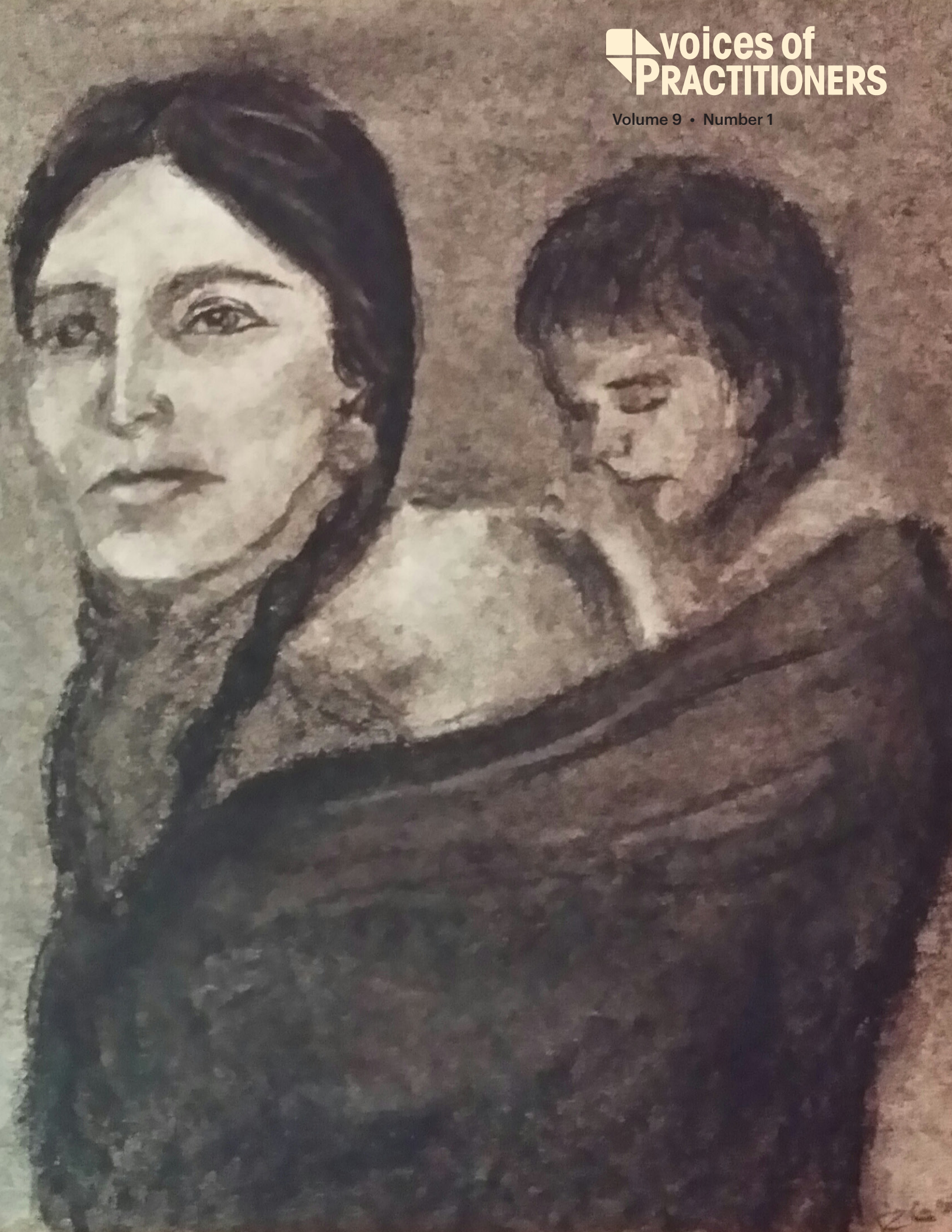
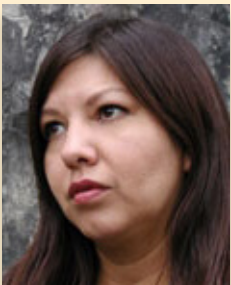


 **voices of
PRACTITIONERS**

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Finding Our Voices Through Narrative Inquiry: Exploring a Conflict of Cultures



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Opening artwork © Renetta Goeson.

“Let us put our minds together to see what life we can make for our children”

—Tatanka Iyotaka-Sitting Bull

As a director of a tribal Head Start program in South Dakota, I encountered problematic and often contradictory tensions centered on my roles as an early childhood program director, a graduate student at South Dakota State University, and a Native American female seeking to change current constructions of what it means to educate young children in my culture. My goal at the outset of this exploration was to construct a better understanding of how the historical and cultural experiences of my tribal community have influenced current views of early childhood education on my reservation, Lake Traverse.

I chose to explore these influences through narrative inquiry, because it is a method that is culturally relevant to the Dakota people—our stories keep us connected to the past and the future. What follows is a description of my narrative inquiry and its impact as a transformational learning experience. This story, which I tell and retell through images, photos, poetry, autobiography, and other forms of representation, is both mine and that of those who have lived and remembered what it was like to be educated in my tribe.

The story begins, with teacher inquiry

Defined as practice-focused inquiry, teacher inquiry emerges when teachers stumble upon a unique and often troubling matter of concern, something that puzzles and perplexes. It is in this stumbling, according to Paley, that teachers may be astonished and transformed; they will never be quite the same (1997, viii). Teacher inquiry is a stance, an attitude, a way of being in the classroom and in the profession that turns the world of research on teaching upside down (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009).

For me, teacher research has allowed a wide range of big questions, like “Who am I as a teacher?” “What does it mean to be a teacher?” “What is my image of the child, and is it consistent with the way I teach?” In other words, teacher research has helped us teachers to recover our voices and reclaim our knowledge and understanding of what we do as a central and legitimate source of knowledge about teaching.

If you are a teacher, at any level, you understand that what is defined as “good teaching” is largely determined by others, not teachers themselves. Those outside our classrooms and schools set the expectations for what the curriculum should be, how children should learn, how learning is assessed, and whose knowledge is of most worth. How ironic this is when teachers are the central sources of knowledge about teaching and their classrooms. Who, as Vivian Paley (1997) reminds us, better understands the demands and rewards, the conflicts and triumphs, the problems and challenges, and the moments of insight and enlightenment that are experienced every day in the complex and context-specific world of teaching? It’s not that no one but the teacher can understand the intricacies of teaching; rather, it is the case that no one else can understand it in the way individual teachers do, in their own settings.

Questions that guided my research were:

- ◆ What are the often contradictory tensions between my role as a director, a graduate student, and a Native American female who seeks to change current constructions of what it meant to educate young children in her culture?
- ◆ How has this narrative inquiry enhanced my understanding of early childhood education and my role as a program director?

Collecting and analyzing data

I employed various methods of inquiry to study how early childhood education in my tribal community has been defined historically, personally, and through the insights and views of others in the tribe. These methods allowed me to both tell my story and to listen to the stories of others in order to make sense of the experiences (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr 2007).

- ◆ Data collection, which occurred during 2011–2013, consisted of
- ◆ listening to the stories of elders and tribal leaders;
- ◆ writing an autobiographical account of my own experiences and views.
- ◆ collecting artifacts, images, photos, and poetry
- ◆ notetaking; taking notes in the moment and analyzing them later for meaning

Notetaking. I kept a small notebook with me, wherever I was. If something made me think of my childhood on the reservation or another aspect of my inquiry, I would jot it down and date it. I am particularly sensitive to images and objects in my environment. For example, in an airport I saw a mural that reminded me of our culture’s Wintercount (see below), and while on a camping trip a feather floating down influenced a decision I had to make.

Data analysis and interpretation processes, or as Connelly and Clandinin describe (2006), moving from field texts (data) to research texts (means of representing and making public the data) were systematic, intentional, and involved continual and critical reflection. In paying attention to the personal, historical, and social aspects of my inquiry, I moved backward and forward in time, focusing both inward and outward between the personal and social. I studied how the educational program and practices in my Head Start center related to the local and cultural context.

This process has included careful reflection on the roles of the extended family; the elders whose stories hold the truths, values, and beliefs important to life in our culture; and the boarding schools, all of which have influenced the current narrative on early education in my tribe. Looking carefully at my notes, journal entries,



A Wintercount was used to tell a story of happenings over time—it was a journal of sorts. Photo courtesy of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian.

Twelve Values of the Oyate

- **Woohda—Respect:** Treat others the best that you can, even better than yourself
- **Wowicake—Truth:** Always say what's right, do not lie
- **Woyuonihan—Honor:** Act in a way that those who know you will be proud of you
- **Canteyuke—Generosity:** Give of what you have, especially to elders, the sick, and those who do not have
- **Woksape—Wisdom:** Don't be foolish, use what you know for good, so you won't be sorry
- **Wowausida—Compassion:** Be kind to others as if it were you
- **Wicowahba—Humility:** Don't think of yourself better than others
- **Wakisakapi—Fortitude:** Be so strong inside that nothing will stop you.
- **Wakitanpi—Perseverance:** Don't quit, no matter how hard, keep on going
- **Wosnapi—Sacrifice:** Sometimes, you have to give up your own for someone else
- **Wowaditaka—Bravery:** Don't be afraid of anything, be braver than the thing that scares you the most
- **Wastedaka—Love:** Always act out of love and kindness, not hate

interview transcripts, personal reflections, and oral stories, I constructed my own narrative, using such story conventions as scene and plot. I represent my inquiry through beautiful images and photographs that tell the story of meaningful moments in the history of my tribe. This form of representation has power in its aesthetics and ability to provoke feelings in both the inquirer and audience, and it is a form of representation that has emerged from my artistic eye and identity as an individual. Further, visual

representation of ideas and thought is consistent with tribal ways of knowing. For example, the Wintercount picture shown here depicts historical story-keeping through images.

Listening to my elders

To understand my story, you as the reader must first know my background. As one of our elders described the Great Sioux Nation, comprised of the Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota peoples:

Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota peoples:

'Dakota' derives from 'WoDakotah,' which means 'harmony,' 'a condition of being at peace with oneself and in harmony with one another and with nature,' and 'a condition of lifestyle patterned after the natural order of nature.' Within the three major divisions of the Dakota/Lakota/Nakota Nation, there are seven major bands, who are referred to as the Seven Council Fires.



Two important historical and current factors of the tribal culture are the sacred act of learning in children's experiences and the explorative nature of their environment. The child herself is considered sacred as well:

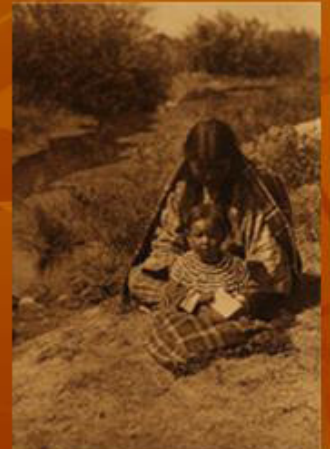
A child was considered sacred having arrived from the spiritual realm. A child was respected and treated as capable of understanding the most important part of living on this earth—the spiritual nature of life. (Morrison & Locke-Flying Earth 2003)

Historical Perspectives

Early Childhood



Children were seen as
Wakayeja or "Sacred Beings"



Elders played an important part of the child's life. Also, they held all the legends and stories that were important in lessons in life.



As the great Native American writer and Sioux tribesman Charles Alexander Eastman stated, “Children must early learn the beauty of generosity. They are taught to give what they prize most, that they may taste the happiness of giving.” His work *Indian Child Life* (1915) offers further insight on historical perspectives of how children were taught, as these excerpts demonstrate:

No people have a better use of their five senses than the children of the wilderness. We could feel and taste as well as we could see and hear. Nowhere has the memory been more fully developed than in the wild life.

As a little child, it was instilled into me to be silent and reticent. This was one of the most important traits to form in the character of the Indian.

I was made to respect the adults and especially the aged. I was not allowed to join in their discussions, nor even to speak in their presence, unless requested to do so. Indian etiquette was very strict, and among the requirements was that of avoiding the direct address. A term of relationship or some title of courtesy was commonly used instead of the personal name by those who wished to show respect.

For more information on the history and context of our culture see Appendix A, “**The Seven Council Fires,**” and Appendix B “**Background and History of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Sioux Tribe.**”



The boarding school era: Life for the children was about to change . . .



Students on the steps of Pipestone Indian Training School, 1893. Both my maternal and paternal grandmothers attended school here involuntarily. Photo used by permission of the Minnesota Historical Society.

School Days



Hard work was part of the day. Photo used by permission of the Minnesota Historical Society.

“Anniversary Day, 1880”

This poem was featured in *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* by David Wallace Adams. It was written by a boarding school teacher, in which she put into words the sentiments she presumed the children were feeling.

Anniversary Day, 1880

Are we the same boys
Who, with trinkets and toys,
Moccasins, blankets, and paint,
And a costume most quaint,
On the 6th of October,
The long journey over,
Came to this friendly roof,
One year ago?

Yes we are the very same
Who to these good Barracks came,
Where kindly friends a welcome gave us,
Did all they could to teach, and save us,
From idle habits, and bad ways.
And Carry us safely through the maze
Of reading, writing, and of talking
And even have improved our walking.
This we learned dat dress-parade,
Where, like soldiers, we are made
To face, and march, counter-march,
While the Band under the arch
Of the stand...
With their bugles and coronets, cymbals and drum,
Play old “A,B,C,”-then with double quick run
To our quarters we go,
And you hardly would know we’re the very same boys,
Who, on the 6th of October,
The long journey over,
Came to this friendly roof,
One year ago.

In the past, native children as young as 3 years old from the United States and Canada were forcibly taken from their families and relocated to residential schools. In 1891, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs was authorized to “Make and enforce . . . such rules and regulations as will ensure the attendance of Indian children of suitable age and health at schools established and maintained for their benefit.” The boarding school era continued for five generations, from the late 1800s to about 1980. The boarding schools were a form of ethnic cleansing, as journalist Charla Bear details:

The federal government began sending American Indians to off-reservation boarding schools in the 1870s, when the United States was still at war with Indians. An Army officer, Richard Pratt, founded the first of these schools. He described his philosophy in a speech he gave in 1892 . . . ‘Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.’ . . . Students at federal boarding schools were forbidden to express their culture—everything from wearing long hair to speaking even a single Indian word. (2008)

Children were robbed of their names, their hair, their clothing, their language and their ways to express emotion. The boarding school teachers, meanwhile, thought they were performing a great service (see Box, “Anniversary Day, 1880”).

The intent was to completely change people as part of a larger plan to overcome the Indians

There was a very conscious effort to recruit the children of leaders, essentially to hold those children hostage. The idea was it would be much easier to keep those communities pacified with their children held in a school somewhere far away. (Lomawaima, in Bear 2008)

Half did not survive the experience. Children were abused, such as made to kneel on a broomstick for hours, deprived of food, beaten, and forced to work long hours in the fields—up to 10 hours a day—doing back-breaking work.

The boarding school experience left its mark on my family, and in that way it is incorporated into my own psyche as well. My grandmother's telling of her experience touched me deeply. Once, when my grandmother was 6 years old, she asked a teacher about a friend who had been missing for a couple of days. She was told harshly "She's not here, is she?" In other words—it was none of her business. The following is an excerpt from an interview with my grandmother Amelia (Owen) German (1908–1992), conducted in February 15, 1991.

Oyate Elder Elden Lawrence (Author's Uncle)

The following is an interview transcript from the Minnesota Historical Society. Elden Lawrence is Renetta's uncle.

Dr. Lawrence grew up near the town of Peever on the Sisseton Wahpeton Reservation in South Dakota. His career teaching Dakota history at the tribal college led him to re-search his own family history. His parents were forced to deny their roots, but Elden [like his niece, Renetta] used his research to reclaim his pride as a Dakota person.

One of the things that happened in my early life is that my parents were both what I call victims of the boarding school system. A lot of people like to call them the products but they are not actually the products, they are the victims and I'm the product because, because of the boarding schools, my parents would talk to themselves in their native language but when we would come into the house they would start talking in English. They never taught us anything about the culture or the history because they thought it was just going to be more of a problem for us. So they figured if we didn't learn it then we wouldn't have to confront it. And so I . . . because of that I never learned a whole lot but in addition to that and because of the way that we had to live in those days . . . being Indian was just a bad thing. . . You didn't go into public places unless you really had to. That was the domain for white people. Indians usually walked in the alleys and just stayed off the main street.

Source: Minnesota Historical Society, 2009. "In Search of Lorenzo Lawrence." Video Podcast transcript. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cS1nyOoOAO>

When I was six years old, I was forced to go away to a boarding school in Pipestone, Minnesota. They came to the reservations and took all the Native American children and put us on a train and sent us off to school. This school was no good, it was like a prison. We had to get up early and march in a line to breakfast. After breakfast we had to do the dishes then we went to school all day. We could only speak English, if we were caught speaking our Native language we were punished. Many of the students could not speak English very well, because they only spoke their Native language at home, so this was very difficult for them. At night we had to clean our dormitories, we worked very hard and were watched closely. We were all very tired most of the time and very homesick. We were treated very badly. I only went to school there for a year, but it seemed like a very long time.

My uncle Elden Lawrence spoke eloquently of this dark time as well, and its long-lasting effect on our people. As he stated, "Because of the boarding schools, my parents never taught us the language and they never taught us anything about the culture or the history." His words have been captured for posterity by the Minnesota Historical Society (see Box).

Eventually, this era did come to an end:

In the 1960s, a congressional report found that many teachers still saw their role as civilizing American Indian students, not educating them. The report said the schools still had a 'major emphasis on discipline and punishment.' . . . [S]cathing government reports led to the closure of most of the boarding schools. (Bear 2008)

Woyake mitawa (my story)

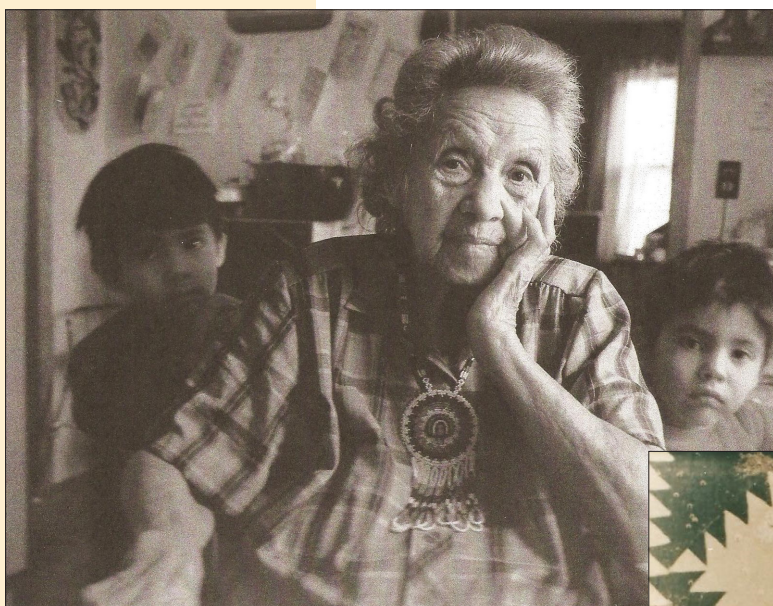
My own story begins with my name. Who am I? My Dakota name is Pte Duta Win (Red Buffalo Woman); this name was given to me by a Wakan Wicasta (Medicine Man) later in life. Typically a person receives their Dakota name as a child, however, for unknown reasons my parents did not give me one while I was young.

To the Dakota people, one's name is very important. It is commonplace to have both an English and a Dakota name. My English name, Renetta, was derived from blending the names of two tribal elders, Rena DeCoteau and Etta Thompson, as they both requested that my mother name me after them. It is an honor to be named after such respected and strong Dakota women, who have made a positive impact on the community. Rena was a caring mother and grandmother, and Etta was part of the first Human Service Board on the Lake Traverse Reservation. Her commitment to the health of the community has left a legacy. I am very proud to be their namesakes.

Growing up among the trees, I have a deep respect for them not only because they are deeply rooted in Mother Earth, but also because I symbolically view a tree's roots as my ancestors, the beginning of our story of who we are as family. I am but one branch of this tree.



© Renetta Goeson



Paternal Grandmother,
Bessie Ironheart



The above photo is of Grandma Bessie (far left) with her mother Myrtle, brother Vernie, and sister Mary. She too was a student of the Pipestone Boarding School, taken there involuntarily at a very young age, soon after this photo was taken.



Grandmother Amelia
(Owen) German

Photos courtesy of the author's family.

My memories of my early childhood years are happy ones. My family are all members of the Sisseton-Wahpeton tribe, and include five siblings (four sisters and one brother who has taken the spiritual journey), mother Marlene, father Dwight, maternal grandparents Amelia and Jack German, and paternal grandparents Herbert and Bessie Ironheart. My ancestors who have been prominent in tribal history include Chief Cloud Man and Chief Ironheart; however, all of my relations are very important, as they all have contributed to who I am. I strive to honor my family and ancestors every day in the work I do and by making positive contributions to society as they have.

I grew up in a community called Big Coulee, comprised of vast rolling hills, ravines, and trees. This became my classroom—an educational center with endless learning possibilities. One of my fondest memories is playing outdoors until nightfall, exploring seemingly untouched land in what we called “Big Pasture,” situated outside our back door. Tipi rings from long ago remained visible, some with rocks encircling their circumference. The ground was indented in large circular divots made by my ancestors who dwelled in these nomadic homes. These historical spaces evoked thoughts of what life was like for children, long ago.

I attended Head Start as a child, on the reservation where I would later teach. The image of “school” spilled into my early childhood education at Head Start. The teachers there were themselves students of the boarding schools.

As I look back on the program’s outdoor environment, or what was commonly called the “playground,” it felt confining/inhibiting and artificial in contrast to the openness, freedom, and interesting challenges I had experienced in the natural environment. I recall structures with “prescribed activities.” For example, my playground memories include slides and swings and bars for swinging and climbing; these structures promote one modality of experience. I recall my teachers reminding us “We go down the slide, not up it.” Many of these structures had limited possibilities. Like my cousin who received a bloody nose while swinging across a stream on a vine on one of our childhood adventures in Big Coulee, I have many scars from childhood. But the memories that stay with me the most into adulthood are the rich experiences of the day as I freely explored the natural environment: the senses I recall, the warmth of the air, the feeling of the grass beneath me, the aroma of the honeysuckle and sage, the power of the beautiful environment, and the sacred bond of learning with my childhood friends and relatives. These far exceed any pain I can recall from my injuries.

A conflict of cultures

I entered the Lake Traverse Reservation Head Start program as a child, and as an adult became a teacher, Education Manager, and Head Start Program Director. I was a teacher for four years, an education manager for eight years, and a director for almost 8 years.

Although it was not its intent, when Head Start began on my reservation it initially echoed the boarding school approach. Even though the teachers were members of the tribe, I experienced a disconnect from my culture. For example, upon arrival we were forced to change our shoes into shoes provided by the school, which were all the same. We spent a lot of time in lines. I was forced to eat food that was foreign to me. My choices were taken away; I wasn't allowed time to explore freely, either inside or outside the center, and this was valued in our culture. There was a disconnect between my home and school. Had they engaged my family in the curriculum planning and individualized practice they would have found out that I loved to draw, dance, and enjoyed music and animals. Teachers made arbitrary decisions. It wasn't a child-initiated, teacher supported environment, and I didn't feel valued or respected.

Along the way, as Head Start director I reflected on these experiences and my perspective on early childhood education changed; I began to question how things were done. Some of the things I observed caused tension. No matter how much I tried to get teachers to see that there was a more meaningful way of interacting and helping children grasp concepts, they reverted to the “drill and kill” methods of teaching of yesterday—echoing the boarding schools. As Dewey eloquently questioned traditional education:

How many [children] acquired . . . skills by means of automatic drill so that their power of judgment and capacity to act intelligently in new situations was limited? . . . How many found what they did learn so foreign to the situations of life outside the school as to give them no power of control over the latter? (1938, 26–27)

Perhaps I was frustrated by their own inner challenges of the image of a teacher and child, which I couldn't change. Training was provided over and over, but the outcome for some would remain the same. Their image of teaching still resembled the boarding school. I wanted them to see teaching as it should be: an exchange of knowledge—inquiry-based teaching that asks questions and values the child's responses. As author Khaled Hosseini writes, “Children aren't coloring books. You don't get to fill them with your favorite colors.” This is true of the sacred act of teaching.

However, not all teachers employed the drill and kill method. There was a teacher who has worked at Head Start for many years whose quiet ways I admire very much; she would take opportunities for children to share a song, dance, or story. She's a treasure to the program.

Head Start today looks very different from my own personal experience as a child on the reservation. Head Start has many very positive and thoughtful standards to strengthen teacher and child interactions and parent/family and community engagement; teachers' interactions and planning must reflect the culture of the children and their family.

Through the deep knowledge I constructed through my narrative inquiry into my own culture and with support from Andy Stremmel at the university, we developed the Sisseton Wahpeton approach to early childhood education at our Head Start program. We incorporated Oyate values about children, education, and community into the curriculum.

Our curriculum was based on the following assumptions:

- ◆ Nature is an important part of the Dakota Culture.
- ◆ The circle is an important shape for our people.
- ◆ We need to be mindful of details and make sure not to disrespect anyone or anything.
- ◆ The children, parents, and elders are important resources.

Another influence on our Sisseton Wahpeton Curriculum was the Reggio approach, which fits with the culture for many reasons, including the fact that

- ◆ children are valued and respected, and seen as strong, competent, and intellectual;
- ◆ there is a sense of a community of learners for both the families and the children; and
- ◆ the Twelve Values of the Oyate (see p.5) fit beautifully with Reggio values and could be seamlessly integrated into the curriculum.

Our next step was to consult the tribal elders and solicit their suggestions:

What do you think a gathering space was like long ago?

- ◆ Pow-wows come to mind when I think of gatherings. An arbor or circular space
- ◆ Fire pits would be present
- ◆ Tipis would be a gathering space for families

What symbols or images could be incorporated in the environment?

- ◆ Artifacts like things you would find in the tipi, par fleche boxes
- ◆ Things from nature
- ◆ Places to sit

Are there things that would be inappropriate for the environment, and things we should avoid?

- ◆ Elements of a ceremonial altar, such as a buffalo skull
- ◆ Peace pipes
- ◆ Medicine wheel with the four directions colors
- ◆ Need to be respectful of those who do not participate in the traditional spirituality
- ◆ Animals are good symbols except for owls, because they are seen as bad luck

Our next step was to consult with the staff:

What could we add to the gathering space to make it more culturally relevant?

- ◆ Pictures of leaders of the past
- ◆ Music
- ◆ Medicine displays
- ◆ Pictures
- ◆ Dakota artwork and artifacts
- ◆ Drum
- ◆ Pictures of elders of the Oyate
- ◆ Legends included in the space (change from time to time)

We then consulted with the children:

What is a gathering space?

- ◆ A circle time when we get together to read a story
- ◆ Time to sing
- ◆ A thinking space

What kind of things do you think we should put into this gathering space?

- ◆ Another chair so more people can sit down
- ◆ This is a thinking space
- ◆ Carpet so it won't be so cold
- ◆ Some books to read
- ◆ Another light so we can see
- ◆ Another one of those (points to the fountain) so we can hear more water

As a director, one of the goals I focused on was to incorporate the elements of nature to our outdoor learning environment. New ideas are not always accepted or seen in a positive light, and naysayers may argue that there are dangers in creating such a space. However, many of the playground structures had limited possibilities, which sparked my interest in the “natural playground” in the early childhood birth to three setting (Rivkin & Schein 2014). As above, the vision of the outdoor learning environment was developed by a team of people, including children, parents, Head Start staff, and community members. The outdoor learning environment included elements of our culture and our language throughout the space. Through this process of reflective practice and work with the elders in our community, I have gained an appreciation and respect for the stories and the storytellers’ images of early childhood education.

In closing, I am reminded of a quote from the film *Sarah’s Key*: “When a story is told it is not forgotten. It becomes something else, a memory of who we were, the hope of what we can become.” It is my goal in my current position as a Trainer and Technical Assistance Provider for Region VI—American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start Programs to support the grantees I serve and to provide world-class services to the children and families in a culturally respectful and meaningful way.

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The Seven Council Fires

The Sisseton and Wahpeton bands are subdivisions of the eastern, or Dakota Indians and are two bands of the eastern Santee Division, who speak the Dakota language with the 'D' dialect. The other divisions of what often is referred to as the Great Sioux or Dakota/Lakota/Nakota Nation consist of the western Teton division and the middle Yankton division, who speak the 'L' and 'N' dialects respectively. The word 'Dakota' can be translated into English as 'friend,' and is the preferred identification of the Sisseton and Wahpeton bands. The Sisseton and Wahpeton Bands have erected seven torches in front of the Dakota Magic Casino's entry, and each torch is representational of each of the seven bands of the Dakota/Lakota/Nakota people. These seven torches also are representational of our seven district council communities on the Lake Traverse Reservation.

The three major divisions and bands within each segment of the Dakota nation are as follows. They are designated first by division, then by bands and any subdivisions thereof. Council fires are listed in parentheses.

Eastern Santee Division

Sisseton and Wahpeton Bands—Subdivisions of the eastern Dakota Indians and two bands of the Eastern Santee Division

1. Spirit Lake People (MdeWakantonwan)
2. Shooters Among the Leaves People (Wahpekute)
3. People Dwelling Among the Leaves (Wahpetonwan)
4. People of the Fish Village(s) (Sissetonwan)

Middle Yankton-Nakota Division

5. Dwellers at the End (Yankton Ihanktonwan)
6. Little Dwellers at the End (Yanktonai - Ihanktowanna)

Western-Teton*-Lakota Division

7. Dwellers on the Plains (Tetonwan)
- *7 Major Subdivisions of the Teton:
1. Oglala (Scatter Their Own)—Pine Ridge
 2. Sicangu (Burned Thighs)—Rosebud and Lower Brule
 3. Hunkpapa (End of Circle)—Standing Rock
 4. Mnikowoju (Planters Beside the Stream)—Cheyenne River
 5. Sisasapa (Black Foot)—Cheyenne River
 6. Oohenunpa (Two Kettle)—Cheyenne River
 7. Itazipco (Without Bows)—Cheyenne River

Background and History of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Sioux Tribe

- ◆ Around 1600, the “Sioux” called themselves The Friendly People of the Seven Council Fires. The Sioux word for “The Friendly People” was *Dakota*.
- ◆ The word *Sisseton* comes from the words *sissi* meaning “fish scales,” and *ton* meaning “village for dwellers.”
- ◆ Wahpeton comes from the word *wahpe*—“leaves”; therefore, *Wahpeton* means “people who lived in the forest among the leaves.”
- ◆ *Oyate* means the “people” or tribe.
- ◆ In 2002, the tribe changed the name from Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux Tribe to Oyate due to the negative connotation of the word Sioux.

The Lake Traverse Reservation is located in northeast South Dakota, 24 miles from the North Dakota state line and 12 miles from the Minnesota state line. The reservation is home to the descendants of the Sisseton and Wahpeton bands of the eastern Dakota (Sioux) people. These bands were signatories of the 1867 Treaty establishing a 1,493 square mile (918,779.32 acres) reservation in northeast South Dakota, central North Dakota, and Minnesota. In 1892, the federal government opened 309,913.66 acres of land for settlement to non-Indian settlers. A further reduction in reservation lands was due to the fact that many tribal members were coerced into selling their land to non-Indians during the lean years of the Great Depression. With the opening of the reservation for settlement and the sale of individually-owned Indian lands, the reservation was greatly reduced in size. Today, the Lake Traverse Reservation forms a triangle that extends from Watertown, South Dakota on the south to Rutland, North Dakota on the west to White Rock, South Dakota on the east. Presently, the Reservation encompasses portions of Roberts, Day, Marshall (where the majority of the Indian population resides), Grant, and Codrington Counties in South Dakota; extends into Sargeant and Richland Counties in North Dakota; and into Traverse County, Minnesota. Individual tribal members and the corporate Tribe own over 110,000 acres in South Dakota and approximately 2,800 acres in North Dakota. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) manages individually-owned tribal lands and the non-Indian land base is over 800,000 acres of land. As a result, the Lake Traverse Reservation is checkerboarded with non-Indian holdings. The service area of the Reservation is approximately 1,493 square miles. The federal and tribal governments have jurisdiction over the land.

The topography of the Reservation is divided into three rather specific climatic and land use regions. These regions can be described as: (1) the low land region of the Minnesota and Bois de Sioux River Valleys in the east where intensive crop and dairy farming predominates; (2) the central area of the hills of Coteau des Prairies which is characterized by parkland type vegetation with interspersions of lakes, grassland, and scrub timber. The land is used for beef cattle production and recreation; (3) the western portion is the high plains area and is characterized by extensive small grain and beef production. The Reservation contains three major watersheds.

The Coteau des Prairies is a series of rolling hills that bisects the Reservation and separates the James and Big Sioux River complex on the west (which drains into the Missouri), from the Minnesota River on the east (which flows into Big Stone Lake and eventually into the Mississippi). A low, nearly indistinguishable divide in the northern portion of the Reservation separates Lake Traverse and Big Stone Lake (which is in the Red River Basin) from the Mississippi and Missouri complex.