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Nâtwahtâw – Looking for a Cree Model of Formal Education

by

Noella Rose Steinhauer

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Abstract

This study examines the need to redefine and establish an Indigenous education system within First Nation communities to replace the foreign formal educational structures that have alienated First Nation students for so many years. First Nation communities have had locally controlled systems for over thirty years, during that time local control has not evolved into systems that meet the needs of communities. Since the fiscal control remains with the federal government and curricula is dictated by provincial authorities, locally controlled systems have been constrained in their desire to meet community needs.

Based on the premise that a First Nation community desires a system that effectively meets the educational and cultural needs of the community, this thesis asks, "what are the key characteristics of formal educational systems identified by a selected First Nation community that coincide with their Indigenous world view?"

Data was collected from participants in one First Nation community; participants consisted of students, parents, teachers, and Elders from the community. The data was examined to determine the characteristics that would create a successful community based formal education system. Participants were asked to define what success meant, what the role of culture might be, what the role of family, Elders, and the community look like, and what would programming look like. The responses were examined and analyzed to develop characteristics that would contribute to the establishment of an effective model of Cree education in a First Nation community.

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Definition of Terms

Aboriginal
: An inclusive term used by the government of Canada to refer to descendants of the original peoples of Canada, including First Nations, Metis, non-Status and Inuit peoples.

Band
: A group of First Nations people who share common values, language, practices, and traditions.

First Nation
: A term that gained popular usage during the 1980's to replace the term Indian or band.

Indian
: Refers to Treaty and Status Indians, as defined by the Indian Act

Indian Control of Indian Education (ICIE)
: Policy established in 1973 by the National Indian Brotherhood of Canada (now the Assembly of First Nations) that advocates for local control of Indian education.

Indian education or First Nation education
: Refers to education delivered to First Nation children in both on- and off-reserve communities.

Indigenous
: Refers to people who are Indigenous to the land or territory.

Okimâw
: Translated as "the leader", used in the historical context to refer to leaders selected by the band to lead the community.

Okimakân
: Translated as "pretend leader" and used to refer to the Chief of a First Nation community elected under the system imposed with the reserve system.

Chapter 1

Background and Rationale

Background

> *What we ultimately need may not be a grafting of Indian content and personnel onto European structures, but a redefinition of education* (Noley, 1981, p. 198).

Grafting means that living tissue from one plant is attached to another so that it can grow into something that is unique and hardy. It works best when the varieties are similar. Grafting of Indian content and personnel has not yet proven to work and First Nations education in Canada has not flourished in the grafting process. Perhaps we have tried too hard to graft into the European structures without realizing that differences are too great and do not allow for successful grafting.

During the last three decades, First Nations across the country have taken over operation and administration of their local schools. The impetus behind the transfer of administration to the local level was the belief that each community would operate the school according to their needs. Unfortunately, the administrative process has been hindered by federal policy. As a result First Nation schools have become a futile attempt to emulate European structures with a speckling of Indian content. Perhaps this is because the process was ill fated from the onset and that the two were not meant to be grafted. In spite of this reality, the education of First Nation children remains a hotly debated issue. The issue continues to be the subject of government policy papers, articles,

forums, conferences, numerous thesis and dissertations. Each of these areas of thought focuses on some aspect of the problems that plague Indian education. Still, the two most identifiable problems of high stop-out rates[1] and low achievement persist. Although these problems have been attributed to various factors like colonization and residential schools, few have articulated the need for a larger systemic overhaul of First Nation education systems.

The education of First Nation children has had a long and tarnished history. Since 1973, when the National Indian Brotherhood released its policy paper, *Indian Control of Indian Education*, limited progress has taken place in the development of school systems that actually meet the needs of First Nations: "We are still faced with the monumental challenge of creating a meaningful education that will not only give hope, but a promise of a better life for our future generations" (Kirkness, 1998, p.10). A meaningful education is one that will "honour our cultures, which include our values, our languages, and our peoples' contribution to the development and progress of this vast country" (p.15). Developing systems of education that emulate the unique world view of First Nations people is of both timely and critical importance.

It is evident that First Nations need to develop systems of education that align with an Indigenous world view. The lack of congruence in values, culture, and language has proven to be detrimental to the growth and development of First Nation education systems. As Kirkness (1998) reminded us, two primary factors have been detrimental to the progress and growth of First Nations

[1] The term "stop-out" is now being used instead of drop-out since a large proportion of Aboriginal students who do not finish high school return to education of some form later in life.

education. These factors are government manipulation to continue administering schools in the same patterns as they have always existed and the insecurity of First Nations to take control. Although progress has been adversely affected by such a contentious relationship, First Nation parents still feel a strong desire to equip their children with formal educational tools to compete in a complex world (Hampton, 1996).

As a First Nation Cree woman and educator for the past 18 years, I have come to the realization that First Nation parents' primary desire is that their children be happy and finish school. Unfortunately this does not always occur. This sombre reality led me to conclude that school leaving and low academic achievement are merely symptoms of an even greater problem. I drew this conclusion from some of the work in my master's thesis, which focused on factors impacting the underachievement of First Nations students. In the analysis, I found that students frequently left school because of racism, identity, peer pressure, family breakdown, poverty, and a general inability to function in the system. In the final analysis, I recognized that the underlying perception among the participants in the study was that these problems were only symptoms of a larger systemic problem of racism. My examination of this larger systemic problem prompted me to return to my studies and extend this work into and examine how a First Nation community could establish a formal school system hinged on an Indigenous world view.

This study examines the need to redefine and establish an Indigenous education system within First Nation communities to replace the foreign formal

educational structures that have alienated First Nation students for so many years. The need to redefine Indigenous education by honouring the values, beliefs, and traditions of First Nations people has been a desire of First Nations and has been discussed by various scholars. Hampton (1993) writes that "the recognition that Indian education is a thing of its own kind indicates a legitimate desire of Indian people to be self-defining" (p. 271). Although participants in this study strongly desired to change the system to meet their communities' needs, they did not propose much change beyond a continued attempt to graft First Nations values, beliefs and traditions into the current system. Generations of systemic racism have permeated every level of our being as First Nation people. We have become shackled to the belief that there is nothing beyond the present system and that we must simply accept, comply, and assimilate. To propose to scrap the current system and build one that meets community needs will require a great deal of work. The current educational system, which is based on the Industrial Revolution model, has a high school drop out rate of approximately 18% for the general population (CCAR). This suggests that the system is outdated and incapable of meeting the changing social and societal needs of the general population. This system has never met the needs of First Nation students. Even with these widely known facts, there is still a great deal of work necessary. It is time for change, a time to be awakened, a time for action to put our values into action with the same degree of optimism and hope as the participants in this study have demonstrated. Perhaps it is time for *kasikocimichik* – to shock our communities into action in a good way, with

information to enlarge the future.

Bringing Myself to the Research

My return to school was guided by my feeling that I needed to find some answers, to search for something that might begin to solve educational issues affecting First Nations people. The name of this thesis is *Nâtwahtâw*, which means the search for something in an optimistic way. I have chosen this name to honour the language I have been gifted with and the knowledge that my ancestors have passed on to me. Their optimism and persistence has sustained us for centuries and given us the resilience to remain as distinct people. I honour the language because I realize more and more the significance and importance of the Cree language in my belief system and perception of the world. *Nâtwahtâw* has far more connotations in Cree than I can even begin to articulate in the uni-dimensional scope of English. *Nâtwahtâw* is a word that means there is something there that one may find if one seeks it in a humble and optimistic way. The notion of *Nâtwahtâw* guided me through my research. I utilized this notion because I am not an expert nor will I ever be an expert, I only know what I know. Many Elders, although they know a great deal, preface their words by saying that they know very little but that they willingly offer what they know. Even as their words are profound, they choose to remain humble and never profess to be all-knowing. I also felt that it was imperative to pay homage to my ancestors because it is they who gifted me with the language, culture, and perspective of the world I possess today. To honour my ancestors was also a way of beginning my research journey. My

research began long before I walked on this earth and it is the knowledge of those relations that I honour. In the First Nation community that I grew up in, we are defined by who our parents are and who we are related to. Although we are recognized as individuals, our relatives place us solidly within a relationship and kinship network (Weber-Pillwax, 2001). Therefore, the purpose of bringing myself into the research was to honour the knowledge of my ancestors and to contextualize the worldview from which I operate. Since this research focused on searching for something I hope will assist First Nations, I needed to acknowledge all my relations and where I am situated in the world.

On my father's side I am aware of the lineage to the Ojibway minister Henry Bird Steinhauer. Reverend Henry B. Steinhauer moved from Ontario to the west with his Cree wife and children in 1854 to set up a mission at Whitefish Lake. They had seven sons and four daughters. Two of his sons, Edgerton and Robert, followed the footsteps of their father and became Methodist ministers. Robert graduated from university in 1887 and became "the first Status Indian in what would become Alberta to obtain a university degree" (Smith, 2000, p.26). My great great grandfather, Samuel was the oldest son and third child. He eventually married a woman from Saddle Lake and lived there until his passing. One of his sons was my great grandfather Morley, a gifted healer and seer who had four sons and two daughters, many of whom continue to live in Saddle Lake. One of those sons was my grandfather, Augustine, who was involved in community politics and elected chief-*Okimakân* for a number of terms in Saddle Lake. He helped to break down some of the

divisions that had been created in the community by religious factions between Catholic and Protestant faiths. My father chose not to follow the political pursuits of his father. Instead, he established and continues to operate a convenience store in the community. Neither he or any of his three siblings continued the political pursuits of my grandfather. Although my father has been approached on many occasions to participate in the leadership of the community, he has always chosen not to for the sake of us, his children. He experienced the detrimental effects of having a father as a leader in a small community and chose not to subject us to that type of scrutiny.

On my mother's side her great great grandfather was the Cree leader Papaschase, the *Okimâw* of a band of Cree people who lived in the present day Blackmud Creek area of Edmonton. Papaschase occupied the area for many years and had to defend the territory from other tribes on various occasions. Papaschase led his people well. Unfortunately, the band fell victim to the decline in the buffalo population and subsequently signed an adhesion to Treaty 6. Papaschase and headman Tahkoots signed the adhesion to Treaty 6 at Fort Edmonton with the belief that, as promised, they would secure land for the band and prevent the starvation of their people. According to court documents, the government of Canada "did not provide necessary and sufficient relief to the Papaschase Band or other bands as promised under the terms of Treaty 6" (Maurice, 2001, p. 3). The actions of government leaders undermined the leadership of Papaschase by slowly diminishing the size of the band and forcing some members to join other bands. Others unknowingly relinquished their

rights to be recognized as Indian people and sold their rights in the process of enfranchisement. Residents of Edmonton clearly did not want them in the area. The newspaper of the day, the Edmonton Bulletin, wanted the members of the Papaschase Band to "be sent back to the country they originally came from" (cited in Maurice, 2001, p.4.). Ironically, while those making the statements were themselves recent immigrants, the Edmonton area had been the traditional territory of the Papaschase family for generations. After a number of years, the band ceased to exist in the Edmonton area without ever receiving the compensation they had been promised in the treaty. My great grandfather, Benjamin Quinn (Papaschase), married Munnie, a Cree woman from the Saddle Lake area, where they settled. They had three children, one who did not return from WWI, my grandfather Morris and a daughter, Matilda. My grandfather, Morris Quinn was a very wise and articulate man. Although he did not know how to read or write, he was a gifted storyteller, well respected for his knowledge and leadership ability. My grandmother, his first wife, was stricken with, and died from, tuberculosis. As a result, my mother was adopted by her aunt, my grandmother. My mother and her adopted brother grew up on a small cattle farm on the reserve.

It is evident that there were both traditional and Western leadership styles within my family. It is from this sense of leadership and knowledge that I arrive at the place I am today in the community, I am identified by my parents and grandparents, their characteristics, and contributions. I feel humbled and honoured to have them as my relatives.

Both my parents attended residential school. Although they believe they did not suffer the abuses that many First Nation children endured, the experience of being away from home and family left an indelible imprint on their lives. My father attended the St. Albert residential school for three years. He vividly remembers the day he was picked up by a big farm truck and hauled away in the back of the cattle truck to the school two hours away. His memories are not of learning; instead they are of hunger, punishment, and the longing to be home. My mother's experience was quite varied. Her initial experience was very traumatic and almost cost her her life. Her life was spared because my grandmother made an unscheduled visit to the school and found an emaciated, barely conscious, seven year old child suffering the advanced effects of an untreated knee infection. My grandmother immediately removed her from school, much to the relief of the priest and nuns. The nuns and priest felt that she was a burden to them and that she did not have the ability to learn. My grandmother then taught her daughter to read and write at home. When she was nine years old she returned to a school that was an overnight wagon ride from home. Like my father, she too remembers that fateful day as if it were yesterday. She remembers crying and clutching onto her mother's dress only to have her hands peeled off as she was taken away. Once she arrived at the school she found that the food was good and a limited sense of individuality was fostered. Her only regret was the long separation from home.

Perhaps it was memories of hunger and separation that caused them to parent in the manner that they did. I do not remember many occasions of

separation from my parents and even though they had five children, they hauled us everywhere they went. We were never punished, our opinions were respected and our requests were honoured when possible. I cannot recall ever being hungry or without food, a reality I did not realize was prevalent in many of our communities until I became a teacher at a First Nation school.

My own formal school experiences were not always positive. My lower elementary years were the happiest because they were spent at the day school on the reserve. The upper elementary years were less than happy and included my first encounter with racism. Hurtful racial slurs, violence, and lack of teacher action forced me to learn to become invisible. By the time I reached junior high and senior high, I was a master at deflecting and ignoring racist remarks and actions. I am still deeply disappointed in myself that I allowed these actions to take place without reacting and instead acted like I did not mind or didn't hear the comments. I know that many other Indian students who survived in the public school by learning not to react; instead they became like furniture, fixtures without voice or emotion. I now realize that for quite some time, I carried the baggage of cultural self-hatred and believed to some degree that all Indian people were indeed lazy and dumb. "Cultural self-hatred ...refers to learned self-helplessness, a socialized belief that no matter what you do, as a member of a particular cultural group you cannot make a difference" (Haig-Brown, 1996, p. 279). The sense of self-hatred haunted and remained with me even through my first undergraduate degree. By the time I completed my Education degree and began teaching, I had matured and gained enough confidence to begin

shedding the baggage of cultural self-hatred. Cultural self-hatred is a form of internalized racism, racism that is so deeply manifested that we internalize it and grow to believe it. I knew that if I was going to be of any assistance to my students, I needed to have pride and confidence in myself as a Cree woman. Still, there were occasions when this would emerge and become a detriment to my teaching success. I clung to the belief that student success was measured only by academic achievement and that I would only achieve this if I emulated the style in which I had been taught. Although I knew that this model was not congruent with the beliefs of the First Nation students I taught, I did not have the confidence to explore practice beyond the Eurocentric model. Eventually, I gained more confidence and began to change course delivery. I also began to utilize story and local knowledge to supplement my teaching, and this proved to be much more successful. Still I wanted more; I wanted more students to stay in school and complete high school. When I completed my master's work I realized that although I had identified factors that caused First Nations students to leave school, the problem still remained. Eager to work toward a solution I soon realized that the only manner in which these symptoms could be eliminated was to determine the type of educational system a typical First Nation community desires. It was the belief that we must scrap the entire system and build a system that truly honours the values, beliefs and traditions of First Nation communities and still provide students with the opportunity to pursue post-secondary education that led to my research focus.

Research Focus

What type of educational system would meet the cultural and psychological needs of First Nations communities? Which factors do members of a First Nation community perceive as fundamental tenets of a culturally congruent system? How should curriculum be redesigned and still provide students with the opportunity to attend mainstream post secondary institutions?

Having considered these questions I came to the realization that the answers must be found within the community itself. This research focused on one First Nation community in Canada. It focused on that community's desire to develop a system of education conducive to the completion of high school education. Large numbers of First Nation students leave and do not complete secondary education (Mackay & Myles, 1996). It is from this point of departure that my research began.

First Nations in Canada can be categorized as involuntary minorities (Ogbu, 1993) who have been forced to accept a western philosophy of education in which they have experienced limited success. Ogbu's theory states that involuntary minorities develop a sense of cynicism about their achievement in a larger society that inhibits them from achieving academically. He believes that involuntary minorities are less prepared for the competitive nature required to secure desirable positions and that they feel that societal barriers have relegated them to the lowest positions. Because the values of individualistic society are based on competition, they are incongruent with Indigenous values (which do not embrace individual competition) and cannot be

grafted onto them. The literature that has emerged supports the need to establish systems of education rooted in an Indigenous world view so that Indigenous students can experience greater success (Hampton, 1996). I wanted to begin to identify the factors a First Nation's community members feel should be part of an educational system that emulates and fosters an Indigenous world view.

The Research Question

What are the key characteristics of formal educational systems identified by a selected First Nation community that coincide with their Indigenous world view? Emerging from this general question are the following sub questions.

1. What parameters are implicit and explicit in this statement?
2. How do the participants view the role of education in their community?

Significance of the Study

This study will help to establish a framework for education within the context of a perspective unique to Cree people in a First Nation community. First Nations in Canada have a colonial heritage that has proven to have a detrimental impact on their language and culture. In the course of colonization, First Nations have become involuntary minorities. As involuntary minorities we have become strangers in our own land and traditional ways of knowing have been discredited, unacknowledged, and - in some cases - destroyed. This study looks at the revival and return to prominence of Indigenous knowledge that has been discredited by public education. I hope this work will lead to change and ultimately help to reverse the relatively low success rates Aboriginal students

experience in secondary education. As a result, many young Indigenous students may find a way to achieve success and, in the process, regain confidence as noble, worthy, and knowledgeable leaders.

Assumptions

I began this study with the assumption that the community would like to have an educational program based on language and culture. I also assumed that people in this First Nation community want a system that meets the needs of their children and that they want their children to complete high school.

Delimitation and Limitations

This study was delimited to one First Nation community in Alberta that operates a locally controlled band operated school[2]. It was also delimited to a school offering programs to students from kindergarten to grade twelve. Some research participants spoke in Cree, which, in this text, is translated into English. The uni-dimensional nature of the English language means that exact meanings and connotations could not always be presented in the translation.

This study was limited to the fact that I was a teacher in First Nation communities for a number of years and participants may have felt that they had to provide me with responses that fit into the context of the existing formal education framework. The study was also limited by the culturally determined contexts of relationships that I had with the participants. This means that there were questions that I could and could not ask the participants because of relational accountability.

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[2] The term locally controlled band operated school refers to a school that is administered by a First Nation, that is funded by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs and follows provincial curriculum.

Chapter Two

Finding the Literature and Stating the Problem

What is schooling? What kind of schooling did First Nations children receive? Why do problems persist? How can we begin to find solutions? The conundrum of First Nations education is confounded with these and similar questions. In order to begin to understand some of these questions and related issues, it was essential to examine some of the related literature. The review that follows is represents a starting point from which to begin research. It is was designed to contextualize the study (which focused on schooling rather than education), the review begins with a brief discussion and definition of the role of schooling. The literature relating to history of First Nation education provides an important backdrop and historical context to the nature of our contemporary situation. Then there is a discussion of the tensions and constraints of local control of education. The review closes with a discussion of important considerations in this research, including epistemological issues, the nature of Indigenous education and teacher education.

What is Schooling?

We have come to accept schooling as an integral part of society yet few of us actually consider the role of schooling and education in society. Every society has a distinct culture and is seeks "to perpetuate itself through deliberate transmission of what it considered the most worthwhile knowledge, belief, skills, behaviours, and attitudes. This deliberate transmission of culture is called

education" (Pai & Adler, 1997, p. 41). In many non-Western societies, traditions, beliefs, skills, and attitudes are taught by Elders, peers, family, and community through an informal process. This informal process might involve ceremonies, rituals, and various non-formalized interactions.

In Western societies, "most cultural transmission takes place within the confines of a specially arranged environment" (Pai & Adler, 1997, p. 42). In this type of arrangement, curriculum dictates what kind of knowledge and skills children will learn in a specific period of time from a trained individual. "This formal and more restrictive process of cultural transmission may be called schooling" (p.42). The "transmission of 'culture' is transmission of an individual 'mapping' of behaviours, associated ideas, and interpretations of those behaviours and ideas. Transmission is made knowingly and unknowingly, in specific contexts for specific purposes" (Miller, 1984, p. 324). Cultural transmission is complicated when it occurs between people of different cultures, who may interpret signals differently than the sender of those signals may have intended. In contemporary society, cultural transmission is contingent upon the cultural hegemony of the mainstream, a detrimental condition for groups that do not subscribe to or understand the same beliefs as those of the mainstream.

The Role of Schooling

By definition, "schools are specialized social institutions specifically designed to transmit the culture of the larger society to the young" (Pai & Adler, 1997, p. 142). Theories attribute various roles of schooling, which can be divided into four distinct perspectives, each representative of a well defined school of thought. The four distinct perspectives are; functionalist, critical, interpretivist, and postmodern. There are varying degrees of agreement among these different schools of thought and theorists within each school of thought can be placed on a conceptual continuum.

Leading functional theorists like Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons believe that the primary role of schooling is one of cultural transmission and the maintenance of social order. "The functionalists view the role of schooling as the process of transmitting the established sociocultural, economic, and political norms so that the young can become productive and contributing members of the society. Hence, the school enables the society to perpetuate itself by reproducing its existing patterns" (Pai & Adler, 1997, p. 149).

Critical theorists believe that the role of schooling includes ideals of both conflict theory and critical theory. Conflict theorists like Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis are often referred to as Marxist, since they believe that school reproduces "the existing social order" in a capitalist society (Pai & Adler, 1997, p.163). "According to the advocates of Marxist and neo-Marxist conflict theories, schools in a capitalist society do not reproduce the established social systems to fulfill the expanding educational needs of increasingly complex

positions in modern society...The school functions to serve the interest of the dominant, the powerful, and the wealthy by perpetuating economic inequities" (p.150). Critical theorists like Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux contend that school legitimizes oppression and reinforces "the roles of the oppressed through uncritical acceptance of social order" (p. 163). Further "schools as social institutions reflect the conditions that led to domination" (p. 157).

Leading interpretivist theorist Basil Bernstein adheres to the idea that the primary role of schooling is to "teach various roles through curricula and learning activities with class bias" (Pai & Adler, 1997, p. 163). "Interpreting the meanings of various interactive relationships between students, school personnel, the curriculum, and pedagogy is essential in understanding the role of schooling, for schooling occurs among people mediated by curriculum and instruction" (p. 160).

Alternately, "postmodernism raises many important questions about what counts as knowledge and whose voice is heard in the construction of knowledge" (p.162). Postmodernists like Foucault and Derrida contend that the role of schooling is to "transmit knowledge as defined by those in power" (p. 163).

Although these schools of thought each provide valid arguments to support their positions, they deal primarily with the role of schooling in the contemporary setting. To gain a clearer understanding of schooling among First Nation peoples, it would be beneficial to understand the establishment of colonial schooling and its detrimental impact on Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Colonial Education and Schooling

The term colonialism conjures feelings of resentment and anger among Indigenous people whose ancestors fell victim to the perils of colonization. Its manifestations have had a long term impact on generations of Indigenous people. "Colonialism is manifested through the "configurations of power" (Said, 1994, p. 133) that worked and still work to control Indigenous lands and populations. Notions of white supremacy, racism, sexism, and patriarchy constitute the power relationships and hierarchical structures within the colonial endeavour" (Weenie, 2000, p. 1). These notions were essential in the establishment of colonial power and particular practices and institutions were imperative in its firm establishment as a power. Colonizers recognized that "colonialism is sustained by an intimate relationship with education, imperialism, and capitalism" (p. 2). Therefore, the issue of colonial schooling as a factor in establishing power is significant.

Colonial schooling has a long and sordid history throughout the world. As colonizing nations like England, France, and Spain established power in the colonies, they realized that schooling would be a means of ensuring control. Although colonial education was established and appeared differently in each nation, "the thread that ran through all colonial education was the fact that it was offered by the colonizer without the input of the colonized" (Altbach & Kelly, 1983, p. 2). Further "the colonial school was an alien institution, alien in the sense that whatever is taught had little to do with the society and culture of the colonized" (p.4). Given that a colonial mentality drove the establishment of

schools for Indians in Canada, it is imperative to examine the history of Indian education in this context.

A Historical Overview

Historically, Native Education in North America "had little to do with Indian nations' culture and society but rather was directed toward remaking Indian children in the white man's image. It was an education imposed on Indians without their consent" (Altbach & Kelly, 1983, p. 22). The primary focus of schools was to assimilate Indian people into mainstream society. Indian education in Canada can be divided into five distinct phases; (a) traditional education, (b) missionary education (c) residential schooling, (d) integrated education, and (e) Indian control of Indian education (Jules, 1999). Traditional education was a non-formal education process utilized by Indian people for centuries prior to contact. The primary purpose of "traditional education was to prepare the child for whatever way of life he or she was to lead: hunter, fisherman, warrior, chief, medicine man, or wife and mother. Educational methods included experiential learning, observation, and listening" (p. 41). As Europeans moved into the traditional territories of Indigenous peoples, missionaries established more formal schools. The Catholic Church first set up day schools in the early 1600s, with the conviction that this was "the best method of bringing Christian civilization to the heathen 'Natives'" (Kirkness, 1992, p.7) The Catholic Church remained the primary educational provider until the 1800s, when Protestant churches began to establish schools. The missionary schools did not convert Aboriginal people quickly enough and by the

late 1800 through to the 1950s, residential schools provided the primary mode of educational delivery.

A great deal has been written about residential schools and the permanent scar they have left on First Nations people and communities. They were "devised as a means of isolating, children from their parents and the influence of the reserve" (Kirkness, 1992, p. 7). Residential schools were jointly operated by the government and the church. "Residential school provided a very basic education designed to prepare students for futures as working farmers, housemaids, mechanics or the like. It was to make provision for the domestic and Christian life of the Indian children" (p.7). Students spent months and in many cases years away from their homes and family. The destruction of Indigenous cultures and languages were primary goals of these schools. In many ways, they succeeded. "The legacy of the residential schools was one of cultural conflict, alienation, poor self-concept and lack of preparation for independence, for jobs and life in general" (p.12)

The transition from residential schools toward integration was initiated by the federal government in 1951. "Integration, administratively defined, was the process of having First Nations children attend provincial schools" (Kirkness, 1992, p.12). In 1951, the "federal government made it legally possible for Aboriginal children to attend provincial schools" (Perley, 1993, p. 124). Unfortunately, like its predecessors, the program "continued with little or no consultation with First Nations parents and children or the non-Native community. No particular preparation of teachers or of curriculum was made to

accommodate the children of another culture" (Kirkness, 1992, p.12). As a result, integration failed miserably because Indian students felt completely alienated by both the system and the teachers who were mostly non Aboriginal and transmitting only their own culture.

The move toward integration of Indian children was two fold:

> [Integration] constituted a cost-saving measure for the federal government, allowing it to divert resources to other branches both in and outside of Indian Affairs. Second and more importantly, native youth were brought in direct contact with a broad range of non-native officials under conditions defined by the general ideology of open competition for jobs and other resources. No one but the individual could be blamed for success or failure (Wotherspoon, 2000, p.127).

The action of the day was typical of the federal government's increasing desire to eliminate their burden of responsibility for Indian people. The policy of integration was implemented without the consent of the Indian people. Indian people not being involved in the planning and decision-making process "is typical of the internal colonial situation whereby the policies adopted by the colonizer were always formulated without any input by the colonized" (Perley, 1993, p. 124). Once again, the paternalistic attitude of government toward Indian education presented itself. "The colonial relationship, even in the face of a policy of integration, has in fact hindered the integration of Aboriginal students into the academic and social systems of colonial education" (Perley, 1993, p. 124).

With the dismal failure of the of the integration experiment, the political mood of the day was ripe for change. For Indian people, the catalyst for change was the timely release of the Hawthorn Report, which critically

examined the effects of government policy on the contemporary Indian. This 1967 report offered startling statistics and revealed the realities of life on reserves. In the area of education, Hawthorn wrote, "the mathematics of the crisis in Indian education seemingly dictate that 97 per cent [of] native children who entered Canadian schools this fall will drop out before receiving a high school diploma. What makes Indian and Métis children abandon one of the world's best educational systems?" (Hawthorn, 1967 in Kirkness, 1992, p.13). The report provided valuable insight into the state of unrest and third world conditions among Indian people in Canada.

Trudeau's government introduced a policy designed to deal with some of the issues. The White Paper, released in 1969, outlined six major policy recommendations. In the end, however, the government merely wanted to transfer their responsibility of all services for Indian people (including education) to the provinces (Persson, 1980). Harold Cardinal, then head of the Indian Association of Alberta, responded with the document *Citizens Plus: A Red Paper*, which criticised the White Paper as "a thinly disguised programme of extermination through assimilation" (Cardinal, 1969, p.1). Cardinal's Red Paper, as it is best known, asserted that Indian people desire to control their own services:

> Our education is not a welfare system. We have free education because we have paid in advance for our education by surrendering our lands. The funds for education should be offered to the tribal councils. Then the tribe can decide whether it will operate schools itself or make contracts with nearby public schools for a place for some or all of its students. These contracts would provide for Indian voice and vote in operation of those schools. (Indian Chiefs of Alberta in Persson, 1980, p. 226)

Most importantly the document reminded the government of Canada that Indian people would no longer remain passive, voiceless children.

Indian groups across the country began to assert and demand control of services. One of the most notable actions was the sit-in at Blue Quills residential school near St. Paul, Alberta. Blue Quills has a notorious history as a residential school that served at least six reserves. Throughout the 1960s, the nuns and priests saw their power and control gradually erode as communities began to question their authority. When the sit-in began on July 14, 1970 there were only 60 people in attendance, when it reached its peak there were up to 300 people (Persson, 1980). During the sit-in, the nuns and priest quietly left the school through the backdoor exits. The nearly month long action was widely publicised and support for the action grew not only among First Nations communities but also nationally and internationally. As international publicity grew, the federal government reluctantly met with delegates to discuss an agreement to operate the school. As a result, an agreement was established and on September 1, 1970, Blue Quills opened as the first Indian operated school in Canada (Persson, 1980).

In this period of political turmoil, the National Indian Brotherhood established a committee and put together a document called Indian Control of Indian Education (ICIE). The document was released in 1972 and "in February 1973, the Minister of Indian Affairs gave official departmental recognition to the ICIE document stating that: 'I have given the National Indian Brotherhood my assurance that I and my Department are fully committed to realizing the

educational goals for the Indian people which are set forth in the Brotherhood's proposal '"(Kirkness, 1992, p.15). Political actions had finally succeeded.

The long awaited policy was driven by the need to improve the quality of education Indian people were receiving. The need for an education relevant to the philosophy of Indian people was recognized as being essential: "We want education to give our children a strong sense of identity, with confidence in their personal worth and ability" (Kirkness, 1992, p.16).

Terms and Constraints of Local Control

In the 34 years since the policy of Indian Control of Indian Education was enacted, almost all First Nations across the country have taken "local control". The devolution process that has allowed this to occur has not been smooth by any means. In fact, what has been mistakenly called "local control" is really local administration of Indian Affairs policies and priorities:

> Control implies that one has the ability to change, experiment, develop, and grow; it implies that one can identify needs and then plan and implement strategies to meet those needs; it implies that one can control income and expenditures, establish criteria for success, and have direct governance of one's own affairs. This is not the case when one refers to a band controlled education system. (Goddard, 1993, p.165)

Instead, what has emerged is local band administration of operational funding within Indian Affairs guidelines, with limited band input into funding levels or curriculum. Given that the process of devolution of educational services simply meant that Indian people were allowed the responsibility of administering unknown budgets with the "real" control remaining with the government, the situation lends itself to a myriad of problems. Local control budgets are

administered at by a local school board or committee, typically consisting of community members who have been either elected or appointed by the leadership. The school boards or committees are duped into believing that they have control of the budget because they receive funding directly from government but instead they do the dirty work of the government and leave themselves as targets to "blame for shortcomings [due to] inadequate financing" (Bottery, 1992, p.104) Funding for First Nation schools comes directly from federal government and funding levels are substantially lower than funding levels provided to provincial schools. At the community level, this means that boards must personally accept the responsibility for financial shortfalls and easily become scapegoats to blame for education problems. Much of the time spent in managing First Nations schools has been spent administering meagre budgets, with very little time or other resources left for program planning guided by the community.

Hall (1992) aptly summarized the situation:

> Education programs delivered on reserves are neither proactive nor sound, but rather compromise a doomed educational façade based on Indians' reaction and response to federal government proposals and policies developed for Indian education on reserves without any significant input by Indians (p. 58).

He further articulated a number of problems that have emerged with local control, including; band councils' conflict of interest in governing, management by the untrained, poor teacher-band council relations, little or no parent input into education programming, financial shortfalls, and policy-administration. Since band councils are the final authority on the Reserve, they have in many

cases vetoed recommendations of locally elected school boards. In some cases funds are redirected to other needs and activities such as economic development, housing and social services etc (Hall, 1992). This places band councils in a contentious position both with respect to their communities and the federal government. As a result, First Nation school boards are often at odds with their band councils' spending priorities (Hall, 1992). Band controlled schools can elect or appoint school boards/committees. Although school boards everywhere consist of elected lay people, this practice on reserves is problematic because reserves are small and people are often closely related. This is further complicated when board members try to operate in that political role in a system they have inherited, attempting to duplicate the role and behaviours of board members of mainstream systems.

Inadequate fiscal resources can also create problems in the relationships between school personnel and school boards. There have been cases in which teachers were fired because of the escalating costs associated with teacher increments. Bottery (1992) states that locally managed schools often are forced to lay off more experienced teachers and hire cheaper less experienced teachers in the face of budget constraints. As Hall (1992) notes, most reserves pay "lower salaries than those paid in provincial and federal schools, the absence of teacher tenure, and diversion of education monies to other band programs leaving" the school without sufficient funding (p. 63). The resulting lack of stability in teaching staff means that students in First Nation schools must become accustomed to new staff coming and going each year. First

Nations are often distracted from focussing on academic pursuits due to issues of high teacher turnover, lack of resources and materials. These conditions are often detrimental to student achievement (Hall, 1992).

In reality, inadequate resources leave First Nation school boards with limited control over the direction of the school while struggling to meet the needs of the community with such inadequate resources. As community members, school board members are cognizant of their community's needs and values but are constrained by resources and policy. This need for control is reflected in the 1972 ICIE policy, which stated that "If we are to avoid the conflict of values which in the past has led to withdrawal and failure, Indian parents must have control of education with the responsibility of setting goals (Kirkness, 1992, p. 44). Still, we remain at the same place today we were 35 years ago, limited in the control of education and a lack of true parental involvement. Lack of parental involvement is an indication that parents still do not feel comfortable in the school. Parental involvement may need to be redefined to meet the needs of First Nation communities and schools, rather than those assumed by the mainstream model.

Although many issues in First Nations schools can be attributed to inadequate funding, there are other policy issues that directly impact the function of the school. First Nation schools do not fall under the jurisdiction of provincial School Acts. Rather, they are regulated by Federal legislation. With no clear policy direction to rely upon at the community level, First Nation schools are often forced to create policy as necessary and policy easily changes with

leadership, Hall (1992) discusses the issue of policy administration, that is, when board members and band council officials take over the role of the education director/administrator by overriding decisions made by the director. This is possible simply because, with no policy to guide administration, Chief and Council can veto any decision and, in turn, any decisions can overridden by the Minister of Indian Affairs. Essentially, Indian Control of Indian Education is merely a semantic exercise because the real power still is in the hands of the federal government.

Epistemological Differences

Epistemology is often seen as synonymous with worldview. How we see the world is contingent upon the culture we were raised in and how that culture functions. For many Indigenous cultures, survival is dictated by their relationship with the land and the environment. "Indigenous societies, as a matter of survival, have long sought to understand the irregularities in the world around them, recognizing that nature is underlain with many unseen patterns of order" (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 1999, p. 2). The struggle to survive in nature manifests itself in the culture and as a result Indigenous people see the world much differently from mainstream Eurocentric patterns.

> For indigenous people there is a recognition that many unseen forces are in action in the elements of the universe, and that very little is naturally linear, or occurs in a two-dimensional grid or a three dimensional cube. They are familiar with the notions of irregularities and anomalies of form and force (i.e. chaos). Through long observation they have become specialists in understanding the interconnectedness and holism of all things in the universe. (Kawagley, 1995, p. 2)

The lack of linearity in Indigenous thought does not mean that there is also no

patterning. For some Indigenous groups the pattern of four is significant. St. Clair (2000) refers to this patterning as quaternity. "In the Quaternity, the pattern is based on the number 'four.' Things move through four stages and then repeat themselves. The day has four parts: morning, noon, evening, and night. Life has four parts: birth, youth, adulthood, and old age. The earth has four directions: north, south, east, and west" (St. Clair, 2000, p. 1). Seeing the world through a lens based on natural constructs is clearly not congruent with Eurocentric traditions, which rely on man made patterns. At a macro level, the clash of culture is evident. The problem becomes even more acute at a micro level, around specific issues such as schooling.

Indigenous peoples the world over have long struggled with schooling because they were never part of the establishment of the formal education process nor did they have a world view congruent with the colonial system. "The Aboriginal world-view reflects a unity of coherence of people, nature, land, and time. Because the physical world has not been compartmentalized into segments such as science, mathematics, and geography, the spiritual unities are able to transcend such European constructs and remain the primary influence in the indigenous worldview" (Hewitt, 2000, p. 8). It is easy to recognize why schooling as it exists is not effective for Indigenous people. Manifestations of this incongruence have appeared in numerous ways, including high dropout rates, lack of achievement, and general lack of parental and school relationship. "If the Native American Indian appears to be apathetic about supporting the efforts of his children to succeed in school, it is not because of

hostility to educational process, but rather because of his rejection of the narrowness of the system that controls the education process" (Otis, 1972 in Bielenberg, 2000, p. 1). This narrowness in the system transcends all aspects of schooling and provides further justification for the establishment of systems respective of Indigenous knowledge and epistemology.

Although First Nation communities operate like islands onto themselves, they are not self-sustaining. Most First Nation people have to leave the community to purchase goods and services, to conduct business and to work. Parents see this relationship with mainstream society as inevitable, yet paradoxically they want their children to possess a strong sense of identity. It is clear that parents and communities want to equip children with formal education that allows them to walk in two worlds (Hampton 1996; Kirkness 1998). This desire further fuels the need to develop an educational system that embraces an Indigenous worldview.

Indigenous Schooling

Theorists have proposed various methods of providing schooling for Indigenous people within the existing framework of mainstream schooling. Two such theories are the Culture Domain Separation Theory and the other is Negotiated Meaning theory.

> Culture domain separation can be defined as drawing boundaries between two cultures and deciding when you are going to operate in one and when in the other... It is a form of biculturalism in which the two cultures are incorporated into a person in a compartmentalised way... The maintenance of strict boundaries is crucial, indeed 'necessary for cultural survival' (Ovington, 1994, p.30)

This theory proposes that schooling be clearly divided to meet the needs of the

two cultures and that each has its own environment, content, methods, and instructors. Logistically, this type of system within one system may be difficult to establish, especially because each system is culturally based and influenced.

Alternately, negotiated meaning asserts "that the bisection of the world into an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal component is an imprecise surgical exercise which is a product of a Western dualistic thought" (p. 34). Negotiated meaning theorists believe that schooling can be made effective and efficient if the two cultures can appreciate their differences and meld them into one system that meets the needs of both groups. This could best be described as Both Ways education. "Both Ways is the dialectic attempting to deal with the conflicts/dissonances produced at the cultural interface... It is this interface which must be engaged actively... in order to produce a 'more comprehensive' higher order knowledge... which is greater than the sum of the constituent cultures" (Ovington, 1994, p. 32). Both Ways education was further explained by Harris (1990), who stated that "two way schooling would be a matter of fair representation of cultural content [from] both Aboriginal and western culture" (p. 7). Harris noted that "a school should reflect a spirit of exchange between the European Australians and Aborigines...in terms of equal power relations... a two way flow of reciprocity... [and] exchange of knowledge" (p.13). Although the primary tenet is that there is an equal power relationship, power can never be equal if there is a conflict of values that cannot be negotiated, especially if those values form the core of the culture.

Unfortunately the way that schools exist today and what we deem Indian

education "is really Anglo education applied to Indians, rather than true Indian education, which is Indian-controlled education "that fosters self-determination (Hampton, 1993, p. 25). We delude ourselves into believing that we offer 'Indian education' in our communities when, in fact, we continue "to mirror the structure of the assimilationist schools in which" we were educated (Bielenberg, 2000, p. 10). Communities need to realize that "indigenous schools serve as sites of negotiation between cultures in contact, and in the process become themselves unique 'third cultural realities'... unpredictable diversity of educational designs which repeatedly defy the theoretical and methodological packages of non-indigenous educators" (Stairs, 1994, p. 64). Although these theories are informed by research they are presented primarily as possibilities for integrating Indigenous schooling *into* existing frameworks. This examination is not intended to be a critique but a presentation of existing theories.

Teacher Education

Teachers are the front line workers and perhaps play the most significant role in schooling. "How a teacher views teaching and learning, the expectations students, parents, and communities have of schools, and the beliefs of all about how schools should be run and what a "real school" is are deeply entrenched norms that are not often questioned by the people being served" (Bielenberg, 2000, p.2). Although many First Nation communities realize that there are significant problems with education, few would dare to assert that teachers might be part of the problem. "Seldom have educators accepted the blame for failing the children, acknowledging that it may be the educational system itself

that must be altered" (p.1).

Ideologically, it would be great if all Indigenous children were taught by people with whom they share a common cultural background, that is, by Indigenous teachers grounded in their own traditional culture. Realistically, non-native teachers must be employed. Many of these teachers have constant struggles due to their lack of understanding of the (unfamiliar) Aboriginal cultural context. In subject areas, "teachers of the western ways employed to teach composition on Indian reservations seem to comment endlessly on the difficulty their students are having with the basic tripartite system of Aristotelian rhetoric" (Cooley, 1981; Cooley & Ballenger, 1981, cited in St. Clair, 2000, p.8). Although there are evident problems with non-Indian teachers, there are also significant problems with Indigenous educators who continue to teach the way they have been taught in mainstream institutions. "This means that there is a need for the development of teacher education programs that address issues surrounding the different ways of knowing that are often part of non-mainstream cultures" (Bielenberg, 2000, p.13). We need to move away from "graded classrooms, in which children are placed in different grades and follow structured curricula... modeled on the division of labour and hierarchical supervision common in factories" (Tyack & Cuba, 1995, in Bielenberg, 2000, p.11). The unlearning of this familiar structure will be a great challenge to all educators, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

Looking Ahead

In light of First Nations people's typical experience that schooling has not

met their needs, we must begin to work toward achieving true Indigenous education. How do we achieve this? "To do this, to achieve 'true Native education,' educators most [sic] look to change not only what is taught, but also how it is taught, where it is taught, and how the school is structured and managed. We must question the very foundations of the institution of Western education and ask which, if any, are appropriate for meeting the goals of a given American Indian or Alaska Native community" (Bielenberg, 2000, p.12). The goal of achieving true Indigenous education, although a seemingly ominous task, is not impossible and given the grave state of First Nation schooling today, how can we do much worse?

The literature was used to define schooling rather than education, it provided a point of departure that demonstrated that schooling did not work for Indian people from the beginning. When government actions did not work the move toward local control provided an opportunity for the government to shift the burden of responsibility for First Nations education to the communities. Unfortunately, the shift to the communities has not worked as well as it was intended because of the epistemological differences between First Nations and mainstream educational systems. These differences were also further compounded by the fact that teachers of First Nation children are taught in a western context far removed from an Indigenous world view.

Chapter Three

Methodology and Nature of the Study

A "methodology focuses on the best means for gaining knowledge about the world" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.157). Ultimately, methodology frames the data collection method and the final analysis. It is fundamentally important to select an appropriate methodology. This is especially important when conducting research with First Nations because they have been a highly researched population. First Nations in Canada consider themselves people of the land. Unfortunately the public knows very little about First Nations and even less about the communities we live in. The ominous picture of First Nations that has been painted for the Canadian public is one of poverty, despair, hopelessness, and crisis. Yet our population has been subjected to research of various sorts that has had limited positive impact on First Nations people. As Smith (1999) reminds us, "we are the most researched people in the world"(p. 3) this statement echoed by Indigenous peoples everywhere. Researchers, especially anthropologists conducting research on Indian populations, have earned a less than favourable reputation because of their lack of understanding and sensitivity (Deloria, 1988). In the Cree language, the word for research is *natonikewin*, which means to probe and not necessarily with permission. It is a more intrusive and impolite word than *nitawâhtâw*, looking for something in a good way. The lack of understanding and sensitivity has resulted in the publication of materials and texts that too often include gross

misrepresentations and untruths about Indian people. Unfortunately, some have become considered seminal pieces of work. Thus the need to utilize culturally congruent research methodologies has been echoed by Indigenous scholars (Weber-Pillwax, 1999; Smith, 1999).

As I searched for an appropriate methodology. I met with theories that could easily be applied to the Indigenous context I wished to research. Like Wilson (2001), I felt that critical theory might provide a perspective because it advocates the type of social change I want for students. Yet, I was not quite comfortable with critical theory because it presupposed the existence of a victim. Most critical theorists believe that others need to be empowered in order to become emancipated from oppression. This focus on power relationships drew me away from critical theory. I do not believe that I am an emancipator because if an individual can give power then that same individual could also take it away. It is my firm belief that because I am no greater than anyone else, I do not have the right to give power to others. Most importantly, critical theory does not acknowledge the significance of relationality, which was central to the study. Although I rejected critical theory I still wanted to utilize some of its tenets but the importance of relational accountability made it more important to select a more culturally appropriate methodology.

I was also attracted to the post-colonial paradigm because it "would accept knowledge from differing cosmologies as valid in their own right, without their having to adhere to a separate cultural body for legitimacy" (Duran & Duran, 1995, p. 6). I was especially attracted to the work of theorists like

Hommi Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity. Hybridity refers to the cross cultural exchange that emerges when a colonizer colonizes a group of people and a third space emerges. Ultimately, though, I was not comfortable with this theory because one of the primary tenets was the development of pidgin or creolization of languages and that has not happened with Cree on a large scale. Although I found many aspects of this paradigm appropriate, I realized I had to look further. This knowledge, however, provided me with increased confidence to find a culturally appropriate methodology.

As I looked and read more I realized that I could synthesize aspects of various theories and paradigms that exist into my own methodology. I also realized that this process was supposed to happen simply because the "Aboriginal worldviews are not reductionist instead they have always stressed similarities rather than differences" (Henderson, 2000, p. 261). Much like a cat chasing its tail, I would almost grasp onto the thoughts of others but in the end I ended up where I began. I finally realized what other researchers like Weber-Pillwax (1999) and Wilson (2001) have already found that the parameters established by Western paradigms are not fitting and that an Indigenous paradigm must be employed because it is Indigenous.

What Is an Indigenous Paradigm?

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000) "a paradigm encompasses four concepts: ethics (axiology), epistemology, ontology, and methodology (p. 157). Axiology refers to the morals and ethics that guide an individual through life. As an Indigenous researcher, I will have to ask myself if I know the proper protocol

for seeking knowledge. I will also have to ask myself how I might present information so that it can be understood as it was intended. Ontology refers to the nature of one's existence. This means that I must, as researcher, recognize that my reality is not the same as someone else's because of where I come from. The late Lionel Kinunnwa (1998) spoke of the differing realities that one might posses being dependent on their knowledge, gender, age, and experience. Henderson (2000) states that "Indigenous knowledge is not a uniform concept across all Indigenous peoples; it is a diverse knowledge that is spread throughout different peoples in many layers" (p. 35). Yet there does seem to be a thread running through all Indigenous groups which is common to all. Epistemology "is how you think of that reality," it is how you see the world (Wilson, 2001, p. 175). As an Indigenous researcher I must recognize that the way I see the world will be affected by the inherent knowledge of my ancestors. The language I speak will also further the knowledge that I have gained through experience and the cellular memories that have been passed onto me. "Cellular memory is the intuitive, instructive ability to sense various energy forms" (Kinunnwa, 1998). We access these memories "when we hear the tones of our languages."

Methodology is how "you are going to use your ways of thinking (your epistemology) to gain more knowledge about your reality" (Wilson, 2001, p.175). Moreover it is of fundamental importance to remember what I have heard Elders state, that "no one owns the knowledge, it is for everyone." Although it is evident that an Indigenous paradigm cannot be easily defined, it is easier to

begin with some of its foundational elements in comparison with Western paradigms. Wilson (2001) aptly captures this idea by stating that

> One major difference between the dominant paradigms and an Indigenous paradigm is that the dominant paradigms build on the fundamental belief that knowledge is an individual entity: the researcher is an individual in search of knowledge, knowledge is something that is gained, and therefore knowledge may be owned by an individual. An Indigenous paradigm comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational. Knowledge is shared with all of creation. (p.176)

An Indigenous Methodology

The premise of relational accountability was a central component of my methodology. The belief in relationship is core to all traditional Indigenous peoples. It is central to a First Nation worldview and various scholars, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, from scientists to psychologists, have noted this (Cajete, 2000; Couture, 2000; Duran & Duran, 1995; Suzuki, 1997). Battiste and Henderson (2000) wrote that "the Aboriginal worldview asserts that all life is sacred and that all life forms are connected. Humans are neither above nor below others in the circle of life. Everything that exists in the circle is one unit, of one heart" (p. 259). The relational accountability that guides a researcher is based on mutual trust and respect between the researcher and the participant. This notion of relationality is best articulated by Wilson (2001) who stated:

> As a researcher you are answering to *all your relations* when you are doing research. You are not answering questions of validity or reliability or making judgments of better or worse. Instead you should be fulfilling your relationships with the world around you. So your methodology has to ask different questions: rather than asking about validity or reliability, you are asking how am I fulfilling my role in this relationship? What are my obligations in this

> relationship? The axiology or morals need to be an integral part of the methodology so that when I am gaining knowledge in order to fulfill my end of the research relationship. This becomes my methodology, an Indigenous methodology, by looking at relational accountability or being accountable to *all my relations* (p. 177).

As an Indigenous researcher I came to the realization that I could take on this task because it is derived from my own lived experience. It is a familiar way of gaining knowledge.

Central to the idea of relational accountability is the virtue of humility. Although the cultural hegemony of contemporary society dictates that humility is a virtue or an ideal not easily achieved, most Indigenous people view humility as a way of being. As a researcher I know that humility is imperative because I am part of the Indigenous community and I represent a family and a First Nation community. Battiste and Henderson (2000) write that

> The Aboriginal worldview teaches Aboriginal people to feel humble about their existence. They are but one strand in the web of life. In the circle of which all life forms are part, humans are dependent upon all the other forces for their survival. Aboriginal worldviews also teach that humans exist to share life according to their abilities. They exist to care for and renew the web of life, and therefore they must respect and value all the forces of life. Often this worldview is called the process of humility. (p. 259)

In this research relationship, participants knew that they bore the responsibility of sharing ideas and knowledge to the best of their ability without deliberate intent to mislead because they were presented with proper protocol and a sacred relationship between the researcher and the participant was entered into. Therefore, the authenticity and trustworthiness of data do not present themselves as issues for consideration because of the sacredness of the relationship. Very little can actually proceed in Indigenous research without first

establishing an honest, respectful relationship. This means that as a researcher I, for example, had the responsibility to present the data as the participants intended and I did this by verifying my interpretation with my peers and doing member checks. This also meant that data analysis was of critical importance because of the need to be mindful of cultural differences in communication. I had to ensure that interpretation and analysis included the intended meaning of pauses, chuckles, nods, and acknowledgements. The ideas of relational responsibility and accountability extend to actions that will take place after research has been completed and after findings have been analyzed. They refer to any changes of philosophy, curriculum, teaching methods, or content that might be recommended by the findings (Wilson & Wilson, 1999). They are also the actions that I am responsible for carrying out once the research has been completed.

The research methodology that I utilized was based on the principle of relationality. It involved students, parents, teachers, and Elders from the community of Nehiyanak First Nation. The First Nation community of Nehiyanak, like many other First Nations in Canada offers school programming for students in grades K-12. Although policy in 1973 determined that First Nations like Nehiyanak would assume local control of educational services for the benefit of the First Nation, what transpired instead is a system that is controlled by federal purse strings and married to provincial curriculum. Because of this, Nehiyanak has developed a certain status quo that has prevented it from evolving into the truly locally controlled organization that it was

intended to be.

Entering the Community

Although I am a Cree speaker and member of a First Nation community, I did not assume that I would automatically gain entrance into the community of Nehiyanak. My concept of community has defined me as a person and no matter where I am, I responsible for conducting myself according to unwritten community expectations. Cajete (2000) writes that

> Through community Indian people come to understand their "personhood" and their connection to the "communal soul" of their people. The community is the place where the "forming of the heart and face" of the individual as one of the people is most fully expressed; it is the context in which the person comes to know relationship, responsibility, and participation is the life of one's people. (p. 86)

Assuming a role as a researcher in your own community brings still further obligations and responsibilities. As a member of such a community, I was quite aware that there were certain procedures and protocols that I had to respect. Before I entered the community I wrote a detailed letter to the Chief and Council clearly outlining the purpose of my research. I also gave them the opportunity to ask questions and asked for their permission to conduct research in the community. The Chief and Council were very supportive of the work and provided me with a letter granting me permission to conduct my research. Once I entered the community I began meeting with different people to establish relationships, talk about my research, and to find people interested in participating.

Selecting Participants

The participants in this study were selected to participate because they were involved in some manner to the existing formal education system in the community. When I first received permission to conduct the research, I spoke to a number of different people who I felt were knowledgeable about my topic and could provide valuable input into my research question. Every individual whom I contacted was interested in participating and so I began with a number of informal visits to with them to explain my research topic. I then set up appointments for interviews; some were rescheduled a number of times. If they were not able to meet by the third attempt, I accepted this as an indirect way of expressing lack of willingness to participate. I know that participants did not want to disappoint me and I also knew the cultural nuances of indirectly letting someone know that they did not want to participate. In the end, I was able to conduct interviews with ten individuals; three youth, two parents, three First Nation teachers, and two Elders. The youth that were selected had attended Nehiyanak for many years of their formal education and one graduated from the school. The parents were selected because their children attended the community school and they were strong supporters of the school. The teachers selected were First Nation and spent much of their careers working in First Nation schools. They were also fully cognizant of school and community issues. The Elders selected had been involved directly and indirectly with the school system in Nehiyanak. They served on committees and their children and grandchildren have attended the school. Overall, all participants had direct

experience and demonstrated commitment to the school system in Nehiyanak.

The Participants and the Community

The participants in any study are of critical importance. In this study, they were of particular importance because they shared their lived experiences in order to further my research. To protect the identities of each individual, I created vignettes. I took this additional precaution in order to maintain the confidentiality of the participants, since the First Nations' community is relatively small. The vignettes also portray the context for the study.

Participants adhered to traditional Cree cultural protocols in the manner in which they shared their knowledge. They stated that they would share with me what they knew from their perspectives. Traditional Cree people are uncomfortable in the role of expert. Instead, they prefer that their words are represented from their personal perspective of the world. Cree Elders almost always preface what they say with *namoya kîkway nikiskeyiten, maka ka wihtamatin anima apisis kakiskeytaman* (I know very little, but I will share with you the little I know). This depends on the type of knowledge that is being shared and is especially used when sharing spiritual knowledge. Most traditional Cree people are willing to share information, especially if you follow proper protocol. People will willingly provide information to the best of their knowledge. "Traditional Cree people don't go where they don't know" (Mary Cardinal-Collins, personal communication, March 1, 2007). This means that they will not talk about things of which they have limited knowledge. The participants in this study willingly shared information once protocol was correctly

observed and followed.

What follows are vignettes that set the context for the participants and community in this study.

Elders

Ella. Ella is a great-grandmother in her early 80's who has lived her entire life in her First Nation community. Ella and her late husband raised six children and numerous grandchildren. Like many traditional Cree families in the community, Ella and her husband chose to raise a number of their grandchildren. Her three older children attended residential school and the younger ones attended the on reserve school. She is a strong advocate of the community school and almost all her grandchildren attended the community school. Ella has always been a strong supporter of community political activism and was a part the group of people involved in the 1970 sit-in at Blue Quills, when the college successfully managed to gain local control.

Although she is a strong advocate of community based education, her own educational experience was not always positive. She was forced to attend residential school from five years of age. By the time she was used to it, she "had to leave", at the age of 16. Ella felt that she was "slow to learn" because she did not seem to learn English as quickly as other children. She saw the value in education and would have liked to continue attending school but did not have that option at that time. Like many other young First Nation girls in that time, her only option was to either return to her home community where there were no opportunities or work as a maid for white people in the surrounding

community. She worked as a maid for a large family till she was 20; she milked cows, did all the house work, cooked, and took care of seven children. When she returned home she met her husband and got married at 21.

Ella has always lived a traditional lifestyle. She continues to participate in traditional ceremonies and willingly shares her vast knowledge of sewing, beading, and other Cree cultural arts. Her children and grandchildren continue to practice the values, beliefs and traditions in which she raised them. Her time spent at residential school left a lasting imprint on her life and she remains a very strong practicing Catholic, yet she is able to balance it with her traditional beliefs.

As a mother and grandmother, Ella has always encouraged and supported her children and grandchildren's school attendance. Still, she avoided visiting the school because she finds it intimidating and said in Cree "I don't need to go the school to find out if my grandchildren are doing bad. They will tell me." As a parent and grandparent, her primary expectation of the school was for the children to be happy and to complete high school.

Edie. Edie is a grandmother has lived most of her 65 plus years on the reserve. Her initial residential school experience was very traumatic but she later attended another residential school where the conditions were better and she remained there till she was 16. Like Ella, Edie did not have many options when she had to leave school at 16, so she worked as a maid and a nanny. One fairly wealthy family that Edie worked for took a special interest in her and hired her as a nanny. Edie had opportunities to travel with her employer and

gain exposure to different lifestyles and places. When she returned home at 22, she met and married her husband and had five children, who continue to live and raise their children in the community.

Edie is knowledgeable of her Cree culture but feels she does not know enough because she "was not raised that way." Her husband is a strong traditionalist and continues to participate in ceremonies and traditions. She is respectful of Cree traditions and practices and is also quite comfortable in the Catholic faith she learned in residential school. Although she is respectful of traditional practices, she does not venture far from the Catholic tradition she knows well.

Through her community involvement, Edie has developed a strong sense of community in the past 25 years. She realized the importance of community collaboration in creating solutions. Up until a few years ago, she was active on various local boards and community groups but her health has encumbered those roles in recent years.

As parents, Edie and her husband have remained strong supporters of their children's educational and work endeavours. All of her children have completed high school and a couple have gone on to post-secondary programs. She enjoys living in the community but is saddened by the impact of illegal drugs on the entire community. Although she speaks English very well, she feels that she can get her message across more effectively in Cree. She firmly believes that the Cree language was a gift to the people and it gives us the strength to remain strong as a people.

Parents

Patrice. Patrice and her husband Patrick have always lived in the community and are the proud parents of two children. One son has moved out on his own and another is still at home. Patrice's children have been educated in the reserve school, except for brief periods of time when they attended another off-reserve school. She is very supportive and proud of her children and their pursuits in life. She does not believe that a high school education is the ultimate measure of success for everyone; she feels that "everyone has to find their place." As a student, Patrice attended the reserve school and was one of the first graduates from the Nehiyanak community school. As a student, she was involved all the school student union activities and was the treasurer for two years. She is a very strong supporter of the school and education generally. Her commitment and belief in education is demonstrated by her completion of an advanced professional degree.

Patrice is the eldest of four children and from a family who battled addictions. She grew up around many cousins and extended family. Although school was challenge for her, she had the strength to persist and complete high school, becoming the first high school graduate in her family unit. She met and married her husband at a young age and they soon became parents. Although they struggled as a young family, they were never lured by the numbing effects of substance abuse. Instead, they chose a very traditional lifestyle of ceremony and community involvement. Patrice and her husband are well respected in the community as cultural leaders and advocates of community healing. Both work

in jobs that serve people in need. Cree traditions and ceremonies are part of their daily life and they lead and participate in many community activities. They believe that the Cree culture provides all the support and strength we need to succeed in life.

Paula. Paula is a parent and new grandmother who spent most of her childhood in a nearby city but has spent all of her married life in the community. Paula is in her late 40's. She and her husband married at a young age and had five children. All five of their children have attended and graduated from the community school. Paula became a mother at an early age, so she did not complete high school until a few years later. She always felt that education was important and would provide her and her family with opportunities. Paula and her husband, Paul have always provided well for their children. As a tradesman, he has always worked and sometimes had to work out of the community to find employment. As parents, they have always been very supportive of education, Paul completed his journeyman training and Paula finished a university degree while raising their children.

Paula is very respectful of Cree culture and traditions but states that she knows little because she did not "grow up that way." She is very supportive of her children's pursuits and believes in the importance of a strong supportive family unit. Paula swore that when she had children they would not grow up in the city and be exposed to the racism she was. She felt that the impact of racism was very detrimental to her self-esteem. To further add to the problem, her parents were alcoholics so there was violence and a lot of movement from

place to place. Paula also promised herself that she would not raise her children in same alcohol infused environment she grew up in. She has always kept that promise. Her husband Paul grew up on the reserve in a quiet family setting. He and Paula have always made family time a priority.

Teachers

Tracy. Tracy is a mother and grandmother. She has had a long and successful teaching and administrative career in both on and off reserve teaching environments. She grew up on the reserve, attended university and then taught in a few communities, eventually becoming an administrator. Tracy and her husband Tim have raised three children and have always maintained strong ties to their large family units. Even when they lived away from the community, they visited family and friends on a weekly basis.

Although she grew up in a family that was always involved in ceremonies and traditional cultural practices, Tracy felt that she did not actively participate in ceremonies until she was an adult. When she left home to attend university, she realized how important they were to her. She longed for the sense of belonging and community that they gave her. As a result, ceremony continues to be an integral part of her daily life. As a teacher, she feels that by providing Aboriginal children with a strong sense of identity and belonging, they will achieve success in spite of adversity and challenges they may encounter in life.

Tracy has experienced great success in her job over the years. She has earned teaching awards and other accolades for her innovative practices and leadership. Her practices are rooted in the belief that the community must be a

part of the school and that this will in turn impact student achievement, attendance, and parental involvement. She also stresses the importance of educating the whole child and meeting the needs of all students by offering a wide range of programming that includes the fine arts. Tracy has successfully implemented her practices in at least two schools with great and measurable success.

Tracy strongly believes that the school is a microcosm of the community. Although the community problems may adversely affect the school, she believes that the best way to achieve positive change is through the children. Her recent return to the community has "been very challenging" because her approaches to education are not readily accepted by the faction of the community steeped in Christian fundamentalism. They believe that any ceremonial or traditional practices are pagan and that they do not have a place in the school. Instead, school should be a place where children learn discipline, sit in rows, and sing the national anthem. She realizes that there will be many challenges ahead and that practice and research should prove that a strong culturally based program will provide the most success for the community. For now, she is not sure if she has the energy or stamina to battle such a strong community faction. She said "maybe they are just not ready yet."

Taryn. Taryn is a mother and grandmother. Other than her years at university she has spent most of her 50 plus years and all of her career on the reserve. She and her husband Tyson successfully raised four children while they attended university. Both have successful professional careers, in spite of

the many challenges they faced. Their perseverance and commitment to family life have paid off, because they still have a very strong family unit and almost all their children have completed post-secondary programs.

Taryn and her family are deeply committed to language, culture, and traditions. As a family, they participate in ceremonies and have made ceremony a part of their daily lives. The revitalization of the Cree language has been a whole family commitment, Taryn, Tyson and all the children and grandchildren have extended this commitment to language to the community. It is their firm belief that it is a collective responsibility to speak the language and to teach it to future generations.

Taryn has taught at the division one and two levels for most of her career and has had wide and varied experiences. She has also been in a school leadership role for a number of years. She firmly believes that culture and tradition need to be part of the school environment and that it is important to educate the whole child. More recently, Taryn has become increasingly concerned about the impact community problems have on the children. She is concerned about the impact of addictions on children, especially those whose basic human needs of food, shelter, and clothing are not being met. Taryn feels sorry for both the child and the parent because she knows that "parents love their children but their judgement has been clouded." Still, she is very hopeful that things will change and believes that it is even more important to make school a positive experience so that students can look forward to coming back to a safe place day after day.

Taya. Taya has taught at the secondary level in Nehiyanak School for the past few years. She has lived all of her life in the community and has taught in the community since her graduation from university. She graduated from Nehiyanak community school and immediately went onto university. Taya was a very popular student in school. She excelled academically and socially. Most notably, she was a strong advocate for equity and consistency. She would assist and encourage students to make their concerns heard in a diplomatic and articulate manner. Taya was friends with everyone from students to teachers. Today, as a teacher, she is very active in school activities that build leadership capacity among students. She also believes in providing students with as many diverse learning opportunities as possible. Although she would never have guessed it during high school, it was just natural that she would become a teacher and return to serve the community.

Taya comes from a large very tightly knit family. Throughout her entire life, she has participated in ceremonies and cultural events. Cultural practices have been such a natural part of her life that she does not know any other way. It is her natural way of being. Although, she is single and does not have children, like many traditional families, she actively participates in the raising of nieces and nephews like she would her own children.

As a teacher, Taya is a strong advocate of consistency and equality with her students; she ensures students respect each other and themselves. She believes that it is important that culture and tradition are part of the school and that academic growth can easily grow alongside it. Taya feels that cultural and

tradition should be integrated into the daily flow of the school but stresses "there are sacred things that should not be integrated into to a school setting because they are too sacred". To incorporate these things would be disrespectful. Taya is concerned with the impact that community problems with drugs, gambling, unemployment has on the students. She feels that students' basic needs are ignored and as a result education does not become a priority. This can prevent students from gaining the freedom of choice that an education affords them. Still, Taya remains a strong supporter of community based education and firmly believes that the community must work together to create the positive changes necessary to move it into the future.

Students

Sage. Sage is 21 years old and a single parent of a one-year old boy. He left high school before graduation to move away and be with his girlfriend. Unfortunately, things did not work out and he has returned to adult upgrading to finish high school so he could enter the trade he wants to. Sage has spent most of his life in the community, except for the brief time he moved away to be with his girlfriend. His world now revolves around taking care of his son and finishing school. Sage wants to become an electrician so he can provide "a decent life" for his son. Although he can easily move onto university, he feels that he needs to make a more practical decision for his son.

Sage is the middle child of five children and was raised by his mother who left a bad marriage. She then raised Sage and his siblings in a strong extended family of aunts and uncles who were strong traditional practitioners.

From a young age Sage, participated in community events, ceremonies, and other traditional practices. His family played in important role in both the traditional and church community and successfully married these roles.

He felt that his own family dysfunction was one of the main factors that prevented him from completing high school with his peers. Sage felt that family breakdown has a detrimental impact on children and that he will work hard to shield his son from those experiences. His strong cultural knowledge has been a great source of strength and has forged a strong sense of identity. Sage is concerned about the level of violence, illegal drug use, and dysfunction in the community and its impact on his siblings.

Sky. Sky is a 20 year old single girl, who graduated from the local high school and began a career in science. Most of her life has been spent living in the community, other than a few years in the city and time away for her studies. Sky has always been actively involved in school and community activities. As a junior high student, she began volunteering with a variety of after school and in school programs. Eventually, she was able to gain part-time employment and began to initiate projects that would engage students in learning and promote community pride and awareness. In one of her projects, children developed a series of posters and plays about the impact of addictions on them. The series created controversy, but the children felt positive because they had been heard.

During her upper elementary years, Sky's mother moved her and her two sisters to the city. The family's move was motivated by her mother's hope of kicking her addiction to alcohol. Instead, she began to drink even more heavily.

As a result, 12 year old Sky became the primary caretaker of her siblings. Along with that, Sky became increasingly unhappy with school. It was so bad that "racism almost killed me." After a couple of months, child welfare authorities intervened and they were removed from her mother's care. They returned to the community of Nehiyanak to live with a close relative.

Although Sky does not consider herself a strong cultural practitioner, she is aware of her role when participating in ceremonies. She is fully cognizant of the nature of community and has a very strong sense of identity. When she entered grade 11, she decided to attend the off-reserve school. She felt that she would "try another school", but ended up staying and finishing there. She found it to be a less than positive experience, yet still managed to graduate. She experienced racist remarks and actions from both teachers and students, but what she found most hurtful was judgement from her peers in the community because she did not participate in the weekend partying. Sky has overcome great odds to achieve the great success she has today. She is now self-assured with a strong sense of identity.

Star. Star is a picture of resilience, at 20 years old she has been on her own since 16 and managed to graduate from Nehiyanak School and participate in various youth exchange programs. She has spent her entire life on the reserve except for the period of time to go on her exchanges. Star has always been a very positive and reliable young lady she is very close to her three siblings. When she returned from her last youth exchange she became even more committed to the community and her family.

Much like Sky, Star volunteered with a number of community organizations and groups. She worked with summer day camps and was active in various youth groups. Star has been a friend and counsellor to her friends and family because of reliable and nurturing nature. Her parent's marriage broke down when she was 10 so she grew up in an extended family unit of aunts, uncles, and grandparents. She felt the strong embrace of this unit because of the traditions that were taught to her and became part of her daily life.

She was forced to make her own decisions from a young age; like where to attend school and she chose the community school. Star believes that it is her cultural learning and strong identity that have sustained her and allowed her to maintain a strong sense of self over the years.

The Community – Nehiyanak First Nation

The community of Nehiyanak First Nation is a Cree community of less than 5000 people. Nehiyanak is two hours away from a Edmonton, Alberta. Most community members rely on the nearby large town of Coldville for food, clothing, and housing. Although the community spends millions of dollars annually in Coldville, the relationship between Coldville and Nehiyanak residents has been a troubled one. Racism toward First Nations members is evident and deeply entrenched in the relationship. In fact, there has never been a time when the relationship has been a positive one. Although people from Nehiyanak are well educated, only a handful are employed in Coldville and these are in menial positions. One has to search hard to find an Aboriginal

person working in Coldville. Racism permeates every institution and business in Coldville; none of the town's four banks employs an Aboriginal person, the social workers and nurses from Nehiyanak are rarely employed in Coldville and those who are remain only a brief time because of the inhospitable working environment.

Nehiyanak and another couple of nearby First Nations pump millions of dollars into the county of Coldville's school budget, yet there are only a couple of Aboriginal teachers in the entire district of over 4000 students, approximately 20% of whom or 800 plus who are from the surrounding four First Nations. Although the county of Coldville receives approximately $7.5 million annually for these students, the First Nations do not have representation on the board of trustees nor is there any attempt to change election policy to accommodate members living in the First Nation communities. Meagre attempts to provide Aboriginal programming have been either borne out of guilt or superficial attempts to meet government funding requirements. The county website still refers to the long outdated term, "Native Education." Little attempt has been made to use current terms such as First Nation, Métis, Inuit, Aboriginal, or Indigenous.

Housing in Nehiyanak is either unavailable or overcrowded, so members have to rely on Coldville to meet the housing shortage. Unfortunately, members are relegated to high rental costs often in poorly maintained or substandard housing. To say that the relationship between Coldville and Nehiyanak is contentious is an understatement. The deeply rooted racism has

left an intergenerational imprint on the members of Nehiyanak First Nation.

Although the impacts of racism have prevailed for many generations, the community of Nehiyanak has managed to produce a high number of tradesmen, undergraduates, and graduate students over the past 30 years. Half of the population is under the age of 18. A large proportion of this group does not complete high school but instead returns to high school later or participates in upgrading programs. Much of the community's educational success is due to the accessibility to college and university programs in a local tribal college. Many members of Nehiyanak have completed professional degrees. Some work within the community but, because of limited employment opportunities there, many others work in the city, in other First Nations and indeed throughout Canada. The community school is one of the larger employers in Nehiyanak. The community has a locally appointed school board and qualified members in leadership positions. Although the community K-12 school could easily accommodate 700 students, less than 450 attend. In reality there are least 900 school age students in the community.

Although Nehiyanak has a large number of professionals in various areas, many community members have not escaped the ravaging effects of addictions. In the 1960's and 70's, the community struggled with alcoholism and by the 80's the problem was almost non-existent. While people were getting sober, a new addiction took over – gambling. People spent their limited incomes on bingo and with the introduction of video lottery terminals the addiction only grew. During the late 80's, marijuana use grew and, by the mid

90's, harder drugs like acid and cocaine made their way into the community. By the late 90's crack cocaine became the drug of choice and has firmly established control of the community. The incidence and proliferation of crack cocaine has impacted many family units, education, and community life in general. Community leaders are very concerned about the magnitude of the problem but have only limited resources to deal with it. Attempts to reduce the trade by increasing police presence in the community have failed, as many young people and other opportunists are lured into the trade by the exorbitant amounts of money they can make in a very short time. Residents know that the trade is controlled by outside gangs. In the past few years, turf wars have caused violent confrontations and even loss of life.

In spite of the problems, the community remains fairly tight knit. One only has to attend a funeral or a wake to realize the level of support the community members have for each other. Residents remain very hopeful that things will change for the better. They believe that the community needs to heal itself and deal with issues head on through education and communication. There is also great hope in children as a vehicle of change and that a successful education system will meet the needs of all the children of Nehiyanak.

The community of Nehiyanak is larger than many other First Nation communities but everyone in the community still knows everyone else. First Nations across Canada are governed by a Chief and Council that are elected according to either local tribal customs or the rules of the Indian Act. Nehiyanak elects their Chief and Council every three years, using a combination of tribal

customs and the Indian Act. Chief and Council are the recognized governing body of the community and are responsible for every aspect of the community's function, from health and education to social services and every other program in the community. The Chief and Council utilize the democratic process in decision making but do not have the judicial or legislative arms of levels that create the balance of power in a nation (some First Nations have assumed limited executive, judicial, and legislative authority). Chief and Council do have the right to create by-laws and enforce them in some cases. The Chief has the authority to appeal to the judicial system on behalf of a band member and they have the ultimate power in the community to veto any decision made by any program.

The right to veto decisions can include school based decisions made by the principal. The principal's power in a First Nation community is not governed by the provincial School Act. Because First Nations are a federal responsibility, the principal has no power under the Act. The Indian Act assigns Sections 114 – 122 to cover schools, including issues such as the Minister's ability to enter into agreements on behalf of Indian children, attendance, who does not have to attend, who can be a truant officer and the powers attached to that position (including the use of force), denomination of the teacher, the right to have a Protestant or Catholic school, and some definitions. Nowhere in the Act is there mention of the authority of the principal. As a result, First Nations usually develop their own policy and procedures for the operation of the school, but final power still rests with the Chief and Council.

Data Collection

Data collection is a key element in any research venture. Appropriate, entrance and procedure protocol must take place when seeking information (Lightning, 1992; Steinhauer, 2002; Wilson, 2003). I began the process of data collection by establishing contact with individuals on an informal basis to ensure that they were willing to participate. I then contacted them again to explain the process and give them a few days to consider participating. On the day of the interview, I met with the participant at a location chosen by them. Most of the taped interviews took place in the homes of the participants. I also provided them with consent forms to sign and a letter outlining the purpose of my research with contact information. After each interview was completed I wrote in notes about the interview, the location, the mood, and any other significant occurrences. This journal was an important part of my data analysis because it allowed me to remember the tone and unsaid elements of the interview.

Interviews

Two types of interviews took place. When I began talking about the research to each participant, we would have informal interviews that I recorded in notes. When we agreed to meet on a more formal basis, I followed specific protocol and taped the interview. To ensure I respected protocol, before we began the taped interview I provided an offering of tobacco and sweet grass. I explained to each of them that the tobacco and sweet grass was a gift to honour them and the knowledge that they would share with me in the interview. Each participant fully understood the sacredness of this relationship. I then asked if

they would be comfortable with being taped and that the tape would only be for me or my supervisor to hear. Each participant was also informed that they had the opportunity to withdraw from the interview at anytime and that their anonymity would be protected by using a pen name and vignette to describe them. I then turned the tape recorder on and began the interview. Once the interview began I asked three guiding questions:

1. What do you define as successful schooling for this community?

2. What do you envision a successful school would look like in this community?
   (a) What is the role of culture and tradition in this successful school?
   (b) What is the role of family, Elders, and the community in this successful school?
   (c) What would programming look like this successful school?

3. How can changes be made in the community to achieve this successful schooling?

During the first few interviews, two areas emerged that were not in this original set of guiding questions. These questions centered on community and social issues that participants felt were detrimental to the school and community. Although I did not incorporate a question about community and social issues, the topic seemed to seep into each interview, especially when they were asked how changes could be introduced into the community.

Interviews varied in length from a half hour to three hours. In most cases, participants wanted to visit and discuss additional issues. In two cases, they requested that I turn my tape recorder off because they wanted to express some concerns that they felt did not add to the interview but which they felt comfortable enough to share with me. I was honoured by the honesty and

frankness in sharing that participants demonstrated throughout the course of the interviews.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was a key element in this study. According to Lightning (1992) and Akan (1992), repetition is important and was very important to me during this process. After each interview, I reviewed the tapes and realized that in addition to the responses to the guiding questions, there were certain themes that emerged in discussions around the importance of positive teacher student relationships and the detrimental impacts of addictions on the community. I also realized that the Elders and other Cree speakers would respond in Cree when they wanted to make their point very clear and ensure that there would be no misunderstanding in how the point was intended. As I transcribed the interviews, I also noted the pauses, expressions of acknowledgment, sighs, giggles and any other additional expressions. These pauses and expressions were very important in the analysis because they held important information and extended the meaning of the words said. I also utilized my journal notes so that I could remember the specific context of the interview and responses. This form of communication is often utilized among cultures that rely on the context to relay meaning. Edward Hall (1981) described it as a high context communication pattern: "Most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person while very little is a coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message" (p. 91). Cultures with low context communication patterns are the opposite and rely heavily on verbalization to transmit messages. Given that

the participants used this communication pattern to relay much of the underlying meanings, repetition was very important.

Once transcription was completed, I assigned pseudonyms to each of the participants, along with a color, and printed the transcripts. Once each transcript was printed in its assigned color, I categorized the data under each of the themes and then reorganized each theme into sub-themes. Although time consuming, this process allowed me to reorganize and analyze my data by once again reconsidering the context in which the statements were made.

When I began my data presentation, I realized that by discussing the data along with the presentation, I could also present the context in which information was shared by the participants. I also recognized that I am familiar with this is the pattern of discourse, which is a common pattern among First Nation people. Linguist Roger Spielmann spent a number of years with the Ojibwe people exploring discourse methods and discovered that context was a critical part of understanding discourse. Among Cree people, the discourse patterns for sharing information involve building the context and acknowledging that you are a participant by either making the appropriate Cree sounds or nodding (not necessarily to show agreement but to demonstrate engagement in the conversation). Both people have an equal role in continuing the conversation, regardless of who initiated it. In Cree conversation you also do not directly disagree with someone. If you do not agree with someone you acknowledge their point and then add your point. It is critical to be completely engaged in the conversation in order to recognize this when it occurs so that the

intent is understood.

As a Cree speaker I wanted to ensure that I remained respectful of the unwritten rules of orality that are learned only through living the language. Elders often use metaphors to share information because they can capture a more holistic picture of emotional and spiritual complexities and "cut mentally across the barriers of time" (Lightning, 1992, p. 217). The timelessness of metaphors allows Elders to capture the complex intent of information and knowledge that must be carefully unfolded in order to capture the meaning. Elders also use metaphors "because they knew that for us to understand them would take time" (p. 217). Therefore, my analysis involved carefully utilizing all the resources I had knowledge of, that is, Cree language usage, contextual intent, and cultural discourse pattern. The analysis involved framing and reframing participants' words to ensure that their layered meanings were captured. This was not an easy process. It is, by its nature, a subjective analysis based on my ability to express myself in English text and how I utilize the resources I have been gifted with.

Chapter Four

Data Presentation: Perspectives on Successful Schooling

This chapter contains data on perspectives related to successful schooling on Nehiyanak First Nation, shared by selected First Nation Elders, parents, teachers, and students. The chapter is divided into six different parts in which data on successful schooling is both presented and interpreted. The presentation will follow a traditional Cree pattern of sharing information by providing understanding of the topic alongside the topic and then providing a more reflective understanding at the end. Each participant provided his or her own perspective of successful school, defining it and outlining areas they felt were important. Participants made it clear that they viewed education as very important but also felt that community issues were detrimental to progress.

The research question is explained and discussed in chapter 1. To support the question, I asked a series of interview questions such as: how do you define successful schooling? What would the role of culture be? What would the role of family, Elder, and the community look like? What would programming look like? Probing questions were also asked when needed for clarification and expansion.

Data presentation is a subjective experience. It is the researcher's interpretation of what a participant said. During the course of the study, I was cognizant of the tremendous responsibility of interpretation. Everything that took place during the course of the interviews – participants' tone of voice,

choice of language and non-verbal expressions of agreement, acknowledgment, delight, and disappointment – needed to be considered in the interpretation and analysis. As I transcribed the interviews, I noted the sighs, chuckles, and pauses as a reminder of the intended meaning of the response. It also reminded me of the underlying dialogue that was taking place. This data presentation and interpretation represents a style of dialogue that I am familiar with when people are sharing information. In the course of a conversation, the two speakers discuss information and their own interpretation occurs throughout the conversation. At the end there is a final analysis, often prefaced with "*maka, omisi niteyihten*" meaning, "uh-huh, but this is what I think." In this way, data presentation and analysis are subjective and highly dependent upon the worldview and language of the researcher.

Defining Successful Schooling

High School Completion

In defining successful schooling, participants viewed the completion of Grade 12 as a bench mark but extended their interpretation to fit the community. Elder Ella stated that successful schooling of student meant "*poko kakameymocik kakiskinamakoscik*, then they could go to NAIT." What she stated is that it is imperative that students be determined and complete their schooling so they can move on to a post-secondary program. She stressed the importance of determination and felt that it was preparation for what a student might want to do make a living.

Patrice stated "Well today, that's what it looks like - having to finish grade

12, I guess in the mainstream world, having that grade 12 to finish. I think in our world today that is one of the successes because that's what will help you get into the next step which is college or university." Although, she felt that completing grade 12 was a sign of success she also felt that it was a bench mark established by mainstream society and not one that had been determined by the community. It was also evident that if this was the route that one took, it meant that they would naturally progress onto university.

Taryn felt that it is important to closely examine "how many people are finishing school. One year I had 20 in grade one but when those kids actually graduated there was only a handful, five kids out of 20 actually made it through." In fact, she was quite concerned that so many students did not finish school and felt that is was very important for the community to examine and determine why students were not completing high school. Tracy felt that "if a lot of our kids are not succeeding and not finishing high school, it's a statement of the educational system. If most of our kids are not graduating, that's our responsibility, that's our fault. That's our responsibility and we can't blame anybody." Tracy was quite adamant that we needed to carefully re-examine our First Nation schools to ensure that students succeed. The responsibility lies within the community to challenge and change those rates.

It was evident from the participants that, while they definitely perceive completion of Grade 12 as a marker of successful schooling, they also clearly understand that this bench mark was established by mainstream powers. They view completion of Grade 12 as a spring board to post-secondary education,

where the student might have a better opportunity to find a meaningful career path.

Recognizing Gifts and Educating the Whole Child

Participants felt that recognizing gifts and meeting the needs of the whole child are critical elements of successful school. Each child comes to school with certain gifts and talents. According to Elder Edie, "Not everyone is going to be a lawyer", so it imperative that educators (perhaps with the assistance of parents) determine what some of these gifts might be. Tracy added that successful schooling means that educating the whole child rather than limiting success to specific subject areas. This involves realizing who the child is and where he or she is coming from. She stated:

> Successful schooling is looking at the whole child. I think that all too often as educators we only look at certain components of the child and we don't look at the total child. And then we come across challenges – because we don't look at the whole child we end up getting frustrated and then even sometimes giving up on children.

Taryn also agreed that the needs of the whole child need to be met and that "you have to plan to meet those needs." Planning is important and good planning is data driven. Taryn felt that successful schools need to revisit their action plans regularly, prioritize what needs to be done, and then "planning research, looking forward, finding resources for next year and the year after, not just in books and materials but also human resources, people that can help." It was important to Taryn that both students and teachers "are engaged" so that they would "want to come back again next year." Taryn stressed the importance of engaging both students and teachers so that the school experience is a

successful one for all.

Tracy also felt that teaching cultural values has a "very, very important role because many of our children do not have that experience." She also added that prayer might be a way of reinforcing cultural values:

> Because when we look at the whole child, we all have spiritual needs, we can't deny spiritual needs and we can do it non-denominationally. We don't have to bring in the church but we can do our own. For example, we do the Cree prayer every single day and we also talk about our core values.

When Tracy referred to core values she was talking about love, kindness, sharing, and determination, the basic tenets of Cree natural law. She was also mindful of the importance of respecting the different religious denominations in the community and felt that this could occur while still successfully meeting the spiritual needs of students by utilizing the language and reinforcing core values.

Meeting Social and Emotional Needs

Meeting the social needs of students tends to be a part of the hidden curriculum in schools. In a First Nation school, those embedded social components might look different. According to the participants, these are fundamental components of the school. Some social needs can be met through cultural programming because it helps students understand who they are, according to Tracy, Taryn, and Taya. In their experience, the community school plays an integral part of teaching the social conduct expected at ceremonies. For many of the First Nation students in Nehiyanak, it may be the first place where they begin to gain cultural knowledge through exposure to ceremony. As a parent, Patrice felt that successful schooling would be "having a cultural base

for students, meaning having something cultural at least a part of their daily life as they're going to school." Patrice felt that having some cultural activity as part of the school day is essential because it provides students with a reminder of the importance role of Cree culture in their daily lives and emotions. More importantly it reinforces their identity.

When most people reflect on their school experience, they have fond memories. For many First Nation students, school memories are not often fond. In fact, many do not cherish their school memories. Their memories are even further tainted by their parents' and grandparents' memories of residential school, schools that were notorious for denying the emotional needs of Aboriginal children. The intergenerational wrath of the residential schools continues to be felt today. This makes it even more important for schools (albeit challenging and difficult to measure) to change trauma and honour the emotional needs of children. Tracy states, "if you make progress with a child's emotional needs, it's very hard to measure and you don't really see results until years and years later or if a child comes back to you and says "you know those were good years I had at your school." Tracy clearly felt that meeting the emotional needs of children is very important and, although it is difficult to measure, it can be correlated to attendance and achievement: "If children feel happy and they feel safe and they're doing the best they can, you know that they're going to do well in school and you that they're going to want to be at school everyday, every single day they're going to want to be there." Once compared with attendance one could easily see that the child that is there and

wants to be there and may do well in spite of other obstacles. According to Taryn, for many First Nation students, going to school is based on their own determination to be there, so the school must be a place that the child enjoys being. She says:

> Let's make it fun for them here. Let's make them want to be here. Sometimes that certain child's determination to be here is the factor that causes them to be here, because they want to be here. And that's the only thing we can control, is how much we entice that child to want to be here in our school.

Tracy's and Taryn's years of experience in First Nation community schools demonstrated over and over again the importance of meeting the emotional needs of students. They firmly believe that it is entirely up to the student if they want to be there and, if they come from a home where there is violence, drugs, or alcohol, they rely even more heavily on the school to meet their emotional needs. Sky and Star both attended and graduated from Nehiyanak First Nation School. They are both in post-secondary programs. As they reflected on the definition of successful schooling, they felt that the emotional support they received in school gave them strength and helped to make them stronger individuals. Sky felt that school staff and teachers were a very important part of her decision not to get "influenced into drugs and alcohol." Drugs and alcohol were easily available to her but she decided that she would not succumb to peer pressure. She said that, although she was not considered cool, she had the strength and support not to get involved in drugs or alcohol. For Star, school provided a daily connection with people, "like coming in everyday and anybody from the office and even if they weren't having a good day or I wasn't having a

good day, they would say "good morning Star." She said that "just the comfort of coming into something familiar everyday" made her feel good and want to come to school. Star's family life faced great difficulty when she first entered junior high and her parents marriage subsequently ended. As a result, she and her siblings ended up in limbo, living with relatives and friends. She stated that "when I was going school in junior and senior high most of the time it was a safe place to be." School became the focal point of her life and she counted on the staff and teachers to provide her with the emotional strength to return day after day, in spite of the fact that there was no stability in her home life. Star felt that school staff also provided her with the confidence to finish school. Much of it was based on the belief that "you could do it". She adds that graduating "has a lot to do with their self-worth." She felt that student self esteem and confidence was critical to student success. The feeling of emotional support and safety was very important to Star and she believes that it was a key to her success.

It is evident that meeting the emotional needs of students is an integral part of successful schooling. For many students, it may be the only place that they can get the emotional support necessary. First Nation schools can meet the social and emotional needs of students better than mainstream institutions because staff and teachers at First Nations schools are more aware of the home situation of students because everyone knows almost everyone.

Staffing

Participants felt that staff and administration were very important factors in successful schooling. Elder Edie simply stated that successful schooling

meant "good teachers and good enrolment." She has had many years of experience as a parent and school committee member and almost all of her children graduated from Nehiyanak Community School. One of her great desires is that more community members send their children to the community school. She knows many of the teachers personally and feels that they play a very important role because they are with the students everyday. Taya feels that it is very important that a school has "a strong administration, principal." Given the size of the community and the complexities of relationships, the school needs people who will provide the leadership necessary to move forward.

Tracy felt that "good teaching guided by research" was absolutely essential. Throughout her years of experience, she has found that good teaching guided by research challenges teachers and allows them to continuously grow as professionals. By remaining knowledgeable about their field, they feel that they are part of a professional community. This is especially important in a First Nation community, where severely limited human and financial resources mean there is no infrastructure to support continuous professional development. Further, keeping abreast of research ensures that you are not reinventing practices each time and that you can build on what exists or improve upon what exists to meet your needs.

Staff-Student Relationships

Paula felt that is was important for the school staff to have a "trusting relationship" with students because "it's got to be an environment where they

feel safe, not alone." She felt that it was important for staff to create an environment that was welcoming and where students would feel secure. Sage summed it up nicely by saying;

> Staff could make the students feel more welcomed so they feel like your family, not your immediate family but take them as your own. So that students aren't afraid to talk to the teacher about anything. You just make them feel like they are wanted and you help them out whenever you can because some students look forward to going to school rather than staying home where they are possibly neglected by their own parents. Or their parents are out doing drugs or and drinking and stuff and some of the students just look forward to going to school. It's like their family to them, and it's a safe place.

At nineteen years old, Sage's experience in school has been recent and from his experience and observations, he sees the ideal school as a safe refuge for students from homes with addictions. He stressed the importance of school as a familial climate for students who may not have such a positive home life. The importance of positive relationships was viewed as a fundamental component of a successful school.

In talking about relationships with teachers I asked participants if they felt it was necessary for teacher to be Aboriginal. None of the participants felt that it was necessary. Like others, Patrice felt that a teacher with an open mind and heart is important because they are able to balance the academics of the mind and emotions of the heart. Taya felt that just because teachers were Aboriginal it did not, by default, mean that they were effective classroom teachers. She said "Teachers have to want to be here. They can't just be here. They have to like kids and believe in them." Tracy also felt that non-Aboriginal teachers could experience great success, especially if they have a spiritual connection with

students. She stated, "They don't have to be Native. These are people that need to work with our children because they're kind and they want [to meet] our children's needs. "Tracy felt that connection is important because it shows that the student and teacher share mutual respect and understanding.

Star said "it really depends on the person, personality, and their character, their own attitudes, what they bring and how they bring it, how they teach, and how open minded they are." Star skilfully summed up the important attributes of a teacher in her final statement by reinforcing that a teacher must be open- minded in order to teach successfully in the community.

Interpretation

The areas that emerged in this theme of defining successful schooling were: Finishing Grade 12, Recognizing Gifts and Talents, Meeting Social and Emotional Needs, and Staffing. These themes emerged in response to the question, how would you define successful schooling? As I listened to the interviews again and reflected on what the participants had said, I realized that they all felt that their definition of successful schooling was based on a foreign system that had to be accepted and adapted to. The Elders and parents spoke about finishing school as an important stepping stone to the future. They spoke of finishing and continuing on as a requirement to survive in today's world. As Ella said "*anohc poko kakisikinamakoscik*" (today, it is a requirement for students to finish school). She spoke of it in a manner that demonstrated that students must finish school or they will not make it in the world. Patrice also stated that finishing grade 12 in today's world is an expectation that has been

cast up the community by the "mainstream world" and that once one buys into this, it is inevitable that one must continue on to university or college. Once it was determined that finishing grade 12 was a marker of successful schooling created by the mainstream culture and that they perceived there was no other option, participants went on to discuss those elements which they felt would define to successful schooling in the existing context.

Role of Culture in the Ideal School

The section presents responses to the interview question on the role of culture in the school (What would the role of culture be in the successful school?). The expectation that culture would be part of a successful school was preferred all participants. Their responses fit into three areas: transmission of values, Cree language, and teaching ceremonies. In asking this question, I expected that someone might say that it had no role in the school instead it was simply an assumption that it would be part of a First Nation's school in a First Nation community. All of the participants felt that culture should have a role in the school. This was interesting because half of the participants did not feel that they had strong cultural knowledge, yet they felt that it had an important role in the school.

Transmission of Values/Identity

The transmission of Cree values was identified as an important aspect of the role of culture in the ideal school. Participants felt that it was important that students were reminded of who they are as young Cree people and offered a daily reminder to reinforce their behaviour and identity. Patrice felt that even

something as simple as a daily smudge would give students:

> A daily reminder of who they are as *Nehiyowak* and also a daily reminder of that respect that they have for themselves. It is a guiding force that guides them for how they will be for that day in their thoughts, in their mind, the way they behave, and the way they speak. They are learning from not only their mind, like in school all the teaching they're getting, but also that we're all part of that universal knowledge of the grandfathers, the grandmothers and how that is a guiding force for what they take in mentally.

Patrice felt that it is important to reinforce students' identity as Cree people on a daily basis and remind them of the responsibility they have to respect and honour the knowledge of the grandfathers and grandmothers as a guide for their behaviour and conduct. She felt that they also need to be reminded of their responsibility to each other in our relationship as a community of Cree people. Her belief in relational responsibility was evidenced by her feeling that, as part of a community of Nehiyanak, everyone has a responsibility for the knowledge and learning for the future generations. By including the knowledge of the grandfathers and grandmothers in her statement she clearly affirmed this. The belief that Cree values must be transmitted in schools was supported by Elder Ella, who also believes that it is very important to remind Cree students of these values all the time. She said "*eka kaponimecik poko, eka kaponimecik soskwatch.*," do not stop reminding them consistently. She stated and stressed the importance that we continuously remind them again and again. Her statement also reminds teachers that they, in turn, have to remind children (even if it reaches the point of nagging) of the responsibility they have to accept and learn the teachings.

Teaching values is an important part of any educational system. For the

community of Nehiyanak, it becomes especially important because the core values are continuously being challenged by the growth of addictions, violence, and language loss. The importance of reinforcing cultural values on a daily basis becomes even more important in guiding behaviour and reinforcing identity. The belief that children need to understand that they have a responsibility to the community, their family, the grandmothers, and the grandfathers is a traditional value that must be embedded in the practices of the ideal school in order to ensure that the responsibility for future generations is fulfilled.

Cree Language

Nehiyawewin (speaking Cree) was identified as a very important element in the role of culture in the school. In fact, Elders felt very strongly that it was the key element in identity. Ella first stopped, cleared her throat and said "*tapwe* English *kiskinohmâkewak* they learn from there, *maka nehiyawewin ayiwâk mistahi ispihteyehtakotek, eokonima eki mekosiya nehiyawewin moy kakiwepinenow wehkac, mo, moycatch, moycatch*. (Yeah, English is taught, they learn from there, but Cree is more important, it was gifted to us by the Creator and we can never lose it, never, never). Before she made the statement, she stopped, looked into the distance as if to remember something, then she cleared her throat because she was preparing to say something that was very important and meaningful to her. At the beginning of her statement she made some of her comments in English when she spoke about learning it in school because she wanted to make a point that she felt was not as significant.

It was something known, but not as personal to her as her belief about the language. Although the translation is relatively close, the connotation is that the Cree language is a central part of who we are as Cree people and because it a spiritual gift to us we must never ever lose it.

The importance of language was also echoed by Elder Edie. In response to the question what do you think the role of culture in the successful school might be, she paused for a moment, then said;

> I wasn't raised culturally and I'm still learning, so I don't know but for me one important thing about culture is our Cree language. *Nehiyawewin oma kistanow emihkosiya kanehiyaweya, emihkosiya ekwa kîspin ki nehiyawan nowatch emamihtisin, kimaskowsin nowatch ekwa kikwkay kamâmiskôtaman kwayask kikiskeyten.*

She stated the Cree language was gifted to us by the Creator and if you speak Cree you are prouder, you are stronger, and you are more articulate in what you mean. Elder Edie's strong feelings about the gift of language was emphasized because she repeated the word *emikosiya* (gifted to us by the Creator) to emphasize the importance in recognizing this gift and its significance in our lives as Cree people. She further added that it is important to use this gift to reinforce identity because, if you are able to communicate in the language, you gain strength, confidence, and you are better able to express yourself. Like Ella, Edie began the first part of her statement in English because it was not as important to her as the other part of her statement about the language. It seemed as though she wanted to make sure that I clearly understood the importance of the Cree language. When she spoke in Cree, she looked directly at me to ensure that I understood the importance of the statement. I

acknowledged her by nodding in agreement and making the appropriate sounds of acknowledgement Cree speakers make to each other in a conversation.

Although Elders spoke eloquently about the critical role of language, Tracy and Sky also felt that it was important to emphasize the Cree language on a daily basis in different ways. Tracy felt that a daily Cree prayer is an important part of reinforcing the language but, more importantly, "language must be emphasized every single day." Sky said that it was important because "we are losing our culture, we are losing our language." The concern about losing language was also emphasized by the Elders. Their concern about language loss made it even clearer that it is very important that the language has a most important role in the school. For the participants, language is culture and it is so intimately interwoven with identity that it is an important part of being a Cree person. During the course of the interviews, the Elders would move back and forth between Cree and English. When they really wanted to stress a point or make it very clear to me, they would speak in Cree and look directly at me. I was deeply appreciative that they had trusted me enough to share their thoughts in such an intimate spiritual way. I have now begun to understand the relationship between language and the survival of Cree people. When Elder Ella stated that "*moy kakewepinenow wehka*c" (we can never discard it), she also means that it is what has helped us to survive this long and we can't lose it even if we try.

Ceremonies

Participants felt that teaching students about ceremonies was another

important element in the role of culture. Ceremonies are the actual practices of the Cree culture. They include smudging, prayer, protocol, rites of passage, feasts, sweats, and other traditional ceremonies. Ceremonies are critical in teaching roles. They have very specific protocols to follow and learning the protocols associated with ceremony are a lifelong learning pursuit. When people talk about knowing very little about culture, they are often referring to these protocols. It requires a great deal of discipline and patience to earn the right to participate in ceremonies to learn the protocols. Patrice states that:

> [If we have] ceremonies as part of the curriculum and bring them in somehow, that's where our children learn about boundaries. They learn about self discipline and that's a big thing about our teachings. The traditional way of teaching is teaching children self discipline and that comes from being raised that way and they learn how to discipline themselves and not be self gratifying and to be patient.

She feels that ceremonies in the cultural programming of the school have a lot to offer students and the school because it teaches students self discipline that can flow into the academic subject areas. More importantly, it teaches students how to be responsible for themselves and their learning. If it is integrated into the curriculum from the elementary level, it could teach students from a young age the discipline necessary and students would be continually exposed to different ceremonies. Tracy felt the same way, saying "If we don't offer these experiences to our children" they may not have anywhere else to learn them. If parents are not aware then "it's our job, our duty to educate our parents and children on the importance of these things." In the community of Nehiyanak, there are opportunities to participate in various ceremonies but many people who are unsure of the protocols avoid participating. Thus it becomes even more

important for a school to provide the opportunity for students to be exposed to some of the applicable ceremonies where they can learn the necessary protocol and acceptable behaviours. As a student, Star had the opportunity to participate in and learn ceremonies at school. She participated in feasts and also had the opportunity to participate in rites of passage ceremonies. She felt that it was important for students to be exposed to these teachings because people learned their roles and protocol. She said:

> I remember in grade 6 when we went to cultural camp and we were talked to about our moon times and stuff like that, stuff I was never taught about that and I always wanted to know and instead of being taught like we were taught in health because we had all our own teachers and we had all the girls in one tepee.

She felt that it was important for her to learn of the passage into puberty in a Cree cultural context rather than only in a health class. Her reference to teachers refers to Elders and community members who spent time with the girls about talking about rites of passage.

Although it was important to participants that ceremonies are a part of the school cultural programming, they also felt that it is also important to recognize that a community has certain standards in terms of what kind of cultural teachings should be offered. Tracy said;

> I don't see a problem in a school being an active part of teaching culture, provided that you take the community at heart. You can't just do your own thing. Communities do have standards and although we have Elders with many different traditions, as a school you can come up with some kind of a standard for offering cultural education or cultural teachings.

Tracy provided a reminder that it is important to know the limitations and the unwritten rules of what can be taught in school and that knowledge of the

community is essential in the planning of cultural and ceremonial teaching to students. Sage also felt that certain ceremonies can be taught in school but also believes there are certain things that one needs to "learn only from your Elders, *mosooms*, *kokums*." His strong traditional background and exposure to ceremonies have provided him with a great respect for ceremonies and the role that they should have the school. He firmly believes that there are some ceremonies are too sacred to be shared in a school atmosphere and the teachings must come from relatives. Taya also believes that it is important for "kids to know about their culture and traditions" but cautions that one must be careful not to overstep the unwritten spoken boundaries of sacredness.

Discussion

The role of culture in the ideal school in a First Nation community has been deemed very important because it reinforces identity. This section recognized that daily exposure to ceremony is critical for students because it is a constant reminder of who they are as Cree people and a reminder of the responsibility they have to the to the grandfathers, grandmothers and the future. To further reinforce this reminder, the Elders spoke strongly about the importance of the gift of the Cree language in identity, pride, and expression. Language was deemed as an essential expression of Cree culture that has managed to sustain us for generations. Since there are many students who have limited opportunity to be exposed to ceremonies, exposure at school is very important but it is also of critical importance that school leadership is aware of the nature of the community and to be mindful of the nature of ceremony that

is acceptable to teach in a community school setting. Although participants had clear ideas and justification of the role of culture in the successful school, they would not frame it outside of the existing system. They clearly articulated how they perceived the role of culture but they did not deviate from the mainstream context.

The Role of Family, Elders and the Community

The participants were asked what the role of family, Elders, and community might be in the ideal community school. Their responses will be presented in three categories. The roles of family, Elders, and the community were perceived as vital players in the successful community school.

The Role of Family

Participants recognized the role of the family as very important in teaching values and supporting children. The role of the families in teaching values to students was viewed as critical because those values would then be reinforced by the school to reflect the values of the community. Although family can be defined in many different ways, for the purpose of these interviews family includes those people who are the caretakers of the child, including parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, or other caretakers. It was also recognized that parental involvement had an important role in the successful school but that role might need to re-examined, since the present model and expectations have not yet proven to work in Nehiyanak.

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement in the school was deemed as an essential role of

the family. Unfortunately, lack of parental involvement has been an issue in First Nations schools since their inception. Although the subject has been the focus of numerous studies, articles, and graduate theses, a solution to the issue still evades even the most knowledgeable practitioners. In the community of Nehiyanak, the issue of parental involvement remains high on the list of school priorities. Parents avoid going to school because their own school experiences were not positive, they are intimidated by the staff and environment, and the list goes on. Patrice provided an interesting perspective of why parents might avoid being involved. She said:

> It doesn't work with parents because in our traditional ways, parents were always involved with their kids teaching and doing things, the way we have now, kids are out of the home. They are learning separately from their parents and their parents are out working, so there's already a cut off there, so if we're going to keep going that way it's not going to work. It's not going to work no matter how much culture and tradition we bring into the school. We have to look at the process and see how we can make that link again, that connection with our busy mainstream life today.

Patrice felt that the disconnection between the lifestyle we live today and how children were taught traditionally is part of the reason parents do not feel comfortable in working with the school and until we find a way to deal with the disconnection no amount of cultural or traditional teaching will encourage parental involvement. When the participants were asked how they would encourage parents to become involved in school, their responses were that the school needed to welcome parents in a non-intimidating manner and provide them with opportunities to participating in what there children were learning about. Paula felt that it is very important that there is someone "to greet people, somebody that has that personality to make people feel real comfortable." The

greeter would be someone who was warm but was not over zealous because "people don't want to be singled out" or embarrassed. It would be important for the individual to be from the community so that they are aware of community norms of behaviour. Being over zealous or trying too hard to be too nice or friendly is perceived in Nehiyanak as pretentious. Being pretentious would be more harmful that not having a greeter at all. Once parents are in the school they need to be provided with something to drink and eat, not because they are hungry, but because they are guests and in the Cree tradition guests must always be treated with respect. By providing them with something to drink and eat, you are thanking them for the journey they have made and honouring their presence. It is important to let parents know what their roles will be at any school event because so many have been put in a position of embarrassment in their past that they avoid situations where they feel that might be singled out.

Role of Elders

Participants had a great deal to say about the role of Elders in the ideal school. They felt that Elders had a very important role in sharing their wisdom with the school and establishing positive relationships with students. Elders are important because:

> [They] have the wisdom and they've been here a long time and they've seen our community grow. They know where we have come from, they know the kinship and everything, they have so much to offer and I think that they are just waiting to come and give us that information. (Taryn)

Taryn firmly believes that the Elders want to share their wisdom and knowledge with children because they see that as their role. More importantly, they possess knowledge of the community that has not been documented and would

be valuable for students to learn about, especially about kinship and the history of families and their survival. In the discussion about the role of the Elder participants stated that it was very important that Elders who will work with children are carefully selected. Tracy felt that an Elder is "somebody who lives a good life by example, has a wealth of knowledge, kind, and compassionate."

What the role of the Elder might look like in the school. To Tracy, the role of the Elder in the ideal school would not be like a teacher, a teacher aide, or an administrator. In the ideal school there would be an Elder in residence. This would mean that the Elder or Elders would be employed by the school and always available to the students. According to Tracy, the Elder's role would be structured according to the needs of the school:

> That person would work closely with a number of people including the leader. You can have the Elder work closely with the school counsellor, your Cree language instructor, the lunch people, your kindergarten and playschool and all the other teachers on a schedule, on a flexible schedule. If children are in need, she is a go-to person, different from the counsellor because you want the Elder to offer nurturing and also the sharing of the wealth of knowledge.

Participants felt that the role of the Elder(s) would be to be available and visible to students so that students learn how to interact appropriately with them. According to Patrice, "even if they are just seen, even if they are there, they don't always have to be doing something. As long as they're around, you know they're walking around, or sitting there." Patrice feels that the presence of an Elder in the school is important. Unlike the other school staff, the Elder does not always have to be engaged in activities. The opportunity for children in the community of Nehiyanak to work with Elders has decreased substantially.

During my data collection period one of the Elders told me that less than 2% of the population is over the age of 65 and 50% of the population is under the age of 18, she said that this information was shared with them at an Elders' meeting. As a result, it becomes even more important for students to have access to and contact with Elders.

Taryn believes that "the more Elders our young children know, the more protective factors they will have as a result of it." When she referred to protective factors, she was talking about children gaining confidence and knowing that they can seek out and go to Elders for support and help. Taryn is also making reference to the community as a whole and the role of Elders to guide and protect the children and grandchildren.

Selecting Elders. As participants spoke about the importance of having Elders in the school to guide children, they also stressed that it was important to select Elders carefully. Patrice said, "We have a lot of old people, and we have some Elders. There is a difference." Tracy also stated, "We have to be careful how we use the word Elder. You have people that are over 65. They're old but not necessarily an Elder. Sometimes you will find a resource person that is not 65 but in all regards they are truly an Elder. They have a lot to offer and they may be what you're looking for in a resource person." Participants felt strongly that being 65 years old did not make someone an Elder by default and, in fact, they felt that someone might not even be 65 and have the attributes of an Elder. When I asked Tracy what she felt the attributes of an Elder might be she said:

> Somebody who knows natural law, live by, they truly live by example with honesty, and kindness and these are not Elders you see in a bingo hall or

> doing things that would be deemed negative. Living the life that is an example, that our children could look to, somebody who understands their culture, their language, somebody who is also spiritual not only through the sweatlodge but maybe through church.

The role of Elders in the community is great and has always been very important, but it is also very clear that community members have certain standards and expectations of Elders. Patrice felt that it was important that those people who are recognized as Elders have gone "through some of their own healing. When you have an Elder who hasn't done that, they're going to be rigid and fear based. Some have come from residential schools and have not done any work on themselves." She strongly believes that it is essential that Elders who work with children have dealt with their own trauma before they are well enough to work with children. Tracy felt that it is important to know the Elders who are coming into the school. She recalls:

> A woman was speaking to these children, they were in grade 4, 5, and 6, and she was saying "you have to listen, you have to listen to your parents, God will punish you and you're going to pay for this if you don't listen." I was obviously listening to someone who went through the residential school system where the whole concept was punishment all the time and fear. I guess she was doing the best she could but that's not what our children need to hear. They need to hear about a brighter tomorrow and also the goodness in life that the Creator gives us, not punishment.

Tracy recognizes the importance of utilizing Elders to bring the proper messages to children and not to continue to perpetuate the fear and punishment model of residential schools.

Role of the Community

Although, the role of the community includes parents and Elders, in a First Nation community like Nehiyanak it is important to make some

differentiation because the community can define who you are. In Nehiyanak, people are judged by who their family is. Family honour or dishonour is passed on for generations unless it is gradually changed by the children. There is an unwritten class system in place that is not based on the same values as mainstream society. Education and having more money does not mean that someone will gain the respect of the community. Respect is based primarily on the family from which you come. As archaic is this may seem, it has sustained the community for a long time. The unwritten rules were a form of social control that allowed the community to function quite well without policing. In more recent years, the drug problem has changed this but there are still many remnants of the social control demonstrated and well understood by the membership.

When I asked participants what they felt the role of community was, their responses were about the collective, the need to be validated and accepted by the community. Elder Ella felt that living in a community one has the responsibility of helping others "because that's our culture." She has spent many years helping and volunteering in the community, not in the official mainstream volunteer capacity people are used to, but helping families at wakes and funerals, helping to care for children, cooking for Elders, and teaching children. She said, *ka wihcito poko, eka kasasâkisi*, it is imperative that we help each other and not to be selfish. Ella feels that as a community we need to support and help each other for the benefit of the school and the entire community. She sees the community as a collective that is interdependent and

responsible to each other. Tracy shares similar views and states,

> In an ideal school you almost have a direct link with everybody in the community and the community at large is part of the school. Its not just a - like it's more than that. It's everybody, everybody needs to work together. In an ideal school the community is part of the overall process and they value what you're doing. They also understand because they are part of it and everybody can speak the same language in terms of the children, what the children need and want.

Tracy's understanding of the community is that it is one in and of itself. If everyone works together they learn to validate each other because they understand the value of the work and its significance for the children in the community. The deeply interwoven network of relationships is well understood by members of the community and the balance between using it in a positive or negative way is a delicate one. Star is fully cognizant of the fact that there are community expectations. When I asked her why she did not leave school, she said, "There were a lot of factors. Sometimes fear could be a good thing, like fear of disappointing people, fear of disappointing my little cousins because they have this good perception of me, and my parents, the community." She is completely aware of the role of community in determining success. She understands it not only as a responsibility to her family but also to the larger community. She did not want to disappoint them because that would be disrespectful to her, her family, and the community. Star also believes that the community has an even bigger role in determining the success of the ideal school. She states, "Looking at the big picture, the community needs to begin just believing in the students, believing in the school instead of how they perceive it and they perceive the students." Star's insight and recognition of the

delicate balance between positive and negative images of the school are clear. She knows that perception is everything and it is an important factor in determining creating the ideal school. She is also fully aware that no one can work in seclusion to ensure success. The community must work together for the common good. Taryn articulated this well by saying, "I think of the word teamwork. We are in it together. We are on the same side. It's not them and us, we're working together." Understanding that the community as a whole must work together and that no part is greater than the other, the responsibility is spread equally among everyone. She further supported this by saying, "We're in this business of education and we don't want to work alone. We don't want to be isolated. We want the help and support of the parents, the leadership, and the community, parents to be there to work for that child, and the leadership to support us so that growth can happen for these kids who are entrusted to us." Taryn accepts that the school has the responsibility of educating the children but the parents, leadership, and community must be there to share the responsibility of working together because the school cannot work in isolation.

Discussion

The role of family, Elders, and the community were viewed as very important elements in the ideal community school. Parental involvement and the lack of it were deemed an area of concern. Taya stated that "parents did not feel like they were part of the school" and learning and as a result felt alienated. This feeling was further supported by the parents' own negative school experiences. Therefore, it was important to find ways to have parents involved

and explore different ways that are community based and not necessarily based on mainstream standards. The role of Elders in the school was recognized as important for the development of relationships and transmission of values from one generation to the next. Since many students have limited access to Elders, it was deemed important that contact be established in the school so that students can learn how to properly work with Elders and, more importantly, create connections so that they know where to go for guidance and support. The community role is important because everyone is connected in some manner and the intricate balance between positive and negative factors can be directed by the community outlook. Sometimes small issues can grow into very negative issues because information is unclear or untrue, and, since word of mouth is the main source of information in the community, information sometimes is wrong. It is obvious that parents, Elders, and community need to increase their involvement in the school for the benefit of the community and all the children.

Programming

When participants were asked how they envisioned programming might look in the ideal community school, they felt that organization and consistency, expanded curriculum, validation of students were integral parts of the school program.

Organization and Consistency

Participants felt that organization and consistency were an important part of programming in the ideal school. They did not feel that the administrative

functions of the school should change dramatically from what exists because it is part of the larger provincial system. In many ways, according to Taryn, "Everything is so systematic; we can't throw out the box." She felt that, being part of a system where there's movement between the reserve and provincial schools, it is difficult to deviate from the system that exists, so structure and organization are very important to her. Tracy felt that in the ideal school, "You would have structure, everybody needs structure and consistency." She felt that it is important to have a structure that people in the community can rely upon and to be consistent so that students, staff and community would always know the routine of the daily and yearly programming. Consistency also refers to how everyone from students, staff, and community members are treated, including consistency in discipline and in staffing and professional development. Patrice stated that the ideal school would:

> Need structure, that's for sure, and consistency, that's one main thing. That way kids know what's expected everyday. You may come from a rough home, there may have been people drinking there that day or whatever happened, but you know, you're coming into a place where you know what's going to happen, what's expected, and that gives a little bit of safety and comfort to anybody.

Patrice also felt consistency is especially important for children who come from homes where there may be alcohol or drug abuse, or violence. By having consistency in the school, the child will always know what they are coming into. They will know what to expect from the environment, the behaviour of staff, and discipline. The consistency provides them safety in knowing that things are always the same and the expectations of them are the same.

Curriculum

Participants felt that the curriculum in the ideal school should meet the needs of all students and the community and still prepare students for post-secondary education. Meeting the needs of students meant different things to some of the participants. Patrice felt that "bringing some of those ceremonies to be part of the curriculum", specific ceremonies like "the rites of passage" was important. By integrating certain ceremonies into the subject area, you could meet both cultural and curriculum needs. For example, in health, you could teach puberty rites of passage and complement it with the western health approach. She also felt that "kids going through them with their parents, where the parents are involved with their kids' rites of passage, that way they are a part of it." Involving parents in the ceremony with the children is beneficial to the student, parent and school, because the student will appreciate the parental involvement, the parent will be able to understand or become familiar with the ceremony, and the school will have positive involvement with the parent. Most of all there is mutual understanding and respect.

Participants felt that they would not dramatically change the curriculum in the ideal school. Instead, they would keep the same provincial curriculum but expand to meet community needs. Sage said "I wouldn't change the curriculum, because you need those subjects to get your diploma." He recognized that there was limited room for changing the curriculum because of the requirements for a diploma. Tracy shared the same view and felt that going "back to the reading, writing, and arithmetic" was important because "all children need to

read and write." She felt that by reorganizing the day you might be better able to accommodate all students "including those who are non-academic. You're going to access them through the fine arts." By reordering the day, you can expand your curriculum offerings and meet the needs of all students. Paula also felt that there could be some expansion to the current curriculum by offering "a life skills course for some kids" but noted that you have to be careful how you offer it because "those kids who need it already feel small, you don't want to make them feel tinier."

Tracy also felt that the ideal school needed to provide various learning opportunities for students especially in the area of fine arts:

> Our children come to us with gifts and talents and all too often those talents are not developed and we don't pursue them as such because we don't see them as a way of improving our schooling for our children. We all know that not all children are academic but a lot of our kids are talented in the arts and we need to provide those experiences and that includes music.

In Tracy's lengthy teaching experience, she has come to realize the importance of exposing children to the fine arts as one way of reaching more children and expanding their horizons. She is very realistic in her assertion that not all children will have success in academics, so it even it more important the arts be utilized not only for those children and that "there's also therapy involved in the arts, and it's a spiritual thing." The fine arts also provide children, especially those in the insular community of the reserve, with a vehicle from which they will have the confidence to reach to the world beyond the reserve. Tracy felt that it is very important to expose children at an early age so that they become aware of the opportunities that exist outside of the community and that they are indeed

attainable.

Discussion

School programming was deemed a very important element of the school function. Participants felt that it was imperative that there was structure and consistency in programming. This would mean that everyone (students, staff, and parents) would be dealt with in a fair and equitable manner to create an environment of safety and comfort. Programming was also directly related to curriculum and it was felt that the community had no choice but to teach the provincial curriculum so students would have the opportunity to go onto mainstream post-secondary institutions. Nowhere were the shackles of the present system more evident than in the section on programming. Teachers felt that they had no choice except to remain and negotiate education through the existing system. This is a system that has long alienated our children, parents, and communities, yet one we cannot seem to loosen its grip.

Chapter Five

Data Analysis

As I thought and re-thought my analysis, I struggled with how I would present it. My thoughts kept going back to my parents and the words of Elders: "You only know what you know." I realized I needed to go back to where I came from in order to know where I was and where I needed to go. So I went back to where the research started – the idea of *Nâtwahtâw*, looking for something in a good way. Prior to this, I had spent many years thinking about and being frustrated with the struggles that First Nations students had with the existing formal educational structure, but I wanted to approach the issue in a positive way. As I looked for something in a good way, I remembered the research question: What are the key characteristics of formal educational systems identified by a selected First Nation community that coincide with their Indigenous world view? In the data collection process, I never asked participants this question directly. Instead, I relied upon a series of interview questions. It was my assumption that each participant operated from an Indigenous world view because I considered them strong traditionalists. In retrospect, this was an erroneous assumption. As an Indigenous person, I needed to find a way to get answers to this problem that came from an Indigenous research paradigm. After much searching, I realized that the most appropriate methodology for my work was basing it on the principle of relational accountability.

Relational accountability was involved in every aspect of this research from its beginning to long after it was completed. In the realm of analysis, relational accountability became even more important because I had a responsibility to the participants, to my family, to the community, to the university, and to myself. I needed to ensure that the words and ideas of the participants were represented in the manner they were intended. The responsibility of representing my family well and demonstrating the values, beliefs, and knowledge of my ancestors was paramount. To the community, I was responsible for doing the best I could in order to share the words of the participants in an honest and respectful way, particularly since I will always be part of the community, long after the research has been completed. As a scholar, I have a responsibility to the university to contribute to the knowledge in this area. The responsibility I have to myself is to trust that I have indeed looked for the answers in a good way.

This chapter is an analysis of the findings presented in Chapter 4, including reflections on my role as a researcher, on the detrimental impacts of racism, and of the need for change in formal education for First Nation students.

Reflections on My Role as a Researcher

My research journey began long before I was aware of it. As a junior high student in a local public school, I was bothered by the number of friends and relatives who seemed to disappear each year. By the time I got to grade 12, there were only two brown faces on a stage full of white students. As I negotiated my way through my undergraduate studies, I was increasingly

disappointed in that there were only a handful of Aboriginal students on the large campus. When I became a teacher, I was deeply alarmed by this same pattern and decided that I needed to learn more. Initially, I assumed that First Nations students left school because they did not do well and all we had to do was find a way to make them do better, but my own master's research suggested to me that I was completely wrong and that the issue was a complex one related to a larger systemic problem. There are societal roots like racism, poverty, identity, and general inability to function in the unfamiliar system. I realized that I needed to approach my work from the point of view that within my community lie positive answers.

The selection of an appropriate community in which to conduct research was critical to this research. In selecting the community, I chose one that I knew had a high number of graduates, had a locally controlled school, and had members who understood research. I did not encounter any problems entering the community; the leadership was welcoming but cautious, and the participants were anxious to participate. As I reflect on this, I wonder if participants agreed to participate in the study out of respect for me in my role as former and current educator. Each of the participants was known to me. They had either known me as a colleague, a teacher, or as a community member. In my role, there was a certain sense of comfort and familiarity, which may have affected how participants responded to the questions. Perhaps they viewed me as a representative of the system and an advocate for the status quo of formal education and, out of respect for me as a member of a First Nation community,

combined with my professional role, did not choose to explore formal education possibilities beyond the current structure.

Analyzing the Data

Analyzing the data involved several levels of interpretation and analysis. The initial analysis involved coding and thematic groupings. The second level of analysis involved reordering of the data within themes. The next level was presenting the data and contextualizing it with interpretation. The most critical level then became analysis that directly corresponded to the research question.

One of the initial questions asked the participants to define successful schooling. They all identified completion of grade 12 as a benchmark of successful schooling but behind this were statements like "well today, that's what it looks like, having to finish grade 12, I guess in the mainstream world." It is evident that participants felt that the completion of grade 12 was another standard of achievement created by mainstream society that First Nations were forced to adopt if they wanted to participate in society. Placing this question at the beginning of the interview was unfortunate, because it seemed to frame the remaining responses of the participants. Although their immediate response indicated that they did not fully embrace the existing system, they seemed to accept it as if there was no other choice. They also felt that, although there was little choice in course or subject selection at the high school level, if students managed to finish high school it would provide a stepping stone to post-secondary education. They felt that there was more opportunity to make choices about post-secondary education that they could make a living from.

When participants were asked what the ideal school system would look like if they had the power to do anything they wanted. Their responses focused on addressing very specific issues: creating a safe and caring school, improving community support, and utilizing research to improve practice. Participants shared some of their own negative school experiences and felt that school needed to be a more welcoming place. The intergenerational impact of residential schools was acknowledged, yet it was not asserted that the system needed to change even though the way of delivering the curriculum had not changed since that time.

Although, participants' responses were deeply steeped in the existing system, they had very strong beliefs that culture was a very important part a successful school. Culture was not defined for or by the participants, yet their responses fell into three specific areas: identity, language, and ceremony. Participants felt that daily inclusion of practices like a Cree prayer and smudging were valuable reminders of identity for the students. Teaching the Cree language was very eloquently identified as an essential component in creating pride and spiritual identity. Ceremonies were also identified as important in reinforcing identity and teaching discipline. As I revisited the data, I found that every one of the participants felt strongly about the importance of Indigenous culture in the school to develop identity and discipline, values that participants felt created the successful student. Again, Indigenous cultural practices were identified as addictions that could be integrated or grafted into the current school system rather than being the central focus.

When participants were asked what they felt the role of family and Elders might look like in the ideal school, they had strong opinions. In the discussion of the role of family, participants identified parental involvement as an area of concern. They provided a variety of ideas for making parents feel welcomed, many of which Nehiyanak has tried. One participant made the insightful statement that "until we find a way to deal with the disconnection, no amount of cultural or traditional teaching will encourage parental involvement." Although she did not elaborate on it much further, it was clear that she was aware that the existing system of trying to involve First Nations parents has and will continue to be ineffective. It may also be time to reconsider the context in which we involve First Nation parents. Lack of parental involvement has been a concern of First Nation schools and many other schools who serve Aboriginal children. Unfortunately, the mainstream interpretation of parental involvement judges parents as apathetic and uncaring if they do not attend parent teacher interviews or participate in school activities. The current format of parent teacher interviews is dogmatic, based on a subjective evaluation of a child's ability. This is an alien concept to many First Nation parents, who see their children in a more holistic frame.

As with traditional Indigenous culture, participants felt strongly that Elders needed to be a part of the successful school. They felt that one was not an Elder by default when they turned 65. An Elder was identified as someone "who knows natural law, they truly live by example with honesty and kindness," and someone who has gone "through some of their own healing." The healing that

they referred to was the trauma of residential schools and its impact on people's ability to be kind, open, and non-judgemental. Over and over again, participants reinforced the importance of Elders in the school, yet their explanation of the role was designed to fit into the current system. Elders were seen as individuals who might come in on a drop in basis or be scheduled to fit into the existing structure. This is sad, considering the very important place Elders fit in our communities. Our communities have tried to find ways to make our schools more welcoming but the rigidity of this foreign system has made us alienate students, parents, Elders, and the community. So who does our First Nation school system really serve?

The inability to envision a school system beyond the current structure was confirmed in the responses to the question on how programming might look. It was the general feeling that there was no alternative. If children were going to be able to move between the First Nation school and provincial schools, the systems had to be the same. They felt it was an even greater justification to have similar systems if students were going to have the opportunity to move onto post-secondary programs. The shackles of mainstream education have gripped so tightly that few want to venture beyond the school house for fear that there may not be anything else.

Although it was clear that participants had trouble visualizing a system beyond the current one, a reoccurring theme shrouded the interviews. This shroud seemed to somehow work into each interview and created a distraction. The distraction of racism and community issues of drugs and violence entered

each interview. Participants felt that since these problems were front stage and center, they were very detrimental to any movement forward.

Racism and Communities Issues

Racism was an area that I did not intend to examine but the issue – in particular, internalized racism – arose in the first couple of interviews. Since racism was not examined in the literature review, some literature will be introduced to support the findings.

Defining Racism

The very term racism creates discomfort, denial, and mistrust. Few words are able to elicit the emotional response that the word conjures up, especially when it is suggested that schools and teachers smack of racism. Those who are implicated in practicing racism immediately get defensive or angry, even while those who feel victimized by racism also feel defensive or angry. Still, racism persists and permeates every aspect of society, from schools to businesses to government. There are various types of racism, including institutionalized, personally mediated, and internalized racism. All are equally destructive in their negative impact on people of color. In Canada, racism has found its way into government policy since the settler population arrived in the country. Its impact continues today and is often not recognized by people as racism, especially since Canadians pride themselves in being a multi-cultural nation. Even the very fact that the policy on multi-culturalism assumes that First Nations accept it is racist.

"Institutionalized racism is normative, sometimes legalized, and often

manifests as inherited disadvantage. It is structural, having been codified in our institutions or custom, practice, and law, so there is need not to be an identifiable perpetrator" (Jones, 2000, p.1212). Institutionalized racism has become such a part of First Nations people lives that it is almost unrecognizable to us. The Indian Act is the administrative legislation that governs all aspects of life on the reserve, from who is eligible to be recognized as an Indian to whom a truant officer can use force on. Yet, the Act is very limited in its scope of power. While Chief and Council have power at the community level, the ultimate power still lies with the Minister of Indian Affairs in Ottawa, who can step in and take over power if he deems it necessary. The Cree people who were forced to form reserve communities and elect leadership recognized the limited scope of this power. The Cree word for an elected Chief is *Okimakân*, which means pretend/acting leader. The Act forced communities to choose this form of selecting leadership, rather than the form that had sustained them for hundreds of years before contact. Today, few take the leadership by customary route.

At the school level, "racism is institutionalized to the extent that it is taught in school curricula. It is formulated into teaching practices and perpetuated in the practical structure" (Steinhauer, 1999, p. 52). In the school context, institutional racism has manifested itself by consistently failing to validate Aboriginal peoples' diversity, culture, history, and values. First Nation students learn as soon as they enter the public system that they are different, because they are in a system that rewards compliance to a white middle class value system based meritocracy. As a result, teachers of First Nation children

often feel frustration because the children do not fit into the system. They cannot understand why First Nation children and families would not strive to gain the same middle class values. Unfortunately, not enough teacher education programs challenge the white middle class perspective from which pre-service teacher are trained, so they go out into the field believing that this is the only right way for everyone.

In a study by Schick and St. Denis (2003) involving non-Aboriginal teachers in Western Canada, researchers addressed the issue of how to teach anti-racist and cross cultural courses to pre-service teachers. They explored three ideological assumptions. One assumption was that teachers believe we live in a meritocracy where everyone "has equal opportunity because we are all basically the same; all that is required to get ahead is hard work, talent, and effort" (Schick & St. Denis, 2003, p. 7). This assumes that if Aboriginal children and people are not succeeding in education, it is because they are not trying hard enough. Little attention is paid to the power that lies with the dominant group and it "ignores and trivializes the significance of unearned privileges conferred by their own dominant group identity" (p. 10).

Personally mediated racism is the form of racism we are most familiar with. It "can be intentional as well as unintentional, and it includes acts of commission as well as acts of omission. It manifests as lack of respect, suspicion, devaluation, scapegoating, and dehumanization" (Jones 2000, p. 1213). It is a form of racism that First Nations children are subjected to from a very young age. In school, they learn early on that people treat them differently

based on who they are, that there are stereotypes about them, and that their families might not look like the typical middle class family unit. As they get older, they realize that people fear them, that they are subject to poor service in stores and restaurants, and that they are expected to do poorly in work and school. First Nation children learn "to accept racism as a fact of their off reserve school experience" (Steinhauer, 1999, p. 51). They recognize at an early age that they are not like the people in textbooks. Teachers do not know how to deal with them, so they learn how to disappear by leaving school or quietly melting into the system. Students begin leaving school in junior high school because they just can't "take it anymore." Tired of the racism built into the school system, they just leave.

Internalized racism is "acceptance by member of the stigmatized races of negative messages about their own abilities and intrinsic worth. It is characterized by the not believing in others who look like them, and not believing in themselves" (Jones, 2000, p. 1213). This form of racism has worked its way into and is deeply embedded in the lives of many Aboriginal people in Canada today. "It manifests as an embracing of 'whiteness,' self-devaluation, and resignation, helplessness and hopelessness" (p. 1213). In communities like Nehiyanak, internalized racism has been detrimental to the people and the community's progress. It is so deeply embedded that people do not recognize it. Instead, it is accepted as a part of life.

Racism in Schools

Although participants did not always use the word racism, I was fully

aware of what they were referring to. The issue of racism is presented only to contextualize the issue of internalized racism and its detrimental impact on the community.

The long term effects of racism were evident among the participants. Elders Ella and Edie both identified themselves as "slow learners." Ella stated, "I was slow in learning, sometimes I couldn't even spell." Although Ella enjoyed school, she felt that she was a slow learner because she could not respond easily in English and often had difficulty in spelling. Edie stated, "When you can't learn, you don't like to be sitting in a classroom and then it gets kind of boring to you." When I probed Edie a little further to find out what she meant by classifying herself as a slow learner, she said "I couldn't answer as fast as the other kids. Sometimes I couldn't understand what the teacher was saying." The fact that both of the Elders' first language was Cree and the language of instruction was English certainly accounts for the fact that they viewed themselves as deficient and less capable. In fact, in a study on Aboriginal student dropout stated;

> Some dropouts confirmed that when they did not completely understand what was being said, they felt unable to participate fully in class and were more inclined to daydream. When students with weak English skills do not comprehend the task that is being asked of them, they may be too shy to ask for clarification. (Mackay & Myles. 1996, p. 164)

Both Elders were students in residential school. Their comments confirm that they felt inadequate because of the language barriers and as a result classified as slow learners. Unfortunately, this has intergenerational effects. They had no recourse or means to understand how to deal with the feelings of inadequacy

because the system was based on a framework that did not accommodate their differences. The form of systemic racism that caused them to believe that they were slow learners is one that persists even today. Tracy states that we need to move beyond:

> The stereotype that most of our kids are special needs and I don't believe in that because sometimes even as First Nation educators we cast those upon our own children and we get stuck in those ruts. We need to get past that and to be able to see past that, our children can and will learn.

The stereotype that First Nations children are special needs students is one that has persisted for many years and seems to have been inherited from parents and grandparents. Unfortunately, we have difficulty recognizing the many years of systemic racism deeply embedded in the educational system. Instead we blame ourselves and believe that we are incapable.

Although participants alluded to racism few actually called it racism. Sky, who reluctantly identified the behaviours and actions of her teacher as racist, states:

> I think she is racist in way, because I am [me] and it was a white school I went to and other people said she was racist and stuff like that. It could be just her own whatever. Maybe she didn't like me because of my skin color or maybe she didn't like my assignments. If I had a problem in class she would be very forceful and strict, "Sky you should get a better mark on this. You should understand this." It's all about the teacher's action and their behaviour toward you when you do something wrong or even when you do something right. I think she had her favourites. I just tried to see above it and be mature about it.

It is clear that Sky tried to act in a mature manner when she knew that the teacher's actions toward her were racist in nature. She tried to dismiss the teacher's actions and give her the benefit of the doubt by stating that it might have been the quality of her assignments. She later found out that the teacher's

actions were indeed racist in nature because other Aboriginal students had similar experiences in the same classroom.

Paula chose to send her children to Nehiyanak to shield them from the experiences she had, experiences that she felt were detrimental to her self esteem:

> I chose it because I thought if they grow up around their own people they wouldn't be picked on. Their self-esteem wouldn't be as low as mine was. I thought that maybe that was part of their foundation and you know what? It worked. It really worked. I think about a lot of these people that had their kids go off the reserve and they're good kids, but some of them just didn't do it. They didn't finish high school and I know a lot of it had to do with their self esteem and probably what I grew up with, cause a lot of them went to school off the reserve, the ones that I know of. That self-esteem was so important for me, that I needed them to have that self-esteem in order for them to move on in their lives.

Paula's strong feeling about the importance of children having positive self-esteem was a very important factor in her decision to send her children to the Nehiyanak School. When she was growing up in the city school, she was often singled out and picked on because she was "the only native kid in the class." Paula did not use the word racism to describe her experience because she did not want to make the accusation, even though it was evident that these situations were indeed racist in nature.

The incidence of racism in the daily lives of First Nation students – especially in off-reserve environments – is so prevalent that is accepted as a part of the off-reserve school experience. For the purpose of this discussion, it was included as an important part of justifying the establishment of the ideal school in a First Nation community. More importantly, it presented and acknowledged the role of racism in the community.

Internalized Racism and the Social Issues of Nehiyanak

During the interviews, I found that community issues were a major issue of concern to each of the participants. Issues about the lack of community support, social problems, and addictions seemed to enter into each discussion as factors detrimental to the development of an ideal school. Over the last 20 years, issues of internalized racism have choked and limited community development in many areas. The decades of institutionalized and personally mediated racism have successfully manifested themselves in the community of Nehiyanak as various forms of internalized racism.

People who suffer from internalized racism suffer low self-esteem, color prejudice, stereotyping, and self-hatred. These are not the only manifestations. Others are so deeply embedded that people do not even know they are guilty of perpetuating this form of racism. The actions of internalized racism can be the most devastating form of racism because they are from your own people. Tracy states, "Having racism within your own is worse because it's our own people doing that to each other... Racism that come from the white culture has a base...what I mean by a base is it comes from somewhere...but when it's internal within your own people it's harder." Tracy feels that internalized racism is more difficult to deal with because there is an assumption that the people in the community will support each other. Instead, they create the worst obstacles.

Internalized racism "involves at least four essential and interconnected elements; decision-making, resources, standards, naming the problem" (Bivens, 1995, p. 2). In decision-making, First Nations know that they do not have the

ultimate decision-making power over their lives and resources because they recognize that power resides elsewhere. As a direct result, Aboriginal people may think that "white people know more about what needs to be done for us than we do. On an interpersonal level, we may not support each other's authority and power" (p. 2). Resources are in the hands of the government and there is societal guilt that we are wasting taxpayers' money. Although Chief and Council are elected by the membership, the funds that are transferred to them to operate community programs are designated for specific expenditures. Limits to funding are established in all areas from education to housing. As a result, resources are not comparable with what "white communities" would get for the same activity.

Standards in education are based on Eurocentric standards that communities try to replicate. Even though these standards have been proven not to work, we hold ourselves accountable to them. For example, I have met a graduate student who said, "I went to a regular program rather than the Aboriginal program." This reflects the deeply instilled belief that if it's an Aboriginal program then it is less than standard and the assumption that Aboriginal programs lack the academic rigor of mainstream programs. Assumptions are made purely on the basis of internalized racism and an acceptance of Eurocentric standards as the most important.

As Bivens (1995) noted, "There is a system in place that misnames the problem of racism as a problem of or caused by people of color and blames the disease – emotional, economic, political, etc. – on people of color." (p. 2).

Aboriginal people believe that we are more violent than other people because of high rates of incarceration for Aboriginal people, even though studies have found that Aboriginal people are not fairly treated by the justice system. Tracy is fully cognizant of the impact and source of this issue. She states:

> We're too busy dragging each other down, and I don't know why we do that. That's what I'm finding in my experience and I'm finding that the hardest people that I have worked with in terms of challenge and difficulty is our own people. I've enjoyed working with many, many people from all parts of the world. The hardest that I have found are our own. I guess maybe I'll go back to the residential schools. They did a really job on many of our people. One of things that I have noticed in communities is a lot of jealousy. As soon as we have somebody who is getting somewhere or they think that that person thinks their getting somewhere, they bring something in to bring that person down. A lot of people lack self-esteem and they want everyone to feel as bad as they are and I don't think it's different even with many educated First Nations people.

In Tracy's vast experiences she has found that one of the most difficult groups has been the people in her own community, because of the constant challenges that they pose to school leadership. Tracy feels that there is a certain underlying intent not to allow anyone to move forward and the best way to prevent this is to continually put them down. This a downside of communal or holistic orientation which should otherwise be positive.

Internalized racism is the direct result of years and years of the oppression that began with colonization. When First Nation people were first placed on reserves, all decisions (including those relating to education) were made for them. As time wore on, the government found that education was failing miserably and, when the embarrassment became a national issue, government realized action was necessary. By the late 1960s, communities were able to have greater control over the election of the Chief and Council.

Prior to then, the Indian agent told the Chief and council when an election would be held and who would be eligible to participate. The local Indian agent wielded a great deal of power and control. He made all fiscal and political decisions in the community. In 1969, the Indian agent left Nehiyanak. From that period of time and the simultaneous devolution of Indian Affairs, fiscal and political responsibilities were slowly transferred to the community. During the 1970s, the community regained some control of education, including the authority to establish a local school board who would oversee the operation of the school. The transfer of responsibilities to the band level was done with limitations and stipulations on powers of Chief and Council. The ultimate power still remained with the Minister of Indian Affairs. When the community achieved local control, they were forced to replicate provincial systems that had already failed children for decades. Communities were anxious to assume control of education but little did they know that they had to continue to perpetuate the system that they had fought so hard to change. This system continues to exist today. The devolution of Indian Affairs was merely an exercise to demonstrate to the world the wonderful job the federal government was doing to "give" First Nations autonomy and self-determination. As a result, we have become our own colonizers; we have become our own oppressors; and we have internalized racism to such a degree that we cannot even recognize it. At the same time, we know that there is something very, very wrong, something that must change from within.

Although, there have been great changes in the self-concept of most

people in Nehiyanak with the increase in high school and university graduates, an undertone of some form of racism always persists. People in Nehiyanak know it well, yet few will actually call it racism. Instead, people will ignore it and are often afraid to confront it for fear of the embarrassment that will come from the accused's denial of racism. The layers of racism run deep and impact the daily lives of people in the community, from trips to town, to hockey games, to school. No one is left untouched. Paula states "a lot of our kids think that white people are so much more powerful, so much better and that's why they can't get along with white people. Even my kids think that white people are so much better and they're not." This statement reinforces that the impact of racism is very evident. More importantly it demonstrates young people's feeling that they are not as 'good' as white people because they don't have the same social and economic power. The resulting tension creates dislike and even hatred.
The impact of internalized racism in Nehiyanak is far reaching and it would take much greater examination in order to fully comprehend the affects. For the purpose of data presentation and analysis, participants' responses will be divided into two categories: lack of community support and family issues; and addictions and violence.

Lack of community support and family issues. Lack of community support for the community school is largely embedded in the idea that the off-reserve school has better standards. Elder Edie states, "It's hard. These parents send their kids off the reserve. We should try and support our own school." She felt that it was unfortunate that so many parents sent their children to off-reserve

schools and did not support the community school. She felt that lack of support was primarily based on the assumption that the off-reserve schools were much better. Elder Edie has extensive experience with the local school and felt that, while people were not aware of what went on in the school, parents naturally assumed it was substandard. Star shared similar feelings. She thought it was unfortunate that students felt negatively but that it was based "on their own lack of self-esteem." She pointed out that students need to "honestly and truthfully believe in themselves. I know a lot of my friends that transferred from there or ones who didn't go there had a name for it - 'no hope.' That's just not true." Star felt that because students did not believe in themselves, it was very easy for them not to believe in the school and perpetuate the belief that that school was lesser than, simply because it was a reserve school. Star also felt that, "The attitudes they have and how they have been brought up, the attitudes of their parents – it even depends on their grandparent's attitudes of the school." She feels strongly that inherited attitudes need to change in order for the perception of the school to change. She graduated from the school and believes that it has much more to offer. Star asserts that attitudes are so deeply embedded that they are inter-generational and consistently drag the school down.

Manifestations of internalized racism: addictions, poverty, hopelessness. The issue of addictions and the impact on the community was a concern for each participant. They felt that addictions have had devastating impacts on the children, students, families, and whole social fabric of the community.

Internalized racism can manifest itself in numerous ways. Addictions can be related to the fact that "patterns of powerlessness and despair" give rise to the "feel good now" pattern (Lipsky, p. 4). This pattern is a result of the belief that Aboriginal people are doomed for failure so "I must settle for making myself feel good right now. At least I deserve that much. Drugs, alcohol, and other addictions ...irrational use of money... these are all directly related to patterns of internalized racism and oppression" (p. 4). It is clear that in order to begin to deal with the problem of addiction, Nehiyanak must accept that it exists and begin to address the hopelessness and devastation that it can create. Sage aptly acknowledged this "feel good now" pattern by saying, "Teenagers are looking to make fast money too, and they start selling drugs, so they drop out to sell weed." The fact that there are very limited opportunities for teenagers to make money forces them into the thinking that they have no other alternative except to live for today and make all the money that they can, even if it is illegal.

Like most of the participants, Paula was concerned about the effects of drugs and other addictions. She said there is "too much drugs now. Everyone suffers, not just them – their kids, their families. I feel sorry for those people in the end because they are the ones who are going to suffer." She felt that parents who were using drugs not only devastated their family and children, but also generated even more problematic long term effects, because their children and grandchildren would inherit the social stigma and the effects that drugs might have on unborn children. Sky felt that:

> Some of them don't care because they are probably alcoholics or into drugs or gambling, bingo and just lack of attention for their children.

> There's a lot of abuse like alcoholism, [drugism], gambling. A lot of it happens and I think that is why parents are not involved in their children's lives.

She felt that some parents were to caught up in their own addictions and did not have the energy to adequately care for their children even if they wanted to, because they were too preoccupied with their addictions. Although she knows parents love their children, she felt that their world was too controlled by addictions to make proper decisions.

Patrice felt that the community and school must focus on establishing consistency because "It's that lack of consistency why some are hopeless and there's a lack of communication and all of those types of things come in when kids come from homes with addictions." This lack of consistency and support becomes even more evident in a community where everything is so intimately interconnected, and interdependent. The problems of the community almost always impact the school. Sage stated, "It's not the school programming that's the problem. It's more the community issues." He did not feel that the school issues were as dire as the community problems with violence and drugs. Sadly, two participants feel that the problem is insurmountable. Sage states, "Our community has tried but they don't really get anywhere. They have been trying to get the drugs off the reserve. They know where the dealers live. They just don't do anything about it and kids suffer for it." He is very aware of the great deal suffering for children drugs create, but he has given up on the idea that current courses of action will ever have any impact. Much like Sage, Sky feels that the community is powerless to eliminate the problem, "because people

have tried to approach it so many times and sometimes some things work but most of the time it doesn't work." The feeling that eliminating the drug problem is impossible because various actions have failed reinforces the feelings of hopelessness that go along with internalized racism.

Although drugs were identified as a huge problem, participants also identified other problems that also relate to the issue of internalized racism and have a detrimental impact on successful schooling. Taryn stated, "There are other issues compounding the problems, mainly things like attendance issues, in school transfers, transitions in the community, the drug trade, neglect, poverty, no homes. We have kids that are homeless, that are going from house to house... We have the haves and have nots in our school." Throughout the years, Taryn has noticed that the social problems have increased and been further compounded by the problems of drugs, neglect, poverty, and homelessness. She feels that it is important to make school "a fun place" because the issues and living situations in students' lives can be so dire that learning becomes secondary to survival. When a child's basic human needs of food, shelter, and clothing are not met, learning and going to school are not a priority. Taryn states:

> Some children come [with] no lunch - don't worry, we'll feed you. No jacket? Come to school and we'll get you one. No winter jacket? Come to school we'll get you one. I know we're enabling but if we didn't they would have nothing because even though parents love their kids there's something out there that makes them think "I need this more than my child needs a jacket."

It is sadly a reality that some children in the community must live in and although Taryn feels that they are enabling parents to continue their bad habits,

she feels caught in the dilemma of either enticing children to come to school by feeding and clothing them or ignoring the problem. The school has made the decision to provide the basic needs to children so that they can be engaged, learn, and gain hope. She also believes that when children are at school at least there is opportunity to engage them. She says when they are here "Let's make it fun for them here. Let's make them want to be here. Sometimes a certain child's determination to be here is the only factor that causes them to want to be here." Unfortunately, for some children, the home is so dysfunctional that a young child is in school because he or she has a deep seated desire to be there. Elder Edie was very concerned about children's home lives and stated, "You know, that kind of life, it's awful and then these little kids are growing and they see all that, what it is going to be?" Edie is very concerned by the fact that children do not have time to be children because they are exposed to violence, drugs, alcohol, abuse, and other problems. She is deeply concerned about what the future holds in store for children who are exposed to this lifestyle.

Sage worries about issues like the impacts of violence on children in the school and community. He defines violence as "not liking each other, name calling, dirty looks, and the way the movies are today, kids acting ghettoes out." Interestingly, he listed the posturing behaviours that often precede physical violence as the more detrimental acts of violence because so much of the communication is done in a non-verbal manner and can be ongoing. Although, he feels that physical violence is hurtful, he is more concerned by the name

calling and dirty looks. The hurt these behaviours generate runs deep and can carry on for a long time. He felt that it was one of the more serious issues since "this family doesn't like this family and it makes the younger generation not like them either." This form of internalized racism is rooted in the belief that we are violent and need to put down each other in order to feel better about ourselves.

Discussion

The problems that the people of Nehiyanak experience because of ongoing institutionalized and personally mediated forms of racism are difficult and embarrassing. It is unfortunate that they continue to exist in this righteous, politically correct and "just" nation of Canada. The problems, which can be found at every level of education, health care, justice, and government, exist whether on not people want to accept. This is the daily reality for First Nation children and parents. Unfortunately, people do not want to confront the issue and pretend that it does not exist. Manifestations of these forms of racism have successfully burrowed their way into every aspect of community existence and have evolved into internalized racism, a form that is difficult to recognize and even more difficult to understand. Tracy states, "Internalized racism, it's a very, very real thing. I've seen it and I've experienced it and it's sad because it impedes our growth as a nation." These words summarize the devastating impacts internalized racism have not only on the community of Nehiyanak but on the Cree as a nation of people who want to move forward.

Towards a Final Analysis

As I gathered my thoughts and reconsidered my analysis once again, I

realized that participants felt that we have no choice but to continue to try to fit into a system that has failed us time and time again. When I revisited the passion with which they spoke about the importance of culture, language, ceremonies, and Elders, I wanted it to work so badly. I tried very hard to find a way to convince myself that the passion with which they spoke about the importance of Elders, language and culture could be accommodated in the system. No matter how much tinkering and adaptation takes place, though, our "round pegs" will continue fall through the "square holes." We can fill the sides with sand for awhile but eventually the sand will fall through. We can use tape but this is just a temporary fix.

So how did we get here? Perhaps we can say it is part of the federal government's plan of genocide. Perhaps our colonized minds do not allow us to venture beyond what our great white father has allowed us. Perhaps part of it is our own fault for saying *kiyam*. *Kiyam* means, leave it alone, let it be, don't rock the boat. It is directly related to what Brant (1990) calls the "ethic of non-interference" in which people will not confront or deal directly with issues. Instead they will endure or accept them, because that is the way things were meant to be. But was this how things were meant to be? Is it proper to let 50% of our children leave school before graduation? Is it proper to let our children feel un-welcomed in a land that has been home to our ancestors for thousands of years? Is it right for a system to be so powerful and righteous that it goes unquestioned even if it cannot meet the needs of 1/3 of the population?

Although participants' words did not demonstrate a vision beyond the

current system, they gave evidence of hope for changing the future. There is also a strong feeling of solidarity, which has been somewhat shrouded by community crisis, but good leadership and awareness could easily move people to demand a system of their own design.

Chapter 6

Summary of Findings and Recommendations for the Future

This chapter will provide an overview of the study, a summary of the findings, and recommendations for future study.

Overview of the Study

The education of First Nation children and their lack of success and low high school completion rates have been issues of concern for decades. Various aspects of these problems have been studied by researchers, school districts, and government, yet the problem is still prevalent. In this study, I wanted to find some direction to begin to deal with these issues within a community based, Indigenous perspective.

The purpose of this study was to determine the key characteristics of formal educational systems identified by a selected First Nation community that, I hoped, would coincide with their Indigenous world view. Selected First Nation Elders, parents, teachers, and students of Nehiyanak First Nation were interviewed on their perspectives of what a successful community school might look like. They provided a definition of a successful community school; the role of Indigenous culture, of Elders, parents and programming; and how the community might begin to introduce the change. Participants also provided a great amount of additional data on existing obstacles that hinder the development of a successful school.

This study can be utilized to establish a framework for formal education in

many First Nation communities. It acknowledges the unique history and context of First Nation communities and recognizes the importance of Indigenous knowledge in increasing the success rates of Aboriginal students in secondary education.

The research involved ten participants who were community members involved and interested in the formal community education system. They were chosen because they had some involvement with the school as either a parent, teacher or student. They were also selected because they were willing to participant and provide their perspectives. In addition to following university protocol for interviewing participants, participants in the study were also provided with the traditional protocol of tobacco for sharing their knowledge. Formal interviews were audio taped and transcripts were transcribed verbatim. The elements of a successful community school were based on themes that emerged during the course of interviews with participants.

Changing the Future by Taking Charge

Throughout the interviews, participants were very honest and, even when the truth was not so positive, they continued to share their perspectives. Their responses were candid because they trusted that their perspectives would be utilized to guide rather than to judge. As the end of the interviews drew near, I asked participants how the changes could be made so that successful schooling could become a reality in Nehiyanak. As I assembled the data and began to categorize it, I quickly realized that their responses were naturally categorized into areas parallel to natural laws that have governed and sustained Cree

people for centuries. They are the laws of living in harmony with each other, the environment, and all of Creation before and after us. These natural laws give us the hope and determination that the future will be better. The responses to the question will be categorized into four areas; love/unity, hope, sharing, and determination.

Love/Unity

Participants felt that one of the important ways of creating change was to be unified and work together as a loving community. More importantly, the community had to unify its efforts for the love of children and their successful schooling. It was clear that participants were dismayed and even discouraged by some of the social ills of the community, yet they genuinely loved and cared about the community. Although many are concerned about the impacts of social issues on the children of the community, they strongly believe that the community is a great place. The participants expressed pride in the community and the achievements that have been made by the people. For them, there is little separation: the people are the community.

Some felt that it was important to utilize the traditions that have sustained us as Cree people. Ceremonies unify the community and many of things that people need to know occur in the practice and participation in ceremonies. Ceremonies require you to think, to observe, and to be reflective. This process may be long but it teaches patience and self-discipline. As you become more involved in ceremonies, you naturally learn and the roles and responsibilities that each person has in a particular ceremony. All roles are important to the

ceremony. By being reflective, people think about their roles and the importance of community in ceremony, which brings families and community together.

Participants expressed appreciation of community and the support it provides an individual on a daily basis. The community's embrace and knowledge of belonging could be felt by just walking out the front door, with people greeting you and validating you as a community member. Participants recognized the importance of being part of the community, earning respect and maintaining it by careful behaviour. Participants clearly believe in the strength of community. They share the success that community has brought them but they also know that it is very important to unify the community for the betterment of all.

Hope

Participants expressed strong feelings of hope for the future. Though they were fully aware of the community's shortcomings, they loved the community and had great hope that things will change for the better. They feel that everyone in the community needs to make a commitment to work together toward changing things. This would mean that people would have to give selflessly and work diligently with the community to try to make things better for the future.

The belief that education is a critical factor in success was inherent in the responses of all the participants. They felt that the school provided hope for the future because it plays a critical role in guiding and supporting children. In this

critical role, school needs to embrace and honour all children to give them hope. Unfortunately, there are children in the community, including some who are very young, who display feelings of hopelessness. Participants believe, however, that even the most distant child can be reached with the proper guidance and nurturing. Ultimately, parents want their children to be happy and enjoy school.

Participants were very supportive and had hope that the current school in Nehiyanak will improve based on the vision the community has for it. Improvement will come not from simply meeting provincial expectations but from careful cultural and social planning. Hope is a critical ingredient in creating meaningful change. The participants of Nehiyanak are rooted in the belief the community has to utilize the strong sense of hope and move forward together in order to create successful schooling for all children, now and in the future.

Sharing

The sharing of knowledge, information and ideas were viewed as important components in moving toward successful schooling and changing the future. There are limited methods of getting information to the community. Although there is a radio station, not everyone tunes in or can get reception. There is no consistent weekly paper and even if there was it would be difficult to get to every household. As a result, most news travels via word of mouth. The danger of word of mouth information is that it may be altered en route and does not reach everyone. Nehiyanak School disseminates information in many different ways but has found that one of the more successful methods to reach parents is through students. Although this method is not always the most

reliable, they have found that it has been effective in getting parents into the school because children will continue to ask their parents until they come.

Information sharing is critical for any organization or government, because the flow of information can be positive or negative, depending upon the source. In Nehiyanak, the school recognizes that it needs to improve the sharing of information but parents also have a role in receiving the information and taking appropriate action. Parental involvement may not have to look like it does in other schools and when parents gain greater knowledge of the school they will feel more confident. Information is power and the power of knowledge builds confidence in both parents and students.

Determination

Determination, *âhkameymowin*, is one of the natural laws that we have a duty to maintain as Cree people. The participants felt that it was important to foster determination as a means of changing and enlarging the future for students in Nehiyanak. Determination and having the will to move on in the face of adversity is probably the single most critical factor that will enlarge the future of First Nations people. It is of utmost importance that the school environment is conducive to fostering determination in children from their entrance into school.

Taking charge to change the future was the theme of this section. It was a theme that brought a great deal of home and community based recommendations for change. Although participants realize that the challenges are great, they also realize that they are resilient and that there is reason to

have great hope for the future. According to Tracy, "The challenges are great. I find the best way to break our cycles is through our children." The task now is to meet these challenges head on and create awareness for the betterment of the nation.

Summary of the Findings

The findings presented in Chapter Four were based on open ended interview questions created from the original research question and sub-questions. These four questions were (a) what do you define as successful schooling and what do you envision a successful school might look like in this community? (b) what is the role of culture and tradition in the successful school? (c) what is the role of family, Elders, and the community in the successful school? and (d) what would programming look like in the successful school?

What Do You Define as Successful Schooling?

The responses to this question fell into four distinct areas; finishing grade 12, recognizing gifts and educating the whole child, meeting social and emotional needs, and staffing. All participants felt that finishing grade 12 was a good benchmark for success and that if students did complete high school then it was also a starting off point for post-secondary programs. There was the general feeling that this was a mainstream concept which they had been forced to accept and adapt to. Determination to complete high school was viewed as contingent upon the determination of the individual student. If students were able to finish high school then they would inevitably move onto to a post-secondary program. In post-secondary programming, they would have greater

opportunity to select areas of interest and suitability.

Participants also felt that it was critical to educate the whole child and recognize that every child comes to school with their own gift. The school has a responsibility to recognize students' gifts and foster them by providing students with a range of school and learning experiences. It is also very important to recognize that good planning plays a critical role in maximizing limited resources.

Meeting the social and emotional needs of students was considered an important component of the successful school. Social needs could be met through some areas of cultural programming, which reinforces identity and provides students with the opportunity to learn roles, responsibility, and discipline. By incorporating cultural activity into each day, students are reminded of the importance of Cree culture in their daily lives and emotions. Meeting emotional needs is especially critical because of the dysfunction in some students' homes and in the community. The successful community school would be an emotionally safe place for students to develop strength, determination, and motivation to be there everyday.

Staff and administration were recognized as the driving force in the school. Participants felt that it was very important that the system treat students, staff, and parents equally. They also felt strongly that good school staff was an integral part of the ideal school and focused on the positive relationship that staff members need to develop with students. Participants felt that it was important that staff and students develop a trusting relationship

because teachers play very important roles in the lives of children. The positive relationship is based on mutual respect and understanding.

What Is the Role of Culture and Tradition in the Successful School?

The participant responses to the question about the role of culture fit into the following three areas: transmitting values, reinforcing the Cree language, and teaching ceremony. Parents and teachers felt that students needed to be reminded of the importance of their identity as Cree people through the reinforcement of values on a daily basis. The Elders felt very strongly that the Cree language needed to be taught in school because it is such an essential part of Cree identity. They also felt that it is our duty as Cree people to speak the language because it is a gift from the Creator. The teaching of ceremonies was also seen as an important element in the role of culture. Participants felt that it was very important that students learn proper protocol and be exposed to the ceremonies that they were ready for, always ensuring that boundaries of sacredness and community rules are not violated. The role of culture in the ideal community school was deemed very important because it reinforces identity.

What Is the Role of Family, Elders, and the Community in the Successful School?

Participants' comments on the role of the relationship between the family and the school centered on the theme of parental involvement, an area where participants had many concerns. Participants felt that parents were not involved in their children's education because they felt alienated by the school environment. Because of this, it was important to find ways to engage parents.

Participants also felt that parental involvement might look different than the conventional school model that continues to intimidate and invalidate parents.

Participants had a great deal to say about the role of Elders in the ideal school and responses were in two areas: what the role might look like and selection of Elders. They felt that is was very important to have Elders in the school to share their wisdom and establish relationships with students. Since half the population of Nehiyanak is under the age of 18, there are few Elders and students do not always have the opportunity to develop relationships with them. The role of the Elder in the school would not be like a teacher, aide, or administrator. Instead, they would be there to guide staff and students and, more importantly, to nurture children and share their knowledge. They would be visible to students. The students would learn how to develop healthy relationships with the Elders and staff would learn how to utilize their skills when called upon. The selection of an Elder was important to participants because they felt that it was important to have a good Elder to meet the needs of children. They noted that someone did not become an Elder by default when they reached the age of 65. Instead, people are identified as Elders because they have the attributes of kindness, wisdom, and honesty and live by example. Participants felt that it was important that Elders engage in their own healing. Otherwise, they would continue to perpetuate the fear-based mentality of residential schools.

The role of community was recognized as critical in the successful community school. In the community of Nehiyanak, there is still a strong sense

of the community as a collective interdependent unit. Participants felt that community members are responsible to work together and support each other for the benefit of the school and the entire community. Students felt a strong sense of responsibility to the community and stated that community expectations and the fear of disappointing the community kept them in school.

What Would Programming Look Like in the Successful School?

When participants were asked how they would envision programming in the successful school, their responses referred to organization and consistency, and curriculum. Participants felt that it was important to that the school was well organized to facilitate movement of students between the provincial and community schools. Consistency in dealing with students, staff, and parents was deemed important because in a small community, people need to be assured that everyone is treated equally.

Participants felt that the curriculum should remain the same as the provincial curriculum so that students would have the opportunity to move between schools and attend mainstream post-secondary institutions if they decided to. It was also felt that curriculum offerings could be expanded to include more practical and fine arts, which would accommodate the needs of the non-academic students. Overall, participants felt that there was little need to change curriculum offerings.

The most perplexing outcome for me was that participants felt that they were bound by and to the existing system. Any changes to the system would need to be negotiated within the context of the current structure so that students

would have the flexibility of choice. Although participants had many ideas about how to improve the system to meet the community needs, responses were contextualized only in the existing system bound to provincial curricula. The findings indicated that people feel that there is a great need for change but the movement toward this change is so heavily weighed down by the community's problems with addictions. As discussed in Chapter Five, these additional findings demonstrated the detrimental impacts of racism and internalized racism (manifested in addictions and other community problems) on the growth of community education. In spite of the crippling effects these issues have on the community, there is a strong sense of hope for the community to move ahead. Participants feel that the community is a good place to live and that the community has to come together to make positive changes because it is a responsibility of the community to enlarge the future for the sake of the children.

Recommendations

The recommendations that came out of this study require a great deal of work and the involvement of various levels of government, universities, educators, and the First Nation communities. Recommendations focus on the establishment of a brand new system for First Nations communities and the actions required to ensure that change happens.

Development of Awareness in the First Nation Community

The recommendation to develop awareness in the First Nation community is both an exercise in dissemination of information and calling the community to action. The findings confirmed the importance of sharing

information and research at the community level to assist the community in moving forward. A series of workshops would be set up in the First Nation to provide community members with a history of system and current practice; the role of teacher education; the need to develop a community based system; and a plan of action. Participants in the study are ripe for change. Given the proper information to make informed decisions, they would begin to recognize that we need a system of our own instead of continuing to adapt and modify the existing one.

Challenge Indian and Northern Affairs (INAC) Funding Policy and Paternalism

Challenging the fiscal policy of Indian Affairs may seem to be an insurmountable task but INAC's control of the purse strings of community based education must be challenged. This recommendation emerged from the realization that participants resented the paternalistic nature of First Nation school structures yet were unable to see a system that could exist beyond the current structure. The lack of adequate fiscal and human resources to meet the needs of students is a widely known problem and was expressed by participants. INAC's funding levels for on-reserve schooling fall far below provincial funding levels across country. INAC willingly pays provincial rates for students attending off-reserve schools but will not provide the same levels for on-reserve students. The year-to-year funding arrangement creates a high degree of instability for First Nation schools and makes it difficult for schools to maintain personnel because they are unable to provide them with permanent contracts, a luxury every off-reserve school district in the country has. INAC's

inadequate funding levels must be challenged by First Nations across the country as a collective.

A community based plan of action to gain true local control of education must be developed and delivered to INAC. At the local level, communities must decide whether they want to continue to perpetuate and support a system that does not meet their needs of the community or whether they would rather have a system based on their Indigenous worldview. We no longer need to ask our great father the Minister of Indian Affairs for permission to do what we know is right for us. Instead, we will let him know that it is time to let his First Nation children out of the house.

Improve Teacher Training

Throughout the course of interviews it became increasingly evident that good teacher training was necessary. Participants felt that a good teacher was respectful, well informed, adaptable, and open minded. The findings demonstrated that the expansion of teacher education programs is necessary to foster success among Aboriginal students by enlarging the lens through which they see the world. Although this is the aim of teacher education programs across the country, we are failing miserably at perpetuating these attributes because we teach them through a single lens. Teacher education is currently taught through a middle-class mainstream (whitestream) lens, so graduates leave teacher education programs with the firm belief that this is the only true way to educate all children. When they begin teaching, they often become frustrated because the methods and expectations they have been taught are not

realistic, especially in the socially and culturally diverse classrooms of today. This inadequacy in teacher training is confirmed as provinces try to include multiple perspectives in the Social Studies programs and meet outcry from teachers who feel that they do not have the resources to teach this material. Little do teachers realize that they only need to have an open mind and see the world through a different set of lenses. This problem becomes even more acute in the First Nations community, because the culture, lifestyle, and rhythm of the community are so foreign to teachers unable to see the world through a different lens.

Challenge the Status Quo of Provincial Curriculum

The recommendation to challenge the status quo of provincial curriculum will first require First Nations to demand true local control with the Federal government and then challenge provincial government to provide curriculum that meets community needs. This recommendation grew out of the analysis of the findings, participants felt that the system was foreign and did not foster success with language and culture as central components. Over the past few years, the province of Alberta has been involved in a project to infuse Aboriginal perspectives into all programs of study. Although extensive consultation was undertaken across the province and promises made to communities that infusion would become provincially mandated, the project has been shelved. One school district took on the challenge of piloting the project but in general it has been just another exercise designed to create hope in the Aboriginal community while, disappointingly, failing to deliver the promise. The language

was carefully chosen for the project, Infusion is exactly what it means – an add-on that you can chose to use or ignore. It is important to challenge the status quo of provincial curriculum to meet the needs of all learners in the province.

Directions for Future Research

Like most researchers the areas that I feel are critical to study are subjective and what I perceive as important today may change. The recommendations for further study grew out of a perceived need to revisit the research question and to further study some of the key findings in this project. They are areas that in my own experience require further study.

1. *Revisit the research question: What are the key characteristics of formal educational systems identified by a selected First Nation community that coincide with their Indigenous world view?* Revisiting this research question is essential because a researcher must first determine if the participants operate from an Indigenous world view and how they define it. Once this has been determined, the same questions and research process can be utilized to see if outcomes change. By replicating this research in another community or communities it can be concluded that language and culture should indeed be central to the formal educational structure.

2. *Further examine the role of teachers in a First Nation school.* The participants in the study provided a great deal of data on expectations of the role of the teacher in a community school. Although I did not utilize much of this data, their expectations and understanding of a good community based teacher certainly warrants further study. It is a body of knowledge that could be utilized

by teacher training programs to help pre-service teachers learn about diversity, understand community, and avoid frustration.

3. *Further examine the impact of internalized racism on First Nation communities and populations.* The issue of internalized racism and its detrimental impacts on First Nations communities is an important area for future research. In this study, participants felt that community issues related to internalized racism were so great that they impeded progress. Internalized racism has been linked to many things like hopelessness, drug use, chronic disease, in-fighting, and other negative issues. The deeply embedded roots of internalized racism in its various forms must be studied in order to create awareness and make necessary changes.

Addressing the Research Question

As a researcher I have a moral and ethical obligation to address my research question; What are the key characteristics of formal educational systems identified by a selected First Nation community that coincide with their Indigenous world view? In addressing this question, further hesitation arises. The question that ultimately emerges for me from the study is, "Why do First Nations people continue to support the existing, failing educational system?" Even though participants suggested ways in which Indigenous culture can be part of schooling, these suggestions were viewed as "add on" elements and were not seen as forming the basic structure in which academic learning takes place.

This study has caused me to rethink and even reconsider my view of the

relationship of First Nation students and formal education systems. I am very humbled by my experiences throughout this study because I realize that the more I learn the less I know and can assume. As a teacher and administrator for 17 years in the formal educational structure, I was quite distressed to discover in the analysis of my findings that the existing system would not meet the needs of a Cree community. The people of Nehiyanak envision a successful system as one that would have language and culture as the central philosophy of the school and its curricula. When I first began this study I was convinced that I if I looked for a Cree model of education in a "good way" then I would find it, instead I have come to the sad realization that I have spent my career working in a system that may never meet the needs of the Cree community of Nehiyanak.

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