



JEAN LAFRANCE

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AND DIVISION HEAD

EDMONTON AND ACCESS DIVISIONS

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

FACULTY OF SOCIAL WORK

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I wish to especially acknowledge the many members of the Sturgeon Lake community who have allowed me to participate in this journey toward empowerment from its inception. It has been understood that in addition to sharing their journey, I would not only carry their words and experiences to helping professionals who need to more fully understand the impact of historical events on community members, but that I would also help to convey the efforts that are being made to heal from these experiences and to create a healthier community. It is my hope that this article will create a greater understanding and appreciation for the challenges in family and community living that communities such as Sturgeon Lake confront on a daily basis, and the tremendous efforts that are underway to chart a new future.

Except where otherwise noted, photographs are courtesy of the Community of Sturgeon Lake.

I have had the privilege of accompanying the Sturgeon Lake community on its journey toward empowerment since 1997, when as the Children's Advocate for Alberta I sought to provide new opportunities for community members to support their children and be directly involved in child welfare policy development and implementation. I was especially interested in finding new ways to collaborate with First Nation communities who were reluctant to engage with a provincial office that was associated with a system that had such devastating consequences for their families. This journey has taken some unanticipated directions as the community pursued a path without a road map, one that required keeping an eye on where we had been, while ensuring that we be alert to sudden turns or unexpected precipices as we felt our way toward a new vision for the community.

This article describes some of the key events that have occurred to date, their outcomes, and some of our planned activities for the future. My role with the community has mostly been of a supportive and consultative nature, and community leaders have been very clear about our relationship. "Jean, you are a part of our community and you are welcome to drive the bus once in a while, but let's be clear that we will be the ones to tell you when you can drive the bus, where you must turn, and where you can get off." I cannot think of a more apt metaphor to describe a balanced relationship between an academic and a truly empowered community.

The story of this journey is divided into three phases. Phase I deals with the preliminary reason for getting together, which was to address child welfare issues that were important to the community. Phase II describes how the interests of the community shifted toward the identification of residential school issues and their impact on children and families, along with a description of our preliminary attempts at addressing these issues. Phase III describes planned community activities to heal from the negative impacts of the residential school system and to achieve a sense of reconciliation with those who played a part in this sad segment of our history.

PHASE I – CHILD WELFARE ISSUES

In July 1997, two members of the Sturgeon Lake Band were asked to commence a community consultation process, with the results to be used to guide future action. These were Margaret Kappo, an Aboriginal woman with a Bachelor of Social Work and a reputation as a healer, and her mother, Mary Kappo, who was then in her early eighties and a highly respected elder.

The community child welfare project generated particular interest among members of the Sturgeon Lake Band, one of the eight bands comprising the

Lesser Slave Lake Indian Regional Council (LSLIRC). The Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation had been providing child welfare services under the auspices of the LSLIRC for over a decade. Sturgeon Lake is a rural community of approximately 800 First Nation individuals plus an equal number who live off reserve. Margaret Kappo facilitated several meetings in this community and local interest increased with each meeting. The involvement of a large proportion of community members indicated a remarkable support for the goal of improving the ability of the child welfare system to protect and enhance the lives of children.

At the initial community meetings, considerable fear and uncertainty about the child welfare system were apparent. A talking circle format helped to create a supportive environment and to provide participants with a safe and familiar opportunity to voice their concerns. Individuals present when the LSLIRC Child Welfare agreement was originally implemented expressed disappointment over how the system has since evolved. They had envisioned significantly greater community involvement in the development of services for children and families. Looking back over more than a decade of local control of child welfare, it seemed clear that the original goal of creating a child welfare system that was responsive to community conditions and input had not been fully achieved. According to many community members, the present system could sometimes be as oppressive and culturally insensitive as the one it had replaced.

As time progressed, participants in community meetings developed a fundamentally different perspective on the child welfare situation in Sturgeon Lake. Fear and confusion about child welfare were still evident. At the same time, however, participants began to evolve into a “planning group” as they gained a greater sense of ownership and responsibility for addressing problems in the system, rather than leaving this up to politicians and professionals. This planning group identified several barriers to community members’ involvement in child welfare. These included:



Fear of child welfare and of having children removed;

Fear of being judged inadequate parents;







Fear that the politicians would not listen;



Confusion about how decisions were made; and

Fear of community gossip.




In addition to these individual-level barriers, the planning group identified what they perceived as problems with the child welfare system itself. These systemic problems included:

-  Policies that prevent many community members from direct involvement in child welfare programs as foster parents, drivers, and visit supervisors;
-  Lack of emphasis on prevention and early intervention;
-  Lack of preparation when children are returned to the community after an out-of-home placement;
-  Poor access to needed social and financial resources;
-  Lack of information regarding programs and entitlements; and
-  Poor relationships between the community and agencies involved in delivering services to children and families.



Sturgeon Lake boys sitting in the doorway of the residential school barn

Participants also identified a number of positive aspects of the current child welfare system. These included:

-  Delegated authority to deliver child welfare services
- Local child welfare committees that function well
-  Community interest in providing support for children in care
- Culturally sensitive child welfare workers at the community level
- Involvement of the Elders
-  Greater numbers of children remaining in the community, and
- The involvement of the Children's Advocate.

Having identified and reflected on the barriers, problems, and positive aspects of child welfare in their community, the planning group moved into an action phase. This phase was enhanced by a celebration of the children of Sturgeon Lake, which had been organized by the Child Welfare staff. The entire community was invited to participate in a feast and a round dance and nearly one-quarter of the community attended these traditional ceremonies.

The action phase focused on increasing community input into the development and implementation of programs affecting children and families in

Sturgeon Lake. A Band Council member represented the Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation at the formal, political level of the child welfare system. To increase and diversify community input, the planning group invited people from agencies that share responsibility for child welfare. This included representatives from Alberta Family and Social Services and the Sturgeon Lake Band Council. Workers from a neighboring child welfare district office were invited and joined enthusiastically in the discussions. Several foster parents from other communities attended because of a desire to ensure that the children they care for remain connected to their home community. This was indeed a community that "welcomed strangers."

Planning group members emphasized the need for child welfare programs to include traditional healing approaches. They also spoke of the need for programs to work in cooperation with tribal elders; for example, with pipe carriers as teachers and leaders to help youth become more aware of traditional spiritual ways. The planning group's most important message, however, was that the community wished to reclaim their legitimate right to have a primary role to play in the protection and well being of their children.

The planning group discussed one example of how the system currently restricted community members' involvement in child welfare. Policy precluded most band members from serving as foster parents, drivers, or visit supervisors because individuals with a criminal record or a claim of child abuse substantiated against them were automatically disallowed from such roles. However, it was widely recognized that many people whose names appear on a criminal record or child abuse registry had lived without problems for many years, and were in fact leading exemplary lives. The planning group argued that the existence of a record should not by itself prevent individuals from assuming child protective roles. Changing this policy to incorporate more appropriate criteria for evaluating an individual's ability to work effectively with children would entail no threat to children's safety. In particular, this policy should incorporate the opinion of the community regarding any individual interested in assuming a child protective role. Advocacy efforts by community members succeeded in changing this policy with the local director of Child Welfare, an action that seemed to validate the efforts of the community members involved in this process.

The community's vision of a safe place for children and, ultimately, a healthy community led them to initiate an important process of reflecting upon that experience to identify what contributed to and what mitigated against the achievement of their vision. The participants began with a vision of an improved and friendlier child welfare system. Their journey has led to

a broader vision; one of child, family and community wellness; a vision that is informed by the stories of the people of Sturgeon Lake. As these stories were told and heard, healing began to occur and the people were increasingly empowered. As they became empowered, they were able to give more fully of themselves and to contribute to the development of health among their brothers and sisters in the community.

As the people of Sturgeon Lake compared their original hopes for a locally controlled child welfare system to the system that has actually evolved, they were inspired to create a renewed vision. They believed that, by building on the lessons of the past, a healthier community could be created — a community of wellness to give their children the safe and healthy home they so deserve.

PHASE II- THE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL EXPERIENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON FAMILIES

The first stage of this journey involved a community consultation process that confirmed a general dissatisfaction with the current child welfare system and a strong desire for change. An important theme identified in the consultation was the desire for a health/wellness perspective to inform whatever new system was created. The participants indicated that healthy children depend on healthy families who feel connected to, and supported by, the community in good times and in bad, and that this principle must underpin whatever “helping” system is created.

The second stage of this journey undertook further consultation with the people of Sturgeon Lake. The intent of this stage was to create a clearer and more community based vision of the kind of healthy community that is desired by the Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation. The core of this vision would be rooted in the stories of the people in this community, related to their contact with oppressive systems such as the Residential Schools and Child Welfare historically and currently. Therefore, one of the necessary activities was to hear and to collect these stories. We were convinced that by following this oral tradition, consistent with Aboriginal culture, community members could begin to heal, as the silence regarding the impact of residential school experiences on the Sturgeon Lake community began to break. This helped to highlight the intergenerational effects that interfered with the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual life of community members. We hoped that it would create a spirit of reconciliation between community members that would replace the legacy of physical, sexual, emotional and spiritual abuse left by the residential school experience.

We came to more fully recognize the extent to which this experience had profoundly impaired the political, ecological, and economic conditions of the community. Community members began to tell their stories about residential school experiences. While this generated painful memories of shame



We have to understand what has gone on before to undertake where we have to go from here. We are the hope for many Aboriginal communities who wish to take responsibility for their own problems — Margaret Kappo

and oppression, it also generated positive memories of experiences that have contributed to a spirit of strength and resilience. A core group of participants who met for 18 months came to realize that they had the capacity to help others and were prepared to do so.

We believed that we could release the chains that keep us prisoners of our memories by first fully facing them and then by letting go of the past. We were convinced that we could only recover from the trauma of the past by changing the conditions under which we lived today. We came to the realization that while our problems are undeniably real; many of them were created by our perceptions of the world. If we could change our thoughts, we might be able to achieve a different reality, and that we could be the change that we wish to see happen (Gandhi).

This journey began with a desire to ensure the survival of community members who did not feel secure as a result of their negative experiences with oppressive structures. By recounting their stories, community members had an opportunity to reflect upon their earlier childhood experiences as adults

with greater awareness and power, who can deal with these realities in a more purposeful way.

The community was seen to possess an innate wisdom that could be tapped by creating an atmosphere of trust in which each member could be helped to feel valued for the special gifts that they have been given. A core group of our members were trained as community counselors who could share their experience of healing with others who had lived similar experiences.

By building upon these unique gifts, the community began to tap the deep wellsprings of its own resources and strengths. Thus began the development of a collective community consciousness of what needed to happen for the total community to heal. We encouraged the full acceptance of each member for who they were and tried to promote a feeling of belonging and safety for all of the participants in the forums and meetings that took place.

This phase of our journey aimed for empowerment through the sharing of our stories in a supportive, safe environment that engendered the collective power and support of community members. The intent was to develop a community based "wellness vision" through the sharing of personal stories recounting past experiences and their subsequent impact on individuals and their community. We envisioned a sharing process that would help counteract the effects of residential school experiences and improve the spiritual, emotional, physical and psychological health of the community.

A community-needs analysis was conducted to achieve a higher level of understanding of the issues that were of import to community members. We continued to gather community stories from survivors of residential schools and their descendants. This was seen as an ongoing task that would form the basis for the work of this project. The learning that occurred was intended in part to serve as a basis for the development of a course for helping professionals to increase their understanding of the residential school experience and its impact on Aboriginal families and communities. Finally, a community counselor training program was developed to train six members of the core group in the skills required to support survivors of the residential schools from their community.

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS AND ABORIGINAL PARENTING

It became clear from the stories related by community members that their experiences in the residential schools had a strongly negative influence on the capacity of Aboriginal people to parent their children. This seems perfectly understandable when one considers that from the late 1800s to the

early 1970s, Aboriginal children from age 3 to 16 were removed from their homes, many forcibly, and placed in residential schools. There they stayed from September until June each year. During this annual ten-month period they were isolated from their parents and from the rest of Canadian society. Breaking up Aboriginal families by putting young children in residential schools was encouraged from an early date by government legislators and



One step in reclaiming ownership of child welfare is for the community to assert its right to decide which individuals have its confidence.

enforced by representatives of the church and by federal government Indian agents. According to Hayter Reed, a senior Department of Indian Affairs official, the total separation and isolation of Aboriginal children from their families was important to effectively “socialize” the children. In his words, “The more remote from the institution and distant from each other are the points from which the pupils are collected, the better for their success” (Milloy 1999). This practice removed the traditional role for childcare from the Aboriginal culture and entrusted it to a government whose stated policy was the assimilation of Aboriginal people into the dominant society, a policy that could only be implemented by completely removing the children from the influence of their parents and communities. Aboriginal children were therefore not only educated separately from the dominant society, they were also educated away from their own culture. In this setting, isolated culturally and geographically, the task of systematically transmitting the dominant society’s values, skills, culture, religion, and language was ensured. To ensure English language acquisition, speaking an Aboriginal language was forbidden

and punished by corporal punishment. All aspects of the Aboriginal child's life were regulated and monitored from morning to night by their caretakers to ensure compliance to this rule. In the words of a former resident:

First thing in the morning, you had to jump out of bed and kneel on the cold floor to pray. It seems like we prayed a lot. We prayed, and then we got up and washed our faces. Then we went downstairs and went to church and prayed some more then went back and had breakfast. We prayed before breakfast we prayed after breakfast. We prayed before school — we prayed all day!



Aboriginal people are all affected in some way whether they attended these schools or not. Even those Aboriginal people who never attended residential schools have relatives or friends who still feel the effects. Many of those who attended residential schools have found it extremely painful and avoid speaking of this emotionally burdensome and damaging experience, while those who did not attend are indirectly affected because they cannot understand why an educational experience should leave such bitter emotional scars. The practice of separating children from their parents and their way of life has had an impact on almost all Aboriginal families. The structure, cohesion and quality of family life suffered. Parenting skills diminished as succeeding generations became more and more institutionalized and experienced little nurturing. Low self-esteem and self-concept problems arose as children were taught that their own culture was inferior and uncivilized, even “savage” (Martens et al. 1988). Taking small children from their parents, and keeping them away from their influence, caused parents and children to become strangers to each other (Unger 1977).

This was especially damaging for Aboriginal communities that were structured around the unique inter-relationships that exist among family, extended family, clan, band, and tribe (Lucas 1989). In addressing this unique family pattern Lewis (1970) described the kinship structure, embodying a network of valued relationships, as one of the important keystones of the culture. The actual structure of the society included large extended families,

and children, who were highly valued, occupied a central place within it. Maternal and paternal grandfathers, uncles, aunts, and cousins all actively participated in child-rearing (Fischler 1985; Cross 1986). In the words of one grandmother:

I'm granny. Long ago, as far as I know, our people had their way of raising their families. Like we had the grandparents, we had the aunts and uncles and then we had the parents themselves. Our grandparents were there to teach us. They were our teachers. If we wanted to know something we approached our grandparents and they taught us what they knew and our aunts and uncles were the people that told us when we did something wrong. When we did something wrong it wasn't our parents that scolded us or told us what we did was wrong. It was up to the aunts and uncles. They were the ones that disciplined their nephews and nieces and I still see that sometimes today. Sometimes one of my sons when his nephews do wrong, he tells them they did wrong. He doesn't wait for the parents to tell them. He tells them. That's the way it was long ago and the parents were there just to love their kids. You gave love to your kids and your kids loved you in return. The children didn't have to be taken out of homes and when they were orphaned or the parents were sick, the rest of the family was there to just take them in and look after them. There was no such thing as who is going to take care of this child, somebody just said you can come home and live with me. I'll raise you and take care of you and that was it.



Photograph courtesy of Randal Kabatoff, Vision Images

Children were continually under the watchful eyes of tribal elders, siblings, cousins, aunts, or grandparents. As a result of this nurturing and security the Aboriginal "child's self-concept is strongly tied to his family, clan, and tribe . . . and bonds formed early within this structure" (Blanchard and

Barsh 1980: 350). Furthermore, the extended “family structure provided support for families to live in a wholesome, non-threatening way” (Lucas 1989: 9) because “child-rearing responsibilities were divided among many members of the community, and no single individual was overburdened with the care, discipline, or feeding of a child” (Cross 1986: 284). Thus, the removal of Aboriginal children deprived them of a tightly knit community of extended family and relatives who shared the task of child rearing by providing nurturing and security. This practice of separating children from parents and the parenting role model is singularly responsible for many of the problems related to child care now found among Aboriginal parents (McKenzie and Hudson 1985). We know that children learn parenting skills by the way they are parented, and Aboriginal children who spent many years in residential schools had limited experience as family members (Haig-Brown 1988). Atteneave (1977: 30) recalls that “Neither they nor their own parents had ever known life in a family from the age they first entered school. The parents had no memories and no patterns to follow in rearing children except for the regimentation of mass sleeping and impersonal schedules.” This lack of positive role modeling has taken its toll in the Aboriginal family in Canada today. According to one mother:

Being at residential school . . . parents of residential schools didn’t have the parenting skills that they had like raising their own families at home.



In addition, communities found their children changed in terms of values. Instead of fully acquiring the values, skills, language, culture, and religion of the dominant society, children became confused and this created conflicts between parents and children. Over time some graduates of residential schools began to display the effects of their education and demonstrated a lack of confidence and awareness in child rearing as they assumed their role as parents (Ing 1990). By the 1960s, a generation of Aboriginal parents who were not given the choice of raising their children began to show signs of “abrogating their responsibility as parents” (Caldwell 1979: 21). The research indicated that a pattern of expectation had developed among some Indian parents that the residential school system provided a carefree way of living without children (Metcalf 1975; Caldwell 1979). One community member recalled it this way:

It's what we lost but it's what let us in the zoo when they gave us the drink. Because we didn't look after our kids, we would rather go and drink to the bars and buy our own liquor and everything. That's when we really lost it because we didn't know how to control it. Even I wanted to send my kids to a group home . . . I wanted mine to go so I could have time to drink but they wouldn't take them because, I don't know, I was a good parent.



I think after a while families got used to not having their children and they didn't take full responsibility and the bonding wasn't really there so that took a lot of responsibility from parents and they were used to not having their children. But that's why they're suffering because there was no bonding.

It has also become clear that some Aboriginal children were subjected to starvation, incarceration, physical and sexual abuse in the course of their long separation from family (BraveHeart 1999). In a 1992 study, negative boarding school experiences were recounted by a majority of respondents and include physical abuse (58.1%), being punished for speaking Lakota (37.9%), and sexual abuse by boarding school staff (22.6%) (BraveHeart-Jordan 1995). In the words of one person:

I've heard some of those stories from older men. How they were treated. And one example was like when they went to bed or something, they were yanked out of bed in the middle of the night and dipped into ice cold water and forced to stand in the corner bare naked in front of everybody like for a day and it was just horrible. This older fellow was telling me that it happened to him. I think he was at an Alberta mission and he said he ran into one of the nuns who used to teach in there. She was in the old folks home in Northern Alberta. This was years and years later. He was already in his 50s by then and this nun saw him come into the old folks home and she said, "Oh, my son," and she was trying to be

all sweet and nice and thought he would be happy to see her and he said he looked at her and he just froze and she came up to him and he said he slapped her face. He couldn't help himself. He had all that hate and anger in him for so many years he just couldn't control it. It's just awful things to cause a person to do that to a nun. When he was a little boy in the convent he was raped every night. As a result of that how would you expect that man to even be a good father — he'd have so much hate.

This generation of young Aboriginal people is the first generation that did not attend residential schools; but because their parents and grandparents attended, they are deeply affected by the wounds and bitter memories of early childhood experiences. The breaking up of Aboriginal families has severely undermined the role of the extended family and kinship networks, causing that structure to break down, or in most cases, to be destroyed (Ing 1990). Descendants of boarding school attendees also report a history of neglect and abuse in their own childhoods, along with feelings of inadequacy as parents and confusion about how to raise children in a healthy way. This historical trauma has resulted in the impairment of culturally normative parenting styles, and a high risk for developing alcohol and drug abuse problems associated with ineffective and injurious parenting (Brave Heart 1999). The residential schools also introduced new and dysfunctional behaviors, such as the use of severe punishment in child rearing. Before the residential school era, the use of physical discipline was uncommon in most tribes, but parents who had been spanked and hit while attending residential school responded similarly to their own children. (Horejsi et al. 1992).

The nuns were so mean to little kids, when they should have just loved them, but they didn't. I remember when my mother died, they didn't comfort me.



It was the punishment that was really bad. They punished for everything: when you were lined up, you couldn't talk. . . . We were made to go to church, even if you were sick, you were still made to go sometimes. Some people would faint in church, and they would just take them out — it would add a bit of excitement, anyway.

This contrasted greatly with the general loving attitude toward all children that prevailed in Aboriginal communities prior to the residential schools, not just for one's own children, but also for all the children of the tribe. Orphans or adopted children were not mistreated or set apart by the family, but were gratefully taken in and cherished. Aboriginal people were known to accept and respect all individuals, irrespective of age or sex, not only for their abilities but also with considerable tolerance for their weaknesses (Bull, 1991). Many mothers in our talking circles spoke of the difficulty they were now experiencing with demonstrating their affection for their children.

If you go and hug someone, you can just feel the tenseness, we hardly ever had that, and that began from the residential school, I think, because we never loved one another that way.



Photograph courtesy of
Ranidul
Kahatoff, Vision Images

They (our children) don't realize how hard we had it and they think we are just neglecting them. We just don't know how to show our affection to them. We don't know how and that's hard.

Another mother described her efforts at demonstrating a capacity for affection and love with the following anecdote:

I feel the need to teach the young people today. They don't understand the love that we have for them and I think that they need to know that we love them. Our children have

been affected by our not knowing how to show our love for them. They need the hugs and to hear that we love them because we don't know how. As soon as you try to hug somebody well you feel bad. Our parents did not show it to us because they were not there and it makes children think that they are not loved but they are but it is we who don't know how to show it. We need to put that love back. I helped my daughter with a group of people about 3 or 4 days ago and one of my nieces asked me what kind of soup it was and I said love soup. I made it with love. The parents are suffering too because they were raised without the love that they should have had. . . . I think sometimes we feel that if we tell our children that they might say well, what are you talking about. You never showed it . . . that's one thing that the convent took away from us. They were never parents and they never gave birth to a kid.

Many Aboriginal people who left the residential school system feared to speak their language and so failed to teach the language and traditional ways to their children. Haig-Brown (1988: 286) states, "As adults many consciously did not teach their children an Aboriginal language so that they might avoid the punishments incurred through its use at school." One of the tragedies of this fear of speaking one's Aboriginal language is the failure to take advantage of what a culture offers to help ease the hardship of parenting. In former times, an intricate network of relatives could be depended on to help in child rearing. There has been a breakdown in traditional and cultural child-rearing patterns. Near loss or loss of language and the fear of speaking it has affected these belief systems and child-rearing values. In the words of one community member:

As an Aboriginal nation and Canadians we should be proud who we are and teach our children to know who they are and I think once they know that who they are . . . they will make progress and they will be proud of themselves and there wouldn't be so much low self-esteem. Before the



Photograph courtesy of University of Alberta

white man came we survived. We need to teach our children to be proud of who they are and to identify themselves as Aboriginal people so they can be proud people.

Dakota Elder Eva McKay of Sioux Valley states,

"It's true that the residential school life has altered the traditional way of our people and was the beginning of the breaking up of traditional family life. We came out confused . . . and the hurt that we did not bring out but hid within us became a reality later in life (Assembly of First Nations 1989).

The remainder of this section of the paper will describe in further detail how the course that was developed finally unfolded and will provide some comments from the students who participated.

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL COURSE

Survivors of the residential schools from the Sturgeon Lake community who were involved in the journey were invited to share their experience with the residential school system, and their perception of its impact on themselves, their families and their community at the onset of this otherwise web



Participants in the course on residential schools.

based course. In a spirit of reciprocity, students were given an opportunity to present and share their learning with each other and with the participants of the first class at the end of the course. This provided a final opportunity for a dialogue that generated recommendations for the future based upon the collective wisdom of the participants. The following six Sturgeon Lake community members shared their experience and wisdom for two days with

students. We are grateful to the following individuals: Florestine Chowace, David Nabew, Peter Kiyawasew, Joe Moses, Elsie Moses and Lena Standing Ribbon.



Participants in the course on residential schools.

The following are selected postings on an electronic discussion board derived from students on this course. It is clear that the contribution of our friends from Sturgeon Lake had a powerful emotional impact on students' appreciation for the meaning of this experience.



Today's class was very powerful. The speakers from Sturgeon Lake were extremely effective at displaying the hardships endured in residential schools. The guest speakers were very courageous to tell their stories about what occurred in the residential schools. It is very sad to know that people were treated so poorly. Many of the speakers talked about how everything changed when they went to residential schools. From the sounds of it this is definitely true. I just find it so amazing that all of the speakers were able to share their experiences with our class after all that went on in residential schools. I commend everyone for having the strength and courage to share their stories. I know that I was touched especially to feel the courage that was portrayed by all of the speakers.



I was so exhausted after class yesterday I came home and slept for several hours. I feel so humbled at the courage of those wonderful elders who shared their heartbreaking stories with us and I thank them from my heart. I try to feel what those children suffered, to empathize with their experience of losing the comfort of family, of being punished for speaking their language of suffering the abuse. I can only weep for them, listen empathetically, and weep with them. But that

is not enough! David asks that we find additional ways to support the healing process and that is my goal.



It is evident that this community has been doing a lot of work for the last several years, and through this project, they continue their healing journeys. The ultimate goal is to create a healthy community that is balanced in all aspects — mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual.



Thank you for sharing your family's story. I've always been impressed with the Native attitude about child rearing. A child is a special gift for the whole family and there is no parental attitude about power and control. Children are recognized to be individuals, not possessions of the parents, from the time they are born. The children who were scooped up and taken to the mission schools must have been in shock at the very different attitudes of their new caregivers, no touching, no love and harsh punishment for what had been normal "daily living" actions. Everything that nurtured them (i.e. smiles, laughter, familiar foods, and an unregimented daily routine) was gone replaced by a cold, frightening environment. I'm sure most of them would have gone into a deep depression and I marvel that so many found the strength to survive. It would have been better if the acculturation process had been reversed. The world of the mooniyas would have benefited from the Native childcare methods.



I would like to thank everyone who spoke to the religion aspect, as your thoughts have helped me broaden my understanding and perspective. The part about the picture that hangs on the Blue Quills wall really struck me. I can't even imagine seeing something like that let alone being a child and seeing it and being taught to change who you are or you will go to hell.



Perhaps Shakespeare said it best, "The evil that we do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones" (Mark Anthony's words from Julius Caesar). While there may have been some good people involved in the residential schools their memory will cast a fading shadow in comparison to those who caused such harm to so many. I'm constantly reminded of the Jewish Holocaust experience and I'm old enough to remember the liberation of those who survived the death camps, the Nuremberg Trials, the capture, trial and execution of Adolph Eichmann. (All of which set off the same kinds of emotions as this discussion board.) I know that one of the important healing techniques for many of the survivors was to be able to talk about the atrocities committed against them and have the world recognize those individuals for the evil people they were (even though some were already dead). Maybe it's time for recognition — of both the good and the bad individuals who operated the residential schools. It bothers me

that the finger is pointed primarily at the institutions (i.e., the schools, churches, and government) when (if I'm getting the right message) the wrongs were committed by individuals on individuals. And if there were good people in positions of power how could they stand by when this abuse was taking place? I'm trying to understand the alternative point of view but, so far, I haven't read much that justifies the events as related by the survivors.



Wow, these stories and the ones in the readings are so sad! As a mother I could not imagine how they felt, especially for the generation of parents who had been forced to live in the residential schools themselves. I too had a similar frightening experience at age 5 to stay in the hospital without parents and I had nightmares for a long time afterwards — so I am filled with compassion for those kids who were tortured, abused, and who were so lonely all the time. I hope to help survivors of this horrible system.



I strongly agree with you that the healing process of the Aboriginal people should be a shared responsibility. An apology from institutions that enforced residential school would be a part of that responsibility and would significantly contribute to the healing process. I also share your skepticism that an apology won't happen soon. I am not a pessimist. I just think that the value system of people who made residential school does not allow them to see what they have done. That does not make them less responsible for their actions rather it tells us what should be included in the global changes of our society. We have to redefine what is what, how we value our relationships, health, environment. What our priorities are materialistic or spiritual or some kind of balance of these two. So I think that people who made and supported the system of residential schools and who exercise their power in contemporary society are the same kind of people. They are raised in their families to see the world as made of "dominant vs. submissive" relationships. They thought that being dominant is good.



I hope that First Nations people will learn to trust and work alongside us non-Native Social workers — there is more power in numbers and alliances, plus we can learn a lot from each other. Many people are interested in Native healing and the four principles: dialogue, consensus, decision, and action.

While it is difficult to select representative comments from numerous and thoughtful postings that have been made, it seems clear that it is possible to create community between social work students and



members of a community that has survived the oppressive structures of the residential schools and the Indian Act. I have seen a profound change in many of our students as they learned to understand what these people had undergone and the influence that this has had on their lives today. It was been a profoundly moving experience for all of us, and we are grateful.

Ultimately, some of our community members have:



Found a safe place where they feel they belong and where they feel free to tell their stories.



Come to realize that they all have important gifts to share.



Become increasingly empowered to assume responsibility for their lives.



Come to the realization that they can improve their lives and those of their families by making better choices.

Combined vision with action in a desire to move ahead in the improvement of life in their community.

PHASE 3- HEALING AND RECONCILIATION

As the community members shared their experiences in the residential schools and their stories were transcribed and shared with others, a greater awareness of the impact of the abuses experienced in the residential schools upon individuals, families and the community as a whole was created. This information was made available to community leaders who have acknowledged that healing from these experiences should be a community priority. Our journey was intended to help create a clear vision of the kind of community desired by the Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation. We believed that the core of this vision was rooted in the stories of the people in this community regarding their contact with oppressive systems such as the Residential Schools and Child Welfare historically and currently. Therefore, one of the necessary activities was to hear and to collect these stories. We believe that this has formed a solid foundation for the next phase of our journey.

As the Sturgeon Lake Community reflected upon its situation it gained a desire to assume increased responsibility for the problems that affect its children and families. Many community members have been significantly involved in the identification of these issues and wish to improve their situation. A community meeting provided an opportunity for community members to share their views with each other and to provide a common base of information to serve as the foundation to guide this stage of the change process.

The purpose of this meeting was to provide information about the origins and the broad intent of the proposed change process; to hear the views of participants, all of whom were survivors of the residential school system, concerning the Project; and to invite their participation. The information generated from these activities formed the foundation for the next stage of the change process. This session helped to inform our vision of the kind of healthy community desired by the Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation. Community members stressed that the authoritarian and emotionally distant approach of the residential schools created relationships based upon shame, fear, and punishment that in turn have created low self-esteem, confusion, rivalry, and the denial of identity and culture among the people.

They see the results today in:



The pain of abandonment

The loss of culture and language



Lack of parenting

Lack of love experienced as children



Inward pain

Sickness of mind



Imbalance of mind and spirit

Emotional, physical, and sexual abuse



Family breakdown

Difficulty in creating and maintaining relationships

In addition, the following issues arose that need to be addressed:



Some feel that the residential school issues are nothing but “old bones” that should be left alone. They did not feel that talking about such things will help, and they fear that they will simply resurrect painful memories.



There are walls of mistrust and dishonesty between people.

There is a sense of hopelessness among many.



The residential school experience has stripped us of who we are.

There is a fear of the police.



There is a loss of traditional sense of sharing.

There is a sense of undue entitlement on the part of some people.

Traditional healing methods and the wisdom of the elders will inform the process that will be undertaken. This will help to ensure that the wisdom and

experience of those who have come before us guide us. The common sense of those who have suffered from these painful experiences and who have since transcended this pain can be expected to provide them with the strength to be of service to those who have not yet reached this stage in their lives. Some participants have found a safe place where they feel they belong and where they feel free to tell their stories. They have come to realize that they have important gifts to share and are more willing to assume responsibility for their own lives. Survivors will build upon the inner strengths that they discover in the healing process that has begun, in part, with a series of helping networks that foster clear and helpful communication between community members. Self-help and empowerment are the community's primary goals.

We are seeking new ways to create a younger generation that is well prepared for life in both worlds. As the seventh generation — the one capable of change, it is time we recognize and support their leadership and empower them to create the change that is necessary if we are to survive as a healthy people. We can do this by finding better ways to treat them as gifts of the creator, and by supporting the family, the school and the community in nurturing, protecting and guiding them.

We hope to break the intergenerational cycle initiated by the residential schools by learning healthier ways of relating to each other — in and between families, between peers and with our community. One of the ways that is being contemplated is the creation of cultural camps in the bush for youth and elders. A great deal of community support exists for the notion of bringing youth and the elders together to reinforce a stronger connection to Aboriginal tradition and culture before this generation of elders disappears. It is felt by many that the “baby elders,” who are heavily involved in this initiative, will play an important role in this process. This generation is now taking on the necessity to “parent their parents,” and carry a dual role with them and their children.

It was felt that the best setting for this to occur is in year round cultural camps in the bush, where youth would be outside of their usual environment and more receptive to some of the important messages that need to be imparted to them. The camps could promote a greater understanding of their history, the learning of the Cree language, traditional crafts, gathering and using healing herbs, and traditional fishing, hunting and trapping skills.

Because some elders were considered to be afraid of change and lacked trust, it was suggested that the youth could help to rebuild this sense of trust with the elders. More specifically, youth related to a particular elder could be enlisted to approach that person to ask for their help and contribution to

this work. The following possibilities have also been raised in the course of our meeting with community:



Involve the community more greatly in determining the school curriculum. The school curriculum could be expanded to help youth recognize family and community behaviours that have resulted from the residential school experience. The school curriculum should be expanded to include traditional healing knowledge, as well as the culture and history of the community.



Work with local nurses/doctors and elders to teach youth the power of nature's hidden gifts (local herbs).



Find ways for youth to learn more about the history of the community and to gather the ancestral knowledge located in the collective memory of the elders.



To continue the collection and documentation of stories to build a stronger sense of community identity and cohesiveness.



To finalize the documentation of the community healing journey in the form of a book and film.



To use an appreciative inquiry approach to community development that seeks to build upon community strengths and assets rather than working from a deficiency perspective. Thus far community residents have identified the following strengths as a starting point:



Artistic Ability

Music

Singing

Dance

Acting

Many community members are well educated.

We have many smart people, whether or not they are formally educated.

The bounty of nature surrounding us could enable us to be self-sufficient in the event of a natural catastrophe.



Talking circles should be instituted and hugging should be encouraged as a way of communicating affection.



Workshops should be held to educate professionals regarding the impact of the residential school experience.

Public education regarding the residential school syndrome should take place.



We need to find new ways of healing from the legacy of pain.

Provide forums wherein the elders can share within a climate of safety.



Trust building among ourselves



Identify the issues

Deal with them

Build healthier relationships



Create greater visibility of the issue by such means as:



Bring out the residential school pictures

Find ways to describe and celebrate local history

Bring forth the messages of the survivors

Find new ways to come together and build community



Community picnics

Support the formation of women's groups

Explore new ways to have everyone contribute so the same people do not always have to carry the load when they volunteer for the community



Create a sense of appreciation for what people contribute to their community

Create a loving community where we can learn to love nature, the animals and each other



Create hope

Learn to own our behaviours

Community participants have identified the following outcomes that could result from this project. These will guide the overall direction of this project and ultimately serve as a set of indicators of success.



Understanding

Acceptance

Feeling of self-worth

Capacity to accept compliments

Learning to own our behaviour

Learning to love nature, animals

To see hope flow into our lives

Finding ways to come together as community

Respect

Self-esteem

Sense of belonging

The following specific outcomes are proposed:

✓ Existing self-help groups for survivors will be supported and maintained, and additional support systems and helping networks will be established.

✓ Community members will develop an increased capacity to generate creative solutions to community and family problems and to the long-range issues that require attention, as community problem-solving skills improve.

✓ Sharing circles will be instituted that will invite representatives of the residential school systems, child welfare systems and other systems that have been experienced as oppressive, to participate in an experience of reconciliation.

✓ Traditional cultural approaches will be explored and implemented where feasible.

✓ The community will be provided with an opportunity to examine the important parallels between Judeo-Christian and traditional Aboriginal spirituality to assist in resolving the ongoing ambivalence of many Aboriginal people in this regard.

✓ The self-esteem and feeling of potency of community members will be enhanced.

✓ New training programs and workshops will be developed and implemented for local people interested in the healing process, with an increased emphasis on the rediscovery of traditional approaches.

✓ Survivors of the residential school system will participate in the delivery of a new course for health and social services professionals that has been created to assist them in working more effectively at a community healing level.

The development of peer support circles will provide an ongoing source of support to community members that are expected to last long beyond the funded portion of this initiative.

It is anticipated that the use of an appreciative inquiry model of community practice will focus the community on its strengths, and create a legacy of positive approaches to the community. The development of an attitude that views the community from the perspective of the “glass half-full rather than half-empty” should serve to socialize community members to view themselves as assets to the community rather than as a collection of needs.

Our long-range plan is to publish a book that describes the experiences of the survivors of residential school survivors and their descendants. This

book would not only focus on the negative dimensions of these experiences, but also on the creative coping strategies that people have developed to deal with the challenges life has presented to them. This information in turn can be used to inform the production of a film with the ultimate purpose of serving as a rallying point for the community by mirroring their reality for themselves and as a vehicle for the achievement of a greater spirit of reconciliation between Aboriginal people and mainstream society.

The Sturgeon Lake Journey Toward Empowerment continues, and while we have many plans, it is ultimately difficult to anticipate all of the potential outcomes that can evolve. Like all journeys, it is subject to detours, potential roadblocks, and the creation of new avenues and roadways; the blazing of new trails by courageous adventurers who do not fear facing the unknown.

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COMMUNITY OF STURGEON LAKE CONSENT

Dr. Jean LaFrance has accompanied the Sturgeon Lake community on its Journey toward Empowerment from its inception. It has been understood that in addition to sharing this Journey with our community, he will carry our words and experiences to helping professionals who need to more fully understand how we arrived at this stage of our Journey. While his role as a researcher is in some respects separate and distinct from that of his adoption into our community, we endorse and support the conveyance of our experiences to academic and professional audiences, in the hope that this will create a greater understanding and appreciation for the challenges in family and community living that we face on a daily basis. It is in this spirit that the Sturgeon Lake community lends its support for the description of our Journey in this publication.

A COMMUNITY COMMENT

The strength of this manuscript lies in its presentation of a community process designed to assess the community's strengths, needs and commitment to a healing journey. It lays out the major issues affecting Aboriginal communities that have survived the impact of residential schools and demonstrates the value of communities, through individuals, speaking out about their experiences. The author describes the process of community mobilization in the spirit of community action research and addresses the need for a balance of power between academia and the community. The author could have further expanded on the role of the researcher in the community process to further illuminate the intricacies of this relationship and the need for community ownership over all types of research activities. A number of important policy issues are raised concerning the child welfare system, residential schools, and community outcomes. The quotes from community members are excellent and add depth and flavour to the article.

