

Leaning Over the Fence: Heritage Fair Projects as ‘Funds of Knowledge’

Lynne Wiltse

University of Alberta

This paper is a response to an article, “Creepy White Gaze: Rethinking the Diorama as a Pedagogical Activity” (Sterzuk & Mulholland, 2011), published in the Alberta Journal of Educational Research, in which Sterzuk and Mulholland critiqued a heritage fair entry, “Great Plains Indians.” I report on a school-university collaborative research project that examined the ways in which out-of-school practices and knowledges of Canadian Aboriginal students might provide these students with access to school literacy practices. Grounded in a ‘funds of knowledge’ approach, this paper presents an alternative reading, explaining how students’ linguistic and cultural resources from home and community networks were utilized to reshape school literacy practices through their involvement in a heritage fair program.

Cet article est une réponse à un autre intitulé “Creepy White Gaze: Rethinking the Diorama as a Pedagogical Activity” (Sterzuk & Mulholland, 2011), publié dans la revue Alberta Journal of Educational Research et dans lequel les auteurs ont critiqué une soumission, « Great Plains Indians » (Indiens des grandes plaines), à une fête du patrimoine. Je fais état d’un projet de recherche collaboratif (école-université) qui a examiné les façons dont les pratiques et les connaissances en dehors du contexte scolaire d’élèves autochtones canadiens pourraient leur faciliter l’accès à des pratiques scolaires en matière d’alphabétisation. Reposant sur une approche « fonds de connaissance », cet article présente une autre interprétation et explique dans quelle mesure les ressources linguistiques et culturelles acquises par les élèves à la maison et dans la communauté ont servi à remanier les pratiques scolaires en matière d’alphabétisation par le biais de leur participation à un programme des fêtes du patrimoine.

While researching a paper, I came across the article “Creepy White Gaze: Rethinking the Diorama as a Pedagogical Activity” (Sterzuk & Mulholland, 2011), published in the *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*. In their paper, Sterzuk and Mulholland critiqued a fair entry entitled “Great Plains Indians.” Their analysis centered on a photograph that had appeared in a Saskatchewan provincial teachers’ newsletter; the photograph was of a “White settler child and two White settler educators gathered around [the student’s] heritage fair entry” (p. 16). The article caught my attention as my in-progress paper was about Aboriginal students who had completed heritage fair projects as part of one of my research projects.¹ These projects were receiving a positive treatment in my paper; therefore, not surprisingly, I was curious what Sterzuk and Mulholland had to say.

In their introduction, Sterzuk and Mulholland (2011) noted that while the photograph could be seen as innocuous and inclusive, it was “actually a snapshot of the educational community’s role in the discursive production of the colonized and the colonizer” (p. 17). As a White educator

conducting research involving Aboriginal students' heritage fair projects, this touched a nerve. Doubts as to the suitability of heritage fair programs began to surface. In a well-written and well-theorized article, Sterzuk and Mullholland made excellent points regarding what is problematic about heritage fairs, and more specifically, the diorama as a pedagogical activity. Sterzuk and Mullholland felt compelled to follow up their viewing of the photo in the newsletter by writing "Creepy White Gaze;" that article, in turn, prompted me to respond. It was not that I felt the need to critique their argument or to defend heritage fair projects, but I wanted to turn the gaze in a different direction—from the White settler's "Great Plains Indians" entry to those of contemporary Aboriginal students. In this paper, I report on one part of a larger three-year study that investigated how to improve literacy learning for Aboriginal students by connecting school learning to children's out-of-school learning. I explain the study's details in brief, provide examples of heritage fair projects completed by Aboriginal students, which, I hope, offer an alternative to a 'creepy White gaze,' and conclude with a discussion of some pedagogical challenges associated with including Aboriginal content in the curriculum.

Research Context

As a classroom teacher who taught in Aboriginal communities for many years, and then as a researcher working with Aboriginal students, I am concerned that Aboriginal students are overrepresented in statistics regarding under-achievement in school. While single-factor explanations of school failure among minority children are inadequate, many researchers concur that school requires specific forms of academic language or discourse that potentially disadvantage minority students (Gee, 2004; Valdés, 2004). Various early intervention projects, such as Aboriginal Head Start programs, have resulted. However, studies show that 'at-risk' students who make gains through these early interventions often experience difficulty with academic literacies/discourse during the intermediate grades (4-7). As many of these students do not complete high school, my research targeted Aboriginal students in the intermediate grades, with a focus on literacy initiatives in the content areas. Rather than a remedial approach, this study took a different stance by stepping back from the notion that teaching and learning problems reside in the traits of students or their families, instead considering ways to merge out-of-school resources of students with school literacies. Core research questions were: 1) Which out-of-school resources and knowledges of intermediate-Grade Aboriginal students may provide these students access to school language and literacy practices? 2) In what ways can pre-service and in-service teachers be supported to create third spaces of enhanced literacy learning that build on students' familial and community?

Theoretical Perspectives

The research was grounded in sociocultural theories of learning and teaching, emphasizing the inherently social and situated nature of learning, and viewing the activity of learners as positioned within the context of practice, rather than analyzed as if it were context free (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 2003). Within a broad sociocultural framework, the study utilized third space theory, in conjunction with the concept of funds of knowledge. Curry (2007) explained that "(n)otions of funds of knowledge and the third space emerge from sociocultural approaches to education that consider learning as participation in social practices" (p. 127). The recognition that identities are multiple, fragmented and shifting, has led theorists to posit the notion of

hybridity as the 'third space' (Bhabha, 1990), enabling the appearance of new and alternative identity options (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Third space is a newly created culture characterized by hybridity, differing points of view, and negotiated agency. Drawing on hybridity theory (Bhabha, 1994), Moje et al. (2004) described third spaces as hybrid spaces where knowledges and Discourses from "the 'first space' of people's home, community and peer networks merge with the 'second space' of the Discourses they encounter in more formalized institutions such as work, school, or church" (Gee, 1996, p. 41). The authors outlined three ways in which third spaces tend to be conceptualized in education: as bridge building between Discourses often marginalized in school to the learning of academic knowledges (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez & Chiu, 1999); as a way of crossing boundaries to succeed in different discourse communities (Luke, 1995; New London Group, 1996); and as a space of cultural and social change where the Discourses from home and school will produce new forms of learning (Barton, 2001; Moje, 2000). My research extended these views of third space in its consideration of how Aboriginal students' funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992) from home and community networks can be utilized to reshape school literacy practices.

Funds of knowledge are "the essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge that households use to survive, to get ahead, or to thrive" (Moll & Greenberg, 1990, p. 321). Given my long-standing interest in the education of language minority students, I was encouraged by approaches that view diversity as a resource rather than a deficit (Schechter & Cummins, 2003), and accordingly, open up literacy pedagogy to a wider range of learning and teaching. This is pertinent to my study as research suggests many school literacy practices constrain access to school literacy practices, particularly for students from minority backgrounds (Heath, 1983; Toohey, 2000; Wallace, 2005; Wiltse, 2006).

Research Methods

In establishing a methodological framework for this qualitative study, I drew on the work of educational researchers who have used ethnographic studies to understand children's language and literacy practices, both in school (Maybin, 2006; Toohey, 2000; Wallace, 2005) and out of school (Schultz & Hull, 2002; Long, Peck, & Baskins, 2002). The study utilized ethnographic research methods and employed a student-as-ethnographer approach as a way to negotiate the politics of researching 'Other people's children' (Delpit, 1995). Because "educational ethnographers work within a legacy of racism and colonialism that makes our research suspect" (Goldstein, 2002, p. 52), community involvement was a crucial aspect of the research. The study was rooted in my belief that—if educational research is to inform classroom practice—there must be closer partnerships between universities and schools; therefore, the project was a school-university collaboration, involving three interconnected groups of research participants: 1) a teacher researcher study group of teachers who taught at the intermediate grade level (4-7); 2) Aboriginal students from the participating teachers' classes (many of whom struggled with academic literacies); 3) pre-service teachers in my language and literacy curriculum classes who were partnered with students in participating teachers' classes. Data sources included field notes from classroom observations artifacts, students' assignments and transcripts from audiotaped teacher researcher meetings, and semi-structured interviews of select school students and pre-service teachers.

I conducted the research in accordance with Tri-Council guidelines for conducting research with human subjects. As I had three different groups of research participants, applying for ethics

approval involved three different stages; permission to work with the teacher-researchers was granted in the first stage of the study (during the first term), and ethics approval for the pre-service teachers and the school students was approved for the second stage of the study (during the second term). The teacher group remained constant over the course of the study; however, as the groups of pre-service teachers and the students changed, permission for these groups of research participants was sought again during the second year of the study. The names of all participants, schools, and locations are pseudonyms.

The six teachers in the research group met monthly to explore pertinent sociocultural literature and to discuss related classroom practice. Three of the teachers taught at a band-operated school on a nearby First Nations reserve, the other three taught at 'inner city' public schools with significant numbers of Aboriginal students. During the first term of the study, we made literacy partnership plans between the school students and the pre-service teachers that would begin in the second term. It was essential to the study that teacher input decided the shape of the literacy initiatives, and was not imposed by me. As I taught two classes of pre-service teachers, my intention was that the students of two of the teachers would be involved in the first year of the study. A Grade 5 teacher, who taught for the local school district, requested support for the science fair projects that her students would be undertaking in the winter term. Another Grade 5 teacher, from the band-operated school, wanted the mentorship to center on her students' heritage fair projects. As both these projects were grounded in content area literacy, I proceeded with plans to match my classes with either of these classes. Due to its focus, this paper will focus only on the heritage fair collaboration. The teachers and pre-service teachers considered this partnership so successful during the first year of the study, that in the second year, all three of the teachers at the band-operated school involved their students in this part of the research project.

The Heritage Fair Projects

The partnerships between the students and pre-service teachers centered on a heritage fair program known as *Historica*, a multi-media educational program developed to increase awareness and interest in Canadian history, unique community events, and/or family culture. Students undertake research when developing their projects and present their completed displays at school, regional and/or provincial fairs. The students who participated in this program attended Wolfwood School, operated by the local First Nations band.² Just a few years old at the time of the study, the school followed the provincial Ministry of Education curriculum, in addition to offering programming in Aboriginal language, history and culture. The school was situated next to the former residential school, which now houses band offices and a museum on the history of residential schooling; many of the students had relatives who had attended the residential school.

The pre-service teachers involved in the study were education students at a small primarily undergraduate university; looking out our classroom window, we could see both buildings across the river that wound its way through the valley. My students were paired with the children as part of a case-study assignment "that place[d] the teacher-education student in the role of researcher, investigating pedagogically relevant questions" (Sleeter, 2005, xii). Visits were made to the school during course time for partners to meet; through the one-to-one mentorship, the children received support with research, data collection, writing and visual representation, and my students had the opportunity to learn about children's language and

literacy practices in a situated approach.

Heritage fair projects were not part of my research plan—this emphasis came about as part of the collaborative research. However, I admit to being eager when the choice was made by one of the teachers. I was first introduced to fair projects when I began my job as a teacher educator, and soon came to think of them as the social studies equivalent to science fair projects. Before attending graduate school, I spent years teaching in small Aboriginal communities in British Columbia; social studies had been my favourite subject to teach and so not surprisingly, I was intrigued. My last teaching position was at a small band-operated school with strong community involvement, not unlike Wolfwood School (except we were housed in a former residential school) and my students were the same age as the children who participated in the research project. During the study, I often found myself thinking about my former students, wishing I had been aware of heritage fair programs at the time. I would love to have had them take part; I can imagine some of the projects they may have undertaken.

As keen as I was about the heritage fair program, and although many of the participants in my study were enthusiastic about their projects, I was simultaneously aware that the projects were no panacea. Not all participants had chosen projects in which they were fully engaged, and various problems accompanied the actual *doing* of these projects in the classroom. For example, in some cases, attendance issues affected project completion, as well as the continuity of the partnerships. However, many of the students selected topics which enabled them to draw on their funds of knowledge to examine the cultural and linguistic practices that were part of their homes and communities (Egan-Robertson & Bloome, 1998).

Additionally, I was concerned that I not sound like an advocate of a 'feast and festivals approach' to multicultural education in the paper I was writing. I was in this frame of mind when I came across Sterzuk and Mulholland's (2011) article; not surprisingly, their argument caused me to examine these projects more critically than I had previously done. The result is this paper. While their article speaks to one heritage fair project, it does not consider Aboriginal students who may undertake heritage fair projects, nor does it make any mention of these students in Saskatchewan (or Canadian) classrooms; this paper attempts to broaden the conversation.

More than a 'Creepy White Gaze'

Early in their paper, Sterzuk and Mulholland (2011) described the content of a problematic photo in detail, and emphasized the 'diorama' aspect of a "Great Plains Indians" heritage fair project. Not all heritage fair projects, which Sterzuk and Mulholland explained were typically limited to a flat surface on a table surrounded by a three-panel board, are best described as a diorama—a three-dimensional scene in miniature. For that reason, I have chosen to begin my response with an example from my study that fits this description, at least to a degree.

In a student's heritage fair project entitled "Jingle Dress Dancing," Karina explored the history and the practice of jingle dress dancing. The jingle dress dance, characterized by rows of metal cones that make a jingling sound, is a women's powwow dance, which originated from a dream among the Ojibwe people around 1900. At first glance, her project appears not unlike the "Great Plains Indians" example. In addition to photos of jingle dress dancers and written information (for example, poems, interview questions and answers, and sections on the spiritual, physical and mental aspects of jingle dress dancing), Karina's heritage fair board includes a small diorama of two jingle dress dancers—paper models dressed in regalia. Unlike

the example in problematic photo, which “reproduces the perennial idea of the Indian as frozen in static pre-contact history” (Sterzuk & Mulholland, 2011, p. 22), Karina’s topic is anything but suspended in time; on the contrary, it speaks to her present-day life.

In an interview, Karina explained why she chose the topic: “I picked this topic because I myself am a jingle dress dancer. I’ve been dancing at powwows since I was five, so I wanted to find more information on the jingle dress with this project.” Karina eagerly explained to me what she had learned about the jingle dress, also known as the healing dress. Below is an excerpt from a longer description of what she learned while researching her project:

It is a healing dress because there’s a story about it. There was a man who was very ill, he was gonna die and he was half asleep and half awake. Then he had a vision about this girl showing him a dress and it was like the best dress that he’d ever seen. She showed him how to make the dress and how to sing the songs and how to dance. After that he showed his granddaughters and they all just put it on and they all danced around him and then after the fourth round his sickness was broken...And, it’s called a jingle dress because of the tobacco lids and whenever you hear that it’s like a ring going on a tin thing.

As a powwow dancer herself, Karina’s research topic holds personal and contemporary significance. When asked what she was able to bring into the project from her personal interest in jingle dress dancing, Karina explained: “Well, I wrote a paragraph about princesses because I myself am a princess. They call that royalty. They have junior princesses and senior princesses and I’m a junior princess.” This explanation led to a discussion of Karina’s responsibilities as a junior princess. “My responsibility is I have to go to as much powwows as I can and I have to sell raffle tickets, make money for the powwow committee. And, when I put my crown on I have to be all proud.”

Perhaps more powerful than the pride that comes with the role, is the way that Karina feels when she dances: “When I dance it makes me feel good since I know I’m gonna dance for the people. It’s like, not a competition to me, it’s just the way I dance.” The way in which jingle dancing is such a part of Karina’s life calls to mind the children’s picture book, *Jingle Dancer* (Smith, 2000), about a girl who dreams of jingle dancing like her grandma. In *Unsettling Narratives: Postcolonial Readings of Children’s Literature*, Bradford (2007) discusses the way in which the story is shaped by Native American narrative traditions:

What distinguishes *Jingle Dancer* from the vast majority of settler society texts is that it treats as normal and natural Jenna’s aspirations and the values of her culture. In this way, it offers Native readers the kind of narrative subjectivity taken for granted by the white children who are the implied readers of most children’s literature, while positioning non-Indigenous readers as outsiders to a culture that they may imaginatively comprehend but that is marked by difference. (pp. 45-46)

Had I known then about the book, I would have introduced it to Karina; I think this fictionalized account could have informed her research. Sterzuk and Mulholland (2011) made the pertinent observation that non-Western systems of beliefs are often demoted to mythology, “as students from kindergarten to high school are engaged in the study of various mythologies as literature” (p. 21). While this is certainly true, *Jingle Dancer* (2000) is one of many texts authored by Aboriginal authors that can offer alternative readings—for Aboriginal and settler students alike.

Given its significance in the “English colonial fiction of indigenous peoples” (Seed, 207, p.

19), Sterzuk and Mulholland (2011) accorded particular attention to one of most common representations of the Indian as frozen in time, the “image of the prehistoric Aboriginal as hunter” (p. 23). Sterzuk and Mulholland contended that, although the boy who made the diorama might have been young, his project “represents the long tradition of demoting Indigenous peoples to the primitive state of the hunter and gatherer” (p. 23). I cannot argue this picture “is ingrained in the White settler story of the European invasion of North America” (p. 23), as I can easily summon the image they describe. However, the heritage fair project board, “Places to Hunt,” completed by another one of the students in my research project, soon replaces it.

Darius, a 10-year-old boy in Grade 5, had recently moved from a small and isolated Aboriginal community in the northern part of the province; he completed his project on hunting there. This written text, prominently featured on the poster board for his heritage fair project alongside photos of a gun and a hunter displaying his mule deer, describes a topic not only of personal passion, but also of family tradition.

Places to Hunt by Darius

I am from Fort Wilson, and our traditional hunting places are located at Seven Mile Lake Creek and Waskat Lake. Fort Wilson is located north of Jackpines. My people are from the Klinchuk Nation. I am the third generation of hunters. When I hunt with my Grandpa and Uncle It makes me feel really cool. They teach me how to kill a beaver and elk, they show me how to skin the animals. These two places are where we do most of our hunting and kill animals. We hunt so we can feed our family with the meat. We make dried meat with the moose we kill. We also hunt black bear for the hide, fat and claws; the elders like to eat them. There are a lot of hunters in the Klinchuk Nation. Men do the hunting while women do the cleaning and cut up the meat.

While Sterzuk and Mulholland (2011) made their case about the “Great Plains Indians” project, for Darius—from a family of contemporary Aboriginal hunters—the object of study is anything but prehistoric:

I picked my project on hunting Fort Wilson because it's part of my tradition. It's one of the things I mostly love to do. You can hunt moose, elk, black bear and white tailed deer. I love it 'cause, like, you learn how to aim and shoot and like when you're older you could teach your kids. My grandfather and my uncle taught me. And, you can make coats, gloves and stuff with their hide. My great-grandma likes to do it. She makes jackets. Well, now she's a little bit too old to make them.

For a boy who, according to his teacher, was rarely engaged in school literacies during the first year at his new school, Darius' investment in his project was encouraging. The example is also a powerful illustration of an Aboriginal family that, counter to existing perceptions, has rich funds of knowledge, “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills” from which they draw “for household or individual functioning and well-being” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133). Given that negative views of Aboriginal students and their families are not uncommon in school and wider societal contexts, this example is important. In this regard, a parallel can be made to the seminal study of household and classroom practices within working-class, Mexican communities living in Arizona (Moll et al., 1992). The authors noted that a funds of knowledge perspective “contrasts sharply with prevailing and accepted perceptions of working-class families as somehow disorganized socially and deficient intellectually” (p. 134).

The information portrayed in “Places to Hunt” suggests that funds of knowledge represent a “positive (and we argue, realistic) view of households as containing ample cultural and cognitive resources with great, potential utility for classroom instruction” (p. 134). Due to space constraints, I cannot elaborate, but the example of Darius made for a strong case as to how “what students have learned at home [can be used] as a scaffold for new learning” (Amanti, 2005, p. 135).

In addition to describing what is in the “Great Plains Indians” photograph, Sterzuk and Mulholland (2011) also asked what was *not* there, noting that no effort to explore history had been made. A number of the students at Wolfwood School did explore history through their projects; however, all delved into post-contact topics of personal significance. For example, Shanta researched the Echo mask that had been in her grandfather’s family before being confiscated during a potlatch in 1921, and then exhibited at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. A second student, Bailey, explored the question of the appropriation of her First Nations band’s land by the provincial hydro company in her project, “Clinton: Little Town, Big History.” She explained the significance of Clinton in an interview, sharing how “My life is connected to the topic of Clinton because my band lived there. I wanted to know more about why we were relocated and why we aren’t up there anymore. It was because of Hydro—they expropriated our land, so forcing us out and moving us to Whispering Pines.” And, for her heritage fair project, aptly entitled “Locked up Indians,” with a backdrop of bars on her project board, Philipa interviewed her paternal and maternal grandmothers about their experiences in two different Indian residential schools in the interior of BC. From interviewing her grandmothers, Philipa learned “that you had to cook and clean and you were separated from your parents and they punished you for being different. They weren’t allowed to speak their native language.” Sterzuk and Mulholland (2011) addressed this topic of language in the “Great Plains Indian” photo example, noting that “the titles and text are written in English, which is the most obvious representation of colonization. The diorama makes no reference to the languages lost, recovered, or in use of Indigenous peoples” (p. 24).

Admittedly, the projects in my study were completed in English as well. However, the students were in a school where they were learning their traditional language, regrettably, for most, as a second language, in large part due to residential schooling. And, while none of the projects were completed in an indigenous language, a number included vocabulary and select information in the local language.³ Philipa’s was not the only project that addressed the topic of residential schooling; as Wolfwood School was situated right next to the former residential school, there was a concrete reminder close at hand, as well as the lingering effects of “education systems that have attempted to forcibly assimilate Indigenous peoples to colonial modes have generated new, multi-generational oppression and traumas” (Battiste, 2013, p. 136).

In their critique, Sterzuk and Mulholland (2011) suggested that “the allure of the activity of diorama construction lies in its affinity to a particular construction of childhood. Like doll houses, dioramas imitate a version of adult life free of complexity while inviting imaginative play” (p. 22). I can relate to that. As an adult, they still appeal to me and I have fond memories of some of my students’ dioramas from my classroom teaching days. However, rather than being free of complexity, the topics mentioned here have the potential to be considered ‘difficult knowledge’, which Pitt and Britzman (2006) argued may represent “narratives of historical traumas such as genocide, slavery, and forms of social hatred and questions of equity, democracy and human rights” (p. 379). These examples are not “random childish objects assembled in a child’s version of the world” (Sterzuk & Mulholland, 2011, p. 21) as in the “Great

Plains Indians” diorama; rather, they characterize children trying to make sense of a complex world.

These three projects also involved aspects of settlement. In a radio broadcast, Aboriginal journalist Wab Kinew contended that “reconciliation with Native People is still the most pressing social justice issue Canada faces” (White, 2013). Evidence of this can be seen in these students’ projects. The Echo mask was repatriated in 1979 to a cultural centre in Alert Bay, but the fight for other Aboriginal masks and additional artifacts—seized after potlatches became illegal in Canada in 1884—continues, along with the many “legal and moral battles to reclaim stolen, sacred, and as well as prosaic, artefacts collected by explorers during times of colonial expansion” (Sterzuk & Mulholland, 2011, p. 21).

Clearly, the Aboriginal land claim process in Canada is far from complete and will no doubt continue far into the future. For Bailey, who has a burning desire to understand what happened to her people and their traditional lands, the past is a pressing issue, as seen in this excerpt from her project journal:

Learning about history keeps us from losing a lot of important things. Doing the heritage fair project keeps history alive instead of forgetting about things that are way back and you don’t even know about it because it’s been lost and gone for so long.

The legacy of the residential school system lives on in contemporary Aboriginal communities. Battiste (2013) noted that “evidence of the effects of forced education of Indigenous peoples in residential schools...are well known to be a substantial contributor to the current high level of suicide, substance abuse, incarcerations, children in care, and family violence” (p. 136). The following interview excerpt demonstrates these long-term effects as Philipa described her most powerful learning from the heritage fair project:

Well, after I interviewed one of my grandmas over the phone she cried and my mom says that I’m really lucky ’cause she doesn’t really talk to people or open up about it that much. So I was real lucky to get to interview her.

The timing of writing this paper coincided with the final event for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Residential Schooling (TRC) in Edmonton. I had the privilege of attending a number of the events; words to adequately express the impact of bearing witness to these proceedings fail me. One of the goals of the TRC, posted on their website, is to “acknowledge Residential School experiences, impacts and consequences” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2014). Part of this process must be the telling of the stories, however difficult, so that healing can begin. Until she began to work on her project, Philipa “didn’t think residential school was that big of a deal but as soon as I chose it my dad’s like, wow.” She explained that the reason for her dad’s ‘wow’ was the silence that had long surrounded the topic. Philipa learned that residential schooling was indeed a ‘big deal’ and her project started the conversation towards healing in her family.

Discussion

I begin this discussion by following up on Sterzuk and Mulholland’s (2011) point that the “Great Plains Indians” photograph was “arguably published as a celebration of diversity or as proof of

inclusion of Aboriginal content in the curriculum” (p. 16). This is no small concern. Sterzuk and Mulholland explained that in “discussions of this image over the past year, we have encountered a range of comments and questions including the frequent—you’re damned if you do and you’re damned if you’re don’t” (p. 25). From conversations with in-service and pre-service teachers over many years, I am not surprised. Clearly, this is a sensitive topic. Dion (2007) suggested that while teachers are being encouraged to include Aboriginal content across the curriculum, most “teachers, like the majority of Canadians, know little about Aboriginal people, history, and culture” (p. 330); rather their understanding is informed by dominant discourses (Schick & St. Denis, 2005). While heritage fair projects create the “possibility of reinforcing relations of domination” (Schick & St. Denis, 2005, p. 295), as in the “Great Plains Indians” example, I propose that the examples provided here show that there are other possibilities.

I share Sterzuk and Mulholland’s (2011) concern that “the study of pre-contact Indigenous cultures remains the preferred point of entry for learning about First Nations and Métis peoples” (p. 16). In a chapter entitled *Beyond a Beads and Feathers Approach*, Amanti (2005) pointed out that in most multicultural curricula currently taught in public schools, culture is portrayed as homogenous and frozen in time, confirming Sterzuk and Mulholland’s point. At the same time, they stressed that educators need to be aware that all cultures change over time. In their analysis of funds of knowledge, Marshall and Toohey (2010) explained that Moll and his colleagues (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) rejected “essentializing discourses that might limit ideas about funds of knowledge to static, ahistorical conceptions of ‘heritage knowledge’ or culture” (p. 222). And, in a chapter that addresses ways to recover an Aboriginal pedagogy, Wheaton (1999) noted that “(s)tudents need to be able to see how and why history is relevant to them and people who experienced it first hand” (p. 164).

Because the research participants were examining aspects of historical significance related to their own lives, they were able to do just that. I am not going to speculate as to whether Sterzuk and Mulholland would consider heritage fair projects conducted by settler students that examined pre-contact history of indigenous peoples any ‘less creepy,’ but I will suggest that there are many contemporary Aboriginal issues for students to examine.

What Sterzuk and Mulholland (2011) had to say about museums, though, caused me to query the projects in a new light. The authors asserted that “most heritage fair displays mimic traditional forms of representation developed and practiced in Western museums from the 18th century forward” (p. 22). Reading this critique made me question the appropriateness of this form of representation, in particular for the students who were part of my study. I agree that, in some respects, the projects of the research participants are typical of what Archibald (2008) referred to as the ‘museum and history’ approach in elementary classrooms. Sterzuk and Mulholland (2011) presented their assessment of traditional museums (visitors viewed displays, read the captions, and were told what to think about the material culture artefacts presented) in contrast to contemporary museums that “often assume a stance that results in an interactive effort to construct knowledge with the viewer” (p. 22).

While the Grades 4-6 students who completed heritage fair projects at Wolfwood School participated in the judging component of the district program—and a number of the students went on to participate in regional and provincial fairs—the projects were also integral to the school and community. Before the judging, there was an afternoon devoted to sharing the projects which had been set up in the gym where the primary students, along with their teachers as well as family members, had the opportunity to not only view the exhibits, but to hear the students speak about their projects and to ask questions. I can readily recall my feelings of

excitement as the projects were shared, and while I was not thinking this way at the time, in recollection, interactivity and knowledge construction were clearly evident. In addition to attending this event, family and community were involved in many aspects of the projects, ranging from suggesting topics, being interviewed by students, offering a technology workshop, and providing artefacts. A funds of knowledge perspective “acknowledges that minority children, like their majority classmates, have participated in social practices in their families and communities, and it urges schools and teachers to connect school learning to children’s out-of-school learning” (Marshall & Toohey, 2010, pp. 221-222). From where I was positioned, the heritage fair projects exemplified this approach.

Reflection

When I read the Sterzuk and Mulholland’s (2011) comment that “the boy in the image, then, not only embodies the gaze, but manifests the entitlement of the male White settler in a colonial society” (p. 20), I accept that I see less than Sterzuk and Mulholland. Perhaps this is because my knowledge of gaze theory is admittedly limited. In any case, as Aboriginal students completed the projects in my study, the gaze of the White male was absent. However, as I reflect on my study, in light of Sterzuk and Mullholland’s paper, I recognize a White gaze—mine. I acknowledge that gaze theory could inform my theorizing of this study, albeit in retrospect. Referring to the photo, Sterzuk and Mulholland noted that “there is more to the image than simply the White settler child’s gaze on his creation. Present in the image, but not visible, is the White settler educational community that shares in the spectatorship...permit[ing] thousands of teachers to share in the spectatorship, voyeurism, and objectification of the other” (pp. 19-20). In the writing of this paper (and on numerous other occasions), I have gazed on the school students’ heritage fair photos that I took at the school, as well as at the regional fair, causing me to question my own “complicity in the devaluation of First Nations peoples” (Battiste, 2013, p. 177). Was this a factor? I expect I will never again look at these photos in the same way, and I will be more observant of my gaze in the future.

Sterzuk and Mulholland (2011) offer a few snapshots of their own, which they feel better represent the history of Saskatchewan. Two of these snapshots are particularly germane to this paper. The first is of “classrooms of White settler children studying a static, historical version of settlement” (p. 26). Especially given the significant and growing population of Aboriginal students in Saskatchewan, I wondered why there was no mention of Aboriginal students in Sterzuk and Mulholland’s argument. I have tried to bring them into the picture, so to speak, in this paper. The other snapshot that relates to this paper is that of “a faculty of education with classes comprising largely White settler students taught primarily by White professors” (pp. 25-26). I certainly recognize myself in this picture. In this paper, I have focused on some of the Aboriginal students who were in my study; here I will mention briefly the pre-service teacher component of the research.

Admittedly, my class was comprised largely (though not only) of White pre-service teachers, taught by a White professor. While there were notable exceptions, a number of the pre-service teachers had stereotypic ideas of Aboriginal students and their families, while others lacked an understanding of the historical and contemporary realities of Aboriginal communities. For example, one pre-service teacher from northern Saskatchewan explained how her personal biography left her with preconceived notions about Aboriginal students that were at odds with the student with whom she was matched for the project:

I grew up with that idea that Aboriginal people are poor, and they're less educated. Unfortunately, that inhibited my idea of who Aboriginal children were. My partner literally showed this to be quite false. She was well versed, she didn't have a language barrier, and she had traveled to many places I have never seen. It changed who I was.

She went on to say that the project will “change my perspective and my teaching as well because I will not come into the classroom with such a low expectation or a low understanding of Aboriginal students.”

This case is but one example from the study findings which suggest that an engagement with school students from Aboriginal backgrounds may offer an opportunity for pre-service teachers to begin to understand how “learning to teach means coming to terms with particular orientations toward knowledge, power and identity” (Britzman, 2003, p. 33). Because I agree with Battiste's (2013) point of view that “each educator has a role, if not a responsibility, in changing her own and her students' conceptions about First Nations students, their heritage and their contributions to society” (p. 177), I was determined to include my pre-service teachers in the research project by involving them in inquiry-based projects investigating learning and teaching in minority students' communities (Chavajay, Angelillo, & Pease-Alvarez, 2005; Schecter, Solomon, & Kittmer, 2003; Solomon, Manoukian, & Clarke, 2005).

Conclusion

In closing, I turn my attention to a Fischer Guy's (2014) *Globe and Mail* review of Aboriginal author Richard Wagamese's latest book, *Medicine Walk*. Drawing on a recent conversation between Richard Wagamese, Shelagh Rogers, and Joseph Boyden, Fischer Guy noted that throughout Wagamese's writing career—as both a journalist and as a novelist—“he'd sought clarity and connection between native people and settlers” (p. R12). In his words from that conversation:

The story of Canada is the story of her relationship with native people. If we lean over the back fence and share part of that story with the person on the other side of the fence, we bring each other closer. (p. R12)

The words of Richard Wagamese made me realize that this paper is my attempt to ‘lean over the back fence’ and share a piece of the story which I hope will move the conversation forward—perhaps in different directions than the conversation sparked by the photo in the newsletter.

In the conclusion to their article, Sterzuk and Mulholland (2011) explained that their intent was not to propose easy answers to the problems they present; rather, they “offer[ed] a description of the condition of relations between the colonizer and the colonized in Saskatchewan schools. Until the situation is acknowledged widely, any hope of disruption seems futile” (pp. 25- 26). I have no easy answers either, and know that there are none. I agree that “colonial discourses are at work in present-day Saskatchewan schools and the broader school community” (p. 25) as they operate in British Columbia where the research for this study was conducted and in Alberta where I live and work, as well as in the rest of the country. However, I am not sure I agree with Sterzuk and Mulholland's assessment of the circumstances. As a White professor teaching mainly White pre-service teachers, I still hope that education can play a role

in seeing that the situation is not only acknowledged, but disrupted, even slightly.

Dion (2009), a First Nations researcher and teacher-educator from Ontario suggested “that accomplishing change calls for a project that will interrupt the dominant discourse and offer teachers and students alternative ways of knowing” (p. 65). As an exemplar, Dion provided a description of *Braiding Histories*, a writing project about the life stories of First Nations people, “situated within a field of theoretical work concerned with relations of pedagogy, relations of power, and how people come to know what they know within the constraints of specific cultural and social forms” (p. 65). It strikes me that dialogue is crucial in how we come to know what we know, and that leaning over the fence is needed to disrupt the “long history of how Aboriginal people have been positioned in relation to non-Aboriginal people” (p. 65).

In this regard, Wagamese furthers his comments about native-settler relations: “To be Indian in Canada today is to learn from history so it is never repeated” (Wagamese, 2013). These words, so oft heard as perhaps to have become a cliché for some, called to mind one of the heritage fair projects undertaken by two Grade 4 students at Wolfwood School, on the internment of Japanese Canadians during WWII. In the course of their research, Grant and his partner discovered connections between Japanese internment camps and residential schooling. I was able to pursue this in an interview with Grant:

Learning about the internment camp reminded me of when my great grandpa went to residential school in Kamloops when he was a kid. They (the Japanese) were taken away from their homes ‘cause the government thought they were being a threat to them.

I asked Grant what difference students learning about the past could make to life today. His response: “If you bring stuff from the past to the future more people learn about it. And, in the future, they won’t do the wrong things again.” The heritage fair projects I have featured in this paper are more than a “celebration of diversity or proof of inclusion of Aboriginal content in the curriculum” (Sterzuk & Mulholland, 2011, p.16); they are part of these students’ earnest efforts to ensure that perhaps history will not repeat itself on their watch. In summary, I trust that my paper has made the point that heritage fairs need to be considered from a variety of perspectives—educators, students, parents, and researchers—if we are to gauge their potential educational value.

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Notes

¹ The authors draw on gaze and colonial theory to conduct their analysis; for a detailed account of these theoretical perspectives, please see Sterzuk and Mulholland (2011).

² In this paper, I use the term Aboriginal, which is inclusive of the Inuit, First Nations (formerly Indian), and Métis peoples of Canada, in a general sense. At other times, I use the term that is most appropriate for the particular context that I am addressing (i.e. First Nations or Indian).

³ Although specificity is of significance here, to ensure anonymity, the particular Aboriginal language, history and culture taught will remain unnamed.

Lynne Wiltse is an Associate Professor in the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta. She teaches courses in the areas of language and literacy and children's literature. Her research interests include minority language education, literacy pedagogy, multicultural children's literature, sociocultural theory, teacher education and qualitative methodologies.