Sometimes I forget that I was me before I was a teacher

At the beginning of her inquiry process, Jen wanted to understand why graduation rates were so low for Indigenous students. As a secondary language teacher candidate, she had concerns about how she could engage students within what she called the “Western European classroom structure.” She believed that by deepening her understanding of life on the reserve, she could appreciate and thus reach her students better. She believed that by being a teacher, she could make an impact in breaking the cycles of poverty that were so closely connected to several of the problems she had encountered with some of the students she taught. Her choice of topic was also motivated by her brother’s failure to graduate from high school. Jen intended to explore the reasons for low graduation rates through library research, interviews and observations.

In her first inquiry process update, Jen reflected on some of her personal experiences growing up. She wrote about how despite living around reserves as a child, she felt she was “ignorant” of Indigenous peoples. She felt this was in part due to a lack of attention to the lives of Indigenous people in both her high school and university courses. She believed that, “only by truly connecting with someone can you find out what they want to achieve and then [you can] help them with these goals.” Jen was saddened and disheartened by what she was learning about life on reserve through her various readings; these things had happened in her own community. Her initial question around graduation rates expanded to include questions such as: “Why do alcoholism, drug addiction and abuse exist?”

As time went on, Jen acknowledged that her topic was very complicated; poverty feeds alcoholism, which in turn impacts education. She admitted that she had trouble understanding how people could succumb to alcoholism on such a wide scale basis asking, “Why would the Indigenous peoples living on these poor reserves not attempt to change their situations?” Further readings led her to see how the introduction of alcohol by European settlers contributed over time to many of the difficulties on reserves today. Visiting the local school district's Aboriginal Resource Centre, Jen was struck by the personal stories shared by Indigenous educator Nella Nelson around alcoholism in the community.

Over the course of her inquiry, Jen’s process became increasingly personal as her searching began to take her “down some dark paths within [her] own life.” Within the safe space created by her thinking friends, she openly and honestly began to discuss and express her personal racial prejudices, ones that she had carried with her since childhood. Her thinking friends offered insights and ideas without judgment. The supportive and encouraging nature of these conversations led her to candidly share her inquiry thoughts on the last day of class. In her final summary Jen wrote:

Sometimes I forget that I was me before I was a teacher. Becoming a teacher takes up all my focus and I lose sight of what made me who I am. ...I learned
that I can be very brave when talking about something personal. ...It felt good to put myself out there knowing that I am strong enough to withstand any criticism or negativity. I also learned that I am very proud of where I come from.

In the pre-class reading response to the Chambers article, Jen admitted that she "had a hard time dwelling on personal errors." Through an inquiry process heavily informed by self-study, Jen came to a place where she could openly express her past racist thoughts and describe how they currently shape her as a teacher. She realized that it was useful to know where her students were coming from, but more importantly, she also needed to know where she came from, and that this was an ongoing inquiry in which she would continue to engage.