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The Meeting of Four Strings and a Bow

My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back.

(Louis Riel, July 4, 1885, Manitoba Métis Federation)

What began as a personal story about my family's first real 'taste' of youth fiddle playing in northern Manitoba in 2005 unfolded to become my Master's thesis in 2008.

After we relocated from our small northern Manitoba community to our nation's capital, I began reflecting on the cultural impact fiddle playing has had on the lives of my two sons. And this reflection led me to eventually reconnect with friends, community members and former colleagues from the 17 years that I worked for Frontier School Division in Cranberry Portage, Manitoba. Although the people and the stories we shared about our connections to fiddle playing came from all across the province of Manitoba, it very quickly became apparent how everyone's stories and lives are intertwined.

At this point the story reverts to Blaine Klippenstein, the teacher who initiated what is now commonly known as the Frontier Fiddle program in a small isolated Manitoba community with a population of approximately 100.

Blaine moved up north at the age of 19 and lived as a trapper, a commercial fisherman and hunter, fully integrating himself into living within the culture of the northern communities. When he became an educator, it was not long before he noticed a disconnect between the curriculum-as-planned within mainstream education and the needs, interests and lives of students in northern communities.

Education for Aboriginal people has long been limited to a curriculum of cultural assimilation resulting in the historical erosion of their self-esteem and disengagement from the colonial public systems of schooling. Today Aboriginal children, as a group, have a diminished quality of life due to the negative impacts of colonization on their parents (Ball, 2008, p. 8). Schools which respect and support a child's culture with a culturally responsive curriculum demonstrate significantly better outcomes in terms of educating Aboriginal youth (Maina, 1997; Battiste, 2002). And so, as a teacher, Blaine was motivated by the knowledge that education must come from a cultural context. He tried everything: local sports, community programs, reading programs, and local whatever. And one day he realized that, no matter which community he lived in, the people he met always shared stories about the fiddle:

Photo courtesy of Fred Cattroll, HRSDC, Aboriginal Awareness Week

Duane, Quenten & Gunthar, May 2010.

> Every Friday and Saturday night, people would clear out their houses, pack up all their belongings, and put them outside. Everyone would then gather inside and there would be square dancing inside the houses. These were not drinking parties, they were gatherings.

He was told about these stories in every community he lived up north. But he never *saw* this anywhere.

Fiddle playing has a rich and vibrant history among Aboriginal people in Canada dating back to the time of contact and the evolution of the fur trade. (Coyes, 2002; Chretien, 1998; Dueck, 2007; Lederman, 1986; Paquin, Prefontaine, & Young, 2003; Whidden, 2007; Dorion-Paquin, 2002). While the fur trade routes ran east to west and from the south to the icy northern waters, cultural artifacts were traded simultaneously in both directions (Lederman, 1986, p. 15). The Scots, employed by the Hudson's Bay Company, as well as the rival Northwest Company French *coureurs de bois* employees, introduced the fiddle and their respective music to the Indigenous people with whom they traded (Paquin, Prefontaine, & Young, 2003, p.13). The music flowed through the waterways in the same way fish spawned along the Canadian river routes (Coyes, 2002, p. 4). While Blaine *heard* the current absence of the fiddle music, he also *felt* the deep-rooted passion, excitement, and connections that these communities had with the fiddle.

As a teacher in the community of Sherridon in 1995, Blaine decided one day that it might be worth a try to bring some fiddles into the school. The positive response was immediate; it wasn't long before students started taking the fiddles home to play for family and friends. The affirmation and accolades from parents and grandparents kept students interested and excited to play and learn more songs. Blaine recalled how every Monday his favourite thing to do was ask the students who they played for on the weekend.

It was not long before other communities took notice of these young fiddle players and they were invited to perform at events all over the province. Blaine recollected travelling on a bus with a dozen students, a vast majority of whom had never been more than 100 miles from Sherridon.[1] When the students went down to Duck Bay, that signified the moment the fiddle program moved outside of Sherridon and the beginning of what is now

commonly referred to as the Frontier Fiddle Program. Duck Bay, a Métis community, has a strong fiddling culture in the community, but at that time was there were only a couple of active elder fiddle players. Community members were amazed at how, with great instruction and the enthusiasm of the students and communities, the fiddle program really took off.

Lindsay, at that time a grade six student in Duck Bay, reminisced how it was a really big deal when Blaine travelled to Duck Bay with his students. With her grade six enthusiasm, Lindsay remembered it was such an exciting thing — these students who played fiddle were coming to their school to give fiddle workshops:

> And I guess the response that we would get is that this was kind of making history; it felt like you were put up on a pedestal; not a pedestal, but people seeing you playing the fiddle, especially the Métis community, people really respected you, and these were a bunch of young kids right; but the fiddle coming back; people were so happy and smiling. It was just a joyful atmosphere whenever we played. And I know we played at prestigious events, so to us it was like, this is a big deal. We have to play really well. We were not pressured, but that pressure was put on you; you have to perform well; you are performing for big dignitaries ... important people ... so it was a very big deal and people were just kind of awestruck sometimes I think, that we could all play together as a big group.

The profound impacts of the fiddle program, including intergenerational connections and personal growth, are further emphasized by another young student who shared the following:

> Well I started playing fiddle when I was...seven I think and this is my eleventh year playing. My Papa Leslie bought me my first fiddle and I continue playing in memory of him. It was so difficult at first for me trying to learn how to play an instrument, but soon enough my fingers just went with the beat. My first time to a fiddle workshop was scary because I didn't know anyone. But it was just about having fun. Throughout the years of playing I met so many great friends that shared the love for the fiddle like me. Now when we gear up to go to a workshop it just feels like a family reunion/get together. Whenever I play I feel this bolt of life going through me and it makes me so happy to pick up my fiddle and play. I get really nervous though because the performances

> just keep getting bigger and better. The reason why I play is because I love music, I love the fiddle and I love the amazing people I meet. Although every concert I play at or even when I just pick it up to play around it is always in memory of my Papa, [Grandfather] and whenever I play I feel as though he is right next to me guiding my fingers to the next note.

Touched by students' stories, Blaine reflected how he had no idea when he began this fiddle program back in 1995 in the small community of Sherridon what kind of interest and enthusiasm there would be and how it would progress. Now, over 2,500 students are playing throughout the province of Manitoba in various school programs. Clint Dutiaume currently teaches fiddle playing at five different First Nation schools in addition to the Frontier School Division programs.

Considering how the fiddle was silent for what appears to be almost 20 years (or more), another long time northerner commented on how the timing was right. Many of the people who grew up with the fiddling traditions are still there in the com-

Photo courtesy of FHelen Betty Osborne Ininiw Education Resource Centre

Jamboree play-in.

munities today. They are older, but they are still there. And that encouragement and excitement from people in the community people makes a huge difference. A lifelong resident of northern Manitoba made the following observation:

> You don't get support like that for anything, sometimes with sports you'll get the support of the people who have kids in that sport. But overall, you don't get that kind of support, and the overwhelming response. And it's *everybody*. You don't have to have children in it. And it was just amazing. When I first saw it, the students playing as a big group of students together playing from all the different schools, *oh man, I was just blown away!* I couldn't believe how amazing that was! For them to be able to play in front of people and to have that confidence to be successful at something. And to go in front of a group of strangers in a strange place, takes it to another level.

Another Grandmother shared her amazement about her first trip to a fiddle jamboree.[2]

> I have never seen anything like it! When you go to those festivals, it's awesome! The students are walking around with their fiddles wherever you see them, they're in the bathroom, in the cafeteria, sitting in the hallways, and they are all playing fiddles. It's just awesome to hear them! And it's just steady. It was so awesome! I couldn't believe it! I just thought to myself, *'what is going on here'?* And some of the songs they were playing were my dad's and it was awesome to hear them, some of the little ones playing this music.

What is happening now with the student level of involvement is absolutely incredible. Some of the best fiddle players from across Canada return to these jamborees every year to instruct the students. They are completely blown away by how much better the students are than they were the year before. Collectively, everyone stands back in awe and asks, '*Where is this going to end?'* The advanced students are so motivated that some of them are practicing two or more hours per day on their own, evident by the noticeable advancement of their skills every year.

Situated in remote and isolated communities, the fiddling deeply engages not only students, but also parents and community members. In addition to building intergenerational bridges, the stories demonstrate how the fiddle has become a contempo-

rary instrument of social change for many communities involved. Representing a shift in education, these school fiddle programs are celebrating local culture, creating a sense of belonging, as well as community and capacity building. A 2001 newspaper article reports:

> Many students who caught the fiddling fever have also changed their lives at school and with their families... A transformation comes over Trevor Seymour when he picks up the fiddle. His attitude is toned down, replaced by a certain earnestness, his eyes trained on the music, his fingers instinctively finding the notes, his foot tapping out the beat...Before the fiddling program, handfuls of students like Seymour were kicked out for behavioural problems or because they didn't show up for class. 'It keeps them out of trouble,' said Dick...The music has roots for Aboriginal people. 'Once they get into fiddling, you'd never know they were the same kids,' said Dave Yeo. (Henry, 2001)

A Government of Manitoba 2010 website story further exemplifies the deep intergenerational connections:

> For the past four years, seniors and shut-ins of St. Laurent, (MB) have been visited regularly by a group of young fiddlers between the ages of 10 and 16. A fiddling program was begun at the school in 1999, and before long a performing group was formed consisting of ten of these talented young people. The group soon became known as The St. Laurent Fiddlers…This group soon became well known in the area, and requests started coming in from neighbouring communities to have them perform for various events and in other seniors' homes. The joy it brings to their [seniors] lives is matched only by the sense of pride it brings to the young performers. As time went on, it was duly noted by their instructor and the public that the more they played for their community and others, the more they practiced and the better performers they became. Teachers noticed also that the members of this group grew in self-esteem and their school work and behaviour improved...

The degree of commitment on the part of the students should not be underestimated; the time it takes to travel to perform is usually not measured in minutes or hours, but days. Furthermore the landscapes, the people, the stories and the musical interludes

Scott; Batoche 2010. Source: Back to Batoche, Kymbor Palidwar

overflow with energy and hopefulness for future possibilities.

These fiddle programs in northern Manitoba communities are representative of opportunities in which Aboriginal students can negotiate their agency. It is the students themselves who are embracing the fiddle playing. Motivation to practice accelerates the opportunities that are coming their way. This is not just about school and education; it is the sense of knowing that the fiddle and fiddle playing is a vibrant part of their community; this sense of knowing it is a part of 'who' you are, and resounding memories of days gone by. The deep emotional connection can be 'felt' throughout the voices of the communities. Blaine reflected on his years involved in fiddle programs in many different northern communities:

> All of these things are synergistic in that they move people in the audience, and then the audience appreciation of it moves the performers, the students. There is nothing else like it that creates that kind of synergy. The fiddling has been a great thing. I don't think it's the only thing that is out there, but at such a large scale as this, I think it's having an incredible impact. This synergy can be felt across communities, connecting youth with the older generations.

It has returned a sense of pride to whole communities, even for those who don't fiddle. Many students who caught the fiddling fever have also changed their lives at school and with their families" (Henry, 2001; Manitoba Government, 2010). When the

fiddle program began in 1995 in the little one room school, no one ever anticipated how enthusiastically students and communities from all corners of the province would respond.

Highlighting the importance of a culturally responsive curriculum brings together the multi-layered stories of place and identity emerging from broken strings of the colonized past and the possibilities of re-emerging bowings of the present and future. These school fiddle programs may not be the answer to everything, especially considering the intergenerational impacts of dysfunction and despair that the Residential School era brought to so many communities, and which continue to prevail (Boyden, 2010). But in many ways the expansion of the fiddle programs throughout schools and communities is an example of grassroots community efforts that have reinforced and nourished a link between culture and education. Surrounding youth with a social support of a loving and caring environment helps to build resilience and self-esteem among young people (Ashworth, 2009). Although this realization was not central in establishing these fiddle programs, it has become an intrinsic outcome of this culturally-responsive curriculum. Moreover, research shows that the most important protector against risk-taking for young people is to feel valued by significant adults in their community. These fiddle programs not only open the door to celebrate culture, they celebrate youth and communities.

The fiddle brings with it an energy and mutual sense of pride. Alongside of that is the sense of hope, where hope was not always present .. .the good news stories continue to flow and are ongoing. With this knowledge in mind, I can't help but ask, where will we be a generation from now?

For me, it is most fitting to close with the words of the instructor who initiated the first fiddle program, Blaine Klippenstein: "This story is absolutely incredible! What you see these young people doing-it touches you in the heart! It is the students and the communities that have made it incredible. And this is only scratching the surface of the full potential of what these students are capable of ...*Where is it going to end?*"

I might add to that: 'or is it'…?

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ENDNOTES

[1] The present day community of Sherridon has a population of about 113 people. It is approximately 600 km Northwest of Winnipeg. http://www.gov.mb.ca/ana/community_profiles/pdf/sherridon.pdf

[2] The jamboree is an annual music event that brings 450 students from all over the province together to work with professional musicians from across Canada. The students participate in intense workshops during the day and concerts in the evenings. There is a very festive atmosphere; in fact they have been referred to as a big 'love-in'.

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