University of Alberta

A Portrait of Aboriginal Elementary School Classrooms:

An Exploratory Study Using Elements of Ethnographic Research Design

by

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Abstract

The objective of this exploratory, qualitative study was to obtain a greater understanding of the educational issues experienced by teachers and students in the context of two rural Aboriginal elementary schools. Using elements of ethnographic methodology including participant-observer interactions and interviews, the data were collected from two geographically and contextually disparate elementary schools in Alberta serving predominantly Cree student populations. Surface analysis of the data revealed that challenges for teachers and students fell into either environmental or academic classification and included chronic absenteeism, transiency and problems pertaining to language mastery and reading readiness. The principal benefit identified for teachers was high job satisfaction and, for students, a safe environment where basic needs are met and programming is reflective of traditional Aboriginal worldviews. Deep Analysis delved into the role of culture in the development of the student and community; implications, practical applications, and further directions for research were discussed.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction and Literature Review

Despite being the original inhabitants of our openly and actively multi-cultural Canadian society, Aboriginal people have frequently had significantly more challenges with which to contend than the average Canadian citizen or even recent immigrant. One such challenge has been education – specifically, formal schooling and the role it has played in the breakdown of Aboriginal communities. "Historically, schools have participated in devaluing [Aboriginal] languages, cultures, and traditional ways of learning and knowing" (Robinson Zanartu, 1996, p.373) and current social problems that serve only to hinder and preclude students' further progress – situations of trauma, abuse, suicide, and the cultural acceptance, especially among youth, of educational failure remain significant ways in which Aboriginal people find their culture challenged and often, in peril.

This study was designed to explore the challenges and benefits of the school experience in two rural Alberta elementary schools serving predominantly Aboriginal (specifically, Cree) student populations. In addition, the research aimed to examine the nature of the integration of traditional elements of Aboriginal culture into the school setting. The literature review will provide a detailed overview of pertinent issues in Aboriginal education including demographic information, historical perspectives, culture and worldviews, and patterns of learning in order to obtain a more thorough understanding of the

factors that mould the school experience for Aboriginal students and their teachers.

In qualitative research it is customary for the researcher to introduce his or her positioning within the research framework and relationship to the topic of study. My primary reasons for undertaking this project were essentially three-fold. Neither Aboriginal nor Caucasian, I am a male of East Indian descent and first-generation Canadian; as such, I am very interested in the concept of culture and how it inwardly and outwardly shapes and directs our lives. Second, like many Canadians, I had very little knowledge of and meaningful experience with Aboriginal peoples. I realized that there was much I could and should learn about this important and growing segment of Canadian society. Finally, having spent some months teaching overseas, I was drawn to the idea of examining the workings of the instructional process for teachers when the majority of student in the classroom are of a different culture. The basic premise of the thesis emerged from a conversation with a classmate on the role of culture in interactions in schools and gradually evolved into the present study.

Demographic Information

According to Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (2009), the term "Aboriginal peoples" is a collective name for the three distinct original peoples of North America and their descendants, each with their own unique histories, languages, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs. The Canadian constitution recognizes three groups of Aboriginal people: First Nations (commonly referred to as Indians), Métis (those of mixed Aboriginal and European ancestry) and Inuit

(the Aboriginal people of the Arctic region). Currently in Canada, there exist 615 First Nation communities, representing approximately 52 cultural groups or 'nations'. The American government recognizes 319 tribes with 120 more petitioning for recognition (Robinson-Zanartu, 1996). Alberta boasts 44 First Nations, 8 Métis settlements, and many urban Aboriginal communities, with Edmonton being home to one of the largest in the country (Alberta Education, 2005). As of 2006, four percent of the population, or more than one million people in Canada, identify themselves as an Aboriginal person. Fifty-three percent of these are registered Indians, thirty percent are Métis, eleven percent are Non-status Indians and four percent are Inuit. According to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, "from 1996 to 2001, the Aboriginal population grew by more than 22 percent while the non-Aboriginal population increased by only 3.4 percent" (Alberta Education, 2005, p.13). By 2017, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (2002) estimate that Aboriginal students will represent 25% to 50% of the entire elementary school population in several provinces and territories (in Auger, 2006).

The implications are clear; as the Aboriginal population continues to grow, schools must be equipped to provide young Aboriginal students - and their teachers - with effective, culturally sensitive, and empowering education. According to Robinson-Zanartu (1996), the infamous "cycle of failure" experienced by Aboriginal children has been perpetuated by school personnel who have not been exposed to or received appropriate training in the cultural and history of Aboriginal populations and schools, including the reasons why

mainstream educational procedures, curricula, and assessment are often

unsatisfactory. The weight of evidence of system failure indicates that to prepare

ecologically sound and culturally compatible services for Aboriginal students and

communities, we must first obtain a more thorough understanding of the

relationships between cultures and the educational experience if, as research hints,

this is indeed a critical variable.

Historical Perspectives

Unfortunately, news headlines featuring Aboriginal populations, on and

off the reservations, typically focus on alcoholism, suicide, and poor social or

educational outcomes. Many of these headlines point to an uncomfortable truth:

many Aboriginal youth living in Canada are experiencing a social and educational

crisis. Research by Perreault (2009) for Statistics Canada indicates that in Alberta,

the overall incarceration rate among Aboriginal adults aged 20 to 34 years was 9.3

times higher than that among non-Aboriginal young adults, a statistic said to be

related to education level and employment status. According to the Royal

Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996), Aboriginal peoples' living standards

have improved in the past 50 years, but they do not come close to those of non-

Aboriginal people. For example, the homes of Aboriginal people are more often

flimsy and overcrowded, and water and sanitation systems in Aboriginal

communities are more than often inadequate.The Commission also reveals that

from 1981 to 1991, only 37% of First Nations students completed high school -

compared to 65% percent of the general population – and only 9% of these

students would enter university with 3% completing their degree (Royal

Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Bazylak, 2002). Siggner and Costa (2005) found that the main reasons given by youth for leaving school early were, for males, boredom, and females, pregnancy or child care. However, they also found that recent trends indicate that the share of Aboriginals aged 25-34 years who completed postsecondary education has increased from 22 to 27 percent, though that increase has been more dramatic for females than for males (Siggner & Costa, 2005).

These statistics and the outcomes they represent do not occur in a vacuum or without precedent; the lasting effect of residential schools and their suppression of Aboriginal culture has been a critical factor in modern Aboriginal education. Residential schools refer to the period from the late 1800s until the 1960s (though many argue that it was longer, given that the last residential school did not close until 1996). During this period, the federal government

> assumed complete control over Native education and began removing children six to sixteen years old from their homes and placing them in often highly abusive residential schools, where strict military influences and the infusion of 'Christian' practices replaced the sacred ways. (Smith-Mohamed, 1998, p.245)

It is estimated that at least 100,000 residential school survivors and their families have suffered the impact of the situation, and such a high number is a rather conservative estimate given the tendency of abuse to transcend generations. Despite the Canadian government's official apologies, most Aboriginal

communities and individuals still do not have the resources, support or adequate redress for healing (Assembly of First Nations, 2002).

The residential schools were implemented for one clear purpose: the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples publically acknowledged that this objective was to extinguish First Nations culture and language (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Since then, more inquiries and investigations have come to the same conclusion but, in terms of government action, their findings have been largely ignored (Assembly of First Nations, 2002). The shame and horror of the residential school situation is difficult to understand for many Canadians. Canada's long-standing image as a (generally) neutral, peacemaker, and beacon of hope to many of its citizens is critically challenged as the government's practice of removing Aboriginal children from their homes and communities with wounding objectives very clearly violates the many treaties Canada had voluntarily subscribed to, including the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Assembly of First Nations, 2002).

The Assembly of First Nations (2002) asserts that this loss of culture and the cultural self has been linked to the exceedingly high rates of youth suicide and alienation. As the vast majority of survivors and elders did not or were not able to pass on their language and tradition out of fear of punishment, many Aboriginal youth cannot speak their language or connect to cultural knowledge or relationships. It has been predicted that only 3 out of 52 Canadian First Nation languages will survive another generation or two. Efforts and campaigns by

communities throughout Canada have attempted to bring awareness to reverse this cultural genocide but, without the financial or political support from the government, large scale change cannot come about. How, then, can schools even begin to address these issues and make formal education more inviting and beneficial to disillusioned Aboriginal students and communities? Do Aboriginal students see themselves reflected in the classroom activities or school curriculum? Are their lived experiences being validated as being important or worthwhile in the classroom context? (Blair, 2001). The current study will serve as an attempt to answer these questions.

Worldviews and Culture

All too often, educational professionals interpret incidences of student nonattendance and the lack of parental involvement as being indicative of a general cultural disregard for education. However, the Aboriginal conception of education is very much dependent on the particular band or tribe's cultural values and this 'bookless' learning is undertaken very differently from Western goal-driven conceptions of academia and success (Robinson-Zanartu, 1996). A brief overview of Aboriginal worldviews, "the set of belief systems and principles by which individuals understand and make sense of the world and their place in it" (Robinson-Zanartu, 1996, p.375) may be useful in understanding this and related phenomenon. As a basic set of human questions and musings are relevant to people in all cultures, our worldview can essentially be defined as our philosophy of life. As such, worldviews have been found to be highly correlated with a person's upbringing and life experiences (Sue & Sue, 2003).

Worldviews can differ markedly between Cree, Blackfoot, Chipewyan and other Aboriginal groups, but studies have shown that Aboriginal culture in general holds certain traits and values in esteem. According to Deloria (1991), 'white culture', the culture from which modern schooling systems stem, functions as a mixture of folklore, Judeo-Christian religious doctrine, Greek natural sciences, and the pursuit of material happiness or affluence. Aboriginal culture, in contrast, seems to be its polar opposite; largely collectivist, Aboriginal cultural teachings lean towards 'we' thinking and extended family (in Robinson-Zanartu, 1996; Ramp & Smith, 2004). Having fewer material possessions is regarded more highly than having an abundance of wealth. The earth is not seen as a beast to be tamed and conquered; rather, harmony with nature is of paramount importance. Competition, as is often manifest in assessment and learning in the classroom, is generally frowned upon. Holistic and spiritual viewpoints – that the pieces derive their meaning from the whole, rather than through exhaustive analysis of its sections - are valued more than the analytical and theoretical arguments, as studied in higher level education. Above all, however, is the belief that all aspects of life, physical as well as spiritual, are interrelated (Robinson-Zanartu, 1996; Brokenleg, 1998). Also of importance in many Aboriginal cultures is the principle of non-interference, documented by Brant (1990) and defined as attempting to not directly intervene in order to control the behaviour of another (Kanu, 2002; Pewewardy, 2002). As a result, those espousing Western thinking are easily liable to misjudge the Aboriginal perspective as lacking the mathematical and precise evaluations that are valued as necessary for success in modern society (Robinson-

Zanartu, 1996). Such an approach to learning, however, is equally valid and may provide a more pluralistic learning environment for many Aboriginal as well as non-Aboriginal students.

The aforementioned Aboriginal values are often taught in conjunction with the acquisition of traditional skills and natural resources are the primal source for gaining knowledge. Robinson-Zanartu (1996) uses the example of songs and story-telling, a popular Aboriginal tradition to explain the cultural view of learning: "at one level, they teach such building blocks of learning and thinking as cause/effect, and temporal orientation. At a deeper level, they have a holistic transcendence meant to teach deeper lessons concerning life" (p.375). These lessons in life therefore form the basis of education. However, the way that Aboriginal peoples define education seems to vary considerably from mainstream notions. Battiste and Youngblood Henderson (2000), Weber-Pillwax (2001), and Steinhauer (2002) all argue that to define Aboriginal education is not an easy task; Battiste and Youngblood Henderson's (2000) statement that a notion similar to 'culture' does not exist in Algonquin thought is perhaps indicative of how different Aboriginal worldviews are from mainstream thought (Laderoute, 2005). Ramp and Smith (2004), in studying the definitions of and motivations for education within the Pii'kani (formerly Peigan) tribe of Southern Alberta, found that the Pii'kani ideal of education was inextricably tied to the economics and politics of the local community. The wrong attitude, members shared, was to go to school and accumulate capital against the interests of others and create resentment, a path referred to by members as the "White Man's way". According

to Jackson, Smith, and Hill (2003), it seems as if it is not unusual for Aboriginal college students to feel

> somewhat uncertain about their families' and communities' acceptance of them as a college graduate or as a student or professional in a particular discipline out of fear that they will be seen as a sell-out for acculturating to the dominant culture's definition of academic and vocational success.
> (p.559-60)

The implications of this are quite significant for the classroom as well as psychoeducational assessment. Psychoeducational assessment refers to the practice of utilizing standardized testing measures and normative data comparisons to evaluate students' cognitive profiles, and has been criticized as being insensitive to cultural differences and misrepresentative of culturally diverse students' true intellectual quotient (Grant, Oka, & Baker, 2009; Sanchez-Johnson, & Cuellar, 2009). If we can better understand how Aboriginal students are socialized to learn, accommodations and interventions can be managed in a way that would be more inviting to their perceptions of success. A popular example of this discussed by Leap (1993) is how

> direct and timed question and answer sequences common in psychoeducational testing and in classroom discourse are experienced as culturally inappropriate in many Native American groups. Such questioning may elicit silence, an "I don't know" response, or a reply that may seem unrelated...all too often, the school-based interpretation labels

students as unable, unskilled, or resistant. (in Robinson-Zanartu, 1996, p.376)

Renowned researcher Susan Urmston Philips (1983), in her ethnographic study of the Warm Springs Indian Reservation community in Oregon, describes in detail the use of the auditory and visual channels of communication in socialization and learning displayed by the Aboriginal schoolchildren. Though her extensive use of participant observation, Philips recounts how the Aboriginal child is socialized differently from its very first days. Ultimately, Philips notes, it is quite apparent that our educational system works under the assumption that there exists a linear, shared developmental sequence in the preschool enculturation of young children when, in fact, that developmental sequence may be culturally diverse in ways as yet unacknowledged by curriculum developers. As a result, schools may become "highly decontextualized, discontinuous learning experiences...resulting at times in opposition or resistance to learning" (Robinson-Zanartu, 1996, p.376).

A study by Kanu (2002) aimed to recognize how an improved understanding of the influence of culture on Aboriginal students' learning could lead to more meaningful teaching, and therefore result in higher academic achievement and retention rates among Aboriginal students. An example of this is the Medicine Wheel, a distinctly Aboriginal framework for analyzing educational success, which is essentially a form of systems theory. Bazylak (2002), discussing his Medicine Wheel model for educational success, describes how the ecological centre comprises volition, or the will to succeed and it is characterized by the

unique gift each person possesses. The centre of the Medicine Wheel acts as the

bond that holds the four realms of life (mental, physical, emotional, spiritual)

together and acts as a catalyst to achieve interconnectedness. The development of

volition allows individuals to examine themselves in relation to the world. It is

worth noting as well that teachers, surrounding each of the four realms, serve as

the last crucial element completing the Medicine Wheel as a final whole. The

difficulty lies in teaching students to develop their volition (Bazylak, 2002).

However, one must keep in mind when dealing with at-risk populations that it is

likely that the courses offered and teachers hired exist more or less to improve

students' lives, rather than to transmit purely academic knowledge (Whattam,

2003; Kanu, 2002).

Patterns of Learning

A learning approach that appears to have a strong basis in Aboriginal

culture is observational learning (Kanu 2002). In contrast to Euro-American

children, who, by virtue of their upbringing and preference for linguistic

expression, are oriented towards oral communication as a vehicle for learning,

Aboriginal children have developed a learning style characterized by observation

and imitation, a method linked to preparation for adult responsibility (Kanu,

2002). This finding is significant because such learning style differences have far-

reaching consequences in the formal education of Aboriginal students,

particularly in view of the fact that the formal education system almost always

favours those who are highly verbal. In the words of one of the study's teenage

participants: "as far as school is concerned, I don't look forward to sharing my

responses" (Kanu, 2002, p.110). Pervasive classroom silence by Aboriginal students is a frequently encountered phenomenon in the literature (Alberta Education, 2005; Robinson-Zanartu, 1996; Kanu, 2002).

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) reports that the efforts of Aboriginal educators and communities are currently directed toward restoring continuity between the home culture and the school – the teaching of Aboriginal languages, the inclusion of elders and Aboriginal teachers, band-controlled schools, curriculum grounded in traditional values – and advances in this field have been noted (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Kanu, 2002). However, in directing efforts to teach students their culture through the curriculum, critics warn of past situations where too much time had been spent on traditional songs and games that students failed to leave the school with the skills needed to survive in the "real world" (Bradley, 1984). Such a contention is indeed a valid criticism and may be at the crux of the problem. According to Auger (2006), most Aboriginal communities are in support of band-controlled schools; the school's programming regarding the role of Cree language in children's education, however, has been subject to considerable community tension, and reaching consensus is often blockaded by the question 'how much culture is too much?'. Effectively balancing students' academic and non-academic programs so as to provide effective, culturally sensitive, and empowering education is likely a challenge in itself; the manner in which schools approach this conundrum is of considerable interest to the present study and will be examined in greater detail in the discussion of the research findings.

Given the nature of observational learning and its impact on real world behaviours, do Aboriginal students look to their teachers as role models? Psychologist Albert Bandura (1997), known for his extensive research on observation and learning, asserts that children and adolescents imitate the models they see around them in a cognitive process called social learning. Bandura states that vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, and support from others serve as powerful sources for fuelling one's self-efficacy expectations: "Modeling that conveys effective coping strategies can boost the self-efficacy of individuals who have undergone countless experiences confirming their personal inefficacy" (p.87). Some past research has looked at the effects of the teacher as a role model, but there is a noticeable lack of research on the subject of teacher role models with Aboriginal youth (Kanu, 2002). An inquiry by Smith-Mohamed (1998) into Aboriginal students and role models found that, aside from choosing Aboriginals when they can, Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals' views of what constitutes a good role model vary little. In educators, Aboriginals

> valued most highly a person who is willing to get involved with cultural activities, willing to learn from students, well educated, fair, accessible, who has faced similar hardships on the basis of race, colour, or creed, and who is similar in culture. (p.252)

The matter is not as simple as getting more Aboriginal teachers into schools. The confounding effects of the peer group are of considerable importance and ought to be examined in order to gain a more complete understanding of the picture. Horvat and Lewis (2003) consider this dilemma in their research on 'the

burden of acting white'. Introduced by Fordham and Ogbu (1986), the expression 'acting white' stems from African-Americans who express a disdain for formal education, as they perceive that they do not receive their fair share of returns for years of hard work in school relative to white Americans. Over time the group becomes embittered and an oppositional social identity is created, classifying certain behaviours as being characteristically 'white', and thereby causing black students to underperform. Academically striving students in hostile environments may be subject to labelling, ostracism, exclusion, physical assault, or other forms of abuse. Studies investigating the 'burden of acting white' have not yet been performed with Aboriginal populations, and it is possible that the same phenomenon does occur with Aboriginal youth and therefore needs to be examined further. With the right reinforcement, burdened students can move away from the fear of losing their racial identity, and move closer to reconceptualising academic excellence as their prerogative as well. However, as Whitesell et al. (2009) posit, the relationship might be more complex; students with a higher sense of Aboriginal identity may in fact reject 'Western' academic goals as not being consistent with or counter to traditional ways.

Current Study

To summarize, the post-colonial residue of a tumultuous history has resulted in the Aboriginal population in Canada becoming generally marginalized, of low socio-economic status, and educationally disadvantaged. Although much more research needs to be done with Aboriginal populations, in both rural and urban settings, few studies have revealed as much about the school experiences of

Aboriginal students and their teachers as the Whattam (2003) memoir and the Kanu (2002) inquiry. However, many of these studies are dated, and many have been performed with mostly American Aboriginal groups (commonly referred to as American Indians) which is significant as "each Native person needs to be understood within the context of the tribe or nation with which he or she identifies" (Robinson-Zanartu, 1996, p.373). Indeed, there is considerable value and much to be learnt from the theoretical perspectives and data offered by these studies; yet, one is left with many assumptions, figures, numbers, and most importantly, questions. Taking into account the literature reviewed to date, the current study examines and explores the school experience for teachers and students at two Cree Nation rural elementary schools in Alberta, using elements of the ethnographic model. The principal research questions are:

1) What is it like to be a teacher at a rural elementary school in an Aboriginal community? What challenges do these educators face? What rewards does the work offer them?

2) What is it like to be a student at a rural elementary school in an Aboriginal community? What challenges do students face? What are the benefits available to them?

3) How do culture and the classroom intersect? Are the concerns expressed in the literature regarding instruction, learning, and culture at work in the classrooms here?

According Bandura (1997), "schools have a vital role to play in promoting the health of a nation; they are the only place where all children can be easily reached

regardless of their age, socioeconomic status, cultural background, or ethnicity"

(p.176). Given the growing interest in Aboriginal education and the expanding

school-age population, there is a considerable lack of research conducted at the

elementary level. Additionally, much of the current literature relating to

Aboriginal education has been performed in the United States with American

Indians; although there are overlapping demographic and cultural factors,

generalizations to other First Nations groups cannot be assumed.

The purpose of this study is not to point fingers, cast judgement, or even

propose to hold the solutions to the pervasive and difficult issues surrounding

Aboriginal education. This study has been designed to provide insight into the

classroom happenings, challenges and strategies employed on two modern, rural,

Aboriginal elementary schools through the eyes of its primary stakeholders: its

teachers and students. The results of this study will provide a better understanding

of the concerns of staff and students, an understanding which can be potentially

beneficial in planning effective interventions. Additionally, as a non-Aboriginal

and non-Caucasian individual, I believe that learning more about current and

traditional Aboriginal methods of education and strategies can present a great

opportunity to implement a more pluralistic learning environment for Aboriginal

as well non-Aboriginal students.

In order to answer these questions, this research proposes to enter the field

of study, two elementary schools serving predominantly Aboriginal student

populations, and examine the dynamics of the school experiences for students and

teachers from the inside out. That is to say, to become part of the school

community as a participant-observer to obtain a first-hand understanding of the

phenomena in order to gather data and postulate hypothetical or abstract theories

that, I hope, accurately reflect the reality underlying the experiences shared by the

study's informants.

CHAPTER 2

Methodology

Setting

Two rural elementary schools in Alberta served as units of study. The first, Cedar Ridge Community Elementary School (a pseudonym) is a Kindergarten to Grade 6 public school situated at the edge of a quiet farming community in Northern Alberta. The school staff estimates the town's population to be no more than 150 to 200 people. The community consists of just a few rows of dilapidated houses, a general store or two, a gas station, and the school complex, which is combined with a library and the school's independently run secondary department. The school building itself, its design indicative of past architectural trends, is somewhat aged but is maintained well. The Cedar Ridge community is a fair distance away from its exit off the main highway and, as such, is an isolated, uneventful place. The closest township is a largely French-speaking town with an estimated population of approximately 5,000 people (Statistics Canada, 2006), referred to by many students in the school as "the city". Also within 30 minutes driving distance are two Cree Nation reservations, each with their own uniquely constructed band-run schools, approximately equidistant to Cedar Ridge Community Elementary School. The reserves welcome their visitors proudly with iconic landmarks and cultural emblems as the pot-holed dusty road points forward, further and further into the heart of the settlement. Official signs reading slogans like "Children Deserve Addiction-Free Parents and a Healthy Community" can be spotted near the reservations' small centre of activity, away

from the tranquility surrounding the spaced-apart monochromatic bungalow houses and accompanying green foliage. Many students' families are said to be employed by the reserve's administration in the maintenance of community projects and buildings like a water treatment facility. The combined population of the two reserves is said to be 7,000. Given the proximity of the two reserves and a nearby Métis settlement, Cedar Ridge Community Elementary School's population is 95% Aboriginal.

The second site, Blue Skies Elementary School (also a pseudonym), is located on a reservation in Central Alberta, situated less than an hour's drive between a few major urban centres. As such, the community and its members are in relatively frequent contact with mainstream society. The school itself is a band-run facility on the reserve's education complex, which includes a Primary School offering Kindergarten to Grade 2, the Elementary School offering Grades 3-6 and the band's Education Administration building. The elementary school is a relatively new, attractive facility with a grand, high ceilinged roof and very generous and open use of interior space. From above, the building is said to resemble the shape of an eagle. Situated just outside the school is a small playground that the neighbourhood children cite as a favourite place to congregate after hours. A newly opened Royal Canadian Mounted Police outpost, decorated in Aboriginal lettering and images, is also on site. A secondary school is situated considerably further away.

This described educational complex is two kilometres down the central road from the town centre area which features community buildings like a Bingo

hall, daycare centre, athletic facility, and an administration building. The town

area seems to form the commercial hub of the four separate reserves on site, and

there is often a small degree of activity in this space, given the area population of

approximately 3,000 people. Unemployment is said to be quite high in the

community. There are many houses crowded around this area in a few residential

lots, many of which appear to be poorly constructed or in damaged condition.

Graffiti and vandalism on houses and property is apparent and widespread around

the area and many windows are boarded with planks of wood. There are also

many small-sized and bungalow houses built on land plots the size of a playing

field separated from one another outside the town area. It is in this more tranquil

surrounding that we find the schools.

As the data were collected predominantly during the months of May and

June, the school year was approaching its closure for the summer and all of the

behaviours that tend to accompany it. Some teachers were preparing their classes

to write provincial achievement tests, but all were engulfed in readying their

students for year-end evaluations. Students were looking forward to their year-end

field trips and upcoming summer vacation with increasing fervour. For teachers

and students, especially those in their final year of elementary schooling, it was a

period of mixed feelings.

Materials

A research design based on the ethnographic model was enlisted for the

study. As a branch of qualitative research, ethnography is a deliberate

investigative and scientific approach to learning about the social and cultural life

of communities, institutions and other settings that uses the researcher as the primary tool of data collection. Ethnography emphasizes and builds on the perspectives of the people in the research setting (Le Compte & Schensul, 1999). "Much like naturalists, ethnographic researchers learn through systematic observation in the field by interviewing and carefully recording what they see and hear, as well as how things are done, while learning the meanings that people attribute to what they make and do" (Le Compte, & Schensul, 1999, p.2). Therefore, the data collected and conclusions derived will attempt to accurately reconstruct the school experience for students and teachers through the researcher's investigative analysis in the field. Information was also collected through interview dialogue with teachers and teaching assistants, often identified in the research findings simply as informants or sources. Students, although a focus of the research and equally subject to observational methods of data collection, did not serve as informants as they were not interviewed as their teachers were. Data gleaned from comments and conversations with students, however, was included in the research findings albeit in a more collective capacity.

As the researcher's eyes and ears are central to the data collection process, I was sure to be well-rested and attentive to my surroundings. A notebook for recording observations was the primary means of storing information while in the field. The notebook was present at all times and was inconspicuous enough to not interrupt or interfere with the flow of events of information provided by informants and observations. A tape recorder was also on hand but was not ideal

in the event that it becomes intrusive and compromises the data collection. To establish trust, maintain the level of naturalistic observation and ensure comfort in interactions with students and staff, a research notebook was decided to be the best option.

To facilitate dialogue with students and keep conversations on track, a set of semi-structured 'discussion guidelines' was devised and implemented (see Appendix A). For teachers, a set of semi-structured interview questions was enlisted (see Appendix B). These guidelines were devised by the researcher to steer and direct dialogue toward the research questions on the challenges and benefits of the school experience, but were also general enough to leave themselves open to related, valuable information informants may have to share. Past research has highlighted incidences of how research has tried to impose a biased model on the sample, to much avail. To illustrate with an example, a study by Ramp and Smith (2004) sought to address two basic but often overlooked questions from an indigenous point of view: the definition and characteristics of an 'educated person', and the meaning of education itself according to members of the surveyed Pii'kani (formerly Peigan) tribe of Southern Alberta. The authors found that:

> Despite a series of initial interviews used to formulate appropriate
> questions, the responses we were getting to the questionnaires seemed to
> indicate that our respondents wished to steer us toward broad concerns not
> always addressed in the questionnaires...a need to listen or hear carefully
> what was already there. In short, the sense was less that we were being

presented with information than that we were being called to pay attention to voices and ways of voicing. (p.69)

As this quote suggests, a study using elements of the ethnographic model may prove to be useful for investigative, qualitative research. This study titled as 'using elements of the ethnographic research design' rather than as a pure ethnography because it is common for ethnographers to spend even years immersed in the field studying the region and attempting to accurately reconstruct the reality of the participants. Given the scope and short-term limitations of this study, a traditional ethnography was substituted in favour of a more basic study using elements of ethnography: in other words, a brief study performed on a smaller scale but guided by the same ethnographic principles.

Procedure

Although ethnography falls under the general umbrella of qualitative research, the defining characteristic of ethnography is that is it is rooted in culture. Through bottom-up inductive thinking generalized from the concrete to the abstract, the ethnographer's task is to build theories of cultures and explanations of how people think, believe, and behave. These theories and explanations paint a picture, narrative, or theory of local culture that produces hunches, guesses, and hypotheses that can be applied to the same situation or to other similar situations using the same research methods and data collection techniques (LeCompte, & Schensul, 1999). As an applied science, ethnographic research is problem oriented, seeking to address specific issues or problems in a community context or 'field of study' where the researcher enters as an invited guest to learn what is

going on. Thus an ethnographic field situation is unlike clinic or laboratory based experimental research where most aspects of the environment are controlled (LeCompte, & Schensul, 1999). Given the specific nature of the research and its intention to uncover and describe the complex layers of an established educational institution, an ethnographic approach was ideal for the purposes of the study.

In the case of this study, the influence of two separate cultures has to be considered in the collection of data as well as interpretation of findings. In examining the elements and effects of Aboriginal culture in the school experiences of students and teachers, there is also school culture entrenched in the everyday run of things in schools that is often taken for granted. As such, school ethnography enables us to study our unit of analysis, an institution of schooling, which involves only some members of society, some hours of each day, some days each year (Erickson, 1984). It is also important to keep in mind that "most of what happens inside the school is somehow related to what happens outside it, but some of these relationships are stronger than others" (Erickson, 1984, p.8). Using ethnography's mission of making the familiar strange will enable the researcher to see if and how school culture interplays with Aboriginal culture in the field setting.

Approaching the subject of working with Aboriginal peoples requires specific ethical concerns, as described by the Tri-Council Policy, to ensure that the research conducted would be respectful to Aboriginal people (Auger, 2006). These concerns were addressed and approved by the University of Alberta's research and ethics board. Once ethical clearance had been granted, the principals

of two rural elementary schools were contacted and presented with an outline of the intended research. The two schools were chosen due to the fact that they both boasted almost entirely Aboriginal student populations and had worked in conjunction with the University of Alberta on previous occasions. Both principals, after consulting with district superintendants, were happy to allow the research to take place. At each school, one third, fifth, and sixth grade class was studied. Grade levels were selected for the study as to feature at least one primary level and one junior level elementary sample. The particular classrooms were selected from a convenience sample. Results, therefore, are based primarily on data collected from these samples. A total of approximately 48 hours in the field was accumulated through six 8-hour days (8:15am to 4:15pm), three days at Cedar Ridge, and three at Blue Skies.

In the field of study, a participant-observer stance was assumed. As an outsider or "Other" (as a figure in the school, as well as culturally, vis à vis the students), I attempted to remain relatively inconspicuous as an observer. Although the initial novelty of having a 'visitor' to the school and classroom may have initially prevented students from behaving exactly as they would in the day to day run of things, it seemed apparent that neutrality had been eventually reached by the end of the first day. Given the importance in Aboriginal culture attached to establishing relationships and the need to build trust and rapport in ethnography, I felt it was important to partake in some classroom and school activities, but only when invited to do so. During lessons, remaining invisible was vital. In this respect, a fair balance between 'participant' and 'observer' was met during the

course of the field work. As participant-observer, the primary strategies employed

were:

a) Classroom observations of teaching strategies, curriculum materials,

student-student interactions, teacher-student interactions, and student-

researcher interactions.

b) Open-ended exploratory 'research conversations' with teachers and

students to explore and identify new domains and break down those

domains into factors. These conversations also served to obtain additional

orienting information about the context and history of the study site

(LeCompt & Schensul, 1999). For students, research conversations were

guided by general questions and prompts ("If I were to start teaching here,

what advice would you give me?") as well as by the general flow of

conversation and the information relevant to the scope of the study that

passed (see Appendix A). For teachers, the research conversations were

mostly guided by a set of pre-determined interview questions ("What is it

like to be part of the community here?"), but also, as with students, the

flow of information relevant to the study that passed (see Appendix B).

Utilizing the more casual approach of a conversation helped to prevent any

strain, discomfort, or suspicion arising from a more formal atmosphere, a

concern more clearly directed towards students. The information was

transcribed into a notebook and students and teachers denoted their

informed consent verbally.

c) Electronic personal correspondence (e-mail) with teachers was used post-data collection to clarify ambiguous or incomplete data.

The same procedure was applied in both contexts after the field work was terminated. Data were subsequently analyzed as follows: the raw data, or field notes, were transcribed electronically and expanded to recreate a more detailed recollection of the observations cited for analysis and future reference. Next, statements, fragments, and sketches from the expanded field notes were cut and sorted by topic and pasted onto colour-coded sheets of paper, with each colour representing a category of data (i.e. challenges for students, culture in the classroom, etc). Extensive periods of reflection were employed to further codify and categorize the data collected at each school into specific compartments (i.e. transiency, use of assistive technology, etc). The purpose of such an exercise was to provide a visual representation of the underlying factors at work in the school experience (Auger, 2006). The patterns and resulting framework that emerged from the codified data were compared and examined for consistency and validity before being summed into the combined, generalized findings presented here.

Findings were divided into Surface Analysis and Deep Analysis, a classification used by Jackson, Smith, and Hill (2003) in their study of academic persistence among Native American college students. The terms Surface Analysis and Deep Analysis are indicative of the degree to which these elements were embedded into the data and the field of study. Surface Analysis themes are representative of the 'raw' data collected and encapsulate the responses offered by informants as well as the direct observations made by the researcher in the field of

study. Deep Analysis themes, in contrast, are representative of the more abstract and hypothetical underpinnings of the conclusions derived from the Surface Analysis. In the Deep Analysis process, the literature was revisited and reinterpreted in light of the field experience as findings were explored further in an attempt to produce an accurate reconstruction of the cultural element of the school experience.

CHAPTER 3

Analysis and Findings

The Surface Analysis findings from the data collection were examined first. These results are presented in an order reflective of the study's research questions. The first two questions, pertaining to the challenges and benefits of the contextual, instructional and cultural aspects of the school experiences of teachers and students, form the Surface Analysis section and were attended to first in order to provide a basis for further exploration of the related issues. Examination of these issues in light of the 'larger picture' followed in the Deep Analysis section.

Frequency of responses and observations led to an initial pattern of results emerging towards the end of the first data collection period at Cedar Ridge Elementary. Once arranged, it was tempting to try to apply and to impose a premature model on the incoming data from Blue Skies Elementary, but I decided to continue with the same approach and begin again *tabula rasa.* The pattern that eventually emerged bore a stark similarity to the previous one. Comparing the initial raw data from the two schools, it was interesting to find that essentially the same domains were present, although some aspects were expressed more strongly than others in one site than another. Such an outcome serves to attest to the reliability of the results, and is reflective of the potential to generalize findings. Still, however, assumptions should not be freely made.

Surface Analysis

The challenges of the school experience for teachers and students were divided into two primary domains: environmental and academic (see Table 1).

The term 'environmental' referred here to challenges stemming from outside of the school zone that are not part of the realm of traditional school activities but may be expressed during school sanctioned events such as recess or in assessment. An example of an environmental challenge was a situation described by an informant about a fourth grade boy finding a bag of marijuana on the school bus. Initially, teachers referred to such occurrences and problems vaguely as "outside forces" and did not disclose much information; as time went on and the level of rapport grew, informants were more verbal about the concerns they had regarding the home lives of their students, many of whom did not always "come to school ready to learn, well fed and well-rested."

The second domain of challenges for teachers and students was labelled 'academic' due to the fact that the challenges in this domain centered around the acquisition and development of life and learning skills traditionally designated to schools. The term 'academic' also referred to the underlying yet active role of pedagogy, educational psychology, and the principals of learning in an applied setting such as an elementary school. An example of an academic challenge was a school's implementation of special needs programming and modified curriculum and/or instruction. Challenges for teachers and students falling within the academic domain will be discussed at length following the examination of environmental domain challenges. In both domains however, a satisfactory level of data saturation via frequency of responses and observations was achieved, indicative of the study's reliability.

Although the two domains and the two factors, student and teacher, were dissected to allow for more thorough investigation, it is important to recognize that these concepts, environmental and academic as well as teacher and student, are very much interrelated. Although the outside environment was separate and distinct from that of the school, what happens in one realm can clearly affect what happens in the other. The importance and influence of the greater society on the individual and his or her education cannot be overlooked; for example, the Ecological Theory of Development, proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), takes into consideration contextual factors from the neighbourhood to mass media to the attitudes and ideologies of the dominant culture, as individuals live their lives enmeshed in various spheres (Kaplan 2002). An ecological model is without a doubt complex and difficult to capture in research, but it is important to understand how these systems permeate their layers to affect the individual and specifically, his or her development and education. In addition, the concept of the student is defined by that of the teacher and vice versa. Therefore, in the school, the challenges of the student were often echoed in the challenges of the teacher albeit from a different perspective. Thus, it is important to consider in interpreting these results that the challenges identified were not the exclusive concern of one group but that there was a liberal degree of interrelatedness.

Teachers' Environmental Challenges

The three primary concerns of teachers from the environmental domain were: the aforementioned "outside forces", chronic absenteeism - term lifted from Whitesell et al. (2009), and transiency. As I was new to the world of Aboriginal

education, teachers were quick to inform me that it was very different from the public system. One informant estimated that as many as 80 to 90 percent of students come from "broken homes" where parents have had negative educational experiences and do not understand how the education system works. Another source told that only 3% of students in her class live with both parents. A special education teacher, in describing the school environment, revealed that some parents cannot read beyond a grade 2 or 3 level. "Nothing", she insisted, "can be taken for granted."

Outside forces. At the community level, there were additional stressors that affected the school experience for teachers. A lack of structure was mentioned a number of times, most notably by a third grade teacher: "The problem with the community is that when kids go to their houses, there is no routine. They come from houses that are absolutely chaotic. School is not always supported at home." Of course, it would not be accurate to assume that all children face similar problems at home; however, informants felt it was a significantly large problem to state as a starting point. Suicides were also mentioned at both schools as being a major community stressor. Given the close and often familial nature of the communities, suicides and suicide attempts were seen to send repeated messages of hopelessness and despair. Having fifth and sixth grade students engage in "cutting", a form of self-inflicted injurious behaviour involving sharp objects, I was informed, was not unusual.

In recent years, the reservation community around one of the schools has received considerable media attention due to its increasing reputation for crime

and gang activity. Even at the elementary school level, this was a very real concern for teachers. Gangs, an informant explained, offer belonging, respect, and power; some students at the school had been known to act as "runners" to make quick money and this was a major problem for the school, particularly in the summer months when there are no classes or structured activities. Students with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, with their friendly disposition and susceptibility to manipulation and praise, have also been known to be particularly attractive to gangs who use them as 'hit men'. Acts of vandalism toward the school have also been taking their toll; during the Christmas break, a case of arson damaged the building and set back schooling by a few months. A rather poignant example from my own observation involved a third grade class lesson on creating paragraphs, with children brainstorming the good and bad things about their community. The list of good things included: powwows, the pinball machine, police, and the local convenience store. The list of bad things included: shootings, stabbings, dying, drugs, fighting, and bad guys. At this point, I would like to mention that it is not my intention to perpetuate the already negative image the community has endured, but rather to share the concerns of the teachers whose students were faced with such threatening environmental challenges.

Chronic absenteeism. Chronic absenteeism proved to be the second major environmental challenge. Despite being a commonly expressed concern of teachers at both schools, chronic absenteeism was a phenomenon that had received little to no attention in the literature. Almost all informants cited poor attendance among students, with one teacher citing as many as 39 days missed on

average in his class this year, the equivalent of two months of school; as another

teacher put it: "Instead of having 10 months to teach, we have 8". Attendance on

Fridays was particularly problematic, a source revealed. In my visits to the school,

I met students who were not present in class the last time or were absent the

following visit. In terms of collecting data, this made establishing relationships

with students much more difficult if they were not regular in attendance.

None of the teachers could offer a definite reason why student attendance

was plagued by absenteeism, but a few suggested that taking care of younger

siblings was common, especially among fifth and sixth grade children. Sometimes

students miss the school bus or do not wish to come to school and are not

pressured into coming as parents believe that the children are old enough to make

their own decisions, a fifth grade teacher recounted. This finding was consistent

with the cultural value of non-interference described in the literature review

(Kanu, 2002; Robinson-Zanartu, 1996) although, according to informants, non-

interference and "Native pride" were often misplaced as many parents were

intimidated by the school.

The intermingling of school and culture in explaining chronic absenteeism

may have root in the residential schools legacy. Both Cedar Ridge, Blue Skies,

and their respective reservation communities have endured the lingering after-

effects of residential school activity within the area in the past. As a result, the

underlying issue of trust in the collective mentality of the larger community may

have been a factor attributing to the apprehension surrounding schools. At Cedar

Ridge, a residential school was operating from the 1930s until it closed in the

1960s; today, students, staff, and community members participate in an annual Walk to commemorate the survivors of the school and raise awareness of the issue. Interestingly, in 1971, the band took control over the former facility and transformed it into a well-established First Nations college which continues to serve the community and surrounding area. On the Blue Skies reservation grounds, a residential school was operating from 1916 to 1973.

Not everyone endorsed the view that residential schools were to be held accountable for chronic absenteeism. In the words of a third grade teacher:

They say that the absences are because of the residential schools, but almost none of these kids' parents have been in a residential school, or sometimes grandparents. The kids run the house...the parents think the school should provide for everything.

One school rewarded perfect attendance by posting star students' pictures on an attractively decorated wall in the hallway, and many teachers delivered deliberate praise for attendance in adverse weather conditions. Some teachers have undertaken especially creative measures to help remedy the situation; offering cookies on Fridays for perfect attendance was, not surprisingly, a popular strategy with students.

Transiency. The final teacher challenge in the environmental domain was transiency. Transiency was considered as distinct from absenteeism as transiency refers to frequent relocation, in this case, to new schools. Many students at Cedar Ridge left the school to move to other schools or to Edmonton only to return again, sometimes within the same school year. A sixth grade teacher revealed that

in his five years at the school, he had lost 10 students to transiency; this year alone he has lost three. His newest student, he divulged, had only been in his class for three weeks at the end of April. When students come and go within the span of the September to June school year, academic achievement was seen to suffer. As an informant shared, children's progress was meticulously tracked and within-year transiency seemed to impact their development negatively. In some cases, students began a new year of school with a lower test-derived grade-level starting point than they had at the beginning of the last school year. Most children who did leave the school found it very difficult, likely attributable to the close community atmosphere of the schools.

In studying the academic school performance of on-reserve Aboriginal students, Gordon Breen (2003) touched upon the subject of transiency and noted that some motivations for moving or changing schools may be to avoid school responsibilities, attendance problems, or disciplinary consequences. Breen also discussed in his thesis the subject of relocation from reserve schools to public schools, citing community parents' perception of their children's potential academic achievement. The study revealed that Aboriginal students who spent a significant duration of time enrolled in urban public schools were found to posses an academic advantage over their classmates when returning to the reservation school. That the mainstream, urban school environment is not governed by a band or council seems to signify to parents that less class time is spent on specialized Aboriginal subject matter and activities and more is invested in the dominant culture's vision of higher education. One of the study's Aboriginal participants

discussing the reservation school was quoted as saying: "How many kids do you see in the last ten years going to university from this system?" (p.72). This irate participant's feelings of frustration may be shared by community parents at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies who choose to remove their children from their current educational institution.

Robinson-Zanartu (1996) also referred to the 'threat' of special education and how schools' pushing services may intimidate, overwhelm, or offend some parents who would rather remove their children from the school than agree to special education programming or services. Interestingly, research by Locust (1988) reveals that most traditional Aboriginal languages do not have words for retardation, disability, or handicapping conditions (Robinson-Zanartu, 1996). The link between transiency and the provision of special education services in Aboriginal populations is a topic that would benefit greatly from future research.

Students' Environmental Challenges

Collecting data from students about their environmental challenges proved to be the most difficult information to procure. Despite most students' amicable disposition and general curiosity towards having a new person on campus, specific examples of environmental challenges voiced by students were almost nonexistent. However, it was not the aim of this study or within its ethical scope to probe deeply into these issues, especially through the students themselves. Given the potential for the release of particularly sensitive information involving minors, it is not altogether surprising that teachers were reluctant to discuss specific incidents or scenarios. Data pertaining to students' environmental

challenges was primarily collected though research conversations with teachers, naturalistic observation of people and places in the field setting, and inductive and deductive reasoning drawn from artefacts in the field. An example of one such item was a teacher's certificate of competency in Aboriginal student counselling detailing participants' familiarity with specific stressors like the prevalence of physical and sexual abuse in First Nation communities, Native patterns of drinking, etcetera. The main categories of student environmental challenge were regarding students' physical needs, emotional needs, and a shortage of role models.

Students' physical needs. The first category of student environmental challenge was the fact that students' physical needs were not always met. Once again, one cannot and should not assume that all students at the schools surveyed would, by association, suffer from some deprivation of physical health; the data collected and the conclusions derived instead suggest that this seemed to be the case for what the school deemed to be a significant portion of the student body at both field locations. An example of this was the school-run breakfast program. Offered at the classroom level in both schools, the breakfast program endeavoured to provide all children with the opportunity to eat their fill before and during the school day. This service was provided by the parent council and was free of charge for students. Children often had the choice of cereal, toast, milk, and related nutritional goods and classrooms were supplied with plastic bowls, cups, and microwaves. Most children did make use of the food offered and appeared to be quite comfortable using the service. Another informant, a teaching assistant in

an early elementary classroom not surveyed, revealed that she had to prepare meals regularly for one third of her first grade students. Simply put, she related, "Some kids get a good breakfast at home, some kids don't, so the parent council provides this through the school for the kids". It is perhaps worthwhile to note that there was an empty ice cream bucket nearby serving as a donation jar, filled with coins that students provided to help run the program. Such an example was an illustration of the strong sense of community inherent in the school and the benefits it drew from this strength. In inquiring about the adolescent student population, I was informed that the secondary school does not yet offer a breakfast program, but that one was in development.

Just as the benefits of a nutritious breakfast have been demonstrated by science, the benefits of a good night's sleep have also been known to increase growing children's overall performance and promote good health (Dahl, 1996). At Blue Skies Elementary School, it was observed that about one quarter to one third of the children in the classrooms studied regularly demonstrated behaviours indicative of a clear lack of sleep. Behaviours ranged from frequent deep yawning to a general state of crankiness to repeatedly drifting asleep in class, intentionally or otherwise. Students in Cedar Ridge displayed almost negligible levels of fatigue during school hours. The difference could be attributable partly to an atmosphere of constant stressors that typically accompanies neighbourhood crime (Sadeh, 1996), a more prominent problem around the Blue Skies communities than at Cedar Ridge. The difference observed could also have been a particular feature more or less unique to a classroom's composition of students, the teacher's

instructional style, or simply fatigue arising from the final few weeks of the

school year, the period during which data collection at Blue Skies Elementary

took place.

At both school sites, services and programs pertaining to personal hygiene

were in use and available for those who may need them. An informant at Cedar

Ridge detailed the use of the school's health programming facilities and the onsite

management of chronic lice. At Blue Skies, a small-scale dental office was

situated inside the school building; a local dental hygienist was said to visit

regularly to offer check-ups and cleaning for students requiring an examination.

One could assess, from the provision of such services, that the school and its staff

were almost obligated to care for some students' well-being outside of the

traditional realm of the student/ teacher relationship, and thereby the role of the

school to the student may take on a larger or perhaps different meaning than a

"normal" school might. In the words of an informant, "You have to be prepared to

give one hundred and ten percent everyday". It is also perhaps useful to note how

the weaving of cultural values into preventative health measures, for example,

served this purpose. An example of this melding was a poster rallying students

against tobacco abuse under the slogan: "Tobacco is sacred – let's keep it that

way."

Students' emotional needs. In addition to students physical needs are their

emotional needs and evidence from the research seemed to suggest that a second

major category of student environmental challenges was that students' emotional

needs were not always met. Given environmental stressors – of which poverty

may be included – tending to students' emotional wellbeing was often a challenge. When asked about students' biggest challenges, a sixth grade teaching assistant stated that the difficult home lives of many students weighed heavily on the children, especially at a young age. A relationship sometimes develops in which the teacher assumes the role of confidante. As she emotively imparted: "sometimes it's just getting through the day without feeling sad." An example from Cedar Ridge Elementary was the school's Life Coach who, in addition to counselling, organized clubs for boys and girls, grief and loss groups, and assistance in dealing with bullying, awareness of which was plastered around the school's walls.

The regular daily routine of school life may clash with students' sometimes moody and unpredictable behaviour, but teachers were quite aware of underlying issues and took steps to help alleviate their students' environmental, emotional concerns. Smudging, a Cree and Aboriginal tradition of spiritual absolution was a popular example. At Blue Skies, sweet grass, sage, and other smudging materials were kept in classrooms and were often used before discussing sensitive issues. The teacher would say a prayer and proceed to pass the burning incense from the smudge around the classroom for students to take in. The result, I was informed, was often a soothing and reflective experience for the student. The sharing circle was also a traditional practice that served to unburden students' heavy emotions; in a sixth grade class at Cedar Ridge, sharing circles are performed on Mondays, an idea inspired by a student teacher from the nearby reservation. Students and teachers participate and can express whatever they are

feeling confidentially and without consequence. The experience was said to be very beneficial as "almost all the students open up and they all really look forward to it". Perhaps then, it would not be inaccurate to deduce that the school functions almost like a security blanket for many. In the words of an informant: "they are safe here, someone loves them."

A shortage of role models. A pervasive theme in the data collection period was concerned with role models, or the apparent lack thereof, to quote an informant. Teachers interviewed found that students usually regarded parents and elders as role models. Often, a family member who attended college is mentioned and some students were keen to point out the graduation photos of their parents in the building. In many classrooms at Blue Skies, inspirational and motivational posters featuring a variety of Aboriginal individuals from various backgrounds can be seen; often featuring was a short text introduction to the individual followed by large print words "a role model". A fifth grade classroom at Blue Skies also prominently displayed a series of books on historical figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela whose messages the teacher hoped to impart with the children.

The teaching staff and the student body's perception of the teaching staff as role models should also be examined. At Cedar Ridge, the teaching staff was composed almost entirely of young to middle-aged Caucasian woman and men; at Blue Skies, the teaching staff was predominantly Aboriginal women and men, young and old. Although there was no perceived or reported significant difference in roles or levels of comfort and efficacy in reaching students at Cedar Ridge,

students at Blue Skies tended to be more open to displays of affection towards

their instructors, females though hugs and males with words. The relationship was

certainly reciprocal as teachers, particularly females, frequently referred to their

students as their children and loved ones. Given the more expansive roles adopted

by teachers in these two schools, it was not altogether surprising to find that the

bond was more akin to that of a caregiver than instructor. The fact that the

majority of staff at Blue Skies was representative of the student body is a possible

reason for the bond; according to a sixth grade teacher, a man of Dene rather than

Cree descent, the issue of standpoint is important because as an Aboriginal

teacher he is able to teach from a unique perspective based on shared experience

that resonates with students. Essentially, in the words of a Cree teacher, "they see

themselves in you...you model a way out" and that seemed to be the difference.

That this particular teacher, as with others at Blue Skies, had returned to the

reservation to offer services in lieu of pursuing employment at a school elsewhere

was consistent with the theory presented by Ramp and Smith (2004) on the

centrality of the community in education, as discussed in the literature review.

Teachers' Academic Challenges

As previously described, the second domain of challenges for teachers

and students was labelled 'academic' due to the fact that the challenges in this

domain centered around the acquisition and development of life and learning

skills traditionally designated to schools. An example of an academic challenge

was a school's implementation of special needs programming and modified

curriculum and/or instruction. As suggested by an informant, "most students are a

year or two behind grade level in this department...and there are a lot of variables behind that", she added solemnly, in a manner as to indicate that this was understood to be a sensitive topic. In contrast to the data from the environmental domain, much of the data were collected through direct observation as well as through research-led dialogue. Environmental concerns, as defined by the research, have root outside of the school zone and therefore outside of the field of study. As a result, environmental challenges were difficult to observe directly. With academic challenges, teachers were quite happy to discuss intervention strategies and oftentimes classroom observations lent well to studying student strengths and weaknesses and remediation measures. Teachers' major academic challenges were: language mastery, specialized programming, and assessment and evaluation.

Language mastery. The primary academic challenge for teachers at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies was found to be students' basic mastery of language skills. Mastery of language refers to establishing a level of ease and comfort with correct oral and written expression of the English language and includes the ability to manage fluent, grade-appropriate reading. Although many students were familiar with the linguistic components of a second tongue (in this case, Cree), English, an informant explained, was the main language used by students, teachers, and parents, albeit with Cree intonation. Regarding oral expression, a non-Aboriginal participant from the Breen (2003) study commented on the subject of the language barrier:

It's not that they speak Cree; it's that they've learnt the language from

people whose first language was Cree, so they get a lot of their past tenses

wrong, things like that. You can see the grammatical errors even as they

speak (p.65).

Establishing basic mastery of language particularly in reading readiness

was regarded by teachers at various grade levels as being of critical importance

and focus. A fourth grade teacher at Cedar Ridge, in explaining the breadth of the

issue ("That's our world") detailed the school's computer labs and accelerated

language-learning software; the school's reading specialist discussed reading pull-

out programs, the goal of which was primarily to boost reading comprehension, a

general weakness that had been identified and targeted for improvement. Each

pull-out group was quite small, usually composed only of four or five students

thus allowing for more individual attention.

Aside from reading comprehension, building vocabulary was a second

goal of the pull-out program. Most students did not possess an expansive

vocabulary, which one informant suggested may be attributable to smaller 'world

views', as many children had not travelled very far or been exposed to many

different environments. Lack of pre-school exposure to literacy was also another

popular hypothesis. Teachers also made mention of the fact that many students do

not have ready access to reading materials outside of the school: "you tell them to

get 20 minutes of reading done at home everyday and they'll tell you they have no

books at home." As such, remedial measures were undertaken to provide plenty of

reading time during school hours. At Blue Skies, fifth grade students have a

mandatory 20 minute reading period in the morning after school begins but before classes start, and another 20 minute silent reading period after the lunch recess. Language Arts class and novel study, using non-specific grade level books, were in addition to these silent reading periods.

In order to further aid students in grasping language mastery, most classrooms – especially at the grade three levels – were overwhelmingly dominated by literacy materials such as homonym charts, large print alphabet banners, expansive "word walls", books of all shapes and sizes, grammatical rules, and clear labelling of common classroom items to build vocabulary. Impromptu class lessons in pronunciation and even basic spelling were all part of the Balanced Literacy program employed at Blue Skies, where the focus is on total integration of elements of literacy into all areas of the curriculum. The Balanced Literacy program also included guided reading exercises, a strategy often used with high-risk learners. Making use of phonics had also been found to be useful.

Specialized programming. An emphasis on special and modified programming was found to be the second major category of academic teacher challenge, and can be seen as another attempt to provide for students needs. Ease in accessing information – cognitive or otherwise – was often manifested in the amount of visuals, charts and related aides. During math class, for instance, students had multiplication tables and number theory place-value charts taped to desks; however, not all students remembered to make ready use of these materials. At Cedar Ridge, most classes at the elementary level made use of

teaching assistants; this added resource was said to be attributable to the special needs funding the school receives due to the amount of children coded by Alberta Education as having learning disabilities, frequently receptive and expressive language delays. At Blue Skies, an informant revealed that the school also receives funding from the federal government but to a lesser degree than do public schools.

Inclusive education, the practice of including both special needs and regular students in a single classroom was practiced to a degree at Blue Skies, but much more so at Cedar Ridge. At Blue Skies, high-risk students, students with more pervasive Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder for example, had their own classroom. As a result, repetition and reinforcement of concepts was quite a regular occurrence and did seem to be beneficial to students. Classroom observations suggested and informants asserted that patience was essential. Such procedures detracted from planned class time and as such could be quite challenging for teachers. For teachers, being flexible and having a background in identifying and instructing students with learning disabilities were useful here.

When viewed from a distance, the notion of literacy becomes inextricably linked with struggle. Laderoute (2005), in her work interpreting Cree children's experiences of literacy, explains that because literacy is used as a measuring tool in many societies, the definition of literacy as the recognition of patterns of symbols in rows is often favoured over literacy expressions of other cultures. That is not to say that reading and writing are not important to the growth of the individual and community; the expression of alternatively derived cognitive and

conceptual skills should be incorporated into the collective mindset, a point of view mirrored by the staff at Blue Skies especially. The curriculum allows for flexibility and adaptation, but according to Laderoute, the personal and private voice of literacy, one that often remains at home, away from the scrutiny of educators - is one that we will only access if we take the time to develop relationships with the children and provide opportunities to build on what they bring from their home environment (Laderoute, 2005).

Assessment and evaluation. Assessment and evaluation was the last theme thus constituting the third academic challenge for teachers. Although many informants relayed that "homework is nonexistent", it was still assigned regularly. Homework completion and coming prepared for class was a visible concern for teachers at both schools. As with the practice of incorporating home reading into class time, other ways to reinforce and assess lesson materials are often a necessity. A sixth grade teacher at Cedar Ridge shared his thoughts on the subject:

> You have to measure success differently, not so much academic but more in terms of enthusiasm. I try for the students to have fun and enjoy coming to class. I probably goof off with them a little more than I should, but I think it's important that for the six hours or so that they're in school, the kids are in a happy and supportive environment.

A third grade teacher at Blue Skies shared how she often finds that her students are very visual and auditory learners, especially during reading comprehension exercises. During year-end assessments, she regularly finds that "[children] can tell great stories but get them to write it and they're lost." She

noted that this discrepancy may be attributable in part to the fact that the

Aboriginal culture is very strongly rooted in the oral tradition. As she explained:

"We see a consistent difference in the result [in comprehension] when read to and

when they have to read the same thing themselves." Some research has hinted

towards the notion that Aboriginal people may have stronger neural wiring that

makes for more effective visual and auditory learning, but, although it is a popular

hypothesis, it is not a conclusive finding (Pewewardy, 2002). The third grade

teacher at Blue Skies placed her assessment emphasis on oral examinations as she

believed they provide a more valid estimation of the student's ability and

comprehension. Although the data collected at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies

cannot of course prove the neural hardwiring argument to be accurate, it certainly

seemed to suggest that this may be an avenue for further study.

Provincial Achievement Tests were also a challenge, informants at both

schools corroborated. Mandated by the provincial government, the Provincial

Achievement Tests are taken at the elementary level by third and sixth grade

students to assess the students' (and the school's) performance on curricular

material deemed essential by Alberta Learning. While students often enjoyed

learning about their cultural heritage though stories and Aboriginal crafts, teachers

were concerned that if they spent too much time on more thematically engaging or

culturally specific subject matter then students will fail the Provincial evaluations,

to which exemptions are not granted except at the individual level. The principal

at Blue Skies, discussing the school's Provincial Achievement Test statistics,

explained the implications of this: last year less than 5% of sixth grade students

who wrote the test met the Gold Standard, and a little over half met the acceptable

mark. The Alberta Learning target is for 15% of students to reach the standard of

excellence in each subject (Breen, 2003).

The struggle of being caught between two worlds manifests itself again

with assessment outcomes; the recurring theme of providing students with one

education at the expense of another was voiced more prominently at Cedar Ridge

than at Blue Skies, but both schools seem to represent opposite ends of a

spectrum. Cedar Ridge, being a public school is governed by a more general

mandate than a specifically Cree band-run educational facility. Auger (2006)

posits that a balanced solution that would enable students to succeed in

mainstream society as well as their own communities: "if we can balance the

school curriculum with basic academic subjects and essential cultural teachings

and model the community's values and beliefs, our youth will be more successful

in school and in life" (p.2). However, Auger claims that no definite

synchronization of band schools' vision and programming exists regarding the

role the Cree language should play in the evaluation of students' education; Breen

(2003) states that Aboriginal educational institutions lack a clearly specialized

curriculum and accompanying assessment tools, a factor likely attributable to the

fact that only a minority of educators remain in the community for long term.

Therefore, while the development of appropriate curricular assessment remains to

be seen, public schools serving predominantly Aboriginal populations as well as

band-governed schools must ensure that students' evaluations serve as reflections

of the students' ability to blossom in not one but two disparate worlds.

At Cedar Ridge, psychoeducational assessment was used regularly to help with programming students' transition to Grade 7, if students required modifications to their program plan. Psychoeducational assessment refers to the practice of utilizing standardized testing measures and normative data comparisons to evaluate students' cognitive profiles. Such measures have been found to be useful in determining students' relative strengths and weaknesses; however, psychoeducational testing has been criticized as being insensitive to students' cultural differences and misrepresentative of their true intellectual quotient (Grant, Oka, & Baker, 2009; Sanchez-Johnson, & Cuellar, 2009). Issues in standardized testing with special populations such as the role of cultural bias in specific items, and the overall questionable validity of intelligence scale scores in testing Aboriginal populations is a concern that would benefit from future exploration. Much of the school's funding for specialized programming projects, I was informed, comes from the amount of children coded for special needs. Using psychoeducational assessment assisted in making decisions for individual program plans, one of which was increased emphasis on functional academics as an option for grade seven students at Cedar Ridge Secondary, as well as the Knowledge and Employment program, which assists students in transitioning from secondary school to the working world.

Students' Academic Challenges

Data regarding academic challenges for students were collected through naturalistic observation processes and through research conversations with informants. Attempts were made to collect data regarding academic challenges

from students' own voices, however the responses were not particularly revealing in nature; school subjects were either easy or hard, or fun or boring, as it often is in the world of elementary age children. Further probes were ineffectual at procuring a more detailed understanding. Therefore, collecting such data from students unfortunately did not prove to be fruitful. This may have been attributable to students' budding level of metacognitive ability, unfamiliarity with the researcher, or ineffective data collection procedures. The challenges identified in this domain for students were motivation and engagement and future school completion.

Motivation and engagement. Keeping students motivated and engaged is always a challenge at any educational institution regardless of students' background and culture. At Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies, this was no different. Due to the lack of educational support outside of school that many students allegedly bear, submission of incomplete homework tasks and falling behind academically because of absences were common. Instructional technology had come in quite useful in this capacity, and the use of computers for scaffolding and reinforcing material and even rewarding positive, on-track behaviour was clearly effective, and seemed to greatly appeal to students' hands-on and visual learning styles. Instructional technology at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies, informants relayed, served to boost students' mastery skills, increase level of enjoyment and interaction with the material, and present a unique and novel take on conventional classroom strategies.

The sense of enjoyment and excitement that accompanies interactive instructional technology, however, is not exclusive to Aboriginal students. These same benefits are available to students from all backgrounds. As discussed earlier, achieving basic language mastery was a goal shared by many teachers at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies, and was reflective of students' struggle with the building blocks of literacy. Student and teacher frustration with the presence of basic spelling errors such as 'hade' instead of 'had', for example, were observed with moderate frequency even at the fifth grade level. Although it is impossible to speak for these students and others in the same position, the visible irritation expressed during lessons or periods of independent study with these elements of literacy was indicative of a key academic challenge for students.

Eventual school completion. Although not an immediate concern at the elementary level, teachers at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies were concerned about students' eventual school completion. At Cedar Ridge, an informant relayed that the most common drop-out group in the secondary department was tenth grade boys. At Blue Skies, an informant explained that economics play a role in the decisions made by early school leavers. The allure and challenge of working on the oil fields and making "easy" money was an attractive alternative to students, he imparted, also corroborating the point that it was tenth grade boys who leave school most frequently. To counter, the secondary school at Cedar Ridge implemented a Distance Learning program, which proved to be quite helpful in enabling struggling students to complete the amount of credits necessary to graduate. An informant at Cedar Ridge stated that the Distance Learning Program

was "hugely important" and without it, they would not be able to boast such a high a completion rate: this year, nearly all students attending Grade 12 were set to graduate. According to research by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (1996), the proportion of on-reserve students remaining in secondary school until Grade 12 has increased dramatically from 3% in 1960 /61 to 75% in 1995/96 (Breen, 2003). Breen notes that in mainstream, provincial schools, the national attendance rate is closer to 95%, a rate equated with one absence a month.

The proximity of the well-established First Nations college may be another perhaps more subtle motivating factor for students in the area. Given that the college was said to be founded upon fusing the Western world's academic element and traditional First Nations perspectives and framework, the result would therefore likely avoid breeding feelings of cultural strain as illustrated in the literature review, thereby enabling and preparing graduates to give back and contribute to their own community, a value identified by the literature and supported by the research.

Benefits for Teachers

The second research question was designed to explore the benefits or rewards of the school experience for teachers and students at the Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies elementary schools. In a sense, this second research question served as the flip side of the school challenges question. The research question sought to uncover what teachers believed to be the rewarding aspects of being a teacher at a rural elementary school serving predominantly Aboriginal student populations. As the analysis of the research data revealed, the underlying composition of the

constructs proved to be much simpler than that of the challenges of the school experience. For teachers, an almost unanimous response led to a one-dimensional factor that fell into two domains, 'Personal' and 'Environmental'. For students, a few themes emerged, falling into the 'Personal', 'Environmental' and 'Academic' domains (see Table 2). It is possible that 'Academic' domain benefits did exist for teachers, but were not identified by the research questions and probes.

Personal and environmental benefits. In considering the benefits and rewards of a teaching position at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies, the teaching staff surveyed expressed very high levels of job satisfaction and fulfillment as their first response, thereby characterizing the 'personal' domain for teachers. In words and in actions, the teachers genuinely seemed to enjoy the work they did at their respective schools. However, teachers were also quick to relate that the job, like any other, was not without its frustrations. An example of this frustration underscored a comment made by an informant: "You begin to see some negative behaviour patterns form at this age that you know will persist into adulthood." Most teachers mentioned memorable interactions as being particularly rewarding. One Cree teacher remarked that "the reward is seeing the kids do well...but also just seeing them", he added emotionally. His response related back to the comments he and other teachers made earlier about their positions as role models in the school and served to open up a second domain, labelled 'Environmental'. As the subject of role models was classified earlier as being one of students' environmental challenges, it would be consistent and appropriate to use the same domain name here.

The idea of contributing to the betterment of the community through leadership is a popular concept in Aboriginal culture and it was not surprising to find it manifest in the classroom. On the subject, a fifth grade teacher at Blue Skies had to say the following: "The thing is to be able to teach them something and make a difference in their lives. I've been teaching for 12 years, and I know I've made a difference in a lot of kids' lives." Like the other staff at Blue Skies and at Cedar Ridge, the teachers were keenly aware of the circumstances and contextual forces at work in many of their students' lives; to be able to make a strong and positive impression on the youth is not something to be taken for granted. Although being a caregiver can be tiring and draining, the same informant conveyed, achieving a healthy balance in life and work was seen to be the secret to preventing burnout. Two informants made reference to spirituality in coping with adversity and difficult emotions.

The findings presented here regarding the benefits for teachers may appear to be somewhat simplistic or naive. However, it should be mentioned that these remarks and the conclusions derived were included and presented because of the unanimity and ardour that they represented. The trustworthiness of the responses may be suspect by some wary readers but the conditions under which the data were collected and the level of rapport established were indicative of a reasonably confident degree of validity. Regarding job satisfaction particularly, more than one informant cited a case where they had left self-employment or higher-paying work to serve at their respective school.

Benefits for Students

Collecting valid data from the students on their views of the benefits and rewards of the school experience proved to be another challenge. When asked about what worked for them in the classroom and in monitoring their own learning, for example, most students attempted to answer but, given their age and level of metacognitive development, most responses were not particularly in-depth or were met with a sometimes curious "ummm....I don't know." Observing the children at work and at play in their natural setting proved to be much more fruitful in collecting data and provided a perhaps less 'forced' depiction of their reality, especially as they were unfazed and temporarily unaware of my presence during lessons. In examining the benefits of the school experience for students at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies, three domains, aside from the obvious more general, societal benefits of schooling, were identified: a 'personal' domain, pertaining to the capacity and role of the schooling experience in enriching and developing the self, an 'environmental' domain relating to the school's tendency to function as a security blanket for many, and a 'academic' domain that referred to the school's role in transmitting the specialized skills needed to build a future in a competitive knowledge society.

Personal and environmental benefits. Regarding the 'personal' domain, students at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies were presented with and engaged in a number of school-sponsored activities and opportunities that fed the development of the growing student's sense of self. Essentially, this is also the duty of the school system and a prominent feature particularly of elementary school culture, the fostering of positive regard to build character and self-esteem. As the majority

of students surveyed were in the fifth and sixth grade, an age of early adolescent exploration, the propensity to establish oneself as a unique individual though participation in activities like intramural athletics, extra-curricular clubs like choir, and in maintaining their own friendship circles, was commonly observed. The comment made by a sixth grade teacher that being at school was the best part of the students' day did seem to be supported by classroom observations and students' remarks, even though some of the older, preteen children were reluctant admit to enjoy being at school in the company of their peers. While school life is not always 'peaches and cream' for everyone, the research findings suggested that, more than not, the school experience was a largely positive one for many students at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies.

For many students, the school acted as a sort of security blanket, and this is reflective of the presence of the environmental domain. If, according to theories like Maslow's (1954) pyramid of needs, an individual's base level demands of physical and emotional wellbeing are guaranteed, that individual is able to effectively pursue the development of a healthy self through the search for identity, a central challenge of the period of adolescence as famously argued by Erikson (1968) and other psychosocial theorists (Kaplan, 2002). Given the environmental challenges of many children living in and around the Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies schools, the school's active attempt to help facilitate students' sense of self was another benefit identified by the research of the school experience for students. A more thorough discussion of the role of culture in identity will follow the analysis of the third and final research question.

Academic benefits. Academic benefits for students centered around the very active use of instructional technology in classrooms. As of the last two years at Cedar Ridge, a grant-funded laptop program had been in effect, entitling every student in grades five and six to the use of a laptop loaded with educational software for school use. Although most homes did not have internet access, students were allowed to take their laptops home one day a week, a condition of the grant two informants admitted to being slightly uneasy about at first. The centrality and interactive nature of the technology in the classroom has completely changed the way the class is taught and managed, a sixth grade teacher shared. A class blog, for example, featured guided discussions where students shared their thoughts and responses to reflection questions on *Parvana's Journey*, the class's latest novel study about a struggling family in Afghanistan. The teacher recounted that among the benefits are that even the quieter students in the class felt they had an equal say in discussions and contributed as much as do others. He also cited an instance where the class webpage allowed a suspended student to access and complete all her assignments electronically instead of falling further behind after returning.

The students were visibly keen to use the technology and were quite comfortable doing so. Engrossed in the new alternative to traditional schooling methods, students were often left to work silently on their lesson modules downloaded from the Alberta Education resources website. The teacher, working at his or her desktop, was able to prompt students to return to work using student supervision software if they were not on task. The classroom dynamic and degree

of efficiency were tellingly successful. Most students listed examples of technologically geared projects among their favourite activities and experiences of the school year: a computer-constructed mini documentary on the role of democracy in Iroquois society, numerous video projects, and of course the Smart Board. At Cedar Ridge, almost every classroom came equipped with Smart Board technology, allowing students to interact with the subject materials and benefit from the latest in hands-on learning. Cooperative exercises and small group work were emphasized as being conducive to most effective learning and the abundance of instructional technology not only facilitated such organization but also clearly engaged students who were acquiring the second-nature technological skills that are becoming essential for success in the job market of the 21st century.

At Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies, specialized programming and modified streams were another benefit for students given the very low student to teacher ratios and the fact that pull-outs and small work groups were custom tailored to students' level of performance. Although the establishment, management, and execution of such programs was indeed a challenge in itself for staff, the delivery of such services was a notable benefit for the school's student population.

Culture in the Classroom

The current research project was rooted in the concept of culture. However, as the focus of the research set out to be the experiences of Aboriginal students and their teachers in an educational context, it is worth noting that I was dealing with two distinct cultures simultaneously at work within one environment.

One culture was the Aboriginal, Cree culture, the existential framework that students, intentionally or otherwise, function within inside and outside of the school; the other was the distinct 'school culture' present in many Euro-American educational institutions often recognized by its rituals (morning and lunch bells, assemblies), traditions (homework, field trips), and underlying theoretical position, or worldviews (the curriculum, principal-teacher hierarchy) (Erickson, 1984). What was of interest here was how these two cultures interacted at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies and what they may tell of its students' and teachers' school experiences. What was observed was how culturally specific concepts and practices were interwoven into the day to day run of school life, rather than presented to students to be studied as part of a 'tourist curriculum'. Coined by Derman-Sparks (1989), the term 'tourist curriculum' refers to the practice of teaching cultural materials in isolated blocks or modules (celebrations or seasonal holidays, for instance) and as a homogenous whole (Reese 1996). Making an Indian headband with feathers, a popular example of an Aboriginal-themed tourist curriculum activity, may be seen as simplistic and even offensive given the often religious symbolism of feathers; according to Reese (1996), "consider how a devout Catholic might feel about children making a chalice out of paper cups and glitter" (p.4).

The level of involvement of and identification with Aboriginal culture at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies was said to vary greatly from student to student, and from family to family. It would be rather presumptuous to assume that all students were immersed in the language and practices of their ancestors; likewise, it would

be equally fallacious to assume that all students were largely disconnected from and avoidant of their ethnic background. The truth likely lies in the middle of a continuum and is subject to change. For the older students at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies, negotiating this continuum may be a developmental task with which they are or will soon be wrestling. For the younger ones, contextual cues and stimuli are still serving to shape and form their quickly evolving schemata. The salience of Aboriginal culture in the classroom, as a result, may have an impact on the way in which they strive to accomplish their respective tasks.

At Cedar Ridge, the school day officially began with the singing of the national anthem in Cree; at Blue Skies, *O Kanata* followed the Morning Prayer, also sung in Cree, and was led by the teacher, with the words to each often found in classrooms. At Blue Skies, the principal, an elderly Caucasian man, concluded morning announcements and interruptions with "Hai Hai", the Cree phrase for "Thank you". Inside classrooms, walls featured dream catchers and were lined with various instructional tools that were indicative of a predominantly Aboriginal student body: geometry charts used tepees to illustrate theorems, social behaviour posters featured animated depictions of Aboriginal children with darker skin tones than are customarily present in elementary schools, and art projects reflected hand-made canoes, drums, and traditional costumes made of crepe paper. Sharing circles, as discussed prior, were an attractive incentive for attendance on Mondays for a sixth grade class at Cedar Ridge, and Cree classes, where students learned to read and write their Aboriginal tongue, were offered at all grade levels at both schools. At Blue Skies, portraits of former and current chiefs, of which there were

male and female, were hung proudly in the school's library. Ultimately, it is clear that Aboriginal culture is represented in both schools in these simple ways. However, without addressing the topic of culturally relevant education, the practice of displaying traditional crafts is only superficial (Breen, 2003). At Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies, measures were in place to harmoniously bridge traditional and mainstream content in order to make learning more effective and appealing. Aboriginal content was infused into the standard curriculum; for example, a lesson on democracy in ancient Athens, part of the new sixth grade social studies curriculum, was tied to the role of democracy and Iroquois tribes at the time of Confederacy at Cedar Ridge. The presence of Aboriginal teachers, particularly at Blue Skies where they formed the majority, figuratively tied together these interwoven realms and, as in Bazylak's (2002) Medicine Wheel model, served to help students complete the circle.

As a whole, the schools themselves reflected Aboriginal culture, in their recognition of alternative view points and activities. Involvement with the larger community was frequent, with both schools recognizing that the central objectives of education are in establishing and strengthening relationships and giving back to the community, both of which related to the underlying value of interconnectedness and support the Ramp & Smith (2004) inquiry into Aboriginal conceptions of education: "We try to make the school as cultural as possible", an informant shared. Within the classroom, learning experiences and activities were designed with a community focus. A fifth grade class at Blue Skies, for example, studying a health and nutrition unit wrote letters to the band office about the

detrimental effects of soda and its prevalence in community outlets. Another poignant example from Blue Skies was provided by an informant who told of a situation a few years ago where a sixth grade teacher took her class to a band meeting after a series of violent acts shocked the community. These examples appear to be indicative of the Aboriginal value and conception of education as a reciprocal institution. Criticisms that such lessons and activities detract from mainstream 'academic' education and pull students further away from reaching their post-secondary potential are misguided. According to Breen (2003), "some curriculum objectives are purely cognitive, affective, or social; in many of these cases, the content is not the focus and thus can be anything suitable to the learner" (p.33). Enabling students to function and succeed in their own communities as well as mainstream society was a goal that was expressed in the research and supported in the field; success was not defined as mastery of one domain at the expense of the other.

Cultural ceremonies and large-scale activities also comprised the schools' attempt to align themselves with the community in spirit and in their actions. At Cedar Ridge, informants spoke of regional and division-wide powwows, an annual walk to commemorate the survivors and victims of the residential school, and of efforts made to bring respected members of the reserve community into the school. Regarding parental involvement in school affairs, teachers' responses ranged from optimistic ("Not too bad, but you have to insist on it. It's been progressively getting better. There are huge generational issues...but we're seeing some involvement") to less so ("Simply nonexistent"). As some families and

individuals were in tune with the culture more than others, the schools seemed to strive toward offering cultural activities and encouraging involvement. The traditional year-end feast at Blue Skies was an example of this; elders, who presided over the spiritual aspect of the feast, were welcomed into the school where the food, prepared by students and staff, was blessed and then, after a brief ceremony, shared amongst all present. The feast was prepared in part by students in the school's cultural club, some of whom participated in the distribution of the food, an act carried out in line with traditional customs. The students, surprised to find that this was in fact my first feast, were excited to share the experience and their knowledge of the popular tradition.

Regarding the cultural aspect of the school, most informants agreed that students find value in the traditional Aboriginal elements incorporated into the school experience. Some said that it gives them a sense of history and belonging; others believe that taking strength from the culture empowers them as individuals, and collectively as a people, to cope with the effects of the suicides, alcoholism and other culturally related environmental stressors. According to research by Auger (2006) on visions of Aboriginal education, a survey of elders revealed that there is community tension over the school's role in teaching culture and practicing it. A number of participants in the study expressed some anxiety over practicing spirituality (the smudge, for example) in schools, reasoning that the rites are not performed appropriately in such a context. Staff at Blue Skies were quite open about the practice of smudging in school because of the positive effect it has on the students and the learning environment. Staff at Cedar Ridge refrained

from using this particular cultural practice in the school, often resorting to other traditional practices like sharing circles instead.

Deep Analysis

For the Deep Analysis portion of the research, the surface findings were expanded upon using inductive and deductive reasoning. Conclusions were drawn from the concrete and specific details of the investigation in conjunction with the existing literature in order to unveil more abstract 'truths' and hypothetical models that may be reflective of the larger picture sought. Dissecting and deconstructing the dimensions and key aspects of the school experience for the students at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies was, as the initial findings suggest, a somewhat unusual task given the regular blurring of division lines separating facets of the student and teacher experience. However, a Deep Analysis may open up new perspectives, enabling educational professionals to gain a better understanding of the factors underlying the role of the school in rural, Aboriginal communities.

Surface Analysis overview

It would be appropriate to begin the Deep Analysis phase with an overview of the identified overarching three domains of the school experience: the environmental, academic, and personal. The environmental domain pertained to the larger, contextual aspects that were brought from the outside world of the student and/or teacher into the world of the school, and had an effect on the learning environment of the school. The academic domain referred to those aspects pertaining to the primary role of the schooling institution in the

preparation of students for the fulfilment of a larger role in society through educational instruction. The domain labelled 'personal' referred to the school's role in facilitating the developmental process and providing its students and, to a lesser degree, teachers with stimulating opportunities for personal exploration and creating a strong and healthy sense of self. These three domains were identified in the exploration of the school experience and were all interrelated yet integral parts of the school experience. The added dimension of culture, given that the student body at both Cedar Ridge Elementary School and Blue Skies Elementary School was estimated to be at least 95% Aboriginal, was an additional concern and will be discussed presently.

The question of culture in the classroom and in the school as a whole was examined briefly and independently of the domains in which it was acting. However, from the surface findings of the study, it became quite clear that the dimension of culture functioned not as a domain to be considered independently but rather as an interconnected part of each identified domain. Consistent with the Aboriginal value of the circle symbolizing interconnectedness, and systems theories like Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological model and Bazylak's (2002) Medicine Wheel, culture permeates and affects each of the three domains. The manner and magnitude in which it does will vary from individual to individual but is consistent in the way that it cannot be understood fully as an isolated aspect of the school experience for the Aboriginal students and their teachers at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies. Therefore, each of the three domains will be examined under the lens of culture, as a specific element and as a sociocultural

phenomenon, to gain a more thorough understanding of this complex, rich, and fascinating relationship.

An underlying factor

Looking over the factors that composed the environmental domain – stressors termed 'outside forces', chronic absenteeism, transiency, physical and emotional needs unsatisfied, and a lack of role models – it became apparent that students' environmental challenges were reflective of their teachers' environmental challenges, and vice versa. For example, a student's emotional needs may remain unsatisfied partly because of an incident of neighbourhood crime and another student's high rate of chronic absenteeism may be influenced by a lack of positive role models (Smith-Mohamed, 1998). Of course, such scenarios are oversimplifications and do not address the greater range of issues and history that have become enmeshed in the study of Aboriginal peoples and education, but the examples serve to illustrate the relationship between the challenges of the student and the teacher.

The examples also reveal a more subtle, underlying factor that was not overtly present in the surface analysis phase of the study. In analyzing the factors composing the environmental domain, the common denominator underlying the concerns and sentiments was anxiety. When one deconstructs the environmental experience based on the data collected, notions of anxiety abound. Fear for self and fear for one's family may be at the forefront of a student's mind when faced with an incidence of violence but intimidation, or a lack of trust may be a significant contributing factor in a parent's decision to remove their child from his

or her current school when faced with a special education program placement alternative. As the reserve communities around both Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies were quite isolated, marginalized, and misunderstood by the general public, anxiety and distrust towards the larger mainstream society may be a critical part of what makes the environmental domain so influential and far-reaching. It is quite possible that the citizens of these reserve communities, defined by their nature as displaced cultural communities, fear the loss of their unique culture to the dominant one. Although state sanctioned racism towards Aboriginal people and government-run residential schools are now often regarded as part of the past, there existed still a very real fear of losing one's culture and history, a notion corroborated by the government statistics presented in the literature review and, to a lesser degree, by Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) research piece on oppositional social identity and the 'Burden of Acting White' (Horvat & Lewis, 2003).

The sentiment behind the saying "taking the bull by the horns and making it your own", the memorable words of an informant in discussing formal education, was expressed throughout the field experience and may be further evidence of this complex relationship. Given the documented history of attacks on Aboriginal peoples' rights (Assembly of First Nations, 2002), attempts are being made at the community level to reclaim their culture and their people. The education system, particularly at the band-operated Blue Skies school, is a key element in this struggle. The establishment of a well-established First Nations college on former residential school property near Cedar Ridge Community Elementary School was indeed symbolic in that respect, as was both schools'

offering of Cree classes for all grade levels. Recognizing linguistic sovereignty, an Aboriginal teacher at Blue Skies insisted, was instrumental in furthering the development of healthy, strong and enriching communities.

The cultural anxiety continuum

Inside the school, the heart of the academic domain, culture was interspersed in many ways. Traditional or Aboriginal content was infused into lesson plans and materials to build upon and help transmit the provincial curriculum, and teachers attempted to build on the strengths of the shared background that their students possess through the incorporation of cultural activities like sharing circles and cultural clubs. The general sentiment and founding belief was that culture is empowering and, as described earlier, many students derive strength from this aspect of the school experience. The data collected seemed to be congruent with a statement made by a sixth grade teaching assistant at Cedar Ridge regarding the students' perspective on the issue: "They don't know a lot about their culture, but they know they don't fall into the dominant one." Inside the school environment, feelings of anxiety may re-emerge as a fear of not being understood, fear of falling into and confirming stereotypes, and fear of failure, which can be viewed as an individual or collective failure. Whereas previous research has examined individual fear of failure (Herman & Polivy, 2003; Fisher, Storck, & Bacon, 1999), the results from this study pointed to a collective fear of failure that may be linked to the fear of losing one's culture which, as discussed, may have a particular salience with Aboriginal students in a school setting. If this is the case, both students and teachers are confronted with

these matters and teachers have an additional responsibility in cultural awareness, especially if such feelings are particularly acute.

The apparent distrust and apprehension of the collective mentality toward the education system, a system maligned as 'selling out' to the dominant culture, has been discussed as an environmental challenge. What was observed in the academic domain was how schools were trying to reconcile these notions of fear and culture. Regular open-house days, for example, served to welcome and encourage parental involvement, which has slowly but gradually been increasing. The relationship between these two concepts of culture and anxiety can be understood as a continuum (see Figure 3). On one extreme, there is the misinterpretation of 'the Native Way', defined by the acceptance of fallacious stereotypes regarding Aboriginal peoples and educational success; on the other end, there is the equally misinterpreted 'White Man's Way', defined as the abandonment of traditional and cultural mores in favour of what is regarded as selfish gain. The burgeoning young student mediates this dynamic continuum, presumably drawn to both ends by potent environmental forces and past experiences, but always evolving with the present. The teacher, particularly if he or she is Aboriginal and/or serves as a role model, acts to renegotiate the continuum and thus the student's place on it, ideally bringing the student closer to reconceptualising education and academic excellence as his or her own prerogative while promoting and encouraging the expression of the student's cultural self. The cultural anxiety continuum and the student's mediation of it are likely to be renegotiated regularly throughout the course of his or her educational

career; it is up to the school to provide a safe, open, and stimulating climate for this often overlooked aspect of the student's development to take place. This proposed theory is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) philosophy that all children are meaning makers. According to Lave and Wegner (1991), Vygotsky's zone of proximal development represents the distance between cultural knowledge, knowledge that is taught through instruction, and the everyday experiential base of the individual. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development builds on the knowledge of the child and scaffolds new learning as interactions with the environment promote and encourage the development of the whole child (Laderoute, 2005). This subconscious mediation and constant renegotiation of one's position on the cultural anxiety continuum therefore may be a critical part of the school experience for Aboriginal students and their teachers.

A psychosocial perspective

The personal domain was the final of the three domains identified by the analysis, and, as with the environmental and academic domains, culture also played a significant role in this aspect of the school experience. The development of identity, a budding concern of most young adolescents according to prominent psychosocial theorists like Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1980), is at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies likely to be influenced by and tied to the notion of culture given the salience of Aboriginal people and culture as represented in the school community and the reservation environment's isolation from mainstream society (Kaplan, 2002). In Canadian society, the recognition of someone as an Aboriginal person is accompanied by political connotations, socioeconomic connotations,

and cultural connotations. Students' preoccupations with such thoughts and concerns at the upper elementary level might arguably be lower than that of an adult, yet gradual awareness of these intricacies may have been a growing realization for students contemplating their position on the cultural anxiety continuum and engaging in identity exploration.

The role of the cultural anxiety continuum was to provide a model or visual representation through which the complexities of identity exploration can be expressed. That the struggle for identity emerged from the data as an underlying theme and led to the continuum model is not illogical; as illustrated through the extensive historical data present in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996), the issue of identity has been a central theme in the history of Aboriginal peoples. The Gradual Civilization Act (1857), which led to the creation of residential schools and stripped children of their culture, families, and community networks, and the Gradual Enfranchisement Act (1867), which persuaded Aboriginal people to abandon their communities and ways of life to become British subjects, are but two examples that served to perpetuate feelings of inferiority and insecurity, leaving many Aboriginal children feeling ashamed of their identity. More recently, many Aboriginal youth, including many students at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies, look to African-American rap and hip-hop culture and expressions of identity because they feel that they can relate to the sentiments of the music.

For younger children, the amalgamation of play in education, including more involved relations with peers in a school setting, is a hallmark of the

industry versus inferiority life stage, the developmental task most associated with elementary school. Successful resolution is said to prepare the well-adjusted, capable youngster for future challenges. Poor resolution is believed to result in feelings of incompetence and inadequacy that transcend the next developmental task, that of identity versus role confusion (Kaplan, 2002). Younger children may mediate the cultural anxiety continuum in school, assimilating cultural activities, literature, and their teachers into existing schemata. Further research focused on the role of Aboriginal culture and developmental psychology in children and young adolescents might reveal a more concrete and detailed pattern of results certainly useful to a range of educational professionals.

Summary

The research presented here identified a link between culture and belonging; this theme was identified indirectly in interactions and observations and served to help support the preceding model's theory of identity. Identity, then, is tied to culture and culture to belonging: belonging was a topic that appeared briefly in the surface analysis, but here it can be understood as it relates to the larger picture. Belonging is generally accepted to be a fundamentally human need (Norenzayan & Heine, 2005) and at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies, culture and belonging were expressed in different ways, each representative of a position on the aforementioned cultural anxiety continuum detailed earlier. For example, early gang involvement, indicative of a negative outcome of the need for belonging, would be plotted closer to the 'Misunderstanding of the Native Way' extremity; involvement in the school's cultural club, an extra-curricular activity at Blue

Skies that features some of the school's most promising students, would be plotted in the middle of the scale as a balance of Aboriginal and Western perspective educational objectives. Such examples once again underscore the need for the school experience to facilitate the developmental process and provide healthy and positive alternatives to negative belonging and identity, especially with an often high-risk group where the incorporation of culture has been shown to be as empowering as it can be debilitating if misunderstood or abused.

Taken together, the widespread, embedded effect of culture on the environmental, academic, and personal domains of the school experience of Aboriginal students and their teachers painted a picture of how the spheres and systems of our lives interplay and influence each other. Of course these matters are always more intricate and extensive than meets the eye and, although ethnography functions by immersing the investigator into an uncontrolled, non-experimental field setting, the matter of perspective is never without some degree of bias. Being a non-Aboriginal individual with relatively limited experience with and meaningful exposure to Aboriginal people, I am somewhat hesitant to offer any sort of contribution to the subject. I am also somewhat hesitant to assure a reader of this work that the conclusions I attempted to derive objectively based upon the data collection process are completely in line with the reality of the very people I sought to learn more about and whose experiences I respectfully present to the academic world.

"The media love to write about all of the horrible things that happen here, but they never write about the good things", a fifth grade Blue Skies teacher

passionately remarked during my final day at the reservation school. In my

opinion, she is completely justified in saying so; the media present one-sided

stories if it serves them, but educators, students of all levels, and the general

public at large would benefit from viewing both sides of the stories and learning

the same lesson.

CHAPTER 4

Discussion

Overview of Findings

To review the results of the study, two domains were identified in which

teachers and students' challenges could be categorized; these domains were

'environmental' and 'academic' (see Table 1). The environmental domain

pertained to the larger, contextual aspects that were brought from the outside

world of the student and/or teacher into the world of the school, and had an effect

on the learning environment of the school. The major challenges in the

environmental domain addressed by teachers were the environmental stressors

present in the community, chronic absenteeism, and transiency; for students, these

were unfulfilled physical and emotional needs, and a lack of positive role models.

The academic domain referred to those aspects pertaining to the primary role of

the schooling institution in the preparation of students for the fulfilment of a

larger role in society through educational instruction. The most prominent

academic challenges identified for teachers were concerned with language

mastery: particularly reading comprehension and vocabulary, specialized

educational programming, and student evaluation and assessment. For students,

the primary challenges were motivation and engagement, struggles with elements

of literacy, and future school completion.

In studying the benefits of the school experience (see Table 2), a third

domain labelled 'personal' was identified, referring to the school's role in

facilitating the developmental process and providing its students and teachers with

stimulating opportunities for personal exploration and creating a strong and healthy sense of self. The benefit for teachers in the 'personal' domain was very high levels of job satisfaction. Additional benefits fell under the 'environmental' domain with teachers referring to their work at the school ideally contributing to the betterment of the communities the schools they serve, a clear reflection of Erikson's (1968) generativity versus stagnation developmental task (Kaplan, 2002). For students, the 'environmental' domain was represented by the warm and secure environment provided by the school. The 'personal' domain was represented by the programming options, in-class and extra curricular, that support the realization of students' potential and development of self. Additional benefits for students fell within the 'academic' domain and were represented by the successful and popular incorporation of new technology in the classroom.

The degree of incorporation of culture in the classroom was initially considered independently as a research question in its own right; however, the study found that instead of being understood as an isolated variable, culture existed in the classroom and the school as an integrated phenomenon. Elements of traditional Aboriginal culture were incorporated in the school experience in an interwoven, holistic and natural reflection of the student body population as opposed to covered in a tourist curriculum, a term referring to the practice of teaching cultural materials in isolation as modules (celebrations or seasonal holidays, for instance) and as a homogenous or caricatured whole (Reese 1996). The Deep Analysis expanded upon this aspect of the school experience. The apparent distrust and apprehension of the collective mentality toward the

education system had been discussed as an environmental challenge. Reconciliation of these notions of culture and anxiety was observed in the academic domain, and the personal domain served to offer the students the opportunity to connect to the culture, given that the presiding view at the school was that culture is empowering.

The research proposed a unique model in the form of a continuum (see Figure 1). On one extreme, sat the misinterpretation of 'the Native Way', defined by the acceptance of fallacious stereotypes regarding Aboriginal peoples and educational success; on the other end, there was the equally misinterpreted 'White Man's Way', defined as the abandonment of traditional and cultural mores in favour of what is regarded as selfish gain. The young student was believed to mediate this dynamic continuum, drawn to both ends by environmental forces and past experiences, but always evolving with the present as teachers served to renegotiate the continuum on a regular basis through observational learning and shared perspective. In studying the workings of an educational institution, the dynamic of mutual influence between students and teachers must not be overlooked; it is quite possible that the renegotiation of the continuum for the student represents a form of ongoing developmental and professional growth for the teacher. If he or she is confronted with a student's educational outcome as confirming a stereotype, for example, feelings of anxiety, guilt, and anger may be experienced directly and indirectly, a common scenario in multi-cultural education (Tummala-Nara, 2009). As a result, the manner in which the teacher performs the function of renegotiating the continuum would be negatively

affected, thereby influencing the student's development. Such a model would support the argument that development takes place throughout an individual's lifespan, rather than being a process exclusive to children and adolescents. Although the proposed model seemed to be consistent with the data collected, it is up to future research to test its rigour through further investigation, ideally with culturally diverse Aboriginal populations.

Applications and limitations

Given the exploratory nature of the study, the objective of opening up new directions for inquiry was achieved, and these are expressed throughout the research findings. Because of its broad starting point and tabula rasa standpoint, the research presented may prove to be useful for investigators with little or no knowledge of the major issues in Aboriginal education; it is also my hope that even seasoned veterans of related research projects find this offering of interest in that it sparks new interest or speculation in scantly covered or previously unexplored areas. Teacher candidates and novice teachers might find wisdom in the words of the teaching staff at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies, and school counsellors might gain an understanding of the nature of reality for the many Aboriginal students who suffer through undue environmental stressors. School psychologists may find the deconstruction of the educational experience into its challenges, benefits, and domains useful for the development of intervention strategies. Using non-verbal assessment techniques like matrices, for example, might be a positive alternative for students whose level or form of verbal expression may not be indicative of their 'true score'. Including proportional and

representative data on standardization and normative information with Aboriginal

populations in psychoeducational test kits would be an exhaustive task but may be

of considerable use for inexperienced clinicians. Finally, school psychologists and

other 'peripheral' educational professionals do not often have the opportunity to

delve into the world of the students and teachers; this study was designed in part

to provide an introduction to the current issues in Aboriginal education at the

often overlooked elementary level, serving as a combination or integration of the

theoretical and practical aspects of educational research.

  Regarding limitations, there are a few aspects of the study that ought to be

given mention. Given the nature of the research, these findings are specific to the

data collected in the field at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies and thus cannot be

generalized to urban schools populated primarily by an Aboriginal student body.

The dynamics of urban Aboriginal communities are quite distinct from those in

rural, reservation areas and one way pertaining to the research presented is in

regards to cultural salience. Aboriginal reservation communities - and sometimes

by association, the schools that serve them – are by definition, isolated land

settlements promised by treaty for members of a particular indigenous cultural

group. Even though most large urban centres in Canada have community areas

populated by Aboriginal people (Alberta Education, 2005), the larger spheres of

society that encapsulate and influence the individual and their development are

very likely to vary from those acting in rural Aboriginal communities that are

independently governed. Moreover, since urban populations were not studied in

the research or included in the data collection, it would not be appropriate for this

to imply any comparison of conclusions based on such criteria. Generalization to other schools populated by a dominant minority, indigenous or immigrant, may yield similar results, but once again, assumptions cannot be made. Such research would, however, make for interesting comparisons.

Additionally, this research was conducted at elementary schools and therefore the conclusions derived are directed expressly at elementary level students and teachers. The deconstructed school experience and resulting environmental, academic, and personal domains (if these indeed prove again to be the identified domains, as more may be evident) cannot be generalized to the secondary or post-secondary levels. Part of the reason for pursuing the elementary level was the fact that there was much more literature surrounding the secondary and post-secondary experience of Aboriginal students and their teachers. In this respect, the research presented is able to contribute to the body of literature available for educational professionals interested in working with or simply learning more about this division of Aboriginal education.

It is also important to keep in mind the period of the school year in which the data were collected. Had the research process taken place during the September to November portion of the school year, the specific findings and results collected may have been slightly different. The more abstract conclusions drawn from the results and the resulting model presented, I believe, would have remained essentially the same given the depth of the environmental and cultural issues that have long been present in these and other marginalized and isolated Aboriginal communities. In addition, the amount of time spent in the field,

approximately 50 hours over the period of late April to mid June, has surely had

an effect on the reproducibility of the results. Had the privilege of time, of a

September to June data collection period been possible let alone granted, one

could be even more certain of the study's principal findings and the larger picture

presented.

Finally, the matter of perspective may be viewed as a limitation. The

perspective employed in the research is the perspective of a non-Aboriginal

individual; the same research undertaken by an Aboriginal individual may shed a

different perspective on the data collected. Some may regard a non-Aboriginal

perspective on an Aboriginal education topic to be a unique feature of the study;

some may also acknowledge the fact that one is and must always be and an

'outsider' when pursuing field-based research; however, this perspective may also

have been a limitation in establishing rapport, collecting data, and obtaining

second-nature insight into particular cultural aspects. Nonetheless, such

considerations are important for guiding future inquiry as well as interpreting the

findings derived from the analysis.

What could have been improved? The idea of using formulated

questionnaires and surveys was initially entertained during the early phases of the

study. Some of the reviewed literature, specifically Ramp and Smith (2004) in

their study on education and the southern Alberta Pii'kani tribe, found that forced

choice responses were often not satisfactory. In the Ramp and Smith case,

respondents tended to steer away from the questionnaire items towards more

general concerns. In this respect, using pre-formulated surveys and opinion polls –

particularly as an outsider largely new to Aboriginal peoples and their culture –

did not only seem to be inappropriate but also felt like an active attempt to impose

a preconceived framework over the incoming data. The overall result would likely

have dismissed or ignored potentially key data from the research and would have

resembled a confirmatory research design, which was counter to the objective of

this exploratory study. With a larger time frame at one's disposal and the stronger

rapport that follows, questionnaire measures devised during rather than before the

period of study could be used to complement the qualitative data. However, these

should still be employed cautiously, depending on the level of comfort established

with participants.

Perspective and methodology

It can be argued that some degree of preconceived framework in the shape

of researcher bias is always in effect. Even reflection for example, employed

almost religiously in deriving conclusions in ethnography and said to "inform and

empower intuition rather than stifle it" (Erickson, 1984, p.7), is susceptible to

bias. Michelle Fine (1994), in her treatise on ethnographic research, writes of a

phenomenon called 'working the hyphen' that describes the way:

> researchers probe how we are in relation with the contexts we study and
>
> with our informants, understanding that we are all multiple in those
>
> relations...we inscribe the Other, strain to white out the Self, and refuse to
>
> engage the contradictions that litter our texts. (p.72)

Working the hyphen, she explains, tends to occur when the research is targeted at

groups that have been exploited and subjugated, and often reveals more about the

researcher and the structures of Othering. The research presented here has made no effort to hide the Self during the data collection and analysis, clearly stating the position and background of the researcher where appropriate; nonetheless, confronting and overcoming the Self is indeed part of the process of ethnography. Fine (1994) described in her paper how science – particularly the social sciences – construct, legitimize, and distance Others, "banishing them to the margins of culture...represented as unworthy, dangerous, immoral, or as pitiable, victimized, and damaged" (p.74). Therefore, throughout the course of the research, one must be conscious of this sort of subtle scientific neo-colonialism and the potential for damage which always leads to the most challenging question of the study: are the findings in fact a veritable representation of the school communities studied, or merely a portrait distorted by the study's basis in the Self?

These are pivotal questions that must be addressed by the researcher as well as the reader, implying that the findings must always be interpreted through a filtered perspective. For example, given that interviews with students proved to be quite difficult in the field (a second aspect of the study that could have been improved), the research presented here cannot confirm the depth of subconscious or personal feelings described in the Deep Analysis. Expanding upon the research conversations and observations naturally lent a degree of subjectivity and interpretation. To this end, we must remember that ethnography, as a deliberate process of inquiry guided by a point of view, cannot be completely objective; disciplined subjectivity, according to Erickson (1984), is employed to assemble meaning from the subjects or 'actors' view. However, as the Deep Analysis

suggests, the findings do hint towards a general model that takes into account this complex web of underlying emotions.

The discussion thus far has detailed indirectly the consequences of the implementation of ethnographic principals in the research design. As a whole, I feel that a study in the ethnographic model was appropriate and satisfying given the nature of the investigation. However, at this point it may be wise to discuss why the research only used elements of the ethnographic model and was not a 'pure' ethnography, per se. As the roots of ethnography can be traced back to anthropology (Erickson, 1984) and the exploits of naturalists in often geographically and culturally remote locations, some modifications and simplifications of the process must be made to tailor the research methodology for schools, which are still Western in design and function and are situated in relatively familiar contexts. Employing a traditional ethnographic approach would thereby mean that there would be a great deal of information and details to which the researcher must attend; however, "everything that happens inside the school is potentially significant, but some things are more significant than others" (Erickson, 1984, p.8). Finally, the time spent collecting data in the field was not as lengthy and therefore multidimensional as would be ideal for a traditional ethnography. Nonetheless, the benefits of a study that enlists aspects of a traditional ethnography are still relevant and valid and because of ethnography's holism and cross-cultural perspective, can result in new insights about schooling (Erickson, 1984).

Discussion of findings

Regarding the research outcomes, the study's findings were generally consistent with the existing literature. The domineering presence of the environmental challenges, as discussed, was found to have an overarching effect on the educational realm of the school. Gang activity, one aspect of the environmental challenges, was perhaps surprisingly, found to be an immediate concern even at the elementary level at one school, whereas unease over the interfering effects of drug-related activities in the community was voiced more prominently at another. Chronic absenteeism and transiency, although overwhelmingly regarded as a major challenge at both schools, were also unexpected findings given the lack of attention they have received in the literature. Measures to alleviate students' challenges like the school-sponsored breakfast program were, although not likely unique in their implementation, largely successful in their operation. The breakfast program provides an example of how collaborative effort within the larger community is a source of strength and inspiration for many, and can be considered a hallmark of Aboriginal education that is, as an Aboriginal sixth grade teacher put it, "investing in our own people". Although partnering with the community institutions for resources is not a strategy exclusive to Aboriginal groups, the implementation of such joint ventures in the school seems to appeal to the need to have formal education address and embrace cultural conceptions of success.

The academic domain's emphasis on language mastery is congruent with the research by Robinson-Zanartu (1996), where she describes the obstacles in the assessment of linguistic and verbal skills. However, the popular image conjured

by observations like "Standard English forms pose difficulty for large percentages of Native Americans, even when their first language is English" (p.379) was not always consistent with what was observed. Students at Cedar Ridge and Blue Skies in the classes surveyed (third, fifth, and sixth grade classes at both schools) were quite verbal, and were often keen to share their ideas and take turns in the classroom using the Smart Boards and other technology, with which they were very comfortable. When work was assigned, students kept on task and consulted with the teacher and each other, as was permitted. Instructional techniques, although focused on hands-on and visual modes of learning, did not vary notably nor in any specific way to what would draw heavily upon Aboriginal culture in an explicit manner unlikely be observed in a non-Aboriginal elementary school setting. The benefits of the schooling experience identified by the research, for both students and teachers, were encapsulating of the generally universal objectives of schooling, yet teachers were cognizant of the fact that their work sometimes transcended the transmission of the curriculum into more personal domains. Sometimes boisterous and sometimes reticent, the behaviour of the students in the classes observed did not deviate significantly from what would be expected from a mainstream or non-Aboriginal school. Perhaps this is, from a non-Aboriginal point of view, a dismal indicator of how people sometimes need to be reminded that Aboriginal children are children like any other, a fact often buried under the rubble of news reports of a perhaps inwardly xenophobic society.

The suggestion that identification with culture may improve Aboriginal students' academic performance is not new, but few studies have examined this

relationship in detail. In the United States, Whitesell, Mitchell, and Spicer (2009)

collaborated with the Voices of Indian Teens project team for a longitudinal study

of self-esteem, cultural identity and academic success among American

Aboriginal students. Assuming that emphasis on involvement with tradition and

culture would lead to a sense of community and validation of the self, the authors

posit that results should be evident in academic achievement. However, they also

recognize that the matter might not be so straight forward as "students with high

American Indian identity might actually reject academic goals as not consistent

with traditional American Indian ways" (p.39). The results were complex;

although a clear relationship was established between self-esteem and academic

success, there was no correlation to American Indian identity, acting against the

theory that engagement with cultural traditions will translate to success in school.

However, the authors were also wise to state that their narrow definitions of

success, rooted in mainstream American goals, may have been a contributing

factor. It is therefore important to acknowledge that the presented study may also

have been relying on mainstream American conceptions of development and the

self through the experience of formal schooling; the lack of research on

developmental psychology and Aboriginal populations is an additional concern.

The conclusion of the Whitesell et al. (2009) study regarding engagement

in cultural traditions and success in school was contrary to the observations of the

present research; although this research cannot claim to make correlation or

causation inferences because of its research design and exploratory nature, the

conflicting results indicate that further exploration and study are necessary to

ameliorate our understanding of this fascinating phenomenon. The implication in the Whitesell et al (2009) study that identification with Aboriginal culture, or identification as an Aboriginal person, may not be a positive association in the mind of the individual is consistent with the cultural anxiety continuum model proposed. The model presented in this research provides an alternative perspective by which issues of education, identity, and culture can be understood. The model is also open to testing with other ethnic and cultural minorities, but this generalization should not be assumed until tested.

Final Words

In summary, the present study serves as an exploration of the theoretical and practical dimensions of research on Aboriginal populations and schooling at the elementary level. Through the use of elements of ethnographic research, the research questions surrounding the challenges and benefits of the school experience for teachers and students were explored. Although many Surface Analysis results were found to be consistent with the existing literature on Aboriginal education, the Deep Analysis of the study led to an exploration of the role of culture in the school and the development of the nascent student and the teacher.

I hope that the novel perspective offered by this research will be of use to educational professionals in all domains and will lead to improvements in providing effective, culturally-sensitive, and empowering education. An improved understanding of various facets of Aboriginal education might be beneficial for readers. The rich diversity present within Canadian society and within Aboriginal

populations is an inspiration and source of strength for creating and directing

future educational pathways that lead to lifelong learning for teachers as well as

students.

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Table 1

Challenges Identified for Teachers and Students

Group	Environmental	Academic
Teachers	Contextual 'Home Life' Stressors	Language Mastery
	Chronic Absenteeism	Specialized Programming
	Transiency	Assessment and Evaluation
Students	Physical Needs Not Always Met	Motivation and Engagement
	Emotional Needs Not Always Met	Future School Completion
	Lack of Role Models	

Table 2

Benefits Identified for Teachers and Students

Group	Personal	Environmental	Academic
Teachers	High Job Satisfaction	Contribution to Community	N/A
Students	Opportunities for Personal Growth	School as 'Safety Blanket'	Preparation for Future Job Market (Technology)

Figure 1. Cultural Anxiety Continuum Model.
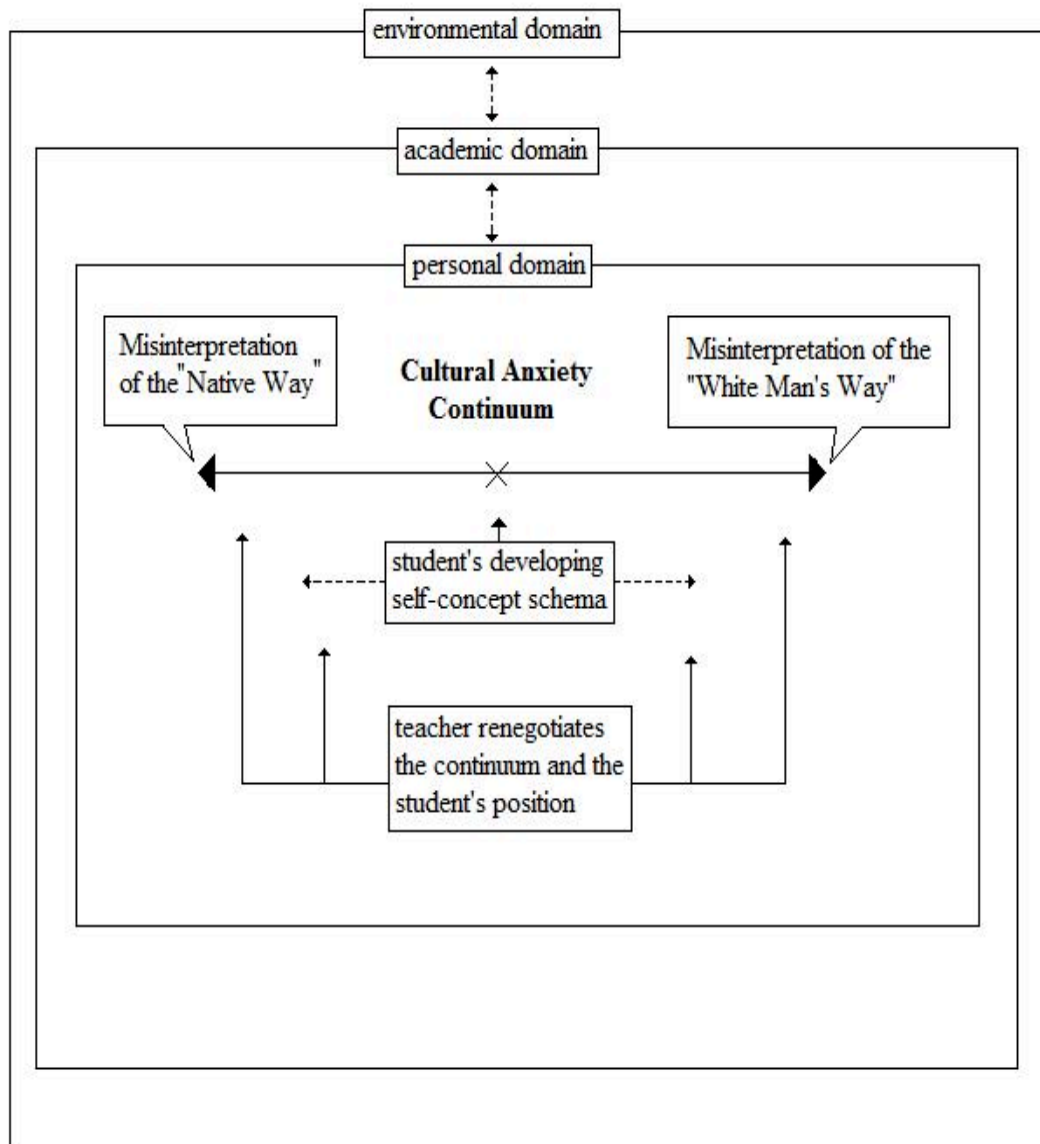
Appendix A

Research Conversation Guidelines for Students

1) Do the classes you take at school have give you lots to think about?

2) Would you say you enjoy being at school?

3) Would you say you enjoy doing well at school?

4) Do you feel that what you learn at school will not help you very much in the 'real world'?

5) What kinds of things have been most helpful to you while in school here?

6) Have you always had someone guiding and pushing you to do better at school?

7) Would you say that your teachers care about how you're doing inside of school and out?

8) If I were to start teaching here next year, what advice would you give me?

Appendix B

Questions for Teachers

1) What is it like to be part of the community here in _____?

2) What is it like being a teacher here? What are the challenges? Rewards?

3) What is it like to be a student at a rural elementary school in an Aboriginal

    community? What challenges do students face? What are the benefits

    available to them?

4) How do you see your role regarding your students? Are you just 'the

    teacher' transmitter of the curriculum?

5) Does bringing culture into the classroom have benefits for students?

6) If I were to start teaching here next year, what advice would you give me?