A Life Story of an Indigenous Elder: Circling the Medicine Wheel’s Life Stages

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Ann Estie (pseudonym) agreed to participate in this small ethnographic study because her life and experiences as an educator have been dedicated to living life within the Medicine Wheel framework. Over the course of three in-depth interviews of up to 60 minutes each, she shared her life story from her childhood days to her current, elder years. She is a First Nations educator, and believes strongly in creating avenues of success for First Nations students that are based on cultural understandings. Her courageous story brings with it tears of sadness and happiness. Her strong cultural beliefs and dedication to keeping her native language is entwined in every stage of her life.
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The Medicine Wheel and the Stages of Life

A Medicine Wheel is a circle of four quadrants, that relate and counterbalance one another to form a whole. It is often used to represent First Nations wisdom in North America. The Four Cardinal points on the Medicine Wheel are the Four Sacred Directions, represented among the Ojibway by the colors yellow, red, black and white. The seven Grandfather teachings are also located on this Medicine Wheel and each is represented by an animal (Pitawanakwat, 2006). In this study, the four quadrants represent the four life stages, birth, child/youth, adult and elder, of a woman whose family, and who personally, attended residential schools. This paper presentation reflects on Ann Estie’s experiences, and her reflections on the impacts of residential schools on children, families, and the education system.

The residential school era wasn’t a pleasant experience for the First Nations people. Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003) clearly state, the residential school system attempted to assimilate Canadian First Nations children into a Euro-Canadian culture and economic system ironically through the practice of isolating them for gradual integration at a later phase of development. The federal government had an impact on First Nations education during the colonial period and still does today. Colonized assimilation and acculturation predominantly through education forced Western literacy, values, and ways of thinking upon generations of Aboriginal people (Archibald, 2008). For all intent and purposes Indians were considered “wards of the government,” and this made it possible and easy for churches to assume legal custody of Indian children in the residential schools. As a consequence, culture has been lost and so has language.
In the early 1900’s, the residential school students entered the school system with their mother tongue. Aboriginal languages, and hence the forms of orality, were prohibited in the residential schools (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2012; Archibald, 2008). Children were removed from families and placed in residential schools, and separated for long periods of time. The students, who ranged in age from three to eighteen, were subjected to a severe regimen (Kirkness, 1999; Sellars, 2013). In certain circumstances, children as young as four years old would be apprehended (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2012). They were forced to live at the school (Milloy, 1999; Morgan, 2002).

Residential schools mostly dedicated the teachings of Catholicism to the children. Academic learning and practical training were balanced in the schedule by the half-day system. Students would spend one half of their day in the classroom and the other half in practical activities (Fontaine, 2010; Milloy, 1999). Classes were spent memorizing the catechism, the manual of questions and answers that taught everything all young Catholics must know about their religion (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2012). Children had to kneel for prayer sessions which would last for quite a few minutes. The knees would get sore (Sellars, 2013). Children performed heavy labour tasks. The boys were involved in cutting wood, feeding the stock and shoemaker jobs. The girls spent their time in the kitchen and sewing room (Fournier & Grey, 1997; Kirkness, 2013). It was difficult at first to learn the prayers in English but a student had to learn fast and abide by the rules.

The physical appearance in the residential schools across Canada was similar. The dorms all shared one bathroom, which had only five or six toilet stalls and one shower room. The shower room had no stalls, just bare shower heads. It was required to shower with
underclothes on (Sellars, 2013). The boys and girls were segregated; brothers and sisters regardless of age did not get to spend time together (Kirkness, 2013). Strange voices and languages could be heard in the distance, strange new smells permeated the air at the doorway, and everything was painted in white, in contrast to the people in black (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2012). The building itself looked eerie from the outside. The priests and nuns were cold towards the children. There was no showing of love and caring. Punishment was their main form of physical and mental abuse.

**Methodology**

This study employed the qualitative approach (Biklen & Bogdan, 2007) of data, data analysis and interpretation. I conducted three face-to-face interviews on three different occasions with the same person. Each interview ranged from 45 – 60 minutes and was digitally audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviews took place at the residence of Ann, my participant. The data were analyzed within with four quadrants of the Medicine Wheel framework, each of which represented a life stage. Stage 1 represents circumstances surrounding the time of Ann’s birth, including some of her family’s history with residential schooling and its effects. Stage 2 represents Ann’s childhood and her experiences in residential school. Stage 3 represents Ann’s transition into adulthood, her career as an educator, and the impacts she made on First Nations schools. Stage 4 represents Ann’s work as an elder, and her continued efforts to improve learning issues facing First Nations students through the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, practice, and language development.

It is clear in the findings that will be presented in the symposium that residential schooling and its intergenerational affects have impacted on all four stages of Ann’s family, life,
and commitment to First Nations education. Ann has lived through horrific experiences that many believe should have crushed her commitment to education. Yet, her resilience and hopefulness have led to a revival of cultural ways of being that has helped her revitalize the educational paths of First Nations peoples and speaks to the triumph of her Anishanabe spirit.
References


