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## Red Lake Revisited

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## Red Lake Revisited

Forty years after my first opportunity to teach American Indian children, Mathew's compelling words still resonate as I work with young people who seek to become teachers. His comments on that January day in 1969 jolted me into realizing the incongruity of his life and culture with the lifestyles depicted in the textbooks we used. Like most texts of that era, Mathew's reading book portrayed father leaving for his office each morning wearing a gray suit. Mother, dressed in her starched apron, remained at home to cook, clean, sew, and watch over children playing in the green yard surrounding the white, colonial-style family home on Cherry street.

The teacher's manual for our text prompted me to ask children if they could remember a time when they needed assistance from a "community helper." My question met with silence. Then Mathew spoke. He told us in his own matter-of-fact way of the day his older brother was knifed in their yard. As he described the sirens screaming toward his home, the other fourth-graders nodded in solemn agreement because his words revealed a vivid memory that many shared.

Mathew and his classmates struggled with the clash between what they knew to be true in their young lives and the "whites only," middle-class lifestyle in their reader. The story stayed with me on the long ride home and the troubling realization that I had little understanding of his community and his way of life in the remote, but pristine, lakes and forests of Red Lake. The distance between my home and Mathew's was only 45 miles. The distance between my understandings of his world was too vast for me to calculate.

Years later when I returned to Red Lake, trees along the forest roads that September morning were showing the first hints of autumn. I looked forward to spending my sabbatical in the same community where I began my teaching practice. I wondered about the changes that the years might have brought. I knew that the textbooks would be different because current textbooks represent a rich diversity of people and cultures that are part of a very different society than the America of 1969. As I walked the school's hallways, posters of American Indian leaders and artist Patrick Desjarlait, who grew up in Red Lake, greeted students. Classroom shelves were filled with books about Native Americans, not stories of life on Cherry Street.

The school looked as if it belonged. Still troubling, though, after all these years, are my observations that not enough of Red Lake's culture was reflected in the curriculum. Remembering a promise I made to myself after hearing Mathew's story, I have sought to learn better ways of understanding and teaching American Indian children. Thomas Peacock and Linda M. Cleary (1998) addressed the balance educators need to establish between cultural influences and effective ways of learning. Teachers are advised to learn how to bridge the richness of students' home life with school. When we listen, we hear their stories — we hear what is important to them. Hearing children's stories was important to the school counselor who lamented that she felt as if "Nobody listens to our children in this school."

I soon learned that she was a fervent advocate of a holistic approach to education that would enable these Ojibwa children to experience success as they were taught by their culture in their own school. She knew that if we listen to these children and to the voice of their culture, we would know that they are uncomfortable when called on to answer our questions. If we really listened, we would know that their culture teaches them to remain silent until they are certain that what they say is right. If we really listened, we would create cooperative, rather than competitive, opportunities for them to work together (Cleary & Peacock, 1998). If we really listened, we wise teachers would not fight but rather grow with the strong sense of community that binds American Indian people.

Sister Zimmer understood how community, traditions and oral language remain a potent influence when she asked her fifth graders to write and draw (White-Kaulaity, 2007) about powwows. The children worked in small groups sharing their stories before writing or drawing their memories. They delighted in my sincere questions, and I still cherish the photo of Joseph's bemused smile as he explained, once again, a jingle dress to me. Patiently, he sketched the metal cones sewn on dance dresses worn by women dancing a traditional powwow.

Conversant with the seminal work of Shirley Brice Heath, Sister Zimmer and the school counselor wisely coupled their understanding of how children learn with powerful cultural influences. Children were invited to talk, draw, and write about their world; thereby, linking "their ways with words" (Heath, 1983) grounded in Red Lake's strong community bonds.

Today, miles away from St. Mary's Mission School in Red Lake, just as I remember Mathew's story from forty years ago, I also remember Vicky's words in my heart: "Nobody listens to our children." I realize now, more than ever, to teach is to listen.

*Lynn Moore is Professor of Education. She became interested in how American Indian children learn best as a substitute teacher in 1969. As a college professor she returned to Red Lake to supervise CSB education majors completing clinical experiences. During her 2000 sabbatical, she completed research regarding literacy practices as well as conducting a one-day workshop for Red Lake educators. After 19 years on the faculty, she retired in December.*

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