

# “They Knew How to Respect Children”: Life Histories and Culturally Appropriate Education<sup>1</sup>

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Nkisi wolosakihtunol kisuwikhomuhticil 'tatkuhkakonol Wolastoqihik naka Mihkomak, etoli spokehkitimok Sitansisk. Nkissakihtunol ona 'tatkuhkakuwal 'ceyak elomahkiwik sawonehsonuk, etolokehkimsulticik. Psi te yukt nutuwikhikhoticik moskomoniya ansa te tan op wen oli aqami kisi skicinuwokehkiman. Yut itomuwiw, yatte wen atkuhkalsu, menakaci tpitahasu, aptuwikhiket. Yut ona toke nit ollukhotimk, nutokehkimut oc 'komasi wicuhkema, aqamihc ona nonasu, peyemi nonom, naka woli kcicihuwan wetapeksit. (Maliseet-Passamaquoddy translation by David A. Francis)

In this article I examine educational biographies and autobiographies by Canadian Maliseet and Micmac university students and by Bolivian Aymara, Quechua, and Uru women engaged in self-education. These writers have discovered something about learning that teachers will find useful in designing culturally appropriate education: that is, that collective work and reflection help define the individual within her culture and her community. Knowing this, teachers can use student collaboration and independent work to help students expand their knowledge and understanding of themselves and of their own culture.

Cet article étudie les biographies et autobiographies d'étudiants universitaires malécites et micmacs ainsi que de Boliviennes aymaras, quechuas et urus pratiquant l'autodidaxie. Ces auteurs ont découvert, au sujet de l'apprentissage, un principe que les enseignants pourront mettre à profit lorsqu'ils auront à concevoir des cours offrant une pertinence culturelle, à savoir que le travail et la réflexion en commun aident à définir l'individu au sein de sa culture et de sa communauté. Sachant cela, les enseignants peuvent faire appel à la collaboration de leurs élèves et à leur initiative personnelle pour les aider à parfaire leurs connaissances et à mieux se comprendre eux-mêmes ainsi que leur culture.

As writers and teachers develop ideas about improving education for Aboriginal children, they continually redefine terms and redirect their thinking. What is a “culturally appropriate education”? How can teaching and learning in school complement and build on the patterns of interaction at home and in the community? For Aboriginal students to succeed in school—still an essentially alien institution for many of them—their teachers must do more than simply introduce Aboriginal content into the curriculum; they must adopt Aboriginal methods and values so that students may come to know their own identity and potential from

within the understanding of their culture (see, for example, Barnhardt, 1990; Clark, DeWolf, & Clark, 1992; Corson, 1992; Deloria, 1992; Irwin & Reynolds, 1992; Larose, 1991; Leavitt, 1991; Lipka, 1990, 1991; Snively, 1990; Stairs, 1991). Teachers—including university teachers like myself—need to become familiar with the culture of their students (any students) and to make learning in the classroom as compatible as possible with the learning that takes place outside it.

One good source of information about traditional education in Aboriginal communities is the expanding collection of life histories in Aboriginal voices, which gives rich new insights into the learning of individual men and women and the learning that takes place within their communities (see, for example, Ahenakew & Wolfart, 1992; Blackman, 1982; Cruikshank, Sidney, Smith, & Ned, 1990; Kegg, 1991; Tyman, 1989). In particular, many Aboriginal writers have reflected upon their own education; their journals, histories, poetry, and fiction, even films, explore their learning (see, for example, Bob, Marcuse, Nyce, & Williams, 1993; Knockwood, 1992; Ontario Native Literacy Coalition, 1990).

Aside from Knockwood's account of her own and others' experiences at the Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia, residential school, however, Micmac or Maliseet authors have published little in the way of life history. This is unfortunate, because First Nations people in the Maritime region have experienced the effects of European contact for longer than in any other part of Canada. During most of that time, Aboriginal men and women have grown up hearing European languages and living under European religious, governmental, economic, and social systems while at the same time maintaining their own languages, spirituality, government, economy, and society. Given the great length and depth of this bicultural history, their life histories, especially those of the present generations, are often quite unlike those of people living farther west or north; for this reason their autobiographies and biographies offer invaluable guidance to the conscientious teacher of Maliseet or Micmac children. I hope to show here how involving Maliseet and Micmac university students and other Aboriginal writers in recording life histories has helped both them and me learn more about culturally appropriate education.

Life history, whether spoken or written, is helpful because it contains not only reflections on education but also indications of the cultural context in which learning and teaching take place. The genre seems in recent years to have become a living part of Canadian Aboriginal writing, literacy making it possible to compile, organize, and reflect on knowledge in ways that oral narrative normally does not (see, for example, Gill, 1982).

How much can be learned from an oral or written life history? Beyond what has been learned and how, a biography or autobiography reveals the individual learner; more important, it helps the careful listener or reader understand what individuality and personal identity might mean to the narrator—and whether in fact “individuality” is a useful concept in the narrator's culture. Teachers find it

effective to get to know each learner as an individual—Couture (1988), for example, has argued that this in and of itself might ensure culturally appropriate teaching—but in doing so they must pay attention to the learner's own understanding of his or her role and capacity *as* an individual.

Friedman (1988) argues that there can be autobiography in cultures where the writer or teller may not be conscious of herself as an individual having an independent existence. In fact the literate autobiographer creates another, separate identity for herself in the act of writing her life history. Autobiographies need not be exclusively individualistic, for in many cultures people have a group identity as well as an individual one. As we shall see, Aboriginal writers may use autobiography to explore both collective and individual identity—and biography to see these identities in others.

What might a truly Aboriginal life history be like? Autobiographies and autobiographical essays seem to emerge naturally from the oral tradition of weaving a continuity of human experience by exchanging or sharing remembrances—in the same way that traditional stories are given or lent by one storyteller to another. By contrast, the genre of biography is not so natural, for to speak definitively of anyone else's identity or personality, to recount the unfolding of a life history or career, presupposes that these are determinate. In reality, however, who one is depends upon one's interconnections and relationships with other people, with the environment, and with the spiritual world (Stairs & Wenzel, 1992). As a result, at each telling, whether years or only weeks apart, the nature of one's life and experiences may change.

Nevertheless, even if biography is not a natural genre in the oral tradition, writing has enabled Aboriginal listeners to record others' stories, reshaping them by making use of the writer's detached, external point of view—something not usual within the oral tradition. Still, the Aboriginal biographer will insist on a personal connection with his or her subject (see, for example, later in this article).

The social and political implications for teachers are clear: education must empower learners as members of a collectivity, not only as individuals striving for autonomy. In Aboriginal communities autonomy is a feature of the group—students or family or community. Understanding the ways in which it is possible for lives to unfold helps teachers, and thus learners, become conscious of the strengths, the resources, the “rightness” of the learners' cultural milieu. For example, Aboriginal storytellers and authors normally centre their narratives on a particular place. Their sense of place must be understood as part of both what makes learning possible (I hear students say, “We learn from our surroundings”) and what learners see as their goals (“We work for the good of the community as a whole”). The physical environment does not delimit but enriches experience (“We draw no boundaries, for we are one with the earth”).

In the last few years I have worked with a number of Aboriginal women embarking on biographical and autobiographical studies. In Canada, these have been

Maliseet and Micmac university students in courses on Aboriginal education. Often these students, particularly those in their twenties, assume that Aboriginal education is “just the same” as the education practised in provincial school classrooms. This is not entirely surprising when one considers that Maliseet and Micmac people have been subjected to non-Aboriginal education, whether academic, spiritual, political, economic, or social, for more than four centuries. Yet despite relentless pressure to assimilate, Aboriginal communities of the Maritime region have kept alive traditional ways of teaching, including, for example, respecting children’s ability to make decisions for themselves and to make sense of what they experience — something, incidentally, that teachers might learn from life histories.

The university students’ assumption that “learning is learning” quickly fades when, in a major course assignment, they begin to interview their parents or grandparents, whose education took place largely outside a school setting. What they learn opens their eyes to the extent and depth of their own informal learning. Writing an “educational biography” of a man or woman in an older generation makes them aware of how children learn in an Aboriginal community in Atlantic Canada. In addition, through readings, they compare local practices and experiences with those reported from other parts of North America, and beyond.

Students approach the assignment by collaborating at first to compile a list of “things to include” in the biographies, a list constituting criteria for evaluating the finished texts. They have identified the following as the most important items:

- interviews with people other than the subject of the biography;
- the author’s thorough knowledge of the subject of the biography;
- the subject’s home and community life — physical setting;
- the subject’s family and community — social setting;
- educational opportunities in the community;
- the educational setting (in or outside school) — where, who, when;
- the subject’s teachers in the home and community;
- dates — birth, childhood, significant events;
- the subject’s role in the community, then and now;
- community and family values;
- non-Native influences — events, people from outside the community;
- the subject’s educational needs, goals, expectations;
- traditional teachings;
- traditional ways of teaching and learning;
- the subject’s ideas about what children should learn today; and
- the subject’s current or ongoing learning.

It is plain from the list that the biographers are to be at once objective — collecting and presenting data from an outside, detached point of view — and subjective — shaping their inquiry from within the community context.

As a result, the biographies are often bicultural in methodology, content, and perspective, and as such they are both a bridge for the biographer and a reflection of her bicultural learning experiences. They may include the writer both as an observer and as an active participant whose perception of the subject truly impinges upon the subject's identity. They may include Aboriginal knowledge about space and time in addition to the usual places and dates. They may include comments from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal contemporaries on the subject's personality, achievements, and "place in history."

One student, for example, writes analytically about her mother's role in the family. She then applies her insights to her own situation, and at the same time uses them to characterize her mother.<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting to note how [my mother] describes her grandmother . . . because it is exactly what I would say about my mother. In my family, the women are dominant, probably because they lost their husbands to death or war. The women have had to become independent and responsible early in life. These attributes have been passed on down through generations. It is a form of education which has been passed on to the present day. . . .

My mother became ill. She had tuberculosis and had to be admitted to a sanitarium for a long time. . . . My mother learned to accept the things she cannot change. She had to learn how to follow a strict routine in order to get better. This is where she learned the virtue of patience. I often used to wonder if patience was learned or innate. I now realize that you have to learn and practise patience.

Another student introduces her biography of her father by establishing a theoretical framework before going on to tell how his family "lived off the land" when he was a boy.

Native ways of life are rooted in an understanding of the interconnectedness among all things of nature and all forms of life. Within this context, the sense of the land is central to the Native person. It shapes his conception of the past, present, and future of education. [My father] sees education in relation to the land.

She describes in detail the many ways in which he and his family and community subsisted, through gardening and raising livestock as well as hunting, fishing, and trapping, according to the season. "Reliance on and respect for the land was stressed . . . this rubbed off on me." She concludes the biography by saying that "as one of his ten children I have always looked at the land through his eyes."

Another student writes of a well-known artist, defining the relationship between herself, as the author, and her subject: "I feel that [she] has lived in the right era. She was born for a purpose. . . . I really believe she is a special gift to [her people]."

A closer look at this particular biography shows how the life history it records—and the text itself—describe a circle. The biographer begins by telling how her subject was first inspired to develop her talents as an artist when her

daughter came home from school one day in tears because the teacher had asked her—in front of the whole class—why Indians practised cannibalism. “She felt she needed to start transmitting her culture to people who didn’t know anything about it. She needed information. . . . She searched for truths. And as she worked, she felt more pride and a need to channel her energy.”

After her parents’ early deaths, the artist had lived in a series of foster homes and then in a residential school, where she lost her language under the cruelly repressive regime: “You had to stop being a savage,” she told her biographer. The pain stayed with her until many years later when, already well known, she met one of her former teachers: “The nun told her that seeing her a success . . . had healed something within her, for the nun too was suffering” from her own memories of the residential school. (How well this illustrates the empowering effect of the teacher’s and child’s knowing each other: both women experienced healing when the teacher was honest enough to look at herself through the student’s lens.)

The biographer concludes by saying that perhaps because the subject had never had a home of her own, “she felt obligated to straighten out any wrongs that were inflicted on her family, especially on that day when her daughter came home from school. She comforted her. She then went to the school and confronted the teacher.” She began to address not only ignorance and racism but issues of culture and justice as well: “‘I have become assertive. The frustration and anger part is gone,’ she says.” The biographer’s and the subject’s own reflections on this life history reveal both its political and its educational functions; they show how the subject’s consciousness has been raised through teaching herself and teaching others—and, indeed, through the process of being interviewed for the biography. In turn, both the biographer and the reader have gained new insights into political and educational activism.

These student biographers have become aware of the learning that takes place among members of a community, and of how it contrasts with formal (school) learning. They also begin to see their own experiences in a new light, discovering that their own perspective—more so than that of their parents and grandparents—is in fact bicultural, like the settings in which their learning takes place today. Having grown up in a schooled society, they can imagine how schools might adapt themselves to mixed ways of learning. The literature on culturally appropriate education takes on a new, personal significance for them. When they read about expert Aboriginal teachers at work with Aboriginal children (Lipka 1990, 1991), they see how community learning patterns might succeed in a school setting. In Snively’s (1990) bringing together oral tradition and scientific method to teach science, they see parallel approaches to using biography in the classroom. They realize that as teachers they must value and encourage in others their own bicultural learning processes. By the same token, as their teacher I must learn to appreciate in a new way the bicultural nature of their education in the university.

In 1991, to learn more about Aboriginal education, I worked in La Paz, Bolivia, with members of the Taller de Historia Oral Andina (THOA). The main task of this group has been collecting and publishing oral history of indigenous communities, both rural and urban, in the Altiplano. They have also been exploring how the knowledge and traditions they are recording might be useful in educating indigenous children.

THOA publications (for example, Huanca, 1989, 1991; Huanca et al., 1984) include accounts of popular struggles against the legacies of European colonialism, especially the role of women in these struggles (for example, Rivera et al., 1990; Rivera, Nina, Maquera, & Flores, 1986), based on interviews with elders and on archival research. There is also a methodology of oral history (Mamani, 1989). One of THOA's chief accomplishments has been to gain recognition for cultures and histories vital in contemporary Bolivian society, yet known and valued only within the indigenous community and not at a national or political level. In the course of their work, researchers have listened so carefully that communities and individuals now come to them with ideas for projects.

One such proposal came from a group of Aymara, Quechua, and Uru women who wished to educate themselves. Some older members of the group (up to 70 years old) had never attended school; the youngest (18 to 20 years old) had left school at age 9 or 10; still others had university degrees. Their *autoformación*—self-education—has engaged these women in a long-term collaboration that continues today. The group took an immediate interest in the idea that children can participate in setting the agenda for their own formal education. They had already done this themselves in their early education outside school and in the present group, but their experiences with formal education had been passive; they had had few opportunities to shape their own learning. Now, in designing their own education, the women decided what tasks they would take on and how they would develop their roles as community leaders and promoters of their particular culture.

They had chosen topics they wanted to explore individually and as a group: textiles, women's rights, trade unions, education, and health. After our initial conversations they decided that a good place to begin the work might be with their educational autobiographies, an assignment which would satisfy their goal of producing a written account of their experiences, and which would also focus on how people accomplish out-of-school learning. The women emphasized that it was important for their writing to be published and valued. Childhoods like theirs are the norm in much of Bolivia, but the depth of knowledge and understanding attained in family, home, and community teaching—through oral tradition and through participation in the work of adults—has not been recognized by the dominant society.

We began by planning a three-day writers' workshop during which the participants would share orally and in writing accounts of what they had learned as

children and young women, and how they had learned it. The objectives were stated in the workshop schedule as follows:

- to explore the system of teaching and learning which has existed for centuries in indigenous communities;
- to share personal experiences in this system and in the formal (state) education system;
- to write about these experiences; and
- to plan activities which will meet needs of young people today—for example, activities with schoolchildren or further research by group members.

The group introduced the topic using a number of questions focusing on their early learning of such skills as weaving, cooking, herding, child care, and selling, and their acquisition of other knowledge about, for example, cures, stories, rituals, natural indicators of weather and of crop yield, or effects of lightning. They answered these questions through a complex process of collaboration and mutual support. Interestingly, by working cooperatively the group produced a set of autobiographies that were nonetheless unique and personal.

The women wrote notes for themselves and then gave oral accounts of their experiences to the group. These were tape-recorded. Their colleagues asked questions and made comments based on their own childhood experiences. Over the next day or so, the participants took time to write. They read aloud what they had written and further developed their accounts in response to their colleagues' questions. Each writer then took her manuscript home for two weeks. At the end of this time, the group reconvened for a day-long editing session, at which each writer outlined the topics treated in her manuscript and the group made suggestions for organizing and further elaborating the content. The workshops were lively and full. So much time was spent exchanging ideas during the day that the writers had to use the evenings to prepare their manuscripts for sharing and discussion. The sustained collaboration perhaps reflects their experience working in groups and the solidarity of their communities and cultures.

Two older women talked about the changes that had occurred since their childhoods, when people of the community had managed their own system of justice, had spoken freely with the earth and the rocks, and had woven and worn fabrics of subdued, natural colours. Girls learned by playing and—as continually reiterated by the workshop participants—just by watching (*mirando no más*) how to weave and cook and otherwise contribute to the household work. One of these women said she was taught to do these tasks for others, not for herself. She had to keep up her responsibilities to be allowed to attend school like her stepbrother—though this was against her mother's wishes. By the time she reached the third grade, her mother would say, "You already know how to write. What more do you want?" She left school and did not return. The other woman was told as a child, "You are [an Indian]; school is not for you."<sup>3</sup>



A young woman of the same community, member of a new generation, was fishing at a very young age and walking five hours to market to help sell the catch. She pastured the family's llamas. As time went on, she learned to weave many types of textiles, each from a different teacher. She recalls how young children taught one another: "Show me and I'll show you." In those days, her family still saw school as a place for boys. But times have changed. Now her mother (one of the elders mentioned above) has encouraged her to complete her schooling. The act of writing her autobiography has raised her consciousness of her potential leadership in educating other women.

I want to tell all my friends, sisters, and other young girls never to be discouraged from studying and to pay no attention to criticism. For example, in my village, almost all women have remained uneducated, and we have to change that. We women have a will, we also have the right and the ability to study. We are always made to feel inferior, and we walk here and there without saying anything, especially those of us sisters who work in the city; we are exploited and mistreated. Many perhaps have come to the city without paying attention to the counsels of our grandparents, father and mother, and are suffering from not having listened to those counsels.

Another young woman from her community echoes her words:

I want to . . . educate myself as a woman so that in the future my knowledge will serve my sisters in my community. This idea inspires me to write and tell about the life which I have led in my community, the form in which I have learned many values. Women today are not valued for being women of the countryside; for that reason I am inclined to relate my biography so that whoever reads it will know that which I was and will be in the future.

The words of these two young women show how the pursuit of education assumes political significance. An elder also talked about the difficulty of her childhood, of the poverty and separation her family suffered after the death of her father. At five o'clock in the morning she was out in the fields picking up *chuiñu*—freeze-dried potatoes—in her skirt. Her only close friend was another girl with whom she herded. She did not go to school but has always seen the value of education and has fought for schooling to be provided in communities with few children.

Her daughter, a street-vendor, became a prosperous *comerciante*, fond of the income and the fine clothes. But she gave up her business to focus on her self-education and to work toward her objective, "that women become one." She believes the education she received at home and in the community has served her well.

The education which we used to receive from the time when we were little until we grew up was from our parents, grandparents, and the local authorities. For that reason, the

people before were well educated and responsible. They knew how to respect children and make themselves respected.

This mutual respect seems a key not only to education appropriate for the community but also to education that empowers learners (witness the autobiographer herself) to move forward to educating others. The Bolivian women have been learning about the continuity of their communities, the ways their people maintain life and culture. They are experts in the skills and knowledge required to survive on the Altiplano and in Bolivian society. As the workshop progressed they continued to surprise themselves with the extent of their understanding, and they kept listing new topics to investigate and write about. Their confidence and interest as writers grew, too, and they began to see their way into more complex research on textiles, rights, trade unions, education, and health. It was as if reflecting on their own education helped them see the power of their personal resources.

They decided to call their group, in Aymara, "Little by Little, the Seed We Have Planted Will Keep on Growing."

What do these Bolivian women have in common with the Canadian university students, and what can we learn from their experiences? Through biography and autobiography, both groups have discovered that collective work and reflection help define the individual within her community. Beyond the material sharing and collaboration frequently identified in Aboriginal community life, the collective exploration of individual experience helps expand the participants' knowledge and understanding of themselves, of their own culture, and of that culture's connections with the "other" culture.

Through autobiographies and biographies, readers become aware in a new way of issues that confront them in teaching. When the Bolivian women, whose formal education had been restricted, took a fresh look at the education they did receive, they recognized its value; and they discovered that *both* types of learning are essential in bringing together the two cultures in which they live. Similarly, the Canadian biographers learned that understanding the traditional knowledge and values of their elders, and how these were learned, can help them to teach others with deeper understanding in both informal and formal situations. Respecting children's ways of learning means looking at the strengths of both cultures in which they live and knowing something of how their communities have met the challenge of getting an education.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article was presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education in Ottawa, Ontario, June 1993.

<sup>2</sup> This and the following excerpts are quoted anonymously from recent unpublished student assignments. I thank these students as a group for the insights into teaching and learning they have shared with me.

<sup>3</sup> The excerpts in this section are quoted anonymously from spoken words of participants in the writers' workshop and, in the case of the longer excerpts, from a subsequent unpublished draft of the women's autobiographical accounts. Spanish is the group's working language; the translations are mine. I also thank these colleagues.

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