

**University of Alberta**

**CASE STUDY OF ABORIGINAL PARENT PARTICIPATION  
IN PUBLIC EDUCATION**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Research has identified parental involvement as an important component of schooling. Due to urban migration, many Native students have become the responsibility of public school boards and attend 'special' programs designed to meet their cultural needs. Despite this, the academic performance of Native students remains below average, high dropout rates persist and Aboriginal parents continue to be blamed for the problems.

Viewing the characteristics of the education system from a social science perspective is a relatively new way to look at low levels of involvement among Aboriginal parents. By using qualitative methods in a study involving Aboriginal parents, a number of issues become evident. First, new relationships are undermined where paternalistic attitudes prevail. Second, while resistance helps to preserve group identity, it also maintains the status quo. Aboriginal parents need community support and a new approach if they are to create meaningful social change within schools.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Background**

Increasingly over the years, research has identified parental involvement as an important component of the public education system (Becher, 1984; Hickman, 1996). The major focus of this discussion is on the relationship between parental involvement and student achievement. This emphasis on achievement has led to the emergence of a commonly accepted theme; when families are involved in their children's education in positive ways, children achieve higher grades, have better attendance rates, complete more homework, demonstrate more positive attitudes and behaviours, graduate at higher rates and have greater involvement in higher education (Henderson & Berla, 1994).

Historically, three major stages of family-school interaction have been identified (Lareau, 1987). Initially, although children's education and family life tended to be intertwined (e.g. parents in rural areas provided food and shelter for the teacher) parents were not involved in the formal aspects of their children's education. With the rise of mass schooling, parents became more involved in school and classroom activities. Still, however, they were not fundamentally involved in their children's cognitive development. Over the past few decades, parent involvement has tended to focus on reinforcement of the curriculum, promotion of cognitive development at home and volunteerism in the classroom.

Recently, the concept of parental involvement in public education has begun to change. While belonging to a parental group is still viewed as an important aspect of ensuring student success, parents are now being asked to participate in new and different ways. Research that incorporates this view is

based upon an advocacy model; one in which the role of parents is to share in governance and decision-making with the school (Skau, 1996). According to Bloom (1992), advocacy is about making parents more active partners in education in two ways. First, as a decision maker/policymaker, the role of the parent is to act as an integral part of the administrative structure of the school. Through their involvement on school councils, for example, parents are invited to advise on site-based management decisions that affect their school. Second, as a mover and shaker, the parent acts as an independent force that initiates, implements, and monitors basic changes in the school structure. Generally, according to Bloom, advocacy is about "standing up for our rights as parents to ensure that all children get the best possible education." (p.23). Little research has been undertaken that would provide feedback concerning the goal of advocacy and its early effects on student performance or whether 'advocacy' is a role that many parents are actually fulfilling.

### **Rationale for the Study**

During the 1960's, Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> leaders began to push for changes to the education system – changes that would require increased involvement on the part of Native parents. First Nation leaders sought control over the education of their young in order to ensure that two fundamental principles would be achieved: 1. that the education system would reinforce the identity of their children and 2. that the education system would provide First Nation students with the necessary training which would allow them to achieve economic autonomy (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972).

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<sup>1</sup> The term Aboriginal is intended to mean those individuals who are considered Aboriginal according to Section 35 of the Constitution Act of Canada – 1982; for this study, the terms Aboriginal, Metis, First Nations, Native, Indian and Indigenous have been used interchangeably to refer to such individuals.

Partly as a result of this movement towards 'Native control over Native education', various Aboriginal education projects began to appear in the 1970's in urban elementary and junior high schools across Canada. The goal of most of these projects was to better meet the cultural needs of an increasing number of Aboriginal students living in urban areas. Despite their creation, dropout rates among Native students remain significantly higher than rates for non-Native students and Aboriginal children continue to perform below average on academic performance and standard achievement tests. As reported on April 15, 1998, "Aboriginal people (in their 20's) are only one-half as likely to have a post-secondary degree or diploma, one-fifth as likely to have graduated from university and over twice as likely to not have finished high school" as compared to non-Aboriginal people (Edmonton Journal).

It is important to note that control over urban Native educational programs has tended to remain in the hands of mainstream bureaucrats and civil servants and levels of parental involvement have remained discouragingly low. One outcome of low participation rates has been a proliferation of handbooks that attempt to address this issue (Butterfield, R. & Pepper, F., 1992; Davis, 1988; Henderson, Marburger & Ooms, 1986). Mostly, parent handbooks are written from a non-Aboriginal perspective and generally, the impact of these has been minimal. The participation levels of Aboriginal parents continues to be seen as a problem from the perspective of many educators, administrators and governmental officials.

A contributing factor to the persistence of low levels of parent involvement is the failure of research to investigate these issues from a Native perspective. To help address this, I thought it both appropriate and necessary to investigate at the source – among Aboriginal parents who have children in school. I felt only then would I have an accurate picture of the problems and

ultimately, the reasons behind the phenomena of low levels of Aboriginal parent involvement in public education.

Many factors point to the need for a qualitative study to examine this issue. In addition to the continued urban migration of Native people during the 1990's, new government initiatives in Alberta suggest a role for parents that involves advocacy and co-management (Skau, 1996). But, as Jim Cummins (1986) argues, "real changes in schools will only begin to take place when the relationships of power begin to change, that is, when the voices of parents and the community are heard and the direction of the school reflects the values of all" (p. 34). He proposes that in order to effect real change, it is critical that historical patterns be reversed and that schools begin to work in partnership with communities<sup>2</sup>, promoting a respect for language and culture.

This view is supported by Anaquod (1994) who believes not only in community control over schools, but that Aboriginal communities be charged with addressing such serious educational questions as: What is the purpose of education? This becomes a significant issue in the case of Aboriginal people living in urban areas as they do not have the natural cultural support found in rural Native communities, due in part to the federal government's practice of categorizing Aboriginal peoples. The existence of these many distinctions mean that Native people are charged with convincing the mainstream<sup>3</sup> system of the importance of local control without the backing of any particular community group.

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<sup>2</sup> I use McCaleb's (1994) definition of the term community to refer to the children, the families of the children, people who work in the area and interact in multiple ways with the families; people who create art and make music, and keep the neighborhoods vibrating, the people who live and care and touch the lives of those around them.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term mainstream, however, 'whitestream' as referenced by Denis (1997) and Halas (1998) may more appropriately describe that portion of Canadian society (most often European descendant) who hold power through both assumed privilege and numerical majority.



## **Significance of the Problem**

Over the past few decades, growing numbers of Aboriginal people have arrived in urban areas across Canada. In 1996, there were 32,835 Aboriginal people in the city of Edmonton (Statistics Canada, 1997). Of these, 10,875 (or one-third) are school age children from 5 – 19 years. These numbers are forecast to grow at a relatively constant rate in the future. This trend has resulted in more and more Native students becoming the responsibility of various urban public school boards.

The research concerning parental involvement and its role in public education has tended to focus on mainstream groups, despite the fact that "parents of ethnically and linguistically diverse students ... often fail to participate in the schools in numbers comparable to other majority group parents" (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991, p. 20). One of the results of this lack of research is that Aboriginal parents, through their non-participation, are held partially responsible for the overwhelmingly negative statistics concerning Aboriginal education without understanding of the reasons for this phenomena. As noted by the Assembly of First Nations (1991), fifty percent of First Nations individuals in Canada fail to reach Grade 12.

Generally, this issue has important consequences for Aboriginal people in that education is viewed as a fundamental tool in achieving the goal of self-determination (RCAP, 1996). If Aboriginal people are responsible for teaching their children values, priorities and how to make sense of things (Tafoya, 1995), then it is imperative that Aboriginal researchers contribute to an understanding who Aboriginal parents are and the type or nature of involvement they desire. This is necessary to ensure that they are not arbitrarily assigned a pre-determined role in their children's education.

As Farrell-Racetta (1988) argues, schools often do not recognize the involvement of parents. Instead, parents are blamed for the problems of the child rather than allied in an effort to address the problems that have been identified. In order to create new types of parental involvement, ones that are more successful than those in the past, it is necessary to look at the role that Aboriginal parents have and whose interests are served through their continued fulfillment of this role.

### **Research Problem**

Although it is important that flexibility exists within the design of any qualitative study, the general research questions that have served as a guide for gathering data related to this study are:

*What role do Aboriginal parents currently have in public education?*

*How has this role developed and why?*

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Because the design of this study is qualitative in nature, it is not intended to reflect the opinions of all Aboriginal parents who have children in school. Rather, the research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the beliefs and values of the Aboriginal parents with whom I worked. Generally, this study is an attempt to contribute an Aboriginal perspective in the research relating to parental involvement in education. It is a reporting of my views, as a researcher, based upon my involvement with a particular Aboriginal parent group at a specific inner-city school over a specific period in time.

## **Assumptions**

An assumption inherent within this study is that parental involvement, as it has been identified in the literature, is an important factor in student success, from both an academic and personal perspective. While this may certainly be true for mainstream groups, studies have not proven whether this is true for particular cultural entities.

## **The Implications of Being an Aboriginal Researcher**

I believe that formal education is only one aspect of learning. The work that we do as educators and the interaction that we have in our own community provides us with learning opportunities that are equally important to those interactions that take place in a classroom. At times, it becomes easy to forget this. Maybe it is because of the value that is placed on formal learning by employers and institutions like universities. This research project has helped me to gain a better understanding of the importance of holistic learning – what I have learned through this process would have little meaning if it were not for my previous experience working within my own community. In part, I believe our survival as Aboriginal peoples will depend upon our ability to apply what we know to current situations.

In a course I took on Aboriginal research methodologies<sup>4</sup>, we investigated the importance of a Native perspective in research relating to Aboriginal people. Although this immediately sounded right, I wondered about the legitimacy of it. Would this type of research be seen as genuine outside of the Native

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<sup>4</sup> I was required to take this course as a masters level student in the First Nations Education graduate program. This program is offered through the University of Alberta - Faculty of Education – Department of Educational Policy Studies.

community? What about validity and transferability? Ermine (1995) has spoken to this issue,

“Aboriginal epistemology is grounded in the self, the spirit, the unknown. Understanding of the universe must be grounded in the spirit. Knowledge must be sought through the stream of the inner space in unison with all instruments of knowing and conditions that make individuals receptive to knowing. Ultimately it was in the self that Aboriginal people discovered great resources for coming to grips with life’s mysteries. It was in the self that the richest source of information could be found by delving into the metaphysical and the nature and origin of knowledge. Aboriginal epistemology speaks of pondering great mysteries that lie no further than the self”. (p. 108)

As an Aboriginal person, this means that I am compelled to draw upon my own experiences, thoughts, feelings, and spirituality as it relates to the research exercise. Thus, indigenous research can be seen as involving us as Aboriginal people; it might begin with us, or it might end with us. Either way, we see ourselves as a part of, or within, our research. Perhaps this is triangulation in an indigenous sense and addresses the issues of validity raised earlier. I feel that as an Aboriginal researcher doing research in an Aboriginal community, I had privileged insight not available to someone who is non-Aboriginal. This is because I look out from my own community as a member, rather than look inside as an outsider. I am not required to interpret meanings from a non-Native to Native reference point. While this does not mean I can speak on behalf of other Aboriginal people, it does mean that I can speak on behalf of myself as part of a larger group.

If the answers to our questions come from within, then this study has achieved that goal. My interactions with those Aboriginal parents with whom I worked has not only taught me a great deal about the topic of parental involvement, it has also taught me something about myself. I once heard a Native lady whom I greatly respect say that; “We (Native people) are like fine

pottery; we are fragile beings. We have been shattered by the experience of dealing with colonial powers over many years.” Native people are resilient people; I feel that this study has helped me to find one of those pieces of myself. I am grateful for the teachings I have received.

A potential limitation of this study is my inexperience as a participant observer. While this may formally be accurate, informally it could not be further from the truth. I realized while conducting this study that I have been a participant observer all of my life. As the fourth of five children, I honed these skills throughout childhood and adolescence, as the focus of our family rested on an older, extremely rebellious sibling. Over many years, we learned to watch and listen as the battle between our sibling and parents waged on. In retrospect, the skills I acquired then are closely linked to the process of participant observation.

While I feel that I can relate to the parents as Aboriginal people, the fact remains that I myself am not a parent. I think this has affected the research in a couple of ways. First, I am not able to speak from experience for parents in terms of what they think or feel about their children’s education. As an Aboriginal researcher, I can only observe and attempt to record their various behaviours and provide an analysis for what I believe will help to explain these. Second, I feel that there is a certain amount of objectiveness that I was able to bring to the research. My emotional involvement is likely not the same as it would have been if I had a child who attended the site in question. I believe this may have allowed me to see more of the forest, rather than just the trees.

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **The Meaning of Parental Involvement**

A review of relevant literature reveals the following in-home activities as being associated with parental involvement in education: encouraging at-home reading, limiting television viewing, creating family routines, scheduling daily homework times, offering praise, communicating positive behaviours and values and regularly talking with children about school. Activities, classified as involvement outside of the home, include belonging to a parent advisory council, attending parent-teacher meetings and volunteering at school. An equally important, but more subtle form of involvement, is parental and/or community expectations for children. Studies show that this type of involvement can also engender confidence and positive expectations in students (MacKay & Myles, 1989).

Studies that attempt to define parental involvement in education have tended to focus on mainstream parents. However, as statistics continue to reveal low levels of involvement among minority groups, research activities have recently begun to focus attention on parental involvement in a more culturally relevant manner.

### **Parental Involvement and Student Achievement**

Over the past few decades, studies have built upon the relationship that exists between parental involvement and student academic success. Many of these show that the availability of reading material in the home is directly associated with children's achievement in reading comprehension (College Board, 1994; Mullis et al, 1994). As television viewing has come to be viewed as part of parents' in-home involvement, research has looked at the hours

children spend watching television and how this relates to academic achievement levels. For those children who watch more than 10 hours a week, achievement drops sharply (US Department of Education, 1987). Other studies have found that spending time on homework has a significant effect on achievement, particularly in the higher grades (Cooper, 1989). Although the actual time parents spend helping children do homework may vary in many homes, parents are involved even if they only act as a support in making sure the work gets done. Communicating regularly with children is also associated with higher student achievement, as this type of communication reinforces parental expectations to children (Barton & Coley, 1992; see also Clark, 1990; Singer et al, 1988).

Generally, it is accepted among mainstream society that the involvement of parents is key to how students perform academically. For example, one U.S. study found that controllable home factors account for almost all of the differences in average student achievement across geographic regions (Barton & Coley, 1992). As discussed, prior research basically tells us that in-home support activities and the academic partnership that exists between parents and teachers is key to creating a climate at home and at school that is conducive to learning.

### **Barriers to Parental Involvement**

While research has focused on the importance of parents' involvement, it has also identified several barriers that may prevent them from being involved. Generally, this body of research can be separated into two categories: the perspectives of educators and the perspectives of parents. It is interesting to note that the barriers identified by each group are very often not the same.

### Educator Views on Barriers to Involvement

A mainstream study conducted in a British Columbia school district offers the view, according to elementary school principals, that the most significant barriers to parental involvement are working parents and young children at home (Langston, 1990). Generally, educators and administrators agree that barriers to parental involvement concern two main issues: parents' lack of time and their uncertainty about what to do. This consensus derives from various quantitative reports that have used socio-economic indicators to explain levels of parental involvement. An example of this is educational level. One study claims that if a parent's knowledge about education is limited, this will restrain involvement because parents feel their contribution is insignificant compared to that of the teacher (Johnson & Ramirez, 1987). Another indicator that has been used to predict level of involvement is income level. Some studies have determined that the link between low income-level and lack of involvement exists because low-income parents often do not feel welcome or comfortable in the school (Bempechat, 1992; Moles, 1993).

A study that looked at Aboriginal student retention and dropout in Ontario provides further insight into educator views on the issue of parental involvement,

“On the whole, non-Native educators were either uncertain or thought that parents of dropouts did lack interest in their children's education and failed to engender in them an appreciation of its value. In very few cases were the judgements based on direct conversation between educators and Aboriginal parents.... One indicator that educators use to judge parental interest is the extent to which parents participate in parent/teacher nights organized by the school. By and large, it was reported that Native parents do not attend these meetings. Both Native and non-Native educators recognized that many parents are uncomfortable coming to school. They cited a number of reasons for this: (1) some parents are unfamiliar with and are intimidated by the educational system; (2) they may



view the school as an alien world in which they play no part, considering that the formal education of their children is exclusively in the hands of professionally trained educators; (3) their lack of participation reflects a deeply rooted ambivalence towards the purposes of school education as an institution; and (4) the principal and the almost exclusively non-Native teaching staff may implicitly discourage parents from participating as complementary partners in education". (MacKay & Myles, 1995, p. 166)

While providing us with the perspective of educators, quantitative studies such as these have not explored cultural differences as a possible cause for lack of involvement. This is typical of most research in this area in that educator perspectives tend to be emphasized over those of parents. According to MacKay & Myles (1995), the reasons for this are all too evident,

"Many educators used the presence or absence of parental support to explain a student's decision to remain at or drop out of school.... Such an apparently cogent explanation can enormously comfort educators because it places responsibility for a student's behaviour firmly with the parents and releases the school system from both blame and remedial action." (p.166)

### Parent Views on Barriers to Involvement

Studies that focus on the perspectives of parents identify a different set of barriers to involvement. In one such study (Elam, Lowell & Gallup, 1994), it was found that families often experienced a strong disconnection with, or distrust of, public education in general. It seems these feelings are not just the result of parents feeling unsure about the value of their contributions compared with those of the teacher, but that some parents feel that educators 'talk down to them' when they do try to become involved in the school (Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 1994).

Another U.S. study of parent-school communication reveals that Native American parents perceive communication with school personnel to be almost non-existent (Cockrell, 1992). Aboriginal parents feel that the communication that does occur between themselves and the school is one way communication only and almost always concerns disciplinary problems. As Delgado-Gaitan (1991) argues,

“While teachers and administrators express the need to have parents in the schools, the reality is that they need parents only when it is convenient for them to help with a difficult child. They have not seen the value of involving parents on a continuous basis.” (p. 32).

The findings of Steinberg et al (1996) support this view,

“Although schools pay lip service to the benefits of parental involvement, their actual behavior reflects mixed feelings about how much, and in what ways, they actually want parents to be engaged. That is, although schools insist they want parental participation – and complain loudly about the lack of involvement of parents – in actuality, schools only want parents to be involved on the school’s own terms.” (p.129).

Studies show that negative encounters between Aboriginal parents and non-Aboriginal school staff reinforces the negative opinions they mutually hold for one another and provides little basis for mutual trust, respect and understanding in parent-school communication (MacKay & Myles, 1989).

### **The Need for Further Research**

While it is clear that feelings of disconnection may lead to decreased involvement, it is apparent that new barriers arise when an educator makes an assumption that parents are not interested because they are not involved. The fact that teacher preparation programs do not train teachers how to

communicate with families or how to involve parents in their children's learning contributes to this phenomenon (Radcliffe, Malone & Nathan, 1994). Interestingly, communication issues are the focus of many 'how to' materials that are intended to bridge the existing gap between parents and school staff. Telling parents what they 'should' be doing continues to be the focus of educators and policy makers alike. More research in this area from the perspective of parents would provide clearer answers to the phenomena of why some parents become involved while others do not. Further research would also help to move us beyond the blaming which seems to characterize the literature surrounding parental involvement.

### **Parental Involvement and Aboriginal People**

*"Liberation from oppression through resistance and struggle depends upon the capacities to dream and hope. There is no change without dream, as there is no dream without hope."*

(Freire, 1994, p.91)

Although Aboriginal parents have high hopes for their children in school, the expected reality often falls short of their hopes (Sherwin, 1994). The disappointment that is felt by Native parents has begun to receive a limited amount of attention in the research literature.

### **Policy Considerations**

In order to gain a basic understanding of the concept of parental involvement as it relates to Aboriginal people, it is helpful to conduct a brief examination of the policy discourse in Aboriginal education in Canada and note the important changes over time. The Hawthorne report (Government of Canada, 1967) was the first to emphasize the importance of parental involvement in the

education of Native children. Prior to this, the focus of policy had been on the goals of assimilation and the removal of Native children from the influence of their parents and communities. In response to testimony regarding high dropout and unemployment rates, the Hawthorne report recommended a variety of actions aimed at revitalizing Aboriginal cultures and economies through the education system. Involving parents and other individuals on education committees and as members of school boards and ensuring open communication with Native communities were considered vital for successful implementation of the report's recommendations.

In 1972, with the release of the National Indian Brotherhood's report *Indian Control of Indian Education*, the link between education and cultural preservation and promotion were further enhanced. This report placed education on a broader, more holistic level and emphasized the principles of parental responsibility, local control and partnerships between Aboriginal communities and the federal government (the report called for legislative change in jurisdiction to give Indian communities and parents control over the education of their children). As the report states,

“The past practice of using the school committee as an advisory body with limited influence, in restricted areas of the school program, must give way to an education authority with the control of funds and consequent authority which are necessary for an effective decision-making body”. (p. 6)

Two reports of significance were published in the 1980's as provincial governments began to take a more active role in policy discourse. Both of these documents were endeavours undertaken in the context of growing numbers of Aboriginal children in urban schools and growing recognition of the social problems that existed among the urban Aboriginal population. These reports reflected a provincial focus on human rights and multiculturalism that was evident throughout Canada during the 1980's. The

first report, *Reaching Out*, published in 1985 by the Saskatchewan Department of Education, offered this view,

“The theme ‘reaching out’ was chosen for this report because the schools and Indian and Metis parents repeatedly said that, although they wanted to work together, they very often were not. It is time for initiatives to be taken. It is time for reaching out by both educators and Indian and Metis people. It is time to establish a process of working together. This process should begin at the school and community level since it is at that level that most of the positive impact must be felt”. (p. 47)

Around the same time, the Alberta government published *Native Education in Alberta's Schools: Policy Statement on Native Education in Alberta* (1987) in response to information that had been gathered in public consultations that included Aboriginal parents and Elders. This report stated that,

“The partnership of Native people, school boards and the Province of Alberta will ensure that we will be able to look at the education of Native children in this province with a sense of pride. Alberta leads the way in taking action to encourage Native people to work with school boards in improving Native education”. (p.2)

It is important to note the consultative process that provided the basis for provincial government reports like those coming from Alberta and Saskatchewan. Government officials and associated personnel assumed responsibility for all information-gathering activities and non-Aboriginal writers were charged with incorporating Aboriginal views into the official reports. So, while the reports were said to represent the views of various Aboriginal people, communities and organizations, their actual voices remained silent. Reports such as these also continued to focus on communication issues (involvement and participation of parents and communities), and on control of the education system (more community decision-making, local control and

decentralized administrative structures). However, unlike *Indian Control Over Indian Education*, transfer of jurisdiction was largely ignored.

Policy discourse began to change direction with the conceptualization of self-government. The Penner Report (Government of Canada, 1983) was one of the first to endorse self-government and provided the stimulus for *Tradition and Education*, published by the Assembly of First Nations in 1988. *Tradition and Education* was based upon comprehensive grassroots consultation with many First Nations communities across Canada and brought the discourse to the constitutional arena,

“Education is one of the most important issues in the struggle for self-government and must contribute towards the objective of self-government. First Nations’ governments have the right to exercise their authority in all areas of First Nations’ education. Until First Nations’ education institutions are recognized and controlled by First Nations’ governments, no real First Nations’ education exists. The essential principles are that each First Nation government should make its own decisions and arguments and apply its own values and standards rather than having them imposed from outside”. (p. 47)

Similar to *Indian Control over Indian Education*, *Tradition and Education* offered a Native perspective on the issue of Aboriginal education in Canada. The focus, however, was no longer jurisdictional in terms of local control and community involvement. Rather, education was being placed front and center in the discussion of a nation-to-nation relationship and the quest for self-government – education began to be viewed as a means to an end (achievement of the broader goal of self-determination).

To summarize, the path of policy discourse in the area of Native education has, in part, reflected the changing relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the federal government. This path relates primarily to governance issues and has led from a focus on assimilation to integration to local control to self-

government. Provincial governments, on the other hand, have tended to focus the discourse on multiculturalism and human rights; for education systems, that has meant a focus on ensuring proportionate representation within schools and designing programs intended to meet the needs of minority groups. This focus is evident in the many alternative educational programs created in urban public schools throughout the 1970's and 1980's.

### A Cultural Perspective

It is important to reiterate that, although many studies have made a connection between parental involvement and student achievement, little of this research has identified whether this connection is relevant to Native homes and Native parents. Recently, studies have determined that individual families have different views on schools, teaching and their own role in their children's education and that these must be taken into consideration in order for successful parental involvement to happen (Morra, 1994; Williams & Stallworth, 1984). This is an important consideration when looking at the issue of involvement among Aboriginal parents. Viewing parent-school interactions from a cultural perspective provides an alternate way to look at some of the problems that exist between Aboriginal parents and public schools. Frederick Erickson (1997) has written extensively about the existence of culture in educational practices and says,

"Differences in invisible culture can be troublesome in circumstances of intergroup conflict. The difficulty lies in our inability to recognize others' differences in ways of acting as cultural rather than personal. We tend to naturalize other people's behaviours and blame them - attributing intentions, judging competence - without realizing that we are experiencing culture rather than nature. Formal organizations and institutions, such as ... schools, become collection sites for invisible cultural difference." (p. 62)

Erickson points out that each cultural group has their own different perspective on what constitutes difference, sameness, conflict, cooperation, success, competence, etc.

Robert Leavitt (1991) sheds a different light on the issue of culture and education. Leavitt identifies three levels of culture: [1] social culture (classroom interactions, relationships); [2] cognitive culture (worldview, value systems, practical knowledge); and [3] linguistic culture (the role of language in community situations, individual and group identity). He believes that education must be based within all three levels of culture in order to be successful; when culture is taught using a 'museum approach' (focusing on material culture only), educators fail to gain the participation of either the students or parents.

Another study that has looked closely at parental participation among minority groups explained the phenomenon of low participation as a result of the conventional avenues for involving minority parents being closed because specific cultural knowledge [i.e. power] is required in order to participate effectively (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). As Delgado-Gaitan argues, "To actively participate in the school, parents must be informed about the school system and how it functions." (p.25). In virtually all school situations, minority group parents do not have access to the cultural knowledge [i.e. power] that would allow them to act in appropriate or positive ways. As a result, it can often appear as though they do not care. Aboriginal parents in Alberta spoke directly to this issue, "Native parents often feel powerless to influence policy, curriculum and teachers." (Committee on Tolerance and Understanding, 1984).

Other researchers have explained lack of parental participation among Aboriginal groups as being related to the alienation that they feel about their



own negative cultural experiences in residential or public schools and their unwillingness to support or promote the aims of the school (MacKay & Myles, 1989). MacKay and Myles suggest that many Native parents have been left with negative attitudes and memories towards schooling and they do not want their children to suffer a similar experience to their own. Paulo Freire (1970) attributes this phenomena to the existence of cultural invasion in education (the imposition of one's power structure onto another). Freire describes the process of cultural invasion as,

“... the invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter's potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression.” (p.150).

An in-depth analysis of the residential school experience points to cultural invasion as the reason for the struggle to gain power and control within these schools,

“European teachers and priests, strong in their beliefs in hierarchy and the superiority of their cultures, attempted to annihilate Native cultures and to absorb the children of those cultures into their power structure. Inherent in the notion of hierarchy within capitalism is the possibility of rising to a position of superiority. Rarely acknowledged by the proponents of the system is that this myth allows for a few in the upper echelons while the masses struggle amongst themselves against the hegemony which the system perpetrates. For one to win, the others must lose. In the residential school, the message given to the students was clearly that they, because of their history, were inferior.” (Haig-Brown, 1988, p.126)

Cultural invasion is an important consideration when looking at the involvement of Aboriginal parents today. It is widely acknowledged that many Native parents who experienced the residential school system will not fully enter into school activities. Educators believe this is because residential schools assumed responsibility for educating and raising children and many

parents, convinced by administrators of the schools, began to question their own capabilities of being able to raise their children. Gradually, they accepted the fact that the school and administrators could do a better job – they were the ‘experts’ and their assumed positions of power were not to be questioned. It is more likely, however, that residential school survivors resist becoming involved as parents because administrators do not ask them for guidance or advice. Public schools tend to remain closed to Native parents; they continue to exist as isolated ‘islands’ outside of the community. While the residential school experience has been viewed in the context of cultural invasion, public schools might be seen as the process of cultural occupation. Throughout the occupation, parents remain on the outside looking in.

### A Sociological Perspective

Viewing parental involvement from a sociological perspective, that is, viewing the characteristics of the education system in the context of a larger social system is another way to look at educational issues. A significant body of research supports the notion of coercive assimilation policies of the past as being responsible for many of the barriers that exist between schools and Native parents (Butterfield & Pepper, 1992).

Colonial theory, as it has been applied to education systems, explains weak academic performance among Native students as a reflection of their colonized status in Canadian society (Perley, 1993). Given the connection between parental involvement and academic achievement, if we look at the education system as a colonized system, then, Perley argues, in order to improve the overall situation, it becomes necessary to decolonize the system.

Four components that form the basis of colonialism have been identified (Blauner, 1975 as quoted in Perley, 1993). First, colonialism involves the forced, involuntary entry of a colonized group into a dominant society. A second feature is that the colonizer adopts policies that suppress, transform, or destroy the colonized group's values, orientations and ways of life (i.e. culture). Third, agents of the colonizers are instituted to manipulate and manage the colonized group. And, finally, the justification for domination, exploitation and oppression of the colonized group is through an ideology of racism (using racial differences to readily distinguish the colonized as inferior to the colonizer). The concept of colonialism generally refers to the establishment of domination over a geographically external political unit.

Internal colonialism has its roots in colonialism and has been used to describe the situation of countries that were colonized by white European powers, but are no longer external political units. Initially, the term internal colonialism was applied to the situation of countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Recently, the concept has been used to describe Aboriginal peoples in both the United States and Canada. Generally, internal colonialism refers to Aboriginal groups who have been displaced as a result of expansion, alienated from their land, isolated through use of a reserve system, forced to assimilate and controlled through legislative and administrative mechanisms of the colonizing group (Perley, 1993). Internal colonialism affects the social mobility of Native people by excluding them from participation and access to power in the development process.

Perley stresses that a key element in the internal colonialism model is the fact that the colonizer holds the power, both politically and economically. For Native people in Canada, this has been reflected in the education system; the colonizer has planned and controlled the education system on behalf of Aboriginal peoples. Decisions about who goes to school, how long they

attend, what is learned and in what language it is learned are all made by the colonizing group. Under this system, the goals of schooling are designed to meet the needs of the colonizer, rather than the colonized. The industrial and residential school systems are historical examples of education as internal colonialism; it could be argued that the public school system is a more current example.

The ambivalence towards education that has resulted from the residential school experience in Canada continues to have residual effects among Aboriginal people today, namely low student achievement and lack of parental involvement. Looking at internal colonialism as it relates to these issues may help to explain why parents of Aboriginal children do not become involved in ways that public schools desire. Perley (1993) argues that, inherent in the process of decolonization is a transfer of control from the colonizer to the colonized. Morrisette, MacKenzie & Morrisette (1993) describe decolonization as a process that will require that Aboriginal people and communities be empowered to instrumentally influence the system. Delgado-Gaitan (1991) has described empowerment as,

“Empowerment is an ongoing process centered in the local community involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over these resources....” (p.23)

Delgado-Gaitan's definition implies that someone will give power or allow others to do something. This creates a problem for Aboriginal people in that it presumes that the giver can take back, at any time, what has been given. Taylor, Crago & McAlpine (1993) have spoken to this issue,

“Empowerment of Aboriginal peoples, especially in the field of education, has become a ‘politically correct’ way of thinking.... Empowerment is only the beginning of the process. Empowerment does not happen in a vacuum. It is implemented

in the context of a long history of subjugation of Aboriginal peoples..." (p. 182).

Many argue that Aboriginal peoples have never given up their inherent right to self-government and that articulating this right in the current Canadian context will certainly go beyond empowerment issues. The development of a culturally respectful dialogue and collaboration between Natives and non-Natives might simply be part of this process.

### An Anthropological Perspective

John Ogbu's writings also assist us to understand how societal considerations may affect levels of parental involvement. Ogbu (1994) has identified three kinds of minorities in the United States: autonomous, voluntary and involuntary. He classifies autonomous minorities as those who are minorities in a numerical sense<sup>5</sup>. Although "they may be victims of prejudice and pillory, but not of stratification ... they usually have a cultural frame of reference which demonstrates and encourages academic success." (p. 358). Voluntary (or immigrant) minorities are those who have come here seeking greater economic opportunities or political freedom<sup>6</sup>. They are willing to adjust to the mainstream culture and generally do not experience problems with low academic performance. Involuntary minorities, Ogbu argues, are those people who have become minorities against their will. They are people who have either been conquered (Mexican Americans), enslaved (Black Americans) or colonized (Native Americans). These groups "experience persistent problems in school adjustment and academic performance," (p. 358). According to Ogbu, the poor educational performance of involuntary

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Jews and Mormons.

<sup>6</sup> Ogbu gives the example of Chinese or Punjabi groups who have immigrated to the United States.

minorities stems from the belief that they have little reason to excel because society has relegated them to a menial position regardless of their efforts.

### New Directions for Future Research

Viewing the characteristics of the education system from a social science perspective is a relatively new way to look at the problems of school failure and Aboriginal children. By applying these ideas to the issue of parental involvement we may gain new insights into the reasons why parents may choose to remain 'uninvolved'. The concepts of cultural invasion, internal colonialism, issues around empowerment and classifications of minority groups give us a more systemic and holistic view of the issue of Aboriginal parental involvement.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

*Of all the teachings we receive,  
this one is the most important:  
Nothing belongs to you of what there is,  
of what you take, you must share.*  
(Chief Dan George, 1974, p.25)

### Overall Approach and Rationale

Theoretical approaches for informing and guiding research generally fall under four major paradigms; these include positivism, post-positivism, critical theory and constructivism. Recently, quantitative approaches (positivism, post-positivism) have come under increasing criticism on a number of fronts, particularly at the methods level (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). First, quantification has been criticized for the lack of a contextual element in studying various phenomena. Relevance may be adversely affected by stripping situations of their contexts. Second, the meaning that people attach to their actions are often excluded from the data in quantitative research. This is due to a focus on the etic<sup>7</sup> perspective. It is difficult to understand human behaviour without understanding references to meanings and actions. Finally, although generalizations that come from quantitative studies may be statistically meaningful, often they have no relevance for particular cases. Each of these criticisms has contributed to the call for an alternative approach to research that will, rather than replace the former, will enhance our understanding of particular phenomena.

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<sup>7</sup> According to Spradley (1979), an etic perspective involves viewing a cultural situation entirely from an outsider's point of view. An emic perspective, on the other hand, seeks to see a particular situation from an insider's perspective. According to Fetterman (1998), an emic perspective compels the recognition and acceptance of multiple realities which is crucial to understanding why people think and act in the ways they do.

The discourse relating to the constructivist approach informs us that its epistemological doctrine makes an assumption that social reality is constructed and that it is constructed differently by different individuals (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996). This includes recognition that knowledge is created in interaction between researcher and participant(s). The term interpretive research has also been used to describe this approach. Erickson (1986) defines interpretive research as the study of the immediate and local meanings of social actions for the actors involved in them. Still others prefer the term qualitative research instead of constructivist or interpretative. Qualitative research is commonly seen as an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter in an attempt to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Whichever term is used to describe this particular approach to research, it is generally agreed that the construction of meanings is important from an ontological perspective and that meanings are only available at the local, immediate level. In cases where the purpose of the study is explanatory, access to meanings becomes important as an aid in the discovery of causal patterns in various social phenomena. Our jobs, therefore, as qualitative researchers, are to find ways to learn about individuals' constructions of their own social realities in particular instances (at a specific place and time). The goal of research becomes the development of "a consensus construction that is more informed and sophisticated than any of the predecessor constructions" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

As Paulo Freire states, the reality is that the voices of those who are oppressed tend not to be heard (Freire, 1970). Freire describes this 'culture of silence' as a direct product of the situation of economic, social and political domination and paternalism which makes victims of those who are



oppressed. Only through an indigenous approach is it possible to begin to present an Aboriginal perspective and an Aboriginal voice on issues that are central to Aboriginal life. This is important because, "... often, theory fails to speak to the personal everyday life-worlds of (individuals) and becomes instead another set of alienating constructs." (Polakow, 1985 as quoted in Haig-Brown, 1988).

The justification for a shift towards an indigenous methodology is that the phenomenon of an indigenous worldview lies outside of the existing lines of social inquiry. Justification requires recognition of the fact that existing methods might not be sufficient to capture particular data. Science has not been able to deal with the things that make up, for example, Aboriginal wisdom. Science has failed in its endeavour to measure indigenous knowledge, it has not been able to capture our emotions, it has not been able to get at the essence of our spirits and it has no way of doing justice to our experiences. While qualitative methods have experienced greater success in trying to explain certain phenomena, it may be that an indigenous methodology is the only true way of doing research involving Aboriginal people.

### **Problem Formulation**

First, I did not identify a research objective for this study. My initial interest in the topic of this study resulted from my affiliation with one of the parents of the Aboriginal Parent Advisory Group in question. Second, once I had decided on this study, the eventual focus of the research was jointly determined between Aboriginal parents and myself as a researcher. This method of defining a research objective is more congruent with the perspective of Aboriginal communities.

Our responsibility as Aboriginal researchers thus becomes one of collaboratively developing a research agenda that relates the identified issues to the enduring concerns within social science (Spradley, 1979). This is important because it is consistent with the emergent design of qualitative research and is a critical consideration for Aboriginal communities. A sacred tenet of any Aboriginal worldview is respect; thus, it is imperative that research be respectful. Rather than thinking of research as a process of 'studying' a particular group or community, Aboriginal research could be thought of as a community effort in the asking of questions and the search for answers.

As a part of the community, I have researched and written about this topic from that standpoint. As a member of the Aboriginal community, and not separate from it, I have a vested interest in not only the outcome of the research, but also the process than has been used. Because of this, I am confident that the research focus is on that which is important to those with whom I was involved. The end goal of this study, then, has been to portray, in a respectful and caring manner, an insider view of the process of working with Aboriginal parents as we interacted with the current public education system.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The role of data collection in any qualitative study is to systematically record behaviour and explanation. There are two purposes for using multiple methods in qualitative research: to draw out unexpected data and to ensure transferability of the findings. Although the willingness to adapt research methods in qualitative studies is important, early on I settled on the following two methods for collecting data:

## Document Analysis

Viewing written material related to this topic provided me with key background information that was instrumental in analyzing other data I collected throughout the study. Official documents considered relevant to the research included the provincial School Council Act<sup>8</sup>, policy decisions and other information regarding alternative programming at the City Public School Board<sup>9</sup> and the Aboriginal Parent Advisory Group<sup>10</sup> meeting minutes and related correspondence.

Content analysis throughout the research process has served three important purposes. It has: 1) contributed to knowledge about the values and beliefs of participants in the setting, 2) provided understanding about the setting from a historical perspective and 3) assisted in determining where the research focus should be (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Gall, Borg & Gall (1996) explain the process of content analysis,

“The results of the qualitative researcher’s analysis take the form of interpretations and hypotheses... these need to be weighed in relation to two different contexts – the contexts in which the documents and records were developed and the context in which they are now being interpreted for research purposes. The researcher must take into account variations in meaning as they are studied across space, time, and cultures.” (p.363).

## Participant Observation

In addition to document analysis, major data collected for the study came from participant observation over a six month period (November, 1997

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<sup>8</sup> For the purpose of anonymity, the province has not been named.

<sup>9</sup> Also for reasons of anonymity, ‘City’ is substituted in the place of the actual school board’s name.

<sup>10</sup> The parent advisory body remains nameless to protect the identity of those directly involved in the study.

through May, 1998). I use the term participant observation to mean direct involvement in the activities that were observed. Generally, observation has allowed me to, "formulate [my] own version of what is occurring, independent of the participants". (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996, p.344). As a Native researcher, I felt that the tools of participant observation best suited the type of information required for the study and the process in which it should be collected.

The purpose of participant observation is to assist in the discovery of complex interactions in the natural setting and provide a more holistic view of events and behaviors as well as inform other investigative processes (Spindler & Spindler, 1987). Spradley (1980) describes the process of participant observation as having three stages. The first is a descriptive stage where observations are general in scope. Second is the focused stage where the researcher identifies features of the study and focuses on the activities that relate to those features. This third is the selected stage where the researcher focuses on observations that will deepen his/her understanding of the specific elements that emerge. Others have described the process of participant observation,

"It aims to generate practical and theoretical truths formulated as interpretive theories. The methodology of participant observation involves a flexible, open-ended opportunistic process and logic of inquiry through which what is studied constantly is subject to redefinition based on field experience and observation. Participant observation generally is practiced as a form of case study that concentrates on in-depth description and analysis of some phenomena... Participation is a strategy for gaining access to otherwise inaccessible dimensions of human life and experience." (Jorgensen, 1989, p.23).

Participant observation, as a data collection method, differs in at least six ways from ordinary participation in a given event, activity or situation

(Spradley, 1980). First, participant observation is dual purpose; it involves participating in a particular activity while observing that activity, the people involved and the physical aspects of a situation. Second, the need for explicit awareness requires the participant observer to consciously focus on audio-visual details and other situational information; details that we would normally suppress as a means of avoiding sensory overload. Third is the use of a 'wide angle lens' approach, where we take in a much broader spectrum of information than is usual. A fourth difference to ordinary participation is the insider/outside experience. As a participant observer, our feelings alternate between feeling like an outsider at certain moments (sense of detachment), while other moments feeling like an insider to the situation. A fifth difference is introspection where we begin to appreciate our role as the research instrument. Lastly, the ordinary participant does not see the need to keep detailed records of objective observations and subjective feelings. This is a key component of participant observation as it provides the source of data from which analyses are made.

I basically observed interactions between parents and school administrators from the time I attended the first parent meeting at the site in question [November, 1997] up to my attendance at the final meeting between parents and school board administrative staff [May, 1998]. I used descriptive fieldnotes<sup>11</sup> to record all observations over this six-month period.

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<sup>11</sup> Descriptive fieldnotes are basically a written account of what I saw, heard, experienced and thought in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in this study. I have used descriptive fieldnotes to describe physical settings, record accounts of particular events, depict various activities and record my own behaviour and that of others.

## **Data Analysis**

Along with descriptive fieldnotes, reflective fieldnotes<sup>12</sup>, made during content analysis and in observations, provided me with the basis for initially analyzing the data I had collected (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Later, I used coding of the data to make the following categories that assisted me to identify themes or patterns: setting or context, participant perspectives including social relationships and worldview, method of data collection and observer comments and questions.

In order to reduce the data, I used summary sheets to depict coded data. By doing this, I was able to identify overlaps and redundancies within the data. To draw tentative conclusions, I attempted to display the data using explanatory matrices. I have attempted to triangulate the data by using comparisons, considering negative evidence and looking for alternate explanations. To ensure validity, I sought feedback from Aboriginal parents and colleagues regarding the explanations I had arrived at. This has helped me to verify the conclusions I originally drew or to come to new conclusions where appropriate.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The negative view of research that exists in some Aboriginal communities stems from the practices that have been used in past studies. In many cases, Native people now view research activities as only serving the interests of non-Native scholars. Often, these individuals have benefited financially and/or professionally and in many cases, no feedback or consultation has been

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<sup>12</sup> Reflective fieldnotes have been used to emphasize speculation, feelings, problems, ideas, hunches, impressions and misunderstandings.

provided at the community level that would help to ensure that Aboriginal voices were heard.

The absence of an authentic Aboriginal voice in research activities is part of the legacy of our colonial past and the unbalanced power relationship we currently have with non-Native people. It is important that research in Aboriginal communities honour those who are involved in the study and that it protect their physical, social and psychological welfare. One way to ensure this is to involve Native people as colleagues, rather than as subjects. The reason for doing research in Native communities should not be simply to provide a cultural description, but to provide a foundation for social change. Generally, I have tried to address this by following the ethical guidelines developed by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (in addition to the university's own guidelines). The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples guidelines focus on giving appropriate respect to the cultures, languages, knowledge and values of Aboriginal peoples, and to the standards used by Aboriginal peoples to legitimate knowledge (RCAP, 1996).

Generally, these guidelines consist of five criteria. First, I have attempted to legitimate Aboriginal knowledge throughout the study. I feel I have done this by seeking distinct Aboriginal perspectives on this topic, including my own perspective. Subsequently, I have looked for Aboriginal sources that could shed light on these perspectives and have noted areas where Aboriginal knowledge challenges assumptions found in prior research. In accessing relevant knowledge, I have made every attempt to observe particular protocols and approaches. Second, I have obtained consent, in writing, from the particular parent group to conduct this research. Confidentiality and anonymity in all reports has been guaranteed to participants and this group will be consulted regarding any distribution of the research results. Third, I have intended the research to be inclusive. The steering committee that I

worked with was comprised of parents and other individuals with different Aboriginal status and gender, thus, a representative cross-section of the perceptions of Aboriginal people involved in this study has been included. Fourth, I have sought a review of the results of this research from the Aboriginal community prior to submission. This includes having the current parent group chairperson review the rough draft and suggest any changes. Fifth, in all activities associated with the study, I have given serious and due consideration to the benefit of the Aboriginal community concerned.



## CHAPTER FOUR: DATA PRESENTATION

### The Setting

Sprucewood School<sup>13</sup> is located not far from the downtown core in a western Canadian city. It is located on the north side of the city, which is home to a majority of the Native population who live there. Many of the children who attend Sprucewood School come from low-income families<sup>14</sup> and, at any time, between 80-90% of students are of Aboriginal heritage. Given these factors, Sprucewood could be classified as an 'inner-city' school. It can also be considered fairly large in terms of elementary school size with an ongoing enrollment of approximately 270 children<sup>15</sup>.

Most students who attend Sprucewood School are enrolled in the *Native Program*.<sup>16</sup> Officially created in 1973, the original idea for the program was developed by a civic task force that was set up as a result of demands by the Aboriginal community for a program that would meet the cultural and educational needs of urban Native children. Initially, the *Native Program* was a pilot project financed by both the provincial and civic governments.

In 1974, responsibility for the program was turned over to the City Public School Board (CPSB). In both the 1974-75 and 1975-76 school years, one kindergarten class was conducted at Sprucewood School and another was conducted at a nearby school (also on the north side of the city). During these first two years, the Canadian Native Friendship Centre was involved with program delivery.

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<sup>13</sup> To protect the identity of those involved, I have used a pseudonym rather than the actual name.

<sup>14</sup> Sprucewood is allocated special grants from the provincial government – this additional funding is based upon enrollment levels of Native students and factors relating to low-income levels.

<sup>15</sup> Based on 1997-98 school enrollment figures.

<sup>16</sup> Due to issues of anonymity, I have substituted 'Native' for the actual name of the program.

For its third year (1976-77 school term), the *Native Program* was amalgamated at Sprucewood School and, from that point onward, was expanded one grade per year as necessitated by enrolment. As a result, by September of 1981, the program was being offered to urban Native children in kindergarten through grade six. The overall objective of the *Native Program* as identified by the City Public School Board is:

“To provide an alternative educational program for urban Native students. Specifically, to provide a holistic learning environment which integrates extensive Native content into the existing provincial curriculum to provide a bicultural, bilingual program consisting of four major areas – academic, cultural, personal development and community. In addition to this, to include innovative approaches to improve school attendance and retention, and to assist students in reaching or surpassing system expectations in the cognitive areas. To provide an atmosphere that emphasizes and values Native traditions, respects the unique individuality of each student and encourages a community based approach to education. The ultimate goal is to provide a school atmosphere in which Native students feel at home and are secure and happy while they learn.” (CPSB Report, June, 1980)

As of the 1997-98 school year, the *Native Program* continued to be offered at Sprucewood School. The program is labeled ‘alternative’ according to school board guidelines. The focus of the program is to deliver curriculum within an Aboriginal context to students in grades K-6; this mainly involves incorporating a Native language and other cultural elements into the curriculum.

Because the *Native Program* is considered an ‘open program’, Aboriginal students come from areas throughout the north side of the city; those who do not live in the immediate school vicinity are bussed each day at the school’s expense. In the first few years of the program, the Aboriginal Parent Advisory Group at Sprucewood School, a non-profit society, were responsible for

paying student transportation. This ceased in 1981 when funding for transportation became the responsibility of the public school board. Enrollment in the *Native Program* is normally at a maximum and there is a waiting list for students who want to get in. The school receives approximately ten calls per week throughout the school year from new parents inquiring about the program<sup>17</sup>.

The remaining students at Sprucewood School, students who are not enrolled in the *Native Program*, are non-Aboriginal children from the surrounding community. One of the challenges for the program is the dual track nature of the school – those not enrolled in the *Native Program* are offered the regular provincial curriculum without the Aboriginal cultural component. This requires that students take classes both separately and together. This assimilationist approach has been justified in the handbook developed by the school board for the *Native Program*,

“This approach is taken with the belief that it will foster greater respect, tolerance and understanding when students, parents and community can interact and relate in a cross-cultural setting. Within the classroom and elsewhere, students have a greater opportunity to learn about different worldviews from an experiential base rather than primarily on an intellectual level. This approach is beneficial to Native children who are involved in a bilingual, bicultural program. Working and playing with a variety of non-Native people can help to equip them with the interpersonal skills required to function successfully in the larger society”. (CPSB, 1980).

The school board funds all of the academic components of the *Native Program* including all costs associated with facilities, teaching staff, curriculum, textbooks, transportation, etc. Because of the inclusion of Aboriginal curriculum and a higher than normal number of special needs

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<sup>17</sup> As reported in the minutes of the October 21, 1997 Aboriginal Parent Advisory Group monthly meeting.

students, the *Native Program* receives significantly more funding on a per-student basis than most other elementary schools in the city. The Aboriginal Parent Advisory Group (PAG) contributes additional funds to the program. Re-activated as a society in April of 1996 [previously it was registered from 1974-1981], this group receives funding from the provincial children's services office through an existing Early Intervention Program (approximately \$230,000 in 1998/99). These funds are intended to pay for social and cultural activities not directly related to curriculum, implementation of a hot lunch program for all students at the school and the employment of two Aboriginal Liaison employees whose task is to work with school staff, Native children and their families.

### **Behind the Scenes**

I first heard of the *Native Program* nearly four years ago when my niece was enrolled into the program (September, 1995). Prior to this, I was unaware that such a program existed in this particular city. What I initially knew about the program came as a result of a discussion I had with my sister soon after my niece began attending. Aboriginal parents who sent their children to school there wanted them to learn about, and in an environment conducive to, traditional Aboriginal culture. Parents chose this alternative program because they felt that an Aboriginal-based curriculum would be more beneficial to the well-being of their children and that it would lead to increased academic success.

A year or two later, my sister shared with me some of the problems that she felt had arisen when the *Native Program* began to receive additional funding from the Early Intervention Program (beginning in the 1996-97 school year). One of the problems she mentioned was ongoing conflict between the

parents of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Due to current provincial School Council legislation, the Aboriginal PAG is considered to take the place of a regular School Council<sup>18</sup>; this means that all parents whose children attend the school, whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, can be involved in decisions concerning the *Native Program*. This seemed to have created a number of problems. Two comments allegedly made by non-Aboriginal parents at an Aboriginal PAG meeting emphasized these, "I am sick and tired of you guys shoving Aboriginal down our throats; this is a public school!" and "The reason there are no Aboriginal parents here is because they are all sitting in the bingo hall every night".

In one of the first courses I took in my graduate program<sup>19</sup>, we were required to choose a topic to focus our course work on. One of the research articles that I received in this course related directly to some of the negative things that I had heard about the *Native Program*. Particularly, Frederick Erickson's (1997) view that problems in multicultural curriculum and pedagogy stem from an overemphasis on visible (explicit) culture at the expense of the invisible and implicit. I thought this was relevant to what was happening at Sprucewood School. As Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents focused on what cultural programming should or should not be included, it seemed that the issue of themselves as cultural beings were largely being ignored. This is important because often, cultural differences can account for the alternate ways in which parents view their world and may affect not only how they communicate with one another, but what they each see as being relevant and important to their children.

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<sup>18</sup> As per Section 17(2) of the Provincial School Act, "The majority of the members of a school council shall be parents of students enrolled in the school." In the case of Sprucewood School, the Aboriginal Parent Advisory Group society and the School Council are, in effect, one and the same.

<sup>19</sup> This course was entitled *Issues in First Nations Education*.

I was beginning to understand how these cultural differences were much less tangible and more difficult to identify than were decisions about what cultural activities should be undertaken at the school. For Native students in the public education system, the odds are stacked against them. Failure is a common occurrence. I have seen this regularly during eight years of recruiting students for post-secondary programs. Most have not completed high school; many have also failed at least once in an attempt to upgrade.

Other problems that my sister mentioned regarding the *Native Program* involved conflict between Aboriginal parents and certain non-Native teaching and administrative staff at the school. Some of the parents felt that the administration had stereotyped them as Native people. They felt that there were low achievement expectations of students. They also felt that the administrative staff purposely ignored many of the decisions they made about how to use the society's funding, whether it was to bring a visiting Elder to the school or to hire a Native person to cater a school cultural event. Parents felt that the administration held paternalistic attitudes and deliberately overlooked their wishes in many of the decisions that were made. Parents felt that some of the non-Native administrators did so because they believed they knew 'what was better' for the children and school.

Provincial legislation requires that the principal (in this case, a non-Native individual) be an integral part of the School Council. It is intended within the legislation that parents will fill an advisory role. Ongoing conflicts at Aboriginal PAG meetings had caused parents to feel that their culture and community were being devalued and disrespected by school staff and was creating feelings of frustration among parents. Some parents also felt that some of the civil servants who worked with the Early Intervention Program were serving to undermine them by working in conjunction with the principal, rather than with the Aboriginal PAG (the group they had formally funded). They felt that the

staff at the Early Intervention Program held the same stereotypes as did certain school administrators. As I prepared to enter the scene, problems such as these were beginning to have a negative impact on parent attendance at the monthly Aboriginal PAG meetings.

Cultural awareness is a key factor for group relations and is useful for looking at the dynamics of the Aboriginal Parent Advisory Group. As Bennett (1990) states, multicultural awareness is important in terms of the awareness it gives us about our own cultural biases. Generally, Native people are expected to be more culturally aware than non-Native people, given that they are forced to operate within the structures and institutions of mainstream society (Wilson, 1991). The theory of standpoint epistemology helps describe this phenomenon,

"... standpoint epistemology begins with the idea that less powerful members of society have the potential for a more complete view of social reality than others, precisely because of their disadvantaged position. That is, in order to survive (socially and sometimes even physically), subordinate persons are attuned to or attentive to the perspective of the dominant class ... as well as their own. This awareness gives them the potential for ... 'double vision' or double consciousness – a knowledge, awareness of, and sensitivity to both the dominant worldview of the society and their own minority ... perspective (Neilsen, 1988, p.10).

Standpoint theory provides an effective way to look at the cultural issues that seemed to be causing some of the problems within the Aboriginal PAG.

### **Meeting the Parents**

Despite all of the negative comments I had heard about the *Native Program*, I also learned that Aboriginal parents at Sprucewood School continued to have

hope for the future. Towards the end of my first semester, the chairperson of the Aboriginal PAG met with our instructor and some of the students from my cohort group<sup>20</sup>. He had made a trip into the city to come to the university to seek help for the problems at Sprucewood School – the same problems that my sister had mentioned. He came to talk about the aspirations that Aboriginal parents, including himself, had for the future of the *Native Program*.

While listening to the chairperson that morning, I realized the extent to which Aboriginal parents want their children to succeed at school. He talked passionately about his dreams for not just his own children, but all of the Native children at Sprucewood School. He talked about how they needed role models of successful Native people; not ones that merely looked out at them from posters on the wall, but ones they could talk to, listen to, reach out and touch. He talked about how Aboriginal parents not only want their children to succeed academically, but they want them to gain knowledge and understanding of who they are as a people. He said Native parents want the education system to honour their children in a way which will allow them to feel good about themselves – he said this was important because many of the parents had themselves experienced an identity crisis in school. He said the need for healing among parents needed to be a vital part of any new programming strategies.

The chairperson felt now was the time to try to gain more control over the school, including control over the hiring of teaching staff – he believed that the superintendent of the school board was genuinely sincere in recent discussions with him regarding these issues. He also talked about the lack of resources available to parents, resources that would allow them to know what

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<sup>20</sup> The cohort group is composed of six Aboriginal students enrolled in the First Nations Education graduate program at the University of Alberta. As a cohort group, all students are required to take core courses together. Four students from this group along with our instructor attended this meeting with the chairperson on a Saturday morning in November, 1997.



is possible for their children's education. He thought that bringing together community members with people working in the field (e.g. Aboriginal educators, Aboriginal university students and others) would help parents to learn what could be done.

All that the Chairperson said was at great odds with what I had mostly read up to that point about Aboriginal parental involvement. The many 'how to' booklets that I had come across seemed to blame Aboriginal parents for low student achievement levels – they suggested that, if you become more involved with your children in these specific (i.e. mainstream) ways, then your children will no longer continue to fail. Ultimately, these booklets placed responsibility for Aboriginal student failure squarely in the laps of Aboriginal parents. This assignment of blame only results in unfairly burdening parents with a label of failure. For those parents who were not successful themselves as students, this becomes yet another failure at dealing with the school system. I was beginning to realize that there was more to this issue than simply telling parents how, when, and in what ways they should become involved.

After the meeting with the chairperson, I asked my sister if I could look at the Parent Handbook that was given to all parents at Sprucewood School. I was struck by the essence of the role assigned to them. According to the Parent Handbook<sup>21</sup>, the responsibilities of the parent/guardian are to ensure that students:

- ◆ Attend regularly and arrive on time.
- ◆ Dress appropriately to go outside at recess time and lunchtime.
- ◆ Are supplied with a lunch.

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<sup>21</sup> Taken from the Sprucewood School 1997-98 Parent Handbook produced and distributed by the CPSB.

- ◆ Have the required school supplies.
- ◆ Have enough sleep to allow them to be alert each day.
- ◆ Understand the Code of the Golden Feather (this code relates to eight rules which are meant to govern student behaviour while at school e.g. no fighting, no swearing, no littering, etc.).
- ◆ Are supervised if they are ill or suspended.
- ◆ Bring any concerns to the attention of the teacher and/or principal.

Under the Parent Involvement section of the handbook, the following information is offered:

“At Sprucewood we encourage parental involvement. There are numerous opportunities and ways for parents to assist us to provide the best for your child. We feel that education is a responsibility shared by both the home and school. Our parents can become involved through volunteer work in the school or by serving on the School Council”.

I asked one of the parents about volunteerism at the school. This individual explained that, at the beginning of each school year, volunteer forms are sent home with students. In the four years that this individual had a child attending the school, she was not aware of any incidences where parents had been called in by school staff to participate<sup>22</sup>.

I compared the Sprucewood Parent Handbook with information I had located in a handbook given to parents of school children in Alaska. This handbook contains a section that identifies how schools can become culturally responsive by fostering extensive on-going participation, communication and

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<sup>22</sup> As far as this individual knew, some parents had returned the forms to the school.

interaction between school and community personnel. According to this Handbook<sup>23</sup>, schools that meet this cultural standard:

1. Hold regular formal and informal events bringing together students, parents, teachers and other school and community personnel to review, evaluate and plan the educational program that is being offered;
2. Provide regular opportunities for local and regional board deliberations and decision-making on policy, program and personnel issues related to the school;

The difference in the two approaches contained within these handbooks was significant. Where the Sprucewood handbook offers parents what appears to be little more than token participation, the Alaska handbook seeks to make parents an integral part of the decision-making surrounding educational programming in general. I wondered why there was such discrepancy in these two approaches.

Shortly after the meeting with the chairperson at the university, I attended a monthly meeting of the Aboriginal PAG at Sprucewood School. At this Tuesday evening meeting, the chairperson advised those in attendance<sup>24</sup> that he had met with our cohort group and instructor at the university. He also informed parents that the superintendent of the school board had agreed to fund a gathering to deal with expansion of the program. The parents had been talking for over a year about wanting to expand the *Native Program* through grade nine, particularly those who had children in grades five or six and were faced with having to send them to other junior high schools

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<sup>23</sup> Taken from *Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools: Cultural Standards for Student, Educators, Schools, Curriculum and Communities*. This handbook is published by the Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1998 (p.20).

<sup>24</sup> In addition to myself, also attending this meeting on November 11, 1997 were approximately ten Aboriginal parents and two non-Aboriginal parents. Of these twelve parents, five were Executive members of the Society. Also in attendance were the principal and vice-principal of Sprucewood School (both non-Native individuals).

elsewhere in the city. Now, he told the group, they had been allocated funds to host a symposium that would allow Aboriginal parents, community members, Elders and educators an opportunity to share their perspectives on expansion and improvement of the program.

Attending the Aboriginal PAG meeting that night brought a couple of things to my attention. I again noticed the high level of concern that Aboriginal parents have for their children's education – comments made that night were very similar to those made by the chairperson in that earlier meeting. There was definite and real caring on the part of these parents towards educational issues in general. I also realized that, in addition to their efforts to make cultural knowledge an integral part of the educational program, these parents had to deal with the everyday issues that concern all parents. Issues such as the upcoming Christmas concert, recent student behaviour on buses, theft of brand name clothing among students and staff supervision at recess and lunch hour took up a significant amount of time at this meeting. When these issues are added to the cultural responsibilities Aboriginal people have in terms of the role that they must play in education, it is no wonder that parents might feel overwhelmed by it all.

One parent talked about the absence of Elders at the school. Although this had been incorporated sporadically in the past, he felt it was important that there be Elders present on an ongoing basis. He felt that language alone was not sufficient – “without the Elders, children will leave here without having learned traditional knowledge”. Mainstream parents do not have to spend time and energy making the education system reflective of their culture. Generally, they know that the school will reflect similar values to their own. Fuller and Ellmore (1996) argue the reasons for this,

**“Educators tend to perceive [favor] the cultural capital (system of implicit and deeply internalized values influenced by social**

class) of those who control the economic, social, and political resources as the natural and only proper sort..." (p.27).

Sadly, Aboriginal parents, must fulfill these dual roles in education in an atmosphere where those in charge may not want to listen. At one point in the meeting, the chairperson of the Aboriginal PAG interrupted the meeting to address the issue of the principal's interruptions each time a parent attempted to speak. He stressed to the principal that it was very important that she listen to what parents were saying instead of starting to talk each time they tried to say something. From the chairperson's tone, it was clear that this was not the first time they had experienced these problems at their monthly meetings<sup>25</sup>. I sensed a real defensiveness on the part of the principal to the admonishment she received from the chairperson. While she did tend to speak less through the remainder of the meeting, she did not, according to several non-verbal cues, appear to be listening in any genuine way to what was being said.

Barriers to incorporating cultural programming at Sprucewood School were also an issue raised at this meeting. One of these appeared to be budget constraints. Some parents felt that traditional knowledge was not valued in the same way as academic knowledge; the non-Aboriginal administration seemed to feel that Elders were not worthy of expenditures, given the tight budget and the many other issues that demanded their fiscal attention.

A larger, and more fundamental barrier, however, seemed to be the battle over who would control programming – Aboriginal parents, non-Aboriginal parents or school administrators. This struggle appeared to be taking up a

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<sup>25</sup> Checking the previous meetings minutes of October 21, 1997, it seems the Chairperson addressed this issue at the beginning of this meeting also. As noted in these minutes, he [the Chairperson] stated that "there should be no interrupting when someone is talking as it does not make sense if you do not first acknowledge a speaker or if someone asks another question before the first one has been answered."

great deal of the energy of the Aboriginal PAG at the time I attended that November meeting. However, the fact that the chairperson, together with the school board superintendent, was looking for input from the larger Aboriginal community into the program's expansion and improvement seemed to be a positive aspect for those parents who were there.

### **Working Within: A Participant Observer**

It is a somewhat ironic sequence of events that led me to choose the Native Program as my thesis topic. Maybe this is in keeping with the belief that we do not always choose our own path – sometimes, we are guided towards the things we should be doing. While I had informally become involved in the Aboriginal PAG through my attendance at the monthly meeting in November of 1997, I began working in a more formal capacity in January of 1998.

My instructor was contacted by the school board and invited to a meeting<sup>26</sup> to discuss a symposium on Aboriginal education (the same symposium the chairperson had mentioned at the Aboriginal PAG meeting in November). My instructor invited me to come because he knew I was interested in this topic and he was aware that the school board was looking for someone to coordinate the symposium.

At this meeting, the focus of conversation centered on curriculum issues. There was also some discussion around improving rates of parental involvement – school board staff confirmed that these had improved since funding was received from the Early Intervention Program.<sup>27</sup> School board

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<sup>26</sup> This meeting took place on January 12, 1998 at 10:00 am. In attendance was a fellow cohort student, our instructor, two central service staff from the Monitoring and Planning division of the City Public School Board and myself.

<sup>27</sup> Although this was initially true, participation rates had begun to decrease recently.

staff hoped one of the outcomes of the symposium would be increased input from parents.

At the end of our meeting, I agreed to take the position of coordinator for the symposium. I was employed, on a contract basis, by the school board beginning in mid-January, 1998 – my task was to assist in organizing a symposium to discuss improvement and expansion of the Native Program (from Grades K-6 to K-9). The Aboriginal Education Symposium was held on February 28, 1998 and was attended by Aboriginal parents and community members, teachers from Sprucewood and other schools, school board personnel and elected officials along with other interested individuals.

As coordinator for the symposium, I essentially acted as a liaison person between the Aboriginal PAG steering committee<sup>28</sup> and two central service staff acting on behalf of the school board<sup>29</sup>. I was responsible for assisting the steering committee to identify and contact guest speakers and develop workshop themes and for coordinating Aboriginal graduate students who would act as recorders at the Symposium. All recorded submissions were turned over to me and I was responsible for writing the final report that was to go before the school board trustees on behalf of the Aboriginal PAG.

The principal of the school attended our initial meeting of the steering committee. Upon her arrival at the meeting, she informed the group that, as a matter of administrative responsibility, she felt it was necessary that she sit in on the meetings of the steering committee. There appeared to be a sense of unspoken opposition from some of the parents to the principal's

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<sup>28</sup> The Steering Committee was comprised of six Native parents whose children currently attended Sprucewood School and an Aboriginal employee of the provincial Department of Education.

<sup>29</sup> One of these two individuals from the Monitoring and Planning Division of the City Public School Board had been involved with the Native Program since its inception.

announcement. This was evident in their faces; some of them looked at each other in silence but nobody offered any verbal response to her proclamation.

During the meeting, the principal made statements such as, "You people need to decide who to invite as speakers to the symposium ...". I thought that her choice of language would further exacerbate the sense of opposition I had witnessed earlier, although it did not seem to. Why were the parents not offended by her words? Certainly the principal's body language and tone seemed to be demeaning. Did they not feel that her usage of language was inappropriate given that they were supposed to be, at the very least, equal partners on the steering committee? I felt that the principal's choice of words only served to further segregate the parents from the administration. When I reflected on this later, I felt that the parents did not appear to notice because they were routinely talked to in what I felt was a colonizing and oppressive nature. Later, I asked two Aboriginal parents about this and they stated that they did indeed feel talked down to by the principal. I also described this situation to an Aboriginal colleague, who agreed that my initial interpretation was probably accurate.

During a second meeting of the steering committee, the principal made the statement that "I can pay for any babysitting services required during the symposium ... " This remark also seemed to go unnoticed by the parent group. The principal's "I can pay ... " remarks seemed highly inappropriate in light of the fact that funds belonging to the Aboriginal PAG were the responsibility of all members. This meant that all parents whose children are enrolled in the *Native Program*, as members of the society, had some say in the expenditure of funds associated with the group. This was particularly true of the executive members who had signing authority on behalf of the Aboriginal PAG. Again, on checking with one parent later, the nature of this remark did not, as I first suspected, go unnoticed.



My observations up to this point along with discussions with various colleagues led me to believe that there were control issues at the heart of the principal's comments. It also seemed that these had become so much a part of the parent-principal relationship at Sprucewood School that it went virtually unnoticed by some parents sitting on the steering committee. Only when I would ask later would I realize that they were in fact aware of the nature of these statements. The steering committee met a total of three times prior to the symposium. Afterwards, we met again to discuss the rough draft and recommendations (Appendix A) from the final report. Although this was the first time the parents saw the report, earlier that day the principal had received a copy of the rough draft from staff at the school board<sup>30</sup>. She appeared visibly upset by the recommendations, particularly the ones relating to control over hiring and the make-up of a new Aboriginal Advisory Circle which would take the place of the existing Aboriginal PAG (see Appendix B). Throughout the meeting, the principal focused attention on provincial teacher association regulations as they related to hiring practices and School Council legislation as it related to implementation of the Aboriginal Advisory Circle. Despite her concerns, the parents felt satisfied that the report contained their perspective and it was approved for submission in final report form to the school board on April 15, 1998.

On May 01, 1998, a meeting was scheduled between the steering committee, the chairperson of the Aboriginal PAG and one of the two school board staff who had been involved from the beginning. The individual from the school board appeared even more distraught than the principal did at the report's recommendations. At one point, she became very emotional - she asked whether it might not be better if the program was delivered as a charter program through the provincial Department of Education instead because this

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<sup>30</sup> I had submitted this draft to CPSB staff for their review and feedback the day prior to our steering committee meeting. For reasons unknown, they decided to send the rough draft to the principal at Sprucewood School prior to the scheduled steering committee meeting.

would be more conducive to what the parents were wanting. The individuals from the steering committee and the chairperson tried to alleviate her fears by stressing that the report was not aimed directly at her – it was about improving the program for the long term.

Despite the concerns of the principal and the individual from the school board, on May 15, 1998, school board trustees approved the report in full. This action was somewhat of a relief to those parents who had sought expansion for some time. Therefore, beginning in June of 1998, the report's recommendations would be implemented and the *Native Program* would be expanded to grade nine for the next school term.

It is interesting to note the shift in attitude towards me by public school board staff over the course of my involvement with these activities. When I first agreed to coordinate the symposium, I was viewed as the school board's link to the parents and they were very friendly and supportive of me as I mediated between these two groups. Turnout at the symposium was good and they seemed pleased with this. I communicated with them regularly during the three months it took to plan the symposium and write the final report. However, although I was in their paid employment and had a seemingly open relationship with them, I felt my primary duty was to the parents throughout the process. I felt the report should reflect the voices of those who attended the symposium. After I submitted the final report, their behaviour towards me changed drastically – I felt treated very differently from this point onward. After the final meeting between the parents and the individual from the school board (May 01, 1998), I was never contacted again.

## **Epilogue – One Year Later**

While the superintendent and trustees of the school board genuinely sought to forge a new relationship with Native parents through their approval of the recommendations from the Aboriginal Education Symposium final report, it is clear that other key staff have not been so genuine. Together, it seems the two staff from the Monitoring and Planning Division of the school board and the non-Native principal at Sprucewood have been instrumental in ensuring that some of the report's recommendations have not been implemented. Young and Levin (1998) address this issue,

“Most of the work of the [education] department is done by civil servants within the broad guidelines set by the minister [superintendent], or within agreements established by past practice. A great deal of this work is fairly routine or formalized.... civil servants are generally guided by their professional training and background. Their views of the needs of education are often similar to those of teachers in schools. They may be quite resistant to what they see as a partisan political direction taken by a government that wants public schooling to move a certain way” (p.34-35).

Of those recommendations that were approved by the trustees on May 15, 1998, only two have been fully met – the expansion of the program to grade nine and the hiring of a Native vice-principal. Recently, however, one of the parents shared with me that the Native vice-principal position has been demoted to a curriculum coordinator (.75 position) with some responsibilities for teaching (.25 position).

At an Aboriginal PAG meeting this spring (1999), the principal was asked when the other recommendations might be implemented. While I did not attend this meeting, one of the parents shared with me that the principal made statements inferring that not all the recommendations from the Aboriginal Education Symposium report were approved by trustees. The

parent I spoke to was frustrated by the apparent confusion the principal had caused with this statement.

Involvement at Aboriginal PAG meetings has dwindled to the point where no parents attended the May 19, 1999 meeting and only three attended the previous month's meeting. Notices for Aboriginal PAG meetings are no longer being sent home with children the day beforehand and there are no meeting minutes available from the beginning of 1998-99 school term. On the annual return form that was recently sent to the provincial department of Consumer & Corporate Affairs, the principal lists herself as the sole contact for the Aboriginal PAG society (despite the fact she is not an executive member). It seems clear that parental participation is being discouraged at Sprucewood School.

The current chairperson (elected in September, 1998) discussed the situation with me recently. This person said that monies received from the Early Intervention Program continue to be used to supplement the regular education budget instead of going towards additional social and cultural programming for Aboriginal students in the *Native Program*, as outlined in the funding agreement. She also said that few cultural activities have taken place this school year yet some non-Native teachers have been registered to attend conferences in other provinces. This parent felt that, because of decreasing parent involvement in general, the principal is in a position to authorize all payments from the Early Intervention Program funds and parents are left to react to these financial decisions and other crisis that have occurred in the new junior high program. The example this parent gave are several incidents where the principal has called in police to deal with troublesome students, regardless of whether the matter is of a criminal nature or not.

The current chairperson feels that instead of being involved in planning and executing the educational program at Sprucewood School, as was outlined in the recommendations that were approved by school board trustees, parents are kept busy trying to cope with the everyday problems at the school. And they continue to deal with these alone instead of with the help of the Aboriginal community (as proposed in the new Aboriginal Advisory Circle). Parents at the school recently learned that the trustees have signed an agreement to be part of a new Native high school in the city to be opened in September of 2000. Although it is touted as a major partnership between the public and separate school board, along with twenty-four city agencies, the Aboriginal PAG at Sprucewood School has never been contacted regarding this issue.

Interestingly, the parents are beginning to rise up once again. Recently (in late spring, 1999) they contacted the assistant superintendent to discuss ongoing problems at the school. They also have a meeting scheduled with Early Intervention Program (EIP) staff in the summer of 1999 to discuss EIP's growing concern over the lack of parental participation and the manner in which funds have been used over the past school year. Where it goes from here will depend, in part, on the ability of Native parents to remain united and to garner the support of the larger Aboriginal community.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Data Analysis**

While more has recently been written about the lack of involvement of Aboriginal parents and the importance of involving the community in Aboriginal education, dropout rates among Native students prove to be constant (MacKay & Myles, 1989). Aboriginal parents and community members remain largely on the outside looking in when it comes to educational decision-making. Initiatives, like the *Native Program*, continue to operate in isolation from the desires of those students, parents and communities they are intended to serve. This is happening more today than ever; as the struggle for control over policy continues, Aboriginal people are forced to deal with more limited resources and the continued unwillingness of bureaucrats to help them put their visions into practice. The need for a paradigm shift has never been more apparent.

To address the problems that stem from an internally colonized education system, which our public system can be considered, it is necessary to change the structural relationships that are inherent within the system. Despite their lack of success, Aboriginal parents have shown a desire to move away from a relationship of dependency to a relationship where they are able to make important educational decisions that will affect their children.

Reshaping the institutional system of learning (schooling) is going to be a much larger task than first assumed. It is important, however, that a paradigm shift for Aboriginal peoples should not involve a lowering of academic standards. If education is the way a people prepare themselves for life, then lowering the bar will only serve to make us more ill-prepared to compete with other Canadians, either economically or politically. This, in turn, would only

serve to perpetuate existing forms of structural racism. Adding a course or two to the curriculum, teaching indigenous language in grammatical form only or putting pictures of Native people into textbooks are only band-aid solutions that do not alter the power imbalance that currently exists. Neither does it empower or challenge Native students to learn more.

Considering culture as it applies to the issue of parental involvement is important if we are to understand who Aboriginal parents are and the meanings behind their actions. The idea of involving Aboriginal parents in schools requires recognition that parents, by their very participation, will add to and change the culture of a school (Highett, 1989). In its final report, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples elaborated on the importance of culture to Aboriginal education:

**“Cultural approaches start from the belief that if youth are solidly grounded in their Aboriginal identity and cultural knowledge, they will have strong personal resources to develop intellectually, physically, emotionally and spiritually. The ability to implement culture-based curriculum goes hand in hand with the authority to control what happens in the school system. Cultural programs can be added to the school curriculum, or the whole curriculum can be developed around a cultural core. The most established cultural programming can be found in school governed by Aboriginality controlled boards.” (RCAP, 1996, p.478)**

Hampton (1995) has also addressed the importance of Aboriginal culture to the educational process, “No aspect of a culture is more vital to its integrity than its means of education.” (p.7). Others expand on this philosophy,

**“The world of today is a continuation of the world of our ancestors, the world of tradition. We do not preserve traditions; our traditions preserve us. It is important that we let this process happen ... education in an [Aboriginal] context ... is part of the process of allowing tradition to preserve present and future generations of students. [Aboriginal] programs are effective**

because they spring from traditions; traditions are the bountiful source and inspiration for every aspect of life, including the academic." (Archibald et al, 1995, p.159).

For twenty-five years, the *Native Program* at Sprucewood School has seemed to flounder and fail in achieving its goal of 'meeting the needs of urban Aboriginal children'.<sup>31</sup> Haig-Brown's (1988) words help to explain this phenomena,

"Education, particularly as seen in the residential schools, developed by immigrant Europeans and their descendants for Native people in Canada, has typically been an expression of cultural invasion. As authors of and actors in the invasion, members of the dominating society have attempted to mold and have chosen and acted for Native people who as objects of the invasion were expected to follow the choices made for them....this kind of domination is perpetuated through invasion whether overt and physical or camouflaged with the invader in the role of the helping friend." p.141).

The 'friends' (in this case, the school principal and employees of the school board) continue to as though they know what is best for Native students. Given this, it is no wonder that Native parents might see public school systems as reflective of the domination that exists overall in society, despite the existence of 'special' programs geared towards their 'needs'. As Urion (1992) states,

"The hallmark term of the past 25 years is some permutation of 'Indian control' and hundreds of bands have begun operating their own schools. Yet, during this period of 'devolution', an overwhelming majority of First Nation children have been registered in non-First Nation educational institutions. There is paradox enough in that observation. It is compounded by the realization that despite whatever non-Native governments profess about their agenda for First Nations control, the real agenda remains what it has been for the past 120 years, containment and social control." (p.1).

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<sup>31</sup> Program goal as stated in the 1997-98 Sprucewood Parent Handbook.



Who holds the school board accountable for the lack of success of the *Native Program*? Why did it take twenty-five years to have the program expanded beyond grade six? Native parents and students have carried more than their share of the brunt of accountability – they have been blamed over and over again for both parent and student ‘failure’. Despite the lack of student success and dissatisfaction felt by Native parents at Sprucewood School, it seems that paternalism is allowed to go unchecked at the school board’s bureaucratic levels.

What seems to become obvious is that neither Native students nor their parents have been willing to accept the existing ‘cultural hegemony’ at Sprucewood School. Erickson (1997) explains this phenomenon,

“Cultural hegemony refers to the established view of things – a commonsense view of what is and why things happen that serves the interests of those people already privileged in a society. Students whose lives are not affirmed by the establishment seem intuitively not to accept hegemonic content and methods of instruction. They often resist, consciously or unconsciously, covertly as well as overtly.” (p.49).

Erickson argues that the role of resistance to cultures of domination and the disaffiliation and distrust that it fosters towards school learning is a fundamental issue in public education. Erickson states, “... resistance can come not only as a result of group history of oppression, but also of oppressive and alienating circumstances of teaching and learning with the school itself.” (p.50).

Ogbu (1994) agrees that resistance to systems of learning by involuntary minority groups is almost inevitable because of the existence of oppression within schools. Both Erickson’s and Ogbu’s views are useful to help explain the lack of Aboriginal parental participation in the public education system. Perhaps, like the parents at Sprucewood School, the mass resistance of

Aboriginal parents to being involved is the result of a system that simply has not worked.

As Haig-Brown (1988) suggests, resistance can also be a response to the notion of cultural invasion. Perhaps low levels of parental involvement are a response to the cultural invasion that exists within public schools today. As Hampton (1995) states, "The failure of non-Native education of Natives can be read as the success of resistance to cultural, spiritual, and psychological genocide." (p. 7).

While resistance on the part of Aboriginal people is meant to preserve dignity in a situation which has labeled them incompetent, this same resistance ensures those in charge will be rid of them. Parents alone will not create change. They will need their community to work with them and they will require the perspective and vision of their Elders. One Elder addressed this concept at the symposium, "Take a single stick and break it in two, it is easy. Now take a whole bunch of sticks and try to break them in two, it cannot be done." By involving only parents and excluding the larger Aboriginal community, the learning curve for the Aboriginal PAG has remained virtually stagnant. Old parents leave each year (as their children move on in grades) and are replaced by new ones who must learn the trappings of the system anew. The cumulative effects of the parent group's learning are negligible when they do not remain involved after their children have reached a certain age. Other parents, whose children are still in Sprucewood, stop attending PAG meetings because they are burned out, frustrated and alienated; they feel nothing will change by their participation anyway. Those who were involved in the beginning (in the 1970's and early 1980's) have been shut out or purposefully forgotten. Because of this, their knowledge does not go to benefit the program in the long run.

Maybe it is that resistance, as a response to alienation, has become a symbol of group identity for Aboriginal peoples. Because these issues have not been effectively addressed, perhaps they send an implicit message to Native students that will serve to further marginalize and alienate them. This, in turn, may only lead to more resistance on the part of Native students in the future. If we look at education holistically, students do not only learn what is taught in terms of the curriculum, they also learn about their role and the roles of others through the interactions they see between parents and school staff.

Unfortunately, resistance helps to perpetuate low achievement. I have seen this in other work I have done with adult Native female students in post-secondary programs. When students sense that a non-Native instructor carries preconceived notions about who they are and what they are capable of doing, they resist what is taught even at their own academic expense. Student resistance is an unconscious response that relates to an unwillingness to comply in a situation that does not honour who they are or how they see the world. As Contenta (1993) points out,

"Schools today continue the historical transformation of rebellion from an act that affirms human dignity to one that imprisons. Paul Willis argued that groups in capitalist societies develop their own ways of doing things in relation to their economic and social positions. Often these cultural expressions help maintain the status quo." (p.56-57)

Although resistance theory can be seen as just another way to 'blame the victim' or maintain the status quo, defiance also serves as a means of wresting control back from a system that has excluded them. Resistance ensures subversion of the system, and in this sense, Aboriginal parents are triumphant and ultimately do determine how they are involved. However, it is also imperative that we begin to move beyond resistance to a place where meaningful social change can occur.

The awareness and sense of community that was raised at the symposium was smothered, in the end, by a sense of powerlessness that parents felt afterward. Looking at resistance in alternate ways, however, shows us that it does serve to keep community spirit alive, whether it be groups of students or their parents. As Haig-Brown has concluded, resistance is not just a means of preserving identity but a way of uniting in the battle for control. The battle for control between Aboriginal parents and non-Aboriginal administrators within a school can be seen as a reflection of the battle for control over Native education in general. Our resistance traditionally has led us to resignation – perhaps it is time for our resistance to take a new path – one that will lead to increased rebellion against the system.

Maybe the only way to truly win the struggle is to alter the ways in which we do battle. It is apparent that resistance is a two-way street – resistance on the part of Aboriginal people to a system that does not meet their needs and resistance by government bureaucrats to truly change the system. Although the public school board trustees appeared to be sincere in their desire for change, the non-Native administrators employed by the board do not appear to have any interest in passing control for the *Native Program* over to Native people. These individuals are responsible for hiring, and continuing to work through, a principal that must sense is in conflict with Aboriginal parents at the school.

Contenta (1993) argues that resistance can make a difference if it maintains a clarity of purpose. Perhaps it is time that Native parents begin to look differently at restoring balance and harmony to the education of their young. Perhaps this will not occur by attempting to undo or redress what has been done. Perhaps it involves rediscovering what our purpose is and what we want our education system to be.

While it is well documented that parental involvement is important to student success, recent studies have begun to focus on new and different ways of involving parents. "With few successes to their credit, urban schools can no longer attempt to educate children in a vacuum, divorcing them from the reality of their lives and denying their parents' full input and participation." (McCaleb, 1994, p.193). The responsibilities for change are joint responsibilities. Educators and policy makers are responsible for implementing the desires of Aboriginal parents and Aboriginal parents are responsible for making these desires known. As Bloom (1992) argues, this is important because,

"We know that our schools need to make some dramatic changes in the way they educate our children, and we know that our children are suffering because these changes have not yet been made. But our ingrained perception of public education is that it is not our problem, or that we are not the appropriate source of the solution." (p.15).

Similarly, Urion (1992) has spoken to this issue,

"... while focusing our efforts on large-scale change and working for policy change are important in that those things contextualize our work [as educators], the changes that matter come about because of action, informed by principle, on the part of individuals in local, face-to-face interaction." (p.6).

## **Conclusion**

Efforts to stimulate input at the community level must become more than an exercise that makes fools out of those who come and offer suggestions; especially when the plan is pre-determined by the governmental bureaucrats to whom they speak. The key to Aboriginal input is not simply getting people to attend meetings, but exhibiting a true willingness on the part of decision-makers to listen to what has been said. The apparent resistance displayed by

school board staff leads one to believe that ethnocentric behaviours may still flourish even where Native education programs have been in existence for many years. Although Aboriginal parents are seen to have failed in the roles they've been assigned by educators, one thing remains certain: they must be resilient in their dedication to try to change their role, and ultimately the system. To be effective, Aboriginal parents must be allowed to decide the terms under which they will participate.

### **Issues for Further Study**

A number of issues for further study have been raised from this research report. First, a quantitative study is necessary to look at the academic records of students who have attended Sprucewood since the beginning of the program and their achievement levels during this time. This would provide key academic information about the *Native Program* in general. Second, in-depth interviewing of Aboriginal parents, both past and present, would supply other Aboriginal voices to the current situation at Sprucewood School. Third, a study that examines alternate mechanisms of control within public education would be useful to determine the potential for change. A further issue is that of inclusive or status-blind institutions for urban centers. Proponents believe separate institutions are the only answer, others feel differently about this issue. Finally, and likely most importantly, is our future educational leaders – who those should be and how will they lead us in the new millenium.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE FINAL REPORT**  
**SUBMITTED TO THE CITY PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARD**  
**APRIL 15, 1998**

**FOUR MAIN PRIORITY AREAS**  
**Parent Advisory Group Meetings (March 12, 1997 & January 27, 1998)**

1. Ongoing Review with City Public School Board
  - transportation
  - joint parent/staff review of native program
2. Parents
  - increase involvement from parents/caregivers
  - cultural awareness
  - parental awareness circle
  - life skills training
3. Future School Program Expansion
  - grades K – 9
  - study Native education school models
  - ceremonies (feast, special days)
  - head start program
  - smaller classes, more teachers
4. Resources
  - Native liaison
  - D.A.R.E.
  - Textbooks
  - St. John's First Aid
  - peer support
  - partnership with the University

**Other items discussed (but prioritized lower):**

- Cree speaking teachers
- Ceremonies (pipe, sweats) involving Elders and parents; educating children about these
- Camping trips
- Other Aboriginal languages (long-term)
- Affiliation with Prov. Dept of Education
- After school program
- Extra-curricular activities
- Area clean-up for community
- Native content in all grades and curriculum
- PD day
- Elder in residence; more Elders
- All bachelor of Education students to take Native Studies 210
- School van for the Native Program
- Educating our young about the environment
- Singing & drumming group; fiddling group
- Native mascot/logo contest

**Recommendations for Follow-up Activities  
FROM THE ABORIGINAL EDUCATION SYMPOSIUM**

- A. Special, open public meeting of the existing Aboriginal Parent Advisory Group (PAG) to discuss recommendations from the Aboriginal Education Symposium final report and the items raised in the Parent/School Council workshops held in March, 1997 and January, 1998.
- B. Creation of an Native Advisory Circle that would act as the PAG for the elementary and junior high program (this could be based upon the existing School Council at Joe Duquette High School in Saskatoon – see Appendix B).
- C. Development of a strategic management plan and timeline, to be approved by the Native Advisory Circle, relating to implementation of the final recommendations. Strategic management plan to be in place by May 31, 1998. Provision for an evaluation component to evaluate the strategic management plan.
- D. Provision for an evaluation component to evaluate the Native educational program at the school on an annual basis.

**CURRICULUM AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT**

- a. Expansion of the Native Program to include Grade 7, 8 & 9 for the September 1998 school term.
- b. Grades K – 9 to be located in the same facility.
- c. Expansion of the K – 6 program to accommodate all those who wish to participate.
- d. Provision for the expansion of the program to the high school level.
- e. Aboriginal Elders to approve all new curriculum, which focuses on the heritage, language and culture of the Aboriginal communities that the school serves (reclaiming of Indigenous knowledge).
- f. Standardization of Native language curriculum should be based upon traditional indigenous knowledge that exists within the community.
- g. Creation of new curriculum that focuses around the learner and is based upon a holistic approach: addresses the mind, body, spirit and emotion.
- h. Curriculum that includes the works of Aboriginal poets, authors, storytellers and musicians.
- i. Arts curriculum that includes cultural teachings such as Aboriginal art, beading, pow-wow and Metis dancing, drumming, fiddle playing, etc.
- j. History curriculum that includes the sharing of Aboriginal stories by Elders.

- k. Curriculum that includes a culturally relevant Wellness and Healing Program for students and families.

#### LEARNING AND INSTRUCTION

- a. Implementation of a hot lunch program for all students. The existing program is contingent upon uncertain future funding and is a key component for student success.
- b. Provision for culturally relevant teaching methods, which are based upon traditional systems of education [e.g. sacred circle, medicine wheel, etc.].
- c. Provision for the inclusion of relevant ceremonial activities within the school [e.g. feast and round dance ceremonies, sundance ceremonies, sweatlodge ceremonies, pow-wows, etc.].
- d. Foster better communications through the use of talking circles for students and staff.

#### PARENT AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

- a. Parent and community member involvement in the Native Advisory Circle.
- b. Parental involvement in decisions about the academic placement of students [i.e. streaming].
- c. Culturally relevant workshops for parents that focus on ways they, or other guardians, can help their children achieve academic success [e.g. parenting skills, helping with homework, communicating with children, etc.]
- d. Open-door policy at the school for parents and community members where appropriate.
- e. Parent advocates that can assist in designing and implementing programs and strategies that reflect Aboriginal cultures and who, in this process, will act as liaisons between the school, other parents and Aboriginal communities.
- f. Partnerships with post-secondary, community and Aboriginal institutions and organizations for the purpose of creating a culturally relevant program.

#### RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

- a. Recruitment of Aboriginal teachers to teach Native languages and other courses as required. This would include recruitment from universities through presentations made to undergraduate classes in the Faculty of Education and/or other programs.
- b. Recruitment of Aboriginal administrators (principal/vice-principal), or in the case where there are only non-Aboriginal administrators, the hiring of an Aboriginal administrator who will work in conjunction with non-Aboriginal administrators.
- c. Recruitment of two Aboriginal Family Support Workers to work with Native students and families and who will act as a liaison between the family and related agencies. The existing Family Support Worker positions are contingent upon uncertain future funding.

- d. Recruitment of Aboriginal teacher aides who will act as cultural advisors to non-Aboriginal teaching staff [one Aboriginal teacher-aide per three non-Aboriginal teachers].
- e. Delivery by Aboriginal facilitators of cross-cultural training to all school staff [four times per year: fall, winter, spring and summer].
- f. Recruitment and hiring of two Elders [one female, one male] who will be present at the school on a day-to-day basis. Elders will participate in staff meetings, attend meetings of the Native Advisory Circle and provide cultural instruction to students.
- g. Creation of an ongoing Aboriginal role model or mentor program, which identifies individuals who can be invited to the school on a formal or informal basis. This includes Aboriginal professionals, visiting Elders, athletes, students and others.
- h. Provision for control over hiring decisions to be transferred to the Native Advisory Circle.

**APPENDIX B**  
**PROPOSED ABORIGINAL ADVISORY CIRCLE**  
**Submitted to the City Public School Board**  
**APRIL 15, 1998**

**The following model is loosely based upon that found at the Joe Duquette High School in Saskatoon, SK.<sup>32</sup>**

Joe Duquette High School in Saskatoon is operated in partnership by the School Council, the Catholic School Board and the Saskatchewan Department of Education. The objective of this tripartite arrangement is to provide an educational alternative for Aboriginal students who, for a variety of reasons, find it difficult to gain meaningful educational experiences from other educational programs. There is recurring emphasis on Aboriginal students, Aboriginal identity, the urban Aboriginal community and Aboriginal cultures. The involvement of Elders, parents and other Aboriginal community members is integral to making the school effective.

The role of the School Council is as "keeper of the vision" or decision makers on policy issues for the school. Generally, the School Council monitors the school's work in relation to members' perceptions of Aboriginal values and specific concerns. The School Council is responsible for framing guidelines for policy issues and promoting cultural dimensions within the school including, but not limited to, fine arts, modern survival skills, Native studies, lifestyles and Native languages. The School Council is responsible for planning activities to enhance Aboriginal identity and selecting Elders and other community personnel to assist with programs. Together, the School Council and the Catholic Board of Education establish criteria for program evaluation, staff selection and schedules for the development, implementation and modification of programs. While the Catholic School Board is responsible for recruiting, selecting and hiring all staff, the School Council participates in staff selection, proposes candidates for staff positions and approves any new appointments. The needs of Aboriginal students are the primary considerations in the recruitment of new staff. The School Council also proposes budget priorities within the global budget for the school and they play a consulting role in retention of staff and administrative procedures. The School Council must approve the location of new facilities and they may apply to funding agencies to enhance the school's programs. Essentially, the School Council takes a strong lead in shaping the school and its programs.

There are fifteen people on the School Council at Joe Duquette High School. Membership on the School Council reflects the traditional belief that every Aboriginal adult assumes responsibility for every Aboriginal child. The people on

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<sup>32</sup> Adapted from *Making the Spirit Dance Within: Joe Duquette High School and an Aboriginal Community* by Celia Haig-Brown, 1996).



the School Council are Aboriginal adults who are concerned about education generally and want to contribute to the school's ongoing maintenance and development. Some School Council members also serve other roles in the school; however, all are always welcome in the school. The School Council meets once a month. The principal and vice-principal also attend these meetings, as does one of the two Elders employed at the school. School Council members often invite guest to the monthly meetings to facilitate the flow of information from the school to the larger community and to attract future members for the School Council. School Council members include Aboriginal parents, Aboriginal professionals, university students, etc. Currently, only three of the School Council members are parents of children at Joe Duquette, however, all are members of the Aboriginal community of Saskatoon. Parents of Joe Duquette students are encouraged to attend any meeting of the School Council. Among the members of the School Council, there is a common bond of commitment to improving educational opportunities for Aboriginal youth in the city.

When discussing any agenda item, School Council members always ask two questions. 'How is it going to benefit the student?' and 'How is it going to benefit the school?'. A Liaison Committee made up of a representative of Saskatchewan Education, a representative of the Catholic Board and a representative appointed by the School Council follows up recommendations that are relevant at the district level. The Principal and Vice-Principal follow up recommendations made at the school level.