themselves as knowing and Stacey and Jane as unknowing, the educators in these stories neglected to create a space in decision making for parent knowledge (Pushor, 2010). When Stacey's son was suspended from school for using foul language, she reflected, "If it was something so simple, it could have been dealt with between the student and the teacher. People got to learn that they have to take a deep breath and learn to calm down..." The knowledge Jane possessed from her lived experiences as a parent was also apparent. In solving the problem about the boots, Jane said, "I don't know. If that wasn't my child and if I was the teacher, I know I would have asked him, 'What's wrong with the boots?' That would have been my first question." Stacey and Jane saw possibilities for resolving these situations in ways that were simple and direct and, most importantly, relational and contextual. In Jane's meeting regarding Gerry, she noted, "I can remember thinking, 'You do not know my child.'"

Within the mothers' stories of experiences with their children's schooling, we see the

educators living out a view of knowledge which privileges their professional knowledge and knowledge earned through formal training, knowledge further developed through their experiences in the protectorate structure of the school. We see within this view of knowledge that they devalued, or were at least unaware of, the personal, practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) that the mothers brought to these situations. The parents' knowledge, gained from their situatedness in culture and community, their vast array of life experiences, and their life in the contextualized situation of their home was not knowledge that was given credence by the educators.

### *Assigning Blame*

In the parent-teacher meetings Stacey and Jane recalled, the difficult situations in which their children found themselves were portrayed as being a result of their children's inappropriate behavior or inadequate performance. Stacey expressed this by saying, "The child is always wrong anyway. It is never the teacher's fault." Jane, too, spoke about blaming. "It's the parents and the child who get blamed when the student has difficulty." Expressed in the parents' words is a perception that there is a divide created between "those who know" and "those who do not know." The parents believed the educators' first tendency was to judge those for whom they were protectors as deficient in some way. Jane asserted that very few Aboriginal parents go to parent teacher conferences because they do not want to be told what is wrong with their children. She expressed her sense that being Aboriginal and living on a Reserve positions Aboriginal parents and children as lesser, as the protected, upon their very entry into the public school system.

The parents spoke of how the blaming that happens on the school landscape insidiously



makes its way into the home landscape. Jane observed, “As parents we have learned to be so negative to our children because the school feeds us negativity. So we take that and put it on our kids. I made my son suffer because he wasn't ‘up to par’ like everybody else.” We find it interesting that Jane's words echo the words, shared earlier in the paper, of the parent who spoke of his experiences in a residential school and the resulting impact on his family. “I lived with anger, humiliation, abuse and disregard. And I brought that to my own family.” We see how a cycle of negativity gets repeated, school to home, when schooling is lived out in protectorate ways. This cycle, although lived out in a different time, place and form, continued to position the Mi'kmaq mothers and their children as deficit, as weaklings needing protection.

#### *Positioning Parents as Troublemakers*

Stacey and Jane were parents who spoke up for their children, and encouraged other First Nations parents to do the same. Because of this, educators viewed them as “difficult” parents or as people to “be careful of.” Both Stacey and Jane found themselves in a vulnerable place. They were convinced that, without their advocacy, their children may fail, be excluded from school, or just give up. As Stacey expressed, “Because you keep on throwing them out or you keep on suspending them, they're gonna care no more.” Yet, when they did act as advocates for their children, as Jane did when she met with the teachers about Gerry's boots or as Stacey did when she asked for a follow up meeting to continue discussions regarding Darlene's behavior, they found themselves being increasingly removed from communications with the school.

Jane did not accept the protectorate view of knowledge the educators fell into, one in which professional knowledge was privileged over other knowledge. Instead she noted, “I don't go in there with a perception that the teachers know it all. I don't even go in there with a

perception that a doctor knows it all. I figure that we're all educated in a different field." Her lack of acceptance of her positioning as someone without knowledge or as someone to be protected resulted in her being storied as a difficult parent.

### **“Unlearning” Views of Knowledge**

The Mi'kmaq mothers' stories of their interactions with educators on a public school landscape awaken us to taken-for-granted assumptions about who holds knowledge in schools and whose knowledge counts. They awaken us to how educators' conceptions of knowledge are shaped and sustained when schools are lived out in protectorate ways. They make visible the inequitable positioning, judgments, shaming, blaming, and marginalization of Aboriginal parents and children inherent within such a protectorate structure.

The roots of this metaphoric protectorate are deeply embedded in the Colonial history of our educational system in Canada. The mothers' stories bring us close to the strong connection between our past history of paternalistic, unjust and inequitable educational policies and practices and the current lived experiences of First Nations parents in public schools. Bear Nicholas (2001) believed, “Not to recognize Colonialism, teach about it, work to expose and dismantle it, is to ensure that it will survive” (p. 24).

Oppression theorists say that to be free we must first realize we are enslaved.  
...[S]o also must educators confront these remnants of oppression before we can know how to better educate. (Cleary & Peacock, 1998, p. 64)

Our intention in inquiring into the mothers' narratives was to make visible how educators' views of knowledge are shaped and sustained by a protectorate structure in schools. We believe it is through awakening to such a structure that we, as educators, can name it. And it is through naming it that we can begin to dismantle it, laying our knowledge as educators alongside parent

knowledge in a shared endeavor to successfully educate Aboriginal students and enable achievement and graduate rates commensurate with their public school peers.

We want to state clearly that we do not believe the educators in the mothers' stories were bad people or that they were consciously or intentionally living out policies and practices that were marginalizing for First Nations students and parents. Rather than seeing the problems inherent in a protectorate structure as being the responsibility of individuals, we view them as located in a larger societal and educational system (Bear Nicholas, 2001). As we stated earlier, the notion of schools as protectorates is historically rooted. Yet, because educators are the protectors, holding formal designations and assignments within schools and the corresponding power and authority, they are positioned to initiate a challenge to the protectorate school structure and the views of knowledge sustained within it. Those with the power must be willing to redistribute it.

Cuthand (2000), a First Nations newspaper columnist in Saskatoon responding to the Prime Minister's apology, wrote, "The apology won't solve all our problems, but it is a start. The responsibility has been put on all Canadians, and how we respond will determine the success or failure of the government's apology" (para. 22). Like Cuthand, we believe the apology is a start to building respectful and trusting relationships between Aboriginal peoples and educators. We also believe it is an invitation for educators to respond in ways that contribute to changing the current educational landscape and enhancing schooling experiences and outcomes for First Nations students and their families. Understanding how our views of knowledge as educators are shaped and sustained by school landscapes lived out as protectorates, how our views of knowledge are rooted in colonial practices, "is to begin what Raymond Williams called the process of 'unlearning' whereby we begin to question received truths" (Loomba, 1988, p. 66).

The scope and purpose of this paper is not to begin imagining what the process of unlearning may involve, but we invite you to carry with you and wonder about what might be involved in democratizing educational processes to position parent knowledge as valid and valuable. What might an explicit *curriculum of parents* (Pushor, in press) look like in graduate programs in educational administration or in leadership development programs within school districts? How might conceptions of knowledge and knowledge holders become central considerations in discussions of organizational theory, policy development, or the role of administrators, as examples? How might holding professional knowledge be redefined and lived in new ways?

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