



Penny Pierce

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As I worked on this block, my thoughts centred on the years I was a teacher at Curve Lake First Nation. I remembered a father coming to the first interview at school – a bit unusual then for a father to come but his wife had just given birth.

He looked around the classroom, and commented, “It has really changed.” I thought he meant renovations to the school that had happened the year before. “No.” he said, and pointed to some Ojibwe language charts – animal pictures and words, if I recall correctly - that were on a bulletin board. “When I was a kid, we couldn’t speak Indian at school, not inside, not outside. The teacher wouldn’t let us.” (Or words to that effect – this was thirty years ago.) He was glad that we had an elder teaching Ojibwe to the children.

Later that year, as we started to plan some transition activities for the Grade 2 children who would leave the reserve to attend day school in Lakefield the following September, I became aware of the anxiety many parents felt. Then, I

thought only of ways to make the transition a safe, non-threatening event. Today, I think about it in the context of residential schools. If parents were anxious when children were 20 minutes away, and would be home after school, I wonder what sadness and grief must have been felt by parents (and extended families) in communities where their young children were taken away to school for long periods of time. I think of how empty those communities must have been, without the sounds of children playing.

I have a wealth of happy memories from my time at that school: ice fishing – with fried fish back at school after Amos caught one; Christmas concerts in the old hall (and in the classroom after the hall burned down); eating lunch by the lake; moving to the new school and the fun there when the kids found they had a cedar bush on their playground... Oh, and the day the HUGE snapping turtle came strolling across the yard and almost in the door. I could go on and on. What a privilege to have had all those experiences. I remember little of what I taught, the report cards I wrote, the learning activities I devised... It is the kids, the fun times, the sad moments – that is what lasts.

I hope the children whom I taught (and who were my teachers) have retained some fond memories of those years. While the skills and knowledge that are imparted in education are important, it has always been my belief as a teacher that the human connections, the unexpected events, the celebrations are equally important and are what live on in memory. It is another sadness of the residential school system history that there are so few good memories to be reported.

Sometime when I was at a native ceremony (a feast after a sweat lodge, I think), I was given a hair tie by a woman that I did not know. I have always loved the design the beads and shells make, and the soft colours of this piece. For my block, I have tried to copy it in fabric, but I did use some beads - I wanted the circle to sparkle. I think the design and colours convey a sense of calm movement within a safe place – like a teacher and a bunch of kids, safe and busy in their classroom, in their community. Meegwetch to the original maker; And meegwetch to Curve Lake First Nation for the happy memories.