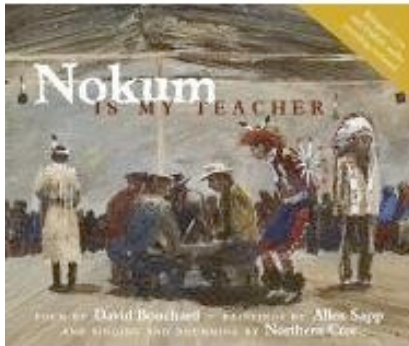


How do Practicing Teachers Understand and Define Community?

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This session focuses on an inquiry conducted with practicing teachers regarding the role of community in the curriculum. Heath (2004) noted that “the concept of *community* has been central to the American ethos since the settlement of the colonies, both as a fundamental idea and as an actual physical construct grounded in the interconnectedness of place, people, history, and purpose” (p. 146). Heath pointed out that the understanding of community may be changing and that many of today’s youth do not see their identity as that of a single ethnic group, place, or family but rather “pick and choose, change and reshape their affiliations of primary socialization” (p. 160). Teachers in today’s classrooms need to have a real understanding of community, because the implications of this understanding are critical in meeting the learning needs of our diverse population of students.

The multicultural book, *Nokum is my Teacher*, by David Bouchard was used with practicing teachers in a graduate curriculum course to examine their concepts of the role of community in the curriculum through literacy. Practicing teachers were initially asked to define curriculum and pedagogy and consider the purpose of schooling. Then *Nokum is my Teacher* was shared and students continued their thinking about pedagogy, curriculum and, especially, community as a result of reading the story.



This beautiful story, a poetic dialogue between a young aboriginal Cree boy and his “Nokum,” is told in both English and Cree. The boy wonders why he should learn to read and if there is knowledge of value outside of the reserve. His teacher has told him that “her books were key to understanding nature,” yet he has always relied on the stories and wisdom of his Nokum to teach him. He asks “do you think white world is meant for me?” and struggles with, “Do you think they care at all about our ways, about our culture?” His Nokum, who never learned to read, answers him artfully with questions that guide him to conclude that he can learn more about both worlds through reading.

We wanted to find out how candidates defined, described and envisioned community. Through a set of reflective writings these graduate students offered ideas about pedagogy, curriculum and community. We share some of their thoughts about community in particular.

- ~ “In my opinion there are two ways to interpret community: literally and figuratively. Brouchard has two literal communities, Cree...and “white world”. The figurative community that Bouchard creates is the loving relationship between the young man and his grandmother and the respect the young man has for his culture.”

- ~ “The literal definition of community is the people with whom you surround yourself.”
- ~ “Figuratively, there are common feelings that are felt when part of a group.”
- ~ “Bouchard creates a community within the text as outsiders from the mainstream cultural world of which the readers of this book are most likely to be.”
- ~ “In the story *Nokum is My Teacher* the author creates a community where there is compromise and mutual understanding.”
- ~ “Community is a group of people working together.”
- ~ “A community is a group of people who are interacting based on a belief or a purpose.”
- ~ “I think we need to create a community where all people are supported no matter what culture they live in.”
- ~ “A teacher’s moral responsibility is to help the student achieve success in the classroom by valuing his culture and presenting other cultures with the same respect.”
- ~ “It is a teacher’s moral responsibility to welcome all cultures into her classroom and to work to create a classroom atmosphere that the students can take ownership in.”
- ~ “The teacher is not only morally responsible for teaching the young man or any young student, but morally obligated to do so. Morally, she should reach out to him, by getting to know him and showing respect for his culture...She must get to know him and his family to fully explain how much freedom he has in his adjustment.”



Bouchard, D. (2006). *Nokum is my teacher*. Ill. Allen Sapp. Calgary, Alberta, Canada: Red Deer Press.

- ◆ Ânskohk Aboriginal Children's Book of the Year 2007
- ◆ Moonbeam Children’s Book Awards 2007 Bronze Medal Winner
- ◆ Alberta Children's Book of the Year nominee 2007

Heath, S. B. (2004). Ethnography in communities. In J. A. Banks & C. A. McGee Banks (Eds.) *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.