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**AN INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE: THE DROPOUT CHALLENGE
FOR CANADA'S FIRST NATIONS**

by

Patricia Ann Makokis

**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education**

University of San Diego

2000

Dissertation Committee

**Mary Woods Scherr, Ph.D., Director
Paula A. Cordeiro, Ed.D.
Raymond Latta, Ph.D.**

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ABSTRACT

An Insider's Perspective: The Dropout Challenge for Canada's First Nations

This modified case study honors the voices of 21 Cree participants, including nine students, six parents, four community leaders and two Elders. This study, written from an insider's perspective, identified more than 50 reasons why First Nations students dropped out of three provincial high schools located in northern Alberta, Canada.

The results were collapsed into several categories that can best be generalized as resulting from the effects of colonization. Canada's First Nations have a long history of oppression, colonization, and the resultant soul wounds.

The four participant groups collectively identified five common themes why students dropped out of provincial high schools. The commonalities included racism/ cultural conflict, poor student/staff relations, marginalization, alienation, and systemic labelling. In addition, each group identified separate reasons: students identified alienation, personal identity, and relationship concerns; parents identified distrust of the education system, marginalization, and lack of involvement; the community leaders identified a sense of powerlessness to initiate change and the intergenerational effects of residential school. The Elders also recognized the intergenerational effects of residential school.

The data indicated provincial high school authorities have failed to acknowledge the role that Canadian history has played and have not recognized the need to establish, and then maintain, positive relationships within the First Nations community. In addition, participants felt authorities chose to exclude professional development that would address, from a First Nations perspective, colonization and the past genocidal attempts.

Most First Nation adult participants felt like outsiders in the education of their children, a feeling that has perpetuated the sense of marginalization. The data suggested provincial school leaders including teachers, administrators, and board members need to find creative ways to ensure provincial accountability and to improve their relationships with First Nations peoples.

Ironically, not one participant identified “academic difficulties” as a reason for dropping out. While the number of First Nations students leaving provincial high schools is high, eight of the nine student participants in this study returned to school, thus indicating their resilient nature, despite the fact that most left due to racial/cultural concerns.

DEDICATION

I thank all the children who allowed me the honor to be a part of your lives; you taught me how to be a better teacher of First Nations children. Some of you have left this Plain for the next, due to your inability to endure your soul wounds. Some died alone through hangings, while others died brutally at the hands of guns, drugs, and alcohol. One froze to death on a lonely road one winter night.

These children, and their life experiences impacted and changed my life forever. As a result of teaching children with such pain, my life today is different. In many ways, their pain helped me further my own healing journey.

Most of the children with whom I had the privilege of working at Poundmaker's Adolescent Treatment Centre/School are the innocent victims of intergenerational trauma and soul wounds. They and their families of origin have been impacted by colonization, oppression, and the residential school legacy. Most are the innocent victims of Canadian First Nations history in this land we call Canada.

This dissertation is dedicated to all Aboriginal children who are challenged daily to stay in school. To the students of Poundmaker's Adolescent Treatment Centre/School, I thank you. You taught me about the importance of love. Your pain inspired me to write this dissertation.

In memory and honor to all Aboriginal children; those here, those gone on, and those yet to come, I pray this dissertation provides information that helps the journey.

ay ay (thank you). May the Creator guide the journey. . . .

:

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge the Creator. I could never have written this dissertation without the belief that a power greater than myself guided me along the journey. My prayers and faith kept me going.

There are so many people to thank. I thank the people of Mahihkan First Nations (pseudonym), all of my participants, the students, parents, community leaders, and the Elders. Without their help, I would not have been able to undertake this study.

I cannot forget my family. They were instrumental in the completion of this study. My husband, Eugene, my children, Janice and James, and my mother, Mildred Suvee. My late Uncle William, who moved on to the next Plain, but who supported me, along with his wife, my Aunt Mary Suvee. To all my other family members, friends, former colleagues and current colleagues, I thank you, too. I could not have done this study without your support and help. To those who read, to those who corrected, to those that helped in other ways, I thank you. I am deeply indebted to you all.

To my community, I thank the Chief and Council, the Education Authority, and the larger community for all your moral and financial support. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the study and my commitment to confidentiality, I cannot publically name anyone. However, you know who you are, and I sincerely thank you.

To my committee, my Chair, Dr. Mary Woods Scherr, I thank you. I especially thank you for your kind way of critiquing my work. You challenged me to “do better.” To Dr. Ray Latta, who always believed in me, I thank you. I especially remember you saying, “Pat, next is the Doctorate degree” when I completed my Masters degree. To Dr. Paula Cordeiro, I thank you. Your input and advice challenged me in how I presented my study.

Last, but by far not least, are Margot and John Berg. Without your help in setting out the dissertation, I would still not be finished. For the many hours of reading, editing, formatting, etc. I thank you both. This dissertation would not be ready for defense and binding without your expertise. Thank you.

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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

**The time has come for
tears of sorrow
to be wiped away and
our throats to be cleared of dust,
and for us to speak
in a frank and open way
about our future
in this land we share.**

(Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], 1996a, back cover)

Introduction

This chapter includes a discussion of the following: an introduction to the problem, background of the problem, importance of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, delimitations of the study, limitations of the study, definitions of key terms, and an overview of how the dissertation is organized.

Introduction to the Problem

Education can be one of the most significant ways to positively impact the lives of a Nations' people. The ancestors of Canada's First Nations were visionary leaders who had the foresight to include education in the Treaty Six signing process of 1876. The treaty they signed included an education clause that stated education would be a treaty entitlement "for as long as the rivers flow, the grass grows, and the sun shines"

(Ahenakew & Wolfart, p. 187). In other words, education would be a treaty right indefinitely to benefit the children yet to be born.

The ancestors would be devastated and horrified if they saw the current state of First Nations education in Canada. They might be in great turmoil in the spirit world. Likely, they would not be able to comprehend the current crisis, including the fact that Canada's Native people experience the highest high school dropout rates among all the students throughout Canada (RCAP, 1996a). They would be overwhelmed, distressed, and deeply concerned. As a part of their visionary leadership of 1876, they would not have dreamed of the current state of education; this would not have been a part of the legacy they envisioned.

Canada's aboriginal population — what the statistics say. The current high school dropout dilemma in Canada's First Nations communities cannot be critiqued accurately without taking into account the negative impact of the residential schools and the federal government's integration efforts utilizing provincial schools. The current state of attendance in provincial elementary and high schools must also be considered.

This chapter includes numerous statistics to help the reader understand the evolutionary process of the current First Nations dropout problem in provincial high schools and the overall socioeconomic circumstances, including the economic costs of dropping out of school.

Although there are Canadian studies of high school dropouts in Canada's provincial high schools (Lafleur, 1992), few specifically address Canada's First Nations' people. Determining dropout rates among Canada's Aboriginal population is

complicated by the fact that there are three distinct Aboriginal groups in Canada: the First Nations, those who are treaty Indians as defined by the Indian Act; the Metis, those that the federal and provincial governments recognize as being of mixed ancestry (both Native and White); and the Inuit, who primarily reside in the Northwest Territories.

Researchers speculate that the Aboriginal people, who account for only 2.8% of the total Canadian population (<http://www:statscan.ca>, 1996), experience the highest school dropout rates (Mackay & Myles, 1995; "Native Youth Need Pragmatic Help," 1999; Regnier, 1995; Wilson, 1992). No official records are kept by the federal or provincial governments, nor by most Aboriginal communities, for the purposes of educational monitoring, evaluation, or research (Mackay & Myles, 1995; Ontario Ministry of Education, 1989). Therefore, there are no accurate means of determining the Aboriginal dropout rates nor the dropout rates for only the First Nations students.

As noted by Young (1987), demographic analysis is imperative: "In order to understand educational development, it is necessary to see it in relationship to the changing demographic structure of a country" (p. 57).

The statistics referenced throughout this chapter are taken from one of Canada's most recent and historic documents reflecting Canada's Aboriginal peoples. The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP] is a five volume, 4,000 page research study that was conducted over 4 years between the fall of 1991 to the fall of 1995; the federal government commissioned the report under the direction of seven commissioners, four of whom were of Aboriginal descent.

The commissioners conducted over 100 meetings, many of which were in the form of public hearings spanning several days; they heard and received briefs and submissions from groups and organizations. The report also included research studies and reports on national round tables. The commissioners visited various communities throughout Canada and the Territories. Among the many recommendations, the RCAP called for "a great cleansing of the wounds of the past" so future, more harmonious relationships might develop between the federal government and Canada's Aboriginal people (<http://www.visions.ab.ca/ayn/pages/n%2dfeds.htm>).

The intent of the report was to get the views regarding government policies of all Canada's Aboriginal peoples, including the First Nations, the Metis, and the Inuit. The federal government wanted to hear Aboriginal people's current feelings regarding their relationship with the government. One result was that the federal government heard how it must move away from unilateral to shared decision making. It was clearly apparent that Aboriginal peoples hold strong views about their relationships among the Nations, the land, and the obligations we all have to the Creator. The government heard that Aboriginal peoples feel a strong inherent right to self-government dating back to the 1867 Constitution. Consequently, there must be greater Aboriginal participation, for without, there is no democratic participation or any sense of justice (RCAP, 1996a).

In response to RCAP, the federal government published *Gathering Strength: Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan* (Ministry of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1997). Included in the document was a statement of reconciliation, through

which the federal government formally acknowledged its involvement in all of the abuses Canada's Aboriginal peoples have experienced at the hands of the federal government and the various churches.

In the reconciliation statement, the government admitted that assimilation measures were, and are, racist and disrespectful. The Minister of Indian Affairs stated that the commission report was the federal government's desire to "reinvent" how it does business with the Aboriginal peoples of Canada. The Minister then apologized publicly to the Aboriginal people of Canada saying:

The Government of Canada acknowledges the role it played in the development and administration of these schools. Particularly to those individuals who experienced the tragedy of sexual and physical abuse at residential schools who have carried this burden believing that in some way they must be responsible, we wish to emphasize that what you experienced was not your fault and should never have happened. (<http://www.visions.ab.ca/ayn/pages/n%2dfeds.htm>)

Along with the formal apology, the federal government committed itself to work with all of Canada's Aboriginal people to overcome some of the inequities. The Minister announced a \$350 million dollar healing fund to help survivors of the residential school legacy (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 1998). Unfortunately, for many Aboriginal people, the government's acknowledgment of this assimilation process did not go far enough. They failed to acknowledge the inter-generational effects of the residential school abuses.

The statement of reconciliation included the following four objectives:

- **to renew partnerships**
- **to strengthen Aboriginal governance**
- **to develop a new fiscal relationship**
- **to support strong communities, people, and economies.**

The Report of Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and the rebuttal, *Gathering Strength: Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan* (Minister of Indian and Northern Development, 1997), are two key historic documents that may help pave the way for more effective partnered relationships between the federal government and Canada's Aboriginal people. These reports include the most recent statistical data available on Canada's Aboriginal people; consequently, the data are critical to this dissertation. They help the reader understand the current Aboriginal socioeconomic reality, which is further affected every time a First Nations student drops out of school.

These two reports clearly demonstrate that Canada's Aboriginal people do not fit with Young's (1987) perception of heritage. He wrote: "This is our heritage today — a large country, relatively rich in resources, sparsely and unevenly populated, ethnically diverse, relatively well schooled, and moderately committed to social programs to equalize access to social and economic resources" (p. 64).

The equalization effort of social and economic resources will have to change significantly in order to equalize First Nations education in Canada. The fact that the Aboriginal people of Canada rank at the bottom of most statistics in education, health, social service, and economic, for example, portrays this reality (RCAP, 1996a). The

following statistics provide some of the more day-to-day realities in the lives of Canada's Aboriginal peoples. In 1996, Canada's population totaled 28,528,125 people. Nationally, the Aboriginal population accounted for 799,010 or 2.8% of the total Canadian population. In Alberta, the general population was 2,669,195, while the aboriginal population was 122,840 or 4.6% of the total Alberta population. As there are 42-44 reserve communities in Alberta, a large proportion of First Nations peoples reside here.

Nationally, the North American Indian (First Nation) population was 554,290, while the Alberta population was 72,645 (<http://www.statcan.ca>). RCAP (1996a) reports that approximately 58% of First Nations people reside on reserves. This large population base is significant enough to warrant a closer look at the education of Alberta's First Nations population.

The cost of dropping out. In 1992, the Conference Board of Canada published a major report entitled, *Dropping Out: The Cost to Canada* (Lafleur, 1992). In this report, Brenda Lafleur documented the long term financial implications of the dropout problem to the Canadian government if it goes unacknowledged by all stakeholders. Essentially, all Canadians pay if this issue is not taken seriously. She estimated that Canada could save \$26 billion by lowering the dropout rate from 34% to 10% by the year 2000. Using figures from Statistics Canada, the country's national statistical agency, from 1988-89, Lafleur reported a national dropout rate of 34.7%, with Alberta's rate at 36.8%. The Alberta rate is second to Quebec's at 37.1% (Lafleur, 1992).

Whether the dropout is Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, the cost to Canada is exorbitant. Lost revenue, in the form of earnings and unrealized tax revenues; potential social problems, heightened demands on the social systems, and increased burdens on individual and corporate taxpayers are but a few of the ramifications of students not graduating from high school.

Statistics for Canada's Aboriginal population indicate that the Aboriginal people have the lowest level of schooling regardless of age when compared to non-Aboriginal populations ([www: statcan.ca](http://www.statcan.ca)). In fact, the 1996 census reported over half (54%) of Aboriginal people aged 15 or over did not have a high school diploma, versus 35% for non-Aboriginal people. The RCAP (1996d) reported this figure higher, at 68.5% for the 15- to 24-year-old age group. Almost 70% have not completed high school, and are unlikely to return. These figures are appalling since the report confirms that two-thirds of the men and 60% of the women in this age category have dropped out and apparently do not later return to take adult upgrading. The long-term consequences of these staggering dropout rates are fairly good predictors of oppressive futures for the children, their families, and the Aboriginal communities at large. The seriousness of the problem is understated and underrated when one considers economic implications only. Lafleur (1992) concluded: "This economic cost of \$4 billion becomes even more staggering when we realize that this amount represents the lifetime loss to society of only one school year of students who drop out" (p. 24). Her report speaks to economic costs only; what about the social and cultural implications? The high school dropout issue is serious for all Canadians, but more so for Canada's Aboriginal population

because of the deplorable statistics, including the poor living conditions among Canada's Aboriginal peoples (Frideres, 1998; RCAP, 1996d). The long-term consequences of not addressing the dropout issue is serious for everyone: governments, communities, and families alike. Lisa Raven, of the Hollow Water Band, who reported to the RCAP in Winnipeg, summarized her views: "I see this as genocide. What better way to kill a people than to rob them of their chance for a good education, taking away the opportunity for us to make something of ourselves" (RCAP, 1996d, p. 164).

The seriousness of the dropout problem is inevitable if one looks at the educational statistics reported by RCAP in 1996. Table 1 depicts differences in educational achievement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth between 15 and 24 years of age based on 1991 statistics (RCAP, 1996d).

Table 1

Aboriginal and Canadian Students Aged 15 to 24, No Longer in School

Level of education	Aboriginal%	Canadian %
Grade 8 or less	15.8	5.4
High school (no certificate)	42.7	31.5
High school certificate	15.5	26.3
Non-university (no certificate)	11.3	9.6
Non-university certificate	7.4	15.0
University (no degree)	5.9	7.9
University degree	0.6	4.4

Statistics Canada ([http://www: statcan.ca](http://www.statcan.ca)) reports the Aboriginal population is growing rapidly, more so than the general population. It is expected there will be a large increase in the next decade of 15 to 24 year-olds based on the current numbers of children in the under 15 age category. *Statistics Canada* reports the population in the 15 to 24 year age category will have increased by 26% by 2006. RCAP projects that in 2011, the 15 to 19 year olds will be the second largest group. These statistics indicate that without attention to changing education systems, the problem will be compounding through the generations.

Table 2 depicts age distribution of Aboriginal and Canadian populations as reported by RCAP (1996d, p. 151).

Table 2

Age Distribution of the Aboriginal Identity and Canadian Populations, 1991

Age group in years	Aboriginal %	Canadian %
0-14	36.5	21.1
15-24	19.8	14.2
25-34	18.5	17.9
35-54	17.9	27.1
55+	7.3	19.7

When examining Tables 1 and 2, the picture of Aboriginal dropouts becomes more disturbing. The figures in Tables 1 and 2, coupled with the degree and intensity of social problems (physical and psychological violence, drug and alcohol abuse,

poverty, unemployment, suicide, and the welfare state) clearly indicate the dropout problem is a crisis situation.

Dropping out of school adds stress on youth, their families, and the Aboriginal community in general. When students drop out of school, what options do they have? What do they do with themselves now that they are not in school? How do they fill their days on the reserve? Can they find employment in an already dismal reserve community employment situation? How do they cope? They often become higher-risk youth, experiencing other social problems including suicide. According to Nabokov (1991), the First Nations suicide rate in Canada is four times the national average. Clearly, dropping out of school leads to other more serious social problems for everyone in First Nations communities and, for that matter, everyone in Canada.

The severity of the situation is best summarized in the words of Sharon J. Caudron, a presenter to the RCAP (1996c) committee:

Family violence is seen as the most rampant social problem of our time. It is probably the most expensive. The costs in terms of human suffering cannot be measured. The cost in dollars can only be guessed at. Our children are vastly affected by family violence even when they are not the direct victims. The cost to our children is hidden in their inability to be attentive in school, in feelings of insecurity and low-esteem, and in acting out behaviour which may manifest itself in many ways, such as vandalism, self-abuse, bullying; and often these children suffer in silence. (p. 54)

The most significant cost of dropping out of high school is the pervasive need to rely on social assistance for economic survival. According to Frideres (1998), Aboriginal people in Canada rely on social assistance more than any other ethno-cultural group. Table 3 illustrates the percentage of Aboriginal people receiving social assistance. The figures are broken down to show on and off reserve First Nations Canadians (North American Indians), Metis, Inuit, the overall Aboriginal population, comparing them to the total population for Canada (RCAP, 1996c).

Table 3

Percentage Receiving Social Assistance, Aboriginal Identity, and Total Population.

1991

Population	Percent
North American Indian	
On reserve	41.5
Non reserve	24.8
Metis	22.1
Inuit	23.5
Total Aboriginal	28.6
Total population	8.1

The parasitic effects of social assistance are best articulated by Elizabeth Hanson, an Inuvik Band councillor presenting to the RCAP (1996c) committee: "Social financial assistance is the single most destructive force on our heritage. Our people do not want to be part of a welfare state that looks after them from cradle to grave" (p. 170).

Suffice it to say, the short and long term implications of not addressing the Aboriginal high school dropout problem both in Canada, and more specifically in Alberta, becomes more profound and pressing. RCAP (1996c) revealed the majority of Aboriginal children, roughly 70%, attend provincial schools. Furthermore, almost one-half of First Nations children who live on reserves attend provincial schools. Using 1991 figures, RCAP (1996c) reported that 46% of children on reserves attend provincial schools. Moreover, the report illustrated that provincial school experiences have often been alienating, with progress and change occurring at a snail's pace.

Seventy percent of Aboriginal education is in the hands of provincial authorities, and few mechanisms are in place for parental involvement (RCAP, 1996c). Parents often feel marginalized; consequently, these issues, along with others to be discussed later, seriously hamper current Aboriginal high school success in provincial schools. Overall, the statistics appear quite bleak for Aboriginal children, potentially putting them more at-risk of dropping out of provincial high schools unless educators and communities alike work towards addressing the Aboriginal high school dropout issue. For example, RCAP (1996c) noted that of the dropouts in the 15 to 24 year age category, only 22% return to high school. Another 11% may return to adult upgrading, while the remaining approximate 63% of the dropouts never return to school. Overall, the figures are staggering and detrimental to the economic, social, and cultural outlook for Canada's Aboriginal population.

Frideres (1998) pointed out that few Indian students graduated from provincial high schools in Alberta over the past decade. For example, enrollment of registered

Indians in high school between 1949-1990 has not increased significantly. In 1949-50 registered Indians made up 3 % of the total high school enrollment, whereas in 1990-91 registered Indians made up 22.4 % of the total high school enrollment. An increase of 19 % over a 40-year period is not sufficient.

Wilson (1989) conducted research with First Nations elementary students in the province of Manitoba, studying their transition from reserve schools to provincial high schools. She noted "less than twenty Status Indian students had graduated from high schools in Manitoba with a full course load of at least five university entrance level courses in the previous decade" (p. 6). Less than 20 status Indians graduated with the full academic requirements for university entry in 10 years.

Fisher (cited in Frideres, 1998) stated that the Canadian educational experience was developed by the White, urban, middle class; consequently, the provincial school experience has been alien, meaningless, and in conflict for children who live on reserves. Traditional First Nations values, which are the soul of the people, have been rendered unimportant in light of dominant world views.

Frideres pointed out just how little control Aboriginal people have over their educational experiences. For example, in 1956, the federal government spent \$13.5 million dollars on Indian education. In 1980, the budget was over \$270 million dollars, or 39 % of the total sum allocated by the federal government to be spent on Indian and Inuit programming. In 1991, the budget was estimated at approximately \$900 million, increasing by approximately \$887 million over 35 years. Yet, despite the increase in the First Nations' education budget, Frideres pointed out that less than 1 % of this

budget goes directly to Native communities, and few First Nations communities have control over how the money is used on their behalf.

In 1993, the elementary and secondary school budget was almost \$700 million dollars. Unfortunately, most of the money was devoured by the bureaucracy or capital grants to provincial and local governments for the purchase of tuition on behalf of Native communities in non-Aboriginal schools. Suffice it to say, that First Nation's voice regarding monies to be utilized on their behalf is minimal. The unfortunate reality is that many in the dominant society believe that First Nations communities are bad accountants and poor financial managers (Boldt, 1993; Ross, 1996). In reality, the First Nations communities do not hold the purse strings and, consequently, they have little input in provincial schools regarding First Nations education.

York (cited in Burns, 1998) captured the sense of powerlessness: "Virtually every government organization has served to marginalize the needs and rights of Native peoples, and the education system has been among the worst" (p. 53).

LaRoque (1975) argued that First Nations students have encountered hardship because the provincial education system does not support and affirm Indian pride. She attributed this loss of identity, in part, to the failure among non-Native people, including educators, to develop respect and understanding for Native people. As a former student of the provincial school system, she believed that authentic, consistent exposure of past and present First Nations' issues in provincial curriculum could contribute to bridging the emotional separation that exists between Native and non-Native people. Some First Nations students experience cultural turmoil, as noted by

the Cree expression “Eh-queh- moo-neyakasoochik” which means “they are trying to be White.” She believed that cultural conflict gives rise to internal and external conflict. Sherry Lawson, a RCAP presenter, shared how her mother prepared her for school: “I remember my first day of school when the bus was coming. . . . My mother had me all ready. My hair was braided. I had red ribbons. . . . I stood at the road and it was a big day and I was afraid. My mother said, ‘Here comes the bus. You will be all right, Sherry Lynn. And remember — try to act like them.’ That’s what she told me” (RCAP, 1996d, p. 164).

In addition, poverty exacerbates all other cultural interactions and cross-cultural relations because many First Nations children lack the economic and social means to bridge both worlds. According to LaRoque, poverty and Indians are like Siamese twins; they go hand in hand.

Background of the Problem

In order to effectively understand the current situation affecting First Nations education, educators must revisit the past. Kirkness (1998) emphasized this well: “I firmly believe that we must know the past in order to understand the present so that we can plan, wisely, for the future” (p. 13). It is imperative educators understand the role governments and churches alike played in the current state of educational affairs affecting most First Nations communities.

Several historical periods have severely impacted First Nations peoples today (Burns, 1998). The first period was pre-contact. Unlike the other eras, this period was most balanced. Prior to White people arriving on Turtle Island (the North American

continent), First Nations peoples lived a harmonious life. The tribe was responsible for teaching the children, and everyone had their assigned teaching roles. Survival depended on ensuring that the children were taught the values, the culture, and the roles (including the male and female roles) within the community. The Elders' role was critical, as they taught the children the necessary lessons about life. Many of the teachings took place in the moment, when adults were observing the children. Children were always in close proximity to the adults, learning through observation. Overall, learning was community based, involving the whole village, and was holistic in nature. Essentially, Mother Earth was the classroom. Everyone was responsible for ensuring the children learned the good life. According to Kirkness (1998), "formal education imposed on our people by the colonizers drastically changed all that" (p. 10).

The second period occurred at European contact. With contact, lives of First Nations peoples changed forever, as did their educational experience (Burns, 1998). Along with contact came the European determination to civilize, Christianize, and terminate the Indian culture. At this point, education was painful, Indians were subjugated, and overt threads of cultural genocide were present. Green (cited in Pauls, 1996) demonstrated a pervasively hostile government attitude of the time:

In 1874, Sir John A. MacDonald introduced the original Indian Act saying;

"Indian children should be taken away from their parents so as to eliminate their barbarian influence and expose the children to the benefits of civilization. The teacher has been sent out as an educational missionary to introduce cultural changes in Indian societies." (p. 36)

The third period of First Nations education was the residential school era. In Alberta, residential schools were intended to civilize the wild, heathen Indian. Smith (cited in Pauls, 1996) stated: "The church-run schools were all in the business for just one reason — to drive a wedge between the students and their culture, to turn Indians into budding young Christians trained in the work ethic" (p. 90).

Again, the federal government's intent of removing the Indian from the Indian is evident in comments of Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent of the Indian Department in the early 1900s. He is noted as saying, "Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and therein no Indian question" (York, 1990, p. 23).

Haig-Brown (1988) shared some experiences of residential school. She wrote, "At the residential school we were not allowed to speak our language; we weren't allowed to dance or sing because they told us it was evil. It was evil for us to practice any of our cultural ways" (p. 53). In another example she pointed out sexual abuse: "One priest, he was kind of odd. . . . and all of a sudden he started to feel my legs . . . I was getting really uncomfortable and he started trying to put his hands in my pants And I just got up and moved away but I never thought to tell anybody" (p. 75).

The residential school era began in the late 1800s in eastern Canada, and terminated in the late 1960s and early 1970s in western Canada.

The long term "soul wounds" (Duran, 1990) can best be understood in the words of a residential school survivor, Mary Carpenter, as recorded in RCAP (1996a):

After a lifetime of beatings, going hungry, standing in a corridor on one leg, and walking in the snow with no shoes for speaking Inuvialuktun, and having a heavy, stinging paste rubbed on my face, which they did to stop us from expressing our Eskimo custom of raising our eyebrows for “yes” and wrinkling our noses for “no,” I soon lost the ability to speak my mother tongue. When a language dies, the world it was generated from is broken down too. (p. 372)

Today, the long-term inter-generational effects of the residential school era are still present. Sadly, some parents today do not understand the inter-generational effects. What is the situation today? Residential schools produced some social pathologies and deviancies in First Nations communities where, for example, members may not understand the origins of the behaviors. Consultants reporting to the Assembly of First Nations noted the following:

The survivors to the Indian residential school system have, in many cases, continued to have their lives shaped by the experiences in these schools. Persons who attend these schools continue to struggle with their identity after years of being taught to hate themselves and their culture. The residential school led to a disruption in the transference of parenting skills from one generation to the next. Without these skills, many survivors had had difficulty in raising their own children.

In residential schools, they learned that adults often exert power and control through abuse. The lessons learned in childhood are often repeated in adulthood with the result that many survivors of the residential school system

often inflict abuse on their own children. These children in turn use the same tools on their children. (RCAP, 1996a, p. 379)

The effects of that era are best described in the words of the following statement approved by the British Columbia First Nations Chiefs and leaders:

The federal government established the system of Indian residential schools which was operated by various church denominations. Therefore, both the federal government and churches must be held accountable for the pain inflicted upon our people. We are hurt, devastated and outraged. The effect of the Indian residential school system is like a disease ripping through our communities. (RCAP, 1996a, p. 376)

The fourth era occurred when the federal government moved from segregation to attempts of assimilation and integration (Burns, 1998). During this period, the means of assimilation were the provincial schools. The predominant attitude again was one of paternalism, coercion, discrimination, and racism. Integration was one way Indian children were forced to attend predominantly White schools, where students and staff alike knew little about the First Nations culture.

From the First Nations perspective:

Integration viewed as a one-way process is not integration, and will fail. In the past, it has been the Indian student who was asked to integrate: to give up his identity, to adopt new values and a new way of life. This restricted interpretation of integration must be radically altered if future education programs are to

benefit Indian children. (National Indian Brotherhood [NIB], cited in Pauls, 1996, p. 100)

During this period (1969), the federal government introduced the White Paper, another piece of legislation that would again change Indian education. The intent of the White Paper, according to then Minister of Indian Affairs, Chretien (cited in Pauls, 1996), was "to ensure equality for all Canadians and to remove what the government considered to be discrimination against Indians from the relationship between Indians and government" (p. 95).

The First Nations people did not see the intent of the White Paper the same way. According to them, "the intention of the policy paper was plain; to eliminate the treaties and therefore the special relationships of Indians to the Crown, and to hasten the assimilation of Indians into White society" (Pauls, 1996, p. 96).

In response to the 1969 White Paper, the Indians of Alberta published the 1970 Red Paper, also entitled Citizens Plus. In this document, they were adamant that the federal government not forget the special constitutional relationship that existed between the two parties. The Indian people reiterated their original ownership of the land and the resultant treaties that had been negotiated Nation to Nation.

Later, in 1972 another very important document came to fruition. It was entitled, *Indian Control of Indian Education* (Kirkness, 1998). Written by the Assembly of First Nations, it described the need for Indian control of Indian education. Two priorities were identified: Local control of Indian education (Kirkness, 1998) and parental responsibility for Indian education (Pauls, 1996).

It is important to note that although the federal government accepted this document, they still do not have a provision in the Indian Act allowing for the transfer of dollars from the federal government to the First Nations (Hawley, cited in Pauls, 1996).

In 1973, the National Indian Brotherhood outlined the goals of First Nations education:

Our aim is to make education relevant to the philosophy and needs of the Indian people. We want education to give our children a strong sense of identity, with confidence in their personal worth and ability. We believe in education:

- as preparation for total living,
- as a means of free choice of where to live and work,
- as a means of enabling us to participate fully in our own social, economic, political and educational advancement. (NIB, cited in Wall & Madak, p. 43)

This fourth period was a time of empowerment in some ways, as First Nations leaders were very vocal about their dissatisfaction. In response to the government's exclusionary policies, the early 1970s was a time of political empowerment for the First Nations' people.

The fifth period in the evolution of First Nations education has been referred to as the devolutionary phase of Indian Affairs (Burns, 1998). History with Indian Affairs has been unsettling; and there is no positive track record to rely on. At this time, First Nations communities are expected to make the decisions about the operation of their own schools and negotiate tuition agreements with surrounding provincial schools on

behalf of their membership. However, some would argue this is merely administration of Indian Affairs budgets since they still control the purse strings (Burns, 1998; Kirkness, 1998; Pauls, 1996).

Former Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Ovide Mercredi recapped the significance of control versus administration exceptionally well:

There is an important distinction between self-determination and self-administration. The Department of Indian Affairs would have us embrace the second option . . . but it is self-determination that we seek A First Nations Government must be able to decide whether to establish its own standards or whether to follow provincial standards. . . . In some cases, provincial standards don't apply. In education, for example, we need a combination of First Nations and provincial curricula in order to teach First Nations languages, customs, traditions and history. (Mercredi & Turpel, 1993, p. 94)

It is during this devolutionary stage that some First Nations communities chose to maintain Nation to Nation relationships with the federal government through Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC). Consequently, today First Nations communities are at various stages of service/negotiation regarding the attendance of First Nations students in provincial schools.

Some have taken the step to negotiate provincial tuition agreements directly. Others choose to use the old generic INAC provincial tuition agreements, rather than get involved directly with provincial authorities for fear of breaking their treaties with federal authorities. Since First Nations education is not a provincial responsibility, but

falls under the jurisdiction of INAC, some communities will not negotiate directly with provincial government authorities because of these philosophical and legal ties.

The First Nations educational journey has been long and arduous. It has not been without pain, and it has been inflicted with shame and abuse and with a clearly genocidal intent.

Importance of the Study

The importance of the study cannot be understood without a clear understanding of First Nations history. In light of First Nations history, Kirkness (1998) did not beat around the bush when she described the relationship between the past, present, and future. She surmised that we must “cut the shackles, cut the crap, and cut the mustard” (p. 10) if we want to affect our peoples’ education.

Statistical data that refer to the high risk factors associated with Native communities, such as the highest suicide and incarceration rates in Canada (Regnier, 1995) and disproportionately high encounters with drugs, alcohol, family violence, poverty, racism, and unemployment, are bountiful. Regnier (1995) paraphrased York poignantly: “Prison has become for young native people the contemporary equivalent of what the Indian residential school represented for their parents” (p. 320). His point is that institutional change has not improved the lives of Aboriginal youth. Regnier noted the severity of the crisis: “Aboriginal people have suffered the most severe social, economic, and educational problems in Canada” (p. 319), while Warner (1991) pointed out similar statistics relevant to the United States. Regnier shared the following:

Students suffer from chemical dependency, alienation, racism, denial, self-mutilation and other forms of violation and abuse. The failure of Saskatchewan schools to meet the educational needs of Aboriginal students has been evident in extremely high dropout rates. The Aboriginal high school dropout rate in inner city schools in Saskatchewan was 90.5 per cent in 1981. (p. 313)

The disproportionately high number of Aboriginal youths who have had early encounters with the law is related to poverty and racism. Arrest, youth detention centres, court appearances, lawyers, social service agencies, incarceration, and the stigma of a criminal record are all part of a social process that criminalizes many Aboriginal youths (Regnier, 1995).

The social and economic conditions that prevail in many First Nations communities are factors that may contribute to the low numbers of graduates at all levels of education, including provincial high schools. Case in point, in 1995, Dr. Stan Wilson and Dr. Peggy Wilson, Native Professors at the University of Alberta were preparing to host the Autochthonous Scholars: Toward an Indigenous Graduate Program Conference. They were hosting the conference with the intention of proposing a Masters and Doctorate program for Indigenous students. They found that approximately 15 Status Indians in all of Canada hold doctorate degrees (Kirkness, 1998). Such a low number of post graduate Native students (Status Indians) is indicative of the seriousness of the education problem in Indian country.

Statement of the Problem

Currently there is a serious drop out problem of First Nations students in Canada's provincial high schools. Determining accurate figures is virtually impossible, however, since no provincial or federal databases are specific to this topic (MacKay & Myles, 1995).

In 1984, the Alberta government appointed the Ghitter committee to address the "widespread criticism of the provincial school system and its treatment of Indian children (York, 1990, p. 51). After several months of public hearings the committee confirmed the criticisms as valid. In addition, they also "found that the dropout rate for native students was as high as 85 percent in some provincial schools" (York, 1990, p. 52). In 1998 Frideres noted, "the province of Alberta, for example, has had few Indian graduates from the regular provincial school system over the past decade" (p. 156).

The situation is further exacerbated in demographics recently reported in a recent Alberta Learning "Native Education Policy Review: Fact Sheet." They reported that 46% of the First Nation, Metis and Inuit population in Alberta is 0-19 years of age compared to 29% of the total Alberta population. Further, these Aboriginal groups are predicted to be one of the largest in any province or territory by the year 2016.

Clearly, these statistics indicate that Alberta has reason to be concerned about First Nations students in provincial high schools.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to give voice to First Nations youth, parents, community leaders and Elders regarding provincial high school dropout experiences. Their stories needed to be heard and honored because from their stories we can learn what to do in order to change and improve the situation. The young people needed to share their provincial school experiences, as did their parents, who sometimes compared the racism they experienced in residential schools with some of the experiences their children are facing, too. The community leaders also needed to share their experiences, as did the Elders. Many shared their own experiences or experiences of their children, grandchildren, or other friends and relatives. All the stories were important and needed to be heard and their voices validated.

As the Elders say, we have two ears and one mouth. Our job accordingly, is to listen twice as much as we speak, and thereby honor all of the participants as they shared their stories.

The second reason for the study was to expand the academic knowledge of Canada's First Nations students in provincial high schools.

Research Questions

In an attempt to determine why First Nations students left provincial high schools, two research questions were formulated for this study, "An Insider's Perspective: The Dropout Challenge for Canada's First Nations."

1. Why do First Nations students leave provincial high schools?

2. Do First Nations students, parents, community leaders, or Elders recognize ways to keep First Nations students in provincial high schools?

Delimitations of the Study

Nine First Nations students, six parents, four community leaders, and two Elders from Mahihkan First Nations reserve (pseudonym) were interviewed for this study. Student participants (four female and five male) were between 14 and 19 years of age; none was in school at the time of the study. Eight of the nine students dropped out of provincial high schools adjacent to Mahihkan First Nations community, while one was expelled. Of the nine students, one was in grade nine. This was not determined until the interview was in process; however, he had also dropped out of the junior/senior high school.

Parent participants were not necessarily the same parents of the student participants. In fact, only two of the six parents had children who were also participants. The community leaders were selected on the basis of their involvement with the Mahihkan Education Authority (pseudonym). In other words, the community leaders were either directly associated with the school board, education authority, or were Councils representatives on the Mahihkan Education Authority. The two Elders were selected on the basis of the knowledge of First Nations children and the provincial school system. I interviewed one male Elder and one female Elder. The male Elder currently works with First Nations children and came to the interview with a wealth of experience. The female Elder was a mother who chose to send all of her children to

provincial schools. Her children have gone on to be successful professionals in the fields of leadership, entrepreneurship, administration, banking, and the health field.

Limitations of the Study

This study was restricted to Mahihkan First Nations community (pseudonym); a Cree community, located in northern Alberta, Canada. It is one of the largest reserve communities in the province of Alberta and has a significantly large percentage of students attending surrounding provincial schools.

Definition of Key Terms

Adult upgrading: Term used to describe students who return to college as adults in order to complete a high school diploma.

Aboriginal peoples: Refers to the Indigenous inhabitants of Canada, including the First Peoples of Canada — the Inuit, the Metis, and the First Nations (RCAP, 1996a).

Dropout: A student who withdraws from a provincial high school and does not transfer to another school in the same school year.

First Nations member: A tribal member of a reserve community who is recognized by the Canadian federal government and the tribal administration as a member of the particular reserve community.

Expelled student: A student who has been expelled, or asked to leave the provincial school he/she attended.

Indian: A person of Indian ancestry, a status Indian under the Indian Act, or a treaty Indian.

Indian Act: Outlines Parliament's interpretation of their constitutional responsibilities to Indians and Indian lands, originally passed in 1867 (RCAP, 1996a).

North American Indian: Registered and non-registered Indians (RCAP, 1996a).

Provincial school: A school located off the reserve operating under the jurisdiction of the provincial government, located in a municipality. First Nations students from surrounding Reserve communities may attend provincial schools once Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) pays tuition on their behalf.

Reserve: A large piece of land set aside specifically for the residential use of a particular tribe of status Indians as defined by the federal government.

Reserve school: A school located on the reserve. Funds to operate the school are allocated by the Federal government, and administered by INAC. The school serves the resident First Nations student population.

Status Indian: An Indian person who is registered as an Indian under the Indian Act and thus recognized by the federal government as an Indian and accorded the accompanying rights, benefits, and restrictions of the Indian Act and related policies (Brizinski, 1989).

Treaty: A Nation-to-Nation agreement between the First Nations and the Crown in right of Britain.

Treaty Indian: An Indian person whose forefathers signed a numbered treaty in which land was exchanged for certain listed payments, such as money, tools, and health and educational benefits; on the prairies, synonymous with Status Indian (Brizinski, 1989).

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter I contained literature on the problem, introduction, introduction to the problem, background of the problem, importance of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, delimitations of the study, limitations of the study, definition of key terms, and organization of the dissertation.

Chapter II contains the literature review which covers five main sections including the residential school era, the provincial schools era, dropouts, tuition agreements, and leadership.

Chapter III contains the methodology including; introduction, methodological overview, research design, data collection, approach to data analysis, background of the researcher, and a summary.

Chapter IV contains the analysis of the findings including; introduction, voices of the students, summary of student stories, voices of the parents, racism, summary of parent voices, voices of community leaders, summary of community leaders, voices of the Elders, cross-group analysis, and summary.

Chapter V contains a summary of the results, the implications, and recommendations as a result of this study.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter begins with an introduction to a review of the literature, followed by a discussion of the residential school era, the provincial schools era, dropouts, and tuition agreements. The chapter concludes with a discussion of leadership.

Introduction to the Review of the Literature

The challenge for educators is to recognize the significant implications of history in the lives of the children that walk through our classroom doors daily. These children daily are placed in our care by their parents and the Creator; therefore, we owe it to them to know who they are and where they come from.

Lomawaima (1995) affirmed this perspective by stating, "Indian education can only be understood against [the] historical, political, economic, and social battleground" (p. 332). For Aboriginal people, this means understanding and recognizing Canadian/Aboriginal history, coupled with the effects it has had on their lives, and the lives of their children today. In 1999, little has changed to address the educational inequities experienced by Aboriginal people, including the First Nations (RCAP, 1996a).

However, the time is here for First Nations peoples to gather strength and start addressing hard core issues, issues like our dropout rates in Canada's provincial schools. Why is it that so few of our young people graduate from high school? Furthermore, if they are resilient enough to graduate, and decide to go to university, why do they have to return to adult upgrading because they have not graduated with the proper credentials (Wilson, 1989)?

First Nations leaders must become more proactive and start asking some of the tough questions; moreover, we must become part of the solution. Only by becoming a part of the solution, can we hope to change educational opportunities afforded our children.

We must become the "Highways" (1989) of the world. He suggested we travel both worlds, and maneuver both, in the interest of all Aboriginal children. To quote him:

I am now, like many Indians of my generation, able to go back to help my people-equipped, this time, with the wisdom of Homer and Faulkner and Shakespeare and Bach and Beethoven and Rembrandt and McLuhan and many other thinkers, artists, and philosophers of the white world, but equipped, as well with the wisdom and the vision of Big Bear and Black Elk Seattle and Chief and Tom Fiddler and Joe Highway and the medicine people, the visionaries of my ancestry and the Cree language in all its power and beauty. (p. viii)

To be equipped for the journey, we need to have travelled the historical path and be prepared to take others there, too, for the love of our children.

The issue of high school dropouts is complex. Numerous studies have attempted to address the problem from various perspectives over the years. In different forms, shapes, sizes, and colors, high school drop outs have been studied both large and small scale, including quantitatively and qualitatively (Barnes Deschamps, 1992; Brady, 1996; Mackay & Myles, 1995; Northern Alberta Development Council [NADC], 1984; Ontario Ministry of Education, 1989; Swisher, Hoisch, & Pavel, 1991; Wilson, 1992; Younie, 1996).

Despite the studies, the dropout rate does not appear to be decreasing significantly. Furthermore, the issue of studying drop outs becomes more complex when one addresses ethnic minorities and their dropout rates. It becomes apparent that other variables or factors need to be considered when studying ethnic minorities (Fine, 1991; West, 1991).

First Nations students are unique in more ways than one. For example, they are one of only two ethnic minorities in Canada that the federal government is legally obliged to assist educationally. This legal obligation is the result of nation-to-nation treaties signed with the Canadian government in the 1800s (RCAP, 1996a). In our area, the Commissioner on behalf of the Crown signed Treaty number six in 1876. It covers treaty Indians who reside on reserves in central Alberta and Saskatchewan.

To better understand the complexity of First Nations high school dropouts, it helps to address the issue from a socio-historic perspective. By revisiting some of the original interactions between the Canadian government and First Nations' peoples, one develops insight into how today's social issues might impact the current dropout

dilemma. It is obvious that the dropout crisis in First Nations communities and provincial schools alike did not just fall out of the sky. So, where did it all originate?

First Nations high school students in provincial high schools are challenged daily to stay in school. These challenges come from within the confines of their homes, their reserve communities, the provincial schools they attend, the surrounding towns in which the provincial high schools are located, and the students themselves.

Could some of the daily challenges to stay in school be embedded in Canadian/Aboriginal history? If this is possible, how have First Nations students survived? (Despite the odds against staying in school due to unusually high rates of alcoholism, chemical and substance abuse, family abuse, unemployment, poverty, suicide, and the blatant denigration of the native culture and identity, those First Nations students who have succeeded have done so because of an inherent resiliency.) These are some of the realities that students live with every time they walk out of their homes to go off to school (RCAP, 1996a).

The literature review covers four general areas with the intention of providing a clearer understanding of the First Nations dropout challenge as faced by the students, their families, the reserve communities of Alberta's treaty Indian population, and provincial school officials.

The initial part of the literature review is from a socio-historic perspective and will, therefore, cover the following areas: (a) the residential school era, including residential school aftermath, and inter-generational trauma and soul wounds; (b) the provincial schools era; (c) dropouts, including determining dropout rates, defining a

dropout, characteristics of the dropout student, and dropout prevention; (d) dropout prevention; (e) tuition agreements; and (f) leadership, including traditional relational leadership, contemporary relational leadership, and relational leadership among the First Nation.

The Residential School Era

Understanding current First Nations education should compel us to look at First Nations history. In the late 1800s and early 1900s various church groups, including the Roman Catholic, Baptist, Anglican, and United Churches assumed responsibility of Indian education. They did so in partnership with the Department of Indian Affairs. Since Indian Affairs was responsible for educating treaty Indians, they partnered with the churches. Both church and state thought Indian people were "barbaric and savage" (York, 1990, p. 23). Accordingly, they thought the Indians needed to be Christianized and abandon their traditional spiritual beliefs and adopt Western beliefs. Clearly, both interacted with the Indians from their world view and imposed that view sanctimoniously.

An example of opposing world views is demonstrated in the words of Henry Bird Quinney (cited in York, 1990) of Saddle Lake. He noted:

The burning of sweet grass and tobacco was "heathen" ritual, but praying with their burning incense was supposedly the only sacred way. Songs with the Drum were "barbaric," but Latin chants were okay. Dancing to honor the return of the birds in springtime was wrong, but kneeling in the dark confines of chapels with rosary beads was right. (p. 42)

At this time the federal government employed Indian agents who held legal authority over Indian people; they in turn delegated their power to the churches. Both parties dealt with Indians and spoke of them as the "Indian problem" (Dehyle & Swisher, 1997, p. 115). Dealing with the Indian problem can best be summarized by the assimilation strategies identified in the following quote:

The idea was the best way for Indians to become American was to remove the children as far as possible from the influences of their homes, families, and culture. The use of native languages by children was forbidden under threats of corporal punishment; semiskilled vocational training was encouraged for Indians; students were placed as labourers and domestics in White families' homes during vacation time; and native religions were suppressed. In a very real sense, the schooling package that provided literacy for Indians also required becoming "White." While the structure has changed somewhat, this practice has changed very little in the past 100 years. (Dehyle & Swisher, 1997, p. 115)

York's *The Dispossessed* (1990) noted the following:

Blue Quills, a Catholic residential school, began operation in 1931 near Saddle Lake reserve in northeastern Alberta. Its Indian students were required to follow a strict daily schedule, rising at 6:00 a.m. and going to bed at 7:30 p.m. They had to maintain complete silence during meals. If they tried to run away from school, their heads were shaven and they were kept barefoot. Students from the school's early years remember the teachers using a pictorial catechism, showing white people ascending a road to heaven and Indians descending on a

road to hell. The children were told that they should prevent their parents from going to Sun Dances because the Sun Dance was forbidden by God. (p. 41)

The Indian Act is the federal government's official legislation pertaining to First Nations people. The original Act dates back to the 1800s. Over the years, the Act was amended to accommodate the federal government's needs, whatever they happened to be. For example, the Indian Act was amended several times, making school attendance compulsory. What better way to ensure control of the Indigenous population than to force school attendance? Just in case they did not adhere, the government also had the authority to jail or fine parents for non-compliance.

As a result of the government's strong iron hand, First Nations peoples were severely restricted by the powers wielded by the Indian Act. Consequently, during this period, attendance at residential schools jumped by 110%. In the 1940s, approximately 8,000 Indian children attended 76 separate residential schools across Canada. Ten years earlier, in 1930, three-quarters of the children were in grades one through three. Hence, approximately, 6,000 children were deprived of the opportunity to be with their parents and siblings at such a crucial time in their lives. Removal of the children at this stage in their lives would tend to support Duncan's claim of abolishing Canada's Indian population. It appeared as if the children were kept long enough to de-program their Indianness only.

Only three out of every one hundred, for example, went beyond grade six (York, 1990). One can only speculate that the government agents felt 10 years was long enough to remove the savage from the child; many children were removed from

their families when they were 6 years old, loaded into the back of farm trucks like cattle to be “De-Indianized,” then discarded like trash when they were 16, if they survived that long.

Although the residential school era thrived from the late 1800s until the late 1960s and early 1970s, the impact on the lives of First Nations communities will continue to be felt for generations yet to be born. Clearly, this was a time of attempted cultural genocide as government sponsored atrocities included forced abandonment of children through segregation and separation, physical, sexual, emotional and spiritual abuses, blatant attempts at extinguishing the language and culture, the use of mental, emotional, and physical torture, coupled with severe forms of fear and guilt. These facts, documented in the literature (Haig-Brown, 1988; York, 1990), are supported in the experiences of survivors of residential schools such as those shared by Cree Elders Joe P. Cardinal and Mike Steinhauer, both of Saddle Lake First Nation.

Residential School Aftermath

The residential school aftermath is unwinding in the 1990s as survivors unveil the secrets that tormented them during the residential school era (RCAPa, 1996). People are sharing horrific stories of childhood abuse, including mental, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. The type, severity, and intensity of the abuse varied. For example, in one case, a child had a needle pushed through his tongue by a teacher for speaking his Native language (York, 1990). In other cases, children reported being physically assaulted, being dragged around, having their heads shaved, and being forced to memorize hymns and bible verses.

The treatment varied as the majority of the children were looked upon as barbaric, savage, heathens in need of Christianizing. They were not allowed to speak their languages, associate with siblings, or discuss their culture. They were punished physically if they were caught speaking their own language, discussing their traditions, or praying in the Indian way. As one survivor noted, "They whipped the hell out of us. . . . they treated us like animals and they expected us to come out a happy person" (York, 1990, pp. 34, 35). An example of mental and emotional abuse included being told their families would go to hell for practicing spiritual ceremonies.

The effects of cultural genocide are still prevalent. Many First Nations' communities are just beginning to realize the long term impediments of this era. Some are just beginning to deal with the grief, and others deny the effects on themselves, their families, and their communities. Some suffer openly, while others suffer in silence. One survivor recounted, "I was broken in all areas of my life" (York, 1990, p. 28). Alcoholism, suicide, drug abuse, and other addictive behaviors are evident. Many parents never developed parenting skills as a result of being separated from their parental role models in childhood. The adults they knew were church officials who broke every bit of trust entrusted them by the very God they diligently served. The philosophy of the time is noted by Ditcham in 1904 (cited in York, 1990):

The philosophy according to which the residential schools operated was diametrically opposed to the traditional Indian philosophy of education. Before the arrival of the missionaries, Indian children learned by watching their parents and elders. Their family and their community were intimately involved in their

education. The myths and stories told by their elders were an important part of the process of learning. (p. 33)

Today, many are convinced residential school experiences are a major contributor to the crippling pain that has, in a sense, paralyzed First Nations communities (York, 1990).

Spinks, a residential school survivor, recounted the tragic consequences: "It affects your spouse, your children, your children's friends. It goes on and on. They've lost their identity. They feel confused about themselves. They feel they're not accepted by their own people. They feel they don't belong in either world" (York, p. 35).

The residential school era affected everyone: the grandparents were the initial survivors who transmitted the woundedness to the parents, who in turn passed it on to the grandchildren. Everyone is traumatized, overtly or covertly, if the grandparents lost the skills to parent, for example (York, 1990). Feelings of inferiority, lack of self-respect, lack of self-confidence, and shame are not uncommon. In adulthood, the shame may manifest itself in the form of addictions to chemicals, sex, food, work, or gambling (Recovery Foundation of the Southwest, Inc. [RCOSW], 1997).

The pain of the residential school era is overflowing and festering like a pus oozing through an open sore, in this case, communities. It oozes in various ways including addictions and other forms of woundedness and social pathologies as communities try to come to grips with the after-effects. The addictiveness people experience serves to keep them from experiencing their inner self, the feelings and the

awareness to challenge the source of the pain, suffering, disease or oppression (RCOSW, 1997). In other words, the addictions simply numb the pain they may be experiencing internally.

Inter-Generational Trauma and Soul Wounds

“Inter-generational trauma” and “soul wounds” are words that come out of the works of Dr. Eduardo Duran, a Native American psychologist. He proposed that the residential school era severely wounded Native Americans, the results of which will be felt for generations to come. Duran’s second book entitled *Transforming the Soul Wound: A Theoretical/ Clinical Approach to American Psychology* (1990) outlined how history has significantly impacted the lives of Native Americans. He calls the wounds “soul wounds” and makes reference to the effects of inter-generational trauma.

Dr. Duran’s work dates back to the early 1980s when he was a doctoral candidate. His published dissertation, *Archetypal Consultation: A Service Delivery Model for Native Americans* (1984) is based on his ethnographic research with Native Americans of central California. His background is psychology; however, the data are applicable in the field of education since his research is based on the psychological impact of woundedness. That woundedness is played out daily in the lives of children who enter classrooms all over the nation.

Dr. Duran’s work is one of the earliest research studies to address the issues of the Native American community from a Native American perspective, with a model developed by a Native American. His work provides a strong socio-historical perspective of the problems encountered by many Native Americans.

Native American history, according to Duran (1984), is laced with ethnocide and genocide experiences of cultural hegemony. In later works (1990) he referred to the European impact of education: "The systematic destruction of the Indian family was attempted under the guise of educating Indians in order that they would assimilate as painlessly as possible, while at the same time inflicting a wound of the soul of Indian people that is felt in agonizing proportions until this day" (p. 28). For an example of the effects of inter-generational trauma experienced by one Navajo woman years after the original residential school era, refer to Appendix A. Her words powerfully illustrate how the Navajo matrons, in a cultural context that is foreign to them, enforce the oppressors rules on their own people. They are the oppressed who become oppressors (Freire, 1993).

Duran's 1984 work laid out some of the possible causes for the mental health problems faced in the Native American communities. Recognizing that changes have occurred rapidly in a time span of approximately 100 years, Native people are faced with immeasurable problems, including loss of culture and a loss of power over one's life, community apathy, lack of formal education and work skills, low self-esteem or low pride, family problems, suicide, severe poverty, poor crowded living conditions, unemployment, and high rates of drug, alcohol and substance abuse. Duran suggested that alcohol and substance abuse are simply a manifestation of a much larger or deeper concern.

The trauma of the loss of land, culture, and people has never been resolved and has merely been anesthetized by alcohol and other drugs. Indian people suffer

from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a consequence of the devastating effects of genocide perpetuated by the U.S. government. (Duran, 1990, p. 93)

Duran emphasized that trauma can be felt inter-generationally. His research gave the pains of the residential school era an official name: inter-generational trauma and soul wounds. In so doing, many survivors could begin to experience healing having put a name to the internal pain. Furthermore, it is imperative that agencies, schools included, understand the long term effects of inter-generational trauma and soul wounds, the result of ethnocide and genocide during the residential school era.

Duran (1990) cited an example of the long-term effects of inter-generational trauma and soul wounds, utilizing a treatment example:

We not only treat the client but are also treating our ancestors, since it is only in this plane of existence that we get to accomplish resolution of life events. If we don't work out a resolution for our ancestors, we can then only insure that our children will be left to continue struggling with the problem. (p. 95)

Another way of saying the same thing is "one generation's trauma causes another generation's grief" and further to that, "when people are healed, the spirits of the ancestors and their future generations are also healed" (RCOSW, 1997, p. 21).

In order to understand Native American people, he differentiated the Indian world view (which he called cosmology) with the European world view.

Duran (1990) noted:

The core of Indian awareness was the place where the soul wound occurred.

This core being essence is the fabric of soul and it is from this essence that the

mythology, dreams, and culture emerge. Once the core from which soul emerges is wounded then all emerging mythology and dreams of a people reflect the wound. The manifestations of such a wound are then embodied by the tremendous suffering that the people have undergone since the collective soul wound was inflicted half a millennium ago. Some of the diseases and problems that Indian people suffer are a direct result of the soul wound. (p. 29)

Conflicting world views affect how we see and experience the world. Some distinctions between the Indian and European world view include temporal versus spatial thinking. Western thought distinguishes world history along a linear temporal sequence where time has a beginning and an end, whereas Native Americans think about events as a function of space, or actuality, where the event actually took place. Another major difference is around process versus content thinking. Process is more action, event-oriented and consequently more people oriented, whereas content is individualistic, focusing on object relationships.

Another example that demonstrates the effects of differing world views is offered by Rupert Ross, a non-Native lawyer, seconded to Justice Canada, a department of the federal government. Most jails are filled with Aboriginal people; Ross's task was to look at the justice system and determine how it served, or did not serve the Aboriginal peoples of Canada. His text, *Return to the Teachings: Exploring Aboriginal Justice* (1996), illustrated the importance of process orientation versus content orientation. He calls process "how" one lives, versus the "dog-eat-dog perspective" (p. 82) of some Euro-Canadians. Ross reiterated the importance of trying to understand the

Aboriginal perspective. Differing values and different lifestyles impact how the two world views interact, how people treat each other and, maybe, the pain and heartache they cause each other.

Ross (1996) called speaking from the heart “heart speaking” (p. 167) and noted the differences in how the two world views communicate in this regard. Accordingly, heart speaking is risky, but it is still maintained by those who experience “oneness with the world” (1984, p. 54).

Duran (1990) described another difference he called compartmentalization. In the Western world, people often separate the mind, body, and spirit. In Indian country, the mind, body, and spirit are not separated; they are thought of in totality. Consequently, the Indian world view is one whereby the individual is part of Creation and part of one system. This categorization and naming causes conflicts with the Indian world view of harmony and balance.

The final difference Duran (1990) explored was the approach to healing in the Indian and European world. In contrast to the European approach, which connects healing with the linear passage of time, Indian healing relies on the intensity of the healing process to alleviate the individual’s pain. Understanding the Indian world view is crucial according to Duran because “treatment or intervention is not possible unless the provider or agency has cognizance of socio-historical factors that have had a devastating effect on the dynamics of the Indian family” (p. 28).

Ross (1996) also reiterated the need to understand the individual. He noted: “I could not deal with him effectively until I understood all the traumas that had affected

him, his family, his community and his people" (p. 121). Duran (1990) concluded that therapists, and I dare include educators, are "co-conspirators" (p. 28) if they proceed to work with Native families with the "blaming the victim" mentality (p. 28). Some of the research around Native dropouts recognizes this perspective.

In this regard, the research seems to swing back and forth, schools blame families, and families and students blame the schools. Some of the research referred to the pathology of dysfunctional homes and its effects on families (Reyhner, 1992).

Provincial Schools Era

Clearly, a new era came into play when Indian Affairs again amended the Indian Act in 1951 to use provincial school integration as another approach to the assimilation of the First Nations. The amendment allowed department officials to enter into agreements with provincial school jurisdictions for the education of Indians (Pauls, 1996). York (1990) explained: "The threat of assimilation was much stronger there, where Indian students were overwhelmed by white teachers, and white students and native culture was ignored and denigrated" (p. 25).

For many First Nations children, this era was a trying and painful time, too. At least in residential schools, they were totally surrounded by other "Indians." Initially, they could room and board with White people in the surrounding communities; later they were bussed off the reserves daily.

Imagine, if you can, this historical era; a time when First Nations children, who more than likely had never left the reserve, would now board big yellow busses daily to leave the comfortable and familiar, to venture out into the strange unknown. Up until

this time, many would never have ventured beyond nearby country grocery stores by horse and wagon. These same children, fluent in Cree only, were now to board huge yellow monsters we call school busses. The bus ride itself would be all right since all the children knew one another and could converse in Cree freely. However, once the children exited the bus and entered provincial schools the story differed. All the children dispersed. No longer are there only little brown faces but the odd brown face. Fluent in Cree only and now in a classroom of English/French speaking students and teachers, what does the child do? How does he/she cope?

At this time in history how prepared or knowledgeable were provincial school authorities about Native children? What did they know about the culture, the traditions, or the Aboriginal world view? According to York (1990), little was known about the lives of Native children. He noted that some White teachers in provincial schools labeled Indian children as "ineducable." Based upon standardized tests that had been designed for white, middle-class, English-speaking urban students, the teachers concluded that 164 of 189 Indian students were not trainable (York, 1990). This meant that approximately 85% of the children were considered handicapped.

The early 1970s, however, were a time of political unity and Aboriginal strength across the nation. Having survived the residential school era, Indian leaders were now forced to contend with provincial authorities regarding Indian education. York (1992) expressed the climate of the time:

To understand why the schools were the first battleground, one must understand the crucial importance of the education system in Canada's assault on Indian

culture from the 1860's to the 1960's. The schools were the chief weapon of the missionaries and the federal bureaucrats in their systematic campaign to destroy Indian culture. Today, thousands of Indians still bear the scars of that war of attrition. (p. 27)

In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood published a document entitled *Indian Control of Indian Education*, whereby they condemned provincial school integration.

Today, many First Nations children still attend provincial schools (Brady, 1992; Burns, 1998; Ontario Ministry of Education, 1989; Wall & Madak, 1991; Wilson, 1992). The concerns of the 1970s have not gone away. Some of the issues may be different; however, there are still concerns. Although the education service providers may have changed, First Nations communities are concerned about the number of students who leave provincial high schools before graduation (RCAPa, 1996).

The financial arrangements for First Nations children attending provincial schools will be discussed later in the section pertaining to the provincial tuition agreements. Suffice it to say that Indian Affairs is legally obliged to pay provincial school jurisdictions for treaty Indian students who reside in surrounding reserve communities and commute daily to provincial schools.

Dropouts

Determining Dropout Rates

The issue of clearly defining a dropout, calculating one consistent dropout rate, or clearly having a set of statistical data from which to make recommendations for improvements is virtually impossible (Brady, 1996; Lafleur, 1992; Ledlow, 1992;

Ontario Ministry of Education, 1989). One thing is clear, however; First Nations (referred to as Native Americans in the United States) have the highest dropout rate of any ethnic population (Barnes Deschamps 1992; Bowker, 1992; Brady, 1996; Clarke, 1994; Eberhard, 1989; Lin, 1985; NADC, 1984; Platero, Brandt, Witherspoon, & Wong, 1986; Swisher et al., 1991). The variance in dropout rates reported for Native Americans in the United States is also quite extreme and bears discrepancies (Swisher & Hoisch, 1992; Swisher et al., 1991). Swisher et al. report variances from 35.5% in 1988 to over 50% in 1991; and for undocumented cases, around 80 and 90%. In 1985, Platero (cited in Platero et al., 1986) reported Navajo dropout rates from 30% (thought to be conservative), to levels exceeding 95%, which are epidemic proportions. Not only are the dropout rates the highest, but the rates of returning to complete high school or other programs are the lowest (National Center for Education Statistics, cited in Swisher et al., 1991, p. 2; RCAP, 1996a).

Within Alberta, the dropout rate appears to be intensifying over the years. For example, in 1992 the rate was considered at 36.8%, while previous reports documented by Alberta Education in 1976 determined the rate was 20% "for all students registered in grades 9 to 12 in Alberta and the Northwest Territories," as noted by HLA Consultants (1984, p. 6).

Other studies in Alberta have determined that Native students leave in much higher numbers than their non-Native counterparts. For example, Saigaonkar (cited in NADC, 1984) reported the Alberta Native dropout rate at 80%. Saigaonkar determined the rate by tracing records of those students who started grade one until they left in

grade 11. McCarthy (cited in NADC, 1984) further reported the Native dropout rate in Northland School Division in northern Alberta at 97%. Although the figures noted by the NADC are dated, this is the most recently published study in the province of rural Alberta which includes data on Native people.

In 1996, Brady published *Native Dropouts and Non-Native Dropouts in Canada: Two Solitudes or a Solitude shared?* In this article, he quoted Anisef and Johnson who in 1993 reported that the Native youth dropout rate ranged between 70-80% (p. 20). They also reported the non-Native figure, according to Gilbert and Orok in 1993, to range from 36.1% to 18%. It is clear that the data vary, depending on the sources, the groups identified, and the year reported.

Elofson and Elofson (1988) cited studies that label Native children as “chronic underachievers” (p. 35). They noted, “in many of our schools in Alberta the failure rate for Indian students in the first grade is as high as 70%” (p. 32). Based on data from three separate schools located in Calgary, Alberta, they found “that by Grade 4 more than half of the Indian students are two or more years older than the expected age for their grade and that two-thirds of the Indian students in Grade 8 are two or more years behind” (p. 35).

To further demonstrate the complexity of determining accurate dropout rates, Younie (1996) cited Canadian rates of 30 to 35%, much in line with what Lafleur reported in 1992. However, he goes on to cite the Statistics Canada School Leavers Survey rates in Alberta at 16.2% and the national rate at 19%, respectively. These rates are significantly lower than those cited by Lafleur (1992) one year prior.

Regardless, these rates suggest, by the year 2000, approximately one million under-educated and untrained youth will enter the Canadian labour market (Sefa Dei, 1993). These examples are a clear indication of the seriousness of the dropout problem, despite the inconsistency and uncertainty of determining a standardized method of calculating the dropout rate.

The uncertainty of obtaining accurate figures is revealed in statistics received from the National Indian Brotherhood, Office of the Assembly of First Nations. They cited numbers from *Statistics Canada, 1994, Custom Tabulations, 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey* in which they note the following: 16% of First Nations peoples aged 15 to 49 left high school before completing grade 12. This figure is reportedly low, compared to other figures shared here. Only 22% of those aged 15 to 24 who leave the system return to high school, while another 11% take upgrading, and 63% do not return at all.

Suffice it to say, the dropout problem among Canada's Aboriginal population is serious and includes great discrepancies in the reported rates within similar time frames.

In 1989, Canada had 466,337 registered Indians; 57,590, or 12.3%, resided in the province of Alberta (Boldt, 1993). A study conducted by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development entitled, *Highlights of Aboriginal Condition: 1981-2001* (cited in Boldt, 1993) compared the age structure of the Canadian and Indian populations. In 1991, 64% of the registered Indian population was under the age of 29.

These figures clearly indicate the significance of the dropout problem among Canada's Aboriginal population.

The dropout problem is a financial strain to the Government of Canada. For example, in the fiscal year 1981/82 there were 39,146 social assistance recipients, for a total expenditure of \$165,030,100. This meant that each individual averaged an annual income of approximately \$4,216. Ten years later, in 1990/91, the numbers had almost doubled. The number of social assistance recipients was 64,360, for a total expenditure of \$459,634,000, of which the average expenditure was \$7,142 per recipient (Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Basic Departmental Data, cited in Boldt, 1993). It should be noted that these figures exclude Indians residing in the Northwest Territories and Newfoundland.

Determining dropout rates is an extremely difficult task simply because there are so many ways to interpret school records. However, if the dropout rate remains as it is, Native people will continue being enslaved to poverty, with all its accompanying social manifestations, including marginalization. With estimated dropout rates ranging from around 16% to 80%, the short and long term consequences will continue to produce bleak socio-economic conditions in First Nations communities.

Defining a Dropout

There is no clear, single definition of a "dropout" or how to determine dropout rates (Barnes Deschamps, 1992; Bowker, 1993; Clarke, 1994; Franks et al., 1990; Sefa Dei, 1993, Swisher et al., 1991; Ward & Wilson, 1991; West, 1991). Hundreds of studies have been done in mainstream society, with some major studies done on Native

American reservations (Backes, 1993; Bowker, 1992; Brandt, 1992; Coladarci, 1983; Dehyle, 1992; Eberhard, 1989; Fenton & Crumb, 1984; Franks, Fortune, & Weaver, 1990; Gade, Hurlburt, & Fuqua, 1992; Kleinfeld, McDiarmid, & Hagstrom, 1989; Platero et al., 1986; Reyhner, 1992; St. Germaine, 1995; Swisher & Hoisch, 1992; Ward & Wilson, 1991). The United States Bureau of Census defined dropouts as "persons who are not enrolled in school and who are not high school graduates" (Barnes Deschamps, 1992, p. 8). Few published studies, however, exist that are specific to Canada's Aboriginal population (NADC, 1984; Ontario Ministry of Education, 1989; Saskatchewan Education, 1985).

One of the earliest studies on Native American dropouts in the United States was directed in 1986 by Dr. Paul Platero. He and his partners conducted a three-phase study of Navajo students in Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico over an 8-month period, including 5 months of intense data collection. Initial data were requested from 259 reserve or border-town schools, including contract, mission, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and public schools. Of the 259 school requests for information, 101 schools responded, setting the response rate at 39%. The interview sample consisted of 2,000 grade seven through twelve students from 33 schools. Most of the field researchers (10 plus) were fluent in Navajo, and they interviewed both stayers and leavers. In the end, 219 leavers filled out the questionnaire. Platero et al. (1986) identified a dropout as "an individual no longer attending school, who did not graduate, who did not request any records to be transferred, and who was not known to be enrolled in any other school" (p. 13).

In 1984, the NADC hired HLA Consultants to undertake a major study of early school leavers in rural, northern Alberta, one of the few studies to include Canada's Aboriginal people. In-depth interviews were conducted with students, parents, educators and community members in six school districts. Data were compiled on 2,671 school leavers, of which 126 dropouts were interviewed. In addition, the researchers interviewed 50 students identified as at risk, 56 stayers, 54 educators, 34 parents of students who had dropped out, representatives of local community organizations and representatives of the University of Alberta, Alberta Education officials, government, Alberta Teacher's Association and the School Trustee's Association.

HLA Consultants (1984) defined a dropout as, "a student who left school before completing the minimum requirements for a grade 12 diploma who did not enroll immediately in a post-secondary, academic upgrading, correspondence or apprenticeship program" (p. 5). The study concluded that there was a serious dropout problem in the north and made 13 recommendations, including an implementation model to address the problem. It would appear that this study was a very early proactive attempt to address a perceived dropout problem identified 15 years previously.

Another major Native dropout study in Canada, was conducted by the Ontario Ministry of Education in 1989. Entitled *Native Student Dropouts In Ontario Schools*, a total of 310 participants including students, parents, personnel, and non-Native school board personnel were interviewed using a 42-item Likert scale and open-ended interviews. Included were two schools, one from northern and one from southern

Ontario. Student participants were either status Indians located on or off the reserve, non-status Indians, Metis or Bill C-31 Indians. The Ontario Ministry of Education reported that “there is clearly a lack of reliable record-keeping regarding the education of both on-reserve Natives and especially Metis/off-reserve in a form which lends itself to the accurate determination of Native student retention and attrition in provincial secondary schools” (p. 18).

The purpose of the study was to examine the Native dropout issue in Ontario public secondary schools and make recommendations on how to reduce the rate, while suggesting ways of increasing school success for Native students. In addition, the study identified at risk students using the “decision questionnaire” copyrighted (1989) by Pierre Quirouette. The study examined factors believed to contribute to students dropping out. These will be identified in a later section. The study concluded by making one superordinate recommendation and 43 other recommendations to remedy the dropout concern in Ontario provincial high schools.

Although they did not clearly define a drop out, they differentiated eight separate factors limiting the student population. They, like many others (Brandt, 1992; Kleinfeld et al., 1989), expressed the difficulty of attempting to quantify Native attrition, retention or graduation rates. They noted, “There is no provincial or federal data-base which has, as its main purpose, the provision of information of this type for the purposes of educational monitoring, evaluation or research (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1989, p. 1).

Clearly, there is no one easy way of defining a drop out, although the words appear simple and straightforward. Regardless of the study, one thing is clear: there is no agreement on how to define a school dropout. Many researchers conclude that it is extremely difficult to find reliable data to accurately determine dropout rates (Barnes Deschamps, 1992; West, 1991).

Characteristics of the Dropout Student

Although there is no standard method for determining dropout rates or defining dropouts, Barnes Deschamps (1992) reported some fairly clear characteristics to help identify dropouts, although one should be cautioned not to generalize. Her dissertation study examined 32 empirical studies addressing characteristics of dropouts. Her review spanned a 10-year period, from 1980 through 1990.

Although the studies varied in size, represented different groups, and were in different states, her data indicated some common characteristics of dropouts and, more importantly, provided educators, communities and governments with data to use for intervention and prevention.

After analyzing the 32 studies (Table 4), Barnes Deschamps (1992) concluded that the most common dropout characteristics included ethnicity, low socioeconomic status, coming from a single parent home, high absenteeism, discipline issues, grade retention, low academic performance, and poor achievement test scores.

Wells, Bechard, and Hamby (cited in West, 1991) revealed the need to have some means of identifying potential dropouts. West, however, cautioned against categorizing all students in the identified designations as potential dropouts.

Table 4

Dropout Characteristics

Category	Characteristic
Demographic	Age/grade Gender Ethnicity/lep status Geographic region Community type
Social and family	Parents' marital status Parents' educational/occupational level Family support received Socioeconomic status Peer group influence Family size Sibling dropout status
Personality factors	Self-concept Motivation level/attitude
Early transition to adulthood	Pregnant Children Dating/marital status Employment
Deviant behavior in society	Discipline issues/suspensions Substance abuse
In-school factors	Grade retention School grades/academic achievement Achievement test scores Extra-curricular participation Absenteeism/tardiness Special education status Poor relationship with teachers

Note. From Barnes Deschamps (1992, pp. 83-84).

Nonetheless, without some screening devices they argued it is difficult for schools to develop screening instruments and prevention measures.

Wells et al. (cited in West, 1991) identified the following characteristics of potential dropouts in no particular order: attendance, grade point average, standardized test composite scores, number of grade retentions, discipline referrals, education level of parents, special program placements, free/reduced lunch program, number of school moves (transfers), reading and math scores, ethnic/ gender distinctions, language spoken in the home, number of suspensions, interests in school, participation in extra-curricular activities, pregnancy/ teen parent, number of counselling referrals, and family status (broken home, single-parent family, family size).

In 1994, Clarke concluded a study of Native American graduates and dropouts from five reserves in Montana, North Dakota or South Dakota, more commonly referred to as the Northern Plains Tribal groups. The purpose was to identify the factors that contributed to their graduation or premature departure. One hundred and sixty-five participants completed the 140-item questionnaire (2 did not identify either graduate or dropout): 108 graduates and 55 dropouts. In addition, Dr. Sixkiller Clarke conducted open-ended interviews with 67 graduates and 37 dropouts. The study took place over 38 months between September 1991 and December 1994.

Clarke (1994) devised his questionnaire and personal interviews on the following nationally recognized dropout characteristics. *Personal factors* included substance abuse, peer pressure, trouble with the law, low self-esteem, and teen pregnancy. *Family factors* included family composition, socioeconomic status, parental educational level, older sibling (dropout or graduate), and substance abuse. *School factors* included

academic achievement, teacher attitudes, teacher expectations, school attendance, and abuse by school employee. *Cultural factors* included tribal self-identity/pride, discrimination, racism, and bilingualism.

Clarke's data indicated the two primary reasons that students left school included negative family situation and negative teacher/student relationships. Other major factors included poverty, being forced to grow up too fast, running away from home because they were abused, teachers not believing in them, school was boring, teachers ignored them, teachers did not like them, teachers did not care, teachers expected them to drop out.

The final item on the survey asked students to "express in their own words" what they thought the three most important reasons for dropping out (or staying in school) were. The students identified poverty, insensitivity of teachers, and lack of a caring school environment, respectively (Clarke, 1994, p. 86), as the three most important reasons for dropping out.

Using characteristics listed from personal problems, school, family, or cultural factors, Clarke then conducted a multivariate analysis, thereby allowing for simultaneous analysis of more than one dependent variable. In this process, the characteristics were arranged into groups to see if they could be used to differentiate between the dropouts and the school stayers. Of the 24 factors between the two groups, four kept cropping up including socioeconomic status, grade retention, skipping school, and self-esteem. He concluded that external forces attack the child's self-esteem, thus alienating the child from the school environment. He also concluded that schools are

failing children, not vice versa; the majority of the dropouts were driven out of school, they did not choose to leave.

Dropout Prevention

The urgency to find methods to prevent dropout is paramount in Indian country for all the following reasons Reingold (cited in West, 1991) identified. These include:

- The unemployment rates for dropouts are twice as high as for those who graduate.
- Employers are having a hard time finding qualified or capable employees to hire.
- For each year's class of dropouts, the cost to the country over their lifetimes (USA) is \$260 billion in lost earnings, taxes and welfare dependency.
- In spite of all the attention given to educational improvement-reform over the past years, the rate of dropouts to graduates has not changed significantly.
- As the educational requirements for jobs change, young people without an education will face even more extreme challenges finding employment, and if they are successful, the job may not meet their basic financial needs to support their families.

Consequently, dropout prevention will continue to be the major challenge in the new millennium. Just as there is no simple definition of the dropout, likewise, there are no simple solutions to prevention. One thing is certain, there is a strong correlation between the dropout problem and the school environment (Fennimore & Pritz, cited in

Wircenski, 1991). West identified school environment as including teachers, administrators, counselors, peers, curriculum, physical facilities, the school philosophy, and the geographic location.

In order to adequately address the dropout problem, one must first determine why students are dropping out, then determine some possible solutions. If, for example, they are leaving because of teen pregnancy, several things could occur, including sex education/awareness classes or the inclusion of a daycare at the school.

Once the dropout issues have been identified, the next step is to identify a prevention strategy that is student-centered. It should focus on the individual's needs and be future oriented. It should be competency based and be individualized. It should focus on the students' strengths and suit their personality. It should not ask the students to conform, although it should provide structure including rules, procedures and organization. At the same time it should provide opportunities for responsible choices. Consequently, the approach should honor the unique individuality of each student. Research has continually proven that many students drop out because of the "school's approach to students' needs" (Clarke, 1994; National Center for Education Statistics, 1983; United States Department of Education, cited in Wircenski, 1991).

Schools have traditionally tried enticing dropouts back, only to have them return to the same "unsatisfactory and unpromising" learning environment (Wircenski, 1991, p. 178). If students perceive the curriculum as unrewarding and irrelevant to their needs, then they will continue to drop out. Tutoring, counselling, parental involvement, mentoring, and alternative curriculum types are mere "stopgaps" if the real issue is the curriculum relevancy (Wircenski, 1991, p. 178). However effective

these strategies may prove to be for a few of the potential dropouts, if the number of dropouts are excessive, then alternative means are necessary.

Five successful strategies that have effectively been used in dropout prevention include mentoring, tutorial assistance, counselling/guidance, parental involvement and alternative curriculum methods (Wircenski, cited in West, 1991).

For the most part, the prevention strategies are self-explanatory, but alternative curriculum strategies warrant further details. If the potential dropout appears to be experiencing difficulties with the curriculum, options might include part-time, evening classes or weekend classes, year round schools, open entry/open exit programs, schools within schools, and expanded time on task programs. These options might require different approaches including alternative classes, alternative programs, or alternative schools (Edison-Swift & Novak, cited in Wircenski, 1991).

It should be noted that this strategy is designed to assist at-risk students in the area of remedial instruction in reading, writing, communication or math, study skills, employability, social adjustment, or everyday living skills (Wircenski, 1991, p. 185).

Alternative classes provide for individualized instruction at any grade level, including a lower student/teacher ratio. Students receive assistance in a specified instructional area, while maintaining regular classes. Early intervention is key to keeping at-risk students from falling further behind.

Alternative programs are much the same as alternative classes, except that they cater to a larger audience. These types of programs allow for greater flexibility and can operate as schools within schools utilizing alternative methods, including part time

or evening classes, open entry-open exit classes, or extended time allocations to certain subjects.

Alternative schools are able to utilize non-traditional approaches to education. They are usually located in separate locations and taught by specially trained staff who try “off the wall” methods to help their students. They may work day or evening or both, depending on the circumstances. More relaxed school regulations may operate including hall rules, washroom use, and smoking in a confined area, for example. Due to flexible individualized instruction, schools may have developed a separate pass/no pass option and their own certificates of graduation, too. Due to the nature of the school, it might include daycare services, counselling and other social services, as well as transportation arrangements.

Wircenski (1991) concluded that prevention strategies must be based on the causes of dropping out, thus allowing for a student-centered approach.

Tuition Agreements

What Is a Tuition Agreement?

As a result of amendments to the Indian Act, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) can purchase educational services from the territorial or provincial governments utilizing tuition agreements. Essentially, tuition agreements are fee for service agreements based on First Nations student counts in provincial schools. Most tuition agreements are written agreements between the Government of Canada as represented by INAC and provincial school boards. In Alberta, most of the tuition agreements are between the federal government and local provincial school boards

(Assembly of First Nations [AFN], 1988). In 1988, when the Assembly of First Nations was researching tuition agreements, one tripartite agreement existed as well as one agreement between a First Nations community and a local school board. Apart from that, the majority remain bilateral between INAC and local provincial school authorities.

Bilateral negotiations came to fruition in the 1950s when INAC decided Indians should attend provincial schools. In some parts of Canada this process did not occur until after the residential school era. Initially, First Nations students were segregated, then the next transition stage was integration and assimilation. According to Burns (1998) tuition agreements allowed the move from segregation to intended integration and assimilation. In fact, he suggested “the overall approach to education was also notably paternalistic, coercive, racist, discriminatory, and assimilative. It resulted in tuition agreement schooling that was, and continues to be paternalistic, coercive, racist, discriminatory, and assimilative” (Burns, 1998, p. 55).

He suggested a three phase process of tuition agreement negotiations has taken place over the years. First, INAC was the sole agent in the bilateral negotiation process. The First Nations were not involved, and INAC simply maintained its paternalistic role. Secondly, INAC acted as co-representative with First Nations band councils. In theory, co-representation meant both parties were represented jointly; however, according to Burns, Native involvement was minimal. In fact, he stated, “Federal tuition agreement negotiation policies were obviously designed to serve the interests of provincial school boards. As a result, First Nations were rarely participants in the negotiations” (Burns, 1998, p. 55). The last phase, is the current phase, the one

he noted as the devolutionary phase. At this stage, INAC is no longer a “mandated participant” (Burns, 1998, p. 55) in the negotiation process; indeed their role has simply evolved to that of funding agent.

In reality, this may not be totally true as indicated by the Assembly of First Nations (1988). The report entitled *Tradition and Education: Towards a Vision of Our Future* outlined major issues around jurisdiction, quality, management, and resourcing within the First Nations educational domain nationally. The report outlined two types of First Nations tuition agreements, namely, master tuition agreements and local tuition agreements. Master tuition agreements essentially are those contracts negotiated between INAC and the provinces. Currently, two master tuition agreements exist, one in British Columbia and the other in New Brunswick (AFN, 1988). A major flaw of master agreements is they do not recognize the unique needs of individual communities.

Local tuition agreements, also referred to as bilateral agreements, exist in the other provinces. Local agreements are negotiated between the local First Nations school boards and the local provincial school authorities. In Ontario, some agreements are trilateral, between INAC, the First Nations school authority and the local provincial boards. Other provinces have similar tripartite agreements.

Funding Implications of Tuition Agreements

The greatest single factor that inhibits the tuition negotiation process with provincial school boards is the fact that education for treaty Indians is a federal responsibility. Some First Nations are hesitant to involve themselves with provincial school authorities for fear of jeopardizing their treaty rights with the federal

government. For some, this is a major stumbling block. Provincial authorities, on the other hand, appear reluctant at times to consider bilateral agreements because they fear they will not receive their monies. In fact, INAC's generic agreement stipulates that the First Nations must establish an "education bank account" from which provincial school authorities will receive their tuition monies.

Another glaring problem for First Nations political participation with provincial school jurisdictions is the fact the First Nations communities are considered federal crown lands. As such, the lands and the occupants are not taxable. Because First Nations residents located on reserves do not pay provincial property taxes, the current system does not permit participation on local provincial school boards. Consequently, there is rarely First Nations representation on provincial school boards, despite the fact that in some cases their children make up between 50-85% of the school population. Frideres (1998) noted, "in some provinces, Indians still cannot be school board members" (p. 159). This is the case in Alberta. Therefore, the provincial school board is not directly accountable to First Nations communities for the monies they receive.

Financial remuneration of tuition agreements is significant, with approximately 51% of First Nations students attending provincial schools (AFN, 1988). Back in 1985, an estimated 65% of treaty Indian students attended provincial schools in Alberta, although that number would have decreased with First Nations school development (Native Education Project, 1985). Overall, the figures vary somewhat; however, the attendance rate in provincial schools hovers around 50% (Brady, 1992).

In Alberta, the majority of the tuition agreements are between INAC and the local school boards, with two exceptions. One tripartite agreement and one agreement

between a First Nations community and a local provincial school board does exist (AFN, 1988). For example, in 1985, INAC paid tuition costs for 6,743 treaty Indian students (Native Education Project, 1985). In any event, despite the lack of First Nations control regarding tuition agreements, significant amounts of monies are transferred yearly from the federal government to provincial school boards.

Elements of a Tuition Agreement Negotiated by INAC

Most First Nations school board authorities delve into tuition agreements with trepidation and caution. Some communities in Alberta have bilateral agreements, while others have reciprocal agreements. Others seek to enter into tripartite agreements. The agreements differ, however; most have elements of the following content and have been negotiated by INAC on behalf of First Nations communities.

Generally, generic bilateral tuition agreements are between a Board of School Trustees of Alberta and Her Majesty The Queen as represented by INAC. For the most part they emphasize finances. For example, a sample contract stated:

The division agrees to enroll students from the Reserves and to provide them with the same quality of education and instruction as provided to all other students while taking into consideration any special needs or requirements that the parties may deem that individual students have. (INAC, 1998, p. 1)

Detailed accountability, including student achievement, success rates, retention, and special needs are rarely noted. In no part of the sample three page agreement are items such as academic programs, extra-curricular issues, special programs, staffing, policies, discipline, (including withdrawals, expulsions, or suspensions) included.

Cross-cultural and school in-service sessions do not appear to have been considered either. In all fairness, it should be noted that INAC officials noted the “outdatedness” of the generic contract supplied. However, some First Nations are still receiving services based on these generic contracts.

The content of the three-page generic contract entitles provincial school boards to millions of dollars, while at the same time does not stipulate any accountability to First Nations communities. Graduation rates, dropout concerns, or other relevant matters pertaining to the successful completion of high school for First Nations students do not appear to be mentioned. The agreement does not outline collaborative relationships between the Tribal Education Authorities and the provincial school authorities.

First Nations Concerns About Tuition Agreements

Essentially, tuition agreements affect two major areas of First Nations education: Educational opportunities for First Nations students in provincial schools, and the accompanying funds. The legal jurisdiction for entering into tuition agreements on behalf of First Nations students with provincial/territorial governments, public or separate school boards, or religious/charitable organizations is found in the Indian Act, under section 114(1) (AFN, 1988).

Indian and Northern Affairs Canada pays local school boards their monies as per the INAC nominal roll head count of September 30th of each year. There are no assurances that monies forwarded are actually spent on First Nations students or the services they may need (AFN, 1988). One of the most serious implications of bilateral agreements in Alberta is the fact that if a student leaves the provincial school for any

reason after September 30th, the monies do not travel with the student to his or her new school. There are no provisions for tuition refunds should a student be expelled, drop out, be pushed out, or decide to transfer to a reserve school. The monies stay with the provincial school district. Sometimes children will transfer to their own First Nations school, but the monies do not follow.

In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood, followed by the Assembly of First Nations (1988), declared Native peoples' right to control the education of their children based on parental responsibilities and local control of Indian education. This was empowering for communities embarking on First Nations-operated schools, however this parental and local control declaration did not apply to provincial school boards. To this day, the First Nations in Alberta do not sit on provincial school boards with full voting authority over matters pertaining to First Nations students in provincial schools.

Brady (1992) cited some ways of improving this situation. In Ontario, their education Act (§165[1-11]) provides for the appointment of Indian trustees, but this provision is linked to First Nations numbers (§165[5-6]). Unfortunately, if the student numbers fall below 10% of the boards average daily enrollment, or 100 students, representation is optional (§165[6]). Furthermore, the voting rights could also be restricted by the content of the tuition agreement. If the agreement is elementary specific, for example, then the representative may not vote on secondary school concerns. Brady concluded: "Overall this legislation restricts the input of Native parents into the decision making process in a number of ways" (p. 68).

Brady suggested an option entitled "group representation" (p. 70). The current Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Bill 75, 1985) provides French

representation either through appointment or election onto French advisory committees. The Maori of New Zealand utilized a similar clause. Brady suggested something similar be considered for Canada's Native people. The AFN (1988) also agreed that something like this be considered.

In 1995, the Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations (in Alberta) mandated local Directors of Education to establish an Education Commission whose purpose was to address First Nations education issues and to report to the Chiefs of Alberta's Treaty Six area. One item on the agenda was provincial tuition agreements. After extensive dialogue, the Commissioner drafted the *Tuition Agreements Workshop Report, 1995*.

Clearly, bilateral tuition agreement negotiations have excluded many First Nations communities. In the proposed draft, First Nations communities would have a direct role in identifying and defining the services, including accountability.

By way of Band Council Resolution (BCR), the Alberta Bands of Treaty Six formulated a draft establishing joint direction, policy, strategies, and cooperation in addressing the concerns of Treaty Six First Nations.

The document outlined four key areas: Treaties and jurisdiction, accountability, programming, and resourcing. Some of the concerns were as follows.

Treaties and jurisdiction. The Treaty Six First Nations developed two options for tuition agreements that they deemed appropriate. One, dual bilateral contracts, which would mean First Nations would have two separate tuition agreements: one between themselves and INAC, and a second between themselves and the local provincial school boards. Such an option would be a major paradigm shift for

provincial school authorities who are not accustomed to reporting to local Treaty Six First Nations in Alberta.

The second option proposed was a tripartite agreement. All three parties, the local provincial school boards, INAC, and the local First Nations would sign. From the First Nations perspective, this option limits autonomy somewhat; however, the local provincial school boards seem to favor this option from a monetary perspective.

In the area of treaties and jurisdiction, many First Nations want greater control of programming, thereby ensuring relevant quality services. It is imperative both the federal government and provincial school authorities recognize tuition agreements as client-based relationships embedded in historical documents, including the Royal Proclamation of 1763, the British North American Act of 1867, and the Constitution Act of 1982. Traditionally, the tuition agreements were patterned after Euro-western culture and values. Today, the agreements should include elements of equal partnership where the needs of students are priority.

Accountability. The Confederacy of Treaty Six noted that provincial school boards be financially accountable to First Nations communities for services rendered. Their accountability should include financial statements accounting for monies spent on behalf of First Nations children. Other areas of accountability should include parental involvement. Research proves parental involvement is paramount to children's success, (Clarke, 1994; Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996; Seitsinger, 1996). School programs should focus on outcome based education and mastery learning that define achievement.

According to the Confederacy of Treaty Six, First Nations school boards should be involved in the development and evaluation of programs and services as equal partners. All parties should operate with consistency, integrity, flexibility, adaptability, and honesty in this collaborative partnership. Clear communication protocol would ensure all information deemed relevant in the decision making process is available to help facilitate accountability.

Programming. Confederacy to Treaty Six also recognized that provincial school authorities need to recognize that language, culture, and spirituality are wholistic and represent the needs of the whole child. Currently, little cultural awareness occurs in provincial schools that will help educators better understand First Nations children. The First Nations community needs to be involved in policy development pertaining to First Nations students, including appropriate curriculum development. Native studies and the study of treaties is paramount in understanding the First Nations of Alberta. Libraries should be adequately stocked with books that embrace a First Nations perspective. Elders should be utilized continuously in classrooms and for staff development.

Resourcing. The Confederacy of Treaty Six also noted that First Nations communities recognize the federal government's fiduciary obligation for education. Provincial school boards should recognize and enter reciprocal agreements that meet the needs of both the student and the community.

In presenting these options, members of the Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations presented the draft principles and guidelines as a guide. Future agreements

need to equally represent the First Nations. The Confederacy (1995) noted: "There must be an equal partnership between First Nations education boards and provincial school boards in decision making on all matters related to the delivery of education services and programs to First Nations students and communities" (p. 12).

The document concluded as follows:

Federal and provincial governments must be flexible and be prepared to move away from the colonial relationship to a partnership respecting First Nations Treaty and inherent rights. Both governments must honour the fiduciary and Treaty obligations and uphold the honour of the Crown. Quality culturally relevant education reflecting the knowledge, experiences, and needs of First Nations must be the priority. All parties must make a commitment to a negotiation process which is guided by respect, honesty, and integrity, where existing policies and patterns do not restrict or prevent the implementation of tuition agreements and education services focussed on meeting the needs of First Nations students and communities. (Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations Education Commission, 1995, p. 13)

Leadership

Traditional Relational Leadership

Traditional First Nations leadership is based on relationships to family and community and guided by the Creator, the Great Spirit. Leadership, therefore, is wholistic, embracing the whole community politically, socially, economically and spiritually in an undifferentiated manner. Within that context, leadership is organized

around extended kinship where the relationships are defined according to custom and communal lifestyle (Boldt, 1993). In the Cree community, the whole community is essentially the governing body, with decision making by consensus where roles and power are insignificant, and there is no "authority hierarchy" (Boldt, 1993, p. 119).

In traditional communities everyone has a significant role to play for the survival of the tribe; individuals, therefore, come to be known for their "strengths." For example, an individual may have been blessed by the Creator with the gift of being a good hunter; consequently, he is recognized for that specific gift and shares those talents communally. As a result, he earns the status of being the tribe's "hunter," and, with that, "status and influence by establishing a reputation for generosity, service, wisdom, spirituality, courage, diplomacy, loyalty, and personal magnetism" (Boldt, 1993, p. 119).

As a result of the communal lifestyle and the accompanying values of sharing, wealth as we know it today in the form of individualism does not exist. Wealth is achieved by sharing, by the community's recognition of one's service to the community. Consequently, "leaders [are] servants of their people" (Boldt, 1993, p. 120). As servants of the people, leadership is exemplified by those embracing the communal values of generosity, service, sharing, through established relationships built on the ground of caring, sharing and love for the good of the community. Boldt noted leaders traditionally are selfless of heart, mind, body, and soul and embrace the philosophies, principles, social systems, and languages.

Educators would do well in serving First Nations children if they understood wholistically based relational leadership, which is significantly different from individualism with its individualistic leadership values.

Over the years I have had the good fortune of learning some of the Cree teachings from some wise, nurturing, and loving Elders. One of the most significant and powerful teachings has been the teachings of the Natural Laws of the Creator. These Laws include the values of sharing, honesty, kindness, and strength (determination); today, these values are referenced in the context of relational leadership.

The teachings of the Natural Laws in Figure 1 were passed on as oral teachings to students learning the culture under the guidance and teachings of Peter and George O'Chiese. Although not a part of the Natural Law teachings, the circle in the middle of Figure 1, with its four directions, represents the four directions of the whole person. These include the mental, the emotional, the physical, and the spiritual (commonly referred to as the medicine wheel).

The four directions as depicted in Figure 1 also represent the four geographic directions of the north, east, south, and west and the gifts of that direction, including colors, animals, and value teachings. For more detailed teachings on the four directions, refer to *The Sacred Tree* (Four Worlds International Institute for Human and Community Development, 1984).

Figure 1 depicts the tree at the top of the page to the right. The tree symbolizes the lesson of honesty; standing straight, strong and tall. The tree reminds us to practice honesty in what we do and say.

Natural Laws of the Creator

Figure 1. The natural laws of the Creator Teaching: Peter and George O'Cheise (artwork by Peter Rasmussen and graphic set-up by Peter Jackson).

Diagonally opposite the tree, Figure 1 depicts the mountains, as represented by the rock. The mountains symbolize strength and determination. They stand erect; they are tough and essentially weather resistant. Rock is believed to be animate, and it demonstrates for us the value of strength.

The value of honesty and strength are represented by the tree and the mountains. Appearing diagonally opposite one another in the illustrations, they collectively come together spiritually in the formation of the pipe, where the stem of the pipe is represented in the tree and stands for the honesty necessary in using the pipe. The strength of the mountain is represented in the bowl of the pipe. The two combined represent the strength and honesty necessary in the lives of those who choose to learn and live the cultural teachings. These teachings are a part of the lives of those practicing traditional relational leadership.

In Figure 1, to the top left, we see the sweetgrass. It teaches us about kindness. After all, how often do we really think about grass? We can be harsh to grass; we stomp on it, we walk on it, we cut it, we burn it, and it still keeps coming back. It demonstrates its kindness for mankind. In a paper entitled, *Entrenching Indigenous Values in the First Nations Learning Communities* (Makokis & Steinhauer, 1993), these two First Nations presenters noted the following about grass: "This constant revival is believed to be humility, forgiveness, and especially kindness, displayed by the grass spirit" (p. 3). Actual sweetgrass is a braid of a certain type of grass from Mother Earth and is used in prayer. The three braid strands collectively symbolize the mind, body, and spirit of each human being. Thus, sweetgrass, as used in ceremony, depicts the

value teachings of kindness and caring and the accompanying importance of living these values in leadership.

Diagonally opposite the sweetgrass in Figure 1 (p. 77) is the value teaching of sharing, as depicted in the animal, the buffalo. The Cree tribe utilizes the buffalo as the animal that represents the value teaching of sharing. Other tribes use other animals as were abundant in their geographic area.

Makokis and Steinhauer (1993) noted the following about animals and sharing: "It is they who openly share of themselves, graciously giving their own lives for the sustenance of the people. In an intricate balance of nature, people take these gifts from the animals, always being sure to give something back to the spirit of the animal" (p. 4). Today, hunters still leave an offering of tobacco and thank the animal and the Creator when they hunt. By giving of itself, what more honorable way to demonstrate love and a willingness to share?

These four Laws are powerfully significant for many First Nations peoples. Living the Natural Laws of the Creator can be most challenging. If leaders believe, practice and embrace the Natural Laws of the Creator, leadership will reflect the need to be healthy, open and honest in relationships and in the decision making process within First Nations organizations.

These teachings are common amongst many tribes across Canada. For example, RCAP (1996e) portrays the same teaching (including a graphic drawing) of the Anishnabe. In various forms, many tribes practice these same Laws of the Creator, thus signifying their importance across many First Nations.

Contemporary Relational Leadership

Contemporary relational leadership has been recognized as an effective means of working with all school personnel. Unfortunately, it has been mostly associated with women because of traditional organizations espousing control, hierarchy, authority, and a division of labour (Regan & Brooks, 1995).

The concept of relational leadership requires a paradigm shift. No longer is the top down hierarchy recognized as effective, as it dehumanizes people. In fact, relational leadership implies that anyone can lead, whether it be the student, teacher, or administrator. Regan and Brooks (1995) posit relational leadership as “relational influence that can be performed by anyone, with or without legitimate authority” (p. xi). They, in turn, cite Schmuck and Schmuck who described leadership as “the action of influence,” as relational, and not operating in isolation (p. xi). In other words, both definitions imply one’s ability to influence others, regardless of position.

Regan and Brooks’ (1995) work is based on research that essentially spanned 20 years, including the lived relational leadership experiences of 11 women in various leadership positions. They concluded: “It takes courage and patience to resist the prevailing norms, and it takes strength to find and use relationship skills” (p. xii).

They believe relational leadership is based on the following five feminist attributes: collaboration, caring, courage, intuition, and vision. These attributes are practiced by men as well as women in the Cree Nation and are therefore not considered feminine. Role differentiation occurred only after European contact; the Cree language does not differentiate gender.

Collaboration, the first attribute, is defined as “the ability to work in a group, eliciting and offering support to each other member, creating a synergistic environment for everyone” (Regan & Brooks, 1995, p. 26). Furthermore, it is inclusive, with people reaching out to others, asking for help when needed, and gathering people to collaborate on the task at hand. In the process, no one person holds power; everyone works together.

The second attribute, caring, is defined as “the development of an affinity for the world and the people in it, translating moral commitment to action on behalf of others” (Regan & Brooks, 1995, p. 27). “Serving children” means leaders who espouse caring always put children first. Leaders who model caring do so for all colleagues, male or female. Caring is believed to come back to those who give it, something believed by First Nations people, too; you get what you give, or what goes around comes around, also referred to as reciprocity. This is why the Natural Laws are so powerful. Regan and Brooks (1995) quote Noddings who said, “caring involves stepping out of one’s personal frame of reference into the other’s” (p. 27). Native people refer to this as “walking in another’s moccasins.”

The third attribute of relational leadership, courage, is “the capacity to move ahead into the unknown, testing new ideas in the world of practice” (Regan & Brooks, 1995, pp. 29-30). In other words, being risk takers, taking the risk! The authors also noted that “a leader is a person who operates by a strong belief or value system” (p. 39). For many First Nations leaders, to be effective in a world that does not espouse the same world view requires courage and a definite need to stand behind one’s values and beliefs.

The fourth attribute is intuition and is defined as “the ability to give equal weight to experience and abstraction, mind and heart” (Regan & Brooks, 1995, p. 33). For a long time, intuition had a bad reputation because it was interpreted as being unprovable, something in which only women believed. However, Regan and Brooks noted “it is a natural mental ability, strongly associated with experience” (p. 33). They call this “listening to our hearts” (p. 34), something Rupert Ross (1996) referred to as “heart listening.” As Ross traveled in Native communities trying to better understand the Aboriginal world view so the courts could better understand Aboriginal people, he learned that many Aboriginal people speak this way.

The last attribute of relational leadership is vision. Regan and Brooks (1995) defined it as “the ability to formulate and express original ideas, enabling others to consider options in new and different ways” (p. 36). As one of their participants noted, “being visionary is not to change the way things are done, but the way you want them to be” (p. 36). The challenge for leaders who believe vision is an attribute of leadership is helping others share the vision. They stated that visionary leaders trust intuition, which in turn also embraces the attributes of care, courage, and collaboration.

The authors cited Mintzberg who maintained “leaders who act the parts they do not live are destined to fall from grace” (Regan & Brooks, 1995, p. 36). Another way of saying the same thing in Indian country is “walking the talk.” Especially in the field of addictions this phrase is prevalent: One cannot simply talk the talk, but you have to walk the talk; in other words live it.

Leaders who practice these five attributes of collaboration, caring, courage, intuition, and vision will essentially be embracing the Natural Laws of the Creator.

For in living and practicing the attributes, Regan and Brooks (1995) noted, "our actions honor and respect the dignity and worth of each person we encounter, of whatever age, gender, race or class" (p. 40).

Cordeiro's and Kolek's (1996) work supported the conclusions cited above. These two authors (citing Lipnack & Stamps) identified five elements of successful business partnerships. They included unifying purpose, a significant number of committed independent members, voluntary links that form a web of relationships, people who assume specific responsibilities and function as multiple leaders, and connections throughout the environment (Cordeiro & Kolek, 1996). Although the original context of these elements comes out of a business setting, collectively, they can work in education, too.

They identified the first element of a successful partnership as common purpose or unifying purpose. In schools where First Nations students needs are not being addressed, how is it that the two groups could not focus on common purpose, namely providing quality education that will address the unique needs of the whole child. In First Nations culture, one might identify "common purpose or unifying purpose" as including the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being of the total person, more commonly referred to as the medicine circle or medicine wheel.

They identified the second element as committed independent members or autonomous partners. When educators can come together to work with Native parents and the school boards in a free way, without imposed structural guidelines children's needs then will be a priority. The authors noted, "Collaboration among independent partners results in a synergistic relationship, one with processes and products that are

richer than those that come from each person or agency working alone” (Cordeiro & Kolek, 1996, p. 4).

The third element of successful partnerships is identified as voluntary links that form a web of relationships. This element is crucial in the area of current changes needed. Partnerships are voluntary and require significant trust. Crossing cultural boundaries requires care and respect. Cordeiro and Kolek (1996) stated: “Boundary crossing and voluntary connections will not occur unless opportunities for relationships to grow are planned for and provided by the school” (p. 5). This has significant implications in cross-cultural settings where ethnic minorities attend schools dominated by a different world views. Partnerships need to develop out of trust.

The fourth element of successful partnerships requires partners who are willing to assume specific responsibilities and multiple roles. Such partnerships will no longer support the traditional hierarchy, but one that is flattened in which individuals can leave behind their sense of roles and take on multiple roles and responsibilities. In this way, leadership will emerge as needed, outside the box of traditional roles and responsibilities.

The final element of successful partnerships requires individuals to be grounded in connections at many different levels within the context or environment. In other words, people will have to remove the blinders and embrace a larger world and be prepared to see the world through another’s lens. When this is done, educators will be establishing partnerships that truly embrace the caring relationships which nurture and protect children.

Successful partnerships require these elements; however, at the same time, certain preconditions must be present. Cordeiro and Kolek (1996) identified five key preconditions: leadership, trust, stability, readiness, and a common agenda.

In order to bring about change, someone in the organization must conceptualize the partnership idea, usually generated by one individual who shares the idea, then others help carry the idea out.

The second precondition for successful partnerships is trust. It is imperative that workers from different organizations recognize that different organizations have different cultural climates. If people recognize this, they can develop the necessary trust.

The third condition is stability. Parties to the partnership must recognize stability within the group, as stability implies a willingness. It cannot be seen as a “fly by night” kind of situation, but something worth the invested time and energy.

The fourth condition to forming successful partnerships is readiness. Sometimes referred to as “tilling the soil” (Cordeiro & Kolek, 1996, p. 9). People have to have had time to be ready. Relationships have to be in place, they have to recognize collective purpose and willingness to work together.

The final condition for forming successful partnerships is having a common agenda. Partners must clearly understand and embrace the agenda. In the case of wanting to prevent minority children from dropping out of school, both the school and the minority community need to have the same common agenda.

Participants of the study identified four additional factors that support collaborative partnerships. They included: communication, reciprocity, alignment or the pooling of resources, and knowing the community (Cordeiro & Kolek, 1996, pp. 10-11).

All of these conditions are important; but “knowing the community” is especially important for schools serving minority children. It is not helpful to sit at the school and never visit the community of the children. Success has a better chance of occurring if the school community knows the home community. Cordeiro and Kolek (1996) noted, “The most formidable obstacle to the widespread adoption of educational partnerships is the failure to legitimize the school-community collaborations as part of a school’s typical service delivery structure” (p. 12).

An interesting idea the authors present is that of “compradors,” those cognizant of the mores and customs of other cultures. Being bi- or multi-lingual and cultural, they point out, enables them to freely cross boundaries. This is significant for ethnic minorities, and schools that support this concept have a much better chance for successful partnerships than those who choose to isolate themselves. The challenge for school leaders is to recognize compradors “within their organization and give them permission and a reason to travel” (Cordeiro & Kolek, 1996, p. 13).

The authors concluded by noting that the needs of students go beyond school boundaries. Too often, however, school personnel are fearful, or simply choose not to consider “crossing the boundaries.” To serve the children in their care, school personnel must cross the boundaries of which Cordeiro and Kolek (1996) speak.

Relational Leadership Among the First Nations

If First Nations communities are to change the First Nations statistics of dropout rates in provincial high schools, they are going to have to assess how they currently interact with their colleagues in the provincial school offices and board rooms. First Nations history clearly indicates the importance of relationships, and the need to maintain on-going positive relationships within the communities.

One must remember that, traditionally, First Nations people establish and maintain relationships within the tribe. Every person within the tribe knows everyone, and they all know who is responsible for what within the tribe. Without this sense of relationship the tribe will not survive. Today, this sense of relationship is still crucial; the context may have changed but the sense of establishing and maintaining relationships has not.

In the context of getting work done in a Native community, Native people should be comfortable with who they are individually, and they need to be comfortable with how they fit into the work group and vice-versa. When everyone in the group is comfortable with who the players are, and a sense of trust exists within the group, then the work can proceed in a healthy positive context.

For example, if I am in the group, I need to know who you are and how you tie into the project or the community, or what your position is in this project; consequently, it is difficult for an outsider to come into that circle without having established those relationships or having had someone within the group bring him or her into the group.

So how does relationship in First Nations communities affect their relationship with off-reserve, provincial high schools? What impact does this have on children in those schools? How do schools build those relationships, or do they even recognize the importance of building and maintaining relationships in order to help the children they serve?

In the First Nations community, very little work gets done in the absence of established relationships. Any activity or event in the community is only as successful as the organizers' ability to establish and maintain relationships with all people involved in the task at hand. Unlike outside organizations, where many meetings flow by means of delegation, in the First Nations community the work gets done when the relationships have been built among the players of the project. For a non-Native person coming into the community and wondering why the work is progressing or moving slower, this could be one of the key reasons: in the Native community the establishment and maintenance of relationships is key.

Summary

Chapter II covered key topics relevant to First Nations students in Canada's provincial high schools including history, dropouts, tuition agreements and leadership. Today's First Nations dropout problem cannot be understood without some understanding of the role that residential schools played in the provincial high school process. History leads one to better understand the current dropout situation.

This chapter discussed the complex nature of determining dropout rates, defining a dropout, some of the characteristics of dropouts, as well as dropout prevention.

In addition, the literature review covered provincial tuition agreements since these agreements are financially significant in the lives of First Nations students in provincial schools. Further, traditional and contemporary leadership were discussed, including the significance of the Natural Laws of the Creator (Figure 1) as originally taught by Peter and George O'Chiese.

Chapter III describes the methodology and the procedures utilized in undertaking this study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In order to understand why First Nations students drop out of provincial high schools, it is important to hear the voices of the students directly. Who better to advise the adult world about their experiences than students themselves? Questionnaires and letters do not permit face-to-face contact in the gathering of lived experiences. What better way to obtain candid, honest answers than to ask the students who dropped out of provincial high schools and those affected by the student dropping out?

The purpose of this research was to investigate why First Nations students drop out of provincial high schools and to investigate ways this may be prevented.

Methodological Overview

A modified case study approach allowed the participants the opportunity to share their stories. This approach honors traditional oral storytelling and offered the four First Nations groups the chance to share their lived experiences. The participants, young and old, shared their stories without having to “defend” what they were saying. As the researcher, my role was to sit, listen, observe, and ask questions as the need arose in a nonjudgmental way, while honoring the voice of my participants. As an insider, I had the confidence of the community and therefore community members

directed me to potential participants. This access might have been more difficult or different for an outside researcher.

Since stereotypes and racial slurs about Canada's Aboriginal peoples are still quite prevalent, the need for accurate stories as told by Aboriginal peoples is imperative. Stereotypes and racial slurs are harmful, pervasive, and exist all over including all levels of government as noted by York (1990) where high profile government officials including Members of Parliament and Senators described Indians as "mentally deficient . . . slovenly, . . . lazy bums, . . . drunks, . . . idlemonger . . . someone who is happy to live off of a government cheque, . . . parasites and the Indian culture as uniquely deplorable" (pp. 268-269). These racial slurs and stereotypes demonstrate the need for research that provides First Nations peoples the opportunity to tell their stories from their own perspective.

Research done for and by Native people may help change some of the current realities in Native communities. Dehyle and Swisher (1997) pointed out that the "insider" view, meaning Native view, is essential for future progress (p. 180). Vine Deloria, Jr. (as cited in Deyhle & Swisher) noted that the Indian voice is critical in the portrayal of accurate scholarship. He pointed out the importance of Indian scholars:

The realities of Indian belief and existence have become so misunderstood and distorted at this point that when a real Indian stands up and speaks the truth, at any given moment, he or she is not only unlikely to be believed, but will probably be contradicted and "corrected" by the citation of some non-Indian and

totally inaccurate "expert." . . . This is not only a travesty of scholarship, but it is absolutely devastating to Indian societies. (p. 181)

Qualitative research in the First Nations community offers Native researchers and the Native community the opportunity to share their own experiences. Rupert Costco (cited in Dehyle & Swisher, 1997), an Indian scholar, noted "traditionally, the scholars [were] the servants of the people" (p. 181). Qualitative research done by an insider offers both the researcher and the participants the opportunity to tell stories as seen through the eyes of another human observer (Wolcott, 1990). Since relationships are significant in First Nations communities, qualitative research offers participants the opportunity to tell their stories from their point of view in an unpretentious, natural, comfortable setting. Van Maanen, Manning, and Miller (cited in Wolcott, 1990) called social research both process and product. Qualitative research lends itself to being the heart and voice of the participants in this study, the heart and voice of First Nations students, parents, community leaders and Elders in a nonthreatening, noncondemning way that permits their stories to be told without judgment from non-Native sources.

In Patton's (1990) opinion, "the evaluator sets out to understand and document the day-to-day reality of the setting or settings under study, making no attempt to manipulate, control, or eliminate situational variables or program developments, but accepting the complexity of a changing program reality" (p. 42). He called this "inductive" research. The researcher focuses on the individual's experiences without "pigeonholing or delimiting" their experiences in advance and builds toward generalizations (p. 45).

Strauss and Corbin (1990) asserted that good qualitative researchers present their data in such a way that “the informants speak for themselves” (p. 21). Seidman (1991) contended, “it is hard and sometimes draining, but I have never lost the feeling that it is a privilege to gather the stories of people through interviewing and come to understand their experience through their stories” (p. xv).

In assessing the soundness of qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (cited in Marshall & Rossman, 1995) dissected qualitative research using traditional/ conventional positivist terminology. They took the four conventional terms of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity, and transposed those into equally significant qualitative terms. In like manner, those four constructs are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Lincoln and Guba concluded that sound research demonstrates its trustworthiness through this process of evaluation.

Credibility (internal validity) is validated qualitatively when the problem under study is recognized as being identified and described accurately. In like manner, transferability (external validity) occurs not with the responsibility of the first researcher, but with subsequent investigators. Dependability accounts for changing conditions versus reliability where the researcher looks for replication possibilities. The last construct, confirmability (objectivity), attempts to determine if the study could be confirmed by someone else. For example, could another researcher do the study and get the same results?

Lincoln and Guba (cited in Marshall & Rossman, 1995) pointed out the need for qualitative researchers to be able to understand and empathize with their participants'

world view. They also pointed out the need to ensure steps of soundness are taken since exact replicability is not possible.

Research Design

In this qualitative study, four separate groups including students, parents, community leaders, and Elders shared their experiences on the topic of First Nations students dropping out of provincial high schools.

Two research questions were formulated to guide the data collection. The two questions were: (a) why do First Nations students leave provincial high schools? and (b) do First Nations students, parents, community leaders, or Elders recognize ways to keep First Nations students in provincial high schools?

Seidman (1991) noted “at the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individuals’ stories because they are of worth” (p. 3) . He concluded that little educational school research is based on studies from the students’ perspective. He pointed out if the researcher’s goal is to understand peoples’ educational experiences, then interviews are a sufficient form of inquiry even though they are “labor intensive” (pp. 3-6).

Data Collection

Entry to the Population

The study did not begin until written permission was obtained from the Chief and Council of Mahihkan First Nations (see Appendix B). A letter requesting entry was submitted to the Chief and Council for their approval. The written request was

hand delivered and the Chief and Council were contacted about the research project. They, in turn, authorized verbal and written permission to do the dropout study. In addition, a written letter of support from the local Counselling Services office was obtained (see Appendix C). This was suggested by the University of San Diego's Human Protection Committee. Should any participant experience some discomfort or trauma as a result of the interview, the Human Subject's Committee wanted assurance that counselling was available. The Director of Mahihkan Counselling Services provided a letter of support (Appendix C).

The next step was finding potential student participants. With the help of the local First Nations Education Authority, student participants were identified. They provided names of students who attended school on the reserve, as well as those students identified as being at risk of dropping out. In addition, volunteer work was done at Mahihkan, on a school committee, as this permitted access to high school students.

A forum was hosted for students who had dropped out or had been expelled from the high school on Mahihkan. This half-day forum provided direct access to students who had dropped out of the local First Nations high school. From this group, potential participants were identified.

In addition, a mail-out flyer was placed in every postal box in the community. In the end, all of the student participants came by word of mouth. In a small community such as Mahihkan, most everyone knows everyone. In the end, the moccasin telegram successfully reached all student participants.

The process of finding student participants was arduous. It required a great deal of time driving to the homes of potential participants. Since it is acceptable protocol in Native communities to approach people directly, contact was by personal visits to homes rather than telephone.

Parents of high school students were located in much the same way. Visits were made to people in their homes; it would not have been possible to have received community support without all the home visits.

Finding community leaders was an easy task. All four participants, two males and two females, were associated with the education portfolio in some capacity.

The Elders were selected on the basis of their lived experiences. The male Elder currently works with Native youth. The female Elder's children had attended provincial schools. Following protocol, tobacco was offered to all participants as the means of asking for their help.

Data collection began in May of 1998 and the last interview was completed in October of 1998. The greatest challenge was finding high school students who had dropped out from provincial high schools and who had not returned to school elsewhere in the meantime.

Selection of Site

The site was a Cree First Nation's community of approximately 5,500 residents located in northern Alberta. The participants were all Cree First Nation's members from the community. The three provincial high schools that the students had attended

were located within a 50 kilometer radius of the community. All students had been transported by bus daily to these provincial high schools and returned daily to the community.

Selection of Participants

The participants of the study were all Cree members of Mahihkan First Nation's community. They included four separate groups: two Elders, nine students, six parents, and four community leaders. In total, 21 Mahihkan First Nations members participated, including 10 females and 11 males. All participants had some affiliation with provincial high schools, either currently or previously, with their own children, grandchildren or other extended family members. The student participants had all attended one of three provincial high schools within a 50 kilometre radius of Mahihkan. With the exception of one who had been expelled, all had dropped out of the provincial high schools.

In selecting student participants the following factors were considered: they were currently not attending school; they had previously dropped out or been expelled from an adjacent provincial high school; they were between the ages of 15 and 19; they volunteered; and they had the consent of their parents/guardian to participate. Nine students were interviewed; four females and five males.

Parents were selected on the basis of having had a child who attended provincial high school who had either dropped out or been expelled. The second consideration

was their willingness to share, on tape, their experiences regarding their experiences with provincial high school authorities.

Community leaders were selected on the basis of their community involvement with the educational portfolio. Participants were either active school board members in the First Nations community, a member of the present Chief and Council, or were directly involved in school administration at Mahihkan.

The selection of the two Elders was based on their life experiences as respected Elders within the community. One male and one female were chosen. Both Elders had experiences with provincial schools through their own children, grandchildren, or other extended family members.

Protection of Subjects

Since Europeans first set foot on North American soil, First Nations peoples have been subject to personal invasions, oppression, and attempted genocide. Some studies did little to honor the cultural beliefs of the tribe, thus playing a role in perpetuating racist, stereotypical myths that continue to harm Native peoples. Often, researchers would go to communities, gather their data, then leave without any consideration for the people they analyzed, diagnosed, or labeled. As a result, some First Nations' inhabitants are skeptical of outsiders.

Cognizant of history, precautions were taken to treat participants with the respect and dignity they deserved. Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (1993) referred to this as "protection of the participants health and welfare" (p. 27). They pointed out

that people do have the right not to be used by others, have a right to know what they are getting into, and have the right to give or withhold their cooperation accordingly. Consequently, all participants heard an explanation of the study and were advised that they could withdraw at any time if they so chose.

The Chief and Council of Mahihkan were guaranteed that none of the participants would be identified; therefore, all names and locations have been changed to protect the participants. In addition, all the guidelines as set out by the University of San Diego's Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects were followed. Interviews did not proceed until approval by the committee was received (Appendix D).

Interviews

In total, 21 interviews were audiotaped. It was important to include participants from different sectors of the community; thus, high school students who had dropped out of provincial high schools, parents (not necessarily parents of those students who were interviewed as participants), community leaders, and Elders were included.

The majority of interviews were conducted at the Tribal Administration office, utilizing offices of the department of education. Interviews varied from between 20 minutes for some students to over one hour for community leaders and the Elders. In general, most student interviews were approximately 30 minutes. All interviews were audiotaped and all participants were asked guiding questions for four separate groups (Appendix E). Hand written notes were taken for clarification purposes only. All participants signed consent forms (Appendix F).

Observations and Oral Teachings

In addition to the formal interviews, observations and oral teachings were utilized. In keeping with Cree oral teachings, listening and observing were key. Two male Elders, who were not asked to give a formal interview, shared their oral teachings of the Cree history, including their residential school experiences.

Approach to Data Analysis

The challenge for qualitative researchers “is to make sense of massive amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns, and construct a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal” (Patton, 1990, pp. 371-372). Patton went on to say, in qualitative research there is no exact or precise time at which data collection ends and analysis begins.

In this study, data analysis began immediately. After listening to the tapes, they were then transcribed. Next, initial coding began. Each participant was given a copy of the transcription and asked to read it over and note any concerns they might have had about the interview. Patton suggested making a minimum of four copies of each transcript because of the content analysis, including identifying, coding, and categorizing the data. The end result is the extrapolation of patterns, themes and categories of data analysis called “lessons learned” (Patton, 1990, pp. 390, 425).

Background of the Researcher

This topic was chosen because of my years of work experience with and for First Nations children. For the past 10 years of my career (in two separate locations), I

have worked with First Nations children who continued walking around as lost, wounded warriors. The children were dealing with drug, alcohol, or solvent abuse addictions. In their lived experiences, most had dropped out of school. Many attended provincial schools, and sometimes they shared their school experiences with me. Many did not have pleasant experiences. Most of the students I worked with were years behind academically, some unable to read or write. All were between the ages of 12 to 18 years of age. These children's lives impacted my life forever.

My experiences with these children, coupled with being a school board member in a First Nation community, led me to this study. I wanted to ask First Nations students personally why they left provincial high schools before graduation. I wanted to honor their voices.

I wanted to take up the challenge of interviewing First Nation members to hear and write their stories from their perspective. History is full of stories written from the outsider perspective. Few studies are written from an insider perspective (Dehyle & Swisher, 1997).

Merriam (1988) noted "the researcher is the primary instrument" (p. 19) in the data collection and analysis process. This was a crucial factor, and one I did not take lightly. I felt a personal and professional responsibility to the First Nations to honor their stories while embracing the Natural Laws of honesty, strength, determination, and kindness. These four core values are the most basic Laws of life by which many Cree First Nations strive to live. As the researcher, I listened to the stories and tried to remain focused on these core life values in mind and heart.

Boyer (cited in Swisher, 1986) described authentic researchers as "those who are members of the group about whom they write" (p. 187). She made the point that insiders may be more sensitive and demonstrate greater understanding of the community and the protocols that accompany doing research in the community.

As an insider, I believe I was able to gather authentic, rich, data that outsiders could not access as easily. I was humbled and privileged to have had the opportunity to write of the experiences of my participants from Mahihkan First Nation. I can only hope that I tell their stories in a way that honors what they shared.

It is important that the reader understand the use of first person, "I," in relation to discussion with the Elders. Out of respect for the Elders with whom I conversed in this study, I could not use third person writing when speaking with the Elders. In the First Nation's community, relationships are very important; therefore, from a cultural point of view, I as the writer am in a learning relationship with the Elders. Therefore, I cannot write third person, for in this learning moment they are my teachers, and I am their student, not some stranger or nonparticipant observer. As an insider, I see the teachings and my learnings from the Elders as a privilege.

Summary

Chapter III covered the qualitative research methodology including the validation approach. This chapter outlined site and participant selection and the background of the researcher from an insider perspective.

The next chapter presents an analysis of the findings for the participant groups of the study including students, parents, community leaders, and community Elders.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

Introduction

The problem of students dropping out of high school is not new; in fact, the topic has been studied extensively and has been determined to be quite complex and multifaceted. What is relatively new, is asking various sectors of the First Nations population to express their opinions about why First Nations students drop out of provincial high schools (Platero et al., 1986). In a humble way, this study attempted to give voice to one First Nations community. The four separate groups are all members of a Cree First Nations community including high school students, parents of high school students, community leaders, and Elders.

From the onset, this dissertation set out to lend voice to the First Nations participants. The greatest challenge has been the researcher's effort to rightfully honor what the participants shared orally and to put what they said into written form. When students drop out of high school, their experiences affect themselves, their families, and the community at large.

In this chapter, tribute is paid to the four separate groups who so honorably offered to share their experiences. In total, the voices of 21 participants are shared.

The findings are laid out in four separate sections, one for students, parents, community leaders, and the Elders.

Voices of Students from Mahihkan in Provincial Schools

As an inside researcher, I present insider stories about some of the reasons why First Nations high school students left three provincial high schools in northern Alberta. One cannot deny the truth. Their stories are presented here as short narratives. They need to be acknowledged graciously for their honesty and willingness to share of themselves. In total, nine First Nations students were interviewed. They attended three separate provincial high schools in two adjacent provincial school districts.

Sage at Nobleton High, Then at Scottsville Secondary

At the time of selecting participants for the study, Sage, who was 17, had been out of high school for two years. At 15, although legally required to be in school, Sage left Scottsville Secondary without completing grade ten.

She dropped out of two separate provincial high schools in the same year. In the first semester, Sage dropped out of Nobleton High, where she felt “unwelcome or discomforting.” In the second semester, she tried returning to school, this time at Scottsville Secondary, but she soon dropped out and never returned.

When initially asked why she left Scottsville Secondary, Sage replied because of medical reasons. Sage explained her exiting Scottsville in the following manner, “I was trying to go to school, but it was really hard because I was on crutches, and for a while

my friends would help me carrying my books and stuff, but it would get really tiring to go from one end of the school to the other and back and forth. It was really difficult."

She compared her experiences at both schools and stated, "Some of the teachers were kind of rude, I found at first and stuff, most of them I just kind of like, whatever. I just stuck with the schooling. But after a while I didn't like it, it just got to me and I just ended up leaving."

She contradicted herself a little when she said, "Some of the teachers I had were pretty good at Nobleton High, but my music teacher was kind of rude, he would get mad easily and kind of blow up . . . like he didn't care."

Sage described Scottsville Secondary: "The one thing that I found about Scottsville Secondary, there are still people that are racist towards each other sometimes, and the Indians and Whites have big arguments."

It appeared as if Sage is tormented personally by the racism that she described: "I am not sure what starts it, but most of the time everyone gets along, but once in awhile one White and one Indian get mad at each other, and then all the Indians stick together and all the Whites. I hate how they try to make you decide, like my friends are on both sides."

It is apparent, that although Sage left Scottsville Secondary due to a medical problem, she encountered a few other reasons that may have contributed to her exit from provincial high schools.

Lee-Ann at Scottsville

Lee-Ann was 15 when she left Scottsville Secondary. When asked why she dropped out she stated, "Well, first my grades were really low, so me and my mom decided that I should take a year off and take home study courses to try and bring up my grades."

When asked why her grades were low she replied, "I was mostly failing my social. I did all my work, and everything, but it seemed like the teacher didn't like me, me and my cousins. She always seemed to give us bad marks. She would always give me detention. I don't know why."

Lee-Ann felt the teacher did not like her because, although working with others, she got the detentions. "She always gave me detention and not my two cousins. We always had to work in groups, and I'd always get the detention." When Lee-Ann was asked how long this went on, she replied, "I only went to school for 3 months, then that's when I dropped out." She goes on to say that she did not want to drop out. "I sort of didn't want to because I didn't want to leave all my friends behind, it was kind of hard." Her friends tried to influence her to stay. "When they tried to make me stay, I told them I couldn't; they just kept trying to make me stay."

When asked what might have helped her stay in school she replied, "If the teacher wouldn't have kept hassling me about detention and talking." Lee-Ann dropped out of Scottsville in December and she started home-schooling in February. Ironically, the course she took was the one where she felt pressured by the teacher. She concluded, "I don't have to see that teacher next year."

Lee-Ann attended Scottsville all of her school life. She started in the elementary then moved into the secondary. When asked if she had anything else she would like to add, she concluded, "Just that I regret dropping out because I missed out on a lot. I didn't get to do my finals."

Lee-Ann started out by stating she left Scottsville because of her low marks in social studies. However, she went on to reference a sense of being pressured by the teacher, detentions, teacher favoritism, and a sense of the teacher disliking her. It would appear her departure was due to more than low marks.

Eaglechild at Scottsville

Eaglechild was in grade ten when he left Scottsville. When asked why he left, he noted:

Because I was getting into too much fights there, the teachers weren't too good. Actually, I got kicked out for fighting because the teachers would always take the White people's side. They would start pushing you in the hallways and then we would go outside and just fight and we would get into trouble. I got suspended about three times for that. The fourth time I got kicked out.

When asked to clarify the fighting or name calling, Eaglechild said it usually happened in the hallways "when you walked by they would push your shoulder, pretty much fighting." He further explained why he felt teachers were "no good." "That one teacher he always give me detentions over nothing and even my brother too, like for having a smoke behind the car while we were walking down the hallway he would just give us detention for that."

Eaglechild was asked to explain what he meant by the teachers taking the White kids' side. He noted, "They would just let them off and they would suspend us." Even though Eaglechild felt the teachers favored the White kids, he tried to return to the same school once he was kicked out. He said, "I tried asking to go back and in the meantime they would say to phone a different time like a couple months later passed. They just kept on saying to phone later."

Despite the fact that Eaglechild was kicked out, he made several attempts to return to Scottsville. He felt he was getting the run-around because the school would always tell him to call back. He admitted that not being in school was "pretty boring." When asked what might have helped him stay in school, he replied, "just ignoring those White boys I guess."

Eaglechild appeared to have come up against several reasons for leaving Scottsville. Despite the fact that he was kicked out for fighting, he felt he was unfairly treated and, still, he wanted to return to Scottsville. He clearly articulated his sense of unfair treatment, as he was suspended, detained, and called names. He felt the teachers were not good, and there was a sense of racism.

Given all these obstacles, why would Eaglechild want to be at Scottsville? One thing he shared was the boredom of not being around his friends. When asked how he filled his days, he replied, "I just work around the house do whatever I can." When asked him what made a good teacher, he noted, "one that[s] not always giving detentions for no reason and that's it."

Jerome at Scottsville

Jerome was in grade eleven when he left Scottsville. When asked why he left, he replied, "I dropped out of school because I didn't like what Scottsville was teaching me. Like they were teaching like old stuff for social and I just thought that I didn't like sitting there. I just thought it's old. I wanted to get taught something like new social life not way back then." He was asked if there were other reasons he left. He shared the following:

They were too strict there. I only got along with one teacher. I used to go to gym class and I would forget my change clothes at home and she would tell me to just get out, go out and I would say why? She wouldn't even talk to me, she would tell me to leave and I would try talking to her and she wouldn't say nothing then next thing you know I would have a detention or something. And she wouldn't even give me a chance to talk and that goes for like almost every teacher. Then like if you try and talk, they will kick you out, and if you want to ask them why, like they would move it up to two if not two detentions like you are suspended for a day or something.

Jerome was asked if he tried to express his opinion in the presence of the principal. He felt he would not be heard "as like the teacher changes, the whole thing." He felt treated unfairly, although he never came right on and said that "I used to get sent to the office almost every day, even if you are sitting with a buddy and you are stuck on something and you want to ask him, 'can you help me out?' Can't. Then he will say both of you will get detentions."

Jerome shared many examples of treatment he felt lead to his departure from Scottsville, in addition to the fact that he said he left because of the curriculum. "In some classes the teacher would favor the White people and say I asked for help, I would have to sit there for so long until I had to ask for two more times, then finally he would come and try and give me help or something and like I can't do it."

He went on to share an example of a sense of helplessness of being damned either way:

I am suppose to hand in so many assignments and I only have like a couple of those and I told him I couldn't do it because you didn't help me and he would try and get mad or something. Either way you are going to get detention because you didn't finish it and I can't finish it without any help because I didn't know what to do.

When asked why he felt that the teachers favored the White kids more, Jerome replied "like he would help them more than us." Here he spoke specifically about the teacher who taught social studies.

When he was thinking of dropping out of Scottsville Secondary, he spoke with his mother. He explained, from his perspective, the unfair treatment he felt First Nations students were receiving. He cited the following example. "The Native would just get the five days [of detention], [but] . . . the White person's parents would come to school . . . that kid would be allowed to come back while the Native [would still] just be at home."

This is probably the case for many students. They give up and/or their parents are not as vocal, as White parents in advocating on behalf of their children. When Jerome was asked what might have helped him stay in school, he shared the following:

I asked one time if I could get all my books and work with one teacher and for him just to tell me what to do and I would do it for every subject and they said they can't and I said why? Like I got along with this one teacher real good and that's why I said that because when they use to send me out of class or something, I would say can I go sit in this teacher's class and they just say no, go to the office. Then I would see this teacher come to the office and then I would ask him and he would just take me to his gym class, I would just play with them or whatever they were doing or sometimes he would say just sit there and I would just sit there.

When asked what was so different about this teacher, he replied:

It seemed like he was the only one that never gave me a hard time, like he seemed like he would help me out even though he wasn't my teacher in any of my subjects because he was a good guy. He would come up to you and talk to you and I just go along and everyday too. Other teachers don't even come up to you and say hi and this guy will come up to you and talk to you and even sit down and talk to you.

Jerome concluded that "a good teacher is one who would help you out when you need it, and tells you what to do, you get along with him and you listen to him, he listens to you, just things like that."

Jerome concluded that dropping out of school was a lonely experience. “I just felt like I was alone, like all my friends were still in school, just sitting at home doing nothing then I just thought why did I leave?”

Like the other Scottsville Secondary students, Jerome initially identified boring curriculum as his reason for leaving school. However, like the others, it appeared that there were a number of other significant reasons why he made the choice to leave Scottsville Secondary.

Pisim at Nobleton High

Pisim was in grade ten at Nobleton High. She is presently 19 years old. She left Nobleton 2 years ago. When asked why she left, she stated, “I was having real lots of problems, into drugs all the time and when I found out that I was pregnant that really blew my hopes down because I was hoping that I would get somewhere with my schooling.”

In addition to the drug problem, Pisim shared other challenges, “My problem was my mom, [she] never liked this guy, never liked him, I don’t know why.” When Pisim and her mother would have conflicting conversations about her relationship with her boyfriend, she dealt with the stress by taking drugs, “Every time we would argue I would be high, drugged up and this was during school too, I was really behind on my work.”

In addition to the drugs and personal problems with her mother, Pisim felt “uncomfortable” at Nobleton High. When asked why she left, she said “because I did not feel comfortable.” When asked to explain, she responded with, “People were

saying things . . . I forget what they say, but real mean words.” She was unable to share with me some specific examples of what made her uncomfortable.

In response to the question, “Did you discuss your planned departure from Nobleton with anyone, she explained she spoke with her cousin who also attended the same school. Her cousin advised her “to ignore it, but she was never around with me because we had different classes.” Although Pisim was unclear about specifics, something made her uncomfortable: “They were saying something really mean and I was going to hit a guy over that because he said I forget what it was, it was a long time ago.”

Pisim was asked how not being in school affected her; she replied, “Now I think about it and I screwed up.” Although she recognized the fact that her pregnancy was a contributing factor in her inability to return to high school, she also viewed herself as a “disappointment” to other young girls.

One of Pisim’s words of advice, based on her experiences was around drugs. To help other students stay in school she said, “I wish[ed] that there was no such thing as drugs because that’s what really is getting them down, I know, I have been there. . . . Today, I see a lot of our kids doing that even, 7- and 10-year-olds at the corner store.”

Pisim initially identified her drug problems as her primary reason for leaving school, although it became evident, like the others, she had multiple problems. She identified parental concerns, boyfriend issues, her pregnancy, a sense of feeling

uncomfortable, of not being wanted, and subtle hints of racism, although she was unable to identify specific examples.

Linda at Nobleton High

Linda was in grade ten at Nobleton High when she dropped out. When asked why she left Nobleton, she replied, "Well it was mainly, I was into alcohol and drugs a lot when I was younger and I met this guy and he was into that, too."

Linda played volleyball in high school. One day the school team was going to play at another school. Linda was already on the bus, ready to go, when the school principal entered the bus. "He just came on and he, it was sort of embarrassing for me because like I was ready to go and like I was really pumped. . . . I was sort of expecting it but not in that way. He just came on the bus, you can't go and well in his own words like. . . . I got off the bus and I just got my lunch."

Because she was missing a lot of school, she was not permitted to go play volleyball. She was asked how she felt about the incident. She replied, "really embarrassed. I think I was like crying afterwards." Although she recognized her attendance problem was the reason why she was not permitted to go, she felt the principal could have dealt with the situation differently. She noted, "He could have like talked to me earlier in the day like he could have called me during the lunch hour or something or he could [have] did it sooner like before the [bus incident]."

Linda was asked if she discussed dropping out with anyone before that decision was made. She replied, "No not really. . . . I didn't want to drop out. No I didn't, I just stayed away I guess."

Linda was asked how dropping out of school affected her. She replied, "Yeah, because I [am] not doing anything and I'm on welfare and it's like nothing, like well it's something, but it's hard to live off [of], like I would rather work and have a good job."

Linda felt that if she had someone acting as a positive role model it might have helped her stay in school. "I really need a good influence, like somebody to [teach] me, like don't do that and stuff . . . it could have been anybody like just somebody to help me."

Like the rest, Linda identified one primary reason for dropping out of school. In her case it was her involvement with drugs, although there were other contributing factors, too. Her relationship with her boyfriend was a major factor. A secondary reason was her embarrassing experience with the school principal on the school bus as the volleyball team was boarding for the tournament.

Kihew at Nobleton High

Kihew was in grade eleven at Nobleton High. When asked why he left school early, he replied, "Honestly, because I was bored." He went on to say:

Actually, that about sums it up. I was bored of school. I needed a change, and I just decided to drop out. It wasn't something I thought of right away, it was something that just gradually happened. I started missing maybe one day a week then it got worse. Eventually I wasn't going to school at all for a period of two to three weeks then I'd go back and make an appearance at school and the same thing would happen again.

Kihew was asked if he had spoken with anyone about dropping out of school. He said he spoke with his mother, but apart from that no one. "I didn't think nobody would want to hear it. Not too many people want to know if a person drops out of school. They all say it's a big problem but they're not doing anything to fix it," he replied.

Some of the consequences of leaving school early for Kihew included loss of sports and loss of friends. "I'm very sports-minded, and sports at the school is probably my only way of having fun. I don't play sports very often [now]. Some of my favorite sports involve school. I cannot participate unless I'm in school and right now I'm not." It appeared as if Kihew felt the loss of sports in his life as a result of leaving Nobleton High. When he made reference to his friends he said, "At home, at least when your in school . . . you have friends to talk to. It can get lonely sometimes you think about what your friends are doing. How your missing out and you just wish you were back in school sometimes."

Has Kihew thought about the long term consequences of dropping out of high school? This is what he shared:

Right now I'm thinking long term if I don't finish high school there's really no hope. I want a family when I get older, how am I going to support a family if I didn't graduate from high school? I have dreams which I need to fulfill. I need to finish high school. Right now those dreams seem unreachable because I did drop out of school. So right now, I wish I were back in school to tell you the truth.

Although Kihew thought it was “weird” to share another consequence with me about his leaving school, it was about the loss of a teacher friendship. In his words, “Yeah, actually this is going to sound mighty weird, but I had this science teacher, by the name of Mrs. Pool from Nobleton High. She was one of the nicest ladies I’ve ever met. I used to go school because of her class. She made things fun. She talked with us. She asked us how our weekend was.”

Essentially, Kihew said he enjoyed the company of Mrs. Pool, and he felt that he let her down. Later he said, “I refuse to go back to Smitherton High and I don’t know if they’ll accept me back at Nobleton High.” I asked him why? His response was, “Because I disappointed quite a bit of people.” He’s referring to Mrs. Pool, one of the few teachers to whom he felt connected. When asked how he felt about returning to Nobleton to see Mrs. Pool, he replied, “Scared, fear of the unknown. I don’t know what to expect if I go.”

What did Mrs. Pool do differently for Kihew? “She would talk to us like we were people, like we were friends. She was there to offer you support if you needed it, just a person to talk to. I didn’t see her as a teacher. I saw her as a friend.” When asked what would help him return to school, he replied, “More teachers like Mrs. Pool.”

In response to being bored in school, Kihew felt the following was part of his dream list to help the situation, “We need laptop computers . . . , instead of having to carry around notebooks. A wider array of sports in school. This is going to sound

weird, but younger teachers, hipper teachers. Shorter school hours, that's out of the question."

Kihew commented about some of the people and things that could help motivate him to stay in school. He wanted to be there; however, as he said initially, he just got bored and stopped going. How are we going to keep the Kihews in school? He suggested one of the driving forces for him, was having one teacher who cared.

Like the other students, Kihew was challenged by more than one contributing factor for leaving school early. There were multiple reasons for his departure.

Asiny at Nobleton High

Asiny was 18. He was in grade twelve when he left Nobleton High. When asked why he left school, he replied, "I am different. I am from the city. I grew up in the city all my life and I don't know how country people act. And we act like real freaky style you know."

Although Asiny identified the fact that he was "different" as his reason for leaving school, he shared the following story of why he left. He stated, "I just didn't like the teachers. . . . Some of them were racist, some of them would make fun of a person." When asked to give an example of what he thought was racist, Asiny shared the following, "When all the White people were around me, he [the teacher] started calling me Chief." When asked which teacher, he identified his physical education teacher noting, "The reason why I left from there was I went to school one day and I had physical education and then all of a sudden they all blame me for stealing two hundred and fifty bucks from all those kids and then the teacher went along with them

and he said, 'Did you do it?' I told him, I was right with you guys all this time."

Asiny felt he was being picked on. He stated, "I was the only Native in that class."

Whether that is, in fact, the case, from his perception, he was separated out as the victim because of his ancestry. Asiny got mad and wanted to leave Nobleton High. He stated, "I told him, I quit. I was trying to get a transfer letter and they wouldn't transfer me so I left Mahihkan and went home to Cow Poke [city]."

Asiny was asked how he felt about the theft allegation. He boldly shouted, "I was mad, really mad, I couldn't stay there, I would have did something . . . they just all pointed their fingers at me."

Asiny went on to say, he and his guardian returned to Nobleton High the next day to request a transfer. The following transpired, "We went the next day to get my transfer papers and he was trying to say that I was swearing and everything and they were going to give me detention for stealing money. They denied all of it and tr[ied] to say that I was swearing and trying to fight them off."

Asiny suggested that racism exists. "A lot of people don't even talk about it, they just go to school and they are getting mocked, they don't even talk to their parents or anything. That happens to everybody."

When Asiny decided to leave Nobleton he looked at his dropout experience as positive. He pointed out "I would say a positive [experience], to get out of that school and go back to Cow Poke."

Despite Asiny's experience, he returned to Nobleton in the second semester. He was kicked out he said, because he skipped one art class. He pointed out, "I was trying

not to get kicked out of school and she said nope, I don't want you in my school." He was referring to the principal of Nobleton.

On the whole, even though Asiny experienced what he calls "racism" he concluded, "I am going to eventually go back to school. It is not hard to go back and I am going back next semester."

Asiny had advice for students and staff. He stated the belief that people should "talk [to] everybody and don't be so snobby." When asked what would have kept him in school, he replied, "If the teachers would have apologized for how they treated me about the lost money." Incidentally, he still maintained that he did not take the money. His locker and clothing were searched, and it never showed up on him.

Like some of the other students interviewed, sports played an important role in Asiny's life. He is an excellent soccer player, he plays soccer in England in the winter. He was asked what role sports plays in his life. He replied, "Awesome. My mom thought I was going to be a bad [kid] and I never did, be bad, you know. I am glad."

Asiny shared his concept of a "mellow and non-mellow" teacher. His art teacher was cool. "He was a mellow person, like see some teachers make you go off, but him, he was nice, he told us what to do you know, pay attention. Like we had the highest marks in that class." A nonmellow teacher is one who

is always getting in your face and always nagging, nagging do this, do that, do this do that, it just wants to make you say f— off you know, I don't like that.

Like Mr. M..... he never, we just sit there and he writes all the stuff on the board and you do it and you do extra work and he would give us tests. He was

a nice guy, but he barely said anything, he was sitting there in his own world, he was a biker.

Asiny's conviction to finish school, despite the obstacles, is best summarized by this goal: "I hope that I make the big time soccer. . . . that's my goal and to visit university because I want to be a gym teacher, that's my goal." Without a doubt, it would appear that his personal physical education experience has not hindered his desire to become a physical education teacher. Asiny's advice to other students: "Don't do drugs and stay in school."

Art at Hazard

Art attended Hazard High for part of his grade ten. Art was quiet, and the taping was somewhat difficult because he was so soft spoken. He dropped out of Hazard because his girlfriend moved to the city, and she wanted him to go with her. He left school to go with her; however, they broke up and he returned to the reserve.

His story reflected the importance of friends. Art tried returning to school and found himself alone. "I just had 2 months left before school was done. But then I was feeling lonely because all of my friends all dropped out. So [I] got bored of it [school] and left . . . [I] just walked out myself."

When asked what might have helped him stay in school, he naturally replied, "if I had friends to talk with and hang around with." He shared an experience of a "favorite teacher." What made that teacher favorite? "Well he was fun, and we would go to town for work and then I [would] have another class with him. Trips [and] we talk[ed] and tell jokes."

Although Art's story is short he is clear about the role of friends in his school experiences. Their role is paramount. He was bored when his friends dropped out, and he made the same choice too; he no longer had friends to hang out with.

Summary of Student Stories

All nine students identified one reason why they left school. However, as the conversations went on, most were able to articulate three or four other contributing factors from their perspective that affected their school departures. Table 5 provides a summary of all of the reasons they identified as contributing to their leaving school.

Despite some of their experiences, seven of the nine have returned to school. Asiny is returning to school in England when he goes to play soccer. Two of the nine are now in adult education programs; they are taking adult upgrading. The others are back in provincial or reserve schools.

Aside from the daily challenges some of these students faced, they all saw themselves returning to school. Eaglechild was the only student I was not able to locate to determine his plans. Everyone else was either in school or planned to return in the near future.

Furthermore, at the time of interviews, all students saw themselves returning to school. The fact that they were presently not in school did not appear to be the end all for them. Moreover, the fact that eight of nine were confirmed back in school suggested that they would eventually find their way through a school system, whether provincial, First Nations, or adult education programs.

Table 5

Student Voices

<p>1. Sage @ Scottsville</p> <p>Medical</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -unwelcome -discomforting -teacher's don't care -racism
<p>2. Lee-Ann @ Scottsville</p> <p>Low grades</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -teacher hassles -teachers not liking her -detention -teacher favoritism
<p>3. Eaglechild @ Scottsville</p> <p>Fighting (kicked out)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -detentions -suspensions -name calling -teacher's not good -racism
<p>4. Jerome @ Scottsville</p> <p>Bored with curriculum</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -teachers too strict -suspensions -detentions -favoritism -racism
<p>5. Pisim @ Nobleton</p> <p>Drugs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -relationship with mom -boyfriend problems -pregnancy -didn't feel comfortable -wasn't wanted there -racism

(table continues)

Table 5

Continued

<p>6. Linda @ Nobleton</p> <p>Alcohol</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -drugs -relationship problems with boyfriend -teacher problems
<p>7. Kihew @ Nobleton</p> <p>Bored with school</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -bored with the teachers -bored with the classes -no excitement (challenges)
<p>8. Asiny @ Nobleton</p> <p>Different from other kids</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -teachers racist -favoritism -wrongly accused of stealing
<p>9. Art @ Hazard</p> <p>Relationship problems with girlfriend</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -friends dropping out, lonely by himself

Their stories provided insight into what might have kept them in school.

Several key factors were identified including:

- **variation in curriculum and instructional approach**
- **teachers who demonstrated a sense care**
- **trust was important, although not labelled as such**
- **teachers as friends and instructors**
- **having a sense of being respected as individuals.**

Their stories are important because what they shared has implications for how schools embrace students, including diversity. Many felt subtle hints of racism; real or not, they interpreted the situations as they saw and experienced them.

Voices of the Mahihkan Parents

For years, literature on Native students dropping out of school has determined a greater need to include parental voices and active participation at the school level concerning their children's education (Davis, 1986; Hurlburt, Gade, & McLaughlin, 1990; Macdonald, 1989; Reyhner, 1992).

The literature indicated parents need to be involved in the education of their children. As a result, this study undertook to interview parents to determine from their perspective, why they thought their children dropped out of school. Consequently, parents were given the opportunity to voice their concerns about First Nations children in provincial high schools. One of the first questions was, "In your opinion, why do First Nations students drop out of provincial high schools, and more specifically, why did your child drop out?" (see guided questions, Appendix B).

Relatively few studies sought to understand from the students perspective why they drop out (Coladarci, 1983; Dehyle, 1989; Eberhard, 1989; Platero et al., 1986), and fewer studies ask parents (HLA Consultants, 1984; Ontario Ministry of Education, 1989). Consequently, parents appeared relieved and vociferous when given the opportunity to share their opinions about their children leaving provincial high schools.

Racism

Racism was the major theme identified by the parents. Although six parents were interviewed, the stories of four appear here; the other two simply duplicated the sharing around the topic.

According to the parents, racism is a major contributing factor why students leave provincial high schools. The effects of racism appear to be multi-generational. Most parents experienced racism and now their children are experiencing the pain and long-term effects, too.

The following four stories of Bart, Martha, Drummer, and Butterfly denote what they wished to share about why their children left provincial high schools adjacent to Mahihkan.

Bart

When Bart was asked why his son left the provincial high school, he replied, "Mainly because he didn't like the teachers and he didn't like the students; there was discrimination and he often got into fights over that. Whenever there were fights, the teacher would side with the White students and kick the Indian students out of school."

Bart noted, "He more or less was forced to drop out, the Principal told him not to come back." He shared another example of racism in another local provincial school: "At Hazard, they had a big riot on their hands between the White students and the Natives fighting. Yeah, there was the cowboys and Indians incident. . . . it's the same at Scottsville, the farm kids against the Indians and usually the Whites outnumber the Indians. They are on the losing end, which is where it is right now. Same with Elkton or Goodview, they are all in the same boat."

Despite the racist experiences his children endured, it appeared as if Bart would like to believe things will change in the future. He noted the need to educate "our" teachers:

In the end, we have to educate our teachers about the effects of discrimination and what that [effect] has on a student's life because some of those experiences now, when they are young, they will carry all their lives, in the back of their minds and those attitudes will stick. They are learning how to interact with people, and if they have bad experiences, then they have a bad attitude about certain people, or groups of people. Its all about discrimination, it's the main problem at Scottsville, as far as I can see. I think the White teachers have to be worked on too. Because, if they are contributing to the problem, the problem is not going to change, its going to stay the same year after year until you get a teacher that doesn't discriminate. It's sad, but it's a reality and we have to get those people to be educated in those areas.

Bart was both angry and sad when his son dropped out of school. He spoke of the effects and consequences of dropping out noting:

You have to look out for the future, that's what I am thinking. What he is doing is [if] he ever has a family of his own and hasn't finished high school [he] is condemning himself and my grandchildren to a life of poverty. He will never have an office job, a good paying job, he will never be a doctor or a lawyer, or whatever to make good money. He will be caught in a trap of welfare. I know it looks easy to get welfare every month, but once you start having children you can't make ends meet, when you go through life there's all kinds of disasters that come on you. Say you lose a family member, and you have funeral expenses or a sickness that cost money, and if you are caught on welfare, you have to cover the expenses so the money that would have normally went to food, power, gas bills is now going to this other problem that has suddenly come upon you and that's the way life is. Trouble comes and trouble goes and we still have to solve them no matter what our income is.

Martha

Martha's son attended Scottsville. She felt her son had left because of peer pressure and poor relationships with other students, although indirectly she pointed out perceived racism as reflected in the following quote:

In most cases, he was the one getting in trouble. One particular student used to pick fights, one point he [son] stood up for himself. He didn't fight but he stood up for himself and it just happened the teacher walked out of the classroom

while the two were arguing in the hallways. My son was told to get the hell out of the school. . . . When I got a hold of her she said he was out of control, very upset. He was upset because this teacher wouldn't give him the opportunity to give his side of the story. He was getting more and more frustrated. She was doing more yelling at him and this kid is grinning in the back while he's getting yelled at. He [son] is trying to explain what happened in the hallway to lead up to this.

Martha further explained how she tried several times to get a hold of the teacher and was continuously told that she was busy or that she was in class. Finally, when she did contact her, the teacher admitted that she may have told him to get the hell out, " I can't remember my exact words I may have said that."

Martha attended provincial schools as a youngster, too. Based on her experiences, it appeared as if we have a long way to go in addressing the racism. She shared some of her experiences:

There was a lot of racism, I lost a lot, I gave up a lot. It got to the point where I wasn't interested no more. I felt like I wasn't intelligent enough. If you didn't answer a question, you were dumb or stupid. I think through the years I just lost interest all together. That really affected how I felt about myself, my self esteem. That's why when I see what these kids go through, it really upsets me. I don't want to see them robbed of their self esteem. I'm trying to raise them telling them they are intelligent. They can do things. It really bothers me, that the school system can turn around and tell your kid these things. I ended up

being really shy and scared to answer questions. I'd sit and pray I wasn't asked to answer questions because I felt I couldn't answer it. I'd be humiliated if I gave the wrong answer, I don't want my kids going through that I wasted a lot of years, I could have been somewhere else, so much further ahead had I felt I could do things.

Drummer

Drummer was guardian to a child who attended Nobleton High. His son was accused of stealing money in the boys locker room during a P.E. class. Drummer went to the school at his son's request, in the hope of clearing up the misunderstanding. He noted, "I tried, but I wasn't successful. The staff didn't want to listen, like they were damned positive. Like if they were so sure, if they were so strong, why did they question Asiny over and over again if they were so sure he took the stuff they were saying. . . . they just kept accusing him."

Racism can be subtle, and once you've experienced it, sometimes there is no clear, definite way to say one is being discriminated against based on race, unless its outright. However, many minorities often think they are being treated unfairly. This is often a "gut feeling" based on the circumstances. Drummer explained, "You've got to experience discrimination, racism. I experienced it, I got beat up because I was an Indian . . . they were saying round up the wagons, the Indians are here and he started doing this behind my back."

Despite the pain this experience caused Asiny, like Bart, he was optimistic and hoped things would change. He noted, "I wish we had more of our educated people

going to work in their schools so they could reason. If our people could get into those schools and work with and help out the staff over there. I don't know how many Native teachers if any are there"

Butterfly

Butterfly's son, Kihew, attended Nobleton High. She was disappointed and hurt when her son dropped out of school. Butterfly experienced an array of educational experiences herself: a former residential school survivor, she was later one of the first Natives to attend integrated schools. She observed how things had not changed much since her time. Back then, physical punishment was permitted. "I remember yard-sticks flying and rulers and these were directed a lot at the Native students, . . . however, I didn't know how to rebel because I was in residential school. I didn't know how to speak for myself."

How were classes back then? She noted:

I think even the seating in the classrooms, Native students tend[ed] to sit in the back and the White students in front. You didn't dare cross that imaginary border because there was a border in everything we did in school. It used to puzzle me, but I didn't pursue it as long as I was left by myself I could only remember one White guy that hung around with some of us Native students. He made friends with everybody, actually, he was friends with everybody. He was the only one that could go in and out of that border that was set.

Butterfly's son experienced trouble throughout most of his school days. He seemed to have this need to advocate for the other children, and sometimes he was looked upon as a trouble-maker by teachers. Butterfly recalled a time when she was called into the school in the junior high years: "The same thing, he was disruptive and by this time Kihew was very outspoken. Many times if somebody did wrong he would speak up for them, but the teachers did not think [he should]. He spoke up for anyone; Native kids, White kids, anybody that he thought was being wronged, mostly for Native kids, a lot of them were so meek."

Butterfly shared threads of a conversation on the effects of racism. She talked to a Nobleton High teacher, who acknowledged being part Native. He commented to her, "I can feel for these kids because I went through that and it still exists in this school, in this age and time."

Being a wise mother, Butterfly recognized peer pressure and cultural identity as crucial factors affecting youth. She shared a teaching she received from her mother, just prior to her mother's death:

The peer pressure is so humongous. The peers have more say than the parents now. There's so [many] influences and yet we are telling them, you are Native. I think a lot of them have to find their individuality. They have to find themselves, sometimes you can't find yourself. It's too late. I know before my mother passed away that's one thing she stressed to all of us; find yourself, find your true self and live up to that. Live your true self, that was one of her last words to us. I can see where these teenagers are coming [from], like everything

is coming down too fast; they are trying to fit [in] and they are not quite sure where they belong.

Like the other parents, Butterfly was optimistic and saw good, amidst the muddy waters of perceived racism. When asked how schools could help, she responded, "By having counsellors who are there for the students." Initially, she felt "brushed aside" by Nobleton's school counsellor; however, she felt her son was genuinely cared for by the school vice principal. She acknowledged:

But who actually helped was Mrs. Beamer, that was his science teacher. She's the vice principal. She phoned me at work and at home and express[ed] her concern about Kihew, about his attendance. Actually, she was the only one that went out of her way in all the years that he has been in and out of [the] provincial school system. She's the only lady that ever contacted me like that.

In all instances, parents expressed heartfelt emotion that their children were no longer in school. Those emotions included threads of anger, discouragement, feeling down, being disappointed and hurting like hell, to a sense of sadness and a desire to cry. Given the parents' lived experiences, and some of the hardships they had encountered as youngsters, it is no wonder they wanted to see changes for their children, to break the cycle of oppression and poverty.

Regardless of how they felt, most were able to identify ways of improving school experiences for their children. They wanted to see Native teachers, Native counsellors, cultural in-service sessions, positive interactions with school administration instead of bad news (crisis interactions), more positive school environment for students,

Native role models, peer helpers, teachers who treated students *fairly*, talks/plays on racism, effective on-going communication, meetings with school boards, and parental involvement.

Summary of Parent Voices

Six parents were interviewed, three males and three females. Of the six, three of their children were also interviewed. Collectively, the parents identified the following reasons (in no special order) for their children's departure from provincial schools: discrimination; fights; peer pressure; drugs; racism; being accused of stealing; problems with the Principal; other students or the teachers; a sense of discouragement by staff; sense of being picked on by the teachers; sense of not being listened to; being blamed without cause; skipping classes; lack of interest; a sense of teachers not caring about their children's needs; being outspoken and, consequently, being branded a "bad kid"; death in the families; lack of parental support; cousins left so they left, too; and skipping. Table 6 provides a summary of the reasons four parents identified as contributing to their children leaving school.

Five of the six parents identified racism as a major factor affecting their children in provincial schools. Not only did they share stories of their children's painful experiences, but they cited other families experiences, too, including similar racist experiences they lived through 20 years prior. The theme of racism came through clearly in their stories.

Essentially, all parents were concerned and wanted the best, whatever that may be, for their children. Despite some of the negative experiences their children faced,

Table 6

Parent Voices

<p>1. Bart (child @ Scottsville)</p> <p>Did not like the teachers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -racism -fights -discrimination -death in families -lack of parental support -poverty -drugs
<p>2. Martha (child @ Scottsville)</p> <p>Peer pressure/poor relationships with others</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -racism -administrative conflict with teachers/principal -discouragement with school staff (put downs) -sense of not being "listened to" -drugs -skipping classes
<p>3. Drummer (child @ Nobleton High)</p> <p>Theft accusation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -racism -discrimination -unfair treatment by teachers
<p>4. Butterfly (child @ Nobleton High)</p> <p>Peer pressure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -racism -branded as bad kid (outspoken) -cultural identity issues

they believed an education is crucial for the development of their children. Bart reiterated his opinion about education:

There's one equalizer in society, it's called education. You can come from the poorest house in Mahihkan, and you can climb the ladder and here's how you do it, you do it through education. You could be born into a very poor family and climb your way up the ladder through education. You can become a doctor or a lawyer and be on top of the world and you will never have any regret. So, education is the key, you have to use that as a stepping stone, you have to persevere, though that's the only thing, stick it out all the way to the end.

Voices of the Mahihkan Community Leaders

Four leaders were interviewed: two females and two males. One of the leaders was a former Chief of the tribe, and at the time of interview, was a Tribal councillor and education portfolio holder. Additionally, the others had experience with the Mahihkan First Nations school board ranging from three to approximately 10 years. Therefore, all were seasoned educators/leaders in the community.

Like the parents, the community leaders usually started by sharing stories of their own school experiences. Like the students, some were not overly pleasant experiences. Several participants were residential school survivors, and several were the first to experience Indian Affairs' integration schemes. The data are presented by themes rather than individual narratives to avoid repetition: Racism, effects of welfare, the changing role of parents, special education labeling, transfer policies between schools, and tuition agreements.

Perceived Reasons for Dropping Out

Some of the reasons leaders believed students left provincial high schools included: students have a hard time fitting in (they get tired of fighting racism and prejudice, they experience a sense of being made to feel stupid); they are physically tired, as sometimes they are the caregivers of younger siblings; their low grades discourage them; school policies related to attendance and skipping are enforced; and conflicting interactions with teachers and students.

One leader compared his school experiences with what our children might encounter today. He noted:

I look back now, from those first experiences and I look at what may be happening today. Certainly, things have not changed all that much you know. For instance, let me go to the hard core issues, like racism, racial discrimination and so on. We experienced that. There were certain days we had to fight just to be respected. Actually, fight our fellow students. I see that happening today when some of our children are attending integrated schools. They are being exposed to the same things, they are having to deal with racial discrimination, not only from the students, but also members of the staff. We experienced those things back in the early fifties, and now here we are in the 1990s and there are certain things that haven't changed all that much.

Another leader shared an experience she was aware of regarding children dropping out of provincial high schools. In her job, she saw evidence of this woundedness. She commented:

Based on my experiences here at work and the people I deal with, some of those kids take a lot of family violence, alcohol abuse, sexual, physical abuse to school. Like you know, they have that inside them, they take that and carry that to school with them. Some of it is just like taking responsibility of the caregiver. So, by the time they probably get to school, their tired [be]cause they have to get everyone else ready.

Racism

Throughout most of the interviews, experiences of racism emerged. These adults, shared experiences of racism they lived between 25 and 50 years ago while they attended school. By providing an opportunity to address their children's provincial high school experiences, the pain of racism resurfaced. Has anything changed?

One of the leaders spoke of three experiences: first, while attending residential schools; secondly, when he was sent to integrated school (provincial school) in a nearby non-Native community; and thirdly, when he was sent to attend another non-Native school (provincial school) miles away.

After the [residential school] experience I went to school in There it was a shock for me, like I went to school with White kids and I was integrated with the White system. I just couldn't adapt to it. I don't know what [happened], I didn't have the confidence in myself to compete or to learn with those kids at that level.

He went on to share how he ran away from the [Indian] superintendent. In those days the Superintendent lived and worked on the reserve. He noted:

I ran away from this guy and he threatened me. Like he was gonna put me in jail or a boy's school or reform school, you name it. I was on the run for about two and a half months, cops used to come looking for me [but] couldn't find me. As soon as I seen them, I was outta sight.

From there he moved to another provincial school where similar experiences occurred. In that school, "The same thing [happened] we couldn't get along with the kids. There, you know, we were, how do you call it, discriminated on. We just couldn't take it. Like Peter and Mike, with myself, [we] didn't last there for two weeks, we got booted out."

"[Discrimination] that was really totally different to us at the time. The discrimination part, you know, that was a big thing at that time and a lot of our Native people, they didn't fight back or answer back you know."

From there, he moved to another provincial school miles away. There he noted things were different. When asked what was different, he shared, "I don't know, I guess the setting. The people you know, the people were more aware of Native people. They accepted them, like integration. There was a wide variety of people from different nationalities."

It is clear that participants believe racism or the sense of being discriminated against was pervasive, as these leaders were in school, and it is something that they think is still quite operative. Furthermore, they believed it was a significant factor affecting children who attend provincial schools.

The Effects of Welfare

Two of the four leaders were quite vocal about the perceived handicaps of welfare in the community. Historically, they cited the effects. One noted:

I guess it was the beginning of an expressed dependency for our people on the federal government. It took away their pride and their initiative to do things for themselves. . . . when welfare came in it changed the whole mentality. That mentality is quite prevalent today. You know that others will do for us, like providing food, shelter and clothing I don't want to sound facetious when I say that, but I view that as probably the most detrimental thing that could have been done [to] anyone, especially our people. I believe that because part of that dependancy started with the educational system we were exposed to [residential school]. It was drummed into us that our way of life was no good, our language was no good, our religion was no good, our people, our society wasn't any good. So we were put in these educational institutions to civilize us and christianize us. You [knew] there was a better way of life, you [knew] so, [however] when you [stay in] that type of negative environment, it is impressed upon you day in and day out, [until] it becomes much more difficult for young people to accept the challenge of obtaining an education. . . . so what did they pass on to their children? You don't have to work hard because the government will provide. . . . This welfare syndrome, the welfare mentality, you can't blame those people, because that is how they were trained. You become

dependent. . . . I always go back to welfare, you know the damage it has done to our people.

Another of the leaders spoke of the harmful effects of welfare in the community today. He noted, "Our people are so used to that handout system, if we could ever abolish that, what do you call it, this welfare mentality? . . . it comes down to that welfare thing, once the welfare came into our community, once that program was instilled here, everything just lacked . . . I think we would be that much better off [without welfare]."

How does this get addressed? Well this leader suggested, "We have to address this whole issue [of] the welfare mentality, the dependency and so on. We have to give [it] to the parents, that they are responsible for themselves, that they are held responsible for their children." They are responsible; however, they need support. This dependency may be part of the multi-generational effects of residential school to which the above noted community leader referred. Maybe, at this time the whole community needs to rally together and re-awaken the spirit within.

It appeared there is genuine concern about the harmful effects of welfare and the resultant effects it is having on parents and their children. Two of the leaders spoke to the issue quite staunchly.

Changing Role of Parents

The role of parents has changed significantly in a time span of approximately one hundred years. The subsequent effects of history on families has significantly impacted the lives of children. These effects are multi-generational and often result in

soul wounds; sometimes individuals are unaware of the long-term effects. They continue playing out the old script, the only way they know, based on their experiences in residential school.

Schools must first understand Canadian history, and how it disrupted First Nations people's lives, and secondly, learn about residential schools and the aftermath of that attempted cultural genocidal era. Then they must understand how the traditional family was totally uprooted in order to understand its effects today.

Traditionally, parents were part of a larger, more wholistically based community, where everyone was responsible for the children. The leaders alluded to the effects of residential school on the erosion of the communal lifestyle. Consequently, some First Nations communities are experiencing pain in proportions and ways with which they are still learning how to cope. Likewise, some communities have not awakened yet; they are still sleeping. As one Elder noted, "The residential school effects take a long time for one to realize what was normal in those settings is not in fact normal. Only when I left, years later, did I realize how 'unnatural' that whole time was."

Leaders in the First Nations community recognize that parenting has been severely impacted; however, one challenge appears to be how to address the needed changes.

No doubt, everyone agrees that education, parents, and community go hand in hand. One leader noted:

It is my contention that at the community level, certainly, the responsibility for education of our young people is everyone's responsibility. [The] leadership, parents, Elders, staff and I am not only talking about the educational staff, but staff on the Tribal Administration. All sectors, everybody has a responsibility for the proper education of our young people.

At the same time, he cited the need for parents to take back their responsibilities. He expressed his sentiment: "But I still maintain that the key player in the education of our young people is the parents themselves. I cannot emphasize that enough. I can also appreciate the difficulty that parents have. Some of it emerging from how they themselves were brought up."

Another community leader expressed concern about parents and their roles too. He noted:

A lot of our own people, they neglect their young you know. . . . like they don't have the gratitude, [the] initiative to sort of push them you know. I don't think they give enough attention to their kids at home, no motivation I think it starts right from the household I found out there's a lot of people that are involved in that [drugs]. Parents you wouldn't think that they'd be involved in that kind of thing, it's scary, at times to think about that.

Another leader, speaking about necessary changes in the provincial schools commented on parents, too. Her comments took a somewhat different slant. On parental voice she vocalized:

A lot of the parents aren't vocal . . . , I think they get lost and parents don't have a voice in the system. The average parent at Mahihkan is not vocal unless they get pushed over the edge. [Then] they are vocal to the extreme and get angry . . . and that always works against them. So there needs to be a platform [for] parents to be heard because we don't have a voice, like the parents here in Mahihkan don't have a voice, they don't have voting rights. They don't have voting rights in selecting their board and so there's a whole big group of people in the . . . school division which our people don't have a voice in their system. I think that as a result, students don't have advocates to support them when they get into trouble or get into difficulties. . . . I think that whole area of representation is not there, to me that's the first big action or act that will make a difference for the success of our students in provincial schools.

Another of the community leaders spoke of parents from a different perspective, too. She shared:

[Residential school] robbed them of all their self respect and love for one [another], for themselves, it wiped them out and changed them into a new person. . . . they become adults [and] they don't know how to treat their kids but they want to have children so they can have someone to love and then they end up doing the same thing. Has to do with the residential schools.

The area of parenting and the effects of residential school on contemporary parents is an area that needs to be addressed. All participants in this educational picture must understand what transpired in the loss of parenting skills in a matter of a mere 100

years or so. From the interviews, it appeared that the community leaders recognized the current state of affairs. They also acknowledged that parents need help both personally and as advocates for their children in provincial schools.

Special Education Labeling

Special education labeling has been an area of concern for some Native parents over the years. Schools currently receive more funding for students diagnosed as special education. Previously, some Native parents felt their children were unnecessarily placed in such classes. Coupled with being in these classes is the fact that more dollars accompany children diagnosed as requiring special education.

One community leader shared his concern, based on personal experiences with his own children:

I was sort of discouraged about it. Like how our Native students were categorized, you know, in the outside schools, in the area of special ed programs. . . .

I was never aware of that till I got involved in the process [board member].

Then I find out that the majority of our Native students are categorized as special ed students automatically regardless if they need it or not. I had a situation with my own kids, like they went to school in Hazard. I knew for a fact that my kids didn't need that. I got a notice, a letter, saying that I had to sign that form for my kids to get that special ed program you know. I went directly to the school and I started asking questions. I sat down with them. I started questioning them. They didn't have any direct answers you know. They just said, this was just a process that they followed and it was given to them that

they had to have that in place. . . . it's just a money making thing for the outside schools.

Transfer Policies Between Schools

One leader spoke of the effects of transfer policies between schools and how these may affect students who are on the verge of dropping out. This topic is important, because it leads into the next topic of tuition agreements.

This leader shared the following about a student on the verge of dropping out of Scottsville:

So anyway, I phoned back to the Scottsville principal and also told her [parent] about the transfer at this point. Even if she were to come to school here without that transfer she wouldn't receive credits because she needed to be released from that school so that she could be put on our system and get awarded the credit hours, credit marks. If she is still on their system and she is here, she is [an] illegitimate student and she wouldn't get credits earned. She felt just lost in the system and [she] felt she was being manipulated by everyone. I just totally felt powerless to do anything. To me, that was the worst case I have been involved in with a student planning to drop out. The student did drop out!

Tuition Agreements With Provincial Schools

Indian and Northern Affairs Canada pays the school tuition on behalf of First Nations students attending provincial schools. The terms and conditions of the agreements between provincial school boards and INAC do not include Mahihkan First

Nations Education Authority. Consequently, Mahihkan Education Authority have no direct say in the accountability factor for the millions of dollars transferred federally on their behalf. As a result, community leaders were very vocal on this topic, as it affects First Nations students in provincial high schools adjacent to Mahihkan.

All community leaders expressed concern about provincial school tuition agreements. Some were more cautious than others, but all agreed that taking control in some fashion of tuition would give Mahihkan greater control over educational opportunities afforded First Nations students in provincial schools.

One community leader suggested that a way of countering the dropout rate would be to control provincial tuition agreements. She said:

If Mahihkan had their own agreement with the province we would have more say and we would have control of the dollars. You know we would have our say how the money would be spent. Hopefully we would get the same amount that they get [provincial school authorities] I don't really believe in that [provincial tuition agreement negotiations] because I have a strong belief in protecting our treaties. Maybe if it was developed by a First Nation person who is trusted, who you could trust [with] integrity.

Another leader felt that students might stay in provincial schools longer if Mahihkan was the holder of the agreements. He posed the following question:

What would happen if we [took] over our own tuition agreement, [including] bussing, transportation [and] all those different programs"? Tuition agreements are basically the cost incurred [for] a child going to school. . . . in

my understanding, the outside schools don't really have the gungho to go full out, [for] what Native students need to go to schools. They don't give them that attention. . . . I guess the thing is to get control of the tuition agreements, to sort of lead, to give Native students, the child a chance to get his full break. . . . the benefits of that money. In an outside school, regardless if that kid goes to school for two or three days you automatically [pay]. You lose out right after the fact, like the kid drops out or is kicked out. They still have to pay that money, but this way, we say, if your gonna take our students in your school, you get paid for what you give. . . . I know for a fact, if we ever get to that point where we deal with that tuition we'd have more to say. They'd have to answer to us, you get paid according to what you do for us. I hope to see that when I'm still alive.

Like the other two leaders, this gentlemen felt the same way. He felt that taking control of tuition agreements would help Mahihkan have greater authority over monies and, consequently, a better position to help students who choose to attend provincial schools.

He noted:

The other thing we can do as communities and this is one of the unfinished things we have to work on collectively as Aboriginal people [is] take control of tuition agreements. For years, even up to this day, the Department of Indian Affairs has been entering into tuition agreements on behalf of our children.

There has been no involvement, on the content of curriculum and all those other

things as to what that dollar is buying on behalf of our children. When our children are kicked out of school for whatever reason, the money stays and that has been a bone of contention; a sour point for me. Like they will really promote and p.r. parents to send their kids to their schools through a major campaign. A lot of our people send their kids there and for the first month of the school year a lot of our kids are in those schools. Something happens in the first two weeks of October, a lot of those same kids are kicked out. My discontent with that is by then the first headcount is done for half of year. The full tuition for that year is allocated to that institution and those kids that are kicked out, by in large, they arrive on the doorsteps of our schools at the community level. We are not provided the funding to continue their education.

He went on to say, there is a definite need to take over the control of tuition agreements so the monies remain in the hands of the First Nation communities. Furthermore, there would be direct accountability for the millions of dollars that exit Mahihkan annually as dolled out by INAC on First Nations behalf.

He stated:

If they are going to kick them out of their schools, I don't see why they need to be paid for the balance of the year. I think we need to impress upon these institutions once they take our kids through their doors they make every effort to retain [them] and work with the parents. We have a lot of work to do, but I am confident we can do it.

When asked why the tuition agreements had not been taken over by Mahihkan First Nations, two leaders spoke with deep understanding and considerable thought of the subject:

There is a fear, and rightfully so. There is a fear if we take control of the funding from the Department of Indian Affairs and we buy educational programming we would sever the fiduciary tie for the delivery of education to our children. I think therein lies the major concern of leadership today.

The whole area of representation is not there, and to me that's the first big action or act that will make a difference for the success of our students in provincial schools.

How do we do that? The first one is always the treaty right to education and it seems that the message seems to be once the student is off-reserve and in a provincial school system it is none of our business, like that's the message we get.

From who? It comes from Indian Affairs, it comes from the system, the superintendent, because we never actually talk to the board members. We only talk to the superintendent and that's sort of like, they have total control whatever in the system and they don't have [to] share it. The decision making, share the responsibility of these students because there, like [it's] their whole box of wax. We are out of their system, we don't have anything to say, that's sort of how we have been viewed. . . . It's like we'll do our thing you do your own thing. . . .

These leaders believe the tuition agreements hold part of the key to more effective relationships with outside school boards. One leader noted, "They [provincial school authorities] would begin to listen and start acting more cooperative[ly]. [Right now] they don't really have to do anything for us, they don't owe us anything because the tuition comes directly from Indian Affairs to them and we are not in the picture."

How will all this transpire? One of the leaders elaborated some of the crucial concerns associated with the tuition negotiation process. Mahihkan has worked on this issue for several years and is currently at a temporary stand-still. Major stumbling blocks include Indian Affairs and their inflexibility regarding the recognition of education as a treaty right.

Consequently, Mahihkan will not jeopardize the federal treaty position. Indian Affairs wants to negotiate a tripartite agreement where provincial school board authorities, Mahihkan education authority, and federal officials from Indian Affairs would all sign the agreement. Mahihkan wants two bilateral agreements. One would be between themselves and Indian Affairs, and they would then negotiate the second with the local school boards. Thus, they could include specific clauses as they see fit, knowing the community, the needs, and the children.

The female leader noted:

Anything less won't be good for our future in terms of our youth and [the] next generation. . . . we are not going to put ourselves in a situation where we are powerless again. . . . right now we are in a situation where we are powerless, we know this and we know the feeling. We won't settle for anything less than a

bilateral agreement. Bilateral meaning we sign an agreement with Indian Affairs and set up the terms and conditions based on principles of treaty. Then from there, deal a bilateral [agreement] with the provincial school board based on what we negotiate with Indian Affairs.

For this to occur one leader felt Mahihkan Tribal leaders would have to have a very clear vision including vision of the ideal situation, honed negotiation skills, and stand on firm principles. Anything less would be detrimental. She noted they would not go for anything that "waters down" the treaty rights between themselves and the federal government of Canada. In the end, "By doing this process with the Band having more say in provincial monies, the ultimate goal is to help our kids from dropping out and [to] having better relationships, etc. in provincial schools if that's where they [student] chose."

She concluded by expressing her perception of what First Nations drop out students might be experiencing:

I think to get [to] where a student is, what is going on with a student at the time they decide to drop out, like dropping out, [it's] their last or seems to be their only means of survival or getting through whatever situation is facing them. I think that says a lot for us adults. To be kind of watching, observers to what is going on with our young people. I would say we are passive observers in the process. You are looking at a school and it's just one of several factors which to me, are like flags, the student is holding up. The young person is holding up,

needing attention, needing support, needing something that they are not getting.

This has happened in the past and it is happening now.

All leaders spoke with concern about student dropouts and provincial tuition agreements; consequently, they all believed changes need to occur. There appeared to be legitimate concerns for youth, the drop out problem, and the community in general. The challenge appeared to be how to best bring about the necessary changes, while keeping the treaty relationship intact the way they see fit. Several concluded with closing comments related to improving relationships with outside provincial sources in the interest of young people.

The need to share and build relationships with provincial school authorities is acknowledged in the following:

The message we all need to pay attention to whether they are our own children or somebody else's children, we are still a community and we need to work together. Even if we can impress [upon] our White brothers, that they will have a more meaningful life if they would share, they will in fact find what they are looking for. It is not wealth, it is not to be better than someone else, but to be at peace with yourself. To me, that's what education is all about, do the best that you can, you share the best way you know how. When my work is done on this Earth, I know I made a good effort. I can go and meet my Creator with a good heart, open mind and spirit. That's what education is all about.

This may have been one of the few times these community leaders spoke from their hearts, without having to objectively state everything supported with hard core

data. As community leaders they are always dealing with federal or provincial authorities, which, no doubt, must be full of frustrations. In this process they must constantly back up their comments with supporting data, figures, and reports. This was a time they could share from their heart on a topic that appears to be emotionally charged.

Summary of Community Leaders

All four leaders expounded upon essentially the same themes. All spoke with passion about the need to change the system; however, all realized some of the shortcomings or challenges of bringing about change. All spoke with caution, fearing that necessary changes could jeopardize Mahihkans relationship of education as a treaty right. Some spoke hardline, while others were more cautious and gentle about the change process. However, all recognized that one of the biggest stumbling blocks was the current relationship with Indian Affairs; not with the people within the organization, but the policies to which the bureaucrats adhere. Consequently, rigidity within the system was seen as the most severe drawback in bringing about effective change for the children of Mahihkan First Nations in provincial schools. Table 7 provides a summary of the reasons the community leaders identified as to why students leave school.

Generally, several prominent themes that emerged included dropout experiences, relationships (or lack thereof) with provincial school authorities and school boards, racism, lack of parental involvement, transfer policies between Mahihkan high school and provincial schools, special education policies, welfare and the dependency it

Table 7

Community Leader Voices^a

<p>1. Community Leader (female)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -transfer policies -attendance -low grades -school policies -intimidation -lost to the system -racism
<p>2. Community Leader (male)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -racism -discrimination -intergenerational residential school effects (lack of effective parenting skills) -effects of colonization (including dependency) -government imposed dependency -welfare system mentality -cultural conflict (value differences)
<p>3. Community Leader (female)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -racism -prejudice -nonacceptance in provincial schools -lack of caring -made to feel stupid -family violence -alcohol abuse (families) -physical and sexual abuse (families) -children tired in school -parent/child relationship problems -teen pregnancy -crime -intergenerational effects of residential school
<p>4. Community Leader (male)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -racism -discrimination -special education labelling -lack of parental support -effects of colonization/oppression (welfare dependency)

^aThe reasons are not prioritized.

has created, and the most frequently mentioned theme: tuition agreements (or lack thereof).

Voices of the Elders

It's a known fact in the Mahihkan Cree community, as in most Aboriginal societies, Elders are revered for their knowledge, wisdom, and lived experiences. For this reason, this research would not be balanced without the input and advice of the Elders. In this section of the research, reference is made in first person context due to the critical student-teacher relationship that is part of the teaching of Elders. Out of respect for them and their sharings the data are presented in first person setting.

Two Elders were initially interviewed, while the teachings of two other Elders were later included. All Elders were from Mahihkan First Nation. The research sharings of one male, known here as my male Elder teacher (Moosum) and one female, noted here as my female Elder teacher (Kookum) are described first. The sharings of the two additional Elders are outlined later. A summary table of their sharings is provided in Table 8.

My Male Elder Teacher (Moosum)

In Cree, Moosum means grandfather and is a respected position for an Elder, consequently, the use of Moosum here. When I asked Moosum why students drop out of school he stated, "There's a difference in the understanding from the educator's themselves of the way of life of the Native people." He felt that a lot of the problems that students encounter in provincial schools was the result of differences in culture as

Table 8

Elder Voices

<p>1. Male Elder (Moosum)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -lack of cultural knowledge amongst teachers -lack of teacher care (take Sargent role) -instructional methods -intergenerational impacts of residential school (including welfare dependency and the resultant poverty) -racism/discrimination -peer pressure -relationship problems (boyfriend/girlfriend/parents)' -youth laziness -drugs -foster care system
<p>2. Female Elder (Kookum)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -lack of family support -lack of parental encouragement -family disunity/background -alcohol -brain drain on community
<p>3. Elder's Mike Steinhauer and Joe P. Cardinal (data collected at an elder teaching circle — Blue Quills Nations College)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -intergenerational impacts of residential school (physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual abuse)

well as peer pressure. In addition, he felt discrimination might be a factor much like in his time in “outside schools” coupled with how the “welfare system.... has crippled our society.”

Moosum felt that how children are raised affected whether they stayed in school or not. He was referring to the fact that some First Nations children have been impacted by being in “foster homes.” He expressed the need for young people to be deeply cared about; he noted, “They need a lot of compassion and love shown from their educators.” He went on to note the need for teachers to be more sensitive instead of taking on the role of “Sargent” noting:

They [students] need to have a lot of compassion and love and for that to be shown from their educators. If that’s lacking, then they have problems.

Sometimes it’s not good to take your educational role like a sergeant; you know, they need to be able to work within the same level as the young people so they can begin to share with the young people; be open, I think in a lot of instances that would really work for them.

Likewise, he felt that early male/female relationships affected students’ prospects of continuing their education. When young people get into serious relationships too early, he felt this impacted their educational opportunities, too. In addition, changing lifestyles, including a laziness to rise early in the morning, affected students. Sometimes they do not readily listen to their parents attentively, unlike when he was a youngster.

Finally, Moosum noted significant cultural differences that contribute to poor student/teacher relationships and ultimately to high student dropout rates. He stressed the need for school personnel to immerse themselves in learning of culture apart from their own. He noted:

For example, if I were a White person, working with Native people I would be unsure as to their background or anything. Therefore, if I was educated about their culture, then it could help me much more to open up and understand those young people. That would enhance the teachings so I would think a lot of importance is to educate our teachers.

Essentially, he felt that if he was teaching "White" people, that he would be an ineffective teacher unless he immersed himself in learning about their cultural ways.

Likewise, Moosum felt community and band leaders must get involved in the education of the children; for example, the Chief and Council should be included in the everyday programming. They should occasionally go into the classrooms as guest speakers for both Native and non-Native students and staff. He felt Elders should be involved in the schools on a daily basis, available to work with students and staff. In addition, he felt having our own Native teachers was important, Native students need to be instructed by Native teachers. Accordingly, "We need to have [Cree] educators, more of our own people to teach our young people as role models, so these young people know they can accomplish something through education."

One of the key concerns expressed was loss of some of the cultural teachings, again because of the interaction between Native people and non-Native people since contact. Moosum noted:

They banned all of our culture and spiritual beliefs. I really think [that] crippled us as Native people, losing our identities. There were a lot of beautiful, wholistic teaching of our Elders and our past with. Compassion that we need to survive is replace[ed] with anger, frustration and everything else. It is saddening to see a lot of our young people [who] do not have their language. If they only had that, they would understand much more of how the human body itself functions [the expression of feelings]. . . . I always tell my children we use English, true for communication purposes. No matter what color you are in this world, you will see English. It's everywhere, but one thing we don't have is the feelings that go with language; whereas in our culture, we have our own language and with every expression of that language you can sense the love or hurt that in the tone of the voice, whereas in English you don't feel that.

In conclusion, Moosum felt that Native spirituality must be included and understood in schools, not in the church sense, but more in line with the traditional ways, where one learns, practices, and tries to live the values daily. He noted, "It teaches us to love one another and everything else." He went on to say that those people who practice spirituality are more in synchronicity with their emotions; consequently, they do not lash out easily. They are more balanced. He further noted,

Culture and spirituality are one you know, we wake up giving thanks and we go to bed giving thanks. It's not just one day out of the week. . . . spirituality, it teaches us to love one another and everything. Therefore, if they [teachers] lack that, then their emotions and physically, they are gonna be more negative towards their teaching. They are not gonna be able to control [themselves] easily . . . they need balance.

Moosum concluded that in order to help First Nations students in provincial high school, much work around culture must be done. In addition, "we need to have Cree educators there to teach our young people . . . these young people need role models to accomplish education," he surmised.

My Female Elder Teacher (Kookum)

In the Cree language, Kookum means grandmother. Again, this is an esteemed position for Elders in the community. Respectfully, Kookum offered a slightly different slant to why First Nations students drop out of provincial high schools.

Possibly due to gender, most of the reasons she shared were around family. Like Moosum, she felt welfare severely impacted the community at large. She referred to welfare as "brain drain," another dependency factor of colonization which affects the community negatively according to Kookum. She noted the effects of brain drain: "They always have negative attitudes, always complaining about the Council and everything you know."

Other factors she identified included alcohol, and lack of parental encouragement, especially in parents helping their children with homework. She recalled her

early days as a parent of children who attended provincial schools: "I remember they used to sit and do their homework by lamplight you know, those days we didn't have power." She went on to note that "parents need to be more involved and not play bingo so much . . . but it's so hard to get parental involvement," she concluded.

I asked her why she thought parents don't actively get involved in schools. She shared the following personal experience. "I didn't feel right you know, being poor and being Indian, to go and you know, to be involved in the school, but still my kids went to school anyway."

In closing the interview with Kookum, I asked her if she had any parting comments she wished to share. She shyly noted, "I'm not good at this . . . I wasn't educated." Ironically, all of her children successfully completed provincial schooling and have gone on into professions including banking, nursing, social work, administration and entrepreneurship, to mention a few areas.

I can only surmise that her role as mother was one of demonstrating strong parental encouragement in the home. She shared her fear and shyness of involving herself directly in provincial school activities. I venture to say that there are probably many other First Nations parents who share similar fears on inadequacy regarding teacher/school interaction.

Elders Mike Steinhauer and Joe P. Cardinal

Recently, I had the privilege of attending a class where two Elders from Saddle Lake First Nations were sharing some of their Blue Quills residential school experiences. Elder Joe P. Cardinal recounted where the caretaker, a short man, would stand

on the table and yell at the children stating, "We're here to take the savage out of you people." For 7 years Mr. Cardinal was "programmed" to believe his parents, and their Gods were no good. He served as an altar boy; he recounted, "This is where I learned to drink wine. . . . I used to serve Father LeGoff." He noted the effects of the programming stating, "At one time, I just about believed that my parents weren't good." At that time the priests and nuns used to show the students a picture of Indian children descending to hell, while white people could be visualized going to heaven. Tactics like these were used to instill fear; by doing this they hoped to drive the "savage" out of the Indian. Mr. Cardinal concluded, "It was hell here on earth . . . as they tried to take away my mind and spirit."

Elder Mike Steinhauer recounted a story where, years later, he realized the severe impact the residential schools had on his outlook of what "normal life wasn't." For example, he shared how he thought it was normal behaviour to be beaten and kicked about. He saw a priest take a boy and bash his head against a pillar realizing days later that young boy died of a brain hemorrhage. It wasn't until he was older, reflecting back on some of these experiences that he realized he essentially witnessed a murder. At the time however, he didn't think anything of it because physical abuse was pervasive, an every day occurrence.

Elder Steinhauer concluded, "We've all been colonized and it's going to be a big job to decolonize a whole Nation." The war at hand is to "salvage our Nation, . . . they took action through the spirit of our people, we no longer have a physical war."

The sense of colonization, including loss of identity and spirit was summarized by John Tootoosis, another Elder:

When an Indian comes out of these places it is like being put between two walls in a room and left hanging in the middle. On one side are all the things he learned from his people and their way of life that was being wiped out, and on the other are the white man's ways which he could never fully understand. Here he is hanging in the middle of the two cultures and he is not a white man and he is not an Indian. They washed away practically everything an Indian needed to help himself, to think the way a human person should in order to survive.

(Barman, cited in Pauls, 1996, p. 93)

After both Elders completed sharing their residential school experiences, one of the instructors, a Native lawyer, Wilma Jackknife surmised, "And our job is to put the savage back in." I can only conclude that this is part of the decolonization process to which Mr. Steinhauer referred. After all, both Elders stated, "We need to get away from the guilt and fear invoked by the church and remember there is only one God/Creator."

Many of the drop out reasons affecting First Nations students in provincial high schools that were shared by the four Elders can be attributed to the impact of residential schools. The inter-generational effects upon generations of First Nations members is only starting to be felt openly.

The Elders, like all the other participants, want the best for the youth of the community. They see the necessary changes only with the inclusion of First Nations

parents, leaders, and teachers in provincial schools. In addition, cross cultural training is a must.

Figure 2 (referred to as the cross-case analysis) provides a graphic visual that portrays conclusive themes, extrapolated from the actual data of each specific group. In addition, the graphic outlines themes that were common to all four participant groups.

The Elders' raw data as initially outlined in Figure 3 is best summarized as students dropping out of provincial high schools for the following two reasons in addition to the five common themes of all four groups. The two reasons as outlined by the Elders were: (a) the pressures of growing up, and (b) the intergenerational effects of residential school. In addition, Figure 3 identifies five common themes of all four groups as follows; racism/cultural conflict, student/staff relations, marginalization, alienation, and systemic labelling. Collectively, these seven reasons are best summarized as the reasons why First Nations students drop out of provincial high schools according to the First Nations Elders.

Summary

This chapter included the actual data analysis of the four participant groups; the students, parents, community leaders, and the Elders. Figure 2 provides the data in the form of a visual referred to as the "cross-case analysis." The graphic, a medicine wheel incorporating the four direction colors of the Cree people, provides a graphic summary of the study findings.

Figure 2. Cross-Case Analysis: Actual Reasons Stated for Dropping Out

The Dropout Challenge: Voices of Mahihkan Village Community

Figure 3. The Dropout Challenge: Voices of Mahihkan Village Community; Common Themes

Chapter V addresses the study results, implications, and recommendations relevant to First Nations high school students who dropped out of provincial schools in northern Alberta.

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CHAPTER V

RESULTS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the entire qualitative study, “An Insider’s Perspective: The Dropout Challenge for Canada’s First Nations.” The topic of why First Nations students drop out of provincial high schools is very complicated. Many factors and groups needed to be considered, including the students, the provincial school community, the First Nations community, and the administrative arms of both the First Nations education authority and the provincial school board authorities. All need to acknowledge their role in the educational opportunities afforded First Nations students in provincial schools.

The study took place in a Cree First Nations community of approximately 5,500 residents located in northern Alberta, Canada. The purpose of the study was to give four separate Mahihkan First Nations groups (nine students, six parents, four community leaders and two Elders) the opportunity to voice their opinions why First Nations students drop out of provincial high schools. The study was undertaken for two key reasons: first, and most importantly, to give voice to the First Nations community since almost 50% (RCAP, 1996c), of First Nations students attend provincial schools; and second, to further expand the academic knowledge on First Nations. Since education is

a major contributing factor to improving the economic, cultural, and social conditions in the First Nations community (RCAP, 1996c), this study has major implications for the First Nations community and the provincial school authorities alike.

Few Canadian studies have addressed the problem of First Nations students dropping out of provincial schools (Wilson, 1992) and, more specifically, high schools (NARC, 1984; Ontario Ministry of Education, 1989; Saskatchewan Education, 1985). To the best of my knowledge, no research studies have been written from an Aboriginal world view. Consequently, the need for this study was paramount in addressing this very complex school problem that ultimately becomes part of the larger socio/cultural/economic concerns for all First Nations peoples and federal officials.

Overall, the dropout problem is complex and challenging because many factors and personnel need to be considered, including, for example, the students themselves and their home environments. In addition, how does the role of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), as the financial contributor, affect students dropping out of provincial high schools? Likewise, how are students affected by the provincial schools, including school culture, climate, and environment; or school administrators, including their attitudes and beliefs about cultural diversity? Further to that, how are First Nations students affected by the First Nations education authority, including their relationship with provincial school authorities, such as teachers, administrators, and the school boards? Since race and culture are significant factors in any school system, schools must acknowledge the importance of race and how they embrace and plan for racially diverse student populations.

In addition, provincial school authorities (teachers, administrative and board officials alike) must keep abreast of the latest literature on effective teachers and effective schools (Glasser, 1992, 1993), including those that have a large population of ethnic minorities (Comer et. al., 1996). There is absolutely no room for complacency in schools; schools are there to serve students. Without the students who walk through the doors of the school everyday, no teacher, administrator, or support worker has a job. Therefore, it is imperative that all school personnel recognize the need to embrace a student-centered educational philosophy which welcomes and embraces cultural diversity.

Minority students are especially sensitive to racial issues (Battiste & Barman, 1996; Comer, 1980), thus school staff should be comfortable with, and academically trained to teach, ethnic minorities. In general, the First Nations have experienced atrocities involving blatant genocidal attempts at the hands of the federal government utilizing various church groups including, for example, both the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches (Chrisjohn, Young, & Maraun, 1994; Haig-Brown, 1988; Milloy, 1999). As a result, many First Nations families and communities continue experiencing the inter-generational effects of residential school trauma and soul wounds (Duran & Duran, 1995). Those negative experiences affect the parents and grandparents who were traumatized by their residential school experiences. This trauma, and its long term effects, are sure to affect the academic abilities of the children attending provincial schools today. Consequently, genocidal attempts and oppression have affected every generation of First Nations peoples since contact and explains their difficulties in

dealing with non-Native peoples and their school systems. All the more reason for non-Native school personnel to study and understand First Nation history and its long-term detrimental effects on the entire First Nations community.

The researcher strived to provide a safe, nonintrusive and nonjudgmental opportunity for students, parents, community leaders, and Elders within the First Nation community to voice their opinions about provincial school experiences. Their voice is the result of either direct or indirect involvement with the system. This research was driven by two research questions: first, why do First nations students leave provincial high schools; and second, do First Nations students, parents, community leaders, or Elders recognize ways to keep First Nations students in provincial high schools.

Twenty of the 21 interviews took place within the administrative offices of Mahihkan First Nations, between May and October, 1998. One interview was at the participant's home. The task of locating participants was an arduous undertaking. Through volunteer work in reserve schools, the researcher located names of friends of friends who attended adjacent provincial schools. All potential participants were located by personally visiting them at their homes, where the purpose of the study was explained. Each participant signed an "Informed Consent Form" and students signed a "Student Assent Form" stating the interview would be taped. The actual interviews varied in length from approximately 25 minutes to 1 hour, with the adult interviews tending to be longer and more detailed. The adults not only shared their recent school

experiences regarding their children or grandchildren, but bits of their own in-school experiences as well.

Introduction to the Data Findings

The findings which emerged from this study will be summarized according to the four groups interviewed: students, parents, community leaders, and Elders.

Students: What They Shared

Two students gave examples of positive teacher interactions, while the other seven shared sad and often painful experiences about why they left provincial high schools. Student findings included the following reasons for dropping out: Racism; a sense of not being welcome/discomforting feeling; teachers not caring; medical; teacher hassles; teachers not liking the First Nations students; detentions; teacher favoritism; fighting; being kicked out; suspensions; name calling; teachers no good; bored with the curriculum/school/classes; teachers too strict; drugs/alcohol; relationship difficulties with mom, boyfriend, and teachers; pregnancy; a sense of not being wanted in the school; no excitement or not being challenged; being different from the other kids; being wrongly accused of theft by fellow students and teachers; friends dropping out, with the resulting sense of loneliness leading to student dropping out, also.

Racism was mentioned in almost every student interview, either directly or in more subtle ways, such as "teacher favoritism or teachers not caring." These findings indicate that, from the student perspective, racism is a major problem in the three schools. Five of the six parents also cited racism as a major problem facing First

Nations students in provincial high schools. From the voices of students and parents, it is clear that racism is a serious problem and has continued for years when one considers that parents experienced the same racial slurs and innuendos their children are experiencing a generation later. One mother noted, "I can feel for these kids because I went through that and it still exists in this school in this age and time." A male guardian shared, "You got to experience it, discrimination [and] racism, I experienced it. I got beat up because I was an Indian." Another mom commented on the effects of racial slurs: "It affects their learning and their attitude towards learning. If [they are] being treated the wrong way in situations, their interest starts slipping." One generation later, the parents are still sharing their stories of discrimination based on race, and they are faced with the painful task of helping their children deal with it, too. Clearly, racism is a major problem.

Study after study in the United States on Native Americans dropping out of school cited the need to improve parental involvement in the schools. This same finding has been cited in the few studies done in Canada, also (Bowker, 1992; Brandt, 1992; Coladarci, 1983; Davis, 1986; Eberhard, 1989; HLA Consultants, 1984; Hurlburt et al., 1990; Macdonald, 1989; NADC, 1984; Ontario Ministry of Education, 1989; Reyhner, 1992; Richardson & Richardson, 1986; Saskatchewan Education, 1985; Swisher & Hoisch, 1992).

Parents: What They Shared

The reasons cited by parents why their children dropped out of school are indicative of the need for greater parental voice in provincial schools. The parents

shared the following reasons why their children left provincial high schools: racism/discrimination; fights between students; peer pressure; drugs; theft allegations; problems with students, teachers, and administrators; a sense of discouragement from staff; a sense of being picked on by the teachers; a sense of not being listened to by the teachers; being blamed for things without cause; skipping classes; lack of interest in school; a sense of teachers not caring for the needs of their children; their child being outspoken and being penalized; being branded bad kids; lack of parental support; cousins left so they left (their support system left); death in the family.

The findings indicate there is a real sense that parents are getting the runaround. For example, one parent noted how she tried several times to reach the teacher to discuss her child's dropout situation. She felt "put-off"; she was told, "The teacher's in class," "she's busy," or "she's unavailable." Another parent noted his frustration as he tried to reach the school Principal; he was told, "He's busy." These types of parent/school interactions discourage parents from becoming members of the school community (Comer et al., 1996; Elofson & Elofson, 1988; Jules, 1988).

Community Leaders: What They Shared

Like the students and parents, the community leaders expressed deep concern about issues affecting the performance of First Nations students in provincial high schools. The community leaders of Mahihkan were very vocal, for example, about the ineffective policies affecting the implementation of provincial tuition agreements, and communication patterns (or lack thereof) among the federal government, the provincial school jurisdictions, and the First Nations school board authorities.

Tuition agreements were a major concern: One leader shared, "I know for a fact, if we ever get to that point where we deal with that tuition we'd have more to say. They'd have to answer to us, you [would] get paid according to what you do for us. I hope to see that [day] when I'm still alive." This statement is a strong indicator of the pent-up feeling among community leaders regarding the inadequate services First Nations students receive in provincial high schools due to federal policies that exclude First Nations participation. Since First Nations parents cannot participate on governing boards because they reside on federal reserves, tuition is paid on their behalf from INAC to provincial school jurisdictions.

Other issues of concern for the community leaders included: relationship factors including the lack of relational leadership between themselves and adjacent school board authorities, lack of parental support, the changing role of parents, and teacher/student conflicts and the resultant low grades which tend to discourage students from further trying to fit in and participate; policy concerns including transfer policies between provincial schools and Mahihkan First Nations community, the policies and labeling associated with special education; policies on attendance and skipping; government systems concerns including oppressive welfare dependency, including going to school physically tired; racial concerns including students having a hard time fitting in, being tired of fighting racism and discrimination, and a sense of being made to feel stupid.

Clearly, community leaders identified reasons that bring out their passion for change. Sad to say, they themselves shared similar painful experiences and thus see reasons to pursue change for First Nations students in provincial schools.

The Elders: What They Shared

The Elders, like the other three groups of participants, were frustrated and poignantly identified their sources of frustration. They listed the following reasons for students dropping out of provincial high schools: cultural differences, peer pressure, teacher instructional methods, discrimination/racism, family backgrounds, personal problems, foster care system, relationship concerns (boyfriend/girlfriend), oppressed behaviors, drugs and alcohol, laziness, welfare dependency, and the effects of residential school.

Summary of the Four Groups

Overall, the four participant groups identified a multitude of reasons (over 50) why First Nations students from Mahihkan dropped out of adjacent provincial schools. Of the more than 50 reasons stated (see cross-group analysis, Figure 2), only two positive examples were cited of teachers who positively impacted two separate student participants. Essentially, all the dropout reasons involved relatively negative circumstances why the students left the provincial high schools. Furthermore, not one student dropped out of high school because of academic difficulties.

Essentially, the student reasons for dropping out can best be summarized as a result to alienation, as a result of poor student/school relationships while the parental

reasons can best be summarized as a result of distrust of the educational system. The community leaders reasons for students dropping out of provincial high schools can best be reiterated as a result of a feeling of powerlessness to initiate the necessary change, while the Elders reasons can best be accentuated as a result of oppression and colonization which has resulted in severe pressures within families and the larger First Nations community.

The reasons clearly indicate that a very serious problem exists, one that will affect the socioeconomic and cultural livelihood of First Nations generations yet to be born. The imperative question: how will Mahihkan students, parents, community leaders, Elders, Indian Affairs, and provincial school authorities (including teachers, administrators, and school board officials) address this multifaceted, complex problem? After all, when one student drops out of school, everyone in the community is affected socially, economically, culturally, and spiritually. Dropouts feel a sense of powerlessness, victimization, oppression, and disempowerment; this cycle of oppression perpetuates itself. According to Cummins (cited in Getz, 1998), "Students who feel empowered by their school experiences develop the ability, confidence, and motivation to succeed" (p. 106). Empowerment, regardless of group, leads to improvement; and the challenge is to find ways of empowering students instead of forcing them out of provincial high schools.

Blame, either by students, parents, community leaders, Elders, or federal or provincial authorities, will not aid in the development of a proactive school intervention action plan. *Reclaiming Youth At Risk: Our Hope for the Future*, authored by Brendtro,

Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990) noted the following on blame: "Research shows that parents lodge responsibility first with the school, second with the child and third with themselves. In contrast, school personnel blame problems first on the home, then on the child, and last on the school" (p. 11). Essentially, blame is harmful, no matter who points the finger. The Elders shared a lesson about blame; it goes something like this: "Remember, when you point one finger at another person, three fingers point back at you." One thing is clear, as long as each side blames the other, everyone loses; but more importantly, the students lose. Educators, including governance boards, owe it to the children to quit pointing fingers and work towards solutions.

Undeniably, there are multitudes of reasons why First Nations students drop out of provincial schools. The challenge is to find solutions to these findings and move forth with a positive leadership action plan that will result in greater numbers of First Nations students graduating from provincial schools, instead of dropping out.

Clearly, the latest literature on leadership points to the need for schools to seek out effective home, school, and governance partnerships. These would include collaborative team approaches that utilize more effective communication styles in cutting edge (innovative) organizations. Such organizations (including school communities) need to develop a sense of shared leadership (Bender, 1997; Covey, 1989; Goleman, 1998; Greenleaf, 1998; Senge, 1990; Woods, 1997). Effective schools (Glasser, 1992, 1993) focus on training their staff in the latest research strategies. There is absolutely no room for complacency on the part of any person in the school systems when dealing with the gifts of the Creator, our children.

All things considered, this study proved that little has changed for many First Nations peoples in provincial schools. For example, the findings indicated that racism was prevalent in the lives of many of the parents, community leaders, and Elders more than 25 years ago and is still affecting their children, one and two generations later. All four participant groups identified racism as one dominant factor still affecting them either directly or indirectly. What are the implications for students, parents, community leaders, First Nations Elders, and federal and provincial authorities as a result of this study?

Implications for Change

While the dropout problem is complex in mainstream society, it is even more complicated in the lives of First Nations students who attend provincial high schools (Wilson, 1989). Few studies have attempted to address this important topic (NARC, 1984; Ontario Ministry of Education, 1989; Saskatchewan Education, 1985); fewer studies yet are done from an Aboriginal world view. While not Aboriginal herself, Dr. Peggy Wilson, married to a First Nations member of Buffalo Runs (pseudonym), studied First Nations students making the transition from Buffalo Runs to a nearby provincial high school. Essentially, participants in her study faced problems similar to those experienced by participants in this study. Clearly, these two studies support the crucial need for change. The reality is First Nations students are big business in provincial school systems. Millions of dollars are transferred yearly from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada on behalf of treaty Indians to provincial school jurisdictions. *Tradition and Education: Towards A Vision Of Our Future* (1988) noted, "The federal

government does not require the provincial and territorial education authorities to be accountable for resources received to educate First Nations children. The system encourages flagrant abuse" (p. 13).

If, for no reason other than financial accountability, the dropout problem faced by First Nations students attending provincial high schools must be addressed. In addition, the more than 50 reasons participants stated for dropping out of provincial high schools in northern Alberta strongly indicate a need for change. No doubt, change is difficult, and many people resist change (Jellison, 1993), but the fact of the matter is that change must occur in the interest of First Nations students in schools all over this country known as Canada.

Without question, the time for change is now. There is no better time than the present to move forth to establish collaborative partnerships. Each of the four participant groups in this study expressed a desire for the doors to open between themselves and provincial school authorities. The findings clearly indicated that First Nations participants do not feel welcomed as partners in the educational process affecting their children, their grandchildren, and the larger First Nations community. Their stories revealed that one of the biggest problems First Nations peoples continue to face in provincial schools is the sense of discrimination based on race. This perception can no longer be swept under the table or belittled by provincial school authorities, as some participants felt was being done.

Since all participants expressed concern about discrimination, racism, and race relations, a key recommendation is the need for diversity training. Such training cannot

occur as mere tokenism, but must be relevant training where provincial school participants recognize the seriousness of the problem and are open to seeking positive solutions and candidly addressing the discrimination based on race and culture.

In the journal entitled *Winds of Change* (Simonelli, 1999), Don Coyhis, a member of the Mohican Nation and a diversity trainer, stated that for diversity training to work, everyone must recognize that we are all connected. For example, everyone must recognize that we are all part of the same universe, the same planet, and the same community. In this case, the same learning community. He suggested everyone needs respect. He noted, "Respect means you don't define me by my earthsuit. It means you look at what is inside me. Human beings need respect, trust, love, caring, understanding, acceptance, patience and a learning environment" (Simonelli, 1999, p. 19). He also noted that if work places were designed with these values in mind, all people, regardless of color, would get along. This idea is further supported in the teachings of the Natural Laws of the Creator (Chapter IV). The values of kindness, caring, sharing, and determination are the epitome of the Laws to be lived according to the teachings.

Coyhis (cited in Simonelli, 1999) further suggested that diversity issues arise because people do not feel heard; therefore, organizations that acknowledge diversity need to provide the opportunity for all members of the organization to be heard. Like the people of Mahihkan, Coyhis noted the importance of developing and maintaining relationships. He stated, "We believe the key is not so much about understanding differences or commonness, as much as it is to teach people how to build relationships with other human beings" (p. 19). Coyhis pointed out that for progress to occur,

organizations must start using inclusive words such as “unity, coming together and merging” (p. 19). He believed organizations could enhance diversity by using the talking circle.

A talking circle allows people of difference — different opinions, different backgrounds and different cultures — to come together and sit in a circle in order to work towards and experience unity. Each person in a talking circle is free to speak and express themselves without being interrupted. . . . When we sit in a circle we begin to interconnect with each other. We find we can learn what we have in common and what the differences are just by sitting and listening to one another. (Coyhis, cited in Simonelli, 1999, p. 20)

Recognizing that organizations and people within the organizations (families and communities included) will not automatically use the talking circle without first spewing their anger, Coyhis suggested the use of the healing circle. He pointed out that issues of racism, sexism, anger, and favoritism bring out layers of anger, guilt, shame, and fear. He noted, “The healing circle can place participants in contact with their own anger, guilt, shame and fear, helping them to face those feelings and let them go the healing circle is a tool to help us release what may be holding us back” (Simonelli, 1999, p. 18). The healing circle is a culturally appropriate First Nations healing method that could be used within the context of provincial schools.

Coyhis further pointed out the “four laws of change” as follows:

1. Change must come from within.
2. A community vision must precede development.

3. A great learning must occur in the community.
4. You must create a Healing Forest within the community.

In providing an argument for change, Coyhis outlined the four laws of change in a simple, straightforward manner. First, he pointed out that the need for change must come from within. Clearly, all the First Nations participants recognized a need for change. It is safe to say, for example, they were tired of experiencing racism. It is also safe to say they are tired of not being heard.

Second, Coyhis argued that "a community vision must precede development" (p. 18). Again, the participants of the study did not recognize or feel part of a community vision. The dangers of not developing a sense of community are also supported by the works of Dr. Comer in his text, *Rallying The Whole Village* (1996), and the importance of developing an intervention team in his text, *School Power: Implications of an Intervention Project* (1980). Both texts supported the need for community vision that welcomes the parents as part of the vision.

Third, Coyhis further argued that "a great learning must occur in the community" (p. 19). This study provided learnings about First Nations students dropping out of provincial high schools in northern Alberta, Canada.

Finally, Coyhis identified the need for healing; he said, "You must create a Healing Forest within the community" (p. 19). His work provided a logical process of change that is culturally sensitive to the ways and needs of First Nations peoples, and is an especially applicable method for dealing with diversity in provincial school settings.

Coyhis went on to share a teaching of the Elders about the healing forest; he noted the similarity between mankind and the forest. An Elder took Coyhis into the forest and had him observe the forest for an entire day. He observed the trees and concluded that mankind and trees are similar. Regardless of the type of tree, all trees have roots, and mankind, too, is like that. Regardless of skin color, all people of Mother Earth have red blood. At the root, all mankind is the same, thus his recognition of creating a healing forest with the community.

By providing the four laws of change, Coyhis pointed to the need for mankind to recognize the interconnectedness; when we realize we are all connected, then change is more likely to occur. Coyhis' basis for change, the four laws of change, pave the way for change by allowing us to become the change we want in our schools, according to Ghandi (cited in Simonelli, 1999, p. 20). Simonelli (1999) concluded that "the key to making changes is at the systems level. It involves respecting differences, finding commonality, and working at relationship building" (p. 21). Clearly, the findings of this study indicate the need for systemic change that allows for change, while respecting differences and, at the same time, finding some commonality, in a relationship that is based on trust.

Over and over again, the literature emphasized the importance of developing and maintaining positive relationships, something absent from the findings of this study. Like Coyhis, Brendtro et al. (1990) reiterated the importance of positive relationships; they pointed out that positive relationships included responsibility, caring, knowledge, and respect. Star performers and star organizations are those

organizations that work as teams. Toxic organizations are those which cannot manage change or conflict well. In fact, in such organizations, their inability to manage change can become toxic to the entire organization (Goleman, 1998). Thus, healthy, collaborative organizations communicate at the heartfelt level (Bracey, Rosenblum, Sanford, & Trueblood, 1990), something many organizations need to address, but often fear.

Stephen Baetz' (1991) text, *Change Is: Helping You Respond More Positively To Your Changing World*, essentially leads one to conclude that people have to want change. This being the case, change (as noted in Coyhis' four laws of change) will be challenging, to say the least. However, the dropout problem being experienced by First Nations students in provincial high schools in northern Alberta must force the issue. Change is inevitable. Relationship building must occur if the learning environment is to improve for First Nations children in provincial schools. The perceived situations involving racism, teacher favoritism, the sense of teachers not caring, irrelevant curriculum, etc. can only be addressed once the two communities, the First Nations community and the provincial school community (including teachers, administrators and boards alike) recognize the urgency for change. They also must recognize the need to develop positive relationships that involve on-going heart felt dialogue (Bracey et al., 1990).

Throughout this study, all participants voiced their frustrations with the current system. All participants expressed a sense of powerlessness, which in part was due to the bureaucratic hierarchy. This continues to be one of the main stumbling blocks used

by various authorities to keep the educational communities apart (provincial school authorities, INAC, and the First Nations). Brendtro et al. (1990) referred to this as “bureaucratic impersonality” which replaces human relations with “an elaborate system of rules” (p. 24). As a result, these bureaucratic impersonalities perpetuate a system that keeps the whole community from rallying around the students. Community members affected include parents, teachers, administrators, and community leaders such as, Chiefs and Councils, the Elders, and provincial school board officials.

We can no longer make patronizing statements such as “they are our future citizens” noted Brendtro et al. (1990, p. 20), without clearly acknowledging the detrimental effects of students dropping out of school. The dropout effects are felt by the whole village mentally, emotionally, spiritually, physically, and financially.

Reclaiming Youth At Risk: Our Hope for the Future (Brendtro et al., 1990) poignantly recounted the economic drain:

The costs of supporting our dropouts and dumpouts as illiterate, unemployable, violent or mentally ill citizens are staggering. We no longer can afford the economic drain of disposable people. The youth whom we are casting aside today are part of a small generation who will have to support a large cohort of retired citizens as the twenty-first century unfolds. We are literally abandoning the persons whom we will ask to support us in retirement. (p. 3)

Recommendations for Staff Development and Shared Leadership

In order to improve the dropout situation among First Nations students in Alberta's provincial high schools, a major paradigm shift is required. Provincial high school authorities must acknowledge the need to do school business out of the box. They must recognize the need for shared collaborative leadership with their First Nations counterparts.

For the dropout problem to decrease, the two governance bodies must find a way to work together. For the First Nations, clearly, there is a sense of alienation and isolation. The current tuition agreement funding formula keeps the First Nations on the margins, essentially powerless and voiceless. Sad to say, but many on the margins might argue that until the day comes where the monies are controlled by the First Nations, nothing will change.

However, in the meantime, we must remain optimistic that both governance bodies will see beyond their own structures and do what is right in the best interests of the First Nations students. Suffice it to say, collaborative shared staff development must occur for all staff within the confines of provincial high schools. And this staff development must be a partnered effort between themselves and the surrounding First Nations, those on the margins. Since people on the margins know best, they should be the facilitators of the provincial school staff development.

The following recommendations will help address the dropout challenge:

1. Host workshops that will focus on *building relationships* between the provincial school authorities and the First Nations.

2. Offer *diversity training* that is facilitated by those on the margins (the First Nations).
3. Find a way to invite *parents* to become a part of the school community.
4. Develop creative ways of enhancing *First Nations to become members of provincial high school staff* who will not only teach but be positive role models for the First Nations students.
5. Involve *First Nations Elders* in provincial high schools on a regular, full-time basis.
6. Establish on-going dialogue with the First Nations on the existing *provincial tuition agreements*.
7. Look at *governance* and find an effective way to partner instead of remaining as two separate isolated structures.

These seven recommendations are portrayed in Figure 4, entitled "Prevention Strategies for First Nations Students in Provincial Schools." Essentially, the graphic provides a visual summary of the priority prevention needs of the four groups.

The following outline details the urgency for staff development to occur on a continual basis on the above noted concerns which come out of the participant interviews.

Relationship Building

Students must feel a part of the provincial high schools. A successful school is one that boosts a sense of a cohesive community based on shared values, beliefs, rituals, and ceremonies (Brendtro et al., 1990, p. 31). Effective schools create a "total

Prevention Strategies for First Nations Students in Provincial Schools

Figure 4. Prevention Strategies for First Nations Students in Provincial Schools

school environment” versus adopting policies and practices that isolate “behaviorial problems” (Brendtro et al., 1990, p. 31). The majority of the students in this study often spoke of detentions and suspensions where they were isolated and, according to them, treated unfairly. The detentions and suspensions only served to further alienate them from the schools and the teachers. Brendtro et al. noted the harmful effects of demanding obedience:

Respect begets Respect. Obedience can be demanded from a weaker individual, but one can never compel respect. . . . Adults confiscate harmless personal property, push students into lines, and ignore urgent requests for bathroom breaks. Sometimes they intentionally embarrass students with questions

These adults command obedience but they own very little respect. (p. 66)

Examples similar to these in the study resulted in students feeling unwelcome and not belonging, and further resulted in them feeling like they were being discriminated against based on race.

In order to facilitate positive relationship development among First Nations students and provincial school authorities, school staff must work on developing positive relationships. Elements of positive relationships include *caring, knowledge, respect* and *responsibility* (Brendtro et al., 1990). The authors noted that, “Relationship is an Action, not a Feeling” (p. 62). They go on to say that caring is “concern for the life and growth of the person in relationship.” Knowledge is

not a superficial awareness but genuine understanding of the other’s feelings, even if they are not readily apparent. Respect is the ability to see a person as he

is and to allow him to develop without exploitation. Finally, responsibility means to be ready to act to meet the needs, expressed or unexpressed, of another human being. (Brentro et al., 1990, p. 62)

Who will be responsible for ensuring that work is done to develop a sense of school community for the First Nations students? School administrators must take responsibility for creating a positive school environment that embraces a clear sense of positive relationships among all students, their parents, the larger First Nations community (including the community leaders of this study and staff in provincial schools).

Diversity Training

Racism, according to Zanda (1993), is defined as:

The practice of discrimination by a defined group, who holds a common ideology of superiority and which has the power to institutionalize it systematically against a group of people, based on their common origin and/or skin color.

In order to perpetuate racism a group needs to maintain institutional control (power). (p. 142)

Every participant group in this study felt that racism was a major problem faced by First Nations students in provincial schools. Zanda reported that "we all learn racism, either by practising it, or by experiencing it, therefore we can unlearn it" (p. 23).

Since racism is harmful and can be unlearned, provincial school officials must address this issue by providing on-going training. Hosting one workshop on racism will not do; the diversity training must be on-going, and it must be facilitated by local First Nations

educators. Nieto (1996) noted the importance of affirming diversity: "Only by listening to students can we learn how they experience school, how social and educational structures affect their learning, and what we can do to provide high-quality education for all students" (p. 4).

Undeniably, racism hurts, and it affected the educational opportunities afforded the student participants in this study. Likewise, it has had detrimental effects on the parents, community leaders, and Elders of this study. New, positive measures must be undertaken to curb racism on a continuous basis. It must be addressed! All school personnel must participate in training. Educating all peoples on the gifts of all races must start in elementary school and continue throughout all grades. Teaching children to tolerate other races is not the answer.

Parental Involvement

Provincial schools must make concerted efforts to involve parents in the education of First Nations children. Clearly, the parents of this study felt left out; they did not feel like they had a voice in what happens in the school lives of their own children. In fact, many felt unheard and somewhat of a burden; they felt they got the runaround by school officials. Brendtro et al. (1990) noted, "Professionals who see parents as 'the problem' and themselves as 'rescuers' are not effective at gaining the trust of the parents. It is easy to stereotype parents as unmotivated, inadequate and even mentally ill . . . research suggests that successful programs involve parents as partners with professionals" (p. 70).

Parents of First Nations children must be invited to become a part of the school community. In the case of local provincial schools, this means driving out to the First Nations communities and getting to know the parents in their own domain. It does not mean only contacting parents with bad news about their children, but making sincere efforts to involve the parents in the day-to-day activities in the school. School officials cannot hold a superior attitude towards any parent or community member. Creating a sense of a community school for the parents is imperative to improving the educational success for the First Nations children.

First Nations Employees (Role Models)

Some of the participants felt that Aboriginal people need to be employed in provincial schools, not just as teacher aides teaching the Cree language, but in other positions including teaching positions; and not just with a sense of tokenism, but genuine positions. In some of the schools surrounding Mahihkan, approximately 75% to 80% of the students are First Nations. Given this high number of First Nations students, the provincial school boards must find creative ways of inviting First Nations teachers and other professionals to work in those schools.

One of the major contributing factors to the lack of First Nations teachers in provincial schools may be the tax issue. Since First Nations teachers do not pay provincial or federal taxes if employed on reserves, school Boards and unions need to look for creative ways to invite First Nations professionals to work in provincial schools with the same tax incentives. The question becomes: how badly do provincial school districts want to have First Nations teachers and First Nations other

professionals in their schools? Additionally, given the sense of alienation about provincial schools, cross cultural training/sensitivity must occur so First Nations staff would feel comfortable and welcome in the schools. Role modeling is crucial; all Aboriginal children need to see their own people around them in all key areas of learning.

First Nations children need to be surrounded by their own First Nations adults (including their parents) employed in all sectors of the school employment population. Currently, there are but a handful, despite the fact that hundreds of First Nations children are in provincial schools surrounding Mahihkan First Nations community.

Elder Involvement

The role of Elders cannot be overemphasized. Elders should be a part of existing staff in all provincial high schools surrounding Mahihkan. They hold a wealth of information about the children, their families, and the First Nations communities; and they are the spiritual guides. They could teach classes in the school as well as do on-going in-service sessions for school staff. Their presence and knowledge would help eliminate the tension that occurs between the Native and non-Native students. Overall, their presence would help improve the overall situation. Like the other First Nations employees, their presence should not be tokenism. Their expertise and presence in provincial schools far outweigh the financial costs in the long term. Everyone in the schools would benefit; the students, the teachers, and the administration.

For many provincial school authorities, this will require a major paradigm shift. Many in main stream society see Elders as old people, and not to be revered for their abundant knowledge.

Provincial Tuition Agreements

School tuition agreements that exist between provincial school districts and Indian Affairs on behalf of students from Mahihkan must be addressed. At present, Indian Affairs uses a generic tuition agreement that allows monies to flow from their federal department directly to the local provincial school board without any participation by the Mahihkan First Nations school board authorities.

Very little has been written to explain what a tuition agreement is and how the negotiation process impedes educational opportunities afforded First Nations students (Assembly of First Nations, 1988; Brady, 1992; Burns, 1998). The current generic tuition agreement used between Indian Affairs and the local provincial school boards totally excludes Mahihkan school board officials. Despite the fact that millions of dollars are transferred yearly from federal to provincial governments, Mahihkan officials do not have a direct say in how the monies are expended on behalf of the First Nations children in provincial school. In like manner, when things are not to their liking, they have no means of financial recourse to rectify the situation.

It is imperative that further work be done to ensure financial authority on behalf of the Mahihkan students attending surrounding provincial schools. Control of the monies must move into the hands of the Mahihkan First Nations governance board. This will leave financial control where it should be, in the hands of the First Nations.

Governance

Clearly, the First Nations leaders in this study felt isolated from their provincial school counterparts, including the school principals and the school boards. The community leaders were clear to state that no board-to-board relationship existed between themselves and their counterparts. In fact, most felt that if the First Nations Education Authorities held the monies instead of INAC, the relationship would be much different. They would insist on financial accountability for the millions of dollars that passes between the federal government (Indian Affairs) and the provincial school authorities in transfer agreements.

If the school relationship between the First Nations and provincial school authorities is to improve, provincial school authorities are going to have to visit the First Nations communities and establish relationships. Currently, they have no reason to do so. As long as Indian Affairs pays them directly, they do not have to interact with First Nations education boards of governors.

Recommendations for Further Research

While a great deal of on-going professional development training must take place in order to alleviate the First Nations dropout problem in provincial high schools, further research is also needed on First Nations students in provincial high schools. Currently, research from a Canadian First Nations perspective is virtually nil. Although there are studies in the United States on Native Americans (our brothers and sisters south of the border), virtually no studies exist in Canada specific to the First Nations.

While some of the problems faced by Native Americans are similar to those faced by the First Nations of Canada, the governing systems and accompanying monies for education differ. These differences seriously impact the way educational services are delivered and administered between tribes in Canada and those south of the border. Consequently, it is imperative that academic research be done to further knowledge on First Nations in provincial school systems.

Based on the results of this study, the following research is necessary in order to improve the educational opportunities afforded First Nations students in provincial high schools. These recommendations are applicable to any provincial school where there are large numbers of First Nations students in attendance.

It is imperative that the following academic research be undertaken.

- **Tuition Agreements:** Tuition agreements must be studied in depth. For example, what are they and how do they affect educational opportunities afforded First Nations students in the province of Alberta, for example? What are the short- and long-term implications of the First Nations controlling tuition agreements? What, if any, impact do these agreements have on how First Nations are treated in provincial school?
- **Racism:** Additional research needs to be conducted on racism within the provincial schools. How does racism affect how students feel about being in provincial schools? How does racism affect how students interact with their non-Native teachers? What does racism have to do with students feeling that non-Native teachers do not care about them? Teachers must learn about

institutional and systemic racism and learn how they are a part of the problem if they are not a part of the solution.

- **Parental Involvement:** Parents must be invited to be a part of the school system. Research needs to be done by First Nation communities and provincial school boards on how to invite First Nation parents to become members of the school community. How does nonparticipation impact students? What role has residential school played in the nonparticipation of First Nations in provincial schools? Investigate the active roles parents can take in the provincial school community. Currently, there is no research in Canada that is specific to the impact of First Nation parental involvement in the lives of their children who attend provincial schools. No research exists that is specific to how such involvement could impact the education of their children.
- **Governance Structures and Their Impact on Educational Opportunities Afforded First Nations Students:** Research must be undertaken that looks at First Nations governance and provincial schools governance and how the two can work collectively. Currently, the two rarely (if ever) meet. Two separate systems are in place, both designed to serve students; however, they never sit together to collaboratively decide how they might better serve First Nations students in provincial schools. It is crucial to address governance systems and find ways to bring the two together.

- **First Nations Elders in Provincial High Schools:** Research needs to be done to study the effects of having Elders employed in provincial high schools where significant numbers of First Nations Students attend.

Conclusions

Solving the First Nations high school dropout problem will not occur overnight. The problem is serious enough to say that the socioeconomic and cultural livelihood of the First Nations are affected both now and for those generations yet unborn. Thus, the long-term implications of students dropping out of school must be taken seriously. By not addressing the issue, we are branding our youth (our future leaders) and ultimately our communities to a continued life of poverty and despair.

Despite the urgency of the problem, we have entrusted education (and our future) to the hands of provincial school authorities who, according to the participants of this study, do not appear too concerned about addressing the issues. Wilson (1990) puts it starkly: "If they really do want Indian students to be part of their system, then they need to show that in action not just in words" (p. 159). Unfortunately, the participants of this study did not feel that provincial authorities even cared that a dropout problem existed. Does this mean we have that much further to go in rectifying the situation? Or do we look at all the options and alternatives?

Wilson (1990) went as far as stating that cultural awareness and cross cultural education practices must be mandated to help improve the situation of First Nations students in provincial schools. She noted:

Legislation must be enforced which will mandate both Cultural Awareness training and Cross-Cultural education practices. What must also be addressed are the structural and attitudinal characteristics of the education system that cause students to feel alienated, bored, rejected and unable to cope academically. (p. 157)

The dropout problem is extremely serious and is deeply embedded in the roots of First Nations educational history. The effects of residential school and the educational forms that followed have deeply impacted the lives of every First Nations child who walks through any classroom door. The inter-generational effects of colonization and genocide are unbeknown to many. The soul wounds for some students have become the daily challenges that they face every day whey they get up and go to school. For some students, the soul wounds are "normal"; they have had to live with the effects all their lives so they know nothing else. In order to nurture the First Nations children that enter their classrooms daily, provincial educators must understand the inter-generational effects of colonization and genocide: lost parenting skills, poverty, alcoholism (addictions in general), unemployment, and the many other social problems. It is not enough to recognize, then generalize about the effects of social problems, but it is also necessary to understand and empathize with their origin. Then, the resultant cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity can only enhance the learning relationships that will develop between the First Nations children who choose to attend provincial schools and provincial school teachers and administrators. First Nations children must

feel a sense of belonging, including a sense of bonding and love in order to be better served in provincial schools.

Only then will First Nations children take their rightful place in the provincial school system of Alberta and become who the Creator meant them to be. Only then will they be able to develop the gifts that they have been given. The late Chief Dan George (1974) shared the following about First Nations education.

There is a longing in the heart of my people to reach out and grasp that which is needed for our survival. There is a longing among the young of my nation to secure for themselves and that their people the skills that will provide them with a sense of worth and purpose. They will be our new warriors. Their training will be much longer and more demanding than it was in olden days. The long years of study will demand more determination, separation from home and family will demand endurance. But they will emerge with their hand held forward, not to receive welfare, but to grasp the place in society that is rightly ours. (p. 91)

First Nations parents and community, like the rest of society, want the best for their children. Clearly, education is seen as paving the way. Not one parent said they wanted their children to quit attending provincial schools, but they do want their children to be treated with dignity and respect. They want their children to feel like they belong, that they are welcomed in school with open arms. After all they, like all other parents, want what is best for their children, too. They want their children to get an education. They want their children to become, for example, teachers, lawyers,

administrators, cooks, construction workers, doctors, clerical workers, and future leaders in their communities.

In the words of Chief Perry Bellegarde (personal communication, September 17, 1999) of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, in Saskatchewan, "Education is today what the buffalo was yesterday to our people." In other words, our people want and need an education for survival. We want an education that is meaningful and inclusive, one that embraces the culture and language. Our children are our future, and we want them graduating from high school fully bicultural. We want our children to be proud of who they are and where they come from.

After all, "Education is today, what the buffalo was yesterday to our people." It's the source of our livelihood and our future in a world where we should be able to maintain our unique identity with pride, in a world that proclaims to embrace diversity.

May the Creator shower us all with the goodness of kind spirit to do the jobs we are all here on this Plain to do.

ay ay (thank you)

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APPENDIX A

INJURED CHILDREN'S SPIRIT

INJURED CHILDREN'S SPIRIT

Watching a late movie on John Phillip Sousa, while spending a quiet evening at home along with my husband, triggered an unexpected reaction from me. It was the part when it got to the marching band music playing. The more the music played and hit the sharp rhapsodic notes, tears welled up in my eyes, my chest got tight, and humiliation built up inside for fear of being seen like this. My husband looked at me and didn't say a word at first. I thought, "He probably thinks, 'Here we go again.'"

We had seen *E.T.* three times and I cried all three times. After three minutes, sobs erupted from within me like a volcano explosion, which I tried to control by making them quiet. My husband sat by and asked if I was all right and let me cry while he rubbed my hand. I feebly offered the explanation, "When I even go by a parade, I react when I hear the marching band music." I added, "Maybe I am overly patriotic. However, how can that be when I was kicked out of the Army?" He then asked, "When was the first time you heard this music?" He knew it was not part of the Navajo culture.

My story began with my earliest memory of this music: in the boarding school during my elementary education. Twice a week we were literally herded out of the dormitory out into a large area where there was pavement. Once we were out there, we

were expected to line up in military style formation as we had been trained to do. In the regimental routine, we stood at attention while the dorm matrons (who were relatives of many of us and, more importantly, products of the boarding schools themselves) made sure we were all present. They called off the English names we were given and even the surnames were unfamiliar for awhile, because even parents had always been referred to by their Navajo names. Automatically, we changed into single file upon command to start the "march." They would have a big phonograph sitting at an open window on which they played this blaring music, to which we were made to march like little soldiers. We all had the same haircuts: the bangs, the page boy at the side, and the back cropped. We looked like we were wearing German helmets. We wore similar government issue clothing. I remember the tight, cinched waists, the high top laced shoes (makes me think of the "ropers" people pay a pretty penny for now), the white socks.

The real excitement began when the matrons would start yelling at us over the loud music to lift our knees high and hold our heads up straight and swing our arms in unison at our sides. The pavement was hard, the government issue shoes were hard, the dresses were binding, the voices mean, the music was unfamiliar, and the music deafening; and this whole idea was totally alien. I would then feel a tremendous longing for the hills and smells of home, the smell and soothing voice of an elder while he/she would sing lullabies as he/she bounced a "little one" on his/her lap. I missed my moccasins which were molded to fit my feet. I missed the morning ritual when my grandmother would wake me by calling me by my real name and we would greet the

new day in our way. Then the manner in which we would sit in the sun together was important and we styled one another's hair in the traditional way as she told me stories of old. I wondered what was wrong with our songs, our language, our dress . . . our ways . . . there were no answers. I was confused because the adults did not talk about those things. Sometimes I was ashamed. It caused resentment even later in my adulthood because my significant adults did not fight for my rights.

That day when my husband allowed me to cry, he not only validated my feelings, but, in an altered state, I could recall the details of everything and I sobbed my heart out for my injured child spirit. Today, I need not to react to this music but embrace the revelation it had for me. I try to have answers for my children and admit it when I don't have answers (and, that's okay, too).

I cannot help but wonder, what have those other children (who are now parents and grandparents) done to prevent unresolved grief, anger, and disappointments from affecting their parenting? These unresolved issues become our "unseen legacies" to our children, not with intent but because some caused attachment disorder due to removal from our immediate families, thus causing trauma to the children's spirits multi-generationally. This is only provided as "food for thought."

By Shea Goodluck

(Recovery Foundation of the Southwest, Inc., High Risk Kids Workshop, 1997, p. 23)

APPENDIX B

LETTER OF SUPPORT FROM

CHIEF AND COUNCIL

**Mahihkan First Nations
Box , Mahihkan, Alberta
T0A 000**

February 11, 1998

**University of San Diego
Human Subjects Committee Members
c/o School of Education
5998 Alcala Park, San Diego, CA.
92110-2492**

Dear Human Subjects Committee Members

Re: Patricia Makokis' study

Please be advised that we, the ----- Chief and Council of the ----- First Nation Reserve fully endorse the study that Patricia Makokis wishes to undertake. She has met with the Chief and Council and explained her proposed study of ----- First Nation high school students in provincial schools.

We recognize that this study can only help address this crucial concern. We believe that our young people are the leaders of tomorrow, and we are concerned about the provincial high school dropout rate amongst our First Nation youth.

The Chief and Council fully endorse the proposed study and look forward to working with and assisting Patricia on this project. The various departments of our administration, including our education and counselling offices are available as support services.

Thank you for your consideration of this study, on behalf of the ----- First Nation Tribal Administration.

Sincerely

**Chief -----
----- First Nation**

APPENDIX C**LETTER OF SUPPORT FROM MAHIHKAN
COUNSELING SERVICES**

Mahihkan Counselling Services

January 7, 1998

To whomever this information may concern:

Re: Request of Services

In the course of research done by Ms. Patricia Makokis, she has my permission to refer persons to Mahihkan Counselling Services. This is to assist her in keeping the wellness of persons interviewed as a priority.

The mandate of Mahihkan Counselling Services is to address the well-being of the community residents. All forms of issues are addressed.

Sincerely

Director of Counselling Services

APPENDIX E

GUIDING QUESTIONS

GUIDING QUESTIONS

Guiding Questions For Students

- **Students drop out of high school for a broad variety of reasons. Could you tell me why you decided to drop out of high school?**
- **What type of experience was dropping out for you? (positive/negative — why?)**
- **Did you discuss dropping out with anyone? (who, why that person?)**
- **What were some consequences of dropping out of school for you?**
- **What might have helped you stay in school?**
- **What would help you return to provincial high school?**
- **Is there anything else you would like to share?**

Guiding Questions For Parents

- **Why did your child drop out of (name of provincial) school?**
- **Did (child's name) discuss dropping out of school with you before the decision was made?**
- **What type of experience was dropping out of (name of provincial school) for your child? (positive/negative — why?)**
- **How has your child dropping out of school affected you?**
- **Did you discuss drop out consequences with your child?**
- **What might have helped your child stay in school?**
- **What kind of support of problems did you encounter with staff from (name of provincial school) regarding your child?**
- **Is there anything else you would like to share with me?**

Guiding Questions For First Nations Community Leaders

- **What experiences have you had with staff from provincial high schools?**
- **Why do First Nations students drop out of provincial high schools?**
- **What changes need to occur in provincial high schools so First Nations students stay in school?**
- **What should Tribal leaders do to counter the dropouts from provincial high schools?**
- **What changes, if any, need to be made at any political level to ease the dropout rate?**
- **Is there anything else you would like to share with me?**

Guiding Questions For First Nations Elders

- **Students drop out of high school for many reasons. In your experience as a community Elder what are some of their reasons?**
- **What role has history played that might affect students today?**
- **How does students dropping out affect the family, the community?**
- **What could the schools do to help students from dropping out? What changes need to occur?**
- **What could the community do to help students from dropping out? What changes need to occur?**
- **What could Tribal leaders do to help students stay in school?**
- **Is there anything else you would like to share with me?**

APPENDIX F

CONSENT FORMS

An Insider's Perspective: The Drop Out Challenge For Canada's First Nations

Student Assent Form

1. The purpose of this study is to find out why First Nations students drop out of provincial high schools adjacent to (-----) reserve. The procedures include the use of personal audio taped interviews with students, parents, community leaders including Elders regarding these experiences.
2. Potential risk or discomfort may occur as you share your experiences.
3. Benefits may include personal empowerment having shared your experiences. Other community students may benefit from you sharing your knowledge on this topic.
4. Participation is strictly voluntary. You may withdraw at any time if you find yourself uncomfortable with the process.
5. Prior to signing the assent form, you have the opportunity to ask any questions about the research and the right to receive answers on the same.
6. The duration of your involvement should not exceed four hours in total. There will be two interviews, one to gather the actual data and the second to share the findings of the taped interviews. The second interview allows you the opportunity to preview the information, and add, change, or delete accordingly.
7. The information that you provide (your child provides) as a participant in this study will be kept confidential with one exception. The exception is for information that the researcher must, by law, disclose to public health or other authorities. Identifying information will be masked to prevent individual identification in any publications or other disseminated reports.
8. No agreement, written or verbal exists beyond this consent form.

Should you have any questions after the interview, please feel free to contact me at 726-3758.

I, the undersigned, understand the above explanation and on that basis, I give my consent to voluntarily participate in this research. My parent/guardians as noted by their co-signature support my participation.

Signature of Student

Date

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Date

Location

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

Signature of Witness

Date

An Insider's Perspective: The Drop Out Challenge For Canada's First Nations

Parent/Guardian Consent Form

1. The purpose of this study is to find out why First Nations students drop out of provincial high schools adjacent to (-----) reserve. The procedures include the use of personal audio taped interviews with students, parents, community leaders including Elders regarding these experiences.
2. Potential risk or discomfort may occur for your child as he/she shares their experiences of dropping out of provincial high school, or their experiences with officials of provincial high schools.
3. Benefits may include personal empowerment having shared their experiences.
4. Participation is strictly voluntary. Your child may withdraw at any time if they find themselves uncomfortable with the process.
5. Prior to signing the assent form, you or your child have the opportunity to ask any questions about the research and the right to receive answers on the same.
6. The duration of your child's involvement should not exceed four hours in total. There will be two interviews, one to gather the actual data and the second to share the findings of the taped interviews. The second interview allows your child the opportunity to preview the information, and add, change, or delete accordingly.
7. The information that you provide (your child provides) as a participant in this study will be kept confidential with one exception. The exception is for information that the researcher must, by law, disclose to public health or other authorities. Identifying information will be masked to prevent individual identification in any publications or other disseminated reports.
8. No agreement, written or verbal exists beyond this consent form.

Should you have any questions after the interview, please feel free to contact me at 726-3758.

I, the undersigned, understand the above explanation, and on that basis, I give my consent for my child, who is minor, to voluntarily participate in this research.

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Date

Location

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

Signature of Witness

Date

An Insider's Perspective: The Drop Out Challenge For Canada's First Nations

Elder/Parent/Community Leader Consent Form

1. The purpose of this study is to find out why First Nations students drop out of provincial high schools adjacent to (-----) reserve. The procedures include the use of personal audio taped interviews with students, parents, community leaders including Elders regarding these experiences.
2. Potential risk or discomfort may occur as you share your experiences.
3. Benefits may include personal empowerment having shared your experiences. Other community students may benefit from you sharing your knowledge on this topic.
4. Participation is strictly voluntary. You may withdraw at any time if you find yourself uncomfortable with the process.
5. Prior to signing the consent form, you have the opportunity to ask any questions about the research and the right to receive answers on the same.
6. The duration of your involvement should not exceed four hours in total. There will be two interviews, one to gather the actual data and the second to share the findings of the taped interviews. The second interview allows you the opportunity to preview the information, and add, change, or delete accordingly.
7. The information that you provide (your child provides) as a participant in this study will be kept confidential with one exception. The exception is for information that the researcher must, by law, disclose to public health or other authorities. Identifying information will be masked to prevent individual identification in any publications or other disseminated reports.
8. No agreement, written or verbal exists beyond this consent form.

Should you have any questions after the interview, please feel free to contact me at 726-3758.

I, the undersigned, understand the above explanation and on that basis, I give my consent to voluntarily participate in this research.

Signature of Participant

Date

Location

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

Signature of Witness

Date