

**University of Alberta**

**The parents' role in school improvement:  
Secondary school parent and student perspectives**

by

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## Abstract

Educational policy increasingly emphasizes parent involvement in improving students' academic achievement, yet this is seldom defined from non-educator or non-mainstream perspectives. In this study I explored secondary school parent and student perspectives regarding what is an appropriate role for parents in improving students' academic performance. Their views were examined vis-à-vis educator views and policy.

I employed interpretive policy analysis based on a case study of a northern Albertan secondary school participating in the provincially-funded *Alberta Initiative for School Improvement*. Using purposeful random and snowball sampling, 41 participants were selected: 14 students, 15 parents, 5 Aboriginal community members, and 7 educators. I conducted initial and follow up individual interviews. Complementary data were gathered from school and government documents and observations of classes, parent meetings, and extracurricular events. Data interpretation consisted of the construction of themes pertinent to the research questions.

Interpretations from this study suggested dissonance among and between parents, students, and teachers regarding the meaning of school improvement and the role of parents. Students, like their teachers and policymakers, defined school improvement as "curriculum oriented" reflecting pedagogy, content, and measurable outcomes. Parents described it as "child oriented" referring to their children's personalities, interests, and learning needs. In contrast to policy, students, parents, and teachers envisioned parents playing an indirect role in children's academic

achievement. Students described “support” as the parents’ role, typologized as social support, curriculum support, and supportive intervention. Parents considered their role: (a) “behind the scenes” as monitors, protectors, distracters, and role models; (b) “off-center stage” as advocates and interveners; and, (c) a negotiation with their children. Analysis of data from Aboriginal participants consisted of self-reflection on Euro-centric assumptions behind research.

Participants denied the north influenced parent involvement. My reconceptualization of north as “neo-north,” however, suggests the potential for attitudes about northern communities to indirectly affect parent-teacher relations; high teacher turnover and negative feelings about northern communities may interfere with positive relationships.

These students and parents suggested parents indirectly affect achievement. My key recommendation is that parent involvement be reconceptualized for the secondary school context. I conclude with further questions and directions for practice and research.



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**DEDICATION**

*For the butterfly at last, to be cocooned again...*

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In the proposal for my doctoral study, I drew a parallel between Plato's cave and the manner in which parent involvement is currently cast in educational discourse about school improvement (Hopkins, 2001). Through numerous policies and directives parents are increasingly considered a key strategy for improving learning outcomes for all students. I likened these educational policy decisions to Plato's cave, where policy makers were the puppeteers who orchestrated parent involvement by the light of a fire. Educators were the prisoners who were chained and disabled from turning their necks, interpreting parent involvement by the shadows projected on the cave walls. By this analogy, I envisioned parents and students as the sunlight outside of the cave. I saw them as unfettered and therefore able to shed light on the meaning of parent involvement for educators and policymakers.

Policy regarding the parents' role in school improvement presupposes that parents perceive their involvement in schooling similar to practitioners and policy makers; the fire in the cave is assumed to illuminate all vantage points. In this way the allegory of the cave suitably illustrates that neither the prisoners nor the puppet masters are enlightened. The policy makers as puppeteers can produce only shadows of parent involvement in school improvement, and the cave walls merely deflect echoes of parents' voices. Educators, unable to turn their heads toward the parapet, caricature parent involvement from these featureless silhouettes and reverberations. Because parent involvement is not examined through parents' and students' perspectives, mandates to increase parent participation in school improvement



planning and implementation are uninformed about the expectations, interests, and needs of the very parents and students they are trying to serve.

Initially, I saw my research as an attempt to lead the cave dwellers—educators and policy makers—out of their darkness to be informed by a true light source, the parents and students. The parents’ role in school improvement endeavors, I believed, was best learned through their own and their children’s voices rather than the echoes of popularized or traditional notions of parent involvement. While this was the assumption I carried throughout my doctoral study, my initial parallel with Plato’s cave and the anticipated goal of helping others escape the cave shifted.

Rather than discard the metaphor of the cave, I chose to extend it throughout this dissertation to demonstrate how my thinking about it—and its relation to my research questions—changed throughout the process of conducting and writing up my study. Throughout this dissertation I called these brief end-of-chapter reflections “Shadowsapes” to trace my growing awareness of the limitations of my understanding, and my folly in thinking social phenomena have singular meaning. Except for Chapter 6, which is itself a shadowscape, I focused these shadowsapes on areas that were most meaningful to me. By tracing my own change in relation to Plato’s metaphor of the cave, I hoped to connect others to my inquiry in a personal way, and instigate reflexive dialogue and debate about parent involvement.

### **Context and Research Questions**

The importance placed upon parents as participants in their children’s schooling is evidenced by a growing corpus of literature in the area. Research on parent involvement can be grouped according to objectives and methodologies

including: (a) quantitative and qualitative studies advancing empirical claims about the academic impact of particular parent involvement strategies or models (DeCusati & Johnson, 2004; Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, & Van Voorhis, 2002; Norris, 1999; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004); (b) critical approaches examining parent involvement based on conditions of race, class, ethnicity, and gender (Crozier, 2000; de Carvalho, 2001; David, 2004; Fine, 1993; Waggoner & Griffith, 1998); and (c) constructivist/interpretivist studies which investigate ex post facto the impressions left by parent involvement programs and practices through narratives, case study, or ethnography (Benson, 1999; Caspe, 2003; DeMoss & Vaughn, 2000b; Pushor & Murphy, 2004). Few studies, however, specifically document parents' or students' perspectives on the parents' role in school improvement. Furthermore, studies regarding parent involvement are primarily conducted in elementary, urban contexts where parent involvement is more common, leaving unanswered the challenge of declining parent involvement in other environments such as secondary or non-urban schools. Recent policy directives to engage parents in school improvement planning and implementation may be well-intentioned, but they are arguably misguided because they lack the standpoint of parents and students, and do not take into account nuances such as grade level and demographics.

My case study (Stake, 2005) explored northern secondary school parents' and students' perspectives about the parents' role in relation to school-led initiatives that aim to improve student achievement and increase parent involvement. This investigation was guided by these primary research questions: (a) How do parents and students define and understand school improvement and the parents' role in these

initiatives? (b) What are parents' and students' experiences with school-led improvement initiatives that have as a key strategy increased parent involvement? (c) Do parent and student perceptions and experiences regarding the role of parents in school improvement reflect those of practitioners and policy makers? I believed an in-depth and contextual understanding of parents' and students' perceptions of the parents' role in school improvement could inform the public policy debate about parent involvement. From a practical standpoint, my intent was to strengthen practices that are designed to enhance the connection between families and schools whose common aim is to improve educational experiences for all children.

### **Definitions**

Concepts of parent, Aboriginal, parent involvement, and school improvement shaped my study. As I have a constructivist view of how the social world is understood, spelling out what I mean by these terms was important for establishing parameters for my study. Additionally, I discuss my view of the *Alberta Initiative for School Improvement* as policy since it is the backdrop of my study.

### *Parent*

Family reconfigurations necessitate a reconsideration of what is meant by "parent" (Tutwiler, 2005). Although scholars have developed an interest in the cross-cultural nature of families and its impact on their involvement in schools (see Coleman, 1987; Davies, 1993; DeMoss & Vaughn, 2000b; Hart & Risley, 1995; Milne, 1989; Scott-Jones, 1984), the contradictory tendency to emphasize the divergence of parents' backgrounds while maintaining a narrow conception of parent involvement persists.

In this study, “parent” was broadly conceived as any caregiver regardless of kinship (Callison, 2004; Mapp, 2003). A broad definition was particularly important for my study because of the Aboriginal presence in the northern school and community where I conducted my study. When considering the dense network of Aboriginal relations, and their belief that all members of an Aboriginal community play the role of parent for all children (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Tutwiler, 2005), the possibility that parents may perceive their role in education differently becomes paramount.

### *Aboriginal*

Collective terminologies such as *Aboriginal* and *Indigenous* customarily refer to people of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit heritage. Variances among these groups, however, defy such all-encompassing nomenclature, for as Middleton (2003) tells us, inclusive terms surfaced only as a necessary political tactic in presenting a united front. This creates a dilemma for a Euro-Canadian researcher like me who, without the socio-historical or spiritual proximity to the culture, cannot escape being arbitrary. That Indigenous and other scholars have employed a range of terms, including *Aboriginal* (Doige, 2003), *Native* (Weber-Pillwax, 1992), *Indigenous* (McCormack, 2005), *Indian* (Hampton, 1995), and *Persons of First Nations Ancestry* (Calliou, 1998), suggests contextual influences. In this study I used *Aboriginal* when referring to circumstances common to Canadian First Nations, Métis, and Inuit because my participants invoked this term. I assumed this choice might be contentious.

### *Parent Involvement*

Much of the research on parent involvement converges on the point of school-home reciprocity; the recognition that schools must welcome parents and that parents should take an interest in their children's progress is, for the most part, uncontested. Dauber and Epstein's (1993) reference to "family and school connections" reflects this synergy. Epstein (1994) suggested:

the term "school-family-community partnerships" is a better, broader term than "parent involvement" to express the shared interests, responsibilities, investments, and the overlapping influences of family, school and community for the education and development of the children they share across the school years (p. 39).

"Parent involvement" however, continues to trump this more equitable terminology in its usage, and is often employed as an umbrella term for a wide range of activities that parents partake in either at school or home, and that are claimed to produce educational benefits for their children (Anguiano, 2004). It is this generic notion of parent involvement that I challenge by redirecting the question toward examining what should be the parents' role in school improvement. The need to expand the definition of parent involvement has been identified in the literature (DeMoss & Vaughn, 2000a; Mapp, 2003; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005), but efforts to address this empirically through the eyes of parents and students have been minimal, and with few exceptions (e.g. Amenu-Tekaa, 1988; Foster & Goddard, 2003; Goddard & Foster, 2002; Goddard, Foster, & Finnell, 2004; Sherwin, 1991) the ethnic uniqueness of Canada's north and its potential impact on educational issues is overlooked. Equally poignant are the broad strokes used to portrait and promote parent involvement from

pre-school to graduation. Ultimately, I seek a broader definition of parent involvement.

### *School Improvement*

There is contestation over the genealogy of “school improvement” and whether it is an independent area of study. Some consider school improvement research a strand of “school effectiveness research,” and one that uses sophisticated postpositivist methodology to examine how schools can change (Reynolds & Teddlie, 2000). Others see school improvement as an area with its own philosophical following (Hopkins, 1998; Young & Levin, 2002). My understanding corresponds with the latter view. Hopkins (1998, 2001) defines school improvement as a focus on improving student achievement through the development of instructional processes and school conditions that support powerful learning experiences for all children. Although school improvement is also understood in general terms, for the purpose of my study I aligned with Hopkins’ precise reference to variables more proximal to student learning outcomes. His definition is congruent with the goals and objectives of AISI, which was the focus of my research, insofar as these programs emphasize initiatives aimed at improved student learning outcomes through teacher development and the collaboration of a broadly conceived school community (Alberta Education<sup>1</sup>, 2004a, p. 1).

### *AISI as Policy*

AISI is not an amendment to the *School Act*, but I categorized it as policy according to Pal’s (2001) definition of public policy as “a guide to action, a plan, a

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<sup>1</sup> On November 24, 2004 Premier Ralph Klein announced a name change from Alberta Learning to Alberta Education. References to both occur throughout this document as a result of this transition.

framework, a course of action designed to deal with problems” (p. 5). Frequently cited definitions of public policy attribute the action to government and public authorities (Brooks, 1998; Dye, 1984), and although AISI is locally designed and implemented, the ministry drives project development through the conditions on which projects are approved, monitored, and/or funding continued. These for me were suggestive of policy.

As a government-funded initiative, AISI addresses issues of student achievement by providing optional money to school boards in cycles of a maximum of three years. School boards acquire funding by submitting research-based project proposals that include specific student learning measures including standardized tests, and that show evidence of collaboration (Alberta Learning, 1999b, p. 4). Each year of funding is determined through a government review of district reported progress on school improvement targets. This last control resembles other policies, such as Title I directives in the United States that require 1% of schools’ Title I funds to be set aside for parent involvement activities along with a “school-parent compact that outlines how parents, the entire school staff, and students will share responsibility for higher student achievement” (Moles, 1996, p. 251). Admittedly, AISI skirts these kinds of strict policy limitations, but implicit in the AISI approval mechanism is top-down policy control.

### **Research Motivation and Background**

My interest in the role of parents in school improvement piqued in the context of developing and supervising an *Alberta Initiative for School Improvement* (AISI) project in a northern Alberta school jurisdiction between 2000 and 2003. Described as

a “grassroots initiative” (Alberta Learning, 1999b, p. i) emphasizing localized improvement and school community partnerships, AISI has become a hallmark of both school improvement and parent involvement in Alberta. The overarching AISI goal to “[improve] student learning by encouraging teachers, parents and the community to work collaboratively to introduce innovative and creative initiatives” (Alberta Learning, 1999b, i) emphasizes for Alberta parents a direct role in student learning outcomes.

My role as district AISI coordinator involved implementing a school-home-community partnership model championed by Joyce Epstein (2001a). Pivotal to Epstein’s thesis is that the school, home, and community are “overlapping spheres of influence” (Epstein et al., 2002, p. 9) sharing equal responsibility for children’s education. Epstein’s (2001a) typology of six keys for effective partnership models a conceptually straightforward approach to involving parents; however, increasing the involvement of parents in AISI, I discovered, was more complicated. My interactions with action teams, AISI school personnel, teachers, parents, students, and administrators revealed the challenges of involving parents in school-led improvement, which was more pronounced at the secondary level. Why was it so difficult to involve parents?

The importance of non-educator perspectives became apparent to me in my AISI experiences when parents shared their trepidation over opening letters from the school. I have since noted the resonance of such experiences at professional conferences involving parents. Being a teacher and not a parent, this for me was an



important insight into parents' assumptions and vulnerabilities regarding communication with teachers.

The importance of examining the perceptions of others has been confirmed through my graduate work. In my first term of doctoral studies, I returned to my former school jurisdiction to conduct a hermeneutic phenomenological (Heidegger, 1962; van Manen, 1997) study of three mothers who were involved in the AISI project as action team members in their children's schools. Findings from this research (Stelmach, 2005a) pointed to a disjuncture between parents' perspectives and the views promoted through government policy documents and by school-based educators. Whereas the AISI mandate presupposes a monolithic understanding of parent involvement, my initial research suggested parents' wishes were dissident and dissimilar. Because the parents in that study had consistent involvement in an AISI project that aimed at improving student learning through increased parent involvement, their experiences contributed to the shaping of my research questions.

My professional experiences, the findings from my research, and my literature review clearly indicated to me a need for examining the consonance and dissonance between policy-based school improvement initiatives that emphasize parent involvement and parents' and students' own understanding of it. Specifically, these encounters led me to me to think there is potential for improving policy implementation so that the expectations and experiences of parents and students is integrated. My earlier restiveness about engaging parents was nurtured into more precise questions: What is the appropriate role of parents in school improvement? To what degree do parents' and students' constructions of the parent role mirror educator and policy maker definitions? I believed

comprehensive documentation of parents' and students' perceptions was a necessary foundation for developing practices around the implementation of policy that would bridge parents' and students' perspectives with educator and policy maker goals.

### **Underpinning Assumptions: Locating Myself within the Cave**

That parents occupy a place in their children's education is intuitively uncontested. They have been described as their children's first teachers (Canadian School Boards Association, 1995; Gestwicki, 2004; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998). But parents are increasingly expected to be more responsible for their and other children's academic achievement in public schools. The orthodoxy that surrounds parent involvement casts them as pseudo-teachers having the aptitude, skill, and desire to fulfill lofty expectations. My AISI coordinator assumptions echoed these beliefs.

When I moved into the position of AISI coordinator in my former school jurisdiction, I adopted Epstein's (2001a) model, which had already been selected as the conceptual framework on which to build the AISI project. I assumed its merits. The mandate that AISI projects include "meaningful involvement of the school community" (Alberta Learning, 1999b, p. 4) unquestioningly became defined in terms of Epstein's model, despite the striking difference between the American, inner-city and predominantly Black and Latina/o context in which the model was developed, and my former jurisdiction's rural, ethno-culturally diverse character.

Retrospectively, my view of parent involvement through Epstein's model was both informed and obstructed. Tracy's (1998) explication of models acting simultaneously as windows and walls gave language to the discord between the certainty I felt about how to involve parents, and the dubiousness that surrounded the

project when parents and teachers did not respond as I had anticipated. My understanding of parent involvement was circumscribed by my secondary teacher and AISI coordinator perspectives, professional literature that outlined step-by-step approaches to engaging parents, and my naïve acceptance that models developed in other socio-cultural contexts were transferable to my own. Platonically speaking, I was in a cave, trusting the shadows thrown against the wall, confident in the ventriloquized voices, and unsuspecting of potential misrepresentation. My doctoral studies turned my head toward the marionettes and the fire. In the early stages I saw my realization of the possibility of other realities as my gaining sight of the cave opening; my research questions were to lead me toward the aperture, and deliver me onto the relatively unexplored territory of parent and student outlooks regarding what is the appropriate role of parents in secondary school improvement. I accepted as important and appropriate the stated objective that AISI was to improve student learning outcomes (Alberta Learning, 1999b); but I also believed understanding whether and in what ways parents and students felt parental participation could contribute was paramount to reaching the stated AISI goal. Importantly, I refuted that parents were homogenous even though policy is often written as if they are; I assumed ethnicity in the northern Alberta context was especially integral to a deeper understanding of the role of parents in school improvement.

### **Methodological Approach**

To carry out my research, I employed interpretive policy analysis (Yanow, 2000) within an instrumental case study (Stake, 2000). Underpinning these approaches were a transactional/subjectivist epistemology and a relativist ontology

whereby meaning was socially constructed and interpreted by both participant and researcher. The research objective to gain educational constituent perspectives on parent involvement policy presupposed this theoretical orientation.

The motivation for this study was to inform future policy and practice that focuses on parent involvement. I believed this could be accomplished through interpretive policy analysis (Yanow, 2000). The strength of the interpretive approach to policy is that it seeks to clarify the various interpretations of policy meaning not only through the policy text itself, but also through the language, objects and actions that symbolize and further communicate policy meaning (Yanow, 2000). I aimed for insight into parent involvement by deciphering meaning that was “authored” in the AISI project and “constructed” by those involved in its implementation (Yanow, 2000). The case study method was an appropriate complement because it afforded an holistic description of real-life events as experienced by those who lived them, namely, parents and students. Case study made possible a thick description (Stake, 2000) of parent, student, and school-based educator perspectives on the role of parents in school improvement. Interpretive policy analysis (Yanow, 2000) provided a lens through which to see whether and/or to what extent the interpretation of these perspectives paralleled the views of those who wrote and implemented policy.

As the main purpose of my study was to examine perspectives about parent involvement, my chief data source was individual semi-structured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2005) with students, parents, and school-based educators. Through my literature review I became aware of the under-representation of research that reflects the northern perspective. Because of this absence and the personal connection

I had with the north, I chose to conduct my study there. I assumed parent involvement in northern communities was influenced by demographic, geographic, ethnic, and sociocultural variables. I hoped my research would advance understanding of the role of parents in school improvement in a northern context, and help me make sense of my own experiences.

The research framework was influenced by my experiences as an AISI coordinator, and what I have learned through my reading throughout my doctoral program. Specifically, AISI, like other parent involvement policies and practices, assumes that writing parents into the program automatically involves all parents, that school-based educators want and know how to include parents in school improvement efforts, that parents and students think of “parent involvement” in the same way as educators and policy makers, and that whatever way parents are involved is positive. My experiences and reading pointed to contradictions between the design of policy, its implementation, and how it was experienced by parents, students, and school-based educators.

### *Significance and Contribution of the Research*

The current goal of parent involvement in education transcends family involvement qua parent presence in schools (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001, p.7). In this era of public accountability and the marketization of the education system (Young & Levin, 2002), parents are expected to take up more demanding, and sometimes contradictory, roles as consumers and producers, pseudo-teachers and learners, decision makers and supporters, fundraisers and accountants, critics and publicists. Endorsed as both an important factor in children’s educational growth and

development, and a critical cog in the education wheel, the drive to utilize parents to improve schools has gathered momentum not only in Canada (Manzer, 1994; Young & Levin, 2002), but in other Western industrialized nations. American and British national policies exemplify some of the furthest-reaching attempts to draw parents into the education strategy. For instance, national policies such as the United States' *No Child Left Behind Act* of January 2002 (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), and England's *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All White Paper* (Department for Education and Skills, 2005) also acknowledge parents as a significant component of student performance. In due course, scholars and professionals have lined bookshelves and libraries with literature that both raises critical questions (e.g. Crozier, 2000; de Carvalho, 2001) and offers easy-to-follow advice on how to get parents involved (e.g. Brown & Moffett, 1999; Danielson, 2002; Dufour, 1998; Marzano, 2003).

Legislation and publication amplify the resounding imperative that has characterized the rhetoric on school improvement. Across Canada, provincial and national parent organizations have incorporated the discourse about parents' influence on children's achievement into their own mandates (Waters, 2002). On October 7, 2003, Alberta's Commission on Learning (2003a) released its final report, in which "support the role of parents" (p. 8) was framed as the first recommendation. At the time of writing, AISI was entering Cycle Three (2006-2009), emphasizing a role for parents. These directives reflect the widespread emergence of policies regarding parent involvement and suggest the likelihood that parents will continue to receive

attention. In this light, I believe my research was timely and significant in Alberta as well as other contexts emphasizing education reform.

### **Presentation of Chapters**

This dissertation comprises seven chapters. In Chapter 2 I review three strands from relevant literature: contemporary literature including educational change literature as the impetus for the genres of school improvement and parent involvement; postpositivist, critical, and constructivist/interpretivist research pertaining to parent involvement; and scholarship contextualizing the north.

In Chapter 3 I describe the impetus, method and rationale for my study. I present the guiding research questions, as well as approaches to data gathering, management and analysis. Chapter 3 includes a description of the school and context to support transferability of findings. Given the number of participants in my study, I used four tables to separate information regarding student, parent, educator, and Aboriginal participants which serve as reference tools throughout the dissertation. I punctuate Chapter 3 with a discussion of how I addressed trustworthiness.

In Chapters 4 and 5 I present my interpretations of the data in response to my research questions. Chapter 4 reports on data collected from student participants; Chapter 5 reports on data collected from parent participants. The data are discussed in relation to literature throughout the chapters, and key learnings are summarized at the end of each chapter.

I introduce a water metaphor in Chapter 6 to reflect a new wave or break in my thinking about Aboriginal parent involvement. As a result of identifying a limitation in my sample of Aboriginal participants, I wrote reflexively in Chapter 6

about my experiences interviewing five Aboriginal women. This chapter is organized around Dion's (2004) questions: "What did I not know before? Why didn't I know? What is the significance of not knowing" (p. 71)? I draw on relevant literature throughout the chapter. I emphasize my assumptions as a non-Aboriginal researcher and educator, and relate these to policy and practice for Aboriginal parents and children. I present key learnings and further questions for consideration at the end of the chapter.

My dissertation concludes with Chapter 7. I provide an overview of the study, a summary of interpretations based on the research questions, as well as the insights I gained from the Aboriginal participants. I discuss implications and suggest directions for future practice, policy, and research.

To reflect my personal and academic growth in this dissertation, I revisit the cave metaphor at the end of each chapter. These shadowscapes highlight that for me this research was also in-search.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **A REVIEW AND CRITIQUE OF RELEVANT LITERATURE**

This chapter reviews literature relevant to my research questions. Keeping in mind Glesne's (1998) articulation of the literature review as "an integration of reviewed sources around particular trends and themes" (p. 21), I have organized it around three broad areas of scholarship that my research questions overlapped. The first section, "The Emergence of Parent Involvement as a Research Theme" genealogically maps the development of parent involvement as a topic of study emerging from "school improvement research," an area with lineage to the "educational change" literature. The second section, "A Critical Look at Parent Involvement Literature" synthesizes and critiques historical and/or contemporary parent involvement literature using as a conceptual framework a modification of Guba and Lincoln's (2005) paradigm positions: postpositivism, critical approaches, and constructivism/interpretivism. The third section entitled "Northern Research" summarizes a selection of relevant studies I read to help me gain an understanding of "north" as the context of my research.

#### **The Emergence of Parent Involvement as a Research Theme**

In the following I show intersections between educational change literature and school improvement research to identify what I perceive to be the origin of parent involvement as a topic of study. This section includes a critical assessment of the popularization of parent involvement in current professional writing.

*Educational Change, School Improvement: The Ancestry of Parent Involvement*

As mentioned in Chapter 1, school improvement differs from the effective schools movement in its inception and assumptions. American educator Ronald Edmonds is considered by some to be the founder of school effectiveness research (Moles, 1993, p. 24). In response first to *Sputnik*, then the Coleman Report (1966), the effective schools movement developed as a counter to Coleman's claim that family background contributes more to student success than schools (Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Reynolds & Teddlie, 2000; Thrupp, 2001). School effectiveness research identifies specific criteria of good schools. It promotes the idea that as long as schools meet certain conditions, students will perform well. Strong principal leadership, high curriculum standards, regular assessment, and efficient use of instructional time are purported to characterize effective schools (Schweitzer, Crocker, & Gillis, 1995). Premised on the faith of proven strategies, the assumption is that children's poor performance is their own, not the school's shortcoming. Initially, parent involvement was ambiguously related to effective schools, but was eventually inventoried (Epstein & Sanders, 2000).

Though parent involvement finds ancestry in the effective schools research, the recent emphasis on parent involvement in school improvement is perhaps more firmly rooted in the educational change literature. Philosophically, school improvement research rejects the deficit model of children that undergirds the effectiveness movement, and advocates for close consideration of contextual variables of schools, including their communities. This critique was inspired by advancements in the educational change literature. Specifically, Fullan's (1982) *The*

*Meaning of Educational Change* problematized large-scale reform, warning against the naïve practice of parachuting external innovations into local schools to improve student performance. In this text and the two decades of writing that follow it, Fullan (1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2005) argued that school change must be understood from the perspectives of those affected by it. This idea was taken up by Roland Barth (1990) in *Improving Schools from Within* whose subtitle claims “teachers, parents, and principals can make the difference.” Although Fullan’s work was seminal in redefining change as a local school process, it is Barth’s publication that is credited for distinguishing school improvement as a contextualized approach to enhancing student outcomes (Hopkins, 1998).

School improvement builds on and reinforces educational change theory. It embraces the idea that schools themselves have the capacity to bring about change, and that relationships among those who belong to a particular school community are central to effecting changes for student learning. Significantly, the school improvement approach pays heed to school culture and the belief that teachers, students, parents, and principals are co-creators of the necessary culture of learning (Hopkins, 1998). This is an important turning point for parent involvement because the reconceptualization of schools as permeable, and improvement as a compromise between bottom-up and top-down strategies, reinforces the need to contextualize the improvement process. If parents and students are indeed important educational agents as both Fullan (2000a, 2000b, 2001) and Barth (1990, 2001) have argued, then it behooves researchers, educators, and policy makers to honor those perspectives in school improvement planning and implementation.

Fullan's (2000a, 2000b, 2001) and Barth's (1990, 2001) work has helped theorists and practitioners understand schools as open systems, which ipso facto suggests parents and students are active constituents. Documenting parents' and students' perspectives can move school improvement from "tinkering at the edges" (Hopkings, 1998, p. 1035) to more deliberately addressing parent involvement.

### *Parent Involvement as Popular Ideology*

Parents' newfound status as fellow travelers in the school improvement journey is evidenced by the amount of space in the educational administration and leadership literature that is devoted to acknowledging a role for parents. For example, academic journals such as *The School Community Journal* are founded on the topic; professional and academic journals such as the inaugural issue of *Principals Online* (2005), *Principal* (2004), *Childhood Education* (1998), and *Educational Leadership* (1998) have themed entire issues around the questions of engaging parents.

The Association for Supervision and Development (ASCD), a portal to popular literature on educational leadership and school improvement, is often the main repository of school administrators' understanding of these issues. The titles and/or content of an increasing amount of texts currently promoted by ASCD are very telling of an idealized understanding of parent involvement. Specifically, there are books that normalize and simplify—positively or negatively—parent involvement:

- *How to Deal with Parents Who are Angry, Troubled, Afraid, or Just Plain Crazy* (McEwan, 2005) is premised on antagonistic relations between parents and teachers, but promises "50 plus ways to build parental support."

- *The Big Picture: Education is Everybody's Business* (Litky & Grabelle, 2004) promotes a more powerful role for parents in chapter seven, "Giving Families Back Their Power."
- *Enhancing Student Achievement: A Framework for School Improvement* (Danielson, 2002) promotes collaboration that involves parents in its chapter, "Linkages Beyond the School", and is referenced by Alberta Education in an AISI document (Alberta Learning, 2003c).
- *What Works in Schools: Translating Research into Action* (Marzano, 2003) considers parent and community involvement a school-level factor that must be considered in school improvement.
- *Building Shared Responsibility for Student Learning* (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2001) writes about collaboration as a process that extends beyond the school walls.
- *The Results Fieldbook: Practical Strategies from Dramatically Improved Schools* (Schmoker, 2001) provides an "Annual School Improvement Planning Process/Checklist" using parent satisfaction to gauge improvement.
- *The Hero's Journey: How Educators Can Transform Schools and Improve Learning* (Brown & Moffett, 1999) describes parents as allies in the sixth chapter, "Gurus and Alliances: Companions Along the Way."
- *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* (Dufour, 1998) devotes a chapter to including parents in professional learning communities.

- *Leadership Capacity for Lasting School Improvement* (Lambert, 2003) builds on previous works by adding a seventh chapter entitled “Parents as Leaders.”

The ability to increase parent involvement is also among the skills of leadership, according to:

- *Promises Kept: Sustaining School and District Leadership in a Turbulent Era* (Gross, 2004). Invoking the language of school culture, chapter eight discusses “Integrating New Families and Students” as a challenge to sustaining a culture of innovation.
- *The New Principal’s Fieldbook: Strategies for Success* (Robbins & Alvy, 2004). Chapter twelve, “Parents and the Greater Community – Partnering for Student Success” engages the rhetoric of partnership as one of the strategies that neophyte principals must employ to achieve success.

The content of these books tends toward oversimplification and/or romanticized views of parent involvement. Whereas the effective schools literature falls short of outlining a process for including parents in improved student learning (Seashore Louis, Toole, & Hargreaves, 1999), the school improvement camp seems to make it look straightforward because assumptions are not challenged.

Evans (1996) aptly noted that “students, like their parents, offer an astonishing potential for school improvement – free” (p. 173) but yet the school improvement literature is bankrupt on student and parent input. This is particularly the case at the high school level. This absence is compounded by poor theoretical translations delivered to practitioners through popular literature which glosses over the complexity of the school-home relationship, and omits almost entirely the viewpoints

of those most impacted. Unequivocally, parent involvement is a potentially rich idea in the area of school improvement, but what cashes out in the popular texts is arguably an ideological platitude. Research into parent involvement rarely reflects the standpoint of students and parents in diverse contexts. This absence points to possible advances in scholarship and practice from research that pursues their views.

### **A Critical Look at the Parent Involvement Literature**

Risking anachronism, I begin my review of the literature regarding parent involvement by resurrecting, as others have (de Carvalho, 2001; Hargreaves, 2000; Lightfoot, 1978; Vincent, 1996), a statement from Willard Waller's (1932) *The Sociology of Teaching*:

From the ideal point of view, parents and teachers share much in common in that both, supposedly, wish things to occur for the best interests of the child; but in fact... parents and teachers are natural enemies, predestined each for the discomfiture of the other (p. 68).

To some, Waller's assessment of the relationship between teachers and parents might seem overly brusque, for the euphemism of contemporary educational rhetoric has thinned many skins with the pleasantries of "partnership." But a broad survey of the scholarship revealed parent involvement continues to be a well-traveled and challenging topography: Seemingly straight paths promise increased involvement of parents and better student grades (e.g. Berger, 2004; Callison, 2004; Ellis & Hughes, 2002; Epstein, 2001b; Olsen & Fuller, 2003; Roffey, 2002); milestones mark places where parent involvement has positively impacted learning outcomes (e.g. Philipson, 1997; Swick, 2003); roadblocks challenge and derail efforts to increase parent

involvement (Hargreaves, 2000); and signs post potentially exploitative and inequitable impacts of particular parent involvement practices (Crozier, 2000; de Carvalho, 2001). In this section I attempt to show the relative absence of firsthand information from those who inhabit the territory of school improvement—parents and students.

### *The Framework*

To organize the sizable body of scholarship on parent involvement, I adapted Guba and Lincoln's (2005) paradigm. Because epistemological assumptions shape theoretical approaches, their framework suitably emphasizes the nature of questions scholars have asked and the subsequent methods used to answer them. My classifications include postpositivism, critical approaches, and constructivism/interpretivism. I use "critical approaches" to reflect differentiations between critical theory and poststructuralism, which Guba and Lincoln conflate.

### *Synthesis of the Literature*

Postpositivism claims a realist ontology in which nature and social life are independent entities, and embraces an objectivist epistemology in which meaningful reality exists outside of human consciousness. Studies conducted using postpositivist approaches are interested in confirming a connection between parent involvement and student learning. The advantage of postpositivist studies is that they support an ecological argument regarding the permeability of educational institutions so as to expand the variables that contribute to students' academic achievement and the improvement of schools. Findings forge a connection between this area and the



school improvement literature. Research on minority parent groups is particularly useful, despite the concentration on the American cultural context, because it highlights the divergent experiences of non-mainstream parents, disrupting entrenched notions of parent involvement. But these latter studies suggest an unresolved question concerning the ecological nature of schooling: how permeable are the boundaries (Nakagawa, 2000)?

The postpositivist research has served the important purpose of informing educational practice because of its focus on outcomes. Methodologically, the approach of these studies treats parent involvement as a pseudo-science, which has given confidence to the field, but at the same time has made parent involvement an unquestioned good. By locating parent involvement in the subject position of a cause-effect formula for increasing students' achievement in school, postpositivist studies have homogenized parents, and have ignored what occurs in the hyphen. In the current age of accountability, educational administration has become sensitive to results, something postpositivist research promises to deliver, but parent-student-teacher dynamics are assumed rather than investigated through this approach. This may be because the studies to date have concentrated on an age/grade category that is more conducive to parental intervention, but more so because the quantitative analysis disregards issues of process. Moreover, because these studies tend to restrict the definition of parent involvement to traditional activities such as volunteering in school and helping with homework, stereotypes of the deficient parent inevitably abound. School administrators and teachers embracing these research findings may decide on compensatory action that fuels unfair prejudices. The field can be expanded

through interpretive studies that open up the subjective terrain of parent involvement by capturing secondary parents' and students' ideas. Indeed, there is a moral imperative to do so because schools are not pseudo-scientific institutions, they are socially negotiated environments.

Fellow postpositivists have also challenged parent involvement research because of inconsistent definitions, overuse of non-experimental designs, lack of isolation of parent involvement effects, and the use of non-objective measures of parent involvement (Baker & Soden, 1998). This critique is motivated by a desire to validate what has become intuitively accepted. However regression analysis, surveys, and mathematical calculations do not distinguish process from product. Arguably, tightening up these techniques will not help the field understand how to improve existing practices and policies; it will only reinforce more strongly what is already working for some parents. To quote Bourdieu, "what statistical analysis can grasp is a moment" (cited in Gardner, 2004, p. 138). Policy based on this snapshot information is problematic for the bigger picture of school improvement.

A second position, borne of critical inquiry, troubles parent involvement by bringing to the surface the way ethnicity, class, and gender affect parents' ability or inability to participate within schools according to current discourses of parent involvement. Rooted in Marxist theory, critical theory focuses on macro-level socioeconomic sources of power among parents, locating the problem with parent involvement in broad social and economic realities. The feminist poststructuralist paradigm departs from critical theory on this matter, and instead examines from a micro-perspective how parents choose or do not choose to participate in schools. Like

critical theory, feminist poststructuralism acknowledges power differentials among parents, but feminist poststructuralism argues that all parents have choices in this regard, and that *not* participating in school-oriented opportunities is also a choice.

The educational reforms of the 1990s lay fertile ground for a crop of research by critical theorists and feminist poststructuralists who scrutinized well-intentioned policies such as site-based decision making, charter schools, and home-based parent strategies that purported to give parents democratic voice and choice in education. The value of these studies is in their attempt to disclose the inequitable dimensions and effects of educational policy and “in their insistence on continuing to ask basic sociological questions about the relationships between educational practices and social inequities” (Ball and Shilling, 1994, p. 2).

Critical theorists have identified educational policies and institutions as sources of oppression, fleshing out how parents’ ethnic heritage, socioeconomic class, and/or gender contributes to the banking (or bankruptcy) of cultural capital that corresponds to the predominantly white, middle class values, practices, and expectations of schools. This view suggests parents are either powerful or powerless within the school’s ideological scheme. The Marxist notion of a parent underclass, central to critical theorizing of parent involvement, infers that certain parents are forced to mortgage themselves to the oppressive power of educators. These arguments have made perspicuous the heterogeneous nature of parents and have questioned postpositivist claims about the benefits of parent involvement. This has had the desirable effect of pushing postpositivist research to consider culture and other factors in their findings.

Critical theory has its own shortcomings. Short of a revolutionary change in the way schools are structured and organized, parents who are shown to be excluded will forever be pushed to the periphery. Critical theory does not offer silence or non-participation as a form of action or resistance to macro-educational forces. Its fundamental question of who is not included presupposes a particular conceptualization of inclusion. While useful for illuminating the relationship between power and culture, elucidating the heterogeneity of parents, and challenging common-sense notions of parent involvement, critical theory domesticates oppression (Crotty, 1998), inherently suggesting the way out of oppression is to oppress, which is antithetical to the democratic project of Canadian schooling. Essentially it relies on the same traditional definition of parent involvement as postpositivist researchers.

The poststructuralist response, rather than ask *to whom* does education policy grant and deny participation, is to question *how* parents access, adapt, reject, or reverse parent involvement discourses (Weedon, 1997) that have been made available to them through policy and practice. Considering the preoccupation with globalization, and that the profile of the involved parent has traditionally been, and continues to be, a middle class white female, feminist poststructuralism built upon the Marxist tradition dominates the field. These studies view parent involvement as inherently gender-biased toward women. Significantly, feminist poststructuralism explains that activities related to caring for children are confined in theory to the private sphere, so women, despite having crossed the threshold into the public domain, continue to be judged and/or rewarded as parents according to patriarchal expectations (David, 2004, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c). The practical significance of this is

promising for it facilitates dialogue about the assumptions of parent involvement strategies and programs, and makes possible parent involvement that is reflective of parents' shifting realities.

The level of analysis of poststructuralism poses a paradoxical limitation for both scholarship and practice. The aim is to isolate and interrogate “signifying practices” within discursive fields (Weedon, 1997, p. 12)—institutional language, practices, hierarchies, and relations that bear plural interpretations—which appear as natural to the acting subject. It is a subject's actions within discursive fields that the poststructuralist locates agency. But how is it possible for a teacher or school administrator to conceive of a parent's absence as conscious (or unconscious) resistance to a school's efforts to engage her as a positive response when teachers and administrators are bound by the discourses of school? Unlike critical theory, poststructuralism accepts resistance as an active form of involvement; however, poststructural analysis cannot fully explicate the nature, reason, or outcomes of that resistance or action. Are some actions privileged over others? How do parents negotiate competing discursive fields such as parent-of-child versus parent-of-student? If power operates in everyday practice, and parent involvement denotes a certain form of power, is parents' (un)involvement, in fact, a subjectivity that is passively enacted? If so, how can knowing this inform policy?

The sticking point in poststructuralist thought for me is that it spirals and recoils to a point where one is left wondering about the practical implications. Unequivocally, the value of poststructuralist research on parent involvement is that it assumes parental agency, and explodes the categories for how agency is filled. It

raises awareness about varying dimensions of parent involvement. This is an important beginning, but accessing the details of these variances from the agents' perspective is critical for policy development, implementation, and evaluation.

A third position in the literature I examined is the one that aligns with my ontological and epistemological assumptions, what I have labeled constructivism/interpretivism. Constructivism and interpretivism are epistemologically and ontologically similar; therefore, I employ the terms interchangeably. Constructivists argue for a relativist ontology whereby all social meaning is constructed. Constructivists subscribe to a subjectivist epistemology whereby all knowledge is contingent upon human interaction and known within a social context (Crotty, 1998). Studies conducted from this position have found both congruities and incongruities with the way parents and educators experience programs and strategies involving parents (Lawson, 2003, Pushor & Murphy, 2004). The findings make clear that educational policy constructs parent involvement in ways that privilege educator expectations; rarely stated, although implicit, are educators' assumptions of a division between professionals and parents in terms of roles and what counts as knowledge. The field has not explored far enough beyond perceptions or evaluations of common parent involvement practices to clarify the types of involvement parents *do* perceive as meaningful. In other words, it is the meaning of "parent involvement" itself that requires exploration. High school students' perceptions are a virtually unexplored territory in this regard.

Constructivist/interpretivist literature focuses on general questions regarding which, how, and why parents are involved or not in their children's education, and

concentrates on the primary grades, often in schools located in inner cities. There is recognition that families in these contexts, often members of visible minorities, participate differently compared to the cultural mainstream. The explanatory power of these findings is great for elementary school parent involvement in these contexts, but the transferability to secondary contexts with unique demographics is questionable. Aboriginal parent involvement and remote, northern communities for example, are seldom investigated, despite the fact that Aboriginal students are falling dangerously below the standards.

Interpretive accounts of what parents and students perceive to be the appropriate role for parents in supporting their children's academic development would balance perspectives in existing research by streamlining findings to improve the design and implementation of mutually beneficial policy. Currently the field confirms that certain parent involvement practices are successful among some groups of parents, and provides accounts of parents' experiences with existing practices and policies, but it does not resolve parent involvement challenges among non-mainstream families outside of American sites. This is not to say that an interpretivist account of parent involvement is without limitations. As interpretivism is premised on the notion of multivocality, the question of how to best to include the many voices of policy into design and implementation becomes a challenging one. Its strength, however, is in pointing out that policy terms have potentially variable meanings.

Postpositivist, constructivist/interpretivist, and critical literature is reviewed below. This is followed by a discussion of research about the north.

## *Postpositivist Research*

As the director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships, principal researcher at the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk, and founder of the National Network of Partnership Schools, Joyce Epstein's (2001a) work is arguably the most influential research in the domain of parent involvement. Epstein and her colleagues have conducted several longitudinal studies using rigorous statistical methods to demonstrate the link between parent involvement and student learning. Her findings have been synthesized into a framework of school-home-community partnership based on a typology of six keys of involvement:

**Type 1 – Parenting:** Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions that support children as students at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families.

**Type 2 – Communicating:** Communicate with families about school programs and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications.

**Type 3 – Volunteering:** Improve recruitment, training, work, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs.

**Type 4 – Learning at Home:** Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curriculum-related activities and decisions.

**Type 5 – Decision Making:** Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy through...school councils, committees, action teams, and other parent organizations.

**Type 6 – Collaborating with the Community:** Coordinate community resources and services for students, families, and the school with businesses, agencies, and other groups, and provide services to the community. (Epstein et al., 2002, p.165)



This typology has come to be the most frequently cited and applied framework for understanding parent involvement in schools (e.g. Baker & Soden, 1998; Canadian School Boards Association, 1995; Dietz, 1997; Hara & Burke, 1998; Lyons, Robbins & Smith, 1984; Mapp, 2003; Norris, 1999; Simich-Dudgeon, 1993). Other parent involvement models, such as the Comer Process (Comer, Haynes, & Joyner, 1996), have been built on similar assumptions, structures, and practices.

Epstein et al. (2002) have generated three key findings: (1) students whose parents participate in their children's schooling show improvements in academic performance, behavior, attendance, attitude, high school completion, and are more likely to pursue post-secondary education; (2) parent involvement tends to decline across the grades unless schools make conscious efforts to develop and implement partnerships with parents; and (3) economically distressed, single parents, employed parents, fathers, and geographically distant parents tend to be less involved unless the school organizes opportunities that consider these parents' needs and circumstances. Though some question a causal relationship between parent involvement and school effectiveness (Bastiani, 2000), these findings have largely justified the inclusion of parents in school improvement and fueled research of this nature.

Using experimental and quasi-experimental designs, surveys, and statistical analyses of student performance in subject areas, a number of experimental studies at the kindergarten and primary level have proven parent involvement leads to significant achievement gains. The consistent reporting of a positive connection between parents helping their elementary school-aged children with language arts-based homework has helped to establish parent involvement as an important variable

of school improvement (DeCusati & Johnson, 2004; Faires, Nichols, & Rickelman, 2000; Hara & Burke, 1998; Porter & Johnson, 2004). That these findings are less convincing at the higher levels or with traditionally more challenging curriculum, such as math or science (Balli; 1998; Wang & Wildman, 1995) suggests an over reliance on the rationalist approach. Thus, though it has been demonstrated through control groups that parent participation in homework increases when teachers requested it (Balli, Demo, & Wedman, 1998; Van Voorhis, 2001), most of the research does not go past the middle years to warrant promoting this practice.

Scholarship that validates the connection between parent involvement and academic achievement at the secondary level has been scant and contradictory. Research conducted among high schools has found that parents' involvement in their adolescents' school lives has made a positive difference to attendance (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004), attitude toward school (Epstein & Sanders, 2000), and high school completion (Anguiano, 2004). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995) conceptualization of "mechanisms of influence" (p. 319), however, troubles the assumption that parents have the unfettered ability to influence their children's performance. They suggested children's perceptions of appropriateness influence parent involvement. Along this vein, a Canadian study of 525 adolescents found that parents' infrequent communication with teachers proved statistically significant for maximizing students' performance in school (Deslandes, Royer, Turcotte, & Bertrand, 1997). These findings suggest parent involvement is contraindicated at the high school level. In contrast to studies conducted in elementary school contexts, where parents are assumed to be a key, unidirectional factor in students' achievement,

secondary school studies factor students into the equation and suggest a bidirectional relationship in which students' responses to parent involvement is actively negotiated. The mechanisms of this negotiation, however, have yet to be explored among students and parents.

Whereas the differences between elementary and secondary parent involvement have been under studied, there has been extensive examination of the differences in parent involvement accrued to culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic level, gender, parenting style, and family structure (e.g. Desimone, 1999; Deslandes, Royer, Turcotte, & Bertrand, 1997; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001; Halle, Kurtz Costes, & Mahoney, 1997; Hart & Risley, 1995; Hickman, Greenwood, & Miller, 1995; Keith & Lichtman, 1994; Lareau, 1996; López & Vázquez, 2005; Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997; Pushor & Murphy, 2004; Zill, 1996; ). These studies indicate, regardless of background, parents have similar desires for their children to succeed at school, but they perceive their involvement in very different ways. Studies such as these challenge de-contextualized parent involvement, as it is currently conceived as a strategy for school improvement, and point out that cultural and other factors must be considered when trying to engage parents for the purposes of helping students achieve better results. This has created a more nuanced understanding of parent involvement. The paradigmatic orientation toward Eurocentricity from which postpositivism has emerged, however, leads to a mainstream understanding of culture, gender, and so on. Thus, postpositivist studies that attempt to contextualize parent involvement are already circumscribed by traditional notions of parent involvement.

The above concern places a limitation on postpositivist research because traditional notions of parent involvement do not reflect the different ways parents understand involvement. For example, non-Anglo parents see themselves as being supportive when they are not interfering with teachers' work (DeMoss & Vaughn, 2000b). Lopez's (2001a, 2001b) work compels us to ask on whose terms we evaluate parents' involvement. Furthermore, my own findings (Stelmach, 2005a) suggest differing perspectives even among Euro-Canadians. Research that measures the impact of parent involvement strategies such as homework help or volunteering perpetuate school-centered values, and discount parents' interpretations of what it means to be involved. School improvement that is based on these notions of involvement create benefits for some families but leave out those parents who do not subscribe to traditional expectations of parents. Teasing out the epistemological and ontological bases of these differences may lead to more sophisticated understanding.

In focusing on measurable outcomes, postpositivist research has generalized parent involvement so that practitioners and policy makers can understand the value of parents. This is especially useful in the current climate of democratic decision making in Western schools. The postpositivist picture, however, is incomplete because it ignores the affective dimension of parent involvement. For example, the research does not describe what homework sessions look like when parents get involved. From a postpositivist perspective, nagging a child to complete homework is acceptable if it results in better grades. But if homework time is riddled with argument and frustration, might not the impact of those interactions negatively effect student-parent relations and children's learning? Parent involvement practices that are

reported to contribute to achievement might actually run counter to its objective when applied at the high school. Furthermore, there has been little attempt to understand how parents experience their contribution because teachers have prescribed it. Complementing the postpositivist view with insight from those who are not educators may provide insight into improving parent involvement practices.

### *Critical Research*

Both critical theory and feminist poststructuralism forecast a cycle of inequity for children and their families borne out of government and educator efforts to increase particular kinds of parent involvement. I was drawn to these literatures because they tug at the notion of parents as a consensual group, and weed out rhetoric from reality by bringing to the surface values and assumptions that undergird policy. Three ideas figure prominently in this literature: cultural capital, power discrepancies, and gender (de)privileging.

*Critical theory.* Studies on parent involvement that employ critical theory lean heavily on Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction. Lareau (1987, 1996), de Carvalho (2000), and Vincent (1996, 2000) are among the prominent scholars of this approach. Based on the idea that schools reproduce an arbitrary cultural scheme (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), critical theorists argue the parental role is constructed around a set of values and assumptions that do not account for differences associated with social class, family structure, ethnicity, and home circumstances (de Carvalho, 2001). What is presented as a democratic opportunity for parents to engage in their children's schooling actually discriminates against those whose needs and interests are not compatible with school and/or policy expectations. Critical theorists have

pointed out that Western educational systems project white, middle class values; therefore, those families whose material and cultural conditions do not match this social code are either labeled as deficient or are excluded (de Carvalho, 2001). This research has raised caution about parent involvement policy and practice.

Lareau's (1987, 1996) and de Carvalho's (2001) empirical work has moved parent involvement research away from the idea that some parents are simply uninvolved by explicating theoretically the root of working and lower class parents' so-called apathy. They have found that non-mainstream culture parents and those of lower socioeconomic status submit to their children's teachers compared to white, middle class parents who interact with educators with a sense of entitlement. While the former group adopts a deferential posture to educators, referring to them as "the school" (Lareau, 1996, p. 60), the latter group has been known to challenge teachers' decisions and demand accountability from them (Caines, 2005). These studies have demonstrated the inextricable link between parents' stock of cultural capital and their sense of efficacy and/or empowerment concerning their children's teachers.

Emphasizing that invitation is not empowerment (Fine, 1993; Ruitenberg & Pushor, 2005) has forced educators and researchers to reconsider how parent involvement is promoted. Most of the research has focused on parents of lower socioeconomic status and minority cultural groups, but Vincent's (2000) work with middle class professional parents serves as a counterpoint. Concluding that parents "felt subordinated in the sense that they believed themselves excluded" despite being from a "relatively privileged grouping" (p. 129) has pointed to the need for further

investigation of non-educator experiences. Importantly, Vincent (2000) has challenged scholars to reconsider the meaning of parental disadvantage.

Critical theory's focus on cultural capital has also helped the field understand the complexity of discrepancies between working, lower class, cultural minority parents and those belonging to mainstream cultures. The economic advantage enjoyed by middle class parents afford them the ability to purchase more resources, services, and experiences to enrich their children's learning (Linver, Fuligni, & Brooks-Gunn, 2004). But social networks and language symbolically feed into cultural capital, suggesting that money is not a singular driving force of parents' ability to participate in their children's schooling. For example, Lareau (1987, 1996) and Lareau and Shumar (1996) have found that working and lower class parents' social networks are composed mainly of family members whose values and experiences are similarly at odds with the educational system. Oriented toward their own, and involved in unstructured activities such as bike riding with cousins, these parents and children cannot climb the social hierarchy. Their social networks provide few opportunities for obtaining information about schools and other educational issues. Because middle class parents have extensive social networks with like-minded parents, they have easy access to the kind of information the school deems important. Without that access, working class parents are considered by educators to be uninformed and indifferent.

Language is another mechanism of separation. Linguistic capital yields symbolic power for parents who speak the language of school, but immigrant parents, or parents who do not have close relations with the school, more often default to symbolic powerlessness in both social and educational contexts (Leonardo, 2003).

Schools essentially create “linguistic legitimacy” (Reagan, 2001, p. 246) based on white middle class values, which further distances parents who are already excluded because their mother tongue is not English.

For some, such as Aboriginal parents, linguistic capital is more than a structural disadvantage. Cajete’s (2005) work has emphasized Aboriginal language from a philosophical perspective, describing an Aboriginal belief in language as the “sacred expression of breath” (p. 71). The integration between the philosophy of the language and its reciprocal relationship to how one lives is an important insight. The spiritual import of language in Aboriginal culture suggests language is not a vehicle for Aboriginal parents to tell their children what to do and how to behave, or to speak for their children by challenging teachers. This notion departs from how parents are often expected to be involved, and offers a new avenue worthwhile of pursuing to understand the cultural element of parent involvement. It suggests that even if parents gain financial capital, their linguistic differences resigns them to a parvenu position compared to parents who have mastered teacher speak.

Critical theory’s most promising contribution to the study of parent involvement has been its ability to demonstrate that not only do some parents have more cultural capital than others, but that the schools themselves reproduce these inequities. Well-intentioned practices such as engaging parents in homework for instance, emphasize differences in cultural capital. De Carvalho has drawn attention to the “obscure side” (p. 115) of homework, arguing homework is a subtext carrying the message that parents who do not help their children with homework are negligent. Because homework requires parents to construct their homes to mirror the values and



practices of the school (Waggoner & Griffith, 1998), when parents do not, they are assumed to be bad parents (Pushor & Murphy, 2004). Thus, critical theory has demonstrated how something seemingly innocuous like homework operates insidiously to construct notions of good and bad parents.

What critical theory has not been able to answer is how cultural reproduction can be avoided, prevented, or disrupted within current educational structures. It lacks a positive argument. Furthermore, critical theory universalizes a particular notion of good/bad parents, without establishing how parents themselves view their circumstances and behavior. The critical commentary is made on behalf of parents who are seen as objectified by the system, but it has not suggested a way for parents to escape this. In relation, critical theory assumes power differentials between parents and teachers are undesirable (Crozier, 2000; Sarason, 1995; Vincent, 1996, 2000), which has focused researchers on the question of how to equalize parents and educators. This may not be the most fruitful avenue to pursue if parents themselves do not desire power. McGrath and Kuriloff (1999) have argued similarly, warning that increased parent involvement may bolster advantages to those parents who already have high access to schools. Assuming power will be utilized for positive ends by parents is perhaps one area that requires reconsideration.

*A feminist poststructuralist critique.* A feminist poststructuralist view has advanced the parent involvement literature by challenging the assumption of school-family partnerships as a gender-neutral concept. David's work has been most instructive in this regard. David (1993a, 1993b, 2002, 2004) argued that gender differentiation is implicit in parent involvement policies and strategies because

mothers have traditionally assumed the educational responsibility for their children. As previously stated, research on positive parental influence on students' success suggests a middle class, white, married female profile (Crozier, 2000; Epstein et al., 2002; Fine, 1993; Riley, 1994; Waggoner and Griffith, 1998). The increase in women pursuing higher education or full-time paid positions, and the greater incidence of lone-parent families headed by females (Statistics Canada, 1996) has decreased stay-at-home moms. Yet, the traditionally held assumption that schooling is the mother's responsibility prevails, weighing mothers' shoulders with additional responsibilities.

Further, David (1993a, 1993b, 2002, 2004) espoused economic and political forces of globalization as the root cause of greater demands for mothers to be breadwinners, babysitters, and baked goods entrepreneurs. The neoliberal expectation for individual self-sufficiency within a shrunken welfare state forces mothers into the labor market. At the same time, parents are pulled into the educational system as market mechanisms and ledgers in a new accountability scheme, both for the sake of educational excellence. At the core, the endurance of patriarchal structures upholds the assumption that mothers' work is in the private sphere, despite changes in women's involvement in the labor market. The implication is a heightened sense of responsibility for women to participate in their children's schooling through the traditional role of care-giving, and the added responsibilities created by school improvement directives to increase the parents' role (David, 2004).

This view implies if parent involvement is approached with the idea that mothers will fulfill school-related functions, then it seems likely that these duties will be constructed to accommodate so-called mothers' work. This critique was important

to my research because it peels back another layer of assumptions, but it takes on another assumption that the postmodern mother is definitive of all mothers. Also, by highlighting the direct impact on women, the feminist critique eclipses the role of fathers in school improvement. Critical to the question of the parents' role in school improvement is how mothers and fathers locate themselves within such initiatives, and how to negotiate potentially divergent perspectives

### *Constructivist/Interpretivist Research*

So far, I have delineated research conducted within postpositivist and critical frameworks. If one can make a rough distinction, much of the former literature claims parent involvement can positively impact students' school experiences and performance, while the latter denounces it as a contributing factor to educational inequity. Like constructivist approaches, critical theory explores how social reality and social phenomenon are constructed, but critical theory's aim is to critique and transform through an activist voice, unlike constructivists who facilitate understanding through multivocality (Lincoln & Guba, 2003, p. 257). In this final section of my literature review I complement postpositivist and critical paradigms with a sample of research based on constructivist/interpretivist assumptions organized around teacher, parent, and student perspectives. To gain an appreciation for how this variance is represented, I read across methodologies, but narrowed my search to studies that attempted to flesh out motivations for, and experiences with, parent involvement from educational constituent perspectives. My objective was to demonstrate an omission of parents' and students' perceptions and experiences specifically in relation to school-led improvement initiatives.

*Teachers' perspectives.* Mandates to employ parents in school improvement blur the line between teacher and parent responsibilities, but constructivist researchers have made clear that impermeable boundaries persist in the collective voice of the profession. Isolationism, protectionism, and exclusion are clear and common themes that have emerged from research on teachers' perceptions about involving parents (Allen et al., 1997; Casanova, 1996; Crozier, 2000; Davies, 1993; de Carvalho, 2001; Henry, 1996; Lawrence-Lightfoot; 2003; Lightfoot, 1978, McKenna & Willms, 1998; Moles, 1993; Ogawa, 1996; Sanders & Epstein; 1998; Ravn, 1998; Sarason, 1995; Vincent, 1996; Walsh, 1995).

Studies have focused on various parent involvement practices, including school governance structures in Canadian (McKenna & Willms, 1998) and international (Kelly-Laine, 1998; Ravn, 1998; Sanders & Epstein, 1998) contexts, organized programs such as *Head Start* (Allen, Thompson, Hoadley, Engelking, & Drapeaux, 1997; Smith, 2004), and traditional practices such as volunteering and doing homework with children (Lawson, 2003) finding that, with rare exception, teachers restricted parents' involvement to non-intrusive or teacher-directed activities such as providing basic needs, reading at home, visiting the classroom, and performing miscellaneous tasks (Allen, Thompson, Hoadley, Engelking, & Drapeaux, 1997). These findings have been useful for decentering the issue of parent involvement away from so-called uncooperative parents, suggesting that the challenges to parent involvement are located in teacher resistance and control. However, much research has clustered around a narrow definition of traditional parent involvement. This limits the applicability of these findings because the insight

into professional superiority or gatekeeping that seems to have characterized parent involvement leaves unanswered how educator and non-educator perspectives can or should be bridged. Because much of the research on parent involvement has emphasized an educator perspective, homogeneous parent involvement has become deeply rooted despite the difficulty in implementing it across parent populations.

Diversity has become a focal point among constructivist research that examines educator perspectives. This research has shown that teachers' low impressions of parents as uneducated, unstable, and therefore hard to reach intersect with race and class (Lawson, 2003), drawing a connection between teachers' beliefs about families and their efforts to engage them (Casper, 2003). The tendency to frame the issue in terms of cultural, socioeconomic, or demographic conflict (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Kirkness, 1998; Lightfoot, 1978; Moles, 1993; Public Agenda, 1999; Quinn, 1999) has preoccupied the field with fitting these differences into current parent involvement schemes. Questioning parent involvement from non-educator perspectives may theoretically strengthen this area of research.

Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2003) recent work has been promising in this regard. Using a narrative approach, Lawrence-Lightfoot explored the connection between teachers' and parents' personal history and culture within their experiences of parent-teacher conferences. By excavating the autobiographical stories of ten female teachers and several parents across the U.S.A., she discovered that teachers' approaches to parents during parent-teacher conferences were shaped by childhood memories of school and their own parents' interactions with teachers. What gets spoken, she argued, is a manifestation of these archival memories, consciously and

unconsciously known. Whereas much of the literature suggests teacher professionalism and expertise grants them power and privilege over parents, Lawrence-Lightfoot revealed teachers' trepidation over parent-teacher exchanges. Undercurrents of anxiety, uncertainty, and a desire to erect boundaries, more commonly attributed to parents, characterized these teachers' experiences. Importantly, Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) disclosed shared vulnerability between teachers and parents; the commonality of experience suggests a broader understanding of parent involvement from parents' eyes may lead to narrowing the perceived rift between them.

*Parents' perspectives.* Lawrence-Lightfoot's previous (e.g. Lightfoot, 1978) and more recent (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003) work is an appropriate segue for discussing research findings on parents' understanding of their school involvement. Whereas much of the constructivist literature on parent involvement assumes parents share teachers' motives for being involved in school, Lawrence-Lightfoot challenges that belief. She drew a distinction between parents' particularistic interest in their own children compared to teachers' universalistic concern for the success of all children. This conceptualization has given a theoretical explanation for the fracture point that scholars have argued to explain the precarious relationship between teachers and parents (Dodd & Konzal, 2000; Moles, 1993; Skau, 1996).

On its own, Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2003) thesis does little to explain how parents define school improvement and perceive their role within such initiatives, or if/how particularistic and universalistic interests can be forged. It is largely presented in the literature that parents get involved in their children's education to have an

academic impact, and policy has been constructed along these expectations. From this standpoint, it is presupposed that parents have a particularistic interest in influencing their children's academic performance. But Lawson (2003) found divergence from parents who doubted their ability to create better learning experiences for their children. My pilot study confirmed this (Stelmach, 2005a). Furthermore, there are conflicting claims about the relationship between student performance and parents' decisions to get involved. One claim is that the better the child is doing at school, the less parents feel they need to be involved (Drummond & Stipek, 2004); another claim is that when students perform well, parents were more likely to be involved (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). That these and other studies on parents' involvement have been descriptive (Mapp, 2003; Morgan & Grace, 1992; Ravn, 1998) and often based on educator-prescribed parent involvement has contributed to an imbalance in the constructivist genre that reinforces educator perspectives. Furthermore, these descriptive studies have not explicated parents' experiences, or whether they agreed with the roles educators have traditionally assigned them.

As was the case for research on teachers' perspectives, diversity has been a central interest in investigations of parent perspectives. These studies have been particularly useful for demonstrating a contrast between teachers' views of parents and parents' views of themselves. For example, parents who do not initiate or respond to contact with the school have been labeled "hard to reach" (Epstein, 2001a, p. 274), yet López and Vázquez's (2005) work with Latina/o parents directly challenged that assumption. An important finding from their study was that Latina/o parents regarded themselves as "first parents" and teachers as "second parents" (p. 15), which turns on

its head the commonplace notion of parents as subordinate educators, and demonstrates a disconnection between how those “uninvolved” parents perceive their role vis-à-vis educators. Similarly, Wilson and Napoleon’s (1998) study of First Nations parents in British Columbia concluded that First Nations parents meant something different from mainstream parents when they spoke about their children’s educational success, and how parents contributed to it. Importantly, these works showed that while teachers viewed some parents as uninvolved, parents viewed themselves oppositely. Thus, the question of what parents’ role definitions are based on warrants further investigation.

To date, much of the research has concentrated on socioeconomic and cultural diversity in American and international contexts, concluding, as discussed in the previous section on critical research, that parents’ cultural capital is tied up with their self-appraisals of their subject knowledge, and their previous experiences with schools determines the extent of their involvement (Davies, 1993; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Skau, 1996; Ziegler, 2000). While this deepens understanding of the parents’ view, these findings have largely been based on inner-city, elementary contexts among African-American and Latina/o parents, so insights gained from these studies may be over asserted in contexts such as Canada’s rural north, secondary schools, and Aboriginal populations. In addition, it has been found that high school parents feel teachers’ rejection more frequently (Westergård & Galloway, 2004), and show a marked decrease in school involvement (Epstein, 2001a; Sanders & Simon, 2002), yet the research has not ventured very far in exploring these phenomena.



Addressing this methodological oversight may portray the multiple perspectives of parents more completely.

*Students' perspectives.* If parents can be described as overshadowed by policymakers' and educators' agendas, then there has been a near total eclipse of the student perspective. There is optimism as more scholars venture into the hallways to remedy this oversight (e.g. Crozier, 2000; Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Garrod, Smulyan, Powers, & Kilkenny, 2005; Levin, 2000; Nogeura, 2004; Oldfather, 1995; Rudduck, Day, & Wallace, 1997; Scherff, 2005; Spencer, 2003, 2004; Taylor, 2001), but I would argue that the project has just begun.

Very little attention has been directed at students' perspectives about parent involvement. Crozier (2000) has been an exception. A key finding of her study was that students expressed decreasing satisfaction with and desire for parent involvement in homework with increasing grade level. These findings importantly demonstrated a pattern of independence that progressed throughout secondary school. Her generalization that the older the students were, the less concerned they were that their parents made direct contributions to their learning departs from the broad generalizations made about the positive impact of parent involvement. This suggests that how parents are involved at the secondary level cannot be the same as it is currently constructed at the elementary and middle years.

Scholarship that has explored secondary students' perspectives on educational reforms outside of parent involvement have emphasized that students are cognizant of their educational environment as political and have a desire to influence or provide feedback about changes that affect them (Spencer, 2003, 2004; Taylor, 2001). Good

teaching, provision of appropriate resources, well-equipped facilities, and a learning environment that upholds the values of respect, fairness, and enriching learning opportunities have been described by students as criteria for effective schools (Scherff, 2005; Spencer, 2004). Parent involvement has been given little mention to date. Students' apparent indifference to their parents' involvement in school-prescribed activities does not necessarily mean that they completely discount parent involvement. But current research has overlooked potential differences between parental roles in elementary and secondary school. Furthermore, most research has only focused on students' reactions to structural and financial reforms, limiting their opportunities to speak on issues that indirectly impact their classroom experiences.

Finally, research involving students has shared the same bias as other constructivist studies in this area, namely, that they have been conducted in metropolitan contexts leaving out those who reside in rural or northern locations. For instance, student comments included in the final report of Alberta's Learning Commission stood for 107 Alberta students; this shut out 589,993 students, according to Alberta Education's current K-12 profile (Alberta Education, 2006b). The challenge for scholarship is to broaden its view of who are the students and dispel the myth of there being one student experience. Illuminating multivocality among students could offer yet another angle from which the issue of parent involvement is understood, and lead to more sophisticated questions and future research. As it stands, the topic of parent involvement is particularly uninformed about these perspectives, despite students being the *raison d'être* of school improvement.

### *Recap on Postpositivist, Critical and Constructivist/Interpretivist Literature*

Methodologically, postpositivist approaches have dominated the field, which has perhaps sparked a critical reaction and a growing number of theoretical studies. Rigorous statistical analyses have helped to clarify the link between parent involvement and student success, but as previously mentioned, parent involvement tends to be narrowly defined in these studies. Critical inquiries similarly take up these narrow definitions to critique parent involvement from the perspective of class, culture, and/or gender. Cultural capital seems to be the theory du jour in these studies, which helps researchers and educators recognize parent involvement as a limiting discourse. But the findings tend to position parents as either privileged and involved, or underprivileged and uninvolved, creating, in my opinion, a blind spot in the literature. Finally, constructivist/interpretivist studies have been conducted within narrow contexts of urban, inner city, elementary schools, based on educator definitions of parent involvement. Interpretive inquiries focused on the concept of a parent role rather than involvement avoids defaulting parents to a state of deficiency. Conducting these studies in secondary and northern contexts and forefronting parents and students' insights will not only complement postpositivist and critical works, but has the advantage of introducing new vocabulary that may lead to methodological sophistication and improvement. My methodological approach was chosen to move thinking about parent involvement beyond its "problems" to highlight its possibilities.

### **Northern Research**

My decision to conduct my study in northern Alberta was based on my assumption that schools in the north face unique challenges. This was my perception

and experience as an educator and AISI coordinator between 1998 and 2003. I was interested in how scholars defined “north” because I believed a deeper understanding of northern characteristics would give me insight into how the northern context effected implementation of policies around parent involvement. In my reading I found Buchan’s (1996) contention to be true that “North means different things to different people” (p. 11). I limited my reading to scholarship that focused on the Canadian north as this was where I situated my study. I found that “north” was contextualized in multiple, sometimes contradictory, ways, which I categorize below.

“Geographical north” most closely described my initial encounters with the north. Isolation and remoteness from densely populated areas are common depictions of the north, reinforced by the fact that the majority of Canadians has never visited or lived in the north (Bone, 2003). Because of their distance from urban centers, one perception is that northern communities are untouched, wild, and waiting to be discovered and developed (McCormack, 2005). The fact that higher measures of Nordicity on Hamelin’s scale are associated with lack of development (Bone, 2003) accentuates north as a hinterland. Demographically, northern communities are presented in contradictory terms: as graying and declining (Baker, 2003), and increasingly youthful and male (Bone, 2003). Depending on one’s referent, therefore, the north can be viewed as a place of possibility or paucity.

“Anthropological north” portrays the north as a cultural binary. Most of the literature about or conducted in the north emphasizes an Aboriginal presence (e.g. Baker, 2003; Bone, 2003; Campbell, 2003; Foster & Goddard, 2001; Furniss, 1999; Goddard & Foster, 2002; Goddard, Foster, & Finnell, 2004; McCormack, 2005). An

“Indian/white dichotomy” (Furniss, 1999, p. 14) is an outcome of this characterization which tends to overlook diversity in both groups and ignore multicultural populations.

The north has also been described as a place where pioneer spirits go to seek adventure and challenge their comfort zones. Campbell (2003), for example, described herself as a “hardy protagonist” (p. 23) living and working in the north as an educator. “Mythological north” is a place that requires the ability to endure long winters, extremely cold temperatures, an absence of daylight (Bone, 2003), and fearlessness of “wild animals and wild Indians” (Furniss, 1999, p. 14). Hostility and threat epitomize an aspect of the mythological north, suggesting it is a suitable destination only for those with the most sophisticated survival skills. From this perspective, the north is also a gendered concept conveyed by caricatures of “the tough, rugged, quintessential miner or lumberjack” (Buchan, 1996, p. 12). Surrounding this mythology of the harshness of the north is the perception that it is a place of punishment. In their study of northern schools in three provinces, Goddard, Foster, and Finnell (2004) reported that teachers perceived First Nations schools, more common in the north, as undesirable posts, and reserved for disciplinary action.

Pristine landscapes and solitary havens also form part of the mythology of the north. It is a place of “absolute stillness,” Campbell (2003, p. 15) argues, “so unlike your [life]” anywhere else. Brilliant and expansive northern lights, healthy lakes, rarely sighted wildlife, and thick forests represent bucolic images of the north. On this side of the mythology, the north is peaceful, delicate and fragile; susceptible to anthropogenic damage because of the time it takes for the land to repair itself from

the scars of human activity (Bone, 2003). This view of mythological north allures those in search of tranquility.

McCormack (1993) identifies an emergent view that challenges romanticized notions of the north as raw and undeveloped. A “postmodern north” confronts the modernist assumption that economic development is good and necessary. This view emphasizes the fragmentation of community and impoverishment that has resulted from haphazard entrepreneurialism. A postmodern north is empowered, not by its potential for economic wealth, but by its inhabitants who resist and attempt to manage industrial penetration of their territory. A postmodern north is not a terra nullis; it is “home.”

In the education literature, north has primarily been framed in geographical and anthropological terms. Among Canadian scholars, Amenu-Tekaa (1988), Sherwin (1991) and Wilson and Napoleon (1998) have looked specifically at Aboriginal parent involvement in northern contexts. More recently Goddard, Foster, and Finnell (2004) have examined leadership from the perspective of educators, parents, students and community members in northern communities in Western Canada characterized by high Aboriginal populations. These studies have been instrumental in highlighting northern Aboriginal perspectives and the challenge of educating Aboriginal students within a school system dominated by Western values. Extending the investigation to broader conceptualizations of “north,” I would argue, may provide a clearer picture of northern educational particularities and issues.

## Shadowscape

I commenced my doctoral studies with a concern about parent involvement that stemmed from my AISI coordinator position in Shadow Canyon. Namely, I wondered why, despite the proven success of Epstein's (2001a) model, parent involvement did not significantly increase in my former jurisdiction. Was this model not the answer to parent involvement? Did I not implement strategies correctly? Was it the teachers who resisted having parents more involved? The principals? Were parents not interested? Did the rural, northern context make parent involvement difficult? Perhaps all of these factors played a part. However, my doctoral experiences helped me to see beyond the need for a particular type of answer; my search for best practice was perhaps a shadow in my path to understanding the issues behind parent involvement. My sense-making around this shadow came about through my engagement with the literature. Ultimately, the reconceptualization of my curiosities was an important outcome of my literature review, and represents the beginning of my transition from educational practitioner to researcher.

To explain, as a practicing educator "research" had a particular connotation for me. I looked for facts about how to do something, what worked, or what did not work. I considered this information a "resource" more so than "research." It was not until I took up the position of AISI coordinator that I considered myself a consumer of research. Most of what I read, however, was in quest of what Labaree (2003) calls "valued outcomes" (p. 17), and stemmed from my particular desire to know how to increase parent involvement. Putting Epstein's (2001a) six keys to parent involvement into practice was what I "knew" about increasing parent involvement.

As a researcher I have come to question those six keys and parent involvement in general, and have had to “give up certainty” as my doctoral advisor would say. Though I once saw parent involvement as a problem to be fixed, I now see it as a problem I have yet to fully understand (Labaree, 2003).

Engaging with postpositivist, constructivist, and critical literatures has afforded me an understanding of parent involvement as a multi-faceted issue. As one genre clarifies, it simultaneously casts a shadow. Learning to navigate the “marshy epistemological terrain” (Labaree, 2003, p. 14) of educational research has been central to my experience.

### **Chapter Summary**

To provide a context for my research, I reviewed literature relevant to my research questions, including educational change, parent involvement with postpositivist, constructivist/interpretivist, and critical persuasions, and research that investigated north from various perspectives. The next chapter outlines in detail the methodology I used to conduct my study.



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter outlines the research paradigm and method I used to conduct the study. In keeping with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) concept of naturalistic inquiry as an emergent and iterative process, I explain the choices made throughout stages of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This chapter unfolds with the following:

- Research questions and purpose of inquiry
- Research paradigm
- Research methodology
- Data sources
- Data analysis and interpretation
- Trustworthiness
- Delimitations and limitations

#### Research Questions and Purpose of Inquiry

My study was predicated on the possibility that “too often we assume that we know the meaning of experiences for others” (Barrit, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij, 1984, p. 16). In designing this study, I identified the need to explore parent involvement as *parents* and *students* experience it, and how their perspectives are similar to or different than those of the policy makers and educators. I followed the lead of notable scholars who have drawn attention to the importance of exploring parent involvement from non-educator and non-mainstream positions (Friedel, 1999; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Lawson, 2003; Lightfoot, 1978) and those who have

specified a need for research in this area at the high school level (Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Mapp, 2003).

My research questions were developed through empirical research and theoretical explorations in my doctoral courses. I conducted a pilot study (Stelmach, 2005a) between September and December 2003 which explored three mothers' experiences in a school-led *Alberta Initiative for School Improvement* project. Using face-to-face, individual semi-structured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2000) I asked five questions:

- What do you expect schools to provide for your and other's children?
- What does "school improvement" mean to you?
- Does the Epstein model accurately reflect what you believe about how parents should be involved in schools?
- How would you describe your experiences working on the AISI project?
- What did you learn from your experiences about school improvement and parent involvement in schools?

For the purpose of member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) I returned transcripts to all participants then constructed themes. I found the parents in that study did not define school improvement in terms of student achievement; they held more encompassing views. Most interesting to me was that their responses indicated a feeling of being peripheral to school improvement decisions, despite their direct involvement in the planning and implementation of the schools' AISI projects. Their experiences ranged from ambiguous and uncertain, to positive and fulfilling. Learning this motivated me to further investigate. I used this pilot study to clarify my theoretical framework,

develop the research questions, and refine data collection plans and procedures (Yin, 2003).

Through course work I explored the topic in terms of organizational theory (Stelmach, 2004), policy, and gender issues. I engaged in an ongoing literature review which made me aware of the complexities surrounding parent involvement, and the relative lack of research that considers secondary parents' and students' perspectives. I did this to focus my research.

My hope for this research was to enrich educational policy discussions and practice by contextualizing the concept of parent involvement. In keeping with qualitative inquiry, my contribution focuses on explicating what parent involvement *means* for parents and students, and how this meaning corresponds or clashes with those who design policy and those who take responsibility for implementing it.

### **Research Paradigm**

Ontology and epistemology act together as a centrifugal force in research; one's beliefs about reality and how it comes to be known propel the researcher's methodological direction. My research was grounded in the belief that knowledge is constructed through interaction with a social world, and meaning is filtered through interpretations by actors in situ (Schwandt, 1994). The decision to explore my research questions through interpretive policy analysis (Yanow, 2000) within instrumental case study (Stake, 2000) stemmed from these constructivist and interpretivist persuasions. Although constructivism and interpretivism are treated as separate paradigms by some (e.g. Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 1994), I saw interpretivism as inherently postured within a constructivist paradigm. This corresponds to Guba and

Lincoln (1998) who suggest interpretation is the conduit to understanding how constructions are brought out and refined through researcher-respondent interactions.

### **Research Methodology**

Interpretive policy analysis (Yanow, 2000) and case study (Stake, 2005) are philosophically and methodologically complementary. Both underscore the link between values and beliefs, regard sense-making as a subjective and inter-subjective activity, and employ similar strategies for data collection and analysis. In this section I justify my methodological approaches by outlining their suitability in light of my research questions.

#### *Interpretive Policy Analysis*

There is mounting argument that “parent involvement” holds different meaning for school-based educators, parents, students, and policy makers. My intention was to “make speak as many voices in the policy conversation as possible” (Yanow, 2000, p. 90). The strength of the interpretive approach is that it explores potential variances in policy meaning, such as those “authored” by policy makers and “constructed” by policy-relevant groups (Yanow, 2000, p. 9). As my research objective was to contextualize parent and student understanding of a policy-directed concept, interpretive policy analysis seemed an appropriate choice.

Because interpretive data cannot be separated from their sources, data are not collected per se, but “accessed” through locally constructed knowledge. According to Yanow (2000), “interviews, observation, and document analysis constitute the central interpretive methods for accessing local knowledge and identifying communities of

meaning and their symbolic artifacts” (p. 31). Interpretive policy analysis must be conducted within a specific context, which led me to a case study approach.

### *Case Study*

My decision to conduct an instrumental case study was not a methodological choice, as Stake (1994) puts forth, but a choice about the object to be studied and its context. As my aim was to elicit emic meanings of the role of parents in school improvement in northern secondary schools, case study provided a means to gather insights about the phenomenon from people within a particular case. This approach carried the advantages of capturing rich and holistic accounts of parent involvement, which I hoped would lead to a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

Having spent five years living and working as an AISI coordinator in northern Alberta, the case was also bound by my persistent questions about the north and parent involvement that emerged from those experiences. In some sense then, this research was a case study of my prefixed ideas about these phenomena. While I hoped the geographical and cultural diversity of Alberta’s north would provide a new angle from which to understand the role of parents in improving schools, gaining insight into my own assumptions as I shifted perspectives from practitioner to researcher was ultimately critical.

### *Site Selection*

My own experiences corroborate scholars’ recognition that northern schools present unique circumstances including frequent teacher turnover, limited access to resources, higher costs associated with access to transportation and distance,

increased autonomy due to isolation, and improved quality of life related to the proximity of social networks in small communities (Baker, 2003; Goddard & Foster, 2002; Friesen & Friesen, 2004; Morgan & Morgan, 1992). Noting this and the relative lack of education research conducted in the Provincial North (Bone, 2003), I selected a Catholic secondary school (grade 7-12) located in northern residence “Zone B” as defined by Revenue Canada (Northern Residence Deductions, n.d.). Residents living in Zone B are entitled to a daily living allowance at half the rate of residents in Zone A which is calculated for income tax purposes.

*The Saints School.* The Saints School was located in a community I called Shadow Canyon approximately 500 km from the provincial capital, and about 200 km from a major city. Shadow Canyon was considered a northern hub by virtue of eight major and secondary highways and an industrial railway line that give access to the town. The town itself sprawled over a significant area on both sides of a river, making public and school bus transportation necessary to an estimated 6200 residents (Statistics Canada, 2001b). Census data between 1996 and 2001 indicated declining population (Statistics Canada, 2001b) although I witnessed a trifecta of industrial, commercial, and residential construction within and surrounding Shadow Canyon. At the time of my data collection, public officials had proposed to include the community’s shadow population of trades workers and business entrepreneurs in the local census, indicating a degree of transient population influx.

The thrice daily passing of trains loaded with oil, lumber, and grain (Alberta First, 2005) testified to a burgeoning natural resource industry, which perhaps accounted for the population fluctuation in Shadow Canyon. Growth appeared to be

both blessing and curse: According to 2001 Statistics Canada data the average earnings for persons in the labor force in Shadow Canyon was \$33,519 for all persons, exceeding the provincial average of \$32,603; the downside was made obvious by the advertisements for journeymen welders and electricians huddled amongst crowds of yard sale signs.

Demographically, Shadow Canyon was a young town; the majority of the population was below 44 years of age (Statistics Canada, 2001b). Contrary to Bone's (2003) claim that males dominate northern communities, females outnumbered males in Shadow Canyon. These demographics may have explained the existence of four school divisions that were located in and served the area. The Saints School was one of three secondary schools in Shadow Canyon.

Five Francophone communities within a forty-kilometer radius created Shadow Canyon's French Canadian presence; one could hear French language at the local establishments, and The Saints School participated in joint French Immersion programming with the two secondary schools in the community. Thirteen percent of Shadow Canyon was Aboriginal; 15% of that population was between 15 and 19 years of age. The statistics on the community's Aboriginal population were pertinent to my study considering the national Aboriginal birth rate was nearly twice that of non-Aboriginals (Statistics Canada, 2001a), and that in 1996 45% of Canadian Aboriginals between 20 and 29 years of age did not possess a high school diploma compared to 17% of non-Aboriginal people (Alberta Learning, 2001). This population growth suggested to me that parent involvement strategies would be increasingly targeted at young Aboriginal parents.

According to school district documents, 66 self-identified First Nations and Métis students attended The Saints School in 2004/2005, and 74 in 2005/2006. In this later year, the self-identified Aboriginal population included 19 Status First Nations, 4 Non-Status First Nations, and 51 Métis students<sup>2</sup>. The principal reported that the total student population was around 406 in both school years.

Both entrances to the school displayed its Catholic *raison d'être* with Scripture and a fountain gracing one entrance, and a Bible and oil painting of Christ resting in the corner near the other. In the mezzanine above the office, a chapel with polished hardwood and wall-sized mural provided a tranquil refuge for group or individual prayer. A trophy case opposite the general office displayed awards for academics, sports, band, leadership, Christian service, job safety, and philanthropic endeavors. Two awards memorialized former Saints students.

The Saints School exuded a feeling of modest prosperity and pride that was expressed in a number of ways. New computer towers stood next to previously existing monitors; TV/VCR combinations perched in the corners of sometimes crowded classrooms; a new Xerox document center stood in the teacher workroom; and, the staffroom was a tasteful arrangement of leather couches, a well-equipped kitchen, small-screen television, and a spiritual nook. Storage spaces had been turned into offices and tiny classrooms, student artwork graced the hallways, and public areas were continually tidied by custodial staff who appeared to work tirelessly throughout the day and evening. Friendly reminders, announcements, and kudos

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<sup>2</sup> Status Indians are registered or entitled to be registered under the *Indian Act*, which establishes the requirements for determining who is a Status Indian. Non-Status Indians are not entitled to be registered under the *Indian Act* because their ancestors were not registered or lost their status under provisions of the *Act*. Métis students are of mixed First Nations and European ancestry.



scribbled on the whiteboard gave the impression of the school as a comfortable, family-like space, while schedules of meetings and events organized the school's bustle of activity.

Academics and sports seemed to be pillars of the school. A floor-to-ceiling oak and marble "wall of achievement" stood prominently near the cafeteria and a history of athletic achievements decorated the gymnasium. A small but functional student room with comfortable arm chairs and a computer housed calendars of 37 post-secondary institutions. That only four technical schools and no vocational schools were represented implied an emphasis on post-secondary degree programs. The administrators pointed out that 40 out of 88 students in the 2004/2005 graduating class pursued post-secondary studies, and 18 of 88 received Alexander Rutherford Scholarships (Alberta Learning Information Service, n.d.). All but one student was reported to have graduated in 2004/2005. The Saints School also had an organized team of teachers who met regularly to monitor the progress of their special needs students, including the 22 coded as exhibiting "severe" behavior (Alberta Education, 2006d, p. 5). Together, these suggested to me a commitment to academics.

A critical criterion for selecting a case is that it provide a prime opportunity to learn about the phenomenon under study (Stake, 2000). The Saints School was my place of employment between 1998 and 2000 prior to my accepting the position of AISI coordinator at the district office to lead the implementation of Epstein's (2001a) school-home-community partnership model in Cycle 1 (2000-2003). After spending five days at The Saints School assisting Dr. Rosemary Foster with a study called *Leadership in Secondary School Improvement: A Northern Perspective*, I decided

with her that The Saints School presented characteristics pertinent to my study. It was demographically and culturally diverse. The school had demonstrated continued commitment to parent involvement by staffing a part-time coordinator to sustain Cycle 1 activities. Together these suggested The Saints School would allow for an information-rich analysis and the advancement of understanding of the role of parents in school improvement shaped by a northern context.

### **Data Sources**

Interviews were the primary data source, and were supplemented with document analysis and observation. I used these approaches to access multiple meaning with the hope of establishing methodological rigor in my study. The following section outlines the procedural aspects of my research. I discuss how data collection was undertaken in sections titled “Interview,” “Document Analysis,” and “Observation.” These procedures were carried out in accordance with the University of Alberta Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB).

### *Participant Selection*

I selected 41 participants through purposeful random (Mertens, 2005) and snowball sampling (Wellington, 2000). My goal was to achieve maximum variation of perspectives while ensuring representation from those who might have divergent views. Fourteen students, 15 parents (included two mother-father pairs), 5 Aboriginal community members, and 7 educators (included two administrators) participated.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> All participants in this study are represented by pseudonyms which they were invited to select.

I used my school visit as a research assistant with my doctoral supervisor to observe the characteristics of the student and parent population, and to gather a list of potential participants from administration, office staff, and teachers to achieve maximum variation of participants. During that week I selected from that list parents and students who were not included in the study with my supervisor, and began contacting them by telephone to invite them to participate.

I began data collection approximately two weeks later. With administrators' permission I consulted school council yearly plans, meeting minutes, and student lists to complete the sample. Following ethical procedures, written informed consent was received by all participants, including parents of minors, before arranging interviews.

Initially I anticipated interviewing a maximum of 10 parents, 10 students, and 5 educators. After conducting a number of interviews with parents, students, and educators, I identified the need to expand my sample to capture greater diversity of voices. In particular I was interested in hearing from students for whom school was academically or socially challenging and/or unsatisfying, parents whom educators deemed unsupportive of teachers, parents who self-identified as Aboriginal, and experienced teachers who could provide a longitudinal perspective on parent involvement. I further explain my choices and courses of action with respect to students, parents, Aboriginal participants, and educators in the next four sections.

### *Student Participants*

Fourteen students were selected based on grade level, gender, and school performance assessed by educators as struggling (academically and/or socially) or honor roll. I had a naive understanding of what constituted struggling or honor roll

when I first created the sample; in chapter 4 I explain how I recognized these terms as subjective.

During interviews I asked students: Do you identify with an ethnic background? Some students identified as Canadian (See Table 3.1). As argued in Chapter 2, student perspectives are under-represented in the literature; therefore, my objective was to capture diversity in student voices. I was particularly interested in including Aboriginal students in my study in light of current educational statistics.

I spoke to some students at the school, while others I first contacted by telephone to explain my research. Regardless of the student's age, I spoke with one of her or his parents to explain the purpose of my research and the nature of their child's involvement prior to inviting or confirming the student's participation. At one father's request I e-mailed information about the study to facilitate his decision. Due to part-time work, one Aboriginal student declined to participate. Two Aboriginal students suggested by teachers were not contacted because the school did not have their current place of residence; one student did not have a telephone. Prior to the interview, all participants and parents of minor children received an invitation letter and explanation of the research, consent forms, and copy of the interview questions (Appendices A-C).

**TABLE 3.1**  
*Student Participants' Gender, Grade, Identified Ethnicity, and Academic Performance*

Participant	Gender	Grade	Identified Ethnicity	Academic Performance
Bailey	F	10	Métis	Struggling
Luke	M	10	Canadian	Struggling
Cory	M	11	Native	Struggling
Trish	F	11	Francophone	Struggling
Jack	M	12	Canadian	Struggling
Suze	F	10	Métis	Honor roll
Michael	M	10	Canadian	Honor roll
Kate	F	11	Francophone	Honor roll
Becky	F	11	Canadian	Honor roll
Sean	M	11	Chinese	Honor roll
John	M	12	Ukrainian	Honor roll
Jermaine	M	12	Filipino	Honor roll
Danny	M	12	Norwegian	Honor roll
Alicia	F	12	Canadian	Honor roll

*Parent Participants*

In light of my review of the literature in Chapter 2, I assumed parents' gender, the grade of their children, and ethnic background would influence their perspectives. For this reason I selected parents on the basis of gender and children's grade level, and asked them to self-identify their ethnicity. Four were parents of students I interviewed for this study. As well, to compare the similarity and/or difference

between parents' and teachers' perceptions of parent involvement, I selected parents that were judged by teachers and support staff as supportive or unsupportive. I did not define "supportive" and "unsupportive" when I asked for potential participants that fit these categories. I selected some parents without staff input; therefore, I could not ascribe the latter attributes to some parents as noted in Table 3.2. During the interviews I asked parents about their ethnicity. As indicated in Table 3.2, two parents who identified with European or Canadian heritage were foster or adoptive parents of Aboriginal children. Invitations and written informed consent were carried out in a similar manner as explained in the previous section regarding student participants. Two parents declined participation because they were too busy. I interviewed two husband-wife partnerships together.

**TABLE 3.2***Parent Participants' Gender, Children's Grade, Identified Ethnicity, Level of Support*

Participant	Gender	Grade	Identified Ethnicity	Level of Support
Yves (husband)	M	11	Francophone	n/a
Martine (wife)	F	11	Francophone	n/a
Hans (husband)	M	10, 12	Dutch Immigrant	Supportive
Gretta (wife)	F	10, 12	Dutch Immigrant	Supportive
Victoria	F	11, 12 (Aboriginal)	Canadian	Supportive
Lewis	M	12	Scottish	Supportive
Guy	M	5, 10 (Aboriginal)	Francophone	Supportive
Oskar	M	9, 10	Canadian	Supportive
Melanie	F	9, 10	Francophone	Unsupportive
Jill	F	12	Canadian	Unsupportive
Surin	F	12	Filipino	n/a
Angela	F	9, 10	Canadian	n/a
Mikah	F	12	Métis	n/a
Betty	F	11	Canadian	n/a
Anneke	F	11	Dutch Immigrant	n/a

### *Aboriginal Participants*

My original plan for this research did not include an in-depth exploration of Aboriginal perspectives. Comments made during interviews about Aboriginal parents being uninvolved however, prompted me to seek their voices. With this objective in mind, the *First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (FNMI) became important to my investigation. FNMI is a provincially funded initiative which supports local improvement projects to increase learning outcomes for Aboriginal students. Launched in 2004, one of its “long-term expected outcomes” is to “recognize and increase parental involvement in the education of First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners” (Alberta Learning, 2002, p. 5). Because its vision, principles, and goals philosophically resemble AISI’s approach to school improvement, I decided to extend my analysis to include the FNMI policy.

In the selection of Aboriginal parents I sought advice from the school and district FNMI coordinators, an Aboriginal community worker, parents, and educators. Two Aboriginal parents obtained from these sources declined participation, and a third did not return messages. Two of the three parents who were recommended by the school and who did agree to participate were legal caregivers of Aboriginal children but were of non-Aboriginal ethnicity, and the Métis mother interviewed indicated she “grew up White.” Therefore, I submitted a Request for Change in Methodology to the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) to include community-based Aboriginal participants in my study. I received approval on June 15, 2005 (Appendix D).



Following the same procedures for contacting and obtaining written informed consent, five Aboriginal women were selected with the help of jurisdiction personnel and through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling allowed me to increase the diversity of perspectives; this emergent yet sequential (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) approach was intended to yield a broader understanding of parent involvement by extending my sample to include participants who were different from the initial sample. A male Elder was contacted several times by telephone but had not committed, and by that stage I was satisfied that the five Aboriginal women who had agreed to be interviewed would represent a range of experiences and insights, particularly considering the central role of women in Aboriginal societies (Kenny, 2004).

Aboriginal participants included two Elders, two trustees from The Saints School's jurisdiction Board of Trustees, and an Aboriginal woman whose community role I called Aboriginal Parent Support Worker. Table 3.3 profiles the Aboriginal participants.

**TABLE 3.3**  
*Aboriginal Participants' Ethnicity and Community Role*

Participant	Identified Ethnicity	Role in Community
Heidi	Cree	Elder
Dolly	Inuvialuit	Elder
Esmé	Métis	Elected Catholic Trustee
Bibi	Cree	Appointed Catholic Trustee
Marlena	Cree	Aboriginal Parent Support Worker

*Educator Participants*

To compare the extent to which non-educator and educator views on parent involvement coincided or conflicted, two administrators and five educators were interviewed. Educators were selected for their gender, years of teaching experience at the school as of 2004/2005, and discipline (see Table 3.4). I believed a range of perspectives would yield a broader understanding. When possible, I chose teachers who were not at the school during 1998 and 2000 when I taught there to reduce the potential impact of familiarity on their responses.

**TABLE 3.4**  
*Educator Participants' Gender, Years of Teaching, and Discipline/Position*

Participant	Gender	Years of Teaching	Discipline/Position
Ned	M	26	Administrator
Keith	M	25	Administrator
Elmer	M	16	Science
Sue	F	12	French
Tina	F	2	Art
Ava <sup>1</sup>	F	1	Cultural Studies
Cathy <sup>2</sup>	F	1	English

<sup>1</sup>Ava was staffed part-time as a teaching assistant.

<sup>2</sup>First year teacher.

*Interview Protocol*

I conducted individual semi-structured (Fontana & Frey, 2005) interviews. A semi-structured approach enabled me to adapt to unexpected responses and pursue salient aspects as they were introduced (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Considering my novice status as a researcher, I believed developing and following interview schedules based on my research questions was necessary to develop the initial framework of the interview (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). I employed a mixture of pro forma questions to elicit information such as what grades their children were in and their ethnic background. I used open-ended questions to encourage interview participants to express their understanding of concepts such as “school improvement” and “parent involvement” as Patton (1990) would say “in their own terms” (p. 290).

Interview questions were refined as data were analyzed and I consulted more literature (Appendix C).

Initial and follow up interviews were conducted at the school and participants' homes or place of work between April and October 2005. Prior to the interviews, I emphasized the ethical standards of anonymity, privacy, and pseudonymous reporting; reminded participants of their rights to withdraw from the study without repercussion or penalty; and, informed them of how the data would be used. With participants' permission, I audio taped the interviews.

Since parents and students, and Aboriginal views are largely overlooked in the literature, my objective was to seek their perspectives to enrich my understanding. I interviewed most of these participants two to three times individually for 30 minutes to two hours to probe information, follow emerging themes, or investigate cultural perspectives. Some initial and follow up interviews occurred over telephone due to unexpected circumstances. Follow-up interviews were conducted as soon as possible after initial interviews were transcribed and analyzed. I believed follow-up interviews would increase the climate of trust between the participants and me, and lead to more insightful conversations, hoping these approaches would increase the trustworthiness of my interpretations.

Interviews with the five Aboriginal women combined semi-structured and unstructured (Fontana & Frey, 2005) questions so that, as much as possible, I would not impose my Eurocentric assumptions about Aboriginal parent involvement. I hoped that by letting Aboriginal participants have more control over the conversation that the complexity and richness of Aboriginal world views could come through.

Because these interviews were conducted toward the end of my data collection stage in September and October 2005, I felt more confident with a less structured interview format. Follow-up interviews with these participants served two related purposes. They increased the comfort level between the Aboriginal participants and me, which I hoped would encourage them to speak freely and allow me to acquire deeper, more contextual understandings of their views about the role of Aboriginal parents in school improvement.

I personally transcribed all interviews as soon after the interview as possible while participants and their voices were fresh. This helped me to monitor and improve my interview technique, and initiated data analysis (Silverman, 2005). Transcribing the interviews also expedited return of the transcripts to participants for member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314),

I conducted member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in a number of ways to confirm whether I had accurately captured the participants' viewpoints and experiences. After each interview transcripts were returned with self-addressed, stamped envelopes to provide participants with a chance to make changes. Follow-up interviews also served as a member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314) as I reported back respondents' comments and my interpretations, and invited them to confirm, disconfirm and/or give feedback. Also, at the end of each transcript I recorded my interpretations of participants' responses. I read these to participants at the beginning of follow-up interviews, and provided written interpretations on the final transcripts so that they could again confirm or disconfirm them via the post. These processes were followed as a means to strengthen my understanding, support

the construction of themes and improve the trustworthiness of the interpretations. One student and one Aboriginal community member editorialized their transcripts.

My secondary objective during my site visits was to decipher educators' understanding of parent involvement in school improvement. Except for two educators whom I interviewed twice to explore divergent views on parent involvement, the teachers were interviewed once for approximately 45 minutes. Interviews were audio taped and I followed the same procedure for member check. This group did not editorialize the data.

#### *Acknowledged Limitations of Interviewing*

Interpretive research is a social accomplishment. This means that both the asking and the responding were influenced by subjective experience. Even though my interviews were semi-structured, the area of focus, the way I phrased the inquiry, and how I responded to the answers were evaluative. Furthermore, regardless of how I structured my questions, interviewees' ability to recall information or their speculating what I want to hear may have impacted the quality of the data (Yin, 2003). This may have been compounded with teacher participants for whom I previously filled a role as AISI Coordinator (Glesne, 2006). These uncontrollable elements are the essence of naturalistic inquiry, thus, reflection and reflexivity were critical research stances which I practiced through regular journal writing.

#### *Document Analysis*

Text can be treated as "a window into human experience" (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). In my study, documents served as a heuristic device to identify words, ideas, and images that have been recorded exclusive of researcher intervention (Silverman,

2000, p. 825). As part of ongoing documentary research this strengthened analysis and interpretation. Internal documents such as school newsletters, pamphlets, public memorandum, calendars, handbooks, and those generated through the AISI and FNMI projects were examined. Publications disseminated primarily through Alberta Education provided important insight into the policy perspectives on parent involvement. Community publications facilitated a contextual understanding of Shadow Canyon.

### *Metaphor Analysis*

Yanow (2000) suggests policy meaning can be “read” through metaphors employed in policy documents. On the surface, metaphors appear to be merely descriptive, but when scrutinized, she contends, they acquire a prescriptive aspect. “Parents as partners,” a commonly promoted metaphor, guides both thought and action regarding the relationship between parents and schools. I searched the above listed documents for ways in which parents or the parents’ role was described. I considered phrases such as “partnership” or “responsibility” as clues to how policy perceived the parents’ role. This analysis complemented primary data collected through interviews, and provided further insight into policy makers’ understanding of parent involvement.

### *Acknowledged Limitations of Document Analysis*

While documents were relatively easy to collect, they were not without impediments. Interpretation of documents had the advantage of giving information that the spoken word might not, but these assemblages of “mute evidence” (Hodder,

2000, p. 703) required more contextualized interpretation to eke out built-in biases and absences (Merriam, 1998). Furthermore, their fixedness was specious: seen through my eyes, their meaning transformed as I did. Using documents as part of a triad with interview and observation data helped to ground interpretation.

### *Observation*

With the intent of improving the trustworthiness of reported findings, I compared data collected from interviews and document analysis with observations recorded in my researcher's journal. I observed the research environment, made notes about participants to support thick description and interpretation, and noted decisions made about the research process. Incorporating methods described by Bogdan and Biklen (2003), Wolcott (2005), and Warren and Karner (2005) I recorded point-form field notes throughout each day that were typed up as narrative with my comments and reactions at the end of the day when possible. Most importantly, in a narrative journal I recorded my personal insights and assumptions about the research process and the phenomenon under study, and noted ideas requiring clarification, which formed part of my ongoing inductive analysis. Journaling captured research as an holistic experience, yielding data that informed interpretation. These procedures were followed to create an audit trail to support the trustworthiness of the research.

### *Type of Observation*

The goal of qualitative research is to understand a phenomenon in its natural setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My observations were conducted in a manner similar to what Bogdan and Biklen (2003) call observer-as-participant because I believed being in the setting while observing it would allow me to capture salient aspects of



the setting and participants to inform my inquiry and interpretations. I visited the school on five separate occasions between April and October 2005, grouped in time periods of several days, two weeks, and one month. Along with casual interactions in the faculty lounge and throughout the school, I observed five junior and senior high classes, and attended seven meetings and five co- and extra-curricular events:

- English 10-1, Math 24, Chemistry 20, Physics 30 and Cultures of the North (pseudonym; junior high course)
- “Going into Gr. 11 and 12 Parent Information Meeting” (May 2005)
- Two school council meetings (May and October 2005)
- Two staff meetings (June and October 2005)
- District-sponsored FNMI Coordinators and Administrators meeting (October 2005)
- Aboriginal Day celebration (June 2005)
- Drama student presentation evening (June 2005)
- Education recruitment and information fair (September 2005)
- School Thanksgiving mass (October 2005)
- School Pep Rally (October 2005)

I engaged in descriptive observation (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000) taking everything in to get a researcher’s sense of the culture of the school and community, and to enable highly descriptive storying in the final report. During interviews I noted impressions, phrases or ideas that cued further questions or required clarification. During school council and staff meetings I paid particular attention to how parents were or were not featured in these meetings. I wanted to gain an understanding of

how parent involvement had meaning in the day-to-day interactions and organization of the school. Internalizing my research questions focused my observations.

### *Observation of Symbolic Objects*

Interpretive policy analysis embraces the anthropological notion of artifacts as key communicators of interpretive meaning (Yanow, 2000). Yanow (2000) outlines two important senses of symbolic objects: built spaces and programs. Considering the plethora of co- and extra-curricular programs that high schools produce for students and families, I restricted my observation of symbolic objects to built spaces, believing this would yield manageable yet fruitful data. Built spaces constitute the physical environment and carry meaning through their design, materials, allocation of space and so on. I applied this concept to observe the following:

- Was there evidence that parents were welcome visitors to the school (e.g. marked visitor parking, welcoming entrance signs, clear directional signs in school, designated parent space)? Was there marked visitor parking?
- What was the nature of promotional material directed at parents?
- Were parents and students of all cultures visually acknowledged through photographs, volunteer appreciation boards, and so on?

Analysis of built spaces revealed how they acted on their users in terms of evoking feeling and behavior (Yanow, 2000). Following Yanow's suggestion, I used my own affective and behavioral responses as a proxy for others to make initial inferences about how the parents' role was defined, and followed these ideas with further observation, interview, and/or document analysis to confirm or disconfirm them. Identifying myself as a researcher and not a former employee, facilitated this analysis.

### *Acknowledged Limitations of Observation*

As Glesne (2006) states, “when studying in your own backyard, you often already have a role” (p. 31). I had to manage confusion over my new role as researcher created by the overlap of my own and others’ memories of me as a Saints School teacher and District AISI coordinator. At times I brushed off comments such as “*I think of you like a staff member*” (Administrator comment, Reflective Journal, June 8, 2005); at other times I concealed my disappointment when others recounted events, forgetting that I had participated in them as a Saints School teacher or AISI coordinator. Shadow Canyon, too, exerted its powerful grip on me. My first trip back since departing to pursue graduate studies was in April 2005 as a research assistant, nearly two years later, and my field notes reflected my initial difficulties with re-entering my once well-known surroundings:

*It feels odd checking into a hotel in a place that should be “home.” Giving Rosemary a tour around town is nostalgic for me. There are some new things in town: the museum has been renovated and a small bridge across the creek constructed. A new café has opened on Main Street. A new “strip mall” has been erected across the Shell station; there is an Extra Foods. Driving the streets is like tracing the lines indented on the palm of my hand; I know them like I’ve known the wrinkles of my skin. I am disappointed to see that new things have come up since I’ve gone, as if I were the only one who was allowed to change, as if life should not grow into the hole that I want to believe I have left. (Reflective Journal, April 30, 2005)*

Like emotional gravity, I was pulled into my past despite the façade of naïve newcomer and neutral researcher that I had presented to myself.

Wolcott (2005) describes field study as “problem finding, problem posing, problem seeking” (p. 147). As a graduate student and researcher, I had embraced the interrogative nature of my research mission, but it was also the very core of my self-consciousness when I re-entered The Saints School. As AISI coordinator I was the problem solver; I had answers, I had certainty. When I explained to a former colleague what I was researching, she responded unabashedly, “*When parents want to help, I want them. If they come to [complain], I don’t want them*” (Reflective Journal, April 30, 2005). This forced me to re-examine my research purpose not only for others, but for myself, and to dedicate sufficient time working out the meaning of such exchanges.

Key strategies helped me overcome my feeling that I had walked into the research site, my former school, with “eyes wide shut.” As often as possible during lunch hour and other interactions with teachers, I chose to engage with teachers who were not at the school during my time there, or those with whom I had not developed close relationships. I resisted temptations to enter spaces I previously felt comfortable in. For example, I waited in visitors’ chairs in the office when meeting participants instead of trespassing the counter to chat with the administrative staff, and I declined the invitation to sit among the teachers at staff meetings. I planned short observation periods so that I could distance myself from the school and reflect on what I had seen. Finally, I decided to live in my parents’ fifth-wheel trailer during September and October 2005 so that I would be in novel surroundings in an area of the community I

had never visited. I engaged in these strategies and made these living arrangements to make the familiar seem a little strange. I tried to create conditions that would, as far as possible, encourage interpretations based on fresh data, rather than my previous life experiences in Shadow Canyon.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

In this section I outline the analytic steps I took to manage and arrange the data gathered from interviews, documents, and observation, distinguishing this from the interpretive framing of conceptual constructs that emerged from the data. I did this to clarify how I arrived at my interpretations for the purposes of replication, although in reality “data transformation” (Glesne, 1998, p. 138) was non-linear, holistic, recursive, and occurred simultaneously with data collection.

#### *Successive Readings*

I engaged in data analysis and interpretation throughout the collection and several readings of raw data. Hatch’s (2002) “steps in interpretive analysis” (p. 181) gave me insight into the unfolding of interpretations as described here.

My first readings of the data gave me a sense of the whole, and I recorded impressions that came to me during this process. These impressions took the form of bracketed notes, point-form ideas, questions, and fully-developed paragraphs, and formed an addendum to my reflective journal. Along with taking successive passes at the data, I re-read these impressions to get a sense of the relationships among these impressions and the formation of themes (Hatch, 2002). After several readings of the data I became more deliberate in my sense making, reading the data and my impressions within the context of my research questions, and searching the data for

confirmation and disconfirmation of my interpretations. Given the number of participants in my study, I did this according to parent, student, Aboriginal community member, and educator groups. Formal coding constituted this stage.

### *Coding*

To analyze my data I combined manual and electronic coding using Nvivo software. Documents coded included 69 interview transcripts—27 from parents, 26 from students, 7 from Aboriginal community members, and 9 from educators—and approximately 165 typed pages of field notes and reflective journaling. Following Stake (2000), I coded the data to identify patterns and construct themes that reflected parent and student perceptions of the role of parents in school improvement. I condensed, or reduced, the data in three phases. Using NVivo qualitative software, I marked the transcripts with codes, or “nodes” that allowed me to “make, manage and explore ideas and categories” (Using NVivo, 2002, p. 41). In this manner of “open coding” (Warren and Karmar, 2005, p. 187) I was receptive to what was most compelling, novel, surprising, and recurrent, and used NVivo to highlight passages and store them under categories for easy retrieval and further analysis. This organization lent itself to a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) whereby I compared, merged, and created new codes and categories to construct themes. I coded transcripts, field notes and my reflective journal in this way until I felt that I had broadly differentiated the data, resulting in 80 codes. In the second phase I retrieved passages from these initial codings and coded within those documents to identify instances where data corresponded to the questions (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Twelve broad categories were created in this way. Studying the

passages highlighted within these twelve codes, I looked for repeated patterns to chunk the data into categories of similarity (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005; Wellington, 2000). In the final phase I synthesized the categories with respect to my research questions, again using a constant comparative method to arrive at convergent themes and exceptions.

### *Construction of Themes*

In the naturalistic paradigm interpretation is a negotiated outcome (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The development of themes was initiated during the interviews when I read to and/or provided written interpretations of participants' responses regarding school improvement and parent involvement. I also sent via e-mail and regular mail biographical sketches to Aboriginal participants to ensure their "stories" were represented. These member checks were vital considering interpretive research constitutes a co-construction of meaning. Additionally, regular meetings with my supervisor to discuss my ongoing interpretations helped me to question the data with respect to my research objectives.

NVivo supported the construction of themes because highlighted passages from transcripts, field notes and my reflective journal were stored in categories relevant to these themes. I mined these passages to look for instances where my interpretations were addressed, noting evidence and counterevidence (Hatch, 2002). Searching for excerpts that exemplified my interpretations also provided necessary confirmation that my interpretations were supported by the data. These steps prepared me for drafting my final report.

Wolcott and Denzin (cited in Hatch, 2002) recommend writing in the early stages of interpretation to connect fragments of thinking and to “see if they hold up when organized in narrative form” (p. 187). I wrote three papers which focused on Aboriginal perspectives (Stelmach 2006a; Stelmach, 2005b) and students’ perceptions of school improvement and the parental role (Stelmach, 2006b). The process of writing and the feedback obtained from presenting these papers were instrumental in refining my interpretations, and led to the creation of succinct themes and typologies reflecting participants’ definitions of school improvement and their understanding of an appropriate parent role.

### **Trustworthiness**

Constructivist research is evaluated for its trustworthiness, which is a matter of establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). I drew on Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) seminal work to establish trustworthiness in my research.

### *Credibility*

The extent to which findings and interpretations are credible is contingent upon how the research is conducted, and the steps taken to ensure interpretations are grounded in the data. The most important step—member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314)—was used to corroborate my interpretations with interview participants. Furthermore, because “there are far more than ‘three sides’ by which to approach the world” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963), I included participants with varied experiences, backgrounds, gender, and ethnicity to “crystallize” (p. 963) the data. By extending the refraction of perspectives, I hoped to gain a deeper understanding of how different



“sides” contribute to a complex whole of parent involvement that can only be “thoroughly partially” (p. 963) understood.

Credibility of the research was also established by my spending uninterrupted periods of time at the site, first as a research assistant, then to conduct my study. Through further prolonged observation I hoped to capture salient issues, (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 304), expunge information that did not count, and pay heed to divergent information.

Data collection and observation occurred over the following time periods:

- April 28 – 30, 2005 (research assistant)
- May 9 – 19, 2005
- June 10 – 11, 2005
- June 16 – 20, 2005
- September 23 – October 23, 2005

Continued, regular peer debriefing with my doctoral advisor were conducted as a means to bring my biases into the open and to refresh my view of the data.

#### *Transferability*

Stake (1994) aptly states, “The purpose of case study is not to represent the world, but to represent the case” (p. 245). The onus was on me to collect rich data that “[made] transferability judgments possible on the part of potential appliers” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). I planned for maximum variation in my sampling to increase the transferability of my findings.

### *Dependability and Confirmability*

The intertwined criteria of dependability and confirmability relate to legitimacy of the process and the product. To increase the reliability of my research I created a database of documents, notes, and procedures that served as an audit trail tracing the research from the questions to data collection and analysis (Yin, 2003). I met regularly with my advisor throughout data analysis and interpretation to receive feedback about the processes I was following and the themes I was constructing to reinforce credibility.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations and limitations are intricately related, for any choice to narrow one's research can produce a limitation. I will discuss these simultaneously.

Both paradigmatic and methodological choices in the research design inevitably produced limitations. The inter-subjectivity of interpretive research invited misinterpretation as part of the human condition. The pursuit of multiple realities could be but a modest approximation, for seeing was a form of blindness (Silverman, 2005).

Case study research is limited due to the nature of its small sampling. My approach represented depth at the cost of breadth (Mertens, 2005), which may have limited the transferability of interpretations. The particular decision to interpret educators' perspectives from a single interview was based on establishing a point of comparison rather than in-depth understanding. Parent samples had an inherent bias because most participants were women, and could be described as mainstream, including the "Aboriginal" parents that were recommended to me by school personnel. The inclusion of Aboriginal community members, including two Elders, was intended to

address this bias, but the fact that the five women who agreed to participate occupied privileged positions in the jurisdiction and community, and were front-line advocates of Aboriginal education suggests they were not representative of all Aboriginal parents, especially those who are perceived by educators as disengaged.

Delimiting my research to the secondary school northern context was viewed as a limitation and strength. Restricting the research to northern Alberta did not fully address parent involvement across the province or throughout Canada. This delimitation resulted from my literature review, my five years of living and teaching in northern Alberta, and my work with Dr. Foster as an assistant on two projects in northern secondary schools. I justified this delimitation with the intent to fill a noticeable gap in the educational literature, recognizing that my professional and personal experiences living in the north implied entrenched biases. In my analysis, the northern context did not appear to be a substantive factor impacting parent involvement.

Being a novice researcher in a school where I formerly taught implied its own limitations. Questioning listening, and observing, for example, were taken for granted skills that required me to constantly reflect not only on my assumptions as a researcher, but as a researcher who was once a member of the case I was examining. My previous pilot study (Stelmach, 2005a) and experiences assisting Dr. Foster on two projects afforded me apprenticeship in the areas of conducting interviews, transcribing, keeping an observation journal, analyzing, and reporting data. Spending time at the school as a research assistant prior to my study facilitated reflection on my new role. Sharing field notes and discussing the data with my supervisor during that study was especially valuable for opening me up to multiple interpretations. Regular reflective journaling also

helped me to cast curious eyes on a context I presumed to already know, which significantly strengthened interpretations of the raw data.

Ultimately, if one is to fully embrace constructivism, then the paradigm and resulting methods can be seen as given, rather than chosen. Indeed, my inquiry was existentially driven by a certain belief in the world as a montage of realities, inseparable from our experiences in it. Quite simply, I believed all parents and all students had something valuable to say about how parents should become involved in school improvement.

### **Shadowscape**

I began conducting interviews in April 2005 and by May 2005 I had completed what I thought were my final interviews. But on June 1, 2005 I wrote in my reflective journal:

*I feel like I could be chasing this question (of parent involvement) forever and never arrive at a satisfactory answer. I feel, however, that there is a veil in front of me still, as if I have not lifted all of my assumptions and haven't been able to look at the issue clearly. That is an ideal, I know, but I feel this frustration with a sense that I am still chained and my head is forced to face one direction. Am I still interpreting shadows?*

Since the researcher is the instrument in qualitative research, qualitative data is interpreted through one's experiences, values, and beliefs about the world (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Understanding is an "emergent construction" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4). My history in Shadow Canyon and The Saints School shaped my outlook and

assumptions, a position I was only beginning to understand in the early stages of my data collection:

*...it was hard to find that balance between being a researcher and someone who used to work there (at the school) and had close relationships with some of the people... By the end of this week I felt like I was morphing into them—becoming a staff member again... I don't know if I can distance myself from them anymore. I wonder if during the interviews I am not listening for confirmation about my own experience.... So at this point I am wondering if I can see anything beyond myself, or if I have become them. (Reflective Journal, May 15, 2005)*

Negotiating my new role in a place where I already had one (Glesne, 2006) was part of my process, as indicated in the following:

*...the research experience at [The Saints School] was schizophrenic. I was trying to be an outsider and trying to be an insider at the same time. I couldn't really dissect my past experiences and take on something tabula rasa. I was who I was precisely because of my experiences there. My question comes from there. How could I ever separate myself? (Reflective Journal, June 27, 2005)*

Thus, it became important to me to become intimate with my own views about Shadow Canyon, the school, parent involvement, and about myself in my new role as researcher. In other words, I realized the need to know how my shadows defined me.

One of my shadows that I was particularly interested in involved my perceptions of the Aboriginal community:

*The “Aboriginal question” seems to be on the periphery at [The Saints School]. Or is this my thinking? I guess I do have to get that perspective, but I don’t know how. (Reflective Journal, June 3, 2005)*

I decided to return to Shadow Canyon in September 2005 to investigate the Aboriginal perspective, but in the summer months that preceded my second stage of data collection, I was learning that the “Aboriginal question” was really a question about me. I spent extensive periods of time at my parents’ farm that summer. Over lunches and dinners with them I poured over family history books and photos, curious about how my ancestors lived and how my parents experienced school. I became sensitive to issues I thought were outside of my research. I tried to make sense of these in relation to my investigation of Aboriginal perspectives. Consider the following:

*I wondered how my parents learned Ukrainian and was struck dumb when I found out that both my parents learned English in school. Why had I assumed English was their first language? Dad retold incidents of being strapped by teachers for speaking Ukrainian: ‘I didn’t understand any English, so I learned to be quiet to stay out of trouble.’ My mother agreed with this recollection. My parents spoke about this matter-of-factly, but somewhere I knew that for them, not teaching my siblings and me to speak Ukrainian was an unconscious form of protection. (Reflective Journal, August 19, 2005)*

I became aware of how I and others are emplaced in our world:

*The grandfather clock bonged the fourth hour of the afternoon. Mom sauntered in and chuckled, "You know, yesterday I changed the chime on the clock, and I have yet to hear it! And again, just now, I thought, 'Gee, I missed it again.' Isn't that funny?" Isn't it funny that our conscious decision to hear something new quickly becomes muted by the patterns we sink into? (Reflective Journal, August 25, 2005)*

The second stage of my data collection was different because these observations and experiences helped me to become more aware of my patterns. By reconnecting with my family history, I could see the value in the Elders' stories; by learning about my parents' vulnerabilities as non-English speakers in school, I was more sensitive to Aboriginals' experiences in residential school; and by examining my world view, I was able to recognize its limitations. A key lesson I learned throughout my data collection was "*the best way to tell [the participants'] story is to tell mine*" (Reflective Journal, February 7, 2006).

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I explained the methodological choices made throughout my study. In the next two chapters I share my interpretations of participants' responses to these questions. I dedicate a sixth chapter to a discussion of my experiences researching Aboriginal perspectives.

## CHAPTER 4

### INTERPRETATIONS AND DISCUSSION OF STUDENT RESPONSES<sup>4</sup>

This chapter is one of two in which I present and discuss themes I constructed from my interpretation of students' and parents' responses to the research questions. These questions were: (a) How do parents and students define and understand school improvement and the parents' role in these initiatives? (b) What are parents' and students' experiences with school-led improvement initiatives that have increased parent involvement as a key strategy? (c) Do parent and student perceptions and experiences regarding the role of parents in school improvement reflect those of practitioners and policy makers? This chapter is dedicated to the students' responses.

The first question was central to my investigation; therefore, I organized this chapter primarily around its content using these headings: "Meanings of School Improvement" and "How Students See the Role of Parents." As my data collection progressed I saw the second question as ancillary to understanding parents' and students' perspectives on school improvement and parent involvement vis-à-vis educators and policy makers. To reflect this, instead of reporting separately students' responses to the second and third research questions, I weaved their thoughts and experiences, and educators' perspectives, throughout the reporting of the first question. I repeat this approach in Chapter 5 with respect to the parents.

#### **Student Voices: Echoes of my Educator Assumptions**

Fourteen secondary students enriched my study. Scholars have argued that grade, gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic factors account for differences in

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<sup>4</sup> A version of this chapter has been published.  
Stelmach 2006. *Journal of School Public Relations*. 27(1): 50-83.



students' opinion, and the extent and nature of parent involvement (Crozier, 2000; de Carvalho, 2001; Lareau, 1987; López and Vázquez, 2005). Given these assertions, I anticipated gender, grade, and ethnicity would bear upon students' responses regarding parent involvement (see Table 3.1). The data, however, did not consistently support this anticipated outcome to warrant grouping students in these ways. To organize the student sample another way, I used the labels "honor roll" and "struggling" (see Table 3.1). My initial sample of ten students included mostly "honor roll" students, which, according to the school newsletter were those whose term average was 80% or greater. To explore whether students' academic standing and school experiences influenced their perspective on the parents' role in school improvement I asked teachers and administrators to provide names of students who were "struggling" in school (see Table 3.1).

At the outset of this study I naïvely assumed "honor roll" and "struggling" were objective and universal. As I engaged with scholarship about the student voice in school reform and change (e.g. Oldfather, 1995; Rubin & Silva, 2003; Rudduck, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996; Rudduck, Day, & Wallace, 1997; Scherff, 2005; Wasley, Hampel, & Clark, 1997), I became cognizant of how these categories echoed my educator assumptions. When I interviewed the so-called struggling students (Bailey, Luke, Trish, Cory, and Jack) my naïveté became clear to me: these categories simplistically reflected what I believed about students, not their self-identity.

Most of the five students were enrolled in a combination of higher (e.g. English 10-1) and lower (e.g. English 10-2) stream courses (Alberta Education, 2005b). Luke (gr. 10), described himself as hard working and "just barely" on honor

roll, and aspired to a post-secondary program that required a high grade point average. Trish (gr. 11), who had achieved “honorable mention” (74.5% - 79.5%), reported to me, “I did a lot better this year than I did last year” despite a teacher’s negative perception of her. Although Jack (gr. 12) suggested, “Sometimes it’s (school) hard,” he was referring to isolated, large-scale school projects and did not mention having trouble in a subject that teachers believed was difficult for him. Among the fourteen students who contributed to my study, only Cory (gr. 11) admitted to facing academic challenges and followed an Individualized Program Plan (Alberta Education, 2005c). “Chemistry seems hard,” he admitted, “I’m thinking of dropping out but I don’t know, I want to do as well as I can.” Still, his hopefulness contrasted with teachers’ assessments of him. At a staff meeting they questioned why Cory enrolled in that course, which I interpreted as doubt about his abilities.

Given Alberta Education’s emphasis on and the practice of publishing diploma exam results in the local newspaper, it is little wonder a binary between “honor roll” and “struggling” characterized some of the teachers’ and my own initial thinking. To their credit, the school’s administration seemed intent to eliminate the polarity between the academically inclined students and those who were enrolled in lower stream courses. For example, the principal reported the school’s improvement goal to significantly increase enrollment in higher level science courses had been met; however, he was quick to point out a drastic decline in diploma exam averages. As a former grade 12 teacher, I could understand the desire to discourage students who “struggled”—because of ability or effort—from “high stakes” courses. Centering success in test results rather than in individual student effort and experiences

however, led to my rigid categorization of students. This holds implications for parent involvement because research shows that parents of “struggling” students receive more negative contact from teachers, and are presumed deficient and/or negligible (de Carvalho, 2001; Giles, 1998).

The discrepancy between educators’ views of these students and the students’ perceptions of themselves raised important issues for me, such as what prompted them to portray themselves in certain ways, and what images they privileged in their self-portraits. Cory (gr. 11) and Bailey (gr. 10) were particularly intriguing to me because of the more evident contrasts between their realities and those of their teachers, and the information I gathered from my encounters with them. For instance, in the first interview in May 2005 Cory was fixated on post-secondary education, interjecting comments such as, “I haven’t really decided what college I’m going to” into conversations of another matter. It seemed important to him that I see him as a university-oriented student, even though he received extensive learning supports. By contrast, in September 2005 when Cory was in grade 12 his focus changed to finding “the easiest way to get credits” and a career “that doesn’t need chemistry or bio.” This made me sensitive to the delimitations placed upon students who do not fit into an education system defined by grades or standardized exams. Alberta Education’s claim is to improve schools so that “every child learns and every child succeeds” (2005a, p. 4), but success has a narrow connotation which was tacitly conveyed by the change in Cory’s outlook.

Bailey (gr. 10) was equally perplexing. When I questioned her about school and parent involvement in May 2005 she said she “love[d] school,” and “Half the

time I don't need [my parents'] help." At that time she made a point of introducing me to her friend and excitedly told me she had "lots to say" whenever we passed in the hallways. Yet, in September 2005 I learned she was excessively truant, experienced family conflict, was entangled in legal conflict regarding "just about anything you can think" (teacher comment, Field Notes, September 29, 2005), and was withdrawing from the school and relocating. She turned her gaze from me as if we had never met, and was businesslike in responding to my greetings. That Cory and Bailey were Aboriginal—even if they did not strongly identify with these roots—added a layer of complexity to my observations. Even if they did not perceive themselves as struggling, among all the students in this study Cory and Bailey bore the closest resemblance to my preconceptions. Was it their tacit awareness of negative stereotypes about Aboriginals that prompted them to portray themselves as succeeding students? This question went beyond the scope of my study, but I felt it was a noteworthy coincidence.

What motivated these students to emulate competent and high achieving students in their interview responses? What accounted for their commitment to particular images, especially those that did not accurately reflect their circumstances? My review of the "Student of the Month" summaries in a series of school newsletters gave me insight into how educators inadvertently create icons of "elite" students. These monthly passages were written by teachers about the grade 10, 11, and 12 recipients of the accolade. Recurrent descriptions of these students of the month included "cheerful," "comical," "funny," "outgoing," "hardworking," "diligent," and were about students who excelled in "academics," were "involved in extracurricular

activities,” “ask[ed] great questions,” and had “many, many gifts.” In sum, students of the month were academic, artistic, athletic, and well-liked. I gathered from my interviews with these “struggling” five, that except for their claim that all students got along well and they had friends, none of them consistently or strongly exemplified these attributes at school. Luke (gr. 10) said, “I don’t really take part in sports events...Just come to school and go home I guess.” Trish (gr. 11) had a similar response, and Cory (gr. 12) reported, “I used to be on the bike club team—mountain bike club.” Bailey (gr. 10) and Jack (gr. 12) both complained about the limited extracurricular options, and did not share outside hobbies or interests. Thus, I wondered to what extent the “student of the month” persona was ingrained, and whether these students’ responses reflected an internalized expectation to conform to this image. In my own teaching experiences, did I register students as “successful” or “struggling” based on this narrow configuration? What happened to those in between? Furthermore, to what extent were parents’ personas constructed out of my perceptions about their children?

The above reflections helped me to listen to students’ voices rather than the echoes of my educator beliefs. An either/or distinction between “honor roll” and “struggling” seemed less apt for a rich analysis, even though I did interpret a connection between academic standing and some of the students’ responses. Another, perhaps more meaningful distinction that separated these students was based on the extent of their involvement in school outside of their classes. On the one hand, there were students whose engagements were school-wide, meaning they took part in extracurricular activities such as sports, band, student council, social justice groups,

and other volunteer capacities. Other students confined their engagement to the classroom. There was correspondence between being highly involved and on the honor roll, and some exceptions which I note below.

### *School-wide Engaged Students*

I considered students to be engaged in a school-wide capacity if, in addition to their classroom learning, they participated in one or more extracurricular activity over a sustained amount of time. Out of fourteen students, six met this criterion: Suze (gr. 10), Michael (gr. 10), Kate (gr. 11), Becky (gr. 11), Jermaine (gr. 12), and Alicia (gr. 12). These students reported participating on school sports teams, band, student council, graduation committee, and social justice groups. Some demonstrated organizational initiative, such as Becky who “organized the senior high volleyball “B” team” and Jermaine who shared the following:

I’m one of the founding members of our little party that we made—a bunch of my friends came up with a party called [name of group].... we wanted to be the actual student council body because no one else does it in our school....we have one big [event] coming up at the end of the year.

In addition to organized participation, these students also participated in an ad hoc fashion, like Suze who said, “I helped out at the [AISI] breakfast.” These students valued extracurricular opportunities for different reasons. Some, like Jermaine, had fun-spirited goals such as “trying to break a Guinness World Record for the longest floor hockey game;” whereas others, like Becky, had perceived the need to be “completely well-rounded” to compete for post-secondary scholarships. She mused:

I do enjoy volunteering but I've never really had that much time for activities because of sports. So next year I was thinking I would play one sport and put in some time for volunteering.

Extracurricular involvement and honor roll status united the students in this group. For me the relationship between being highly involved in school and doing well academically somewhat explained how educators identified students as “struggling” or “honor roll.” These school-wide engaged students seemed to be socialized into the idea that success was constituted by academic and extracurricular achievements.

### *Classroom Engaged Students*

By contrast, most of the students who were engaged in the academic requirements of their classes but not in activities outside of the classroom were not on the honor roll and were deemed by the educators as “struggling.” These students included Bailey (gr. 10), Luke (gr. 10), Cory (gr. 11), Trish (gr. 11), and Jack (gr. 12). Three exceptions in this group were on the honor roll—Sean (gr. 11), John, (gr. 12), and Danny, (gr. 12). There were four students in this group who lived outside of Shadow Canyon and relied on school bus transportation as opposed to one in the highly involved group, which may have prohibited some students from getting involved. John, for example, lived in a community ninety minutes away from Shadow Canyon. Jack and Bailey's lack of involvement may have been related to the type of opportunities the school offered for students, for both complained about existing options. Other students shared with me outside interests that did not correspond with school programs such as golf, dirt biking, and equestrian.

Part-time employment or domestic responsibilities seemed to play into some of these students' lack of extracurricular involvement. When I asked Sean to describe activities that were going on at the school that supported student learning he replied, "I don't know much about things because I have to work after school." This indicated to me that Sean did not participate in school outside of his classes. Danny's circumstance was unique because his father worked out of town and was reported to be away from home quite extensively during the winter. Although these factors may have been coincidentally rather than causally connected, this group was unique from the students who had school-wide engagement because they made statements such as "I'm here to learn" (Danny), or "[I] just come to school and go home I guess" (Luke). I made some distinctions based on characteristics in these groups in relation to their responses to the research questions, but because I did not interpret a strong connection between these student groups and the themes I constructed, I discuss my interpretations in light of the complete sample.

### **Meanings of School Improvement: Curriculum Oriented Improvement**

My motivation for pursuing respondents' definitions of school improvement was my assumption of contiguity between this and their perception of parents' appropriate involvement. Based on students' responses to the question "what does school improvement mean to you?" I classified their definitions as curriculum oriented. Their concern was with what occurred inside and related to the classroom insofar as it impacted their ability to achieve predetermined standards. Curriculum oriented improvements fell into three areas: pedagogy, content, and outcomes.



## *Pedagogy*

Students from both groups—school-wide engaged and classroom engaged—suggested school improvement was the “teachers’ role and how they improve in trying to convey information and get students to learn. Like techniques” (Alicia, gr. 12). Pedagogical approaches that were “hands on” (Suze, gr. 10), incorporated “different strategies” (Jack, gr. 12), gave students “the opportunity to be creative (Jermaine, gr. 12), and allowed them to “choose how they want to learn information according to how they can learn” (Alicia, gr. 12) described school improvement in terms of improved teaching. These students emphasized what Rudduck, Chaplain, and Wallace (1996) called learning conditions as a way to improve schools.

I found that the highest achieving students in this study spoke more prevalently about pedagogical improvements than those who had not achieved at the highest levels. Levin (2000) pointed out that the least successful students are accorded the fewest opportunities to actively participate in their learning (p. 164). Perhaps the lower achieving students did not mention teaching practice as often because they did not see teaching as a domain in which they had an influence.

I pursued these students’ perspective that school improvement was aligned with pedagogical development because at the time of data collection The Saints School was in the second and third year of implementing its Cycle 2 (2003-2006) AISI project which focused on differentiated instruction, a project I designed before leaving the district. This project specifically aimed at developing teaching strategies and assessment to “meet the needs of all learners” (*AISI*, School Jurisdiction Website). Since the provincial AISI documents espouse a collaborative and inclusive

approach to school improvement (Alberta Learning, 1999a), I was also interested in whether and/or how students had been engaged in the project. When asked, only one student vaguely identified with the term “differentiated instruction.” Most of the students did not recognize pedagogical experimentation in their classes nor strategies that corresponded to this approach except for Jermaine (gr. 12) and Alicia (gr. 12) who provided detailed examples:

In my classes we’ll go through different styles of learning for different kinds of students...[name of teacher], will leave it up to us to present our project in whatever form we want to. (Jermaine)

We kind of do surveys about which one we are (learning style)...and there will be options about how you convey the information in the assignment, like a poster or report if you’re better at writing or acting.  
(Alicia)

The high achieving and school-wide engaged students had more experiences with differentiated instruction, which resonated with Levin (2000) who argued struggling students had fewer opportunities to make decisions regarding their learning.

I found, however, that even the school-wide engaged students in this study had not been extensively involved in planning or implementing the AISI project on differentiated instruction, or other school improvement initiatives. For example, in the 2004-2005 school year when I conducted most of the student interviews, the school was reorganizing into a “house” system, but none of the students mentioned it. When I asked teachers “who is involved in school improvement at your school?” the majority of them listed school and jurisdiction administrators, teachers, and to a

limited extent, parents, but not students. Sue's (teacher) was an isolated comment contrasting idealistic decision making processes with how she perceived reality:

I think the ones we often forget are the students behind it all. They're the ones that it really impacts the most. You can only consult to a certain point and eventually an administrative decision must take place, but I think we sometimes skip a step and rush into things.

Her reflections gave me pause for thought about my assumptions about the "inclusive" processes I employed as the AISI Coordinator. Specifically, to design the Cycle 2 AISI project, I conducted focus groups with teachers at all the schools, but the thought that students should have input into school improvement did not register with me. At that time, I treated students as auxiliary rather than instrumental to school improvement planning.

Sue's above comment also made me question the extent to which educators' attempts to engage students were perceived by students as inclusive. For example, as part of the Cycle 1 AISI project, I had organized a full-day focus group for students from the district to revise the district nutrition policy. As well, schools administered surveys, and I delivered a presentation to students at The Saints School. I felt we had captured student opinion, but Alicia (gr. 12) forced me to challenge my assumptions:

I know a couple of years ago we did a survey about whether we want healthy foods or not. Everyone kind of said yes, but they took away everything else but the healthy food. I don't think anyone knew that was going to happen. People wanted options.

Did I include students in the process to hear their opinions, or to convince them of mine? Alicia's comment brings to light the speciousness of democratic arrangements that are made in the name of student inclusion (Kaba, 2000; Silva, 2003), and highlights the temptation for teachers, researchers, and others to speak for students from an unstated position defined by history, social location, and epistemic privilege (Fielding, 2004). Oldfather's (1995) work with student researchers exemplified this; the students in her study expressed feelings of being discounted by teachers, even though teachers claimed students were equi-positioned as producers of knowledge. The issue of teachers acting as professional gatekeepers (Allen et al., 1997; Casanova, 2000; de Carvalho, 2001; Sanders & Epstein, 1998) has been explored with respect to parents, but as some of the students in this study suggested, they too were essentially locked out of decisions that affected their daily learning, save occasional chances to provide input. This opinion seemed most widely shared among the students who were not highly involved in school activities; when I asked them whether the provincial mandate to involve parents in school improvement was appropriate, some replied:

I think they should talk to them (students) to see what they want to do.

How they want to learn, different methods of teaching. (Luke, gr. 10)

I think if they want to improve high schools, students should be the biggest role. They should ask the students...(Jack, gr. 12)

By contrast, the school-wide engaged students seemed more content about their opportunities to contribute to school improvement, and felt on par with teachers:

...they (teachers) get student volunteers to help with stuff. (Michael, gr. 10)

Teachers also play a very active role, students as well. Usually they (students) come up with some of the ideas and are the ones that go through with it because they are closer to the student body to get them to do things. (Becky, gr. 11)

Alicia, who reported membership in the school's Amnesty International, "a multi-issue group," perceived preferential treatment even among engaged students:

Some kids that do basketball, I find a bias with that, with the sports kids. I think they get away with a lot of stuff sometimes, and I think they get marked better. (Alicia, gr. 12)

Tina, a teacher, mentioned "I notice that this is a very sports-oriented school... There are big accommodations to try to get coaches." I, too, formed the impression that sports were highly prioritized in the school based on the fifteen minutes spent near the beginning of the staff meeting deciding new track suits for the school sports teams. By comparison, because of a shortage of time the religion coordinator was asked to present "the bare minimum" (Field Notes, October 5, 2005). The crucial insight gained from Alicia's comments is the need for educators and policy makers to question *which* students get asked about their ideas, *about what* students are given opportunities to speak, and *whose* opinions carry over into action. A minority of students participated on the teams, suggesting, as Alicia did, that a minority of students had a strong voice. Moreover, as was my case with the nutrition policy, educators' assumptions of authority reduce students to a minority.

Additionally, even the school-wide engaged students in this study, who suggested students played a strong role in school improvement, did not seem to be

talking about issues of teaching and learning. When I questioned them about who plans school improvement related to student learning, Jermaine (gr. 12) reflected:

I feel it's more the teachers in general....It could come from administration, but I don't know what goes on behind closed doors...

Jermaine's reference to the "closed doors of the school" indicated to me that student learning was guarded, even from those students who were both high achievers and committed to a variety of school programs. Ironically, the goal of school improvement, as expressed in AISI and FNMI, is to "improve student learning and performance" (Alberta Learning, 1999a, p. 2) and "First Nations, Métis, and Inuit learner success" (Alberta Learning, 2002, p. 5), respectively, which presupposes a focus on teaching and learning, and particularly for those students most in need of support. In this study, the students who worked well within existing educational structures and practices, and who conformed to hegemonic codes of good students, seemed most content with their level of involvement. But it is the students who were not highly involved in the school outside of mandatory classes and who were not doing as well as others that needed to be heard so that the taken for grantedness of the way our schools operate can be confronted. This has been strongly argued within a cultural capital framework (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) regarding the marginalization of families who lack or cannot access the material and cultural capital valued by schools (de Carvalho, 2001; Lareau, 1987, 1996). In the same way, students who are not academically strong or do not participate in activities that receive a high profile in school may not have the same ability to effect change. And

as Jermaine indicated, students may have less influence over academic goals than those related to improving school atmosphere and culture.

When I visited the school for its Aboriginal Day celebration in June 2005, an exciting plethora of activities and events had been scheduled. I noticed adults orchestrated the agenda. Similarly, according to the people I spoke with, the district FNMI roundtable consultations involved parents and adult community members, but not students. None of these students talked about FNMI as school improvement, which reinforced it as a teacher-dominated enterprise. This is antithetical to the ethos of collaborative planning claimed in both AISI and FNMI policy documents.

Local improvements, namely, the school's restructuring into "houses," were not at the forefront of students' minds either. Given the attention devoted to discussing it at school council and staff meetings, I gathered the house system was an improvement priority. In September when the house system was in place, Cory's (gr. 11) response to the new organization was, "I don't love it." He was unable to clearly articulate its purpose. A teacher told me that first block absences had become excessive because students did not consider the morning "house time" important, which suggested to me students were not committed to the idea. Literature on educational change suggests that those who are involved in the decisions to bring about change are more likely to support it (Fullan, 2001). Considering this, if school improvement is about helping students perform at their potential, their input is essential for making that happen. But if these students were not invited to participate directly in planning and implementing a change that, as I understood it, was intended to improve school spirit, what was the likelihood that teachers would invite students

to make suggestions to improve pedagogy? Since pedagogy was one of three areas these students felt school improvement meant, I felt this was an important question.

### *Curriculum Content*

Many of these students also felt that the curriculum itself required enhancement, but the students who achieved at high levels appeared to have different motivations for their responses compared to those who were average or below average achievers. The students of average or below average achievement focused on content and learning resources, suggesting to me they were bored with learning. When I asked what specific advice he might give to the government about improving schools, Jack (gr. 12) offered, "Maybe new books for the school would help quite a bit because the same stuff over and over is just ridiculous." Bailey (gr. 10) also said "better textbooks" constituted school improvement. "Everybody wants better textbooks," she posited. Because Bailey was not a high achiever and was hardly involved in any other aspect of the school, I wondered whether she felt her opinion would not count unless she projected it upon others, considering that besides Jack, she was the only one who suggested textbooks required improvement. It again raised questions about student clout.

Bailey and Jack's perceived monotony of schooling pervaded all aspects, for they also shared the opinion of a lack of extracurricular selection:

More extracurricular activities would be good....Anything besides football and basketball. (Jack)



I think they should improve something here though. For all us horseback riding people, they should get us a horseback riding club.

(Bailey)

Ironically Bailey contradicted herself declaring, "I don't have time for my horse life anymore." It is not whether Bailey's interests were genuine, or that Jack's critique was vague that is the point, but that for these students school did not speak to them. My interpretations question Alberta Education's 2004/2005 Annual Report which showed student satisfaction with receiving broad programming. That the report did not disaggregate high performing versus low performing students, or differentiate students in other ways suggests school is not constructed around individuals.

Other students from both groups were judgmental of the curriculum, but at the heart of appraisals by those who seemed to do well in school was doubt about the extent to which the curriculum would benefit them beyond high school. As most of these high achievers envisaged a career trajectory that involved higher education their questions were utilitarian. In the following statements, Danny (gr. 12) and Alicia (gr. 12) expressed their dismay with certain subjects and topics:

I would tell them [government] to look at your curriculum again because there is some stuff in the curriculum that I will never ever need to know. Why will I read Shakespeare again?...What purpose does it serve?....There's just stuff you'll never ever need to know unless you're in that specific field (Danny).

I find some of it is unnecessary....I don't understand how math is going to apply to very many people in post-secondary stuff (Alicia).

Alicia speculated, “I get that they want us to expand our minds with it,” but Danny favored narrowing the high school curriculum by “looking at specifics, what interests you, not what generally you’re going for.” Michael (gr. 10), who said he would probably pursue a career related to history, called math “tedious.” I did not think it coincidental that these students who argued for improving the connection between curriculum and post-secondary pursuits were in grade 12 or had anticipated attending university. In Alberta, the Klein Government’s resetting of the educational dial toward a market environment (Harrison & Kachur, 1999; Taylor, Shultz, & Wishart Leard, 2005) has embedded students and teachers in an accountability paradigm. Even Alberta Education’s laudable goal to prepare students for “lifelong learning” is measured by enrollment in post-secondary programs (Alberta Education, 2005a, p. 7). Thus, today’s students are raised on the canon of credentialization and commoditization; an appetite for ideas and self-examination which I believe feeds a quest for lifelong learning has been spoiled by a public discourse on education dominated by measured outcomes and standardized learning. The pontification of quantification, I believe, is what prompted Danny to decry the curriculum:

I don’t think I’ll ever use it again, and I don’t want to know....the probability of flipping a coin, I don’t really care. I flip it twice and it’s 50% chance, right? Why calculate it and make it 36% chance?

Mercenary sensibilities overshadowed learning for its own sake.

Educator views on the purpose of curriculum seemed to converge with Danny.

In talking about the parents’ role in education, Elmer (teacher) said they should:

...portray school in a positive light, that it's something important for you and it's something that is going to improve your life down the road, whether that's a higher paying job, better career, better connections to the community, whatever that might be...

Although an "improved life" for Elmer did not exclude citizenship, I noted that "higher paying job" topped his list. In my analysis I was intrigued by the term "better career" and although I did not investigate this further with Elmer, I observed behaviors and practices that led me to believe "better career" entailed higher education. For example, the college information displayed on bulletin boards, the time devoted to Diploma Exam analysis, and the kind of information the administrators made an effort to gather suggested to me a post-secondary school aim. Early school leavers were not tracked, but the principal totaled the value of Alexander Rutherford Scholarships amassed and the number of students who attended post-secondary institutions. Consciously or not, curriculum seemed geared toward higher education which presumably led to the "better career" and an "improved life," a view that Kate, a grade 11 honor student, seemed to have internalized. Her estimation that "about 75%" of her classmates would attend university was an exaggeration compared to the 45% the administration recorded. She further criticized some of her male counterparts: "...they screw up all their classes, get low marks and then they can't get into further education, so they resort to trades, right?"

I was and continue to be disturbed by Kate's assumption that a career that does not require university education is undesirable and is a default for those who cannot or do not succeed by educators' standards. Further, her comment implied that

those who do not pursue university are not learners. I see this shortsightedness perpetuated through Alberta Education's conflation of lifelong learning with formal university learning. This drives an erroneous distinction between those who hold university degrees as lifelong learners versus those who, as Kate said, "resort to trades" or other pursuits to make their living. If citizenship is a goal of our education system as Alberta Education (2005a) proposes, and lifelong learning contributes to that goal, then curriculum must be connected to this ideal for everyone, rather than just the traditional academic elite. I could sense from Jack (gr. 12) a disconnection between school and life, for when I interviewed him during a weekend in June 2005, a few days before his diploma exams, he seemed unconcerned telling me, "I forgot my books so I couldn't [study] today." Was it because he intended to enter the work force that learning the curriculum was not urgent? Did he, like Danny, not see a connection between his learning and the rest of his life? My interpretation of these students' claims that school improvement means "look[ing] at your curriculum" (Danny, gr. 12), was that though they talked about content, they inherently questioned interest and purpose. It became clearer to me that although Alberta Education (2005a) claims "The highest priority of the education system is the success of the student" (p. 6), a delimited understanding of "student" and of "success" underscored this policy claim. What kind of student is prioritized by curriculum planners?

### *Measurable Outcomes*

Both AISI and FNMI are premised on the goal of improving student learning, which is defined in terms of standardized exam results, attendance, retention, and graduation rates as assessed by measures such as improvements over baseline and

effect size (Alberta Learning, 2003c; Alberta Learning, 2004a). From the provincial perspective, school improvement is predetermined and quantifiable. Regardless of their level of achievement or engagement in the school, most students in this study closely aligned with this view. “Better grades, better average” (Trish, gr. 11) resembled the strongest and most unified response to the question of school improvement. With little exception, these students defined school improvement in terms of measurable academic achievement. This is perhaps not surprising considering the regiment of standardized tests Alberta students undergo throughout their K-12 education. This aspect of school improvement mirrored what I heard from the teachers and observed in formal and informal interactions with the staff. One teacher’s definition of school improvement mirrored the policy rhetoric:

As I understand the term as it is generally applied, it refers to the measured improvement in achievement of students, either measured on standardized tests such as achievement tests or diploma tests or some other standardized set of criteria (Elmer).

Later Elmer suggested standardized tests were but one measure of improvement, but the amount of time the school dedicated to analyzing these results was an indication of their priority. In my experience as AISI coordinator (2000-2003), quantifiable measures were deemed necessary to gain approval for further funding from Alberta Education, and to give rigor to the evaluation. As a grade 12 teacher (1998-2000), I too was focused on preparing my students to perform well on diploma exams. My understanding now is that the pervasiveness of accountability frameworks influenced

me to act in this manner, despite my beliefs that to be educated means to be transformed in inestimable ways.

Almost every student praised the teachers' willingness to provide tutorial help. I noticed strong correspondence among the students' examples of school improvement, as noted in the following:

We would have things before midterms and big tests. Usually the midterm or final week they would have breakfast brought into the school before we had a full-time cafeteria. They would organize many study sessions with the teachers opening up the school on weekends and after school hours. (Becky, gr. 11)

Like now during exams they have study sessions that are on the weekends or after school to help you. (Luke, gr. 10).

The teachers help a lot. They'll stay after school, or they'll come early, stay over lunch. They're here all the time. (Trista, gr. 11)

Tutoring and stuff like that, they're open to that. (John, gr. 12)

They're always wanting to get the extra mile to give the extra study session...(Jermaine, gr. 12).

Only Sean (gr. 11) said, "it's hard to find them (teachers)" but I concluded Sean did not actively pursue tutorial help because when I congratulated him for being on the honor roll, he said, "It's not that hard to get on there." Among the student comments, Kate's (gr. 11) statement caught my attention because it implied teachers' motivation:

As long as I've been here we've always had tutorial sessions... When I have asked, the teacher says, 'Oh yes, whenever you need it. I'll come in early if it means you'll get a better mark on the test.' (Kate, gr. 11)

Unequivocally, these teachers were committed to helping their students learn, but learning was closely connected to test performance. The pressure to measure is symptomatic of a system-wide commitment to a vision that "the best Kindergarten to Grade 12 education system in the world" (Alberta Education, 2005a, p. 6) is defined by its claims of fiscal commitment, and its reams of statistics on teacher salaries, average class size, percentage of post-secondary credentials, and provincial and international test scores (Alberta Education, 2006a). Arguably, the pursuit of learning for the sake of personal growth and social contribution has become somewhat questionable ever since Sputnik's launch into space spread fear across North America that another continent would garner more geopolitical clout. This concern lingers despite the collapse of the former Soviet Union, and has penetrated into and beyond macro-politics. A cascading effect of provincial policy touting standards as the pinnacle of a "world class *learning system*" (Alberta Education, 2006a, italics inserted) is evidenced not only in teachers' preoccupations with exam results, but in students' perceptions that to improve schools means to focus on the end result.

My interpretation was that pedagogy and content were preconditions for what students ultimately held to be the mark of school improvement: exam results, project marks, grade point averages, and course credits. Regardless of academic standing, most of these students expressed school improvement in terms of such outcomes; however, high achieving students who were in their last year facing Diploma Exams

and had made post-secondary college or university plans were most concerned with this aspect of schooling. Danny (gr. 12), a student who was on the honor roll, spoke most emphatically about the current process of schooling, critiquing examinations and grading procedures. I warrant quoting him at length because the specificity of his critique led me to see him as caught in the undertow of accountability:

...tests, this is what I can't wrap my mind around... When you're out of high school and you're in an office or something, even if it's a math calculation, you can look through your papers, you can look it up on the Internet. But when you write a test you have to memorize how to do it, that's not very fair... Even the teacher—he looks up how to do something. He doesn't have to write a test on it, he can go into his notes.... I think they really get people like that because some people can't write tests. I'm not very good at writing tests... If I didn't have to write as many tests as I do I'd probably be a high 90s student. In Physics 30 for the first while I had 94% and I am now at 78%. That's going to go back up right away, but just the fact that it says I'm not doing as good as I could be [and] where I should be.... Lots of kids are like that. Lots.

Danny's resentment for a system that he perceived as unjust was unequivocal.

Alicia's (gr. 12) comments about tests resonated with Danny's:

It's a whole semester of stuff, and they even ask for above in a unit.

They'll ask extremely challenging questions I find. I don't think that's



fair...in an exam you have to put everything together and know absolutely every little thing.

According to school records, Alicia was an honor student, yet she considered tests “only meant for the really smart kids, those that do really well.” For me Alicia’s perception of herself as a student who did not perform well on tests begged the question: How did students such as Bailey (gr. 10) who was not on the honor roll and for whom school did not appear to be a positive experience, fare in such a system?

*A Divergent Definition of School Improvement: School Climate*

I felt compelled to examine comments that diverged from the notion of school improvement as a measured phenomenon because I noted the divergence came from a classroom engaged student, rather than from those who had school-wide engagement. This divergent opinion did not align with policy and educator views of school improvement, and so I wanted to honor those who seemed to have fewer opportunities to engage in school improvement discussion, and who represented a different viewpoint. Sean (gr. 11) was this voice.

Sean (gr. 11) had achieved at the level of “honors with distinction,” which was the highest level of achievement recognized by the school. Classroom learning was the only activity he reported. When I asked him about what school improvement meant to him, his answer reflected issues regarding school climate, rather than academics:

Teachers being nicer to you sometimes...and telling other students to be nice to you as well. Sometimes you get bugged by a whole bunch of

people, and they just keep on bugging you. There's nothing you can do about it.

At the time, the import of Sean's statement did not register with me. I had regularly seen Sean in the hallway with his friend, and each time he smiled and appeared happy. This, in tandem with my observations of him in one of his classes, suggested to me that school was a place where he felt a sense of belonging. After I had begun to read more about cultural issues, particularly about the impact of historical and contemporary racism and forced cultural conformity on non-Europeans (Axelrod, 1997; Barman, 2003; Battiste, 1998; Parris, 2005), I examined Sean's transcripts in a different light. Unquestionably Sean was one of few who formed the cultural minority among a mostly White student population.

Sean lived in China when he was "really young" in a city "beside the river." He did not tell me the name of the city claiming, "I don't know that name in English." It struck me as odd at the time that he would think I wanted to hear an Anglicized version of the city, but perhaps he felt speaking Chinese was not acceptable or would be perceived as exotic by a White person. I wondered whether his selection of "Sean" as his fictitious name related to wanting to blend in with the other students in the study. His insistence that I use the Irish spelling of the name perhaps enabled him an appropriate degree of uniqueness without invoking racial judgments.

Sean seemed to crave an environment that catered to his cultural roots. For example, when we discussed the cities we had both lived in or visited, he said, "Edmonton is not bad. They have a China town." I mentioned the Chinese restaurant

in the community, but he doubted its cultural authenticity: “Well, it’s like Whitelized.” These comments suggested to me “real” culture was lacking for Sean.

Research on the north often focuses on the “disturbing lack of awareness concerning the multi-faceted nature of Aboriginal culture” (Goddard, Foster, & Finnell, 2004, p. 52), and I did hear from some parents and community members that being Aboriginal was a continuing challenge for some in the school and community. But I wondered to what extent Sean’s experience was connected to being ethnically unique in the school. While northern research tends to emphasize Aboriginal issues, I would argue for a broader conceptualization of culture especially considering the increasingly pluralistic nature characterizing northern communities. More importantly, Sean’s statement made me question how well our schools accommodate students’ differences. The Ministerial claim is that it aims to “anticipate learner needs” (Alberta Education, 2005a, p. 6), but there seems to be a two-pronged approach whereby students are either singled out for being different, such as Aboriginal students and special needs (Alberta Education, 2005a, p. 6), or they lose their individuality by virtue of being a “student” in Alberta’s education system. On the other hand, is it realistic to expect schools to be all things to all students? Certainly parents and children should expect to be treated with respect and courtesy, but can teachers be expected to cross cultural boundaries skillfully? For years The Saints School had welcomed numerous foreign exchange students from Asia, South America, Australia, and Europe; as a teacher there I welcomed these students and hosted one myself. But was there a difference in how I treated a cultural visitor as

compared to the cultural immigrants? What did it mean for Sean, who excelled in his subjects and seemed personable, to be treated “nicer?”

### *Summary of Students' Definitions of School Improvement*

These students defined school improvement in a curriculum-oriented fashion. A trio of pedagogy, curriculum content, and measurable outcomes featured prominently among both succeeding and struggling students' conceptualizations of school improvement, elements that paralleled the views of educators and policy makers. In the next section I discuss the intimate connection between these students' perspectives on school improvement and their ideas about an appropriate role for parents in enhancing their academic performance.

### **How Students See the Role of Parents in School Improvement**

Almost unanimously these students prescribed for their parents a limited role in their learning. Contra this restriction, however, a second theme emerged that disclosed a strong desire that their parents provide support—academically and socially—whenever necessary. I now turn to these themes.

### *The Parents' Limited Role*

The first “key consideration” listed in the *Framework for the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement* (Alberta Learning, 1999b, p. ii) is that “collaboration is an essential element for school improvement.” The *First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Alberta Learning, 2002) takes this sentiment one step further and states the objective to “research, develop, share and implement with stakeholders successful teaching, learning and assessment models for First Nations,

Métis and Inuit learners” (p. 12). These documents presume that parents will be front and center in school improvement planning and implementation for their and other’s children. Students’ responses did not correspond with these policy expectations.

Luke (gr. 10) captured a particularistic limitation on parent involvement. When I asked him if parents played a role in students’ learning he responded, “Not other parents, no, just my own.” Like the other students, however, Luke did not ascribe to his parents a direct role in his school performance:

I don’t really think they have a role other than just making sure that their kids do their work and monitor their grades, and always getting their kids to try harder. I don’t see any reason for them to come to school and do anything.

The parents’ role was also limited by what students’ perceived as their inability to understand the curriculum. Danny (gr. 12) also articulated this doubt:

I don’t think my parents could really help me with anything in school.... From what I know, I tried to get my parents to help me in grade 10 and they couldn’t do it.

Students of all levels of ability and school engagement identified exceptions to their parents’ ability to participate in their learning based on their parents’ education and/or career background. As Michael (gr. 10) suggested, “Maybe they’re (parents) smarter in a certain area than you.” Gender polarization played into the perception of parent

participation in homework; there was a tendency for some students to turn to their fathers for math and science help, and to their mothers for help in the humanities:

My dad is really good with math, so if I need math help I'll get it from him. (Trish, gr. 11)

If I was doing social I might come to my mom and ask her something because she would know more about that than math or science. (Jack, gr. 12)

The teachers' assumptions were gender neutral but they upheld the students' belief that parents could be more involved in humanities rather than science and math:

With senior high courses they might not know what's going on in like a chemistry or math class. (Tina, teacher)

That's where I think we have the greatest success—working at the classroom level with the grade teacher inviting parents to come in. Like [teacher] having her cultural night and inviting the parents in to be part of that, or Language Arts, a famous person night where they have a dinner theater kind of thing in the classroom, or the CTS Foods have a cultural cuisine night, or the Immersion and what [teacher] did. (Keith, teacher)

Keith added, "Other things, [teacher] runs science fair and brings them in as judges" which suggested, as some of the students did, that expertise and/or experience might be a prerequisite for parents to participate in science fair.

These data offered an alternative perspective because the research on parent involvement profiles mothers as more likely to be involved in their children's learning (Crozier, 2000; Epstein et al., 2002; Fine, 1993; Waggoner & Griffith, 1998). Gender-neutral assumptions about mothers' and fathers' roles have created the tacit expectation that mothers play a prominent role in their children's education (David, 1993a,b; 2002). Scholarship has examined barriers to involving fathers in traditional, school-based practices (e.g. Brooks, 2002, Frieman & Berkely, 2002; Shedlin, 2004), but has given questionable attention to their non-traditional at-home engagement. Based on a search combining "father participation" and "secondary education" of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), I found fathers are practically absent from the parent involvement literature. As these students suggested, however, some fathers played a significant role, but often in specific types of homework. A key inference I drew was that students are an untapped resource; they may know better than educators or policy makers about how their parents can and want to be involved in school improvement.

A sometimes exaggerated generation gap also factored into students' discrediting their parents' ability to help them with school. Some perceived a chronological gap between their parents who "did school twenty years ago" (Sean, gr. 11) and themselves, whose learning style was "completely different from 30 or 40 years ago" (Alicia, gr. 12). Sue and Marly (teachers) echoed this sentiment:

...a lot of parents seem to think they know what happens in the school. They've been there, done it, and it hasn't changed, but it HAS changed drastically. (Sue)

...times have changed since they (parents) were in school—they don't necessarily know where things are at this point, so it can get kind of intimidating. We have new ways of doing things, well, 'That's not the way it was when I was a kid, so this is new and foreign to me.' (Marly)

Assuming schools had not changed or fearing they had were, in these teachers' minds, partially explained why parent involvement was "the most difficult thing to achieve" (Keith, teacher).

More important than the age gap between students and their parents perhaps, was the students' perceived difference between being an elementary and high school student. These students either simply stated they did not need their parents' help or they felt high school was a time for them to work independently. Academic standing or level of engagement in the school seemed to have no bearing on their responses. In comparing his elementary and high school experiences with homework, Michael (gr. 10), an honor roll and school-wide engaged student, said, "Now I just don't ask for help because I have a grasp on it all." Bailey (gr. 10), who had not been achieving at the level of honor roll, argued, "[Independence is] what high school is about I think. I know I do." Trish (gr. 11), an honorable mention student, claimed, "I don't usually need a lot of help." Interestingly, some educators still expected parents to participate in homework the same way they did when their children were in elementary, and gave no consideration to parents' abilities:

Parents have to take their own responsibility...Johnny is going to bring home homework and Sally is going to bring home projects, and they're



going to have to study...It's so much better if the parents understand ahead of time, 'Oh, okay, I knew you'd be doing this sooner or later. Cool, we'll stumble through it together.' Even the stumbling through is a lot better than going, "I don't know, you're going to have to ask your teacher tomorrow.' (Marly, teacher)

In sum, I interpreted two key reasons why these students assigned to parents a limited role in their learning. First, they questioned their parents' ability to understand the curriculum. Although some students had confidence in their parents' knowledge, there were specific subjects they felt either limited or maximized their parents' potential to help with homework. Second, the parents' role was limited by students' perceptions of not needing or wanting help, regardless of how well or poorly they had been performing in school. This begs the question of how parents can be meaningfully involved in school improvement, or take responsibility for their children's learning, two expectations expressed in the AISI and FNMI projects, respectively. I pursued this question specifically to find out what these students considered meaningful and appropriate parent involvement.

### *Meaningful Parent Involvement*

"Parent involvement" has become an umbrella term for a range of traditional practices that require parents to participate in their children's schooling in ways that privilege educator expectations. Homework monitoring and assistance, attending school functions, responding to teacher requests to chaperone, supervise, or help in the classroom, and mimicking the school environment and rituals at home constitute a

rubric against which parents are judged (de Carvalho, 2001; Lawson, 2003). While these practices may be appropriate and meaningful for parents of elementary school-aged children, the noted decline of parent involvement in the higher grades (Dauber & Epstein, 1993) suggests secondary parent involvement evades this categorization.

When I asked the students in this study to provide examples of ways parents are or could be involved in the school, many described extracurricular activities such as sports events, awards assemblies, fundraising for music programs, and grade 12 graduation ceremonies; they emphasized those activities which made parents visible in the school. Some of them provided role descriptions that I interpreted as more relevant to elementary school, and when I pressed the issue, it became apparent to me that at-school parent involvement was like a script carried over from earlier grades. John (gr. 12) told me his mother volunteered to read with children when he was in elementary school, and suggested a potential role for parents was to come into classes and help out students. But when I asked him if he thought parents could understand grade 12 physics material he replied:

Well, no, not as far as that. Yes, I guess that wouldn't really work in high school. I guess it was okay in elementary school.

Contrary to research that describes teachers as territorial (Ravn, 1998), a couple of teachers in this study shared John's perspective. They told me they had an open door policy with parents, and seemed disappointed that no parent had taken them up on their offer, or contacted them in other ways to ask questions about curriculum:

I've said to every parent that I have, 'Please come sit in our class. Come. No problem...just come in, see what we're doing, find out what we're learning about, see the assignments...' Sadly, even the good parents don't get involved and say, 'How are we doing this?' (Marly, teacher)

I tell them (parents) to come in and sit at the back of the class or they can help out—they don't take that up. I've actually never had anyone do that yet. (Tina, teacher)

I noted that these teachers were very early in their careers, and their attitude contrasted with Sue, who had twelve years of experience:

It's basically, unfortunate to say, whenever you need a parent to drive or parent supervisor or that type of thing. You call them up and they'll come in and get involved. (Sue, teacher)

I also noted a difference between classroom engaged and school-wide engaged students' opinions on parents being at school. Four of the students who did not participate in extracurricular activities disapproved of parent involvement at school, while none of the school-wide engaged group found it problematic. The former students were adamant that parents "stay off the property" (Bailey, gr. 10) claiming students "get embarrassed" (Sean, gr. 11). By contrast, school-wide engaged students appreciated parents' support of extracurricular activities:

For volleyball this year we went to provincials and lots of parents came out and supported us. Through the whole year, for every tournament we had quite a few moms there watching. Same for basketball. That was nice. (Suze, gr. 10)

Regardless of school-wide engaged students' appreciation for parent presence at extracurricular events, they believed that type of involvement was academically irrelevant. Kate (gr. 11), whose mother volunteered in the school cafeteria, plainly denied a relationship between parent volunteering and her school performance:

Her volunteering in the cafeteria I don't think that really affects how I learn...it's great, she's supporting the school and everything, but that doesn't affect my learning I don't think. It's not like, 'Oh, my mom's here so I'm going to do better today.' It's nothing like that.

Alicia's (gr. 12) opinion mirrored Kate's:

There are kids who play sports and their parents really support sports. I guess it kind of makes sense, but they don't seem interested in anything else. That's the only part that they're really involved in I think...More the fun stuff I guess.

For me this was significant because regardless of these students' achievement or engagement, they did not associate parents' presence at school as a meaningful form of involvement where their achievement was concerned.

*“Support” as Meaningful Involvement*

I interpreted “meaningful parent involvement” as variable. However, “support” was a unifying principle among these students, and between the students and teachers in this study; the parent role in student learning was perceived as an indirect one of support for their children as well as their teachers. In their words:

I find that directly with my learning that they (parents) don’t have much of an influence. But in the support that I get for my learning the influence is totally there. (Jermaine, gr. 12)

In a perfect world...the parents would be very supportive making sure that consequences are in place, or if assignments aren’t being done the child would have a lot of support at home in terms of their assignments. (Ava, teacher)

Based on students’ comments, I typologized three emergent categories of support: social support, curriculum support, and supportive intervention. I discuss these next.

*Social support.* Implicit in these students’ comments was the desire that parents guide, motivate, and celebrate their children’s academic success and personal well-being. For some of the school-wide engaged students the parents’ role was situated in the creation of a positive home environment. Jermaine’s (gr. 12) statement supported this interpretation:

I feel the biggest thing for parents is to have a solid foundation at home for us because you can't expect the student to perform at school when they come home to whatever.

All of these students' comments closely reflected what I heard from the teachers; establishing routines, providing nutritious breakfast and lunch, monitoring their children's progress, and modeling the importance of education were among the list of parenting items that the educators in this study talked about as parents' responsibilities. Both students and teachers constructed the "good parent" (de Carvalho, 2001; Pushor & Murphy, 2004) around these tasks:

My mom, for example, I've always thought has been a very good parent. When I come home with books, she says, 'What do you have for homework tonight?' (Becky, gr. 11)

[Parents ask], 'And while you're at it, can you give them some moral fiber, can you teach them right from wrong, and can you actually sit down with them and explain to them why it's not alright to use obscene language and to talk to people in the obscene way that they have?' I think there are a great number of parents who are shirking their responsibilities, who don't know how to parent, and now it is falling upon the school. (Marly, teacher)

The teachers' rationale for the perceived decline in parenting skills was that "the nuclear family is not there like it was before" (Keith, teacher). Educators' negative perceptions about single parents and their children have been found by others (e.g.

Westergård & Galloway, 2004; Zill, 1996). My sample included only two cases of lone parent families. This prompted me to investigate. Statistically, the number of lone parent families in Shadow Canyon was 15% in 2001, which was actually one percent lower than the 1996 national census (Statistics Canada, 2001b). The discrepancy between teachers' beliefs that "there are more single parents, there are more broken families" (Marly, teacher) and the empirical evidence was a powerful demonstration of unexamined assumptions. Upon what did educators base their assessment of the parent population? Furthermore, Becky's (gr. 11) evaluation of her mother, a single parent, as a good parent, poignantly demonstrates how the postmodern family (Elkind, 1995) has been judged as inferior. How can schools negotiate the tensions between their rather traditional notions of parents as social supporters, and parents' postmodern realities?

Helping their children balance academic priorities against their extracurricular and social calendars was another suggestion about what was a meaningful role for parents. In Becky's (gr. 11) opinion: "when [parents] want to emphasize just school to such an extent that it's going to turn the kid off of school, they're not doing the kid any good." While much of the parent involvement literature emphasizes the role parents play in focusing their children on curricular goals, a healthy de-emphasis on academics was arguably appropriate for secondary students.

I interpreted the high achieving students as more likely to be grateful for parents who encouraged them in ways that related to academics; the lower achieving students were more likely to express a desire for parents to empathize with or

alleviate some of the non-academic, adolescent pressures. Bailey (gr. 10) generalized about parents' inability to provide social support:

When you end up with conflicts in school the parents always try to give you advice to just ignore it, be the bigger person or ignore it.

Well, they should come to school today and see what it's like to be in a high school when there's drugs, alcohol, abuse, bullying. Things have changed since their generation.

Her comment was reminiscent of a student Scherff (2005) cited in her anthology of over 700 American high school student submissions:

I hear teachers and parents always saying that, 'school can't be *that* bad!' well, from a student's point of view, yes, school can be *that* bad!

When I hear those words coming from these ignorant adults I must say it is quite annoying. (p. 98)

Bailey did not specify with anecdotes; however, her being withdrawn from the school and relocated to another community provided clues to her comments. This, in tandem with the two comments above, demonstrated clearly that "to be there" (Bailey, gr. 10) was broadly conceptualized within the notion of meaningful parent involvement.

*Curriculum support.* The curriculum support these students talked about fell into two general areas: motivating students to do schoolwork and taking an interest in what they were learning and how they were progressing. I asked Jermaine, "what kind of things would [parents] do to support your learning?" He replied, "Just to remind me to study all the time, and remind me if I have a poor mark to motivate me



to pick it up.” Michael (gr. 10) also suggested the parents’ role was to “try to hassle you. If they know about a test they’ll tell you to study...It’s that extra little push.” Ultimately, however, all of these students saw their achievement as their responsibility, and therefore deemed parents to be indirectly involved. As Michael put it, “if you don’t want to do it then you won’t.” This seemed to be the attitude among both high and lower achievers.

Findings from Crozier’s (2000) British study indicated that traditional parent involvement practices such as engaging parents in homework undergo significant shifts at the secondary level, and more importantly, have declining relevance for students in their last three years of high school. As mentioned in the previous section, the students in this study were not confident that their parents were able to assist them with all homework directly. But there was a consistent expectation that parents support students in completing it. Becky (gr. 11) described this role as creating a seamless educational experience:

Continuing education once you’re at home outside of school hours would be a big role for parents too....Learning doesn’t end at 3:30. The teachers may initiate lessons, but it is also the parents’ responsibility to support and encourage the student to achieve and work at their highest potential.

The importance of this role was marked by Kate (gr. 11), who seemed dissatisfied with what she observed as declining parent interest in her learning:

I think them being interested in what you're doing really helps. When I was younger and my parents asked me what I was doing I was so excited.....they used to ask questions or if I needed help on homework, but they don't ask me anymore.

Students wanted to be independent learners, but at minimum, wanted their parents to be curious about it. Many approaches to parent involvement, however, cast parents into the role of pseudo-teacher (Blackmore, 2004), which not only exceeds students' expectations for parent involvement, but arbitrarily labels as uninvolved those parents who do not take up a teacher role.

Recognizing the difficulty of understanding high school curriculum, most students said they would count as meaningful their parents' awareness of the curriculum and their children's progress. I noted some of these students put the onus on parents to communicate with teachers about their children's progress, while others ascribed to teachers the role of "educating the parents about what we're supposed to know and learn" (Alicia, gr. 12). Alicia, however, was suspicious of teachers demanding parent involvement, musing, "how is it supposed to be sincere if it's asked of them, and they don't do it on their own?" Her question struck the core of the issue for me, for if parent involvement is hegemonically constructed and orchestrated by educators according to their expectations, parents whose involvement takes a different form than what the school prescribes are viewed by the school as uninvolved, negligent, or apathetic (de Carvalho, 2001; López & Vázquez, 2005; Pushor & Murphy, 2004). Questions about parents' involvement require reconsideration. For example, instead of asking how schools can update parents about

school-related information, perhaps the question should focus on what information parents require and want in order to support their children in appropriate ways. Furthermore, what information do the teachers deem appropriate or necessary to provide? The principals' comments on this point were insightful:

There are one or two parents that are very much on my doorstep coming in here; they want to know about the program....What I would love to see is a learning profile of a student, parents coming in throughout the year and working with the career counselor, bring really involved in their child's education. We've got a smattering, maybe 5%-10% that actually do that.

Two issues arose for me. First, to what extent do parents who conform to educator expectations regarding the parents' role reinforce an entrenched script? Second, what conditions would encourage educators to examine their assumptions and practices around parent involvement so that traditional scripts can be challenged? A corollary to these questions is to what extent is policy created as a justification for educational practice? Considering Alicia's comment, what parents do without school prompting may ultimately be more meaningful for students.

Jermaine (gr. 12) offered a counterpoint to the argument that parents should be well-informed about their children's progress. Whereas most students implied a two-way communication between parents and teachers which entailed parents receiving full knowledge of their children's school lives, Jermaine proposed variations of this dyad, and regarded trust as the pinnacle of effective communication:

I find that the teacher and the student could have their own communication, and the parent and the teacher can have their own communication...but there are some things that the teacher and student could have personal, and not run and tell the parents all the time.

Because much of the literature on parent-school communication is based on elementary schools, parents are presented as proxies for their children, but these students debunked the feasibility of this for high school (gr. 12) and Luke (gr. 12) :

I think we're old enough, we can make our own choices. (Jack)

The parents don't know what the students want exactly. (Luke)

Ignoring students' desire to develop separate relationships with their teachers and make decisions based on their own wishes would be antithetical to the goals of citizenship and democracy in Alberta's educational policies (Alberta Education, 2005a). Thus, again, I raise the possibility of tapping into students' opinions to gain a better understanding of the parents' role in secondary school improvement.

In agreement with students, teachers considered reviewing report cards and attending parent-teacher interviews a basic parental role, but this seemed reserved primarily for those parents of students who were not performing well. Tina (teacher) complained, "You don't see the parents you really want to see." These students suggested the parents' role in school improvement was limited because "they're not here all the time...and they're not in classes" (Trish, gr. 11), but some teachers thought parents should be involved in decision making about curriculum changes

initiated by Alberta Education, and understanding the difference between the two curriculum streams. This role was more direct than the students perceived. Keith (teacher), however, outlined an important boundary: “we bring [parent involvement] in curriculum to a point, but [teachers] have to be careful when it crosses the line of a teacher and then it has to stop.” This line that Keith spoke of is often blurred in the literature, with the exception of Ogawa (1996) and Casanova (1996) who questioned the positive connotations that enshroud parent involvement. Specifically, Ogawa argued that “with increasing uncertainty, teachers would be expected to buffer their core technology” (p. 3). In other words, to prevent small groups of parents from excessively influencing or controlling the learning environment for personal gain, teachers should create a “buffer.” A question that comes to my mind is whose role is it to negotiate this boundary? And should students, as these have argued, be given more consideration in this matter?

*Supportive intervention.* The most common student perception was that the appropriate role for parents is to step in when students are having difficulties. This was the case for both school-wide engaged and classroom engaged students. Parent intervention was preferable to spiraling into deeper trouble:

I think they [parents] should probably do that more—step in and confront...when the students aren't doing very good because I've done pretty bad. In grade 9 I wasn't doing very good and I don't think the teachers ever told my parents once how I was doing...which was good for me because I didn't want to get into trouble, but then I just slid deeper and deeper. (Jack, gr. 12)

Some students highlighted this role in terms of parents' proximity to their children. John (gr. 12), for example, said, "No one knows you like your parents." This idea challenges the privileging of professional knowledge, an idea that has recently surfaced in studies exploring counter-conceptualizations of parent involvement (López & Vázquez, 2005; Pushor & Murphy, 2004).

According to some, the degree to which parents were expected to support their children's academic achievement through intervention was contingent upon students' personality and/or maturity. This kind of involvement was deemed more necessary for meek students who were unlikely to advocate for themselves. Although age was identified as an indicator, poor grades proved the need for parent intervention:

My little brother is 15, and he is under no circumstances ready to be cut off...I'd say usually around 16 you get a good sense of what needs to be done, and if you don't then you need help. But your marks will reflect that. (Danny, gr. 12).

It was the absence of intervention typical of her parents that made Suze's (gr. 10) comment stand out for me:

They don't know about school and stuff like that. That's just in my family, but I'm sure it would make a difference if you had somebody to help you if you needed it.

Suze's honor roll ranking showed unequivocally her ability to navigate high school without parent assistance, but she seemed to crave the prioritizing of her friends' parents:

When I come over to hang out they [friends] say, 'No, my mom's making me study.' ... If your parents knew there was a big test going on they would probably insist a little bit more on studying and not just cramming.

Regardless of academic standing, and despite their claims of independence and maturity, these students did not preempt an active parent role in preventing or addressing problems. Their responses reflected contradictory desires for autonomy from and reliance upon their parents, a tension, I would argue, parents and students must negotiate, not policy makers or educators.

Intervention also seemed to be what these teachers were most concerned about. "Hard to reach" parents of those children who are performing or behaving poorly in school tend to be the focus of parent involvement models (e.g. Epstein, 2001a). I detected resentment from some teachers for parents who were either unaware or unconvinced of their children's difficulties. Marly posited, "Some parents don't even get involved when they know their child isn't having success."

Involvement from parents whose children were succeeding was appreciated, but it was really the parents of those who were not whom the teachers honed in on.

Provisions for special needs children and discipline were bones of contention, as suggested by Tina and Ava:

The biggest problem I think is that you need to convince the parents that their kid does need help. (Tina)

With behavior, some parents are very defensive about hearing criticism that refers to their child. (Ava)

As reflected in the literature (Allen, Thompson, Hoadley, Engelking, & Drapeaux, 1997), discipline was a particular area of emphasis for these teachers which ranged from parents teaching their children “what an authority figure means” (Marly, teacher) to limiting their children’s part-time work hours. I gathered from interviews and informal conversations with teachers that parents’ behavior when intervening also determined teachers’ openness to their involvement. I interpreted a general disapproval for “parents whose first and in some case only response or only way of getting attention or action is to threaten, yell” (Elmer, teacher). Ned, however, articulated the potential for negative parent intervention to create positive outcomes:

Whether the kid is right or not, any time that [a parent] questions something it gives an opportunity to look at something and say, ‘Well, is it happening or is it not?’ ....it takes us out of our comfort zone to say, ‘Oh, geez, I need to deal with that.’ So I think that by dealing with that one situation you’re helping a lot of kids.

Negative forms of parent involvement have received little scholarly attention, and these two teachers confronted conventional wisdom that all parent involvement is good. An unexplored question is whether all parents have the capacity to intervene in ways that contribute to improved results for their children, and whose responsibility it



is to provide parents with suitable skills. The literature also takes for granted that all parents and their intentions are good. It may be the case that all parents care (Epstein, 2001a), but as Becky (gr. 12) suggested, parents who “want [their children] to get into colleges, get into universities, get the scholarships, make sure they have the marks” break the threshold of support and become “pressuring.” Thus, as these students and their teachers suggested, supportive intervention is a carefully measured approach.

### *Meaningful Parent Uninvolvement: A Divergence*

Some of the students’ divergent comments regarding the qualitative nature of parent involvement warrant discussion. In discussing the role of parents in secondary school improvement, students raised some concern over their parents acting like surveillance mechanisms, particularly with respect to their grades. This divergence was most notable among the classroom engaged group. By way of example, Danny (gr. 12) shared the following:

...for the most part I don’t want my parents to know my marks until report cards come out. If I do bad on a test I don’t want my parents to know. Like I don’t want a note to be sent home to be signed. I don’t think that’s fair...if you’re doing poorly and you’re barely passing grade 12 or you’re borderline failure, then yes, they should know.

Danny seemed to be referring to the informal progress reports that The Saints School teachers sent home in between official report cards. Similarly, Jack (gr. 12) and Bailey (gr. 10) emphasized negative social consequences of parent-teacher relationships:

It might be harder on the students if your parents are more involved with teachers because then you're going to school and getting possibly a hard time from the teachers and then coming home and getting the same thing from your parents. (Jack)

Personally I wouldn't want parents and teachers to get together because students might just have some bad grades and they really don't want their parents to know about it, and if the teachers and parents are involved they'll know and the students will want to quit school. (Bailey)

I was also told that when students receive unsatisfactory grades, "their parents take away their stuff, [students] get grounded, kicked out of the house" (Sean, gr. 11).

These were the most acute examples I heard; however, they, too, trouble the taken for granted goodness of parent involvement by distinguishing intervention from interference. My interpretation was that constantly informing parents about poor school performance did not facilitate the supportive intervention students wanted, particularly those who received lower grades. Perceived interference had a potentially divisive and complicating effect on the student-parent relationship.

Thus, these students did not invite parent involvement when they were performing poorly. Scholarship contends that when schools create opportunities for parents to become involved, students will perform better academically, have better attitudes, (Epstein et al., 2002), and attend school more regularly (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). But these school-oriented outcomes overlook the quality of parent-child

interactions. Clearly, the qualitative dimension was at the forefront of some students' concerns. In other words, schools should not assume parent involvement guarantees positive results on students' academic achievement. Not only were the students in my study resistant to some forms of parent involvement, they were resentful, which may hinder, rather than facilitate positive learning experiences.

### **Whose Role is School Improvement? Are Parents Partners?**

The African proverb, "It takes a whole village to raise a child" is the rally cry of policies and programs that direct educators and administrators to seek parental input into decisions to improve students' academic outcomes (Haynes, Ben-Avie, 1996). "Parents are partners" is the Westernized version of this adage. Mantra-like, as AISI Coordinator I invoked both of these to promote the philosophy of Epstein's (2001a) school-home-community partnership model. Given the indirect connection between parent involvement and students' academic achievement expressed by these students, I explored their perceptions of the popularized partnership metaphor and policy intentions to convert parents into school improvement decision makers. I was intrigued by the contrast between students' discounting ex officio a role for parents in deciding matters related to curricular outcomes, and their agreement with the partnership image.

When asked, ten of these students agreed with the expression "parents are partners." But when I invited them to break down educational constituents' shares in improvement planning, all but one allocated unequal proportions in the teachers' favor. The one student who claimed an equal partnership had participated directly in

the Cycle 1 AISI project that used Epstein's (2001a) model; therefore, I attributed this students' viewpoint to three years' engagement in that project.

Once again, the students who were not high achievers or highly involved in the school stood out. Most of them rejected the partnership model. Jack (gr. 12) pointedly articulated this from what I interpreted as a common standpoint of others in that group:

I think if they want to improve high schools students should be the biggest role. They should ask the students what they want because I think we're old enough, we can make our own choices, and we do not want the same things that our parents want I'm sure.

Why did more of this group of students say, "they [government, teachers] should talk to [students]" (Luke, gr. 10)? Reflecting upon my experiences as an educator I thought about the type of students that represented their peers on committees and assume leadership roles. Within schools, educators often invite the academically strongest and most popular students to lead others because they are assumed to be organized, influential, and up to date on their work so that taking on extra responsibilities would not affect their grades. These types of students are more likely to have the ear of the educator and be given more opportunities to voice their opinions. But are they representative of their peers? This problem of representation is compounded when one considers who educators are prone to select as ambassadors for their school. For example, who was asked to participate in the youth consultations sponsored by Alberta's Learning Commission (Alberta Learning, 2003a)? The less involved, lower achieving students are often perceived as uncooperative, inarticulate,

and unconcerned about policy issues, and because their performance is below standard, they are least likely to be allowed to miss classes to attend events that are unrelated to classroom work. Ironically, though school improvement is motivated by the desire to increase these students' achievement, they are not asked about their needs. It is the students who are already succeeding in the current system who tend to get asked about school improvement. It is akin to fortifying a building's foundation by banging more nails into the roof.

Researchers may also contribute to imbalanced perspectives. Although there is now a growing concern with describing the student voice, the above factors may consciously and unconsciously play into sampling decisions, and make specious whose voice is being represented. Much insight has been gained from various scholars who have dedicated a research agenda to understanding students' experiences with school reform (Crozier, 2000; Kaba, 2001; Oldfather, 1995; Spencer 2003, 2004; Taylor, 2001; Rubin & Silva, 2003; Scherff, 2005; Wasley, Hampel, & Clark, 1997; Wilson & Corbett, 2001); however, I learned that the field is fallow with regards to the views of those students who are less "noticeable" academically or otherwise.

The widespread acceptance of the partnership metaphor among these students made me question the extent to which educational rhetoric leaches individuality from students' thoughts. The persuasive power of metaphor predisposed these students to the schematic validity of partnership (Lakoff & Turner, 1989). In the hope of honoring these students' original ideas, I asked them to create their own metaphor for the relationship between parents and teachers in school improvement. Once again, I

interpreted philosophical distinctions between the students who performed well and contributed beyond the classroom—the school-wide engaged students—and those who underperformed and limited their involvement to the classroom—the classroom engaged group. I spell these distinctions out in the final section of this chapter.

### **Students' Metaphors**

Yanow (2000) defines metaphor as the “juxtaposition of two superficially unlike elements...in a single context” (p. 42). Her use of metaphor analysis to decipher policy meaning is an extension of Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) refutation that metaphor is merely decorative. She quotes Lakoff and Johnson (1987) to establish the import of metaphor in policy:

Metaphor is not a harmless thing. It is one of the principal means by which we understand our experience and reason on the basis of that understanding. To the extent that we act on our reasoning, metaphor plays a role in the creation of reality. (Yanow, 2000, p. 42)

Metaphor, then, is an access point to the descriptive content and prescriptive forces that shape policy. Where parents are concerned, how their role is described necessarily moves policy actors to perform within and respond to policy parameters. Literal language is useful because it reflects deeper structures that outline how one experiences, and therefore understands, a phenomenon (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The current use of “parents as partners” in education implies a conjoining of parents with educators who presumably share a singular vision and are equally responsible for attaining it. These students' metaphors only roughly aligned with this idea, and in some cases, pitted antagonistic relationships among parents, teachers, and students.

*Parents as Assistant Coaches: The School-wide Engaged Students' Metaphor*

The students in this group most often concurred with the partnership metaphor and described new metaphors that embodied a notion of cooperation between parents and teachers. A common metaphor employed was that of parents as assistant coaches. Though this metaphor embodies a team concept, it places parents in a subordinate role in which they performed functions and tasks organized by teachers (head coaches). Statements such as, "The assistant coaches, they're there, but they kind of just write down the stats" (Suze, gr. 10) suggested parents are indirectly involved in these students' learning.

The students spoke about the ideal relationship between parents and teachers in terms of unity and coherence, even if they did not agree that parents had a strong role to play in school improvement decisions. Importantly, I noted that these students aligned with the teachers, who also spoke about the parent-teacher relationship in terms of a coach-assistant coach dynamic. The idea that parents and teachers worked together to achieve common goals for children was obvious, but more telling was that the dynamic typically placed teachers in more control. Thus, the metaphor that parents are partners was a workable concept for these school-wide engaged students because it was an unequal partnership, unlike the kind of partnership that is increasingly promoted in policy documents.

*Aggression and Protection: The Classroom Engaged Students' Metaphors*

For most of the classroom engaged students the partnership metaphor did not resonate. Their metaphors were strikingly combative compared to the other groups' or the teachers'. Luke (gr. 10) described the relationship this way: "...it's like if there's

a bug around you outside you don't hit it unless it's doing something bad, unless it's bugging you." He told me the teachers were the ones who squashed the bug by calling the parents, who were cast as exterminators. Collegiality between parents and teachers was absent in Luke's metaphor; he portrayed parents as ad hoc participants in school improvement, called upon only when their children were not performing according to teachers' expectations.

Jack's (gr. 12) metaphor was equally informative. When I asked Jack if parents were partners in their children's learning, he responded, "More like bodyguards than partners. They're more there to help us than they are to see us along the way." He did not feel parents could contribute much to improvement that focused on increasing students' achievement and in keeping with his earlier comments about parents' interventionist role, he envisioned, as Luke did, parents being called upon in specific cases of students' underachievement or misbehavior. These two metaphors reflect research that concludes teachers involve parents of poorly performing students differently than those of excelling students (Giles, 1998). Despite these teachers' agreement that all parents should have input into school improvement, I interpreted their concerns largely with those parents of students who were not meeting acceptable standards, and wondered if parents who fell into that group were given different opportunities to participate in the school based on their children's lack of achievement. For Luke and Jack, parents served a corrective function. Research has shown that parents of minority and low socioeconomic status receive more negative attention from teachers and are assigned less complimentary stereotypes (de Carvalho, 2001; Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1996; Giles, 1998; Zill, 1996). Luke and



Jack identified as “Canadian” and had parents who worked in well-paying employment; therefore, I was unable to interpret their perspectives beyond their own social and academic struggles. Significantly, analysis of these students’ metaphors challenges the homogeneous approach that is taken to policy, practice, and research.

### **Shadowscape**

Throughout my education career in Alberta and overseas I have been uncomfortable with the labels assigned to students through programs or initiatives. I have heard teachers refer to students as “my 42’s” (coded as having “severe” behavior disorders), “the gifted kids,” “ESL’ers” (English as a Second Language), or “at risk kids,” and have questioned the ethical implications of teachers’ shorthand. Although I did not endeavor to investigate teachers’ perceptions of students, my interactions with these students gave me pause to think anew about how educators unconsciously sort, catalogue, and pigeonhole students, and how this manner of identifying students influences approaches to school improvement.

I was surprised that the “struggling” students that I selected to participate in my study did not describe themselves as such. Cory, a grade 11 First Nations student, left a particularly strong impression on me because though I assumed he was the least likely out of the group to attend university, he was also the most determined. When I interviewed him five months later as a grade 12 student, however, he had all but decided not to pursue university because of his grades. What I found heartbreaking about this was his tone of resignation and rationalization that he should rethink his post-secondary pursuits. It was an unsettling feeling to learn that teachers did not

think Cory “belonged” in the higher academic courses. More disconcerting, however, was that Cory eventually adopted this stance.

These “struggling” students have encouraged me to be more thoughtful about the practice of grouping students, and more significantly, to question how “struggling” and “succeeding” are defined. These labels, like “ESL” or “42,” have become matters of convenience and efficiency in discussions about students, but they are not benign. Perhaps my own definition of success as measured by academic achievement has played into my perception of students and the way I categorized them. Are other educators followed by this same shadow? Has the altruism that teachers can help all children achieve their dreams become cliché? Intuitively I know this to be false, but my observations of schools throughout my career, perusal of government documents, formal and informal conversations with teachers, and reflections on my own assumptions have lead me to question which “dream” is promoted, and which students are encouraged to chase it.

Before I embarked on this doctoral study I assumed that school improvement was about helping the “struggling” students become “succeeding” students. As I speculate on what those terms mean to me, and how those categories emerge from my personal beliefs about education and success, I wonder how educators and policy makers can be true to their intentions to help “every child learn [and] succeed” (Alberta Learning, 2003a) in a way that will help them actualize *their* dreams. This study has changed my mind about my either/or categorization of students, but I wonder how this type of thinking can be avoided when current school improvement has narrowly defined “improvement.”

## Chapter Summary

This chapter presented themes in relation to students' responses regarding two issues: the meaning of school improvement and parents' appropriate role within school-led improvement initiatives. Their experiences with school improvement, such as AISI and FNMI, which claim to include parents in a grassroots fashion, were supplementary and therefore interspersed throughout the two key sections. To summarize, my interpretations of the students' responses were the following.

These students defined school improvement in a "curriculum oriented" manner, which included pedagogy, content, and measurable outcomes. Overwhelmingly, these students most often described school improvement in terms of measurable outcomes. There was a distinction between "school-wide engaged" and "classroom engaged" students in terms of content improvement and the extent to which measurable outcomes such as Diploma Exams were relevant to their lives. These students' understanding of school improvement aligned closely with policy maker and educator intentions.

Achievement was deemed a student's responsibility and parents were assigned a limited role in this regard. An appropriate role for parents was defined in terms of support. I constructed a typology of support that included social support, curriculum support, and supportive intervention, with intervention being the most popular notion of parent involvement. These students' understanding of what is an appropriate role for parents in school improvement somewhat aligned with educators in the sense that students did not experience or envision school improvement as anyone's role but the

teachers' which contradicts the expectations for student and parent engagement in programs such as AISI and FNMI.

“Parents are partners” was an agreed upon metaphor for the “school-wide engaged” students, but not for the “classroom engaged” students. Further analysis of students’ metaphors suggested that partnership was not conceived of in terms of equality. School-wide engaged students referenced the role of assistant coach to describe the appropriate relationship between parents and teachers in school improvement. Classroom engaged students’ metaphors were more antagonistic in the sense that they did not conceptualize parents, teachers, and students working together to reach school improvement goals; rather, these students saw the parents’ role as ad hoc and necessary only in times of crisis. These distinctions are relevant because the literature treats parent involvement altruistically and does not account for the potential impact of parent-student or teacher-student relations on students’ perceptions of parent involvement practices and policies.

In Chapter 5 I address the research questions from the parents’ point of view.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **INTERPRETATIONS AND DISCUSSION OF PARENT RESPONSES**

This chapter parallels the preceding one in form and function but focuses on the parents' responses to the research questions. In the following I discuss themes constructed from parents' responses about the meaning of school improvement and parent involvement, their experiences with respect to school-led improvement, and their conceptualization of what is the appropriate role for parents in children's learning and achievement. Educator responses and policy meaning are weaved throughout as in the previous chapter to answer my third research question regarding the extent to which parents mirror educator and policy maker views. At the end of the chapter I reconvene students and parents to briefly discuss the impact of the northern location on the question of parent involvement in school improvement.

#### **Illusory Parent Clusters**

In this study I was concerned with representing the ethnic characteristics of parents in the school to balance a literature which relies heavily on British and American contexts. At the beginning of the interviews I asked these parents to describe their employment and their residential history; thus, many of them directly or indirectly provided information about their education level and earnings. There is quite a literature that argues non-White parents and those in low socioeconomic circumstances can not or do not participate in their children's schooling like their White, middle class counterparts, and therefore do not benefit from current parent involvement policies and practices (Caines, 2005; Crozier, 1999a, 1999b, 2000; de Carvalho, 2001; Lareau, 1987; 1996; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Linver, Fuligni, &

Brooks-Gunn, 2004; López, 2001a, 2001b; López & Vázquez, 2005; McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999; Pushor & Murphy, 2004; Skau, 1996; Vincent, 2001; Vincent & Martin, 2002). In my analysis of the data, however, I found ethnic background and socioeconomic status figured inconsistently in parents' responses. Parents' education level and their children's academic accomplishments and gender had some relevance to the nature of school improvement and parent involvement they envisioned, but these associations did not hold for all parents or across other areas of my investigation to render socioeconomic status an appropriate clustering.

When I created the parent sample, I thought of parents as being "supportive" if they cooperated with teachers and participated in traditional ways, and "unsupportive" if they challenged teachers' authority, but did not participate in the school in any other way (see Table 3.2). These parents did not correspond to my educator classifications. For example, Melanie and Jill, who were labeled unsupportive by educators, described very positive experiences with the school and its staff, and either claimed they never had cause to approach the school, or, if they did, to have resolved issues amicably and usually to their satisfaction. On the other hand, Oskar, who was listed as a supportive parent, told me, "In general I feel like I'm always threatening." Victoria, too, suspected teachers branded her a "difficult parent" because she advocated assertively for her children. Their experiences emphasized a contrast between educator and parent assumptions.

That these parents' responses did not clearly conform to characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, children's grade level, or their children's academic experiences confirmed for me scholars' arguments that parents, and parent involvement as a

concept, are heterogeneous and multi-layered (Morgan & Grace, 1992). This throws into question blanket expressions such as “meaningful involvement of the school community” (Alberta Learning, 1999a, p. ii). As I conclude in this chapter, there were occasions of discrepancy between parents, policy makers and educators, and among parents themselves about what is meaningful activity for parents in their children’s academic achievement. This further highlights potential problems with homogenizing parent involvement.

### **Meanings of School Improvement: Child Oriented Improvement**

In contrast with the students and educators whose definitions of school improvement predominantly referenced curriculum outcomes, children were the referent for all but one of these parents when they talked about school improvement. Thus, I interpreted their predominant conceptualization of school improvement as child oriented. Child oriented meanings of school improvement fell into two comprehensive categories: (a) individual needs, and (b) holistic development.

#### *Meeting Individual Needs*

A central concern of these parents was that schools appreciate and respond to their children as individuals. Individualism was conceived of in several ways including personality, interests, and learning needs.

#### *Personalities and Idiosyncrasies*

All of these parents had put more than one child through school, and anecdotes about the often-striking contrasts among their children were abundant. Respect for children’s dispositions was especially important for Yves and Martine

who described their children as being “different shades of black and white.” In their experience, some teachers did not heed their children’s personality and judged younger ones according to older siblings. They explained for example, “one child was...ADHD and another was very quiet [but] that teacher was...expecting the same behavior from both of them.” Betty described the polarity of her two daughters’ work ethics, also stating her younger daughter’s unscholarly approach to life was “not necessarily bad.” Parents tended not to hold their children up to the provincial archetype of the ideal student as a producer of “world-class results” (Alberta Learning, 1999b, p.i) and as a “key component of the ‘Alberta Advantage’” (p.i). Consequently, they were more likely to emphasize children’s individuality rather than collective goals in their conceptualizations of school improvement.

### *Interests and Aptitudes*

These parents also expressed school improvement in terms of accommodating and developing students’ individual interests, often with the hope of setting them on a career trajectory. Variances among these parents were based on their children’s aptitudes and experiences in school. To illustrate Anneke shared the following:

In [country] you can send them to a different school that’s more about what they like. [Child] likes animals, so then you can go to that school because that’s more with the animals and plants and that kind of thing. I have a niece in [country]...she doesn’t have skills for math and that kind of stuff, but she can...make nice flowerbeds.

I interpreted Anneke’s position as stemming from one of her children leaving before completion. She conjectured her child’s and other early school leavers’ issue was



boredom with having to follow “one straight line.” Her comment to the school when they persisted at keeping her daughter in school was “when she is really unhappy at school it’s not good,” which exemplifies par excellence a difference in emphasis between parents and teachers. Whereas retention and graduation mark success from educators’ and policy makers’ standpoint (Alberta Learning, 2002), Anneke’s decision to support her child’s early school leaving demonstrated children’s happiness as the benchmark.

Anneke’s experience alerted me to assumptions that had grown out of my AISI coordinator experiences. In particular, as an AISI coordinator I had encouraged The Saints School to pursue a goal of increasing participation rates in Diploma Exam science courses, a goal that the school was continuing to work on at the time of my study. From my educator’s view of school improvement, I assumed that persuading more students to enroll in higher level courses would increase their post-secondary opportunities and help them decide on a career path. Moreover, I assumed parents would support school improvement that moved in this direction. However, in conducting my study I have questioned steering students toward a narrow curricular focus. Would this marginalize the already disengaged students? Indeed, some of the lower achieving students’ comments recorded in Chapter 4 were congruent with Anneke’s and pointed to the short sightedness of my assumption.

Other parents were not critical of the curricular format, but like Anneke, spoke about the importance of children achieving goals that corresponded to their passions and future aspirations. As Melanie put it, it was important for teachers to “sit with the [students] and try to explain to them, and find out what they’re interested in and what

career they want to go into.” Some parents supported their children’s decision to withdraw from programs such as French Immersion or higher academic courses if they did not deem them necessary for their children to succeed at their lifelong pursuits. More than one parent had mentioned they permitted their children to do this, which suggested not all parents were in favor of improvement goals such as increasing participation rates in Diploma Exam courses. Rather they saw school improvement as teachers being “in tune with the individual needs” (Melanie).

### *Diverse Learning Needs*

By far the most common meaning of school improvement that came through from these parents’ responses was that it was about meeting children’s specific learning requirements. Comments such as “not everybody learns the same” (Guy) were plentiful, and embodied a general expectation that teachers provide instruction and create environments conducive to meeting such diversity. With little exception these parents made explicit or implicit associations between school improvement and their own children’s learning needs, as suggested by the following:

I guess I’m happy with schools that look at each student individually and can focus on different groups of students’ needs at the same time, and accommodate a wide range of students...(Victoria)

The way they try to make teachers aware of the different learning styles of kids. (Hans and Gretta)

To me these illustrated that parents think of school improvement within the particular needs of their own children. I had witnessed firsthand parents advocating for their children’s needs at school council meetings. Similar findings about parents’

propensity to seek or support improvements solely for the benefit of their children have been reported (McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999; Morgan & Morgan, 1992).

Victoria gave me a new insight into school improvement when she told me that school improvement was something that affected her personally, not only her children. By way of example, she shared the following experience with school improvement decision making in her children's former school:

It was really hard for me to sit there in those meetings and vote for a fee increase, which I knew the school needed...I was thinking that means whatever less for me, you know? But I always voted for the fee increase because that was what the school needed; it was the best for the school even though it had a negative impact on me personally. So I think it's hard for parents to set themselves aside and not relate everything to their own son or daughter, and do what's best for the school and community. Maybe that's what scares some people away. Maybe it's too difficult for them to do that.

Studies have argued that wealthier parents are more likely to participate in school governance (Caines, 2005) and exercise their social and cultural capital to influence decisions that will benefit their children (Kohn, 1998; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999). Framing the issue within critical theory, however, creates the impression that parents who engage in decision making at school are powerful; those who do not are victims of a market system. Victoria's point challenged this theory by suggesting some parents purposefully do not participate because they cannot overcome the instinct to act for themselves or on behalf of their children. This

was voiced by a mother in my pilot study who temporarily removed herself from her school's AISI team over a frustration involving her child's teacher (Stelmach, 2005a). Together these examples accentuate the complexity of parent involvement in school-led improvement initiatives. While parents might agree in principle with programs and policy frameworks such as AISI and FNMI which focus on helping students do better, the method and resources required to achieve such goals have practical consequences for parents not only for their children, but for themselves. The personal and affective dimensions of school improvement decisions and their impact on parents have not been considered in current literature, but as Victoria articulated, they may critically influence the nature of school improvement to which parents are prepared to assent.

Parents' particularity was further signaled by their examples of improvement at the school. There was consensus among these parents that the school was committed to special needs programming, but depending on their own children's academic aptitude, it was viewed as a strength or weakness. Some parents claimed there was a concentration on what they termed "severe" (Surin) or "behavior problem children" (Lewis), and that the school was "missing a whole other segment of special needs" (Lewis). Speaking for remedial learning needs, Victoria and Guy believed that Individualized Program Plans (IPPs) (Alberta Education, 2005c) and the school's Achievement Watch Team were beneficial to their children. Surin, Lewis, and Hans and Gretta idealized improvement as the implementation of an International Baccalaureate or gifted program, but understood that because of the small population it was "pretty well impossible." These parents were university-educated and their

children were high achievers, which perhaps explained their desire for academically broad and challenging programs. Regardless of the academic standing of their children, what was crucial to these parents was that the school accommodated their children's learning requirements and interests.

There was divergence among these parents regarding their experiences with securing learning provisions for their children. For example, Guy felt the school was prepared to "deal with [him] as part of a team...to get things accomplished."

Although he was insistent that his children's learning needs received attention, he said, "I go in willing to discuss and negotiate." Ultimately, he presented his children's needs and trusted the educators to decide how they should be addressed. Morrissette and Morrissette (1999) described similar deference to professionals in their study of parents of special education children. Victoria perceived this aspect of school improvement rather differently:

Their (teachers') idea was that they would prepare the IPP and we would go in and meet and they would present it to us...but I said that wasn't going to work for us.

Victoria and her husband successfully convinced the teachers to begin afresh with planning their child's IPP, but Victoria believed it was her and her husband's assertiveness that precipitated an inclusive process. What I learned from Victoria and Guy was that parents had differing expectations about what constituted improvement for their children's learning, as well as the extent to which parents felt it was their role to advise teachers about how their children's needs should be addressed.

My discussions with teachers and observations in classrooms suggested teachers and parents were disconnected on this aspect of school improvement. Even though the school's Cycle 2 (2003-2006) AISI project on differentiated instruction was premised on students having different learning styles, and its FNMI project emphasized learner diversity, I did not get a clear impression that these foci had dramatically changed what I interpreted as predominantly teacher-led, conventional approaches to learning. For example, teachers expressed mixed feelings about the value of differentiated instruction as an improvement aim. Some complained that time and subject matter prohibited them from pedagogical experimentation, and said students themselves questioned, "Why do we have to do all these projects?" (Marly, teacher). Other teachers believed "subconsciously we do fit in multiple intelligence anyway" (Tina) and thought "it (AISI) validates something we've always been doing" (Sue). These statements pointed to Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer's (2002) argument that cognitive frameworks motivate policy implementers to pay attention only to information that corresponds with their desired outcome. Was school improvement understood as an opportunity to improve learning opportunities and outcomes for individual students, or did teachers view it as a threat to their current practice? Based on the data, I would argue that learner diversity was inconsistently addressed.

Roughly 20% of the students in the school had been coded as special needs (Alberta Education, 2006d) which entitled them to various learning provisions. During a school council meeting, however, I surmised that attending to individual needs as parents desired was impractical from the educators' point of view. For instance, when a parent raised the matter of including parents and students in

individual program planning, the principal explained that it would be “a nightmare” to include parents in all the steps of the planning process for 80-90 students who followed an IPP (Field notes, October 19, 2005). Total inclusion was not conducive to timely preparation of IPPs for the students or to meet deadlines set by Alberta Education. This incident exemplified a possible reason why parents’ ideas about school improvement differed from educators: whereas parents had the needs of their own children in mind, the teachers dealt with a conglomerate of individual needs.

#### *Holistic Development*

Outside of developments to support their children’s distinct learning styles, parents recognized that schools can “become very competitive for students if they’re just focusing on the basics” (Victoria). Developing the “whole child” (Gretta) was important to these parents. Some parents were impressed with the programming offered at the school; others felt it was limited or merely “getting there” (Mikah).

Most of these parents spoke about school improvement as a compromise between academic and non-academic development, but they dissented over whether and how co- and extra-curricular programming should be approached. Some felt students’ sexuality was the parents’ domain, whereas others argued for its inclusion; some were satisfied with presentations on alcohol and drug prevention, others suggested the school should “pick it up a couple of grades” (Oskar) to stay abreast of teenagers’ knowledge. In addition to the above, a range of areas from fine arts opportunities, career and personal counseling, physical activity programs, and sports and nutrition were offered as part of holistic development. There was a lack of consensus on what was involved in this kind of school improvement.

Considering the denominational nature of the school, I was surprised that religion was not at the forefront of holistic school improvement for most of these parents and none of the teachers. Some parents mentioned Catholicism non-specifically as an example of ways the school was improving, but this tended to be an afterthought rather than a priority. One father agreed with his wife's definition: "school improvement is teaching the Catholic faith, not only academic stuff" (Martine). They reported their child being ridiculed by peers for publicly expressing his faith. Their concern with what they perceived to be the dilution of Catholic content and the secularization of the school environment went unanswered calling into question Bauch and Goldring's (1996) claim that Catholic schools are more likely in "partnership mode" (p. 423) constituted by a trinity between the school, home, and parish. In "[The Saints School] School Improvement Plan 2004/2005-2006/2007" I noted the discrepancy between the local priority to "Improve the family, school, and parish relationship" (Field notes, May 12, 2005), and Yves and Martine's perception of the displacement of the church from this dynamic. Their outlook was important because it reinforced for me the idea that for parents, school improvement means many things and is often conceptualized according to students' individual needs, experiences, and preferences, rather than standardized learning outcomes. Importantly, it also reinforced for me that perspective matters.

#### *A Divergent Definition of School Improvement: Measurable Outcomes*

Oskar represented a divergent perspective on school improvement that warrants highlighting. He was clearly committed to an educational bottom line, thinking in terms of "cause and effect." He was supportive of a wide range of goals—



academic and non-academic—but stated strongly, “we should throw the whole thing out unless it’s backed up by a fairly rigorous system of measurement.” In fact, he thought school improvement was “potentially harmful if there’s no follow-up to it.” He referred to the identification of multiple intelligences as problematic if it led to streaming young children. He recalled being “yelled at” by his children’s elementary school teachers when he challenged this practice. He did not comment on The Saints School’s differentiated instruction project except to unabashedly say he knew “absolutely nothing about AISI at [The Saints School]” beyond what he read in the school newsletter. He was the only parent to question why he had “never had or heard of a parent meeting where somebody explained what school improvement [was] from the school’s point of view.” This to him made school improvement nebulous.

I interpreted as cynical Oskar’s comment that he only hears about school improvement when the school “comes up with some project, a particular one-off project that they want to talk to the parents about.” He admitted that “if you (the school) can’t explain what the program is, what it’s supposed to accomplish and how you’re going to measure that you’ve actually accomplished it, then the screensaver kind of comes on.” Lewis was the only other parent who suggested that Alberta’s emphasis on standardized tests was “a very strong thing,” but ultimately, he, like the other parents, thought school improvement hinged on accommodating individual needs of students. Oskar somewhat owed his perspective to his math and science background. One other possible explanation is that both he and Lewis claimed to have participated in school council at their children’s elementary and/or secondary schools, which would have made them privy to conversations about Provincial Achievement

Tests and Diploma Exam (Alberta Education, 2006c) results. Beyond this, I was not able to fully account for this deviation in perspective. Oskar was the only parent who aligned with students, teachers, and policy makers heeding the outcome-based nature of school improvement.

### *Summary of Parents' Definitions of School Improvement*

These parents, unlike the students and the teachers, defined school improvement in what I called a child oriented manner. In particular, they described instructional and environmental elements that made it possible for their children to explore their individuality, develop their interests and aptitudes, and most importantly, to advance their learning strengths and overcome limitations. They also concentrated on their child's holistic development. These orientations of school improvement played into these parents' understanding of their role within school-led improvement initiatives, which is the focus of the next section of this chapter.

### **How Parents See Their Role in School Improvement**

AISI and FNMI promise a bottom-up approach described as “grassroots” (Alberta Learning, 1999b) and requiring the “collaborative efforts” (Alberta Learning, 2002) of all educational stakeholders, including parents. This assumes that parents are prepared to play an active role in directly affecting student learning outcomes. My study pointed to an overwhelming departure from that notion; like the students, these parents considered their roles in ways that clearly separated them from the work of classroom teachers and curriculum. The idea that involvement occurred at school was a strong undercurrent in these parents' responses, despite most of them

admitting to not participating in school meetings or events outside of their children's activities. With further exploration, three common themes countered this entrenched view: (1) the parents saw their role in their children's learning "behind the scenes"; (2) their role was to advocate for their children and intervene when their children faced academic and/or social problems; and, (3) the parental role was a negotiation between parents and their adolescent children.

*Parent Involvement at School: An Entrenched Assumption*

Research shows that teachers evaluate parents' involvement according to their visibility in the school (Crozier, 1999; Epstein, 1996; Thomson, 2002). Indeed, this was my educator and AISI coordinator belief. Interestingly, the examples these participants provided about how parents are or should be involved in schools led me to believe they also evaluated themselves according to this notion. One mother, for example, insisted that parents should "just be here (at school)" (Angela). I detected self-reproach among some parents who told me they did not help out at school:

I'm kind of a guilty parent. I help until grade 7 and 8 and after that I don't volunteer for things anymore. (Guy)

It's bad, we used to be so involved....We're probably not very good ones to be interviewing. (Martine)

A perceived lack of involvement was based on a comparison of their at-school interactions when their children were in elementary school. Teachers also critiqued the "'I finished my job after elementary' attitude" (Keith, teacher). To counter this mindset the principal reported one of his strategies was to attend a school council meeting at the elementary feeder school to recruit parents and say, "here are the

reasons why you should get involved.” This confirmed the entrenched assumption that parent involvement occurs at school.

Yves and Martine told me they had “really pulled back” and considered themselves “uninvolved,” yet they described meal time as their family’s “sacred” opportunity to debrief from their day. It did not make sense to me why they saw themselves as uninvolved except for the fact that their behavior did not coincide with an elementary school rhetoric of parent involvement. And when I asked parents what was an appropriate role for them in relation to their high school children’s academic success, most reported it was no longer meaningful to be at the school unless their children were involved in extra-curricular activities, or the school contacted them:

You know, when they get to grade 7 you almost think that’s the level where they should start doing a little more on their own, rather than always having to be there making sure they’re doing whatever. (Betty)  
...we were probably more involved in elementary. It’s kind of the idea that as they get older then it becomes more and more your [child’s] education and stepping back a little bit more and putting the responsibility for their education on them. (Martine)

Many did not understand their role as one of engagement at the school or with their children’s curriculum. Importantly however, I learned that their involvement did not dissipate; rather, it transformed to suit their children’s needs and growing independence, and the parents’ comfort level and parenting philosophy.

### *Meaningful Parent Involvement*

Perhaps Victoria (parent) put it best when she said:

what's meaningful for me is different for someone else. Just someone else knowing what the project is could be meaningful engagement for them....Information isn't necessarily meaningful engagement for me.

Victoria's desire to have more than information about school improvement represented one of a range of views about meaningful parent involvement. Most parents in this study were not interested in extensive involvement in the school, especially when it came to making decisions about achievement. Many seemed satisfied with the information they received in the school newsletter, and were content with the option to provide input through this or other media. For example, when I asked Guy to define "meaningful parent involvement" for high school parents, he said, "I don't know if you'd use a newsletter or update forum, but probably bi-monthly at least because it's surprising how quickly things change." "Information and feedback" (Guy) were his idea of meaningful parent involvement. Others, like Surin and Oskar, wanted to set academic goals with their children and to be able to complete the kind of homework their children were expected to. They said:

The teacher has to explain to me and the student the goals. That's what we do during the parent-teacher interview, we set goals for how we can improve. (Surin)

I wouldn't mind if the teachers sent me homework. I think that would be great. (Oskar)

Interestingly, none of these parents raised AISI, FNMI or other formal initiatives as areas in which they wanted more influence. For the most part, these parents considered specific involvement with their children meaningful, a standpoint I associated with their similarly particularistic definitions of school improvement.

### *Behind the Scenes*

Describing the relation of parents to school improvement vis-à-vis educators Surin offered:

Personally, I think parents should be behind the scenes and be supportive. That's why we have principals and teachers—to plan. You have to provide good programs for the kids to undertake and for parents to be supportive.

Surin highlighted a separation of roles between parents and teachers that was common among these parents and educators, and is consistent with other findings about parent-teacher relationships (Allen, Thompson, Hoadley, Engelking, & Drapeau, 1997; McKenna & Willms, 1998; Smith, 2004). To be “behind the scenes” ultimately meant performing functions that supported their children as well as the school and teachers’ goals. In my reading of the data, parents enacted three behind the scene roles: monitoring, protecting and distracting, and role modeling.

*Parents as monitors.* Admissions such as “When I went to high school it’s nothing like what these children are doing now” (Jill) implied high school material was too demanding for some parents, including those who held university degrees. I imagined this accounted for most parents describing their role in terms of monitoring performance, meeting with teachers during parent-teacher interviews, participating in

workshops about learning styles, encouraging their children to seek extra help, and attending awards ceremonies when their children were honored. Indirect roles such as these aligned with a traditional division of educational labors.

A number of parents reinforced an educational script whereby curriculum and school improvement design were policy makers' and educators' domain:

...as a parent it is my job to feed my child and get him ready to learn, and the student has to behave in class so that learning can be absorbed so he's ready for the teacher. And I would expect that the teacher has to teach. (Surin)

Unless it's a major issue then parents should have a say in it, yes, but overall the educators should know what is to be taught. I think it's fine educational-wise to leave it in their hands. (Melanie)

I had heard this before from the three mothers in my pilot study (Stelmach, 2005a), but these high school parents faced additional obstacles because of the foreign nature of the grade 10-12 curriculum. Surin said, "That's the very thing that is the challenge because I don't know that stuff (the curriculum)."

During an information meeting for parents of children entering grade 11 and 12 parents employed terminology such as "matriculation" and "advanced diploma" indicating an outdated understanding of high school requirements. This had been noted by some students in the previous chapter, but teachers also speculated that involving parents in school improvement was difficult because parents think, "They've been there, done it, and it hasn't changed" (Sue, teacher). Admittedly, during the meeting I faced difficulties following a sophisticated flow chart that was

referred to during the presentation. Two years away from a school jurisdiction and over five years outside of a high school classroom had distanced me from the information. At the end of a day of data collection, I did not want to expend the energy to figure it out. If I felt out of touch and lacked motivation to decode the information as an educator, how did those parents feel? Judging from the low attendance at the meeting, I considered that many parents did not think of it as their role to understand the details of high school planning.

Although parents' self-appraisals about their lack of knowledge are a common explanation for their disengagement from educational decision making (Crozier, 1999a; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Simich-Dudgeon, 1993; Westergård & Galloway, 2004), some parents' comments pointed to alternative explanations for their designating a supervisory rather than participatory role in their children's academic performance. First, parents acknowledged their children's independence. Many of them stressed education as their children's responsibility:

I tell my kids this (school) is a job. This is your job, and I want you to treat it as such. You need to be on time, you need to do a good job or you're going to get fired. (Angela)

Their education is their responsibility. It's not my problem if you choose to have low marks... We encourage, but ...I already did grade 9, and it's your responsibility to do it. (Martine)

As AISI coordinator working with parents I occasionally encountered parents who said their children were "on their own" after a certain age. At the time I perceived this as apathy, but after repeatedly hearing these parents in my study say, "You've got to



let them grow up” (Hans) I understood them as trusting their children to take learning into their own hands. This is not, however, how policy constructs the parent role, especially for those parents whose children do not exhibit the ability to manage their learning. The FNMI policy, for example, claims “improving Aboriginal learner success is...a responsibility shared by parents” (Alberta Learning, 2002, p. 29). Having the lowest achievement rates, Aboriginal students may be considered as needing constant surveillance by their parents. But as these parents suggested, independence is not solely constituted by grades.

Second, a lack of professional expertise did not necessarily discourage parents from participating in curricular matters. One parent had volunteered on a committee to discuss curriculum, but in the interest of time, she, like other parents, trusted policy makers and educators to make effective decisions about teaching and learning:

The educators are there, and Alberta Learning sets up the curriculum and I think that’s okay. Unless it’s a major issue then parents should have a say in it, yes, but overall the educators should know what is to be taught. I think it’s fine educational-wise to leave it in their hands. I trust them in that way. They know what they’re doing. (Melanie)

Even Oskar, who claimed, “we’re all graduates so there’s no reason why we couldn’t [help with high school assignments],” acknowledged parents’ busy schedules and therefore deferred to teachers’ and policy makers’ specialization when it came to setting and delivering curriculum. Current scholarship treats parents as victims of institutionalized power asymmetries (Fine, 1993), and policy appears to want to create educational equilibrium between parents and teachers, but parents may feel

time is their nemesis. Many of them reported not becoming involved in school council because “if you go to meetings like that, and you’re not involved in things already you might get elected to do something” (Betty). Nobody wanted another job. The amount of time many parents needed to become knowledgeable about curriculum, pedagogy, school governance and educational infrastructure may be discouraging in light of working parents’ calendars.

Although parent involvement has become part of the conventional wisdom of school improvement, consideration must be given to the possibility that parents do not feel comfortable making what they perceive to be educators’ decisions, or have the time to be involved in that way. By analogy, if I wanted to contribute to improving the health care system, I might volunteer to visit or read to patients, or work in a hospital gift shop, activities that do not require formal training and fit my schedule. I would not volunteer to perform surgery. In the same way, these parents preferred to be behind the scenes performing functions that contributed to their children’s positive educational experiences and the overall atmosphere of the school, but most were not inclined to be at the head of educational decisions

*Parents as protectors and distracters.* A second aspect of the parents’ “behind the scenes” role had to do with ensuring their children were safe, happy, and responsible. Parents saw it their role to provide basic care and needs for their children, instill a strong work ethic and family values, support them through difficult times, and steer them away from harm. This latter responsibility was foremost in some parents’ minds. They felt adolescence was a period of personal and social

challenge. The pressures and pitfalls teenagers faced required parents to be ever more vigilant about their children:

If anything we're more involved because there are a lot of fears and issues in junior high that weren't there in elementary school—more social issues, drugs, and all of those things that were not a concern....I'm very involved...because I don't want my kids to go down that path. (Oskar)

By no means was Shadow Canyon or the school perceived as troubled; however, these parents were not naïve about the encroachment of risk-taking opportunities upon their teenaged children. They conveyed their role as actively preventing their children from becoming embroiled in this type of adversity.

In Chapter 4 I reported students' comments about parents' inability to understand high school students' stress. Ironically, a number of the parents raised academic, psychological and social pressures as a key area of concern, and defined their role in terms of alleviating their children's increasing anxieties. For example, Angela held that the parents' role was "just to be there and to let the kids know that we've been here too and we know it's difficult, it's not a cakewalk." Parents commented globally on increasing violence among youth and Internet exposure to risqué ideas, and consequently thought their role was not only to shield their children from potential dangers, but to create positive outlets for them. Guy coupled these dangers with teenagers' ambiguity about their future, and took a protective stance: "The world will offer enough lessons and things to decide throughout your whole life that you don't need to be bombarded by all these things when you're not sure what

you want.” To him, the parents’ role was to allow children to grow up slowly, and to relieve them from unnecessary burdens. Given the discrepancy between the students’ and these parents’ comments, however, it was not clear that their shared perception about the parents’ role meant there was continuity between their expectations for how that role was carried out with respect to social pressures.

Along with outside pressures, these parents saw school itself as a mounting pressure. As an immigrant for seven years, Anneke provided a fresh perspective:

It’s always school, school, school. That’s a lot in Canada. But the personal, the feeling about oneself is even more important because...it’s a different age, a difficult age for those kids, and now they have to choose what they want also...so leave them like that, don’t press them too much.

She underscored the need for parents to support their children’s emotional development, an area that is largely overlooked in current educational systems. Although she did not disparage the school’s emphasis on homework and preparation for post-secondary careers with her children, she strongly felt that school was an overemphasis in children’s lives. She saw her role in terms of encouraging her children to engage in non-academic activities after school to relieve school pressures.

Melanie extended Anneke’s concern:

I find these kids have a lot on their plates, and higher expectations. I think a lot of them are stressed out, and I think you see more depression with these kids, and more emotional and psychological issues than in our days. I don’t know what’s happening there, but it’s

really hard on these kids...Therefore I try to focus my energy into what they're interested in...so that they're doing something positive. Like Anneke, Melanie chose not to participate in school council, volunteering, or other committees because she dedicated her time to supporting her children's engagement in non-school related activities. Distracting their children from negative experiences was a key parent role.

While the school may have considered these parents uninvolved because they rarely saw or heard from them, in the parents' minds, they were appropriately involved in their children's lives. This runs counter to policy, for the rationale behind encouraging parents and others to get involved with school improvement is that "continuous improvement" (Alberta Learning, 1999b, p. i) can only be achieved through collaborative efforts. Ironically, mounting expectations for students to perform has not encouraged parents to get on board this mission. Instead, "behind the scenes" these parents witnessed the effects of escalating standards on their children, and felt motivated to distract rather than focus their children on the expectations of school. Though the focus of policy and practice has been to inspire parents to participate in the academic aspects of their children's lives, these parents' concerns were mostly elsewhere. Educators and policy makers are like a theatre audience enjoying a polished performance and barred from the off-stage bustle of nervous energy. As in Plato's cave, they see policy and practice through a world that is not quite real for parents and students.

*Parents as role models.* Protecting their children from harm and ensuring their academic success often rested in "the way [parents] bring up their children" (Mikah).

Many parents talked about setting positive examples for their children, whether that meant prioritizing visits with relatives, packing nutritious lunch for their children, or establishing a diligent work ethic. Anneke emphasized:

You're your kids' teacher in a different way, more of how to live, and that's important also. We are a kind of family who are hard-working people. We like that our kids are doing that also.

Confidence that their children had adopted effective work habits meant for some parents that by high school they did not have to play an active role in their learning.

Beyond asking about homework, Angela assured me that her role had changed:

I don't think at this age it's necessary [to help with homework] because I did it at a young age. I taught [child] how to study, and I taught him what he needs to do to stay focused.

The idea expressed here is that parents lay a foundation for their children to develop a scholarly attitude and habits that will carry them through their school and lives.

Again, parents seemed willing to give their children space to exercise the values, attitudes, and practices they had been taught. Being at the school was only important insofar as parents felt it necessary to demonstrate to their children that education was a priority, through parent-teacher interviews or awards ceremonies for example. For the most part, their role exceeded that and was constituted by "being totally involved with your children's life" (Mikah). It did not necessarily mean, however, that parents enacted their role at the school.

The teachers were in agreement with the notion of parent involvement as a background to school, but they tended to acknowledge the extremes: "It's either I'm

completely involved in my child's life, I know what's going on, or else it's I have no idea what's going on, it's out of control, and my child doesn't respond to me" (Marly, teacher). Teachers associated good students with parents who valued education, were themselves formally educated, and behaved like upstanding citizens, as evidenced by Sue's remark: "The cream of the crop—the academic kids—come from backgrounds where their parents are all educated, their parents are 100% supportive." Though the literature draws a link between higher levels of education and parents' involvement (de Carvalho, 2001; Epstein, 2001a; Lareau, 1987, 1996; Lareau & Shumar, 1996), applied to my study, these findings were an overgeneralization. The point is that these teachers assumed parents should role model certain values and behaviors:

I think often times the issues that we do have with students are because there are different values or philosophies being shared at home compared to what's being shared at the school, and the student is sort of caught in the middle not knowing in which direction to go. (Sue, teacher)

I interpreted a tacit expectation that students should follow school-based values and behaviors, and parents should be reinforcing those at home. As Pushor and Murphy (2004) have indicated, this may be difficult for non-mainstream families such as Aboriginals who do not pattern their lives Eurocentrically.

#### *Off-Center Stage: Advocacy and Intervention*

Providing their children with support outside of the classroom and school was a key role for these parents, but they also recognized that "parents have to speak up for their children" (Mikah). They identified advocacy and intervention as a second

parental role, one which was more directly related to their learning, yet not one that supplanted the central role of teachers.

*Advocacy.* The nature and degree of input parents sought was largely contingent upon their children's needs. Parents who had children requiring specific learning support tended to be more vocal about learning issues, but the extent to which parents insisted on accommodations for their children differed according to each parent. As discussed in the previous section, Guy and Victoria both had children who followed an IPP; therefore, their involvement in curricular issues was more direct than the other parents. But Guy's approach differed from Victoria's. He reported, "I've always dealt with the school as if it's in the school power to go ahead and do what they want to do, go ahead." Unequivocally, Guy was forthright with the school when he identified a need for his children, but unlike Victoria, he deferred to teachers' judgment about how the need should be met. By contrast, Victoria wanted full inclusion throughout the process. Both parents claimed to have many years of experience dealing with IPPs and were non-biological parents of Aboriginal children. Perhaps Victoria's level of education gave her more confidence to insist on her wishes, but Guy did not appear to lack confidence in dealing with teachers. Therefore, I could not pinpoint a clear explanation for the difference in approach. Guy and Victoria highlighted the importance of seeing parents as individuals.

These parents also advocated for their children's rights, although this seemed to be a more tentative role. In other words, there were definite limits to the lengths they would go to ensure their children received what they regarded as respectful treatment. Parents seemed most limited by the extent to which they perceived their



previous advocacy attempts as efficacious, and the level of independence they assumed their children should have. For example, one parent disapproved over a couple of incidents in which she claimed her child was “guilty by association,” but resignedly said, “I’m not going to fight a war over it either” (Melanie). The parents’ advocacy role was sometimes trumped by their belief that their children should learn to deal with injustice, disagreement, and disappointment. Gretta summarized well what I heard from others:

There are some issues—maybe with some work or with some teachers—and I say, ‘You know what? We’ve all had good and bad teachers. Deal with it.’ I mean, that’s life.

This stance differed from my expectation that parents respond to all signs of their children’s struggle. What I perceived as parents’ indifference, however, may have been the parents’ allowing their children to exercise judgment or develop resiliency.

I gathered these parents felt teachers were more accepting of a parent’s advocacy role in children’s learning, but less willing to respond when parents came forward with complex philosophical issues. Religious and Aboriginal issues, for example, resisted resolution, despite parent activism. As indicated earlier, Yves and Martine felt the school was inattentive to their concerns about the Catholic atmosphere of the school so they “[did] their part at home in making Catholicism a primary focus of living and learning.” As another example, one parent perceived subtle and ubiquitous racism against Aboriginal children. She was dismayed that her concern was addressed through increased lunch hour cafeteria supervision because to her, the crux of the issue was under representation of Aboriginal students receiving

awards and recognition. When I probed Aboriginal issues with the educators, only the teacher of the Cultures of the North class felt it possible that Aboriginal students were permitted to “fall through the cracks” (Ava, teacher) more so than non-Aboriginal students. Ned’s (teacher) perception was that racism was not a problem in the school:

...in the environment here in the school, most of the kids they don’t even look at them as being Native. They don’t look it, so they don’t treat them that way. Since I’ve been here I haven’t had to deal much with racism toward Native kids. Even with teachers—first when I started some would say, ‘That teacher doesn’t like Natives.’ I haven’t had to deal with a situation like that for years.

I attributed the “epidermalization” (Fanon, cited in Furniss, 1999) of Aboriginal issues partly to the fact that Métis students were double the population of First Nations. As a previous teacher in the school, and recent researcher, I myself did not “see” Aboriginal students in the hallways, and more than one parent in this study claimed there were very few “totally Aboriginal” (Mikah) families. This powerfully illustrates how shadows shape perceptions and actions, and the divergence of our value systems that result from these umbrae.

*Intervention.* I interpreted parents and educators as being in agreement that academic issues were the teachers’ jurisdiction. Because these parents trusted teachers to deliver curriculum safely and effectively, they held the attitude “if it’s not broken we don’t try to fix it” (Yves). Unlike elementary parents who provide closer guidance for their children, these parents sensed their role was less constant. Like Hans said, “If they come home with a 94% and they tell me, ‘I’m fine,’ I’m backing

off. I shouldn't rattle the boat or do things." This did not discount parents' curiosity about what and how their children were doing, but as long as their children were performing at an acceptable level they did not feel the need to get involved. Defining an "acceptable level" was perhaps a point of contention between parents and educators. Some parents felt it was their children's problem if they earned low grades. They permitted their children to withdraw from courses if they were having difficulty with the content or the teacher. Others were satisfied if their children did well in "lower level" (Betty) subjects. These contrast with my own educator definition of a successful student as one who excels at high-level courses, and my belief that parents should intervene in cases where this ideal was not met. But what sparks the need for intervention for teachers is not necessarily what moves parents to act.

Primarily, these parents did not intervene in their children's school unless they felt "there's really something wrong" (Anneke). These parents had positive experiences confronting teachers about problems; they indicated feeling "well received" (Mikah). Because the literature does not explore in any depth negative parent involvement, I wanted to know parents' feelings about those who get involved when they were angry or upset with the school. On this topic there was much disparity. Some parents said, "I don't think anything productive comes out of that" (Angela); others argued "parents don't become assertive for no reason" (Victoria). As reported in Chapter 4, among the teachers Ned believed negative parent involvement alerted the school to issues that would otherwise go unnoticed, but others criticized irate parents, saying, "They're not involved in the kind of sense that we would consider parent involvement" (Elmer). The proliferation of literature addressing

confrontational parents from both legal and social aspects (Jaksec, 2005; Keel & Tymochenko, 2004; McEwan, 2005) testifies to this latter opinion.

Interestingly, the “kind of sense” that these teachers, and certainly policy makers, considered parent involvement meant school council, yet many parents perceived it as a complaint forum. Some parents and teachers lamented the lack of membership on school council, but many of these parents told me they had no reason to go to school council meetings Betty’s comment was informative:

...they have the school council meeting. If you have concerns. I have never attended one, but I’ve always been happy with the level of teaching my children have had there.

According to the School Councils Handbook (Alberta Education, 1995), parents were given legal status in the school because:

Alberta Education recognizes the right of parents to be involved in their children’s education and for parents, community members and school staff to be involved in key decisions about the education of students...School councils will have a role in advising and consulting with the principal on any matter relating to the school (p.1).

There was an obvious disjuncture between parents’ perceptions of this policy and the intent of policy makers. These parents’ views suggest absence from school may be a sign that parents do not perceive the need to intervene.

Finally, the parents’ interventionist role seemed highly dependent on whether tacit expectations of teachers and parents were spelled out. This “psychological contract” (Renihan & Renihan, 1995, p. 57) between teachers and parents could be

complicated because even though many parents and educators described open communication as an ideal relationship, they were at odds about who should step forward about children's difficulties. Ava (teacher) for example, felt it was important that parents take responsibility in this regard:

I'm not saying it's totally the school's responsibility. I think it's also the parents. They have to take the initiative as well by attending parent-teacher interviews...the progress reports go out regularly, so I think the school does well in that part...the initiative has to come from the parents or guardian.

Many of the parents agreed being informed about their children's progress was their responsibility, but they felt teachers were in a better position to warn them about worrisome situations. Despite the school's regular dissemination of formal and informal progress reports, some parents thought it was incumbent upon teachers to communicate with parents in between those periods. Disappointment over teachers' lack of follow-through with such communications was expressed. Consider the following perspectives:

It's nice if the teacher phones the parent too ahead of time and before the progress report because by then a lot of ... time has gone by where this child may have been wasting his time. (Melanie)

I had one incident in particular when [child] was in grade 7 and he got 12% or something on a test. [Child] has been on honor roll since junior high, he's never missed! So [child] was supposed to bring this test home for me to sign. I knew what was going on because he gave me

the test. I didn't sign it. I was a little bit miffed that the teacher didn't mention something to me. That's pretty major. I should have gotten a phone call home. I hung onto that test. I never signed it; I never returned it. That teacher never knew if I knew or not because the test was never returned to that teacher. So I called the person on it, and I said, 'Look, what's going on here? This is not acceptable.' (Angela)

The psychological contract between parents and teachers was not always clear, which might explain why these parents called constant and open communication between teachers and parents utopian. Thus, though parents perceived their role as intervening when their children were in trouble, their ability to do so hinged on the level of communication between them and their children's teachers.

### *Role Negotiation*

The position in the literature is that the parental role is a negotiation between parents and teachers (Beck & Murphy, 1999; Keyes, 2002; Lawson, 2003; Morgan & Grace, 1992; Pushor & Murphy, 2004; Ruitenberg & Pushor, 2005; Skau, 1996; Waggoner & Griffith, 1998). I was not convinced that this was the case at this secondary school. Parents recognized their children as developing their independence, and they understood students' opposition to parents' present and pervasive involvement in their school lives. The parental role, as I understood it, was also, and perhaps to a greater extent, a negotiation between parents and students.

Privacy and autonomy were reasons these parents believed their children would not appreciate seeing them at the school on a regular basis. Mikah reported that her children were "very happy" when she and her husband went to the school, but my

understanding was that parents and their children felt most comfortable when parents blended into an audience. Individual volunteering “would be embarrassing for [students]”, thought Melanie.

Crozier (2000) found students’ perceptions of parent involvement were gender influenced. In my study, parents similarly reported negotiations differed with sons and daughters. Namely, sons were less inclined to want their parents to get involved in school-related activities, and were more reticent about school issues, as suggested by the following:

I never got involved with [son] because for one thing, he’s a guy, and it’s not a guy thing for Mom to get involved. With the girls it was different; we did everything. I did the hot dog thing, I did the field trips, and it was okay to hang out with the girls. But for me to hang out with my son is a little different. I don’t think my son is going to come and say, ‘Mom, do you want to go on a field trip?’ (Jill)

It’s hard to get information from boys sometimes at 3:30, never mind at 5:30. They’re boys. Girls yap, yap, yap, but boys are, there’s quite a difference between them. (Martine)

Gender was not a conclusive factor for all parents, however, which emphasizes the danger of essentializing. Sons more typically might have rejected parents’ involvement in their lives, but some parents felt the same about daughters. Personality and parent-child relationships were perhaps equally influential in some cases.

Understanding one's children was a critical factor in parents' approaches to negotiation. Yves and Martine maintained they did not have to discuss their involvement with their child because they were cognizant of his cues:

[Child] will say such and such is happening in school. If he tells me I know—because I know him—then it's important for me to be there. He doesn't have to say, 'Mom, I'd really like you to be there.' All he would have to do is tell me this and this is happening at school.

They also described their son as a "heart level kind of person;" therefore, they could differentiate between information they were supposed to act on, and what was merely descriptive. Part of parents' knowing their children meant recognizing what was non-negotiable as well. Melanie altered her input depending on the nature of her children:

[Child is] a very challenging, stubborn kid, so the more I try the worse it gets. So I just back off. The other one is okay. He'll come to me and he will try; he confides in me and he's interested in what I have to say... Whereas, the other one, the more I try to encourage him to go one way he does the opposite...he's a teenager I guess.

Not only do most parent involvement models and policies assume parents are homogeneous, they presume children react to parents' involvement in the same manner. The above examples debunk that assumption.

Negotiations between parents and their children occurred within the academic and non-academic realms, and varied according to children's dispositions. Angela was very respectful of her children's wishes:



When I get asked to supervise something I would always ask my kids if they're okay with that. If they don't want me to go then I'm not going to go. It's up to them because it's their thing. I know other kids want me to go because I can be fun, but my kids don't necessarily need their mom there.

But these parents were more likely to initiate covert negotiations through telephone or e-mail with their children's teachers when it came to academic issues. This was not a common or manipulative practice for most parents. Rather, it was a last resort when parents felt out of touch with or worried about their children's school experiences:

The oldest one who goes to [The Saints School], she is not that kind of girl who shows me something. So sometimes I don't know where she is. Sometimes she tells me about a project or something, but she is more, 'I'll do it myself.' That kind of stuff. But if I give the school a call and if I'd like to know a lot about her, they tell me.(Anneke)

I was told one parent threatened to go to her child's classes to enforce attendance, which suggested not all parents see involvement as a negotiation. For the most part, these parents looked for information to support their children, not to infringe upon their privacy. One parent, for example, desired online information about curriculum, such as exams, not so he could get around his children's withholding information, but to help them understand the marks they received. As Crozier (2000) found, however, students draw a fine line between support and control. This emphasizes the conciliatory nature of parent involvement at the high school level. Policy denies this outright by excluding students from policy design.

*A unique perspective.* Jill's negotiation tactic was unique because it occurred indirectly through her son's peers. Her usual approach of coaxing him, she felt, was ineffective: "I think by the end of the year he was just tired of me pushing him. He's just like, 'Mom, give it up. I'm gonna graduate.'" Her solution was to work indirectly to encourage her son to mind his schoolwork:

I hate to put him on the spot sometimes, but I do it in front of his friends only because I know if he hears it and his friends hear it, maybe they will say something. He always says, 'Do you have to bring that up in front of my friends?' And I say, 'Well, you know, [son], if I didn't, it kind of goes in one ear and out the other. This way when you walk away you might all talk about it.' So it kind of works for me.

Jill's method was insightful because it confronts both the parent-teacher relationship and parent-child relationship as the pinnacle of parent involvement. While it is likely the case that parents respond more favorably to schools when teachers create a hospitable environment (Ruitenberg & Pushor, 2005), and when parents and children have positive and open communication, Jill conveyed her role as context-bound by her parent status. If this is how secondary parents construct parent involvement, then exploring the role of peers in parent involvement may be worthwhile. At the very least, Jill suggested peers are at the intersection of high school parent involvement.

### **Whose Role is School Improvement? Are Parents Partners?**

Because for these parents school improvement meant their children's individual needs, they assigned themselves a role in it. As stated throughout this chapter, however, their role was indirect, just as the students had described it. Many

parents were happy to be included in goal-setting with their children, and thought it was appropriate for parents to have the opportunity to give input into school improvement decisions. Unless a strategy or goal was controversial though, parents did not foresee a need to be directly involved.

The partnership metaphor was invoked by a couple of parents, and when I asked others, there was both agreement and disagreement with it. Surin was alone in suggesting an equitable partnership among parents, teachers, and students:

To me, it's (partnership) 30-30-30....it's kind of a triangle. A triangle can't be a triangle if you don't have three points, three angles. It should be equal.

The equilateral nature of partnership for Surin did not entail parents assuming teachers' work, or teachers interfering with the parents' job. She identified equal responsibility, but not the same roles. She articulated an important point because parent involvement policy and strategies often treat parents as if they were or should be on par with teachers. Certainly a "responsibility discourse" in Alberta Education's policies suggests this.

Teachers were open to the idea of parents providing input into school improvement. Some afforded parents more responsibility than others, and there were varying opinions on whether or not parents had or made the time to participate in the school in any way. Elmer summed it up in this way:

I think most parents are comfortable being able to put in some anecdotal comments: 'I approve' or 'I'd like to see us do more of this kind of thing.'...but I think if anything, more parent input would be

welcomed, and in many cases it has to be sought or solicited...If parents wanted to get involved there are certainly opportunities to do so.

As Ruitenberg and Pushor (2005) argued, educators often assume newsletters and other communications stand alone as invitations for parents to participate. From my interviews with the parents I concluded they did not get that message. Most of them had heard of AISI through the newsletter, but none of them spoke about opportunities to participate in the project, despite the fact that, as former AISI coordinator, I knew there was a collaborative team established for the first three years of the project, and it had been extended alongside the new AISI plan. Interestingly, these parents were able to give examples of the Cycle 1 project—mostly in relation to changes that were made to the cafeteria—but few of them knew much beyond the title of the Cycle 2 differentiated instruction project. This reinforced the separation between school and home in my mind. While non-curricular items were open to parents, curricular ones seemed to be on an information-only basis. Furthermore, only one parent in this group was familiar with and had participated in the FNMI project through the district's roundtable consultation. This parent expressed irritation that the school council did not hear about FNMI except when the issue of self-identification was introduced. Despite the long-term expected outcome to “foster a greater appreciation and understanding by all Albertans of First Nations, Métis and Inuit people” (Alberta Learning, 2003b, p. 5) a philosophical and cultural separation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families had become normative, and that improving learning for Aboriginal students was an educator role. An invitation to parents seemed most open when school fundraising was the issue.

Overall, I learned that AISI and FNMI, the school's two key improvement initiatives, were largely teacher-run. In fact, at least half of these parents named specific individuals, usually from Central Office or special programs at the school, when I asked them who participated in school improvement. I did not interpret this as a concern amongst parents, for all of them expressed confidence in these individuals and in teachers in general. Many thought it should be the case that teachers orchestrate school improvement; some even said, "I hate to see the parents in control...because it will automatically become more of a political ball as soon as you do that" (Hans and Gretta). Oskar was exceptional in this regard, for even though he said The Saints School was an "excellent school," he was unequivocally skeptical about its openness to parent input:

I find there's a real protectionism—that the school knows best. They occasionally organize parent input sessions, but aren't necessarily interested in parent input unless it agrees with what the viewpoint is...[partnership] is a catch-all.

In this study, I found the administrators were more sensitive to parents' needs and more willing than other teachers to engage parents in school improvement that dealt with student learning. Classroom teachers often presented parent involvement as a list of teacher-led tasks. It is perhaps not surprising that the administrators adopted a collaborative stance, for they were more likely to interact with parents on a regular basis. They also bear the task of setting the cultural tone of the school. But as Oskar's experience pointed out, it is one thing for administrators to open the school doors to parents, and it is another to open minds to parents' opinions once they are inside.

## Space as Metaphor

Language is only one aspect of policy meaning (Yanow, 2000). Spaces and programs also convey messages nonverbally through their use, materials, and foci. I wanted to explore this aspect of metaphorical meaning for two reasons. First, the verbal metaphors parents provided reified their supporting role and did not offer new insights into my inquiry. Second, I detected conflict between words and action from both parents and educators. I was interested in practice as a subtext of meaning.

How schools are constructed and operate carry meaning about parents' place and schools' values. Yanow (2000) writes:

Interpretive analysis of built space draws on the researcher-analyst's participative experiences as a proxy for others' behavior and actions.

(p. 64)

Using my firsthand and immediate responses was a way to understand how parents might experience the school. I anticipated my experience would be shaped by the fact that I was a former educator and AISI Coordinator who taught and worked in The Saints School. To counter this I drew upon my early AISI Coordinator experiences of entering other schools as a newcomer among central office personnel, recognizing that my educator status gave me a sense of confidence regardless of the unfamiliarity.

I examined the school in terms of physical and social space, and found the school both welcoming and intimidating. For example, school council meetings were held in the staffroom where the couches were arranged in circular fashion, eliminating hierarchy. Conducting the meetings in the staff room, I thought, expressed openness and honesty, for schedules, teacher notes, and other information

were in full view for parents to see. Comprehensive binders had been created for each parent member of the school council, and spare ones were available for newcomers. This gave the school council an air of importance.

I wondered, however, about the affect of the clinical greeting on the outside doors that asked visitors to “report to the office,” and whether parents could easily find their way there. As a teacher at the school, I never thought about the importance of directional signs, but the public entrance to the school was quite a distance from the general office, and there were no markers to indicate which way a visitor should go. Was there a purpose to this mystery in schools? Was it code for who belongs and who does not? I also noticed bilingual signs posted on doors. I interpreted the new addition of French language as a statement of pride in the school’s French Immersion program. Noticeably absent, however, were Aboriginal language and culture, except for the office designated for the FNMI Coordinator. Obviously it would not have been possible to represent all Aboriginal families through language or icons because there was both a tribal and Métis mixture in the school, but the absence delivered a message about cultural priorities.

The location of program offices in relation to the main office also told a story. Clearly, as is the case in all schools, the administrative offices were the nerve center of the school. I spent much time waiting in the office chairs to meet my participants, and observed the office as a flexible space constantly abuzz with students, and occasionally parents. Unequivocally the school was for the students. At times I could not help but feel like a nuisance as students and teachers stepped over my legs to navigate the narrow channel between the wall and the office counter and pondered,

“Would a waiting parent feel as I do, pressed against the wall, trying to squeeze into as little space as possible, in a place I am not sure I belong?” The feeling was compounded by my assumption that I *should* belong because I once did. Did parents feel satisfied that *they* were as welcome as their children?

The offices of the counselor, special education, religion, and AISI were down the hall or upstairs from the administrators, but unquestionably belonged to the central enterprise. The FNMI office, however, was tucked away around the corner, and down another hallway. The bulletin board outside the office was the only presence of Aboriginal language, culture, and current events. I doubted the FNMI office placement was intentional. It was likely a function of availability, but this office, set apart from the others, was an unspoken reification of the disconnection between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal education.

A key question I had during my observations at the school was: Who fills these spaces and participates in these programs? I was cognizant of this question because I had conflicting reports from parents and teachers about the profile of the “involved” and “uninvolved” parent. Some felt Aboriginal parents were disengaged, whereas, Mikah, a Métis woman, felt it was only First Nations parents who fit that description. Some felt there was an increase in fathers’ participation at school, but others confirmed findings that White, middle class mothers were most often involved (Crozier, 2000; Epstein et al., 2002; Fine, 1993; Waggoner & Griffith, 1998). Everywhere I went, I saw parents who matched the traditional profile. Few fathers attended with mothers, and rarely on their own. Interestingly, however, except for



school council, which was heavily dominated by mothers, during the meetings I attended, fathers raised more questions than mothers.

One final note deserves mentioning because it raised the issue of how schools construct parent involvement and which parents form that construct. The principal shared an impressive plan to create a parent handbook that included detailed information about curriculum, graduation requirements, standardized testing, and so on. It reminded me of the sophisticated flow chart the teacher had used at the parent information meeting. Since few parents in this study indicated a desire to have detailed information of this sort, I was interested in how the school arrived at the decision to create the handbook. The principal admitted that a minority of parents asked for this type of information. Creating the document would undoubtedly require a significant dedication of resources in the form of educators' time and dissemination. Speaking from a strictly cost-benefit perspective, it did not seem to me that the document itself would increase parent involvement, which was the principal's hope. The few parents who were interested in such a document essentially had enormous influence over the school's parent involvement practices.

To whom space is accessible, how participants interpret their roles within school space, and how programs prescribe parent involvement are metaphorical undercurrents in policy meaning. These are unintentional symbols that sneak past educator consciousness, but because they are unnoticed, they are unquestioned, and thus, they become powerful policy forces.

## **The Northern Context**

I opted to conduct my study in a northern location because my experiences there led me to believe northern, rural schools face unusual challenges compared to central and urban ones. While it may be true that the northern context denies schools economies of scale, results in higher teacher turnover, and limits programming opportunities (Baker, 2003; Goddard & Foster, 2002), The Saints School did not appear to suffer in the way Friesen and Friesen (2004) described similarly located Alberta schools. In this study the students, parents, and educators who had experiences in larger centers were more inclined to focus on the north as somewhat deficient, but for the most part, I concluded that Shadow Canyon represented a “neo-North” where technology defied geographical distance and isolation, immigration weaved a multicultural social fabric, and economic growth galloped at a feverish pace. As I drove the miles from Edmonton to Shadow Canyon I could see the frontier myth (McCormack, 2005) of the terra nullis vanishing; frozen, empty quarters were filled with industry, commerce, and residences. Bone’s (2003) “forgotten north” (p. 4) of this province had been remembered. From a school improvement perspective, there were challenges; however, the perception was that parent involvement was minimally affected by the northern location. Areas in which I interpreted potential impact included geographical distance, and fathers’ and Aboriginal parents’ involvement.

Some parents did not believe distance excused parents from getting involved in school. Technology and access to transportation were considered to be readily available to parents. Furthermore, according to the students and parents, there was

little reason for parents to go to the school outside of parent-teacher interviews, extra-curricular events, and awards ceremonies. The teachers had a slightly different view because they defined parent involvement largely in terms of parent presence. One teacher suggested that parent involvement was limited to those from Shadow Canyon, and reported less involvement from those in outlying areas. Some students and teachers also talked about the decreased opportunity for students to attend after school tutorials because their parents could not pick them up, although Tina (teacher) observed out-of-town parents were more willing to drive in to pick their children up for sports:

He (student) can't come to after school tutorials because they say, 'Oh we can't come in, we're too far out of town.' But with sports, all of a sudden he can go to basketball or football, and they have time to pick him up after that.

Perhaps, as I indicated earlier, distance masks parents' role construction; it may be that distance is not the factor, but parents want to support a distraction that makes their children happy.

The higher likelihood of fathers being away for employment purposes was documented by Nord, Brimhall, and West (1997). Five participants in my study were affected by this, and although it did not represent a significant number of participants, I interpreted this as a potential challenge for parent involvement. With his father away most of the winter, Danny (gr. 12) reported that his full-time working mother did not have time to come to the school unless it was absolutely necessary. The current economic boom in Alberta, particularly in the oil sector, may cause fathers, and

consequently mothers, to be drawn away from the schools regardless of location. But the nature of employment in northern locations increases the chance that homes are temporarily lone-parented.

Research conducted in and/or about the north has critiqued the insensitivity to Aboriginal cultural and learning needs, and the lack of inclusion of Aboriginal parents and community members in the schools and other social organizations (Goddard, Foster, & Finnell, 2004; Furniss, 1999; McCormack, 2005). This appeared unchanged in my study of the issue. While parent involvement was reportedly not impacted by the northern location, Aboriginal parents continued to be least engaged with the school. This was perhaps less of an issue for the school because the majority of its self-identified population were Métis, and I wondered how many Métis shared Mikah's experience of "[growing] up White." For this reason, the conflation of north and Aboriginal may be decreasingly apt for Shadow Canyon and The Saints School, although there are pockets of resistance to assimilation. I could not, however, deny the residual effect of history on Aboriginal parent involvement because throughout my data collection I did not encounter First Nations parents at the school, despite the Aboriginal participants declaring this as an important role for Aboriginal parents. I am, however, convinced this is a global problem rather than a northern one, considering the mobility of Aboriginal families to more central and urban locations (Statistics Canada, 2006).

Finally, a common description of the school was that it had a close-knit, family atmosphere because of its small size. This was perceived as an advantage to parent involvement because familiarity bred a sense of ownership and commitment to

the school. Comments by parents also pointed to possible disadvantages of these friendly relations. For example, Guy suggested the formation of cliques discouraged him from taking part in certain groups:

...you volunteer for certain things and there are those seven people who sit there and they always come up with their own ideas, and then there's the eleven other people that sit everywhere else... Like grad meetings, a lot of meetings, field trips and stuff like that. There's a core group... You're either in the core group or you're not.

Even though he understood the need to participate in order to register his voice, he described the foreboding aspect of dismantling long-held parent leadership and control. His comments reflected Wiseman's (2006) thesis in *Queen Bee Moms and Kingpin Dads* that peer pressure, popularity contests, and power struggles are just as pervasive for parents as they are for their children. Wiseman describes a "Perfect Parent World" (p. 23) as one which requires parents to adopt a set of behaviors that matches an unspoken construct of what a good parent is and does so that they gain the privilege of membership in parent groups and the right to voice their opinions. These "Queen Bee Moms" and "Kingpin Dads" about which Wiseman writes undoubtedly face different expectations from their peers depending on the context. Nonetheless, Wiseman validates Guy's point about being "in" or "out" of the parent group by debunking the assumption that parent involvement is a group of like-minded, welcoming parents. In fact, Anneke avoided school councils for this very reason. "I never go there (school council) because I know how it goes. One parent says this, one parent says that. I'm not into that kind of stuff," she explained. Thus,

while the literature has defined marginalization in terms of culture, class, and gender, these parents suggested anyone could be subjected to the tyranny of long-established parent leaders. Exclusion is not a northern concern per se, but may be amplified in smaller locales where breaking these barriers may have more widespread social consequences. As my study detected only whisperings of this idea, further study is required to explicate more fully the transferability of Wiseman's thesis.

### **Shadowscape**

In Chapter 1 I described current policy processes regarding parent involvement and school improvement as exclusive and based on "shadows" of information about parents. I framed the issue of parent involvement in terms of parents and students being outside of the "cave" of policy making, positing that policy makers and educators would benefit from venturing out to where parents and students would inform them about parent involvement. As an optimistic researcher I assumed there was a common ground upon which policy makers, educators, parents and students could agree, and that this could be found by bringing all educational constituents together. However, if one can judge by the responses of the parents in this study, "parent involvement" and "school improvement" have meaning in the context of their children and their own lives, and therefore, do not necessarily point to the same thing. As it turns out, there is little common ground. Furthermore, I now see that parents and students are not immune from shadow thinking; they are not outside of the cave.

Before conducting this study, I assumed all parents are concerned about their children's academic achievement, and therefore should take responsibility for it.

Though the former may be true, my study has prompted me to question whether my educator perspective has cast a shadow over my “schoolcentric” (Lawson, 2003) thinking about parent involvement. But if parents, students, and even educators doubt the extent to which parents, especially at the high school level, can influence students’ school performance, then why is parent involvement promoted as a key strategy to increasing academic results in educational policy? This question has troubled me throughout the process of this study. As I encountered theories and literature new to me, this shadow in my thinking receded. One course in particular, EDPS 680, “Policy Research and Education” inspired me to examine more closely the underlying problems that parent involvement purports to address. Whereas I used to think of educational policy as addressing problems related to children’s learning, I now understand the policy environment as a “political firestorm” (Clemens & McBeth, 2001, p. 321), and educational policy as the nexus of broader social, economic, and political goals. Specifically, the ubiquity of market-driven strategies has prompted me to question parent involvement as *only* a strategy to support children’s learning, and to see it, as Dehli (2004) argues, as the normalization of collaboration by which “neo-liberal governmentality” (p. 65) operates to not only change how schools operate within a marketized state, but to “alter the conduct and disposition of individuals” (p. 66). Her Foucauldian critique suggests a rationality for parent involvement in school improvement; by demonstrating that parents are self-governed to become involved in certain ways, she unmask a subtly created noxious effect of enabling certain parents while constraining others (p. 52). This is not to say that parent involvement is never intended to create positive effects on children’s

learning, but rather, to suggest that policy is not straightforward because the assumptions that drive it are not self-evident. I wonder now about my complicity in driving a political agenda that used parent involvement as a prop for something besides children's learning. And as I try to escape this shadow what other shadows orbit around me and center me in particular conceptualizations of my world? Shadows are ever-present in policy making because it is not only educators and policy makers who are caved in by their assumptions, so too are parents and students.

### **Chapter Summary**

The miscellany of these parent responses defied categorization, and the diversity in their perspectives suggests parent involvement policy and practice has failed to represent their wishes. These parents were primarily concerned that their children's individual needs be met, which included understanding them as individuals, appealing to their interests, and accommodating learning styles. I called parents' understanding of school improvement "child oriented." What was ultimately meaningful to these parents was a role that supported teachers' educational expertise. Parents considered their role: (a) "behind the scenes" as monitors, protectors and distracters, and role models; (b) "off-center stage" as advocates and interveners; and, (c) a negotiation mainly between them and their children.

There was mixed response to the partnership metaphor, but their role constructs and experiences clearly suggested these parents did not envision parents being directly involved in school improvement that relates to academic achievement. They had very little knowledge of the AISI and FNMI projects, and seemed content to have information about it. Educators claimed a willingness to include parents in



school improvement decisions, but my metaphorical analysis of spaces and programs suggested they too were inclined to cast parents in a supporting role.

The northern context did not strongly impact the nature of parent involvement as I had anticipated. Distance from school, fatherhood and Aboriginal culture was associated with less involvement. The small size of the school and community also indicated possible advantages and disadvantages to parent involvement. This latter interpretation was interesting because it challenged an unquestioned belief that all parents can and want to be collaborative. Considering collaboration is increasingly vogue in education doctrine, I see this as a germane topic for future research.

The implications of these interpretations for policy and practice on parent involvement will be discussed in Chapter 7. In the next chapter I discuss what I learned about from five Aboriginal women who participated in my study.

## CHAPTER 6

### IN THE WAKE OF RESEARCH: WHAT I LEARNED FROM FIVE ABORIGINAL WOMEN

My conversations with five Aboriginal women led me to write against the current of the previous two chapters. In “Melopoeia: Syncope, Interruption and Writing” Rebecca Luce-Kapler (2003) invokes the concept of syncope in relation to the arrhythmic flow of poetry. Poetry, she claims, is a form of “interruption” (§ 9), of which she writes:

The concept of interruption is an important one for we cannot hope to provoke without first getting attention and halting the commonplace and taken-for-granted language... Where the rhythm changes, we find the moment of interpretation and our attention is drawn to what has previously been in the background. We have the opportunity to consider what is important. (§ 8)

Initially I did not intend to pursue in any extraordinary way the Aboriginal perspective on the parents’ role in school improvement, but as my data collection progressed and I engaged in the literature and conversations with doctoral committee members, my thinking was “interrupted” so that I began to understand my research not only in terms of what I was examining, but by what I was *not*. In hindsight, interviewing these Aboriginal women and analyzing their transcripts was a form of “in-search,” a meta-examination of myself as a researcher and the processes undertaken to conduct this aspect of my study.

I wanted to know how Aboriginal parents perceived their role in their children's learning, but throughout my study and after many readings of the data, a complexity of issues surfaced, and I reassessed what was within my grasp of understanding. I could not capture Aboriginal perspectives through the experiences of five women. I began to "see differently, and sometimes uncomfortably" (¶ 9) by tracing the inextricable links between what I thought I knew and assumed, my historical and social locatedness, and my pursuit of Aboriginal perspectives. This chapter was, in Luce-Kapler's (2003) words, an unanticipated stopping of a "breath...that leav[es] us wondering before coming to understand" (¶ 9).

Among my reading I came across three questions that resonated with my exploration of Aboriginal perspectives:

- (1) "What did I not know before?"
- (2) Why didn't I know?
- (3) What is the significance of not knowing?" (Dion, 2004, p. 71)

The implicit interplay of these questions throughout this chapter appropriately reflects how the lives and stories of these five women led me to important questions. In this chapter I share the learning gleaned from the research experience itself, arguing that research processes are as critical, if not more critical, than the research outcomes. I have juxtaposed participants' comments with personal reflection and current scholarship to establish the nascence of my understanding of Aboriginal culture and issues, and to emphasize the need for non-Aboriginal researchers like myself to situate themselves among those who are better positioned to "know."

## **The Participants**

I interviewed five Aboriginal women whom I met at the school, or whose names were given to me by school or district personnel. All participants gave me written informed consent and are represented here by pseudonyms which they were invited to provide. Dolly and Heidi were Elders. I interviewed them twice for up to two hours each time. Esmé and Bibi were Catholic school trustees whom I interviewed once for up to an hour. Marlena was employed in a community program to support Aboriginal families. I had a preliminary meeting with her in the spring of 2005 and formally interviewed her in the fall for about an hour. All except one interview was audio taped. Transcripts and interpretations were provided to all participants for the purpose of member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## **Lessons from Navigating the Research Process**

A number of scholars have highlighted the political nature of research involving Aboriginal communities (Kenny, 2004; Kowalsky, Thurston, Verhoef, & Rutherford, 1996; Menzies, 2001). Essentially all research is political because it is aligned with our particular points of view and social practices (Menzies, 2001). All theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices reflect epistemological and ontological predilections (Kenny, 2004). I reflect on this in three sections: “Pushing the River,” “Tumult in the River...Safety in My Boat?” and “The Confluence.”

### *Pushing the River*

In my previous role as AISI coordinator I occasionally worked with Aboriginal staff at the schools and community members from Shadow Canyon and

the surrounding area. I had a tacit awareness that working with Aboriginal people was, as Kenny (2000) put it, “somehow ‘different’” (p. 143) and so I consulted various Aboriginal experts to learn how to approach potential Aboriginal participants. “Slow is fast” is one recommendation that stuck with me, although in hindsight I realize I did not fully grasp the origin of this advice. I superficially understood trust as an issue between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, but failed to recognize how a legacy of “forced relocation, systematic discrimination, and expropriation of resources and territory” (Menzies, 2001, p. 23) overshadowed relations. When I embarked on my study I thought I was prepared for the challenge of inviting Aboriginals to participate in my study, but I naively thought I could accomplish my task within my time frame. When this seemed unlikely, I extended my data collection period and stayed on site for a month thinking this would be sufficient to achieve my research goals. Thinking of my research as a series of time-bound tasks, however, exposed my logocentric tendency to push my agenda in a linear direction and at a heightened pace. By centering myself in the research rather than the Aboriginal people, I overlooked the necessity of time to build relationships with potential research participants. Given the history of the colonial research gaze (Kenny, 2004; Kowalski, Thurston, Verhoef, & Rutherford, 1996; Menzies, 2001) taking the time to demonstrate my objectives and allowing potential participants the time to assess whether my objectives were honorable was paramount.

My attempts to push the river, so to speak, thwarted, rather than abetted my intentions. I tried to orchestrate the research process and participants through lockstep motions, and contain the objectives and outcomes within my research design.

Understanding was not something I could produce at will; it was not a commodity I could find and store. Rather, it was a river that stirred and tossed me about. It was a quick touch upon and retreat from the shores of my mind; it was overwhelming waves of insight, then frustration as these pools of newly gained understanding leaked from my consciousness. Coming to terms with research as a fluid process with which I had to flow was the understanding I have started to acquire.

I relied on my former role as a teacher at The Saints School to create a sense of familiarity when I telephoned potential participants. While this may have been effective with non-Aboriginal parents, I wondered if it had a contradictory impact on Aboriginal parents. *How* was I familiar to Aboriginal parents—was my legacy as the teacher who only called home with negative reports? Did I contact Aboriginal parents at all? Furthermore, did using the telephone as a first contact hinder the development of trust? Kirkness (1998) and Friedel (1999) argued that Aboriginal parents are seldom asked to be part of educational matters regarding their children, and I wondered to what extent conventional school-home communications could explain this oversight. Do educators assume that parents who do not have telephones or do not contact the school are not interested in their children's schools? Upon what criteria are parent representatives chosen?

My procedure for sampling Aboriginal parents provided some insight into the aforementioned question. To generate a list of Aboriginal parents I consulted with the district and school FNMI Coordinators, educators and administrators from the school. To my surprise, the three that I chose from that list were a Métis parent who declared a mainstream lifestyle, and European legal guardians of Aboriginal children. These

three were highly recommended; however, that they had no or a negligible link to Aboriginal heritage made me question how the school personnel I consulted perceived Aboriginal representation. More than once when I asked educators to suggest key participants, they suggested parents who frequented the school and were knowledgeable about its goings-on. I wondered if the parents who were suggested to me were perceived in this way. Were they deemed cooperative? Easy to get in touch with? Is this what representation meant? While the parents I did interview were informative as parents of Aboriginal children, they could not speak to the issues *as* Aboriginal parents, or as Aboriginal parents who connected with those roots. Moreover, they were parents for whom school and teachers appeared approachable, and who reported success when advocating for their children. They did not resemble the profile of the “disconnected” parent others had mentioned, the very perspective I sought.

Esmé problematized the issue of Aboriginal representation in this way:

Oftentimes what happens as Aboriginal people is you're asked to sit on a committee because of what you look like. Not necessarily because of what you know or what you think.

As I thought back to my AISI Coordinator experiences, I recalled encouraging schools to invite Aboriginal participation on their collaborative teams to ensure inclusion and representation. I gave little thought about what it meant to have Aboriginal representation, and for the most part assumed someone who “looked the part” could fill the role. As Middleton has noted about Native Americans (2003), however, the term “Aboriginal” only surfaced in response to the need for political

unity. One Aboriginal does not speak for all any more than a non-Aboriginal person does. I had not thought before about the prevailing assumption among non-Aboriginal educators and policy makers that Aboriginals are a singular, homogeneous political group. Dolly, for example, articulated her dilemma about participating in the school's FNMI program and Cultures of the North class:

To me, when I first started going to the schools, I felt I shouldn't be the one doing it as an Inuvialuit. It should be the people from here talking to the students and coming into the school about how they lived long ago here. After that I was told, "[Dolly], it's a First Nation, Métis, Inuit. So you're an Inuit, so it's good to let you come in here.' I used to think, 'Oh, they should get somebody else to talk about it.'

Dolly's initial hesitation suggested Aboriginals do not assume similarity among all. Esmé pointed out, "A lot of times we try the one size fits all for our Aboriginal studies and that just doesn't work." Significantly, all five of these Aboriginal women emphasized distinctions among Aboriginal groups, and that Aboriginals embraced their ethnicity in varying degrees and in different ways.

The inclusion of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit in the FNMI policy heeds distinctions among Aboriginal people, but grassroots interpretations determine whether or how those distinctions are honored. Dolly reported that cultural practice and life in general in Shadow Canyon and the school were "totally different" compared to her roots. Hers was a voice from elsewhere yet she was asked to be the voice of all. Kenny (2004) warned that relying on easily accessible participants may result in spurious Aboriginal representation. With regard to the school, it is difficult



for me to say whether their decision to seek Dolly's expertise was philosophical or pragmatic, for the perceived difficulty in finding Elders who were willing to work with the schools may, in their minds, have left little choice. Just as I had felt.

During my five years working in Shadow Canyon there were constant vacancies in Aboriginal liaison positions, which would suggest that the pressure to implement a policy or program may influence how schools perceive and seek Aboriginal representation. As an educator I would have accepted this as a rationale for being indiscriminate, but from a researcher's perspective I saw the complexity of the issue. Is it better to opt out of policies that cannot be implemented in the spirit in which they are written, or will foregoing funding be more detrimental to Aboriginal students? These questions contain economic, philosophical, and political implications, for if schools choose not to participate in programs such as FNMI, they potentially decrease opportunities for Aboriginal students.

But it is not clear to me that policies such as FNMI have taken into account the persistent difficulty with hiring appropriate people to bridge gaps in understanding that have, in my opinion, prevented Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people from working toward mutually beneficial approaches to educating Aboriginal children. At the school, for instance, the position of FNMI coordinator had been filled both years by non-Aboriginal teachers. Despite their good intentions toward Aboriginal students, their Eurocentric backgrounds meant "they just don't get it" (Esmé). Like AISI, FNMI is ideologically committed to school improvement as a clinical task of getting students to perform similarly. Seen this way, who takes responsibility for the policy is the person who can complete the task in one year, or in

AISI's case, three. My approach to researching Aboriginal viewpoints signified a similar philosophical flaw. I assumed *any* Aboriginal view would suffice. That I have only in retrospect begun to understand my research approach as a limitation demonstrates the significance of not knowing the variances of experiences and understanding of what it means to be "Aboriginal." As a non-Aboriginal researcher, I have recognized that what I seek to learn is important, but to whom I turn to gain that understanding is a cultural, political, and ethical imperative (Kenny, 2004).

My decision to include these five Aboriginal women in my study resulted from the recognition that the three parents I had interviewed represented non-Aboriginal or assimilated perspectives. The common thread among the five women selected was their familiarity with the FNMI project. Esmé and Bibi were elected and appointed trustees of the Catholic school division. Because of their Elder status, Dolly and Heidi had special knowledge of traditional and contemporary culture. Through their employment and/or volunteer work, all of them had contact with the school and had participated in the district's FNMI roundtable gathering. For this reason I considered them key participants regarding Aboriginal educational issues and families. They were not however, parents of children of the school under study. There was also a bias in these respondents because these women were successful in their lives, and, with the exception of Esmé who reported no personal setbacks because of her Aboriginal ethnicity, had overcome hardships and developed positive coping mechanisms to deal with experiences such as residential schools, separation from biological parents, and racism. They represented Vizenor and Lee's (1999) "survivance, the idea of survival and resistance" (p. 79). Their ability to access

mainstream systems is an important caveat, for even though none of them attested to speaking for anyone but herself, it circumscribed whose voices these Aboriginal women represented. Marlena laid out some important contrasts between herself and the families she worked with:

Some of them (families) have been around for a long, long time, and I think have gone through every hoop there is—Child Welfare, [Aboriginal family programs]—and it just doesn't work because I don't think they understand where they're coming from. They don't live even as I live. I have my own way of living. They don't live the same way. They live in low income homes. So a lot of the time the kids are labeled in school, 'Well, you live in that dirty area.' They have trouble with that. They have trouble with lice, they're sickly, there's often clothing issues, they don't have the clothes they need or they're dirty clothes. Just sort of unkempt some of them.

She spoke to me about the low priority education receives from some of these parents versus their basic needs, and legal, social, and psychological issues. She described some Aboriginal youth as “sort of lost” and attributed it to “a long line of parents and relatives that have not put any issue on education.” Marlena emphasized that parents care about their children, but day-to-day difficulties were their priorities; education was the teachers' concern. These are the parents and children for whom FNMI and other school improvement policies are supposedly designed to support, but given Marlena's comments, I wondered about the likelihood that such parents were part of the discussion about Aboriginal student “problems” or the FNMI “solution.” I did not

hear about these types of families from the teachers or administrators, and recognized that as an educator and researcher I, too, had been blind.

Marlena further suggested that “a lot of them feel that they’re not going to be heard,” emphasizing that parents’ lack of confidence led them to believe their children’s teachers would not like them, and therefore it was futile for them to engage in school. She debunked common perceptions that Aboriginal people lack initiative:

They don’t accept help that easily. They’re proud people in a sense. I’ve had some people say they’re pig-headed or stupid. They’re not stupid or pig-headed, they just don’t know. They’re scared. Most agencies come with that stigma that if you deal with them you’re going to be involved with Child Welfare—the people that will rule you and run you. And they don’t want to be part of it.

Her assessment of the situation exposed for me Aboriginal parents’ vulnerability, and indicated what prompted their silence. Her example conjured up a revelation my former colleague from Shadow Canyon experienced when an Aboriginal mother admitted at a truancy hearing she did not send her child to school because she could not afford to supply him with lunch. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) shared similar examples of parents projecting educationally unsupportive behavior to mask deeper domestic circumstances. Is it a keen sense of awareness of Eurocentric definitions of “good parenting” that drives Aboriginal people to avoid situations that endanger their independence and family life? This possibility reinforced for me the importance of building time into research projects to understand why some Aboriginal parents

remain unasked, and to develop non-threatening research methods that will allow Aboriginals to speak freely or through other modes of communication.

My research plans took for granted mutual agreement, and only toward the end of my stay in Shadow Canyon did I see I was driving my agenda. For example, I was interested in interviewing a male Elder from the community. Over several telephone conversations he denied receiving the requested information about the study. I interpreted his response as rejection to my study, a consequence of me forging ahead with a plan that lacked reciprocity: these were *my* questions based on *my* ideas about Aboriginal educational needs. I failed to gain the Elder's trust.

I had similarly erred as an AISI coordinator implementing a project aimed at Aboriginal students and families. During an organizational steering committee meeting, one of the Aboriginal members nonchalantly stated he hoped the project would be successful since we were going to, as he put it, "exploit" his people. I was taken aback by his word choice. How did he not see my intentions to help his community? I should not have been shocked by his attitude since I wrote the grant proposal without consulting the community about their needs and giving them ownership. Johnson (1984) and Hutchinson (1985) (cited in Kowalsky, Thurston, Verhoef, & Rutherford, 1996) described four stages of entry into a community where cultural sensitivity is critical: stopping, waiting, transition, and entry. Chief and Council's eventual opting out of that project and the Elder claiming he did not receive my correspondence about the study illustrated I was suspended at the stage of stopping. I wondered whether I moved through to the entry stage with relative ease with the five Aboriginal women because they were comfortable in both Aboriginal

and White worlds. Furthermore, did I select these women because I had assurance that they would agree to participate?

The presumption of entry into individuals' or communities' lives was my oversight, but also, it is implicit in research protocol such as the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) "Application for Ethics Review of Proposed Research" (University of Alberta, 2005) for it requests applicants to indicate how participants will be given the opportunity to opt out of the study. The presupposition that ethical obligations become important after a participant has given consent is characteristic of non-Aboriginal methods. Respect for Aboriginals' historical and social contexts, world views, philosophies, and values implies that research should grow out of a dialogue with Aboriginal communities (Kenny, 2004; Kowalsky, Thurston, Verhoef, & Rutherford, 1996; Menzies, 2001), but my way as AISI Coordinator and doctoral researcher treated dialogue as an afterthought. I equated my initial conversations with an Aboriginal FNMI coordinator with permission to 'enter' into Aboriginals' lives to conduct my study. I now believe it is incumbent upon non-Aboriginal researchers to engage Aboriginals in the decision to embark on a research study to avoid perpetuating the attitude of colonial predecessors. I appreciate the significance of "slow is fast."

In other ways research institutions have systematized inappropriate and presumptuous approaches to research regarding Aboriginal people. Indigenous and other scholars have noted the impediments of the linearity of Euro-normative research practices (Hampton, 1995; Kenny, 2000; Menzies, 2001). Guidelines make the process clinical, and the assumption that principal investigators own the data violates

the Aboriginal belief in knowledge as a co-creation to be shared among the community (Menziés, 2001). I felt this firsthand. The seemingly innocuous act of presenting participants with a consent form delivered contrasting effects for me when I interviewed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants. Whereas the ethical preamble served as an ice breaker and a means to ease into the interview act with non-Aboriginals, I felt introducing the documents to Aboriginals was like happening upon an unexpected cliff over which gentle waves of conversation inevitably plunged.

Not only did research guidelines interrupt the flow of conversation, but my preoccupation with rules and procedures distracted me from being present to the participants' stories. Consider the following excerpt from my field notes:

During the interview I felt myself getting pulled deeper and deeper into [Dolly's] stories and her life. She herself was a researcher. I was nervous about asking whether I could tape her or get her consent, but when she showed me a book of Elders from a project she worked on, I flipped to a page and serendipitously found that the interviews were taped...and knew that I could ask her to tape the conversation. (Field notes, June 17, 2005)

This entry in my field notes illustrated my schizophrenic pose of listening to Dolly while listening to myself. This was due to my concern with the procedural aspects of my research which speaks perhaps not only to my novice status, but to the parameters of my epistemological comfort zone.

How do these experiences relate to educational policy and practice?

Educational policy and practice, like research programs, are grounded in

logocentrism. The FNMI policy is a case in point. Although the fourth goal of the FNMI policy states developing and sustaining meaningful relationships between Aboriginals and educators, policy makers and other educational stakeholders (Alberta Learning, 2002, p. 13), the focus on quantitative measures to assess the project make relationships seem like a perfunctory objective. Furthermore, the schedule of reporting student learning outcomes embodies postpositivist thinking which, in itself, can be antithetical to the patience required for school improvement, but which also denies relationship building beyond a serendipitous by-product. Thus, the river seems pushed in another way: Parents, while stated as co-responsible for their children's learning, are potentially channeled into pre-scripted behavior in support of a ministerial desire to reassert its current monopoly, quantitatively speaking, over having Canada's and the world's top "performers" on standardized exams (Alberta Education, 2005a). This reflects postpositivist, Eurocentric assumptions and world view.

#### *Tumult in the River...Safety in My Boat?*

Through my research I discovered that seeking "safety in my boat" was the Siamese twin of "pushing the river." I sought control over the research process: I would ask the questions and the interviewee would provide direct answers. Believing adherence to my interview schedule would lead me to the information I needed to have caused me to completely miss opportunities to explore in depth participants' responses. This was particularly the case with the first interview I conducted with an Aboriginal woman, which was Dolly in June 2005.



In the first interview I asked Dolly to describe the parents' role in their children's learning, and her answers were not what I expected:

They bring them out in the land in the summer time where they're teaching their children to go whaling, fishing, berry picking....long ago when I was going to school I was one of the very lucky students. I was in there (residential school) for seven years but my dad would take us out every April I believe it was. He took us out of school and brought us back out onto the land where we did muskrat trapping with him and my grandmother.

Missing the relevance of Dolly's answer, I rephrased my question and asked, "What is the parents' job in helping their students become successful?" She replied, "I think they should let them know who they are. Let them be proud of who they are no matter if they are Aboriginal Peoples or not." I was admittedly somewhat disappointed and confused when I left the first interview with Dolly because even though I was fascinated with her stories, I worried that I did not get the answers to my questions. I did not know the significance of the physicality of being "out on the land" experiencing it through one's senses; therefore, I did not connect Aboriginal ecological and experiential ways of knowing (Antone, 2003; Cajete, 2000, 2005; Doige, 2003; Hare, 2003; Jojola, 2004; Kirkness, 1998) and the parents' role. I felt frustrated by these currents that swept up from under me and capsized my plans. What I did not know was that while I felt Dolly was meandering around my questions, she *was* answering them, and her recurrent stories about fishing, trapping, whaling, and hunting with her father exemplified meaningful parent involvement. I

needed to let go of thinking there was *an* answer to my questions; I needed to let go of my assumption that I could make the current of conversation flow in my direction.

Kirkness (1998) made a point about mainstream education that suggested why I could not immediately understand Dolly's recollections about being out on the land with her father as a comment about education and the role of Aboriginal parents.

Kirkness postulated:

We are uncomfortable when too much time is spent outdoors learning from the land, because we have been conditioned to believe that education occurs in the classroom. (p. 13)

I have recollections from my teaching days of being instructed by principals during the month of June to keep students in the classroom and continue teaching until the official end of term. The warm weather was considered a distraction from learning. At the school, an issue that appeared to persist from when I taught there was the amount of time that students were away from class for sports tournaments, religious celebration, and other extra-curricular activities. Containment, control, curriculum coverage, and closure characterize European methods of teaching and learning, which differs from how Dolly described her education:

When I was growing up I learned from the land. My grandmother and my dad—I was raised up on the land... When you are raised out on the land you learn a lot of things. It's just like an education.

The formality of Western education stands in stark contrast to the lessons Dolly naturally learned beside her father and grandmother in the outdoors. Her comment, "It's just like an education" is redolent of the "cognitive imperialism" about which

Battiste (1998) writes to describe the validation of Eurocentric foundations of knowledge as the only legitimate way of knowing. I interpreted Dolly's statement as the internalization of the discourse that equates Western schooling with education.

Also, as indicated by her earlier statement, her father taking her out of school during the spring was considered an important part of her education, rather than detraction from it. Attendance is one of the measurements of success for the FNMI policy (Alberta Learning, 2002), which attests to the way policy makers and educators institutionalize learning. This infringes on the ecological nature of Aboriginal education (Cajete, 1994). Furthermore, Bibi and Heidi confirmed what I had read about the importance of family and community. "The first thing (responsibility) is the home, second is the school," Heidi said. Therefore, Aboriginals' absence from school, perceived by educators as truancy, reflects the Aboriginal priority of family and community (Wilson & Napoleon, 1998). When parents keep their children at home, they are fulfilling a familial obligation, but the current education system does not permit this as an appropriate parental role.

As my interviews with these Aboriginal women progressed, I became more reflective in my observations at the school. I was alerted to the distinctions between Aboriginal approaches and mainstream methods. My experience in the Cultures of the North class was eye-opening. When I began my data collection an Aboriginal teacher was instructing the class, and I recorded the following field notes about my observations:

At the beginning, the students attempt to form a circle... I like the talking circle idea. It is the third time I have experienced it and it

reminds me of the cross-cultural Aboriginal workshop I attended at Windy Lake (pseudonym). The students definitely understand the procedures and seem to respect it. I find it ironic that they will hold each other and themselves in line and wait for their turn to talk, but they won't conduct themselves in that way once the talking circle moment has ended. (Field notes, April 30, 2005)

I was invited to join the talking circle to share my Ukrainian heritage. For that moment I forgot I was a researcher, an "outsider." I found it remarkable how the lesson emerged from an unstructured talking circle, and that students were self-disciplined and collegial. When the talking circle disbanded, however, students were noticeably chattier and I felt disharmony in the room. Initially I attributed the difference to classroom management, but I later wondered whether the talking circle approach created an atmosphere of respect that made supervisory action unnecessary.

In October 2005 when I asked to observe the Cultures of the North class again, the new non-Aboriginal teacher hesitated because he thought they might be out on a field trip. My field note recordings indicated a transformation in my thinking:

It was funny that when I asked him (the teacher) if I could observe a class that he said he had to think about it because sometimes they are out of the classroom going on hikes looking at medicinal plants, as if I thought education only really happened in the classroom. (Field notes, October 12, 2005)

My reflections were resonant of Kirkness's (1998) argument that mainstream educators think of education as formally organized, specially designed, and as a

confined space and activity. The second experience in the class was comparatively different, for there was no talking circle, and the authoritative stance of the adult was made clear by the physical arrangement of the classroom and the location of the teacher when he addressed the students. Rather than being a part of the class, I felt like an extra pair of surveying eyes at the back of the room. This signaled a philosophical difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teaching; whereas, the talking circle seemed to facilitate a sense of equality among learners, I automatically fell into an evaluative position in the conventional setting. I began to see that correction is a critical part of Western education compared to Aboriginal traditions that “never seek to force their understanding on [others]” (Hester, 2004, p. 187). Esmé alluded to this when she said she could not explain to her non-Aboriginal colleagues what she felt they could not understand without insulting them, and “that’s not an Aboriginal’s way to be offensive.”

The connection between these incidents and my initial frustrations interviewing Dolly was my educator background and Eurocentric inclinations. I recognized myself the second time around in the Cultures of the North class; the student-teacher dichotomy, the linear arrangement of the desks, and the separation of “fun” from “serious” learning resembled my own classrooms and epitomized an adherence to the Eurocentric principles of authority, didacticism, and hierarchy (Calliou, 1998; Battiste, 1998). Eurocentricity was how I tried to organize a research experience that felt tumultuous. My valuing order told me that I should lead, and Dolly should follow. Is this the arrangement that educators and policy makers expect for their relationships with Aboriginal parents? The significance of not knowing what

guides educators' practices lies in the unquestioning way Aboriginal parents are asked to contribute to educational goals that privilege one definition of education. When policy makers pledge to "support the capacity of school divisions...to dialogue, plan, and make decisions with First Nations, Métis and Inuit parents, authorities, and communities" (Alberta Education, 2002, p. 13), from whose epistemology does the dialogue emerge and grow?

### *The Confluence*

I once believed there was a way for me to know what it means to be Aboriginal. I thought learning this was a matter of taking a few cross-cultural training workshops or reading about Aboriginal culture. Doing so felt necessary for me to be effective in my professional roles. My decision to explore Aboriginal perspectives as part of this study was freighted with the assumption that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures were two infinitely parallel rivers that I could experience equally, stepping in and out of each at my will. This was not the case. But while it is imperative to recognize that there are differences in world view between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, the emphasis on differences—and the belief that I, from my limited understanding, can know them—overshadows the hope of bringing groups together in mutual appreciation and common purpose (van der Wey, personal communication, February 7, 2006). The significance of not understanding this was why I could not imagine there should be a confluence.

Heidi helped me to realize that the key to collaborating with Aboriginal people is embracing the uniqueness of one's own history, circumstances, limitations, and potential. She did not believe it was appropriate for Aboriginals and non-

Aboriginals to think they could cross over into each other's world views or shed their ancestry; rather, she emphasized bringing one's knowledge of herself and her own world to others in the spirit of collaboration:

...once you are an Aboriginal person you can never be anything else. That was given to you. And you in Western society as a White person, that is your own gift. That's what you are. You could never be an Aboriginal person. The same as I could never be you. But we could work together.

I had never considered my being White as my gift. In fact, I felt burdened by the history of what White man did to Aboriginal inhabitants in this and other countries. Significantly, I thought, as Marlina had said about angry Aboriginal teenagers who "hate everything White man stands for" that Aboriginal people resented me. It was not me they resented, it was the way I imposed my beliefs upon their communities and my naïveté in thinking I knew what Aboriginal children needed better than they. To reiterate Esmé:

...while the non-Aboriginal person can be very well-meaning and have a whole cultural understanding, take a workshop and definitely knows what culture is about, lots of times...*they just don't get it.*

Heidi spoke to the notion of confluence. She clarified for me, "It's not necessarily to have to change that curriculum; it's just to add onto it." When Aboriginal parents said they wanted their children to learn about culture, it did not mean they discounted the value of what was offered in conventional schools. These

women used the expression “walking in both worlds” to describe what Aboriginal children and parents required to be successful.

But how can schools open up intellectual and spiritual space for Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals to co-create a positive environment for all children and families? This is a complex task considering the Euronormative environment of current educational systems. One profound experience during my data collection suggested to me the difficulty of integrating Aboriginal culture and people into schools in a way that feels appropriate and effective. I was invited by the school district to present my review of literature on Aboriginal culture and education to a group of FNMI Coordinators and administrators. Following my presentation, the group gathered at a community venue to hear an out-of-province Elder speak. Excerpts from my reflective journal recreate the experience:

*The building, quite large, had a high ceiling and a stone fireplace nestled in the corner... Three stained glass designs of Alberta wildlife graced the south wall... The chairs were set up in a semi-circle, and we were instructed to form a circle before we began... In the middle of the chairs was a blanket—the bundle. There were braids of sweetgrass, rocks, tobacco, a candle, objects made of hide and fur. As the Elder spoke he circumnavigated this bundle, referring to it often. Fraser (pseudonym) started the presentation with a prayer after being presented with tobacco. He spoke in Cree, and a reverent sensation vibrated throughout the room. (Reflective Journal, October 13, 2005)*



The Elder talked about his own struggle through alcohol abuse and poverty, and made a plea for teachers to respond with kindness to the sometimes inconvenient needs of Aboriginal children and parents. Back at the Board office following the talk, a heartfelt talking circle transpired in which non-Aboriginals divulged their own misunderstanding and new learning, and searched for ways to connect with the pain of the Aboriginal experience. For example, one principal reported not knowing what the ceremonial presentation of tobacco symbolized until the Elder's talk. Two others shared boarding school experiences of feeling isolated and out of place. I felt affirmed as the District FNMI Coordinator told me she listened to my presentation from her Aboriginal woman's perspective and found I was "bang on." I was relieved and excited to hear this, but yet I do not know exactly how it was that I hit the mark, or what that mark was. This conversation did not happen, and I think it is a crucial one that holds the potential to help non-Aboriginal learners and researchers like me to understand where the "hits and misses" of our thinking lay. At the end of the day another Aboriginal woman made a profound statement:

*She thanked me, as an Aboriginal woman, for presenting what I did because she felt that Aboriginal people could say the same thing over and over and over, and never ever be heard. She said it was important that it come from me, someone who is White, someone to whom others will pay attention. This was stunning. And sad. (Reflective Journal, October 13, 2005)*

This is central to the issue with involving Aboriginal parents, and with Aboriginal education in general. It is inherently wrong in my opinion that Aboriginals continue

to be dubbed over by the non-Aboriginal voice, even if a non-Aboriginal can express the uniqueness that separates Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal historical or political experiences, or point out epistemologically and ontologically what Aboriginal world views are *not*. What has to happen so that Aboriginals can speak for themselves?

I discovered the complexity of the aforementioned question a few days later when I observed the same Elder, Fraser, presenting to the Cultures of the North class.

The disparity was noted as follows:

*[Fraser] organized us into the sharing circled at the chalet on Thursday afternoon. His talk was wonderful. Free, unscripted, heartfelt, powerful. He seemed to be 'at home' even though he was a visitor to the community. The wood façade, the large windows opening to the hills complemented his message. The bundle in the middle was emblematic of the spiritual force of the gathering, and served as a focal point for me...In the classroom on Monday in the [Cultures of the North] course, however, I observed a different Fraser. He was at the front, central to his message in a different way. He looked uncomfortable, as if he didn't know what to say...Why didn't he rearrange the students into the sharing circle? At the front was his bundle, but from where I was at the back of the classroom, it didn't have the presence or sacredness I felt in the ski chalet. It wasn't central, and few could interact with it. And when he spoke it was incoherent; it had no beginning, no end, and the middle of it hung precariously in the embarrassment I felt for him. For me. It was so*

*different than the lucid narrative he delivered on Thursday.* (Reflective Journal, November 3, 2005)

Could the difference be interpreted as Fraser's default to a position of powerlessness reminiscent from his residential school experience? Was he reminded that he did not belong to the culture upon which the school was constructed? Why did he not exercise the right to arrange the classroom in a way that was conducive to the spirit of his message? The juxtaposition of my experience with that Elder led me to believe that it is insufficient to open the schoolhouse to Aboriginal people and expect students to be "infused" with Aboriginal culture. It is not by opening the schoolhouse to Aboriginal Elders that Aboriginal students and families will feel welcome to join educational conversations, but by educators being open to question the epistemological and ontological foundations upon which the school is built so that it can become clearer why Aboriginal students and families feel shut out despite being inside. This powerful experience and the way Aboriginal students lag behind their non-Aboriginal peers suggests to me schools have not yet come to the confluence.

### **In the Wake of Research**

In writing this chapter, I broke the rhythm of my previous interpretive chapters to "call into question what [I] have believed" (Luce-Kapler, 2003, ¶ 24) about research and Aboriginal perspectives. My doctoral research experience alerted me to the way my Western values and socio-historical positioning have shaped the epistemological, ontological, and cosmological paradigm that has become my subjectivity and serves as my point of reference in all my human and natural interactions. I steered the research process in directions I assumed it should go, and

believed there was a clearly defined destination. Although it is fair to say all rivers seek the ocean, is there a point at which we can say it has done so? And who decides?

My assumption that I could understand fully Aboriginals' perspectives and experiences, and in return help them understand what is needed to improve education, stemmed from my thinking of Aboriginal educational issues as "problem" and "solution." A complex web of factors influences Aboriginal students' and parents' experiences in a way a non-Aboriginal cannot comprehend. A productive dialogue, I now understand, can only come about if I and other non-Aboriginals see the differences as integrated parts in a productive dialogue. This implies the concept of balance, but as Zwicky (1992) aptly aphorizes, "To balance is not to oppose" (p. 372). But how can non-Aboriginal educators and policy makers develop this understanding from within an education system that is founded upon Western notions of teachers as experts? What conditions will encourage non-Aboriginal educators to question an educational system that conforms to their epistemological and ontological beliefs?

I was not able to amplify the voices of Aboriginal parents from the school, nor was I able to comprehend their silence and absence. Was disengagement a resignation to feeling subjugated by an institution that denied diverse world views? Or was their silence a potent statement against an established mainstream perspective of education? What and where is the Aboriginal parent role? These questions remain at the end of my study.

Could I have created the conditions necessary to put Aboriginal parents at ease so that they were willing to speak? If I were to go back to conduct my study again, an ethnographic approach would be more in keeping with guidelines for

researching in Aboriginal contexts. I may be better prepared to release control of the research process; to allow time for informal engagement to gather insights about Aboriginal perspectives and to exercise reflexive responsibility; and, to reciprocate learning and appropriately contribute to the community. (Kowalsky, Thurston, Verhoef, & Rutherford, 1996).

The need to celebrate multicultural parent involvement and confront taken-for-granted practices is increasingly considered in the literature (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; López & Vázquez, 2005; Pushor & Murphy, 2004; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005). But because the literature on Aboriginal education tends to emphasize how Aboriginals are not like non-Aboriginals, little has been written to demystify the process of bridging these two perspectives. The significance of my research for me has been the clarification that Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals bring unique gifts to the table, but what conditions will encourage both groups to view their perspectives as complementary and workable within a system perceived as privileging non-Aboriginal ways remains a compelling question for me.

## CHAPTER 7

### OVERVIEW, IMPLICATIONS, AND COMPELLING QUESTIONS

My aim in this last chapter is threefold. First, I provide an overview of the study purpose. Second I review key interpretations from chapters 4, 5, and 6 to establish a context for pertinent implications. In doing so, I pose questions that have become compelling for me, and that may direct future practice and my research.

#### Overview of the Study

This study documented the role of parents in school improvement from the perspective of secondary students and parents from one northern Alberta school. I drew on Hopkins' (2001) definition of school improvement as “enhancing the level of student learning and achievement” (p. 2). My investigation pursued three questions: (1) How do parents and students define and understand school improvement and the parents' role in these initiatives? (2) What are parents' and students' experiences with school-led improvement initiatives that have increased parent involvement as a key strategy? (3) Do parent and student perceptions and experiences regarding the role of parents in school improvement reflect those of practitioners and policy makers?

The purpose of my study was to examine secondary students' and parents' perceptions of an appropriate role for parents in school-led improvement initiatives. A noticeable trend in the educational policy arena is the rising expectation for all educational constituents—teachers, parents, and students—to collaborate in the planning, designing, implementation, and evaluation of school improvement programs. Globally and locally parents are encouraged to be “meaningfully” involved in their children's learning. Yet, in my review of the literature, I found little attention

has been given to exploring what students and parents think is an appropriate or meaningful role for parents. Additionally, though the area of parent involvement is abundant and growing, secondary level studies and those within non-urban contexts are considerably rare. This absence, and my professional and personal experiences as an AISI coordinator in northern Alberta were the rationale for my study.

### **Interpretations**

In this section I highlight the themes I constructed in relation to the first research question, which was central to my inquiry, and summarize findings for the second and third research questions. To reflect the organization of this dissertation, I highlight what I learned from the Aboriginal participants at the end of this section.

#### *Research Question #1: Conceptualizations of School Improvement and the Parents' Role*

Students' responses to the question of how they understand school improvement and the parents' role within such initiatives were reported in Chapter 4. These students talked about school improvement in terms of pedagogy, content, and outcomes. For this reason, I called their definitions of school improvement "curriculum oriented." Measurable outcomes featured most strongly in these students' definitions of school improvement. Regardless of level of engagement or academic standing, "better grades" were their hallmark of school improvement.

I attributed these students' curriculum oriented understanding of school improvement to their claim that parents had a limited role in their academic achievement. They reported parents' lack of understanding of the curriculum, as well as students' need to be independent and responsible for their learning as reasons why

parents did not play a key role in school improvement aimed at increasing academic performance. They did, however, describe an indirect role for parents that I typologized as social support, curriculum support, and supportive intervention.

In Chapter 5 I reported on parents' responses to the research questions. Most of these parents described school improvement in ways external to the classroom and particular to their children. I called their perspective "child oriented" because their definitions focused holistically on children's individual needs pertaining to their personalities, interests, aptitudes, and learning requirements. One parent, however, aligned with the students' notion that school improvement must be "backed up by a fairly rigorous system of measurement." This divergence signaled to me the importance of acknowledging heterogeneity among parents.

I interpreted these parents' child oriented view of school improvement in two ways. On the one hand these parents believed their job was primarily behind the scenes monitoring their children's progress, protecting and distracting their children from social and school-related pressures, and role modeling a positive work ethic and values. On the other hand, parents advocated for their children's needs and intervened when they were facing difficulties. Like the students, these parents recognized their limitations with high school curriculum, as well as teenagers' maturity and independence, and for this reason, assigned themselves an indirect role which was sometimes negotiated with their children or their children's peers.

Although policy seems to assume that parents will support goals to increase achievement for all, educators must be prepared for discord when they invite parents to contribute to school improvement because parents do not share the same concerns



as teachers or their children. The resemblance between these students' and teachers' views about school improvement suggested strong potential for them to collaborate on school-led improvement initiatives, even though it was not apparent that these students were given many opportunities. But because parents did not share the students' and teachers' perspectives about the meaning of school improvement, collaboration seems more challenging. Engaging in dialogue with parents about the meaning of school improvement seems a necessary first step.

*Research Question #2: Students' and Parents' Experiences with School Improvement and Parent Involvement*

There were varying levels of awareness of AISI and FNMI, but it appeared to me that these students and parents had participated very minimally in decisions about improving achievement. Relative to AISI, FNMI received no mention by these students and parents, except for one parent who participated in roundtable discussions sponsored by the district. My interpretation was that curriculum specific school improvement involved a top-down process that involved few parents and students.

Parent involvement was described in schoolcentric (Lawson, 2003) terms; at-school, traditional forms of parent involvement characteristic of elementary school parent involvement were commonly provided as examples of ways parents were involved. Yet, outside of parent-teacher interviews or awards ceremonies, the students did not believe their parents' involvement in extracurricular school events impacted their achievement. School-wide engaged students enjoyed having their parents at the school for such events, but classroom engaged students were particularly adamant that seeing their parents at school would be "embarrassing," and

they discouraged a close parent-teacher relationship. Most parents respected their adolescents' growing independence.

All the parents in this study reported having very positive experiences dealing with the school whenever issues arose. There was divergence, however, on the extent to which parents wanted to express their opinions and felt satisfied that their voice was heeded; whereas most parents felt they had ample opportunities to give their input and were happy to read about AISI in the newsletter, some suggested that parents were "superficially" included.

The educators in this study felt the school did consider parents' opinions, and some argued that parents in general did not capitalize on opportunities to participate. I got a mixed report on which parents were involved and which were not, but in my observations, at-school involvement was limited to White mothers, which was consistent with the findings in the literature (Crozier, 2000; Epstein, 2001a; Waggoner & Griffith, 1998). My examination of symbolic policy meaning through physical space and agenda priorities suggested to me that although the administration expressed strong commitment to involving parents and had organized formal and informal opportunities for parents to participate, the spatial layout of the school, the type and manner of information given to parents, and the nature of discussion items at school council and staff meetings suggested that parent involvement was circumscribed by educator expectations. The statement, "we have to be careful when [parent involvement] crosses the line of a teacher and then it has to stop" reflected educators' propensity to buffer parents from their teaching (Ogawa, 1996).

I see two implications arising from these findings. First, parent involvement requires reconceptualization at the high school level. Since parents and students do not value parents participating in high schools the way they did in elementary schools, it is incumbent upon teachers and administrators to discuss with parents and students in what ways parents can and should contribute to school improvement. The truism that parents can directly improve students' achievement at the high school level must be questioned.

Second, how parents are valued is not only conveyed by what teachers say to or do with parents, it is expressed by the school building and organization. This implies that educators must examine *all* their practices and surroundings, not only their parent involvement practices, to bring to the surface their values and assumptions about including those other than professionals in their "space".

*Research Question #3: Parents' and Students' Perspectives Vis-à-vis Educators and Policy Makers*

The *Alberta Initiative for School Improvement* (Alberta Learning, 1999a) and *First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Policy Framework* (Alberta Learning, 2002) perpetuate the notion that parents are "partners" in their children's learning and achievement. The parent and student participants in my study did not see the parental role as a direct one involving research, planning, implementation, or evaluation of school improvement. In theory partnership was an agreed upon notion, but when it came to describing how school improvement actually happened, I saw the partnership metaphor as highly contestable. These parents and students believed the parents' role was largely outside of school and curriculum. These educators tended to perpetuate

traditional views of parent involvement such as helping with homework, attending school-related events, and volunteering when teachers asked them to.

I found correspondence between policy documents, and students and teachers in that they defined school improvement in terms of measurable learning outcomes. The parents did not place priority on measurable improvement in their definitions. However, in terms of the parental role, policy seemed to be most out of line with the parents, students, and teachers because policy documents inferred the most direct role for parents. Though teachers claimed parents had input into school improvement, and parents and students tended to agree that parents should have input, all three groups considered parents to be indirectly involved in student achievement. But while the educators aligned with a traditional, schoolcentric (Lawson, 2003) view of parent involvement, these parents and students challenged that notion.

### *Aboriginal Perspectives*

My reporting of the Aboriginal perspectives deviated from the manner in which I interpreted the other participants' responses for two reasons. First, my sample included five Aboriginal women who no longer had children at The Saints School, and they were arguably socially, politically, and economically positioned to access both Eurocentric and Aboriginal worlds. My hopes of hearing from "uninvolved" Aboriginal parents who opposed or were denied the chance to participate were therefore thwarted by this relatively mainstream bias. Second, my experiences engaging with Indigenous literature and interviewing these Aboriginal women felt like an intellectual and personal "interruption." Referring to Luce-Kapler's (2004) notion of syncope—stopping to consider the importance of the background—I shifted

my focus away from interpreting what the participants said, and instead self-examined the epistemological and ontological foundations that undergirded the research process.

As I reflected on the Euro-normative linearity of my research approach, I related these assumptions to the way I perceived Aboriginal parents as a former educator, AISI coordinator, and developing researcher. Wittgenstein's aphorism was instrumental in this self-reflexive exercise:

...Where does this idea come from? It is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we can see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off. (Malcolm, 1958, p. 317)

I have begun to identify the taken for grantedness of my epistemological and ontological upbringing. I concluded that ethnography would support a respectful, culturally sensitive approach to conducting research with Aboriginal people because not only is building trusting relationships and releasing control of the process paramount, but one needs time to, as Wittgenstein proposed, think of removing one's glasses. This is not to suggest that ethnography makes it possible for one to see clearly through someone else's glasses, but rather, that prolonged engagement may compel one to examine how the view is colored by what one assumes about the way the world is and how it is known. This seems more achievable through immersion.

### **Implications and Compelling Questions**

My intent in this section is to indicate areas which hold significant implications for policy, practice, and research based on my interpretations of the data. Given my interpretive sensibilities, my preference was to raise compelling questions,

but so that school-based educators may reap from what I have learned, I offer general ideas to support their practice. It is my contention, however, that theoretical and philosophical questions are central to informing effective action in schools.

### *Implications of Child Oriented School Improvement*

If parents view school improvement in terms of their own specific improvements for their children while educators and policy makers focus on aggregate measures, then involving parents as a means to increase overall academic achievement becomes challenging. Using Lightfoot's (1978) language, parents' particularistic expectations that the school will improve in a way that provides more than curricular benefits for their children clashes with educators' universalistic intentions to help all students meet the standards. This notion has been spelled out as the dark side of parent involvement in literature that demonstrates how some parents exert their influence to their children's advantage and at the expense of other students (McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999; Morgan & Morgan, 1992). A mother in my pilot study (Stelmach, 2005a) disapproved of parents who only took an interest in the school when they had "a burning issue" and argued, "[parents] need to look at it from a wider view" (p. 176). In this study, parents who said school improvement would become a "political ball" if parents had too much control, or that school council was a case where "one parent says this, one says that" also hinted at the problem of personal agenda setting. This turns the altruism of neutral parent involvement on its head, and points to the challenge of expecting parents to be part of school improvement for the good of all students.

What, then, does this mean for policy that mandates involving parents in school improvement? I see three implications for the implementation of such policies. First, it problematizes current approaches to representation. The standard practice of having one or a few parents join committees entrenches parent homogenizing and the idea that there is a singular parent voice. Because parents see school improvement in terms of their children's needs, pluralism makes representation difficult. When multiculturalism is factored in, the issue becomes even more complicated. As I learned from the Aboriginal participants in my study, the "one size fits all" misconception about Aboriginals oversimplifies inclusion. The participants who contributed to the development of the FNMI policy, for example, all belonged to national or provincial organizations (Alberta Learning, 2002). Similarly, a member of the Alberta Home and School Councils Association was on the AISI steering committee (Alberta Learning, 1999b).

It cannot be assumed that as long as one parent or cultural group is represented that all parents have spoken. Practical questions arise from this: What can schools do to ensure input from a variety of perspectives? How can multiple views be incorporated into a singular school vision? How can "absent" parents' views be solicited? Rotating parent representation on committees, actively and randomly seeking input from parents outside a core group, and utilizing technology to create convenient and expedient ways to communicate with parents are possible ways educators can seek broader parent representation. But these recommendations do not guarantee all parent opinions will be presented or heard, nor are they necessarily appropriate for all contexts. I recognize the difficulty presented to schools who wish

to elicit and incorporate variable perspectives; questions of how to address multiple perspectives that interpretive research helps to present are not easily answered, which may be an inherent limitation to such a theoretical framework. What seems more important to me is that educators confront the assumption that all parents conceive of school improvement in the same way and as teachers do, and that one parent can therefore speak for many. I see this as a critical first step in recognizing that parents are heterogeneous. My case study has demonstrated this in a limited way by focusing on one secondary school, but extending the investigation to other school contexts and conducting a multi-analysis may address the inherent limitations of the single case study.

For me the issue of parent representation also gives rise to philosophical questions: Whose vision of school improvement should parents (or teachers) support? Ought the school capture the “silent” parent perspectives? Examining parent involvement within an ethical framework may be particularly fruitful considering the moral undertones of policy. For example, Alberta’s Commission on Learning states “parents *must* be actively and positively involved in the education of their children” (Alberta Learning, 2003a, p. 39, italics inserted). Likewise, the rational choice model of the market, though seemingly neutral, shapes arguments for strategies such as school choice so that parents see their lack of “involvement” not only as irrational, but also, irresponsible. As reported in Chapter 5, parents who felt “guilty” or that they were “bad” parents to be interviewing were an articulation of the way parent involvement policy internalizes a moral obligation. As policy intensifies the expectation for parents to be pseudo-teachers (Blackmore, 2004), the line between



right and responsibility between teachers, students, and parents becomes blurred. Explicating policy values and their impact on how rights and responsibilities are defined may shed light from a different angle on the question of an appropriate parental role in school improvement. This has been done with respect to issues of diversity and equity. The field of educational administration research and practice may also benefit from a focus on the value-ladenness of parent involvement policy as a complement to current research that looks at how parent involvement can improve schools and how educators can increase it.

A second issue that arises out of parents' child centeredness is the assumption that all parents know what is best for their children. It is one thing to subscribe, as one of the students in my study did, to the notion that "no one knows you like your parents," and for scholars to argue for the recognition of parents' knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Pushor & Murphy, 2004; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005), but it is another to presume that what parents know about their children or the world in general is educationally beneficial or that teachers know how to appropriately apply it within a school context. Furthermore, given adolescents' increasing maturity and independence, it is not unreasonable to expect them to develop alternative viewpoints from their parents, and to have a better understanding of their educational goals and needs than their parents. Even parents in this study who seemed to be in tune with their children's schooling joked about reading their children's report cards, wondering, "Is this my child?" As reported in Chapters 4 and 5, whereas the parents thought they could fulfill the role of social supporter, some students denied parents' ability to understand what teenagers go through. Therefore, a

recommendation for practice may be to include students in school improvement processes. As they suggested in Chapter 4, learning is a students' responsibility, and if school improvement planners want to know how to enhance student learning, "they should ask the students."

Third, parents' broad expectations for school improvement surpass narrow policy goals to quantifiably increase "world-class results" (Alberta Learning, 1999b). Parents' wish for education to develop their "whole child" presupposes ambitious school improvement goals, with children, rather than statistics, as the standard. How can school administrators reconcile competing and contrasting expectations between and among parents, teachers, and policy makers? Our current era of public accountability creates additional tensions for educators, which poses questions for educators and administrators in particular: How can school administrators and educators manage multiple levels of accountability? To whom are educators ultimately accountable?

From an educational administration standpoint, the expansion of public accountability makes schools permeable not only to parents, but to taxpayers, corporations, judicial institutions, and social welfare agencies, which creates dilemmas about resource allocation. Because education is touted as "the silver bullet" of the global economy ("Education, economy linked," 2004, p. A6), schools are increasingly drawn into the competitive mien of our economic, social, and political world. The coupling of funding with accountability inherent in policies such as AISI and FNMI tempts, and in some cash-strapped jurisdictions, forces schools to participate in improvement initiatives to gain a perceived financial advantage.

Overtaxed resources and school personnel are pending problems as schools add to their strata of programs and respond to intensified pressures to be transparent and open. The complexity of school environments and teachers' work makes teacher wellness a mounting concern (Sackney, Noonan & Miller, 2000; Canadian Teachers Federation, 2005). It may be useful for school jurisdictions to weigh the qualitative costs and benefits alongside anticipated quantitative outcomes when deliberating new improvement initiatives. For example, how does an influx of financial resources impact staff wellness, school culture, and school community relations? In the wake of Klein's cuts to education (Peters, 1999) programs such as AISI are alluring, but the addition of initiatives demand more from existing personnel, which, oftentimes is in the form of administrative tasks rather than professional learning. Whether and how schools can manage the expectations of many should be a considerable factor.

Thus, bringing parents into school improvement discussions is not as simple a matter as some of the popular literature I reviewed in Chapter 2 would suggest. Educators must question whose views are invited, heard, and promoted, and the feasibility of incorporating a polyvocal parent community into school improvement processes. At a conference sponsored by Joyce Epstein's National Network of Partnership Schools that I attended as an AISI Coordinator (2001, 2002), I remember Dr. Epstein saying that "all parents care." Intuitively, this seemed profound to me at the time, but I am learning that parents' caring does not ipso facto mean they are easily incorporated into school improvement. About what, for whom, and how parents care are paramount questions.

### *Implications for Involving Parents in School Improvement*

My interpretation was that the partnership metaphor as it is conceived in the popular literature and policy I outlined in Chapter 2 inadequately represented most parents' and students' thinking, and that parents volunteering at the school or sitting beside their children while they completed homework was not a universal understanding of "parent involvement." Perhaps the most obvious implication from this is that a reconceptualization of parent involvement is in order. In suggesting this, I: (a) challenge the generalizability of research that has led to a schoolcentric (Lawson, 2003) approach to involving parents; (b) critique the dichotomization of "involved" and "uninvolved" parents that results from centering parent involvement around teachers' perspectives; and (c) argue that a reconceptualization of "parent involvement" should be based on role clarification and negotiation between parents and their children and their children's peers.

The feasibility of the postpositivist claim that parent involvement results in positive gains for student achievement (Epstein, 2001b, 2001c; Henderson & Mapp, 2002) must be questioned within the secondary context. For example, as cited in Chapter 2, Joyce Epstein's (2001a) work, the model I employed in my role as AISI coordinator in my former school district, outlines a comprehensive approach to engaging parents, from supporting them in their parenting role, creating homework that can engage parents, to including them in school governance. The research I reviewed in Chapter 2 showed that the results of strategies related to Type 4, Learning at Home (Epstein et al., 2002, p. 165), have been particularly positive (e.g. Balli, Demo & Wedman, 1998; DeCusati & Johnson, 2004; Epstein, 2001b; Faires,

Nichols, & Rickman, 2000; Hara & Burke, 1998; Porter & Johnson, 2004; Van Voorhis); when parents worked closely with their children on regular or interactive homework that required parental input into students' assignments, results improved. But if secondary parents do not have the time or skills required to engage in their children's learning in that way, and if adolescents are vying for independence, these types of strategies are irrelevant. Moreover, if parents and students do not see the parents' role as going beyond monitoring progress and taking an interest in what their children are learning, the secondary parents' role is considerably distanced from the outcomes students are expected to achieve.

Does this mean secondary school parents are unimportant to their children's success? This is hardly the case. Research confirms parental impact on areas such as attendance and attitude (e.g. Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Empirical evidence about their impact on academic achievement is noticeably lacking however. This implies that the type of secondary educational outcomes parents can be expected to influence must be reconsidered. While it might make sense for parents to read with their elementary school children to hone their children's reading abilities, to expect secondary school parents to perform similar functions goes beyond their and their children's imaginations of what parents can and should be doing. Subjects in the humanities, as these students suggested, may hold more potential, but this puts the responsibility for parent involvement on teachers in those areas, and assumes, moreover, that all parents' circumstances allow them to do this. It also designates school improvement to the level of individuals, which implies that the system itself is effective. My central critique here is that models that have been shown to be effective

at the elementary school level may mislead secondary educators toward unlikely expectations for parents. To move secondary school parents into a role that is neither strongly supported in the research, nor corresponds to how parents and students are prepared to have parents participate, is to create a false consciousness about parent involvement.

Inherent in current conceptualizations of parent involvement is that parents should fulfill teachers' goals by running "school-like homes" (Epstein, 2001a, p. 32) or performing teacher-like functions at the school. Because these parent behaviors have been shown to increase academic performance in elementary and middle schools (Epstein, 2001a), educators and policy makers subscribe to such practices believing that this is what parent involvement should always look like. Any educator-directed conception of parent involvement will automatically label parents. This results in a dichotomization of "involved" parents who perform according to teachers' expectations, and "uninvolved," or what Epstein calls, "hard-to-reach" (p. 274) parents who do not come to the school, do not have a school-like home, and do not respond to teachers when they make requests. This is problematic if secondary students and parents do not envision the parental role in school-like or teacher-like ways. The misconception that secondary parents must act like elementary school parents, or that parents must "be" a certain way at all, distorts the issues for educators, policy makers, and researchers; research or professional development that focuses on identifying strategies for engaging hard to reach parents (Epstein, 2001a, p. 275) is symptomatic of this false binary.

Thus, I argue for the reconceptualization of “parent involvement” that accounts for heterogeneity among parents and does not ascribe to them an educator role. This has been identified and taken up by Pushor (2005) and her colleagues (e.g. Pushor & Murphy, 2004; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005) specifically, and is underscored in critical works that trouble parent involvement within frameworks using cultural capital theory (de Carvalho, 2000; Lareau, 1987; 1996; Vincent, 1996, 2000) and feminist poststructuralism (David, 1993a, 1993b, 2002, 2004). In my opinion Pushor and Ruitenberg (2005) have advanced furthest in challenging current conceptions of parent involvement. They have introduced new vocabulary to the parent involvement terrain, replacing “involvement” with “engagement” to denote the ethical stances of “care and commitment” (p. 43) to the practice of including parents in the schooling of their children. While I am attracted to these ethical undertones of their suggestion, I am still concerned that a lexical re-emphasis will be insufficient to change current educational practice and policy unless the assumptions that cause policy makers to prescribe to parents a substantive or direct role in student achievement are dislodged. Pushor and Ruitenberg (2005) argue that replacing “involvement” with “engagement” will give parents a “place alongside educators in the schooling of their children” (p. 43) and flatten the hierarchical structures of schooling. Theoretically their thesis is attractive, but what is missing is an empirical account of how or whether parents define themselves “alongside” educators. As noted in Chapters 4 and 5, parents and teachers clung to the rhetoric of “partnership” and traditional forms of parent involvement, even when deeper investigation suggested they did not subscribe to those notions as it is currently perpetuated. Terminology is important to how parents

are included or excluded, but terminology to be effective must come about through multiple perspectives.

I further question the underlying assumption that equality is a laudable or achievable goal for parent-teacher relations. I do so with reference to the distinction between equality of opportunity and equality of condition. It is often assumed that if educators create equal opportunities for parents to participate, that all parents have the equality of condition to capitalize on those opportunities. But as the critical literature has demonstrated, working class parents, ethnic minority parents, and mothers are considerably disadvantaged (de Carvalho, 2000; David, 1993a, 1993b, 2002, 2004; Lareau, 1987; 1996; Vincent, 1996, 2000). Suggesting that the term “engagement” serves as a leveler (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005) is to assume parents can and want to be teachers’ equals, and that this is a desirable goal. If parents are pseudo-teachers, they bear the same responsibility, and therefore blame, for students’ achievement.

Finally, so far the literature has been treating parent involvement as if it is a matter between parents and their children’s teachers; therefore, the issues are framed in terms of discrepant power relations, underprivileged forms of capital, and silencing. I suggest that a reconceptualization of “parent involvement” should focus on parents’ role construction as a negotiated accomplishment between them and their children. Important questions for researchers to pursue include: How do parents negotiate their role with their children? What factors influence the negotiation process? Furthermore, my study suggested that parents see their involvement as limited by the very fact that they are parents. “Backing off,” “not rocking the boat,” “not fixing what is not broken,” were idiomatic ways in which parents articulated



their limitations. The role of adolescents' peers has also not been considered, but my study suggested that working through their children's friends is a mechanism parents may employ to exert an influence that is less direct and more acceptable than "nagging." The student who shared the example of her friends' mom "making [her friend] study" instead of going rollerblading points to the possibility that what friends do is considered by adolescents. Examining parent involvement from the angle of role construction, rather than how and which parents can or cannot be involved in the way teachers expect, holds the potential to cleave the literature in theoretical and methodological ways.

### **Unanticipated Learning**

*What makes a subject difficult to understand—  
if it is significant, important—is not that some  
special instruction about abstruse things is necessary  
to understand it. Rather it is the contrast between  
the understanding of the subject and what most people  
want to see.*

-Ludwig Wittgenstein

Two characteristics were important to my investigation: the Aboriginal population and the northern context. The insights I gained about these areas were serendipitous not because they had previously been beyond my abilities to understand, but rather because of the stronghold of my preordained sights. What made these learnings possible was my recognition that much of what I had to learn throughout this study had to do with me. Specifically, at the outset I believed the case in this study was bound by The Saints School where I conducted my research. At some point in the study I revised my idea of the case as bounded by the participants who contributed to my study. But at this point, I understand this study was a case of

my changing perceptions and understanding. In this section I share how this study has altered my thinking about Aboriginal families and the north, and how my insights may prompt advances in research and practice.

### *Insights into Aboriginal Issues*

Indigenous and other scholars of Aboriginal and multicultural educational issues consistently argue for sensitivity to the differences among students and families (Battiste, 1998; Cajete, 2005). When I commenced my study, I believed that explicating these differences was the key to resolving the “problem” of engaging Aboriginal parents. As an educator, I thought it was my misunderstanding of Aboriginal perspectives that led to my clumsy approaches to working with Aboriginal community members; I believed if I could capture how Aboriginal parents defined their role in their children’s education, that I would be in the position to inform schools about what it means to act in a culturally sensitive manner. As I explained in Chapter 6, I was able to capture Aboriginal perspectives in a very limited way, and therefore, could not explicate the differences between Aboriginal parents and non-Aboriginal parents. Ironically, this shortcoming has led me to see that defining Aboriginal differences as a problem to be solved may be why outcomes for Aboriginal students and families continue to lag behind non-Aboriginals. Additionally, I have come to understand that focusing on how it is that *I am* and how I can use my “gifts” is central to addressing this gap.

Undeniably, understanding historical and cultural difference is critical for addressing Aboriginal educational issues. Through the stories and experiences of the participants in my study I came to appreciate that Aboriginal world views are

epistemologically, ontologically, and cosmologically guided in ways unlike mine. Acknowledging this has helped me to examine the prejudgments I impose upon the world. It is not that I am able to say I do or do not “know” how an Aboriginal sees things, and that therefore I can or cannot respond effectively to the issues that plague our Aboriginal families, but that I am aware of how I was constructing difference as a problem. At one point during my research I believed I had grasped “the Aboriginal perspective.” Discussing this with a former colleague, I was asked if my learning had affected me such that I would be accepting of an Aboriginal student who exhibited poor manners or personal hygiene. I responded “yes” which erroneously and arrogantly demonstrated that I defined being Aboriginal as a “condition” or “problem” that one either accepts or rejects. I have begun to understand that I would not, in fact, be accepting of an Aboriginal student with poor manners or hygiene but not because they are exhibited by an Aboriginal person, but because those behaviors are themselves reprehensible. Thus, defining “being Aboriginal” as the issue is the crux of the problem. As educators and researchers, we do not resolve the educational situation for Aboriginal families by finding ways to fit them into our mainstream schooling, but rather, by looking at our mainstream schooling as part of the reason for their educational situation.

By focusing entirely on how Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals differ, there is more potential to drive these groups apart than to develop shared understanding. Reflecting on my conversations with the Aboriginal participants, I wondered if their experiences with being emphasized as different prompted them to conceive of

cultural events in schools or communities as “overkill,” or to suggest that White “Elders” should be invited to share their stories as well.

Does this mean that celebrations such as Aboriginal Day should be eliminated from schools, or that policy should not emphasize Aboriginal culture? These participants’ perspectives were at odds with scholars who critique the “beads and feathers” (Amanti, 2005, p. 131) or “add-and-stir” (Battiste, 1998, p. 21) approach, and argue that traditional displays of Aboriginal costume, food, music, and dance “emphasize differences to such an extent and in such a way that the gap between people of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture is widened, not bridged” (Doige, 2003, p. 150). While the Aboriginal women in my study stressed the need to nurture Aboriginal children so that they can be successful within a mainstream society, they did not discount the importance of cultural events, claiming such festivities were “a start” to helping Aboriginal children develop a respectful relationship with their ethnic roots. Once again I invoke the metaphor of a confluence of two rivers in suggesting that important questions for school teachers, administrators, and policy makers to ask are: How can the elusive balance between respecting differences and appreciating them as contributions to a fuller, more enriching educational environment be achieved? How can we educate about “difference” without implying it is an issue? What are the barriers to and opportunities for developing mindful and respectful responses to the students and parents we perceive as different? These are queries my study did not address, but which have important implications for education in all circumstances of difference, including parent-teacher relations,

gender, religious affiliation, linguistic preferences, physical and intellectual abilities, sexual orientation, and culture.

This has important implications for policy as well. For instance, though the FNMI policy claims its goal is to “develop and sustain meaningful relationships with First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners and parents” (Alberta Learning, 2002, p. 13), using self-identification as a mechanism for determining funding essentially commodifies Aboriginals. Difference is constructed as a Catch-22 through policy: those who self-identify surrender to being singled out while those who conceal their identity are not provided with the necessary resources to be successful. Either way, being Aboriginal is cost-bearing. How policies can support Aboriginal students—or all students with individual needs—without reducing them to a budget line item is a difficult but necessary question to consider.

A challenge for research is to move streams of uniqueness toward the confluence. Though the identification of clashing views and experiences is an important part of developing awareness of different experiences, the lengthy preoccupation with how alternative positions flow against a mainstream has not resulted in strategies that can be employed in schools. The critical literature is helpful for complicating diversity and identifying the points of contention, inequity, and injustice, but unless we rethink the issue in terms of how we can relate to alternative ways of being, the problem will be anchored in the doldrums. “We can work together,” Heidi (Elder) said. But what is necessary for “mainstream” to become “multistream” in our schools? How we learn from each other has become a compelling question for me.

*Insights into Northern Research*

*The evening had turned to rain  
Watch the water roll down the drain,  
As we followed him down  
To the station  
And though he never would wave goodbye,  
You could see it written in his eyes  
As the train rolled out of sight  
Bye-bye.*

- excerpt from *Life in a Northern Town*, Dream Academy

Shortly after I accepted a teaching position in Shadow Canyon in 1998 I headed to a shopping mall and bought five thick sweaters and a VCR; frozen and isolated were my perception of The North. I moved into the first apartment I looked at because I was unconcerned about a place I perceived as temporary; I did not hang pictures to avoid the inconvenience of repairing holes in walls I knew would not surround me for long. Shadow Canyon, and all of The North, was for me a place one endured, survived, and eventually said good-bye to.

In the research the north is similarly portrayed through terms like “remote,” “isolated,” and “frozen.” Adventure is what takes people north (Campbell, 2003). The north has been described as a place with fewer opportunities, greater distances, and cultural homogeneity. I anticipated these challenges would be felt with regards to parent involvement at The Saints School. But most participants, save those who grew up in central areas or cities, did not consider Shadow Canyon “north,” nor did they think the school’s northern location negatively influenced how parents were involved.

When I lived in Shadow Canyon I might have considered myself an adventurer or “survivor.” But my research experience has encouraged me to reflect upon Shadow Canyon differently. From my childhood home near Edmonton, Shadow

Canyon seemed like a far off place, but each time I reached the town's limits and saw the heart-stopping stretch of the tree-lined hills and mighty river, my descent into the valley felt like falling into the welcoming arms of an old trusting friend. Ironically, it was not until I climbed out of the shadows of the canyon that comments such as Guy's about whether Shadow Canyon was north struck a chord:

If you want to make it your home it doesn't matter where it is...If you think you're up north, well, you'll feel like you're up north. If you think you're at home—we've always made [Shadow Canyon] a home.

Thus, a redefinition of "north" was an important outcome of my study for me.

Although economies of scale and geographic distance often do create challenges for northern schools, the frontier myth of the north and its association with Aboriginal culture and a dearth of opportunities is decreasingly apt in my opinion. Communities like Shadow Canyon are illustrative of a "neo-north" where a bounty of natural resources has attracted investors, developers, and residents from various places and cultures, and infrastructure and technology have bridged formerly insurmountable geographical distances.

But the extent to which these transformations have altered perceptions about the north is questionable. Ned (teacher) articulately captured the contrasts between north and neo-north:

I consider it northern Alberta because people say it's northern Alberta. I don't look at it as that. I just look at it as a place I live, and I love being here. But is it northern Alberta? Well, yes, it's still northern Alberta. When we start recruiting people, and we say 'northern

Alberta, it takes on a negative context...if we're in Edmonton everybody else thinks northern Alberta is "hick town," in the boonies or whatever...we have to watch the way we use it because it does affect who we get here.

I see neo-north then, as a psychological definition. For the participants in this study, "north" was relative to their experiences and considerations of such as amenities, weather, and travel. Economically speaking, those participants who had lived in northern communities with fewer amenities did not describe Shadow Canyon as North because it had "all the big brand name stores...like McDonald's and Canadian Tire" (Luke, gr. 10); whereas others described it as north because it took "five hours just to get to shopping" (Kate, gr. 11). Jill (parent) who had lived in Whitehorse denied Shadow Canyon as being northern because "We (in Shadow Canyon) don't experience the dark, but up there it's long, dark, and cold beyond cold." On the other hand, Tina (teacher), who also said, "I'm used to the cold," contrasted her roommate's experience: "The poor girl couldn't get the grasp of waking up and it being dark, going to school and it's dark...and also with it being so cold." This led me to understand neo-north as not a place per se, but a state of mind that shifts in relation to what one has experienced.

Does neo-north impact parent involvement policy? I would argue against the near-consensus of the participants in this study who suggested the northern context had no effect on parent involvement. If for example, relationships between parents, teachers, and students are a key element of parent involvement or other collaborative policy endeavors, then challenges with teacher recruitment or turnover may interfere



with that. Teachers who view places like Shadow Canyon as a last resort when jobs in urban centers are unavailable—as I did—may not feel the necessary commitment to the community or school that would foster the development of positive relationships. If teachers do not feel welcome and “at home,” their “outsider” perception may trickle over into how they perceive those perceived to be peripheral to the classroom. These challenges indirectly complicate the implementation of parent involvement strategies, but are worth administrators’ consideration. Teacher recruitment plans need to include strategies for attracting, but also retaining, teachers in northern locations. Social committees, often treated as incidental to school organization, may play an instrumental part of new teacher orientation in this regard. Since school budgets for social events are typically limited, schools might consider joint efforts with community agencies, such as “welcome wagons.” Furthermore, mentorship programs that encourage mentors to support protégés’ development of social, as well as academic, resources may address issues of loneliness and boredom for those who are accustomed to the stimulation of options provided by urban locations.

Issues of neo-north also have implications for undergraduate teacher education programs. For instance, extending support to students to complete intern placements in northern jurisdictions may dispel the mythology of the north and encourage students to see the north as a possibility for future employment. Developing mandatory undergraduate education courses around rural and northern education may also help to develop more in-depth understanding about the north as more than a frozen, empty land where Aboriginal people live.

From a research standpoint, the concept of neo-north as a psychological construct holds possibility for the study of educational policy in general. To what extent does geographical distance between policy makers and northern schools influence policy design and implementation? For example, what image of “school,” “student,” and “family” do policy makers apply in their deliberations about policy? Do policy makers ignore or heed circumstances related to geography and population?

Also, in Alberta, how “success” is defined is also becoming increasingly important as northern regions become sought after for economic development, and the wealth of the population in these areas rises. Traditionally, the educational impact of poverty has been a research focus; however, as I reported in Chapter 3, people in areas like Shadow Canyon have an average income that exceeds provincial averages. An important, but currently overlooked, question concerns the educational impact of wealth. To what extent does the relatively easy access to high-paying jobs in the north impact students’ and parents’ perceptions about the value of education? Considering the nature of jobs available in these regions, is educational value a gendered issue? How do parents’ perceptions about wealth influence their involvement in their children’s learning? These questions are outcomes of reconceptualizing “north” in psychological terms.

Methodologically there are research implications for neo-northern research. The misconception that all northern communities are isolated and populated mostly by Aboriginals leads to site selection and sampling that corresponds to, and therefore perpetuates, this assumption. It can lead to presumptuous thinking that lack of resources, difficulty of access, and cultural challenges are unique to northern

jurisdictions. My research questions this; however, my single case study cannot answer questions of whether the data were particular to northern schools or rural schools. A cross-case analysis that includes rural schools from southern or eastern locations with a multicultural composition would contribute to a deeper understanding of issues of remoteness and diversity.

### **Returning to the Cave**

*We step and do not step into the same rivers; we are and are not.*

-Herakleitos

Toward the end of writing this dissertation I was asked by three consultants from an urban school jurisdiction to meet with them to discuss ways to improve a program they were operating to increase parent involvement. As the position had recently been vacated, they also suggested I would be a suitable candidate to oversee the program. This was an admittedly tempting proposition, for securing an administrative position in a large school district presented professional and financial advantages, not to mention the convenience of not having to relocate from family and friends. Before I began my doctoral program, this opportunity would have required little deliberation: I would have applied, and if successful, accepted the position.

I stood over many podiums as AISI coordinator in my former school district as an expert about increasing parent involvement. Could I take this stance once again as the director of another parent involvement program? When I began this study, I was clinging to the assumption that there were straightforward answers to policy, as if Wisława Szymborska's (1995) "Utopia" were true: "On the right a cave where Meaning lies" (pp. 127-128). Coincidentally, it was Plato's allegory of the cave

where I situated the issues. Inspired by the image of parents being closed off from policy processes and parent involvement being caricatured by false, dim lighting, I proposed the meaning of the problem lay in the cave and that the answers were available outside. But there is no uncluttered horizon where we can cast off our chains, “turn [our] head[s], and walk with eyes lifted to the light” (Plato, 515a).

The above realization has been an important part of my learning, and my use of metaphors throughout my dissertation has itself become a poignant question for me. Why was I attracted to the image of the cave in thinking about policy making? Why was the cave metaphor not workable for me when I discussed my experiences researching Aboriginal perspectives? What do these metaphors reveal about me?

A cave is a place of confinement, containment, and concreteness. It evokes structure and boundaries; it suggests one way in and one way out. Notions of certainty, authority, and hierarchy fit into how I conceptualized educational issues as a teacher and AISI coordinator, and this inevitably shaped my approach to my study. Although I claim to be interpreting the complexity of parent involvement, my interpretivist outlook was influenced, perhaps constrained, by my epistemological and ontological tendencies to seek form. Regardless of how I want to envision the world I cannot escape the way the cave has shaped my understanding of knowledge and how I come to know it. The cave is culturally bound in my experience.

My conversations with the Aboriginal women jarred me from the comfort of order that has predominantly characterized my experience in the world. Aboriginal perceptions felt ungraspable to me. Like the tide that approaches and retreats, when understanding seemed near it would slip out of reach. Water seemed an appropriate

metaphor because compared to a cave, it was fluid, formless, and in constant, visible motion. The idea that I could still control the water, and find “safety in my boat” perhaps reflected my latent tendency to want to find certainty in something that felt elusive. When I wrote Chapter 6, “In the Wake of Research” I wanted to demonstrate that the experience of researching Aboriginal perspectives was unique for me, that I could not comprehend it in the same way I had understood my experiences talking with the other participants. This way my way, I thought, of suggesting I understood paradigmatic nuances between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. But perhaps my decision to isolate the data also signified my *inability* to understand cultural differences. Perhaps Chapter 6 is separate because its integration eludes me.

So what does this mean for parent involvement and school improvement? Before I would have argued that the answer to making parent involvement a workable concept is in getting educators and policy makers out of the cave, but now I am inclined to say we are always within a cave that is epistemologically, ontologically, and cosmologically delineated for us as we are nurtured and grow in this world. Furthermore, I have discovered a river runs through the cave. How can I understand and incorporate these seemingly contrasting forms into my understanding of the world? What I have presented can only be tentative suggestions about how the current state of parent involvement policy, as I have critiqued it, can change. I have yet to work out how Aboriginal perspectives can be part of, rather than separate from, educational policy and practice. This feels imperfect compared to the way I imagined my research would conclude, for I was convinced I understood the question well enough to find the answer. But the cave is no longer the same. Nor am I.

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## APPENDIX A: Letters of Invitation

### Invitation Letter to Superintendent

Bonnie L. Stelmach

April 22, 2005

Dear [Name of Superintendent]:

As mentioned on April 19th over the telephone, I am writing to invite your school jurisdiction to participate in my research study titled *The parents' role in school improvement: Secondary school parent and student perspectives*. The purpose of the proposed study is to explore the perceptions of northern secondary parents and students vis-à-vis educators regarding the following question: What is the appropriate role of parents in school improvement? My hope is to contribute to the development of educational policy and practice that will strengthen the connection between northern families and schools, leading to improved educational experiences for all children. This proposed study will form the basis of my doctoral dissertation.

Being a former employee of your district, I am aware of the uniqueness of your Cycle One AISI project in terms of the direct intention to engage parents in student learning outcomes. My doctoral advisor, Dr. Rosemary Foster, has visited [name of school] as part of her own research, and speaks highly of the innovative ways [name of school principal] and his staff are sustaining and further developing that AISI project. Significantly, she believes [name of school] offers a prime opportunity for me to learn about the phenomenon of parent involvement. With your permission, I would like to conduct my study at [name of school] because it would align with my research objectives to study the secondary level. This letter outlines the study and includes informed consent.

I would like to spend a minimum of five consecutive days at the selected school to collect interview and observation data. I will be conducting individual interviews with the principal, as well as 5 teachers/school-based personnel, 7-10 parents and 7-10 students who will be randomly selected from staff, parent, and student lists. Once selected, I would like to contact all participants by telephone to introduce myself, explain the study, and invite their participation. Informed and written consent will be obtained from all participants before the interviews. Parents of students who are selected will be contacted and written consent obtained before contacting and receiving written consent from their children. The principal and 5 teachers will be asked to participate in one 30-minute interview scheduled at their convenience. The 7-10 parents and 7-10 students will be asked to participate in two individual interviews that will both last 30 minutes. I will seek permission from all participants to take notes and audiotape the interviews. All participants will receive a



type written copy of the interview transcripts to keep, and will be asked to make additions or deletions before I analyze the information as data. All interview schedules are included in the ethics application, which is also attached to this message.

This study will not pose any risk to participants. In compliance with the University Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants and selected interviewees have the right to:

- not participate
- withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice
- opt out without penalty and any collected data withdrawn and not included in the study
- privacy, anonymity and confidentiality

Participants will be ensured of these rights in the information letter when they are invited to participate, and will be reminded of their rights before the interview begins. At that time I will assure all participants that privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity will be maintained through (a) the use of pseudonyms and (b) the avoidance of quotations that might identify participants when I write the dissertation and prepare manuscripts for publication in academic journals. I will only discuss the study anonymously with my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Rosemary Foster. All notes, transcripts, and recordings will be secured in my office during the study, and destroyed after five years. I anticipate conducting data collection between May and November 2005, followed by analysis and final reporting by April 2006. The findings from this study will be used in my doctoral dissertation, as well as for publication and presentation through scholarly journals and conferences.

At the beginning of the research, I will inform participants of their right to request and receive a final copy of the written report after Summer 2006. Upon their approval of the final report, I will provide you with a copy as well.

Please find enclosed a copy of a written consent form for your consideration. If you accept this invitation to participate in the study, please read and sign the consent form and return it to me by fax to (780) 896-3799. Maintain a copy of the consent form for your records. Please feel free to contact me at (780) 433-5163 or via Email at [bonnies@ualberta.ca](mailto:bonnies@ualberta.ca) with any questions regarding this invitation to participate.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education and Extension Research Ethics Board (EE REB) at the University of Alberta. Information regarding ethical standards can be obtained from <http://www.ualberta.ca/~unisecr/policy/sec66.html>. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EE RE at (780) 492-3751. Questions concerning the research study at this point, or at any point during the study, should you choose to participate, can be directed to my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Rosemary Foster at (780) 492-0760, or to the Chair of the Department of Educational Policy Studies, Dr. José da Costa, at 492-5868.

Sincerely,  
Bonnie L. Stelmach

## Invitation Letter to Parent, Student, and Educator Participants

Bonnie L. Stelmach

[Date]

Dear [Name of Participant],

My name is Bonnie Stelmach and I am a doctoral student studying Educational Administration and Leadership in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. I am a former [name of school] teacher and AISI Coordinator for [name of school district]. Your school jurisdiction and school principal have given me written permission to invite you to participate in my research study titled *The parents' role in school improvement: Secondary school parent and student perspectives*. The purpose of the proposed study is to explore the perceptions of northern secondary parents and students vis-à-vis educators regarding the following question: What is the appropriate role of parents in school improvement? My hope is to contribute to the development of educational policy and practice that will strengthen the connection between northern families and schools, leading to improved educational experiences for all children. This proposed study will form the basis of my doctoral dissertation, which is a requirement for earning a PhD.

This letter outlines the study and informed consent. Please take time to read it and the attachments carefully. I have provided my telephone and Email at the end of this letter if you would like more information regarding the study.

I will be spending a minimum of five consecutive days at [name of school] to collect interview and observation data starting [date]. I will be conducting individual interviews with the principal, as well as 5 teachers, 7-10 parents and 7-10 students who will be randomly selected from staff, parent, and student lists. Informed and written consent will be obtained from all participants before the interviews. Parents of students who are selected will be contacted and written consent obtained before I contact and receive written consent from their children. The principal and 5 teachers will be asked to participate in one 30-minute individual interview scheduled at your convenience. Parents and students will be asked to participate in two individual interviews that will last 30 minutes. I will seek permission from all participants to take notes and audiotape the interviews. All participants will receive a type written copy of the interview transcripts to keep, and will be asked to make additions or deletions before I analyze the information as data. Please find enclosed a copy of the three interview schedules.

This study will not pose any risk to participants. In compliance with the University Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants, selected interviewees have the right to:

- not participate
- withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice

- opt out without penalty and any collected data withdrawn and not included in the study
- privacy, anonymity and confidentiality

I will remind you of your rights before the interview begins. I assure you that privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity will be maintained through (a) the use of pseudonyms and (b) the avoidance of quotations that might identify participants when I write the dissertation and prepare manuscripts for publication in academic journals. I will only discuss the study anonymously with my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Rosemary Foster. All notes, transcripts, and recordings will be secured in my office and destroyed after 5 years. The findings from this study will be used in my doctoral dissertation, as well as for publication and presentation through scholarly journals and conferences. You have the right to request and receive a final copy of the written report after Summer 2006.

Please find enclosed two copies of a written consent form for your consideration. If you accept this invitation to participate in the study, please read and sign the consent form and return it to me in the self-addressed stamped envelope. Maintain one copy of the consent form for your records. When I receive written consent, I will call you to arrange an appropriate time for me to interview you. Tentative dates for the interviews are during the week of (date). Please feel free to contact me at (780) 433-5163 or via Email at [bonnies@ualberta.ca](mailto:bonnies@ualberta.ca) with any questions regarding this invitation to participate.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education and Extension Research Ethics Board (EE REB) at the University of Alberta. Information regarding ethical standards can be obtained from <http://www.ualberta.ca/~unisechr/policy/sec66.html>. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EE RE at (780) 492-3751. Questions concerning the research study at this point, or at any point during the study, should you choose to participate, can be directed to my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Rosemary Foster at (780) 492-0760, or to the Chair of the Department of Educational Policy Studies, Dr. José da Costa, at 492-5868.

Sincerely,

Bonnie L. Stelmach

## Invitation Letter to Aboriginal Participants

Bonnie L. Stelmach

[Date]

Dear [Name of Participant],

My name is Bonnie Stelmach and I am a doctoral student studying Educational Administration and Leadership in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. I am a former [name of school] teacher and Coordinator of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement for [name of district]. I would like to invite you to participate in my doctoral research study titled *The parents' role in school improvement: Secondary school parent and student perspectives*. The purpose of the proposed study is to explore the perceptions of northern secondary parents and students vis-à-vis educators regarding the following question: What is the appropriate role of parents in school improvement? My hope is to contribute to the development of educational policy and practice that will strengthen the connection between northern families and schools, leading to improved educational experiences for all children. This proposed study will form the basis of my doctoral dissertation, which is a requirement for earning a PhD.

I have contacted you as a potential resource for helping me understand the community context, and in particular, for gaining insight into the Aboriginal and Métis perspectives on education and life in the north. Your experiences, background, and knowledge will provide rich information to support my understanding of the northern and cultural components of my research investigation.

This letter outlines the study and informed consent. This study will not pose any risk to participants. In compliance with the University Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants, selected interviewees have the right to:

- not participate
- withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice
- opt out without penalty and any collected data withdrawn and not included in the study
- privacy, anonymity and confidentiality

Please find enclosed two copies of a written consent form for your consideration. Please read and sign one consent form and return it to me in the self-addressed stamped envelope. Maintain one copy of the consent form for your records. Please feel free to contact me at (780) 433-5163 or via Email at [bonnies@ualberta.ca](mailto:bonnies@ualberta.ca) with any questions regarding this invitation to participate.

I look forward to hearing your perspective.

Sincerely,

Bonnie L. Stelmach  
PhD Candidate  
Educational Policy Studies  
University of Alberta

*The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education and Extension Research Ethics Board (EE REB) at the University of Alberta. Information regarding ethical standards can be obtained from <http://www.ualberta.ca/~unisecr/policy/sec66.html>. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EE RE at (780) 492-3751. Questions concerning the research study at this point, or at any point during the study, should you choose to participate, can be directed to my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Rosemary Foster at (780) 492-0760, or to the Chair of the Department of Educational Policy Studies, Dr. José da Costa, at 492-5868.*

## APPENDIX B: Participant Consent Form

By signing this form, you indicate your understanding of the research project and agree to participate/give your child permission to participate. In giving your consent, you/your child have/has the right to:

- privacy, anonymity and confidentiality
- withdraw participation at any point during the study without explanation or penalty
- safeguards to security of data
- disclosure of the presence of any apparent or actual conflict of interest on the part of the researcher
- a copy of interview transcripts
- a copy of this consent form for your reference
- a copy of the final report upon request

All data will be handled in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants. Information regarding this is available on the University web site at

<http://www.ualberta.ca/~unisecr/policy/sec66.html>.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to the ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education and Extension Research Ethics Board (EE REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EE REB at (780) 492-3751.

Please contact me at any point during the study at (780) 433-5163 or via Email [bonnies@ualberta.ca](mailto:bonnies@ualberta.ca). In the case of concerns or complaints, please contact the Chair of the Department of Educational Policy Studies, Dr. José da Costa at (780) 492-5868, or my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Rosemary Foster at (780) 492-0760/Email at [ryfoster@ualberta.ca](mailto:ryfoster@ualberta.ca).

**Name of School:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name and signature of participant:**

_____	_____
Printed name	Signature
<b>Date:</b> _____	<b>Telephone</b> _____

**Mailing Address:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Signature** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C: Interview Questions

### First Individual Interview (Parents, Students)

The first individual interview will be semi-structured as outlined by Fontana and Frey (2000). Interviews will be conducted with 7-10 parents and 7-10 students.

At the beginning of the interview I will thank all students and parents for their involvement and remind them about their rights as participants by reading the following:

Thank you, (name of participant), for participating in my doctoral study entitled *The parents' role in school improvement: Secondary school parent and student perspectives*. The purpose of this study is to learn how parents and students at the secondary level perceive parent involvement in school-led improvement. The questions I will be asking are designed with this purpose in mind. Before we begin, I would like to remind you that you are a voluntary participant, and that you have the right to withdraw from the study at any point without question or consequence, or to decline from answering any of the questions. The information you provide is private and confidential, and will not be shared with anyone during or after the study. I will only discuss information anonymously with my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Rosemary Foster. In the final report and articles written for publication, pseudonyms will be used to ensure your and the school/school jurisdiction's anonymity. I will not include quotations or information that might identify you. In keeping with University of Alberta ethical standards, the data will be secured in my office for 5 years, and then destroyed. Do you have any questions about your participation? Do you agree to my tape recording the interview and taking notes during the interview?

The interview will last approximately 30 minutes, guided by the following questions/probes:

#### **Tell me about yourself.**

Where do you live?

What grade are you in? (student) Where did you attend school? (parent)

What organizations, clubs, hobbies, and other activities do you participate in?

#### **Tell me about school improvement in (name of school).**

Tell me what you understand by the term "school improvement".

Tell me what you know about AISI.

What are some ways AISI has contributed to improving (name of school)?

What are some examples of activities that have been/are going on to help your school improve?

In what ways does your school try to improve student learning?

#### **Tell me about the people who are involved in school improvement.**

Who takes part in school improvement activities at (name of school)?

Where do ideas for school improvement come from?

What role do teachers, parents, and students play in school improvement at your school?

**Tell me about parent involvement at (name of school).**

What are examples of ways that parents are involved in the school?

In what ways do parents contribute to improving student learning?

How would you describe the role of parents in school improvement?

Thank you, (name of participant), for taking the time to participate in my research study. I will transcribe the interviews and provide you with a copy for your review and approval before proceeding with data analysis.



## Second Individual Interview (Parents, Students)

The second individual interview with 7-10 parents and 7-10 students will be semi-structured, and will last approximately 30 minutes.

At the beginning of the interview I will read the following:

Thank you again, (name of participant), for participating in my doctoral study entitled *The parents' role in school improvement: Secondary school parent and student perspectives*. The purpose of this study is to learn how parents and students at the secondary level perceive parent involvement in school-led improvement vis-à-vis educators. In this interview I would like to share what I learned from you in the first interview, and would like you to add, change, or confirm what I summarize. Again, I would like to remind you that you are a voluntary participant, and that you have the right to withdraw from the study at any point without question or consequence, or to decline from answering any of the questions. The information you provide is private and confidential, and will not be shared with anyone during or after the study. I will only discuss information anonymously with my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Rosemary Foster. In the final report and articles written for publication, pseudonyms will be used to ensure your and the school/school jurisdiction's anonymity. I will not include quotations or information that might identify you. In keeping with University of Alberta ethical standards, the data will be secured in my office for 5 years, and then destroyed. Do you have any questions about your participation? Do you agree to my tape recording the interview and taking notes during the interview?

The interview will last approximately 30 minutes. I will use the following interview protocol, allowing participants to edit information and/or ask questions after each summary:

- I am going to summarize what I learned from you during the first interview regarding school improvement. Does this reflect your responses from the first interview? Would you like to add anything?
- I am going to summarize what I learned from you during the first interview regarding the people who are involved in school improvement at (name of school). Does this reflect your responses from the first interview? Would you like to add anything?
- I am going to summarize what I learned from you during the first interview regarding parent involvement. Does this reflect your responses from the first interview? Would you like to add anything?

In concluding, I would like to ask you three brief questions:

**What is the *ideal* relationship between parents and teachers in school improvement?**

**What do you perceive to be the *actual* relationship between parents and teachers in school improvement?**

**Provide a metaphor that describes the appropriate relationship between parents and teachers within school improvement.**

Thank you, (name of participant), for participating in my research study.

## Interview Questions (Educators)

Individual interviews with teachers/administrators will be semi-structured as outlined by Fontana and Frey (2000). Interviews will be conducted with 5 teachers and 1 school principal.

At the beginning of the interview I will thank all participants for their involvement and remind them about their rights by reading the following:

Thank you, (name of participant), for participating in my doctoral study entitled *The parents' role in school improvement: Secondary school parent and student perspectives*. The purpose of this study is to learn how parents and students at the secondary level perceive parent involvement in school-led improvement vis-à-vis educators. The questions I will be asking are designed with this purpose in mind. Before we begin, I would like to remind you that you are a voluntary participant, and that you have the right to withdraw from the study at any point without question or consequence, or to decline from answering any of the questions. The information you provide is private and confidential, and will not be shared with anyone during or after the study. I will only discuss information anonymously with my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Rosemary Foster. In the final report and articles written for publication, pseudonyms will be used to ensure your and the school/school jurisdiction's anonymity. I will not include quotations or information that might identify you. In keeping with University of Alberta ethical standards, the data will be secured in my office for 5 years, and then destroyed. Do you have any questions about your participation? Do you agree to my tape recording the interview and taking notes during the interview?

The interview will last approximately 30 minutes, guided by the following questions/probes:

**Tell me about yourself.**

Tell me about your teaching experiences at (name of school) and elsewhere.  
What grades/subjects do you teach?

**Tell me about school improvement in (name of school).**

Tell me what you understand by the term "school improvement".

Tell me what you know about AISI.

What are some ways AISI has contributed to improving (name of school)?

What are some examples of activities that have been/are going on to help your school improve?

In what ways does your school try to improve student learning?

**Tell me about the people who are involved in school improvement.**

Who takes part in school improvement activities at (name of school)?

Where do ideas for school improvement come from?

What role do teachers, parents, and students play in school improvement at your school?

**Tell me about parent involvement at (name of school).**

What are examples of ways that parents are involved in the school?

In what ways do parents contribute to improving student learning?

How would you describe the role of parents in school improvement?

What is the *ideal* relationship between parents and teachers in school improvement?

What do you perceive to be the *actual* relationship between parents and teachers in school improvement?

Provide a metaphor that describes the appropriate relationship between parents and teachers within school improvement.

Thank you, (name of participant), for taking the time to participate in my research study. I will transcribe the interviews and provide you with a copy for your review and approval before proceeding with data analysis.

**APPENDIX D: Request and Approval for Change in Methodology**

**FACULTIES OF EDUCATION AND EXTENSION  
RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD  
(EE REB)**

**REQUEST FOR CHANGE IN METHODOLOGY**

Submit this form to your statutory member of the EE REB for any proposed changes in the approved methodology of your research. Attach the complete application originally approved by the EE REB.

Applicant Name: Bonnie L. Stelmach

Email: bonnies@ualberta.ca

Project title: *The parents' role in school improvement: Secondary school parent and student perspectives*

Original Starting Date: 2005/04/01

Original Ending Date: 2007/04/30

Have you received approval from the EE REB to change this study previously? Yes ( ) No (X)  
If yes, attach the approved *Request for Change* form.

Briefly summarize a) progress on your study to date, and b) rationale for the requested change(s).

- (a) I have received informed written consent from two secondary schools from two different school districts. I have spent two weeks at Site #1 recording observations and have conducted first and second interviews with 11 students, 10 parents, and one interview each with 7 educators. Interviews with two additional parents are forthcoming, and I am in the process of arranging at least two more interviews with students. Additionally, I have attended a School Council meeting and Registration Information Meeting for Parents at Site #1. I have twice visited Site #2 to meet with the principal and attend a staff meeting. Interviews and site observations at Site #2 will be arranged for Fall 2005.
- (b) My original intention as indicated on my ethics proposal was to interview parents, students, and school-based educators. I am now requesting a change to include community-based people as research participants based on the following rationale. As my study seeks diverse perspectives of students and parents in these northern school communities, it is important to include the Aboriginal voices. I have included Aboriginal students in my sampling, but have found it more challenging to identify and approach Aboriginal parents. During my two weeks in Site #1 I have learned that there are many community members who are part of Aboriginal organizations or who associate closely with Aboriginal families as part of their work. At Site #1 I met with the district First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) worker to discuss Aboriginal protocol for approaching Aboriginal families. Central to approaching Aboriginal families is having an Aboriginal contact that the community trusts. The FNMI worker put me in contact with an Aboriginal woman who works for an Aboriginal parenting program in the community. My discussions with her lead me to believe that her insights and experiences, as well as others she mentioned in our conversation, would facilitate a more contextualized understanding of Aboriginal issues, and would facilitate access to Aboriginal parents. In particular, some parents may no longer have children at the selected sites, but have insights about educational issues regarding Aboriginal children that are invaluable to my research questions.

Signature of Applicant

Date

June 9, 2005

Name and Signature of Supervisor/Instructor  
(if applicable)

Date

June 9, 2005

---

Change Status

- Change approved by EE REB member
- Change approved by EE REB
- Change not approved

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of EE REB Member

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

June 15/05

*Distribution:* Original to EE REB file; Copies to applicant, Supervisor/Instructor (if applicable)  
Unit student file (if applicable)

Form revised 2004-June-28