Notes and reflections on reading *Out of the Depths: The Experiences of Mi'kmaw Children at the Indian Residential School in Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia* by Isabelle Knockwood

Ruthie Fullerton

Personal Reflections

I had a very intimate experience with this book this summer. I had been gifted a copy of the text at a two-day Professional Learning for the Department of Education, where I was asked to be a speaker. When deciding to do this, I was concerned that there were so many non-Indigenous educators involved, but besides the Elder, Walter Paul, who opened the event, there were no Indigenous voices on the agenda. I agreed to present if I could come with one of my First-Nations colleagues as I expressed this concern to the organizer. A friend of mine from UNB was interested but not available, so I ended up speaking with Katrina Clair, who is a Mi'kmaq educator from another school district. In her part of the province, they had done a major study of this book and had the author, Isabelle Knockwood, come to speak. She suggested the work to me, and coincidently someone gave it to me. This is an important book, and that must have been an even more powerful experience. I read the work last month while tenting on a beach for a few weeks while my house was being rented out. This provided a lot of time and space to contemplate and connect. The following are some reflections on the readings.

Healing through Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being

What I appreciate most about *Out of the Depths* is how this story (particularly in the original edition/intention of the book) both begins and ends with grounding in Indigenous healing, knowledge and education. This full-circle quality is both symbolic and literal, grounding the written and life work presented in a way that is almost ceremonial and certainly cyclical in nature. It is also special and significant that the story starts with Isabelle as a young child, home with her family before being taken to the Indian residential school and ends with her return to the school with her own daughter and granddaughter to rescue or remove Isabelle the child from that same space.

Some aspects of these Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, being and, specifically, healing, in this context are explicitly stated, while others are more subtle. Unambiguously, there is explanation of the talking stick with related protocols and ceremony for speaking and listening (Page 9, 20 and 163), discussion of the origin and power of language, significance of story, role of elders (Page 21), food and earth medicines (Page 21), honoring relationships with others (Page 22) and description of specific symbolisms (Page 26). Of course, as the account of the residential school proceeds, these rich cultural references and spiritual practices are referenced less, and the forced assimilation into a contrived Christianity takes over. Again, however, towards the end of the text, the narrative references various means and methods that the narrator and other survivors of this dreadful system tap back into for healing purposes. Some of these include: the funding and accessibility set up for healing through the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) (169), adults claiming an education formerly denied to them growing up (160), counselling through the Native Alcohol and Drug Rehabilitation Center (160),

breaking cycles of poor parenting practices (161), immersion in the Mi'kmaw Lodge (162) and the use of language (189-190). In these and other acts of reclaiming there is healing and revitalization of individuals, communities and cultures.

In referencing the Prime Minister's apology, Knockwood writes, "It is clear from the story that many Aboriginal people question whether we have heard the non-Aboriginal truth" (Page 165).

This line and concept reminds me immediately of the question posed in the Reader's Guide to Tom King's *The Inconvenient Indian*, and put forth throughout much of his writings, including the 'Prologue: Warm Toast and Porcupines' of that text, *The Truth about Stories*, and in other areas of his work. This is also reminiscent of the pedagogy, curricula and teachings (or lack thereof) related to Indigenous worldviews, histories, treaties and realities. Often these are presented, if at all, within a deficit framework, (which Tuck, 2009, among many others discusses), and further marginalize Indigenous peoples and experiences, (as in the case of our NB Grade 9 Social Studies *Canadian Identity* textbook, I would argue), or spun positively or with a suspicious, accusatory tone (as I feel is the case in some of the writing in Scott Trevithick's 1998 article *Native Residential Schooling in Canada*). This non-Aboriginal truth is potent and pervasive. It is reinforced both when it is spoken and through silence, but this dominant discourse is being disrupted through written works like that of Knockwood and King and other academics and activists like Tuck, Yang and Vowell who present the public, popular culture, scholars and social media with a more accurate Aboriginal truth. Their positioning is of paramount importance and should be infused into existing pedagogy and practice in classrooms all over Canada and Turtle

Island. I think this work does happen, but still predominantly in silos, although it is recently resounding with more power in larger school circles. As these teachings tend to start with information and awareness raising, the next steps should push towards moving to make more action, including systemic and structural shifts. These former two spheres are where I need to start focusing my energies on my own educational practices; personal and professional. Promoting what I consider Aboriginal Truth has become a comfortable space to me, the challenge now is to find means to promote this outside of my own classroom and learning and expand it into action that will affect positive change in school and societal communities.

Moreover, while some readings and scholars call for more time and attention in research to be given to Indigenous voices, others, even hypocritically, question the authority of these same voices. Trevithick, for example, writes "*if* we are to believe Knockwood" (italics added, Trevithick, 1998, page 64). However, near the end of this same publication calls for more credit to be given to oral testimonies in academia, for example. In the preface of *Victims of Benevolence* Furniss (1992) problematizes the available records, questioning who they were by and how they "reflect a non-Native cultural orientation. As a result, Native perspectives are often excluded from documentary sources of information, making it critical...to consult Native people for information based on their first-hand experiences and oral traditions" (Furniss, page 216). Knockwood makes a similar comment in discussion with her professor and editor, referencing the limited scope and singular view in the official archival materials she consulted for her research.

Also relative to this concept of 'non-Aboriginal truth' I was very engaged by what was revealed about the particulars of this apology concerning the Indigenous understandings and protocols for apology that the author explains. One important critique she makes is that this official apology was only translated into English and French (Knockwood, 170). Especially considering the detriment residential schooling has done to Indigenous languages, having the apology translated into these languages would have been a significant, symbolic and appropriate gesture. Knockwood also remarks on the relative silence between groups of peoples after the apology, and wonders if this is attributable to differences between Native and non-Native conceptions of 'apology.' Quoting the Merriam Webster Dictionary, one understanding stems around "an expression of regret for a mistake or wrong with implied admission of guilt or fault... (Knockwood, 172), whereas the Mi'kmaq word for apology, "'*Apiksiktuaqn'* includes both 'apology' and 'forgiveness' (Knockwood, 173)." The complexities and implications of this deep and multifaceted word are remarkable, interesting and a valuable cultural (and personal) lesson for anyone in re-considering the nature of this gesture. One final note about this apology, and concerning the yet again stifled 'Aboriginal-truth,' comes from immediately after the delivery itself. Knockwood writes that the planned intention was for the protocols of the House to open for the protocols of the Talking Circle. The plan had been that after the Prime Minister was finished speaking, (addressing his words to the Speaker, another critique), that the Speaker would then open the House to 'The Committee of the Whole,' in order to allow for the Aboriginal leaders who were present to respond to the remarks in the apology. This, however, was not done. Instead, the Speaker left the session and, in doing so, closed the session and quashed the opportunity for remarks (Knockwood, 174).

Still in reference to the apology, Knockwood notices "that he [Harper] leaves out spiritual abuse - nearly always omitted in assessments of the damage done by residential schools. However, for survivors, it has been a primary cause for psychological trauma. Being taught that your ancestors had no god and no religion and that you are a heathen, a savage and a pagan is spiritual abuse of the worst kind because it demonizes the Indigenous concept of the Supreme Being, Kitji Manitou or Kitji Mndu – the Great Spirit." (Page 167).

The apology, although citing emotional, physical and sexual abuse, did not acknowledge the spiritual abuses caused by these government sanctioned and Christian run schools. Elsewhere in this same chapter, Knockwood references someone's remark that the church itself did not participate in this apology and was not even named in this speech. It is ironic, and interesting, and debilitating that the spiritual side of this assimilative and abusive system was not taken into consideration here. I have to assume that this was a conscious decision with a political intention. I am not sure what the ramifications for the government would be if they had implicated the churches as partners in this, and I am also interested in the ongoing attempts to separate spirit from state initiatives and institutions in general.

I have read some in other sources, Marie Battiste (2013) being one of them, about the concerns of schools and governments to separate church and state. I think this omission may be in part from that vein, but I am going to move this conversation, momentarily, to the damage I feel this does to the entire school system and all students. Battiste writes in *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Spirit* (2013) that incorporating Indigenous spiritual and ceremonial practices would be faced with opposition from

standard provincial and federal school systems in its efforts to remain secular. She infers, and I would agree, that this separation does a disservice to students and certainly limits full integration of Indigenous ways of doing, being and knowing (Battiste, 114). George J. Sefa Dei and other scholars have also spoken about the importance of holistic education, with the spiritual facets of the individual and collective, being a central concern for true, full education (Dei, 2013).

Avoiding acknowledgment of the spiritual damages done by the Residential School System is severely troubling, but, sadly, not so surprising. As Knockwood seems to know so well, the spiritual injuries are perhaps the most multifaceted and most deeply seated concerns out of any form of these atrocious abuses. The spiritual is interconnected and interconnecting, of course, with all the other realms of being. For the individual, this includes the physical, mental and emotional, but it also has important connections to relationships with others, living and non-living, with elements of nature and the environment, as well as with the cosmos and Great Spirit. Without education on, or at least acknowledgment or acceptance of the spiritual, I believe we are profoundly lacking in our education system still today, as is this exclusion in the apology.

Aboriginal or Native Education

I keep thinking as I read the phrases 'Aboriginal Education' or 'Native Education' in this book (Knockwood, Page 187), or 'Ideology if Native Education' in other articles (Trevithick, Page 54) when the content is really making reference to Residential Schools, that these phrases are inadequate. I think there is a semantic issue at play that we could work to correct. This phraseology, for one, seems to infer that the hegemonic (dominant 'white,' 'western')

school system imposed on Indigenous peoples in the past and present is the only form of education for and of Indigenous peoples. This is of course not the case. When I see these titles, I have often hoped the following text, article or instruction will explore traditional teachings and contemporary pedagogies from Indigenous perspectives. This has rarely been the case, as the content is far more often about the residential school experience or regarding contemporary deficiencies in 'educating' indigenous people. I wish that when this is what we are talking about, the education system that we settler-colonial powers have imposed on Aboriginal people, we say so more explicitly. Likewise, when we use the term 'education' more generally, we should mean it more inclusively and universally and openly, as it is and was and will be a part of all cultures. Education is not, of course, a western invention.

So, what does constitute Indigenous Education? In a literature review with recommendations, Battiste writes that we should not frame Indigenous Education in contrast to Western Education (Battiste, 2002). I have indeed used this more binary or 'compare and contrast' approach in my teaching and learning. Even Knockwood makes a brief but interesting note with this tendency, revealing non-Native students are more competent on theory whereas Native learners have more experience in practice (Knockwood, Page 181). She writes about her attendance at Saint Mary's University; "I thought, naturally they (non-Native students) are smarter than me when it comes to theory. However, when it comes to practice – living life – I knew I was way ahead of them (Knockwood,181)." Although she is talking about a particular lived experience regarding the residential school system and other cultural and linguistic issues, I think her comments have larger layers of truth. What I have gleaned from formal education and personal experience, is that the language and living in Indigenous cultures -

such as among local First Nations and Indian/ Ayurvedic systems - is much more about presence and practice than the dominant white/Western worldview. I find that our systems, institutions, (physical and philosophical), are much more linear, limited, compartmental, sequential and hierarchical. Indigenous education seems to be more integrated and whole. The authenticity of Indigenous Knowledge is also seen when citing such characteristics as "face to face interactions in learning," the "role of observation (and) participation," and "orality versus literacy" (Plaice, Course Notes, ED6255, Learning Contexts and Policies, Slide 8). As King questions and calls for in *The Inconvenient Indian*, why not a blended and balanced education plan, not one dominant system that demands you to give up one thing to gain other perceived benefits (King, 2012, 119). The Mi'kmaw theory of *Etuaptmumk: Two-Eyed Seeing* supports this systemic shift and has been proven to benefit all learners (Thomas, Bartlett et all).

History of the Land and the Brick Metaphor

In the discussion-style segment of the book, shared between Knockwood and her editor, there is a fascinating conversation about the importance of the history of the land and how this is what the writer originally intended the book to be centred around (Knockwood,182). This made me recall a few of the thought-provoking articles we were assigned in this course, particularly *Pedagogy of the Land: Dreams of Respectful Relations* by Celia Haig-Brown and Kaaren Dannenmann and *Decolonization is not a Metaphor* by Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang. The former article made connections concerning its content, but also in its form, as the two co-writers almost converse with us in the article, each taking turns to share their knowledge, intentions and experiences. The authors beautifully articulate points about slowly and gradually learning from

the land (page 464), manifested knowledge (page 453), knowledge that cannot be written (page 454), or owned (page 456), community and individual healing (page 461), and dreaming as the organizing metaphor and reality (page 455). The latter article was essential for me to read. I have read, heard and used the term 'decolonizing' as a framework, and as a metaphor, so much in the last while that I had mostly disconnected from the fact it is indeed meant to be used in literal relation to land. There have been some instances that have called me out of my head-space or comfort zone on this central issue. The first is an ongoing recall, which I know, and always have known, that I live and work and play and reap all kinds of benefits as I exist on the unceded territory of the Wabanaki peoples. The next re-revelation is from an excerpt I head many months ago on the radio about a settler-woman re-turning her land to a local Indigenous community (CBC, Unreserved). The third snap out of this delusion was in a course I took a few weeks ago at UNB, where a few students seemed to be maintained in a superficial discussion and understanding about these concepts- proudly repeating that it was enough to be doing their part as settler-allies of having some Indigenous content in their classrooms. I do not usually say much, but I had to voice my concerns because of my own inadequacies, that in the scheme of things it was pretty easy and comfortable to teach about and raise awareness for, but much more difficult to actually do. In saying that, I admit, I am not a doer. I need to make more meaningful actions to practice what I feel I preach. I am not sure if or how this is possible without returning to and resolving the issue of land now, as Tuck and Yang explain. Also, in Knockwood, it is exciting and insightful to read how she understood the intention of tracing back the origin of the bricks that built the school. Symbolic for sure, and metaphorical as well. She explains that she literally used this to build relationships with non-Indigenous people whom

she feared were racist (183) and that this retracing and rebuilding really had little to do with architecture.

Roles and Relationships of Researcher/Researched and Speaker/Listener and Educator/Student

A final few thoughts I want to make in appreciation of this work- its process and its product- relate to the integrally essential roles and relationships which produced it. One instance that I want to remark on is in the conversation between writer and editor where they talk about these roles, as well as that of student and teacher, older and younger, listener and speaker (185). I think there are a lot of interesting observations here regarding authority, relationships, roles and behaviours within each of these contexts. According to my studies in this field, Relationships, Respect and Reciprocity are three critical components to Indigenous knowledge (Archibald 2008, Battiste 2013, Chilisa 2011, Wilson 2009).

Also of interest, is a subtle reference to a wisdom I have read in many other publications, including Wilson's *Research is Ceremony* (2009) and cited in Chilisa's *Indigenous Research Methodologies* (2011), which talks about story listening, and a line spoken by Elders to listen with three ears, two on the side of your head and one in your heard. Gillian Thomas, the editor who worked with Knockwood, I think comments on this and embodies it (185) when she talks about the sacred importance of story listening and becoming like one big ear. Here and elsewhere in *Out of the Depths*, Knockwood also pays much attention to the protocols and procedures involved in good story listening. This is something I have to become more cognizant of myself. Although I am ever attentive when someone is addressing me personally or sharing a personal experience with a larger group, I am usually

scrambling to make key point notes in order to retain or reference later, and so don't seem so present. The two also talk about the role of the interviewer as the other and share a debate on whom the audience was intended to be (184). Although Knockwood says they did not consider who the audience was to be (perhaps writing as a more personal process), Thomas admits she was ever conscious of this consideration. Intended or not, the product has great appeal to broad audiences, Native and non-Native, casual and academic, informed and learning.

On a final note related to these considerations of roles, respect and relationships, I was reminded while reading *Out of the Depths* of the story of 'Coyote goes to school.' I have come across Coyote tales/ teachings in a variety of sources now, including Jo-ann Archibald (2008) who shares several in *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Mind, Body and Spirit*. On page 180 Knockwood talks about challenges in trusting (all white) professors, her indigeneity being sometimes challenged (talking stick seen as a gimmick), and racist remarks and experiencing isolation (othering). There is also the academic institution itself that she finds overbearing (page 180). Nevertheless, she was determined to gain this form of higher education despite all the obstacles and oppressions. Similarly, Coyote struggles in pursuing a university education in Native Studies; meeting only white professors, learning from books written by dead-white people, and having no affirmation or acceptance to use her own experience, knowledge, relations, etc. (Chilisa, 2011 151-153).

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Ruthie Fullerton has been teaching Language Arts and, more recently, Native Studies at high schools in New Brunswick for a decade. She is currently completing her Master's in Critical Studies in Education at UNB. She is also trained in Yoga and Ayurveda. Her particular interest is in looking at how more holistic models of education such as these ancient philosophies and local Indigenous perspectives can create wellness for students, schools and systems within society.

No correspondence information provided.