Iseechige mina, Planned Actions: Connection to the Process

Effective teachers foster learning environments that connect Indigenous students to the process of learning in class. Many Indigenous students approach school as a colonizing institution of exclusion, discrimination, and imposed submission to authority. Based on their grandparents’ or parents’ negative experiences, the experiences of their older siblings, or their own past experiences with school, Indigenous students are often closed to or resist the teaching and learning process. As we have seen, Nehinuw learning environments balance the self-determination of the individual, the small group, and the larger collective. Since the Nehinuw view of life (pimatisiwin) is based on movement, learning environments are often active, experiential, or take place in context. Effective teachers structure their teaching to develop student agency and self-determination. They adapt their teaching to address the issues of colonization and ongoing racism and the effects these issues have on the Indigenous students’ past skill development. They respond to students’ progress and interests, make accommodations for the characteristics of Indigenous learners, and use a variety of approaches that build on their own strengths and passions and the gifts of their students.

Some of these aspects are evident in Monica Goulet’s story of teaching in racially mixed urban schools. Monica’s story clearly demonstrates her use of the features of Category 1 and Category 2 as she shows students that she genuinely cares for them and creates a climate for open sharing in her teaching through the use of the talking circle. As mentioned in other teachers’ stories, the talking circle connects students to the process of learning to achieve holistic
goals such as the social, emotional, spiritual, and academic development of students.

Standing Up to Open Space for Student Voices

*Monica Goulet*

It has been observed that one’s approach in education is profoundly influenced by experiences and world view. As a Métis woman of Cree, Saulteaux, and French ancestry from the community of Cumberland House, I have many experiences that have shaped my approach to teaching.

First of all, I had one of the best teachers in Grade 1. Her name was Miss Libby Newell. She made me feel special and recognized my eagerness to learn. I recall one day I asked her if I could share my love for the Beatles’ music with the class. She agreed, and after recess, I proudly went up to the front of the class and proceeded to dance and sing, “She Loves You.” In that moment of song and dance, she encouraged me to be me. When I became a classroom teacher and referred to my students as “my boys and my girls,” that sense of belonging – of familial and community connection I had experienced in Miss Libby’s classroom – was what I wanted to replicate. Although I had dropped out of high school, as a

Talking circle in Miss Bley’s Grade 5/6 Class, St. Mary’s Wellness and Education Centre, Saskatoon – Dylan Morrissette and Monica Goulet.  
*Photo by Keith Goulet.*
young adult, I took upgrading to acquire an adult Grade 12. I was fortunate to be admitted to the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP). At that time, I also overcame an addiction to alcohol. When I was seventeen, I had heard a speaker say, "If you're going to lead your people, you're going to have to do it sober." In a way, teaching is about leading and I realized I wanted to set a good example for my students.

My first teaching job was in an urban high school as the first and only Aboriginal teacher. One memorable event from that school happened when I was on noon-hour supervision by the gym in the hallway. All of a sudden, Wesley, one of my Grade 9 students – probably ninety-five pounds – came running out of the locker rooms with the wrestling coach, Mr. Jones [a pseudonym] chasing after him. His gigantic strides were no match for my little boy. The coach grabbed him by his shirt collar on the front of his neck, lifted him off the ground, and proceeded to bash his head into one of the metal lockers. His head bounced off the locker as I watched in horror. Mr. Jones's anger was so visceral that I could see his veins bulging on his neck and his face was red with rage. My little Grade 9 boy, pumped with adrenaline, got away and began to rush down the hallway. As I gathered my thoughts and emotions, I asked, "What did you do that was so bad?" No sooner had I said this, I realized it was a dumb question. I said, "I don't care what you've done. Mr. Jones had no right to treat you like that." He retorted, "I don't give a [expletive], I'm getting out of this [expletive] school and I ain't comin' back." As he rushed to his locker, I ran to keep up with him. I knew that if he left, that would be the last I would see of him. Luckily, one of my other students was lounging on a table by the lockers, so I said, "Help me keep Wesley here." So he helped me to physically restrain Wesley from leaving. I asked Wesley to look me in the eye and I repeated, "I don't care what you've done. Mr. Jones had no right to do that to you and I am going to help you." That's when his eyes started to tear up. I took him by the hand and I led him downstairs. As we walked to the main office, I saw Mr. Jones pacing in front of the gym wondering what I was about to do. With my boy's hand in mine, I looked Mr. Jones square in the eye and continued walking. Once in the office, I shared with the vice-principal what I had observed. He said, "I'll take it from here." Later, I was summoned to the office and after thanking me and assuring me violence was not condoned and that I had done the right thing, the principal wanted me to know the incident was not race related. Wesley was Aboriginal and the coach was white.
I had a very difficult time with most of my fellow teachers after that. Fortunately, I had two really good teacher friends who helped me survive. The upside was that my students realized their learning and well-being was my primary concern. Wesley stayed in school. The coach was transferred. In reflecting on this experience, I recognize that the strength I needed to intervene in this situation came from observing many of my relatives face challenges, stand up for themselves, and do the right thing. We were always taught to persevere and not to think we are better than anyone else. Our sense of community was modelled and cultivated from an early age.

I needed my perseverance in another school when I was given a Grade 6 class considered to be a “bad group.” Initially, I probably spent 90 percent of my time on classroom management. But one of the things I have noticed working with students, especially Aboriginal students, is that they need to have a sense of belonging. To do that, we need to establish a safe climate. At the very beginning of the year, I asked my students to assist in developing a list of guidelines for expected behaviour in the classroom, which applied to me as well. I sat down with them and we generated a list of rules. The rules most important to them were things like no name calling, no put-downs, treating one another with respect. I asked them to be specific. “What kind of put-downs are you talking about?” They didn’t want any put-downs about their size, ethnicity, or the clothing they wore. They were pretty comprehensive in their list. The agreed upon guidelines were taped on the wall so we could see them every day.

Since the students developed the rules, they had a sense of ownership for their enforcement. A situation arose when I volunteered to have two other Grade 6 boys from another class take part in a course I was teaching. These boys were two of the leaders who had given this class the reputation of being a “bad group” the previous year. In my own class, we had talked a great deal about racism and colonization as part of the social studies program. I was including Aboriginal content in my teaching when one of the visiting boys made a derogatory comment about Indians. I responded immediately by saying one of our classroom rules was that everyone was to be treated with respect. I asked him to leave and sent him to the principal’s office. I spoke to the principal about it and he was anxious for a peaceful resolution, partly because this boy’s mother was an administrator in the school system. I said I would take him back, but only if the students supported that decision, and added, “I think it’s up to the
students to determine whether they want him back in the classroom. We have a job to do and we can’t have one student coming and interfering with our learning. So it will be up to them to decide.” I went back into the classroom and said, “What do you think? Should we give this boy another chance?” The students clearly knew he had been disrespectful. They had developed the social skills and vocabulary to express their thoughts: “I don’t think we should let him back in. He was being racist,” and “We didn’t like talking in class when he was here because he would put us down.” So he had had a really negative effect on those students. With the sense of justice these kids had, they felt like they wanted him to be held accountable for his actions, but they also felt like they wanted to give him another chance. I told the principal, “This is what they have decided. We’ll let him come back in, but let him know this is his last chance. If he messes up in any way, he’s out. I’m being supported by the students in this decision.” So that student knew when he came back in, he had to behave himself, and he did. He was fine after that.

To teach an appreciation for diversity, I used group work with these students. Before I used groups, I did a presentation on “In Group” and “Out Group” dynamics and had students talk about the behaviour of cliques, which is so prevalent in school. I tried to reinforce those ideas when I did my groupings. When there was group work, rather than allowing them to always select who they were going to work with, I would say who would work with whom. In that way, they developed friendships with people they wouldn’t normally have been friends with – at least within the context of the classroom.

My primary goal as a teacher was to make the classroom a safe place for my students to fully develop to their potential. I knew I couldn’t do that alone; I needed my students to assist in the process. We rearranged the students’ desks into a circle and made use of the sharing or talking circle (which was an approved strategy in the Language Arts curriculum) four days out of the week. I had an hour designated for the circle, which we often needed, but sometimes we zipped through in fifteen minutes. Most of the time it was student-directed, although occasionally, I would set the topic, such as the thought of the day out of an affirmation book. Students shared what they wanted to talk about or brought things like a newspaper clipping to class. For example, one student brought in a clipping about Nike exploiting people from the Third World. A lot of the students were wearing Nike shoes. I had them do a written assignment on what they thought about Nike, whether it was okay to do this or not.
Then we had a talking circle. Sometimes I would have them do the
writing assignment before they participated in the circle, to develop and
reinforce writing skills. Sometimes writing helps kids collect their
thoughts. They are able to say a little bit more if they have a chance to
write it out first, as opposed to talking off the top of their head.

Another reason for the talking circle was that I wanted the students
to be fully aware that I was Aboriginal, and that the integration of First
Nations and Métis content in all subject areas was part of my job. To me,
the structure of the talking circle was a good way for students to gain an
appreciation for what it means to be Aboriginal. I made it clear at the
very beginning that the foundational objectives for the circle are that
everybody is connected, everybody matters, and everyone has a right to
be heard. Those are the underlying beliefs of the circle. The rule is that
nobody can interrupt when somebody is speaking. They have to hear
one another. In this way, you’re teaching the kids listening skills. I’ve had
teachers ask me what to do if some students talk too long and monopolize
the circle. As a teacher, you have to show leadership and respond with
appropriate guidelines. If it’s a problem, you could set a little timer for
three or four minutes, so the student knows he or she should finish and
it’s someone else’s turn to speak.

The talking circle developed speaking skills for a lot of the kids. Some
of my students were really scared to speak. When it was their turn, they
would hold the stone, fidgeting, not able to participate. I used my profes-
sional judgment and sometimes prompted them, “Talk about this, what
you wrote about,” or asked them to just say one or two things. At least if
they say something, they are developing their ability to speak. A few times
other students would get really uncomfortable or upset when some of
these kids were trying to speak. They wanted them to speak right away
and viewed them as holding up the circle. The impatient students got
somewhat rude. I chided them. “You can’t do that,” I said. “You have to
understand that for some people it’s really difficult to speak in a large
group.” When that happened I would share a personal story or talk about
somebody I knew who had a lot of difficulty. I would remind all the students
that speaking up can’t be taken for granted. That’s how I would communi-
cate my support for the person who was having difficulty speaking. I kept
reinforcing respect and understanding in the comments I made.

It takes time to develop the climate of trust needed in the circle. I
remember one boy in particular who tried to sabotage the circle by
continually interrupting or making a nasty comment when somebody
said something, I removed him from the circle and put him in the hallway because we needed to have our circle. I only had to do that twice and then he was fine. I believed he could learn how to be quiet and listen to other people. I expected that from him and I communicated that to him. I just let him know I really liked him a lot, which I did. Yes, he was disruptive, but he was also full of life and he had spirit.

I think the talking circle builds a democratic foundation where everybody has a chance to say what they think and feel. The talking circle not only develops critical and creative thinking, it builds personal and social skills, reinforcing important values of respect and sharing. Rather than being teacher-directed, it's student-directed. It allows a place for children to control the curriculum, to be in charge of what's being taught in the school. If we can meaningfully and consistently engage our students and treat everyone with dignity and respect, especially when incorporating Aboriginal content and perspectives, we can create a more equitable space for learning for all students.

Monica's story illustrates how development in each category builds on the next. In her class, she lets students know she really cares for them. Through the joint development of rules and expectations for behaviour, she builds a positive climate in which students can take part in the leadership of the class. Monica's actions demonstrate how important it is to address issues of racism and discrimination in classrooms and schools, especially with heterogeneous populations. She directly and indirectly confronts these issues in the school and in her classroom. Directly, she stands up for herself and her students when racially charged situations arise. Her passion for and belief in the importance of Indigenous content and processes for all students is evident. Her use of the talking circle developed both the individual and the group based on the values of respect and sharing.

**Category 3: Connecting to the Process**

Because our education system was developed on a European model of schooling, exacerbated through colonization, the hierarchical relationships between administrators and teachers and teachers and students are normalized. Although new forms of more cooperative and interactive modes of teaching have been incorporated, Eurocentric, hierarchical, and individualistic ways of
knowing and coming to know continue to be seen as standard. This mode of schooling is in contrast to the Nehinuw emphasis on self-determined, interactive, and collective ways of coming to know through kiskinaumasowin (teaching oneself) and kiskinaumasowin (teaching each other).

In Monica’s story we see her challenge the norm of hierarchical relational teaching through her use of group work and the talking circle, where students learn independent expression and interaction based on equity, as in kiskinaumasowin. In the talking circle, students are also developing and practising the oral tradition of storytelling. Both group work and the talking circle open space for student voice and choice in the process of learning, and flatten hierarchical structures to create more equitable participation that in turn fosters student input and responsibility. When space is created for interactivity and reciprocity in the learning process, students are able to bring themselves to the learning, developing themselves as individuals and giving expression to their cultural self.

Category 3 has five subcategories: responsive teaching, accommodating characteristics of Indigenous students, structuring for success, variety of teaching approaches, and student belief in self.

Responsive Teaching

These teachers supported student engagement in learning by being responsive to their students in planning, management, and instruction.

Being Well Planned

Teachers talked about the need to be well planned and spent a great deal of time planning and preparing. At the same time, they found quality planning a challenge when striving to integrate Indigenous content as well as meeting individual needs. Doris expressed the stress of planning:

Every teacher is not a curriculum developer. You don’t have the time. You are supposed to be looking at all the students’ needs like “[Do they have] Attention Deficit Disorder, are they this? What can I do for this one and that one?” Meanwhile you’re creating a whole curriculum [for Aboriginal students] and making sure you haven’t missed any of the skills [for that grade level].

Responding to Students

The above quote also identifies the next attribute of responsive teaching, which is responding to students’ cultures, abilities, needs, and interests. Wanda
described how she chose stories and other print material that used language her inner city students were either familiar with or would hear used. Teachers were constantly searching for good resources that reflected student interest and ability, and often prepared their own materials. They used the curriculum guides but also adjusted their expectations based on student progress and whether or not students could cover the material quickly. Decisions regarding pacing were based on students' responses to learning – that is, “on how much they're into it” (Doris).

Learning as a Shared Endeavour

Responsive teachers viewed learning as a shared endeavour and enacted *kiskinaumatowin*, where the students learned from the teacher and vice versa. Mutual trust was an important attribute of this reciprocity, because students would not ask questions or show what they didn't know to a teacher they did not trust. Teachers recognized and used the knowledge students brought with them to the class. When Kendra was teaching Grade 1, as her students took leadership, they shared their knowledge of the cultural and natural history of the reserve area around the school. 

One of the students took us to a pile of rocks. We had just finished doing a science unit on rocks. We took rocks back to the classroom and painted them ... They taught me about all the different kinds of bugs, and the different kinds of plants ... [Another time] when we were outside, one little guy said to me, “Okay, I want you to close your eyes and trust me.” So I closed my eyes and he led me by the hand. It was kind of scary because we were [at the lip of the valley]. Finally, he said, “Open up your eyes.” I looked over the valley and it was the most spectacular sight I've ever seen. He had taken me to a spot where there was a sun dance ceremony at one time. It was an old spot, and the sun dance poles were still up, with the offerings on the poles. I just stood there. Goosebumps went through my whole body. I looked at him and said, “This is just beautiful. How did you know about this?” He said, “Me and my Grandpa go up there.” ... It was a wonderful teaching experience [for me and the students] because they just felt so good that they were able to teach the teacher something.

In other classes, students worked together because they liked working with friends and could help one another as soon as one of them encountered a problem, rather than having to wait for the teacher. Sometimes, the students who were closer to the skill and vocabulary level of their fellow students were
better able to explain the concept than the teacher. Teachers did not leave
the students' teaching of others to chance. Teachers showed students how to
effectively assist other students with their work (Goulet 2005, 16).

Accommodating Characteristics of Indigenous Students

In addition to the general practices described previously, the effective teachers
in our study used practices responsive to the characteristics of Indigenous stu-
dents and classrooms.

Contemporary and Traditional Culture
Some of the ways teachers brought the culture of their students into the class
will be described in the next category. In this subcategory, the culture of the
student was used to create a learning environment that reflected the child's
identity as an Indigenous person. To achieve this, teachers sought appropri-
ate human resources from both traditional and contemporary sources. Con-
temporary role models included Indigenous authors, artists, firefighters, police
officers, dancers, and singers. Elders were welcomed to share stories and skills
with students. The Elders brought with them their traditional approach to
teaching and learning, an approach the children would be familiar with from
their early childhood prior to entering school.

Traditional activities included such things as fishing, hunting, and gathering
as well as food preparation. Participation with an Elder or in traditional
activities meant skills were learned in context in a more holistic manner. For
example, fishing requires knowledge of the methods of fishing used by the
community in their particular relationship to the land, including their water-
ways, as well as knowledge of when and where to fish. The activity of fishing
has embedded in it the values needed when fishing for sustenance. Students
whose families were involved in fishing found familiarity with the activity, so
new learning took place within a context of familiarity.

Anti-Racism
Racism is an issue common to Indigenous peoples and affects Indigenous stu-
dents. Many teachers had an anti-racism stance in their teaching to address
this reality of their students' lives. As we saw in Monica's story, she addressed
racism in the classroom and school immediately in a way that was firm but fair.
In interracial schools, student-student racism can be hidden from the teacher,
taking place in the school yard, bathrooms, and hallways. It is important to be
aware of this reality and to deal with it as a teacher.
Teachers recognized the ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and bias in the school curriculum and were aware of the effect it had on students. Wanda found an oral language program to be effective but racist in places, so she skipped or adapted the lessons in which there was any bias. In teaching the history of Indigenous people, Val used historical journals but with her own interpretation, using an Indigenous perspective of what the explorers had to say about Indigenous peoples.

Many of the teachers counteracted bias and ethnocentrism by teaching local history. Some teachers involved students in oral history by having them interview family and community members. Teachers included Indigenous or community history because they believed students needed to know the contributions of their people to the development of today’s society. Doris designed a social studies program that situated the Indigenous community history within the context of the history of the Canadian West for use with her Grade 1/2 class. In his Native studies class in a provincial school that drew students from nearby reserves, Tony dealt with real-life issues in the community by having students explore the complexity of those issues and discuss solutions in terms of “community solutions as opposed to Indian or white solutions.”

**Language Development**

Language development is important in teaching Indigenous students. Many Indigenous students, especially in the North, speak an Indigenous language as their first language or are only first or second-generation speakers of English. Others often speak a dialect of English. A focus on the development of English and Indigenous language skills was evident in all the interviews and in the school observations.

In one community where Dene was the first language of the children, Val thought it was important to develop oracy in both languages, because the children alternated between Dene and English in one conversation or “code switched when they talked.” The students responded to Val’s use of Dene in class, because often they did not understand the concept or the content of the lesson until she explained it in Dene. She also used group work extensively so that students could translate for one another. In assignments for which students used written English, she was careful to structure the assignment to make it achievable for “English as an Additional Language” students and to ensure the assignment wouldn’t overwhelm them.

Teachers were aware the structure of English is difficult to master. It is even more difficult when students are trying to learn to read in a language that is not their first. Harriet spoke Cree as her first language. Her teaching reflected
her insight into the difficulties children faced in mastering the written code of English.

I tell them how tricky some words are ... For example, the word come has an e at the end, but it doesn't have a long vowel sound, it's a short vowel. So I tell them, "That's why you really have to see the word and know it and learn it, in order to know the difference, to see the difference in it."

Teachers help Indigenous students become familiar with the structure of English in other ways, too. Wanda used manipulative strips on chart paper where words could be rearranged to practice the word order and sentence structure of English. Doris considered language issues in evaluation. She said it was important not to test for English-language ability in the other subject areas because it was not fair for students who were still learning the language.

In addition to emphasizing the structure of the language, the teachers stressed the need to develop vocabulary. This need was partly due to second-language or dialect issues, but it also had to do with the curriculum. School curriculum is designed for middle-class children with middle-class experiences. Many Indigenous children have been exposed to different kinds of experiences than those assumed by the curriculum. Teachers in our study constantly developed vocabulary and often did it in context. For example, when the Grade 5 class was preparing moose soup for a health lesson, one of the students was observed asking, "Teacher, are you going to use that thing you peel potatoes with?" The teacher replied, "A potato peeler? No, I won't use a potato peeler, just a knife" (Goulet 2005, 5). To ensure the vocabulary was appropriate for the students' language abilities, teachers also simplified the language they used in explanations.

Oracy and literacy were emphasized because many of the teachers believed reading and writing were important for success in schooling. In addition to vocabulary building, teachers developed oral language through a variety of means. They integrated the four components of language arts (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) throughout the day and in all subjects. Teachers found music and songs especially effective in teaching oral language, along with chanting, poetry, and choral reading. Children also liked to play word games with flashcards and pictures.

**Multi-Level Skill Development**

Multi-level skill development is a common characteristic in many Indigenous classrooms. Different skill levels in terms of expectations, programming, and
assignments were accommodated in this study. Resources such as books included a range of reading levels. Sometimes, teachers presented the lesson to the whole class and then differentiated the assignments or expectations. One-on-one teaching was sometimes needed to teach basic skills. Group work, with differentiated roles and expectations for individual group members, was another way to engage students whose skills were developed at different levels.

Sometimes the curriculum was restructured, as we saw in Calvin Racette’s case study of his math program, or the teacher adapted the method of instruction. In addition to direct teaching for basic skill development, Owen used peer helpers to assist students who had difficulty with math.

I get peer helpers to sit beside them … Even if they’re doing different work, as long as they are beside them physically, whenever that child needs help, they can help automatically. The ones that don’t come and see me, who aren’t finished, are the ones that are a little insecure. They might feel more comfortable talking to another student or friend rather than a teacher – because they don’t want you to think they’re stupid … When you think about it yourself and someone asks you a question out of the blue at a meeting, if you know what you’re talking about, that’s okay, but sometimes you have got to hesitate [because you don’t know], so how do little kids feel?

In addition to peer support, teachers also offered to work with children outside of class time.

**Social and Personal Problems**

In our study, effective teachers of Indigenous students made accommodations in their teaching for the social and personal problems experienced by many Indigenous children. Val reported that sometimes just being able to share was enough to “resolve a lot of issues,” so feelings were expressed and others could support the person going through difficulties. Providing the opportunity to talk about issues was not enough for some students. When students were under considerable stress and acted out in class, Fran talked about giving them a time out, then easing them back into class instruction when they were ready.

In Ida’s Grade 5 class, the behaviour of students ranged from physical withdrawal to physical outbursts of anger. A few of the girls regularly came into the class and covered their heads. One girl in particular frequently pulled the hood of her jacket forward to cover her head and face when she sat at her desk. Ida would not respond to this behaviour immediately, but let the student sit with her head covered for a while. Later, when the class was busy doing work, she
would go and talk to the girl quietly. Most of the time, but not always, the student would then join the activity of the class (Goulet 2005, 4).

Another student acted out physically when she became angry. Ida worked one-on-one with this student to help her recognize when her anger was rising. Together, they identified alternative behaviours to express anger. Although the extremity of this student’s angry outbursts subsided dramatically over the year, she continued to have occasional episodes. When one occurred, Ida made use of the other staff in the school. Sometimes a talk with the school social worker would get the student back on track. Other times, if the student was having a particularly bad day, Ida arranged for her to take work home for the afternoon so she would not disrupt the other students’ learning or be roused to further anger in her interactions with others in the school.

Structuring for Success

The second subcategory involves teacher actions to ensure that students experience success in learning. In our observations, we noticed that often, teachers started with the student’s strengths to build student confidence. Motivation was important to get students involved. The effective scaffolding of new learning contributed to success that gave students the confidence to proceed to more challenges and to take more responsibility for their own learning.

Starting with Strengths

To draw students into learning, the teachers talked about starting with the students’ strengths. A teacher needed to observe her students because all children have different preferred approaches to learning, both individually and as a group. Ida said her students were good at retaining information from oral presentations (as opposed to written text), so she often used that form of instruction. Fran said students who spoke English as a second language or dialect responded to a lesson more readily through the visual arts, because the expectation to respond in written English was threatening. When teaching English writing skills, Fran found students were more comfortable starting with poetry. She believed that since Cree was such a descriptive language, poetry drew on the linguistic strength of her Cree students.

The option to choose enhanced the students’ responsiveness. Teachers often used group or other activities for which students could choose how they would participate or what content to use. For example, the class could first choose what book to read. After they read the book, Fran had students respond to the story in groups by making booklets with text and pictures. The
group activity required students to do different tasks such as writing, editing, and illustrating. At first, students could choose the task they were most comfortable with. If after a time the students did not choose to take turns doing different tasks, the teacher would encourage them to do so. This approach allowed students who were unsure of themselves in a particular learning task to participate after another student had modelled successful completion of the task.

**Practising in a Safe Situation**

Earlier categories refer to the importance of safety in the emotional and social realms of the class. In this subcategory, safety is important for student engagement in intellectual tasks. The activities we observed in our study were often structured so that a student did not have to expose what he did not know to others. Not being exposed was particularly important in the beginning, before trust was built between the teacher and student and the individual and other students. Many teachers worked one-on-one with students, paired a student with a younger, less able student, or had students do the performance as a group so that no one person would be singled out. Older and younger students were paired as reading buddies: the older students could read without fear of being laughed at, because the younger students did not know if they were making mistakes. Wanda used a Read-Along process, where all children read together. She said, “Whether you’re a good reader or a new reader, it can and does eventually make people feel comfortable.”

The development of peer support in the social realm in Category 2 was an important aspect of drawing students into learning. When students were supportive of one another, it lessened the fear of making a mistake in front of another student. Instead of making fun of someone who was unsure, students encouraged other students to try to achieve learning goals. Peer support provided reinforcement for student achievement.

**Motivating Students**

Teachers used a variety of approaches to motivate students to participate in learning. As in earlier categories, topics of personal or cultural interest often drew students into the learning. Younger children showed enthusiasm and excitement when singing was used to support the development of reading skills (Goulet 2005, 16). With her older students, when the Tribal Council sponsored a storytelling contest, Val came up with a valued prize—a trip to the city to see Tom Jackson—to make the contest exciting and enticing instead of scary. Several teachers in this study used various rewards to motivate students.
Tony let his students choose a cultural enrichment activity (such as watching a video on Indigenous hockey players or doing an Indigenous craft) when their work for the week was done. Owen had students help other teachers and staff members in the school as a reward for completing their work.

Scaffolding Learning Experiences

Teachers used scaffolding to help students learn new information and practise new skills. When students were going to visit the band council meeting to view decision making as part of their unit on governance, Ida identified what she wanted them to look for. Both Fran and Val used scaffolding before students conducted oral community interviews. The teacher provided instructions on how to conduct an interview, and together with her students developed possible questions. Students then practised with one another before they did the interview with community members.

Emily was observed using pictures and diagrams in her teaching. When asked about it, she described how the visual representation gave her students the direction they needed to proceed in new learning situations.

[In a science lesson a student says] “I can’t draw leaves.” So I draw my square that represents the paper they are using. Then I start from the top and work my way down to the bottom. They watch me. “That wasn’t hard, Teacher.” I say, “I know you can do it too. Now it’s your turn.” … It’s a way to boost them, get them going, get them started with their work.

In Emily’s classroom, scaffolding clarified the critical features of the learning task so that students were more confident about how to proceed.

Variety of Teaching Approaches

No single teaching approach was used for every class or by every teacher to effectively connect students to the process of learning. Each teacher used a variety of approaches that included mastery learning, concrete materials, storytelling, one-on-one, the talking or sharing circle, group work, and learning that was experiential, community-based, activity-based, or land-based learning.

Each teacher used strategies that worked for her or him, the students, and the context. Wanda found math workbooks ineffective because too much time was spent deciphering the meaning and format of the workbook and not enough time was given to math experiences. On the other hand, Emily found
that sometimes worksheets settled the children if the class was having a hard day. Fran tried learning centres but they did not work, because her students were more social and preferred to work in groups. Doris used one-on-one teaching only occasionally when a student needed help, whereas Emily, who was also a Grade 1 teacher, used this strategy extensively. Although no one teacher used all of the following approaches, there was overlap among teachers in the approaches they found effective for teaching Indigenous students.

**Mastery Learning**

Teachers used mastery learning (Bloom 1971) to develop student competence in and the understanding of basic skills through review, drill, and practice. They reviewed basic skills in math and language arts daily, often using a fun approach or one in which students competed as teams or with themselves to see how much they could improve. Board work by students was frequently done, especially in math. Teachers stressed student understanding of the processes and concepts of math, along with the memorization of basic operations. Instructing students on how to recognize and understand keywords was especially important for problem solving. Owen said, “[Students have to know the] meaning of words. So we go through [the wording] so they know what the question is asking and they understand how to … do the questions. In mathematics it’s not always the answer that is as important as understanding the process.”

**Concrete Materials**

The use of concrete materials was a teaching approach that sustained engagement when they connected experience to conceptual understanding and symbolic representation. Wanda stressed, “You can’t underestimate hands-on activities – getting children to manipulate materials has been a given for me since I started teaching.” Ida explicitly taught students how to take proper care of any equipment or materials they used. Doris emphasized the need to develop student familiarity with the materials.

When I introduce the [Cuisenaire] rods I just let them play with them for the first while. Then we’ll put two rods behind our back and I’ll say, “Bring out the one that is the biggest” so we get into greater than, less than, [learning] those terminologies they need to know. I’ll ask questions like “Is three greater than one or less than one?” So we play quite a bit with [the rods] … The students have to be really familiar with them [before they use them to learn number facts].
These activities helped students connect abstract concepts and vocabulary to the concrete representations of the concepts. Conceptual understanding was developed and interacting with the materials helped students stay focused on the learning.

**Storytelling**

Teachers reported that good stories engaged Indigenous children. Oral stories were a vehicle for inclusion of cultural content into the curriculum. Wanda said that reading and telling good stories appealed to the strength of the Indigenous students in her class, since they came from a tradition of oral storytelling. Val reported that her students would sit and listen for hours to oral stories.

Yvonne used personal stories to help students learn decision making in their own lives and how to overcome problems. She used the biography of Martin Luther King to teach English and critical thinking skills, while at the same time, the story of his life was a way to prepare her students for the reality of living in a society still plagued by discrimination.

**One on One**

One-on-one teaching gives teachers insight into the individual's view of what they are learning. As Emily worked with her students, she observed their performance or directly asked them in confidence if they grasped the concept. Calvin and Owen used one-on-one to teach math because they found it was the most effective way to sustain learning in that subject area. Both had another adult working in the classroom with them: Owen had a special needs tutor, while Calvin had a teacher associate. In Owen's Grade 6 classroom, although one-on-one was the primary form of teaching math, it was combined with whole-group instruction, drill and practice, and peer tutoring. He explained his math teaching as follows:

There is nothing wrong with things like repetition and drill, in limited amounts. In my class, everybody works at one chapter at a time and they see me whenever they have a problem. That can get a little hairy sometimes. Sometimes I have to stop at page 27 and do it all on the board. But if I can talk to [a student] one-to-one, I can see if they are getting it. After 20 years of teaching, I know when [a student] says "Oh, yeah, I understand" [when they don't]. In a one-on-one situation I can say, "Let's go over it again." We go over it again and again until we understand it.
Owen’s description illustrates the time-consuming nature of one-on-one teaching and the complexity of keeping track of each student. At the same time, the effectiveness of one-on-one for both Calvin and Owen was evident because both had measurable success with Indigenous students’ achievement in math. Owen’s students, over many years, consistently placed in the top ten in the provincial math competition. Calvin’s students successfully passed the Grade 10 math course that most Indigenous students had failed in past years.

Talking or Sharing Circle
As evident in the case studies, many teachers made extensive use of the talking or sharing circle in their teaching. Emily viewed the talking circle as reinforcing traditional Indigenous processes and communication patterns in the classroom:

The main purpose of this talking circle is to deliver the idea of respect and responsibility, respect by utilizing the feather as a symbol of respect. It also reminds the students that in the past Aboriginal people used to have their meetings like this. [I tell them,] “What’s the one thing you want to share, because there are lots of us.” They have to limit their stories … [They] learn respect and how take turns. They really like that.

Students were the speakers in the talking circle; thus, the circle differed from the teacher-dominated form of communication common in schools. Students took the lead and could bring their experiences and culture into the classroom. Emily said, “The talking circle is good [for students]’ self-esteem, to open up, and to see their stories are important.” The talking circle was used as an effective strategy in language arts to develop listening and oral language skills, as well as writing skills, especially where students spoke English as a second language or dialect. The children were eager to pay attention to others, especially when a peer was talking about something exciting, “like what they saw at the circus” (Doris).

Group Work
Teachers told me their Indigenous students liked to work with their friends. Learning was more enjoyable when it could be done with someone else, so group work sustained participation in the activity. In my (Linda’s) school observations, the Grade 2 class had a shared reading program with multiple copies of books at different reading levels. Students would read from their...
own copies of the same book in pairs or small groups. The children were enthusiastic and engaged when participating, and looked forward to reading together. Their talk was animated as they discussed pictures and text. Different pairs or groups would often come over and ask if I would read with them or if they could read to me, even when they came in early before school started (Goulet 2005, 1–5).

For some students, group work was more interesting than other forms of instruction. Fran explained how her students felt when they had to just sit and listen. “In their words, ‘That’s boring.’” Although some students preferred to work individually, she found most stayed engaged when carrying out a group task.

They liked [doing group work] because they did it themselves ... If the group work was well laid out and well planned, they knew exactly what they had to do. They had a task, they went about it, and they took pride in it, it was theirs. They had ownership of it. That encouraged the feeling of doing their best, because they wanted to show the other groups they could do well.

Group work sustained student engagement by connecting learning to the social and emotional realms of the child. Students stayed interested because they were actively involved, as opposed to sitting and listening, and were responsible for their own learning. Indigenous students responded positively to the collaborative nature of group work, with its inherent joint responsibility and group achievement.

Experiential and Activity-Based Learning

Experiential learning (Kolb 1984) was based on or applied to the real-life experiences of students. This helped students situate concept development within their cultural realm and allowed them to apply and practise skills in real-life situations. In this way, they were able to better retain the information they were learning. Wanda spoke of how the development of vocabulary and language based on the children's lives validated self in the classroom, especially important in the multicultural and Indigenous classrooms in which she taught.

Many teachers used activity-based learning for academic skill development. To apply real-life math skills, Kendra's students prepared a budget for their fashion show. Fran used the community fish fry to teach math skills, science skills, and vocabulary development, as well as social skills. She said, “I felt experiences such as fundraising would be much more meaningful to the students than doing the same sorts of questions from a math text.” As part of
this project, Fran had one of the parents come in and talk about fishing as a way of life in the community, as well as about the different kinds of fish. In this way, scientific knowledge and traditional Indigenous knowledge were integrated into the project.

Doris, a non-Indigenous teacher, effectively used role-playing as her activity-based approach. When teaching her Grade 1 and 2 students about the history of Canada, she had students role-play different situations and try to solve the problems they encountered:

I do the train with the settlers coming. They line their chairs up. They have to decide what they're going to bring with them to this new country, and where they want to get off. ... Then they learn the Aboriginal people got pushed back off the land because farmers and businesses and towns and cities were taking over and Aboriginal people often didn't have the training to do a lot of the jobs. I've had the Grade 6's come in and get these kids out of their desk and tell them they have to find someplace else to sit because the principal said [the Grade 6's] could have their desks. [It illustrates] the white people coming and [taking over Native peoples' land]. They hate it. They're mad at these [Grade 6] kids. But it makes them understand what's happened. I try to develop a pride in where the people are ... where they've come from.

Through an experiential approach to history, Indigenous students learned the hard realities and faced some of the problems their peoples had to deal with during the settlement of this country. They experienced the frustrations felt by Indigenous peoples when solutions were imposed upon them, and better understood what it was like to lose something that was theirs. They could empathize with the feelings of their ancestors and also see how the past affects the present.

Community- and Land-Based Learning

Field trips and experiences on the land were also effective teaching approaches. Wanda took advantage of any field trips that were available, because they worked so well with her students. Ida had her students observe a chief and council meeting as part of a social studies unit on governance, so students could “look at how it's done in action, to see something real.” Many teachers implemented cultural camps, often as a whole school initiative. Culture camps can have a profound effect on students and teachers alike as they learn traditional Indigenous knowledge, often from Elders and the land, and take pride in the accomplishments of their peoples. After one of her first
culture camps with high school students, where Val emphasized the history of the Dene in the region, she related, "As we were leaving the camp, the students started to cry, saying 'I feel really sad. There's something missing in our life. We weren't taught that. So this is how Dene lived. Why was I not told?'"

Val's and Doris's stories illustrate how, regardless of the teacher's culture or the age of the students, these teachers affirmed the culture of their students while dealing honestly with the history of colonization in Canada. The teaching was done in a way that related history to the lives of the children and to their communities and families today. Their active approach personalized learning for the students. Community history gave the children a sense of their roots, where they came from, and where they belong in the world. In this way, the students were situated in and connected to the learning in profound and meaningful ways. More detailed case studies using these approaches are presented in Chapter 9.

Student Belief in Self

In our study, we observed that the belief in self connected the socio-emotional realm of the student to the intellectual aspects of learning. In order to engage in learning, the student had to believe he or she was capable. The development of belief in self had three overlapping aspects: setting standards for achievement and responsibility, valuing self and one's culture, and public recognition of students' accomplishments.

Setting Standards for Achievement and Responsibility

Standards for achievement consisted of setting expectations, believing in the students' capability, and expecting responsibility from students. Unfortunately, too often in Indigenous education, teachers believe the stereotype that Indigenous students and their parents do not care about school and the students will not succeed. Tony expressed his frustration with what he had seen of teachers' expectations in one school that had a high dropout rate of Indigenous students. "The problem was [the teachers] had no expectations of the [Indigenous] kids. If you have no expectations, you get no results. If you have no standards, you get nothing. Those teachers had no standards." In the situation described by Tony, the students were expected to engage in school learning on their own with no encouragement from or accountability to the teacher.

On the other hand, when a teacher of Indigenous students set high standards and conveyed the belief to students that they could and would meet those standards, Indigenous students responded positively. Teachers followed
through with students to ensure expectations were being met and standards achieved. In addition to teacher support, the development of social structures in class discussed earlier came into play when peers provided encouragement as students took pride in their learning. When students in Owen’s class were able to solve a math problem on their own, they would “feel good about it” as they explained their solution to the other students. Doris said that as students experienced academic success and gained confidence in their ability to engage in the work, inappropriate classroom behavior lessened. Kendra developed a budget with students, and then left it to them to find the money for a class trip while she was away. In her absence, the students met with the chief and council and offered to clean the ditches on the reserve in order to earn the money needed. These students responded when they were given responsibility. They appreciated the sense of self-accomplishment when they initiated and implemented a successful idea.

*Valuing Self and One’s Culture*

All teachers talked about the development of self-esteem in their students both in terms of self-concept and cultural identity. Teachers used different approaches for students to explore, give expression to, and develop self-concept. Fran had students make a personal shield with a feather in the middle and four quadrants to represent different aspects of themselves, plotting important life experiences and identifying how those experiences made them who they were and gave them strength. In Kendra’s after-school modelling program, practising walking tall helped students feel better about themselves. Ida tied self-esteem to the concept of social responsibility and designed a social studies and health unit around that concept.

Val, an Indigenous teacher, stressed the need to develop the cultural identity of Indigenous students. Kendra, who was also Indigenous, tied the issue of cultural identity to school success:

In order to get our kids to succeed in school, they have to feel good about who they are as Indian people. They have to know they are worthwhile, and they have just as much potential as anybody else. They have everything intact to be successful, but they need reassurance. They just need someone to tell them their culture is beautiful. They need to be guided, to be shown there’s nothing wrong with who they are.

In her teaching, Kendra used art and dance from various cultures to demonstrate the similarities among Indigenous cultures and other cultures. She felt
this helped lessen the students’ feelings of being different and isolated. Tony talked to his students about building on the success of their community, because both their Indigenous community and the students themselves had so much to offer the non-Indigenous community.

Public Recognition of Students’ Accomplishments
Belief in self was reinforced by the public acknowledgment of student achievement. Recognition was usually one-on-one or community-based. Often, parents were invited to the school to honour students at school assemblies. Principals recognized student excellence when students entered contests and won prizes or acted in a manner that epitomized respect and responsibility. Public recognition had the most dramatic effect when the students experienced a direct response to their achievement. Kendra’s student fashion show that featured Indigenous clothing designers illustrates this point.

We did the fashion show and it was absolutely great … Walking in front of a lot of people was a huge risk for them. After the fashion show these kids were absolutely high – a natural high. You could see it in their face[s]; their eyes were glossy and everything. It was due to the pride and the joy in the accomplishment of what they had done.

The risk these students were able to take, the success they experienced, and the resulting pride did much to bolster self-esteem and develop the belief in self.

Consequences of Connecting Students to the Process
In Category 3, teachers connected Indigenous students to the process of learning. In the actions of these teachers, we see the different forms of teaching that develop both collective abilities and self-determination in learners. Teachers used direct instruction (kiskinaumagehin) to ensure students had the knowledge and skills to be successful in learning. They invited Elders, cultural experts, and storytellers who modelled traditional forms of teaching. At the same time, teachers saw learning as a shared endeavour, a process in which teachers and students learned from each other (kiskinaumatowin). In this shared space, teachers became more aware of student characteristics and understandings; their teaching, as a consequence, became more responsive to students’ learning needs. Shared learning means students are able to bring their knowledge, including self-defined cultural knowledge, to the classroom. Both
kiskinaumatowin (teaching each other) and kiskinaumasowin (teaching oneself) were evident in the variety of approaches teachers used. When students teach one another and themselves, they take on more responsibility for their own learning processes. They practice self-determination and responsibility to others in preparation for their life in self-determining communities and nations.