The Unfinished Stories of Two First Nations Mothers

Maryam Moayeri | Dr. Jane Smith

Little Mary loved the busy time at the fish camp. She was piling wood by the smokehouse. Granny was filleting salmon and telling stories to Mary and her mother, who was cleaning fish. Her younger siblings were playing and laughing in a nearby field. Then the priest arrived in his long black robe. He announced that Mary and her younger brother would be attending residential school. The armload of wood was forgotten, the laughter of the children ceased, the story ended. Years later she would say, “Whatever happened to that wood?” (Mowatt, 1999)

This was also the case for Aileen and Charlotte (all names are pseudonyms), as their early stories were erased by the days of drudgery at residential school. This article focuses on the literacy practices of these two First Nations mothers, in their 50s, who live in a low-income urban Canadian neighborhood. First Nations is the current term used by aboriginal peoples in Canada to describe themselves. It replaces the words Indian and Native that are commonly used in literature about the First Nations people. This article investigates how Aileen’s and Charlotte’s cultural and childhood literacy practices, or lack thereof, have influenced their present literacy practices. These women discuss the reasons why healing is a part of their literacy practices in adult life. Their unfinished stories cannot be completed until the hurts and fears of their childhoods are expressed.

Theoretical Framework

This study is shaped by an underlying theoretical assumption that literacy is a cultural practice, shaped by and shaping social factors such as culture, gender, politics, and economics (Purcell-Gates, 1995; Street, 1984). Literacy differs amongst cultures, communities, and times, and it plays a role in shaping those times and places.

Street (1999) asserted that there are different forms of literacy in different sociocultural contexts. Barton (1994) also argued that different literacies are privileged in different institutions, which are controlled by a dominant power in each institution. Thus, literacy does not take any one form nor is
autonomous, but is multiple and ideological. Because literacy is shaped on the basis of social and cultural contexts, when looking at the Aboriginal experience with literacy, it is necessary to consider the cultural values and the historical experiences that have influenced their lives.

Furthermore, literacy is most often taught in schools as decontextualized, technical skills, and some researchers suspect that this disconnect between school literacy and home/community literacies is holding back literacy development for children, particularly those whose home literacies are undervalued and ignored by the schools (Dewey, 1956; Dyson, 2003).

Methods

This study focuses on a community that is served by one of the schools that rank in the lowest quartile of achievement in British Columbia as assessed by The Fraser Institute (www.fraserinstitute.org) and the British Columbia Ministry of Education website (www.gov.bc.ca/bced).

I interviewed 10 parents and asked them to report all of the different types of texts they read or wrote in the course of their daily lives. I asked them about their current and childhood literacy practices. I elicited information about the purpose and social content of each practice and whether it was an important or fulfilling part of the participants’ lives. I offered prompts to assist in recalling information. This was especially needed during the recollection of childhood literacy practices. All of the field notes, artifacts, and interview transcripts were loaded into the qualitative data management program ATLAS.ti and coded according to the coding protocol for the larger Cultural Practices of Literacy Study (CPLS) project.

I was particularly affected by the stories of the First Nations women and felt compelled to write an article based on those interviews. Because indigenous literacy was not my area of expertise, I solicited the assistance of a second researcher to collaborate in writing this article. She was born and raised in the Gitxsan/First Nations Community of Gitanaamaaxs. Listening to stories was the beginning of her education. She extended my knowledge and understanding of First Nations communities.

Findings

Aileen

Aileen lives in a modest ground floor apartment that consists of a kitchen, living room, and small bedroom. Blankets lie on the floor of her living room and serve as her son’s bed. Beside the bed sits a basket of picture books. We sat at the kitchen table and Aileen began to share her history.

She grew up in the time when outsiders came with their new ways and systems to change the First Nations people. According to Sutherland (1996), colonialism set out to undermine the foundation of the First Nations people. To force assimilation, colonialists attacked the most vulnerable component of the First Nations societies—they took their children.

The government then turned the responsibility of schooling these children to churches, and this played a role in shifting the culture and identity of the Aboriginal people. Aileen, along with other students at these schools, faced physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. They were separated from their families and did not have the opportunity to partake in the literacy practices of their families or communities.

Jaine (1993) discussed the devastating effects the residential schools had on First Nations people. Losses of culture, traditions, language, and identity have been documented, and the effects are still being felt today. The First Nations students attending residential
school did not have the opportunity to sit with an Elder and listen to the stories so that there would be no questions in their minds as to who they were and where they belonged. Loss of family ties, childhood, innocence, and support systems resulted in an alienation from the extended family. Loss of identity, individuality, and positive self-image created feelings of unworthiness. Loss of role models gave the students no examples of goal setting. Loss of social skills and morals led to a high rate of self-destructive behaviors such as alcoholism, neglect, and suicide.

Aileen stayed at the residential school for three and a half years and then stayed in a detention facility for three years before she escaped. She said, 

after my mom took us out from the residential school, I was only at home with her for a month and a half before they put me in a, what do you call that, detention hold, when I was 12. So from there until when I was 15 I was there and then I’d go to school for a while and then from there I ran.

At 15, when Aileen was on her own and living on the streets, she turned to alcohol. During the next decade of her life, Aileen gave birth to five daughters but had to give them up to the government. She said, “Because I never had any parenting skills, all my kids were taken from me when I was young, because of the alcohol and being on the welfare.”

While Aileen was living on the streets, she was incarcerated on a few occasions. During these incarcerations, she took advantage of government-organized parenting programs and worked toward receiving certificates for mothering and life skills. She said, 

all I did was drink out there...then I ended up going in and out of jail too much, so I just figured while I was in there, I’d do something. Yeah, so I was taking [classes], like I took this one [showing a certificate from a parenting class] before I got out. I was trying to get some education.

She also mentioned a “change your life seminar,” for which she also proudly showed her certificate.

Aileen’s motivation to educate herself was evident. The first words she uttered upon our meeting were, “I’m trying to educate myself, that’s why I have the dictionary and some books. Because I quit school a long time ago.” Indeed, there were many novels, a dictionary, and self-help books scattered on the kitchen table and a nearby countertop. The self-help books pointed at the need for Aileen to heal. She was reading books such as *The Art of Selfishness* (Seabury, 1964), which dealt with the oppression she faced, and *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway* (Jeffers, 1987), which was about learning to cope with various types of fears such as self-assertion and loneliness. It became increasingly evident that several of Aileen’s literacy practices were linked to the healing process.

With uncertainty and a tinge of embarrassment, Aileen chuckled and told me about her possible plans of starting more formal education. She said, “I’m trying to get some information on the school over here, because I might try it, but I’m not too sure.” I didn’t know if her embarrassment came because she doubted her ability to succeed academically, she questioned her right to an education, or she feared the late age in which she wanted to pursue it.

King (1988) stated that the residential school experience impaired children’s sense of self-respect, self-esteem, and self-confidence. In addition, it shows how these past travesties have continued to have a negative impact on future generations. In the eyes of the dominant society, First Nations people were not meant to be high achievers. The First Nations people were looked on as a pool of cheap labor. Therefore, only basic literacy skills were taught and much time was spent on reforming children through religious doctrine. Focus was placed on occupational training such as developing housekeeping and farming skills, which were thought to be the basis of their future vocations. Barman, Hébert, and McCaskill (1986) described it in the context of the hierarchy: “curriculum was to be limited to basic education combined with half-day practical training in agriculture, the crafts, household duties in order to prepare pupils for their expected future existence on the lower fringes of the dominant society” (p. 6).

Aileen’s quest for an education then stems partly from the lack of effectual instruction in her youth. Aileen is not only on the path to seeking knowledge; she is also contributing to it. She is in the process of putting together a collection of her own poetry. She showed me more than 100 pages of her poetry. All of the poems were about her experiences in the
residential schools and the circumstances in which these experiences have led her. She pointed to her journal and a binder full of poems and said, “All of this was the life I was living on the street.” I have taken the titles of some of her poems and combined them. Together they form a found poem giving some insight into her journey:

Chained to Past Traumas
A Time for Change
The Path to Healing
Forgiving Ones, “Self”
Cleansing My Spirit
Breaking the Silence
Opening My Eyes
Finding Peace
No More Room for Alcohol
 Spirits Arise
Mending Family Ties
Healing Together
Taking Back Our Power
Reclaiming Our Lives

Aileen writes under her “Indian name which was given to [her] in a sweat lodge by an Elder.” Similar to the self-help books that she reads, her poems act as stepping stones toward healing her tumultuous past. This is a distinctive difference from her early education in which she never wrote poems or wrote in her journal. Now, though, she is “trying to get a book together...and get this published.” She persists with this goal despite obstacles such as lack of equipment, contacts, and resources. She said, “I just threw that typewriter out, it broke on me” and “This is my only copy of my poems.”

Her motivation to educate herself through books, writing, and courses has allowed her to develop the life skills necessary to take care of her son. Her innate interest in learning has given her the motivation to assist her son in developing literacy skills. She recites or chants nursery rhymes, animal songs, and Dr. Seuss books to help him with his speech impairment; she posts a cardboard clock on the wall so he learns to tell time; and she reads him picture and chapter books in the evenings. This practice is distinctly different from Aileen’s own childhood experiences that lacked access to children’s literature. She said, “see all these different books [pointing to her son’s picture books]...we didn’t have all this when I was growing up.”

Many of Aileen’s literacy practices have to do with the act of reading and filling out official documents and forms. For example, she spends much time with forms and documents from “Social Services when you have to fill out those little welfare stubs saying that we need help.” Also, as a result of the recent developments of the Canadian government’s “Reconciliation Process” where they reassess claims of the indigenous population that were placed in residential schools to verify eligibility for compensation, Aileen has been receiving official documents in the mail that require her to read this technical text and take action to get compensated. Aileen is seeking her family’s assistance in figuring out what to do with these documents as she finds the text, concept, and application process to be challenging.

Although spirituality is an important part of Aileen’s life, she rejects the conventions that were imposed on her during her youth. She said, “When we were in the residential school, we had to go to church...and we had to read the Bible. Pray.” But, “I never went after I got out from there. I didn’t go to church again.” She eloquently expresses her feelings through one of her poems:

Spiritual Awakening [excerpt]
Creator, I looked for you inside a church.
To feel your presence near.
But, as I walked through the open door.
My heart welled up with fear.
I don’t recall the reason, why
I turned and walked away.
I just felt it in my heart that day,
That the church was not my way.
At the age of seven, I was sent to church.
But, I don’t recall you being there.
My heart had been broken and I felt alone.
And the people did not care.

Aileen talked of the uniqueness of her culture: “In our tradition, things are not supposed to be written down...so if some other person like you, if you need to know about our spirituality you’ll have to go there and experience it yourself.” Although not considered religious text in its traditional sense, I did find that many of Aileen’s literacy practices were linked to
Research has shown that the literacy development of children is associated to the literacy practices and behaviors of parents, families, and homes. The case was similar in her community. “I don’t remember anybody reading anything,” she said.

It was difficult for Aileen to remember much of her childhood experiences, as they were linked to trauma. She acknowledged this, stating, “I think my school years are hard to remember.” According to Smith (2004), the stories of the Elders serve to reinforce First Nations values, customs, language, culture, and identity. Research has shown that the literacy development of children is associated to the literacy practices and behaviors of parents, families, and homes (Freeman & Wasserman, 1986; Leichter, 1984). The literacy development of the Aboriginal population consequently was inhibited because they were removed from these natural literacy environments. This literacy development was further stunted by the low quality of education provided to the students while at the residential schools. Those in power had low expectations of the Aboriginal students and did not expect them to achieve academically (Barman et al., 1986).

**Charlotte**

I met Charlotte at a local coffee shop. She had brought her daughter, Elsie, along with her. Elsie was a vision of the typical preteen: she was fashionably dressed and had a trendy hairstyle that suited her tanned complexion. She seemed confident and comfortable in her surroundings. On the other hand, Charlotte seemed rather timid and ill at ease. Elsie asked her mom for some money to buy iced coffee and then busied herself fiddling with her cell phone while I interviewed her mom.

Fulford (1999) cited MacIntyre, the moral philosopher, when he stated, “humans create their sense of what matters and how they should act by referring consciously or unconsciously to the stories they have learned” (p. 33). According to Fulford, MacIntyre suggested,

I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’ Children grow into adults by learning stories, and so do nations and communities.... Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in words. There is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources. (p. 33)

Smith (2004) stated that the future generations of the Gitxsan/First Nations need to gain the confidence and pride that come from the sense of belonging as a result of knowing one’s story. They need to know of the residential school system. She believes that the lives of those who attended residential schools and the future generations, who are not living their stories, drift into the master story of mainstream society.

I learnt that much of Charlotte’s history was similar to Aileen’s. Like Aileen, Charlotte was forcefully removed from her family at a very young age and placed in a residential school. She was incarcerated there from the ages of 6 to 11. As a result, she found it difficult to remember much of her childhood experiences, as they were linked to trauma. She acknowledged this, stating, “I think my school years are hard to remember.” According to Smith (2004), the stories of the Elders serve to reinforce First Nations values, customs, language, culture, and identity. Research has shown that the literacy development of children is associated to the literacy practices and behaviors of parents, families, and homes (Freeman & Wasserman, 1986; Leichter, 1984). The literacy development of the Aboriginal population consequently was inhibited because they were removed from these natural literacy environments. This literacy development was further stunted by the low quality of education provided to the students while at the residential schools. Those in power had low expectations of the Aboriginal students and did not expect them to achieve academically (Barman et al., 1986).
residential school.” Like Aileen, she was not willing to acknowledge the residential school as her home, yet she was not able to describe any other location as home. In this regard, both women lacked a sense of home while they were growing up.

Charlotte also found it difficult to recall memories before her residential school years because of the lack of stability within her family. When I asked her about her earliest childhood experiences, she said, “That’s a tough one, because I really feel like I have a block from age 6 and under.” Her explanation expanded to show how this turbulent life continued for her into her school years. She said,

It’s kind of hard to remember stuff from back there, because it was really an ugly time because my mom left us on the reserve and there was a whole bunch of different abuses that were happening at that time, so I feel like I went on a block from then through school. It had to do with abuses from the teacher and other people, like trying to teach me how to do math and pull me around here to abuse me. I felt like I couldn’t learn very much in that environment.

Smith (2004) compared her childhood with those who attended residential school. “I was often envious,” she explained, “they would come back sophisticated and knowledgeable about the world. I never left my humble village.” After reading the documents (e.g., Sutherland, 1996) relating to the negative residential school experience where they were denied their language and culture and were constantly hungry, Smith was glad that she never attended. It seems that she worked just as hard as the residential school students with all the chores that needed to be done. However, her work was contributing to the family unit and she was encouraged and praised for her accomplishments. The stories of residential schools indicate quite a different experience, where mental, physical, and emotional abuse was endured. To view a slideshow of Residential Schools, visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBzTG4G-40.

Life after the residential schools continued to be tough on Charlotte. After grade 8, she “started running away” but was discovered and sent to live with her aunt. This cycle of not feeling at home continued for a while. Her past experiences along with her family background eventually led her to turn to alcohol. Even now she struggles with the recovery process. She said, “I’m just really recovering. I don’t talk about this, but I come from a long family of alcoholics and addicts and I’m in recovery.”

Despite this block in her memory, Charlotte was able to share some of her childhood literacy practices. She said, “My mom was quite a reader...she read a lot of romance novels...homemaker magazines...knitting books and crocheting books.” She made shopping lists and flipped through fliers. Charlotte picked up on this convention and practices this habit today when she shops. She remembers her mom going to church and reading the Bible. She remembers official-looking court documents that may have had to do with placement at particular reserves or residential schools. She notes that even today her mother continues to fill out similar forms sent to her by the government in regards to affairs having to do with being Aboriginal.

A literacy practice that Charlotte vividly recalls from her time at the residential schools is the posting of signs that were displayed everywhere, such as “clean your own dishes.” Charlotte noted that this practice made its way to reserve life once the children had become adults: “I notice that around a lot in different Native communities, homes that post these signs up all over.... This is all residential school mentality, I think.”

Some of the text Charlotte saw during her childhood came from the reserves where she lived and resembled many of the texts apparent in her community today. She described how community members posted instances of text around the reserve:

They used to have notice boards. They posted up stuff for some people to have a big sale at this house...the smaller stores, they would have a list of what they were selling, mostly, like goodie stores, like pop for sale, and chips, and like how much they would cost.... There was a restaurant on the reserve; they have ice cream floats for sale, and...also, at the ball field they used to have hot dogs and hamburgers, all those things they would sell at the hot dog stand.

The texts that are apparent within Charlotte’s community today also revolve around signs, announcements, and advertisements that community members and businesses have posted. Otherwise, most
of Charlotte’s present literacy practices revolve around digital texts such as e-mails to friends.

Like Aileen, many of Charlotte’s literacy practices as an adult have to do with her healing process and reconciling her life. She said, “Well, I journal almost every day...and I do a lot of reading, like self-help books.” Like Aileen, Charlotte is attempting to cope with her past trauma. Another step she is taking toward healing is to compile a list of all her relatives and to create a family tree with this information. She said,

I just started corresponding with some family members that I haven’t had contact with for a long time, because I’m working on my family tree...I sent them pieces of paper to write down their addresses and all their children’s names and their birthdates.

This served the dual purpose of healing and of finding family members who had lost contact from one another during the times of the residential schools. Charlotte also partakes in a healing program. She said, “I started going to [Changes] once a week, and...we do journaling and we do art therapy and so, that was just part of my own thought, to do a family tree in the same kind of way.”

Healing was a constant theme when discussing religious text. Although Charlotte was greatly exposed to Christianity during her times at residential schools, she no longer follows that doctrine. Instead, she said, “I’m going through different things, of reading on the medicine wheel. It’s just a circle of things to check on how I’m doing spiritually, physically, mentally, emotionally.”

Like Aileen, Charlotte attempts to grow intellectually. She is motivated to extend her education despite her past negative schooling experiences. She has been spending time reading and exploring schooling options. She said,

My idea is to go back to school again...so I figured if I start to read more often, then I could prepare myself to get into study mode. I’ve gone through the catalogues for colleges, just check out the course system.

Part of her motivation resulted from recent positive educational experiences. She said,

In adulthood, I went to a program called [Changes] that helped me. And there we were doing upgrading and, math, English, the basic. And we had to write stories, different times in our lives...and I did a whole lot of different papers on different subjects, and I really communicated well with the teacher there.

Charlotte emphasized the importance of the teacher in her learning process:

She was a very, very good teacher; she said that I should just go back to school instead of trying to find a job. She said I was very good at writing, and well I liked it all...it was all brand new to me, like I had a great teacher and I was wanting to learn.

This experience made Charlotte realize that much of her negative views toward school actually had to do with the people in charge of her schooling and the circumstances with which she was faced and not at all with her motivation to learn. She said, “I think it was what happened earlier when I got abused that stopped me from wanting to learn anything.... It felt that it was wrong and ugly.”

Charlotte further contributes her early apathy toward school to the disassociation between the subject matter and her personal interests and culture. She fears that her daughter may be faced with similar circumstances. She said,

I remember doing history on England.... There wasn’t much in the way of learning about my culture at all. We had to learn about England, and that’s the biggest thing that I know I remember, and it’s something that I heard today, is that a lot of the Native children today, they don’t learn a lot about their culture still.

Hanamuxw (personal communication, 2004) made the distinction among scientific knowledge (dominant), life world ways of knowing (learning by experiencing everyday life), and narrative way of knowing (learning from stories). The Gitxsan/First Nations have their way of creating meaning. Over generations they have developed a holistic traditional knowledge of their lands and a legitimate and practical way of transmitting information to the learner. This knowledge has been recorded within the oral traditions and not in text. The oral tradition must be viewed as a distinctive intellectual tradition, not simply as myths and legends.
Too often, attempts to contrast traditional knowledge with scientific knowledge create a sense with First Nations people that their way of knowing is not legitimate. Gitxsan/First Nations hunters, fishermen, and healers have a sense of knowing. The hunter has a sense of the forest and knows if there is an animal nearby. The fisherman stands on the banks of the ’Xsan (Skeena River) and knows whether he or she will catch any fish. The healer enters the room and knows who is in need of healing. This knowledge comes from their close relationship to the land and the creator. First Nations people knew how to function effectively within their world. The stories of Aileen and Charlotte open two worldviews and ways of knowing. It also reminds researchers to consider whose stories are being privileged and whose stories are being marginalized in any representations of the other.

**Interrupting the Story**

King (1988) concluded that the residential school failed to assimilate First Nations people. They failed to totally destroy their culture and language, but they often succeeded in destroying the self-esteem and self-confidence of the students who attended the schools. Smith (2004) stated that, regrettably, the current school system resides in the grand narrative and for years has promoted a Western, scientific, paternalistic knowledge system that has oppressed and devalued other knowledge systems. Perhaps if the same amount of commitment and resources were used to reverse the damage it caused, we would have a truer start at rebuilding.

This study also supported the theories of Dewey (1956) and Dyson (2003) that literacy development for children is being held back by a disconnect between school literacy and home/community literacy practices, especially for those whose home literacies are undervalued by the institutions in power. This was precisely the case with both Aileen and Charlotte. Because the government and churches had such low expectations for their academic achievement, they were taught only basic literacy skills. This holds serious implications for educators. Predetermining students’ intelligence and ability, especially on the basis of culture, limits students’ potential success. Familiarizing ourselves and valuing the diverse and multiple literacies that students of different cultures bring with them enhances the learning potential of those students and that of the entire class.

According to Smith (2004), the intervention of colonial discourse, practice, and ultimately colonial legislation designed to destroy First Nations cultures led to massive disorientation, which created social, political, and economic dysfunction. During the time when First Nations people were at residential schools, the focus of their education was on religious development and occupational training. Consequently, their school literacy practices led them to future literacy practices quite different than their home/community practices. For example, both women’s negative childhood experiences with religion led them to reject it in adulthood.

This also supports Barton’s (1994) views that historical literacy practices were greatly controlled by a dominant power. Today, literacy practices continue to be controlled. Just as Charlotte was not able to learn about her culture while at the residential school, her daughter is not being taught about her cultural heritage at her local public school. Instead, they were both taught about the history and culture of the dominant society. Educators can assist in defusing the dominant power by creating opportunities for learning about multiple cultures by deconstructing existing text, using supplemental materials, or by viewing curriculum through a broader lens. Smith (2004) contended that storytelling can become a powerful means to overcome the legacy of the residential school system and to instill the self-confidence and competence that will assist Aboriginal students in developing lives worth living in both First Nations and mainstream societies. Storytelling has the potential to guide these students toward a constructive personal value system by presenting imaginative situations in which the outcomes of wise and unwise actions and decision can be recognized.

Furthermore, Aileen’s and Charlotte’s literacy practices supported the research that literacy
development of children is correlated with the literacy practices and behaviors of parents, families, and homes (Freeman & Wasserman, 1986; Leichter, 1984). Both participants emulated practices that they recalled in their childhood homes: Charlotte makes shopping lists like her mom did, and Aileen searches for information orally instead of through print. Both participants made references to the importance of oral literacy in their culture and noted the continuous use of it in their present lives. Most pervasively, Charlotte commented on the use of regulatory signs posted around reserves that had their history in residential schools.

Conversely, the women picked up literacy skills that they did not use in their past but now needed to deal with their past. For example, they both read self-help books and partook in journaling-type activities. It is quite possible that they would not be partaking in these practices had they not had the need to heal.

The literacies in which Aileen and Charlotte took part in their youth and take part in presently are somewhat different from that of others in their community because of the sociocultural context in which they grew up. This concurs with Street’s (1999) findings that different forms of literacy exist in different sociocultural contexts. The research interview questions were often not relevant for these two participants of indigenous descent. When asking them what types of things their families read and wrote in their home during childhood, both women mentioned that they did not have a home and that they did not live with their families because they were institutionalized in residential schools.

The Aboriginal population, therefore, fits almost as a separate community within the community. Aileen’s and Charlotte’s past and present lives have led them to experiences quite different from the rest of the community. The information they provided enriched the data considerably by adding another layer to the results. It also made us as researchers (re)realize that our methods to discover textual practices of the community are limited by our own experiences.

Lost and Found
There are no residential schools in existence today, but so powerful was their mission that the ghosts still haunt those who attended, as well as those who did not and future generations. Sadly, like Mary at the opening of this article, Aileen and Charlotte were frozen in the time of faded memories of the carefree years. They could never find the armful of wood again.

As children, Aileen and Charlotte were denied their stories. According to the Elders, the children need to learn from the past to be prepared for the future. They state that the youth must take the talking stick from the hands of the oral culture and incorporate it into the hands of their book learning. Now Aileen and Charlotte are the Elders. Aileen’s and Charlotte’s unfinished stories will make a difference to others who faced similar struggles and help them complete their stories.

The Gitxsan/First Nations had a way of looking at the world through stories. They emphasized that everything and everyone was connected to animals, trees, rocks, and humans and all have spirits. Everything was created in perfect harmony and to disturb a part of creation was to disturb the balance. The lives of Aileen and Charlotte were disrupted in their childhood and now they are finding a balance in their healing journey. We find ourselves connected to them through the telling of their stories. They have shown us how resilient the human spirit is. Aileen’s and Charlotte’s unfinished stories will be completed as it comes from their hearts and will be told in their voices, uninterrupted and strong. We wait in anticipation for the powerful chapters to come.

Note
This study was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council and by the larger Cultural Practices of Literacy Study, which has as its goal to document literacy in practice in different sociocultural contexts around the world (educ.ubc.ca/research/cpls).

References


**Literature Cited**


Moayeri teaches at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada; e-mail mmoayeri@shaw.ca.

Smith teaches in the Gitxsan Territories for the Coast Mountains School District, Hazelton, British Columbia; e-mail mjsmowat@bulkley.net.