

“I’M STILL LEARNING”

The Lived Experience of Disengagement from School

of

Five Young Aboriginal Women

by

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to understand the lived experience of disengagement from formal schooling of five young Aboriginal women in a mid-Northern community.

Using the qualitative methodology of narrative inquiry, and through a series of guided open-ended interviews, this research explored each participant's experiences as a learner; informally and in school.

Analysis of the personal histories of learning shared by the participants enabled the identification of attributes of best-remembered learning experiences and also elements that contributed to marginalization and dis-continuing of school.

Key elements for each learner clustered around *relationship* and *connectedness*. Contexts of optimal learning as revealed in the narratives can be characterized as authentic, situated, experiential, guided, and often culturally-relevant. Marginalization and dis-continuing of school were related to: a sense of emotional insecurity in the school, the need for community and a sense of *belonging*, disrespectful treatment and relational bullying by teachers and/or peers, administrative policy related to placement and psycho-social needs, and restrictive curricular decisions. The participants' desire to learn and continuing pursuit of learning goals, although out of school, is expressed in the title of this thesis by Participant A as she speaks for all in saying, "I'm still learning" (PA#1, p. 3).

Recommendations for formal schooling are made based on the needs and preferences expressed by the participants and by the institutional circumstances revealed in the narratives that affected engagement and dis-engagement.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

For the past forty years I have worked as a teacher and education consultant in a mid-northern region of Quebec comprised of nine First Nation communities¹. One of these communities is my home. I am a non-Aboriginal member of an Aboriginal community. That is, by virtue of marriage to an Aboriginal person I have “legal status”. The community in which I live is legally, geographically, and emotionally my home and the home of my children and grandchildren. I am deeply committed to its present and future well-being. Recently I had the privilege, over a number of years, of serving the schools in my region as a special education consultant; coordinating services for exceptional students, their families, and their teachers in their home communities. Over this time I became increasingly concerned about the experiences of young women of school age who did not attend school: *drop-outs* or, as described by Fine (1996), *school leavers*.

Problematic

While visiting these community schools in my capacity as a consultant, I was asked

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The use of the term ‘community’ in this sense is the usage defined by The James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement as Category 1 land under the administration of Canada and the local Band Council. In other parts of the country the term ‘reserve’ would be applicable.

to counsel adolescent girls who had come to be “falling, jumping, dropping, or being pushed out of the school system” (Olafson, 1996, cited in Field & Olafson, 1999, p. 70). These were young women of fourteen to sixteen years of age who had been disengaged from school for many years. Their behaviour was often described by school personnel as oppositional, disruptive, or insolent. My professional responsibility was to negotiate their reintegration into school and to design a manageable education program for them. My attempts had limited success. The student was usually willing but too fragile and the staff, although often sympathetic, was unable to envision any special accommodation for some of these individuals. There was a long history of negative experiences between them that made attempts at reintegration into school difficult on both sides.

In my capacity as education consultant, the young women who were referred to me and shared their stories were a small fraction of those who were alienated and in similar circumstances. Marginalized young people and early school leavers are frequent topics of public discussion and debate in my community and yet the voices of these young people are not heard. They are not present. We do not really know them. My interest in their experiences stems from this absence. Opinions and pronouncements are often offered about people who are ‘not at the table’ and this concerns me for two reasons. From a remedial point of view one is deprived of valuable input on which to base corrective or alternative measures to design a more inclusive system. From an ethical point of view there is the issue of ‘right to representation’ that interrogates the imbalance of power inherent in the relationship between a formal school system and those who are disengaged or alienated.

In this study I wish to give voice to young women who have become alienated from school. I chose this particular group because it is mostly adolescent girls who have expressed their concerns and aspirations very openly to me in the past. I am concerned for their present and future well-being. I want to gain a deeper understanding of their situation and I want their experiences to be better understood by the education system and the community in which we live.

During my employment as a regional consultant, I learned that the marginalized young women with whom I met were engaged in school in the early grades: they attended regularly, they participated in classroom activities, they defined themselves as *students* and *learners*. I am motivated by this knowledge to explore, through this study, the positive learning experiences of the young women who are its participants: How do they remember their early school experience? What were the characteristics of those early learning experiences, classrooms, teachers, the *selves-as-learners* who they recall? How can we identify, recapture, and build on those early strengths? What role did school play in their past experience and can school play a role in their future learning? Will the act of relating individual learning experience reveal to each participant and to me a sense of self-as-learner: her strengths, her learning needs, the learning environment/experience that is most favourable for her.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to identify, with the participants, the qualities of early learning experiences that enabled them in the past to enjoy school and to engage in learning activities; and to discover the *selves-as-learners* that they construct in their

accounts of those experiences and in accounts of other learning contexts.

Michelle Fine (1996) states that, “institutional and structural accountability seem to evaporate whenever rebellious or tragic individuals rise to the foreground in stories of school dropouts” (p. xi). The very high number of students who reject or are rejected by formal education in my community compels a critical examination of the role played by current educational structure and practice in the disengagement of young people such as the participants in this study.

Learning takes place within socially and culturally constructed contexts. We construct meaning about ourselves and our world based on our interactions with the people and objects around us in our physical, natural, social, and cultural environment (Bruner, 1990; Lave, 1993; Smith, 2001). LeCompte (1996) uses the term “core of constructed meanings” (p. 137) to define the sets of assumptions or beliefs held by teachers and administrators in a school system: sets of assumptions/beliefs that define their attitudes toward learning, students, themselves, cultural difference, and the community. Other researchers present contexts of meaning-making as socially and culturally mediated *discourses* (Heath, 1983; Philips, 1983; Reid & Button, 1995). Conventional school-based discourse utilizes urban white middle-class ways of communicating and making meaning that are not easily accessible to minority students from Aboriginal communities. It supports a value system that does not address and accommodate difference.

Rationale

The identification of personal and contextual attributes of learning as described in the statement of purpose above is important to any project of re-engagement. The data

collected in this research project may reveal the direction that school personnel might take in order to help young people to continue their schooling.

The rationale for conducting this research pertains to discovering the web of meanings constructed by each of the participants about herself based on her experiences in school and in other learning contexts. What can we learn from their stories? How can their stories inform practice? How, in their view, is the formal education system implicated in their leaving? What are the effects when a meaning making system constructed in one culture is imposed on another culture? What would a re-constructed *core of meanings/school discourse* look like: a learning context that is accessible and welcoming to all in the cultural milieu of my community?

Context

The schools attended by the participants of this study are under the jurisdiction of the Cree School Board in the James and Hudson Bay region of North-Western Quebec. This School Board was created in 1976 as the result of negotiations between The Grand Council of the Crees of Quebec, The Northern Quebec Inuit Association, the Government of Quebec, The Societe d'energie de la Baie James, The Societe de developpement de la Baie James, The Commission hydroelectrique de Quebec (Hydro-Quebec), and The Government of Canada that resulted in The James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (Editeur officiel du Quebec, 1976). The Philosophy of Education of the Cree School Board follows.

The Cree School Board will ensure that each student has the opportunity to develop his or her full potential as an individual and as a member of society.

We believe that:

The Cree language and culture are the root of the Cree education system.

We believe that the Cree child:

Is unique.

Is entitled to proper spiritual, emotional, mental and physical development.

Begins to learn before and from birth. It is our duty to foster the growth of this learning.

Has the right to learn and be taught in his or her Mother tongue.

Has the right to be taught and practice his or her culture and its value system.

Must be taught to be non-judgmental, aware, and comfortable being a Cree person.

Has the right to be provided with the opportunity for support and resources according to his or her needs.

Is to be provided the opportunity to follow any level of academic, technical, vocational and Cree traditional education. (Cree School Board, 2007)

This statement is a powerful and loving expression of intent. It is invested in faith and the anticipation of success. These words would be similar to the mission statement of any other education system if the word *Cree* were to be removed. Everything changes with the inclusion of this one word. The statement becomes clothed with meaning and powerfully evocative. It becomes a political statement.

The authors of this philosophy, Cree People, are the survivors of education systems that denied their language, culture, and identity; often oppressed and brutalized them; promoted a reductionist, patriarchal, and hierarchical organization of learning; and attempted to rob them of all agency: the ability to control their own future. The residential school experience of many members of this community is summarized by Pashagumskum (2005) and is worth quoting at length.

The story of the residence on Fort George Island is more infamous and echoes the stories of residential schools across the country. Stories of sexual and emotional abuse have surfaced leading to the arrest and incarceration of a former principal. Tales of psychosomatic illness connected with trauma are told; it was not unusual for students to vomit or to faint in stressful situations. One of the goals of the residence was conformity through identity erasure with the tight control of students' appearances; uniforms were worn and hair was styled according to sex. Family groups were broken up; brothers and sisters only saw each other when all of the

children were trooped into the dining room for dinner. The children lived on non-Native foods and were forced to eat this kind of food even when it made them sick to their stomachs. There was a definite pecking order in the way the residence was run with non-Native people being in charge of all decision-making, while the few Native people who worked at the residence performed duties like cleaning and laundry, and the children had absolutely no control over their own lives. (P. 87)

Regarding language and culture we learn that,

The schools were used as ways to assimilate Native people into non-Native society: Those who ran the schools tried to force Native children to adopt the ways of the wider society. Children were taught in English or French and were sometimes punished severely for speaking their Aboriginal Languages. (Faries & Pashagumskum, 2002 p. 202-203)

It is this shared memory that is evoked by the Philosophy of the Cree School Board.

For young students in my community, there is a strong link between culture and their identity as learners in the early grades. The first language, Cree, is the language of instruction for students from pre-kindergarten to grade three in an ‘inverted triangle’ model that introduces the second language as a subject starting in grade one. Their teachers are Cree people who know the community and, usually, the students’ families. The images that surround them are familiar, most of the didactic materials have Cree text, and the culture is embedded in the curriculum.

This changes dramatically when the students arrive in third grade in that their instruction is predominantly in the second language (French or English according to parents’ choice) with Cree Language being taught as a subject a few times during the week. This is a recent adaptation of a model that used Cree as the language of instruction up to the end of grade three. The transition from mother-tongue medium of instruction to second-language medium of instruction is potentially dangerous. From this time onward

the students encounter few Cree teachers, the reality of the “mother-tongue” policy being that nearly all Cree speaking teachers are required to fill the Primary positions. Students are immersed in a second-language environment with few cultural markers and, for most, a stranger at the front of the room. They experience doubt and confusion: for the first time in their school careers they don’t know what is going on. They are on unfamiliar ground.

Thesis Organization

In what follows Chapter Two explores the literature related to school alienation focusing in particular on identity and academic self-concept, marginalization, and connectedness to school.

In Chapter Three I present the methodological principles and procedures that I followed to ensure that the narrative work with the young women participants respected their stories and experiences and allowed for the greatest degree of understanding of the phenomenon of school alienation.

Chapters Four and Five present the data. These chapters feature the voices of the participants through narrative samples, thematically grouped, that tell the stories of the young women: their learning, their schooling, their triumphs, and their struggles.

In Chapter Six the data is examined in the light of other experiences and theories presented in the Literature Review.

Recommendations and Conclusion are presented respectively in Chapters Seven and Eight.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

In response to my interest in and concern for the experiences of young women ‘on the margins’, I have explored literature about identity, how formal schooling may affect identity in terms of self-concept and self-esteem, and theories and findings about marginalization and building connections in schools.

Constructing Identity

Identity development from an Indigenous perspective has less to do with striving for individualism and more to do with establishing connections and understanding ourselves in relationship to all of the things around us. (Bergstrom, 2003, p. 26)

Connection and relation are cornerstones of identity formation as it is addressed by Indigenous researchers. Cajete (2003 p. 183) describes the role of education in assisting the individual to become “a complete woman or man”. The integration of *face*: “who you are, where you come from”, and *heart*: “the passionate sense of self that motivates you and moves you along in life” results in the expression of authentic self or *vocation*: how one lives out or enacts one’s identity. This formation of the authentic self is grounded in relation to community, in relation to place, visionary tradition, mythic foundation/worldview, and spiritual ecology -- the relationship with all creation (Cajete, p. 184). These themes of *completeness* are expressed in Henderson’s (2003) “principle of

alliance” (p.266) whereby “Aboriginal children are taught to establish close relationships with all the forces of their local ecosystem”(p. 266). Henderson speaks of “personal identity as a member of a community” (p. 269) and the concomitant and coexistent responsibility that the relationship entails “to other life forms and to the whole” (p.269). Graveline (1998) uses the term *self-in-relation* as the expression of individual experience grounded in a particular community.

“The shape and space of a psyche” is one way that Grosz (1992) defines the human body. She speaks of constructing subjectivity from the inside to the outside and from the outside to the inside: the *produced body*. As she describes the development of human identity, the psycho-socio-emotional and physical person is formed by the culture and environment into which that person is born. The body is “inscribed” (p. 244), first in the family, then in an ever-widening circle of influence. The formation of identity, the creation of a psycho-social *self* inside a particular skin, begins with the meeting of the inside infant self (with its psychological and bodily needs) and the outside other, or (m)other, as framed by Grosz. From the beginning of life we act upon and in turn are acted upon by the environment, human and otherwise, in a continuous narrative of *becoming*.

Identity and Schooling

How is this narrative of becoming affected when the Aboriginal child, formed in the embrace of family and community, finds herself in culturally and linguistically unfamiliar surroundings; the local school: a place in which the construction of meaning is foreign and self is not reflected? Studies show a pattern of disenfranchisement and

disengagement of those whose culture is not recognized by the school and whose culturally mediated linguistic and interactional styles are not those of the classroom (Heath, 1983; Philips, 1983). Conventional classroom discourse and curriculum assume a certain socio-cultural preschool environment, a “training ground for school” (Heath, p. 351), that is Euro-American and urban. The nature of this construct assumes a valuing of individual achievement, a particular socio-cultural form of goal-setting; and the specialization and compartmentalization of subject matter. Children whose family and community cultures reflect these attributes of early child-rearing find themselves ‘at home’ and connected in school and those whose background is different often do not. As a consequence, the latter children are dis-empowered by school and often doubt and devalue their own ability.

The ways that children are acted upon by the classroom environment, given the reciprocal nature of identity formation (Bruner, 1990; Grosz, 1992), determine the roles that students assume for themselves in school. Bruner speaks of self-concept forming and changing in response to the reactions of others with whom one associates, based on the “positive or negative remarks that people made” (p. 109) and situated in power/hierarchical structures.

Teasing and relational bullying are components of many school-based power structures and, as reported by Barbara Coloroso (2002) and Dan Olweus (1993), often the cause of low self-esteem, depression, and school-leaving. These authors and others (e.g. Garbarino & deLara, 2002; Rigby, 1998) stress the importance of developing clear guidelines in schools for recognizing and responding to student victimization in all of its

forms. School policy that prevents or greatly reduces bullying supports a secure and caring environment in which all adults in the school recognize and respond to acts of intimidation; in which all persons, students and staff, are well-informed about bullying in all its forms; and in which students are listened to and feel that they are respected and part of the solution.

The relationship between a student and the educational system in which she is situated is never passive. Institutional culture plays a dynamic role in student engagement. Patrick Brady (2005) ascribes two *personae* to secondary school institutional culture: a school may have a culture of inclusion or a culture of exclusion. Brady associates inclusion with “equity and justice” (p. 300); and exclusion with the “division of groups for differentiated delivery of curriculum” (p. 301). The former enhances student engagement: “the belief on the part of all students, not just the most academically able, that they are included in the learning process as well as in the life of the school community” (p. 302) while “the potential risks of the latter include diminished academic achievement, diminished participation in the life of the school community, and its most extreme form withdrawal from the process of formal education” (p. 308).

Smith (1999) refers to the need for “seeing ourselves in the text”(p. 35) in reaction to the absence, marginalization, misrepresentation, or deficiency of Indigenous people in conventional Eurocentric school texts or journals. *Text* may be extended to mean the message conveyed by the complex set of elements that is the institutional construct of school. That message for many children is: *You are not what I expected. You do not meet expectations. You do not understand the obvious. You do not respond appropriately to*

accepted practice. You do not behave / talk / look / listen / answer / move / react / emote / relate in ways that are valued here. What is wrong with you? These are the students who are often ‘identified’ as being *at-risk* and pulled into the vortex of *special education* with its highly programmed, teacher-centered, and lock-step structure resulting in learned helplessness and the reinforcement of low self-worth (Cummins, 1989). Learned helplessness, as a “pedagogically induced” (Cummins, p. 63) state, inhibits our ability to learn new tasks or even to attempt new learning. It affects our identity as learners (Edwards, 1999). This might explain why, as Wehlage and Rutter (1986) find in their analysis of data from studies of American high-school students, dropouts gain on measures of self-esteem after they have *left* school.

Marion Crook (2000) advises teachers to encourage young Aboriginal women to tell their stories; giving each the tools to write and thereby the means to explore and express identity and to construct her place in the learning environment and the wider community:

Narrative is not simply a reporting of events; it is the explanation of the events, the connection and the meaning-making that the narrator brings to the events. Events form a narrative when we recognize connections between them, and possibilities for meaning within those connections. The telling of our stories then is important in order for us to establish who we are and how we fit into our world. (p. 58)

Academic self-concept can be formed *in opposition to* the meanings constructed in schools and classrooms. Delpit (1995) defines the act of resistance, framed by Kohl as “not-learning”(cited in Delpit, p. 160), as conscious opting out by a student because identity is denied, misrepresented, or not respected in the school setting. Similarly, Cummins explains that underachievement/dropping out is not caused by poor second

language proficiency (as is widely believed in my community) but by “particular kinds of interactions in school that lead minority students to mentally withdraw from academic effort” (p. 34). There is also the sense in which *silence* expresses an active choice (Lewis, 1993; Modleski, 1991). In this sense, choosing not “to voice” signals an opting-out, a wish not to participate, a rejection, or an absence of common purpose; an act of resistance in situations where power and control are issues. The active use of silence can refuse to dignify a particular stance by not engaging with it. That students refuse to speak, an act reduced to insolence, is a typical complaint of many non-Aboriginal teachers in my community.

Marginalization and Building Connections

“The culture of power” (Delpit, 1995, p. 24) inherent in the mainstream North American school system is exercised by those who are frequently least aware of it, or least willing to acknowledge it. Conversely, its existence is felt and often recognized by those least able to exercise it. Delpit supports the overt teaching of the dominant/mainstream discourses, thus giving minority students the cultural/social capital to survive and thrive in that milieu. Cummins (1989) uses the term “institutionalized racism” to describe the disabling effect of Euro-American style of classroom discourse on minority culture students. The ways that teacher interactions with students are constructed, “mediated by a system of unquestioned assumptions that reflect the values and priorities of the dominant middle-class culture” (Cummins, pp. 52, 53) can be disempowering personally and academically. Heath (1983) describes the “discontinuities” (p. 348) between home and school cultures that lead to alienation in the classroom: differences in literacy practices,

patterns of discourse, ways of conducting interpersonal relationships, learning/teaching styles, and valuing of various behaviours (what is rewarded and what is not). Teacher and student are not meeting on the same plane.

Language is the focus of many researchers who look for the causes of alienation in the educational environment (Heath, 1983; Philips, 1983; Reid & Button, 1995). Meaning is conveyed not only by words but by the ways in which talk is regulated: narrative style, defined by Philips as “socially appropriate ways of conveying attention and regulating turns at talk” (p. 126). Narrative style in this sense is a culturally constructed code that defines the relationship and dynamic that exists between speakers. There is the potential, when a student has a different communicative style, for teachers to make assumptions about the child’s academic ability and worth. According to Philips, a linguistic and cultural disconnect between teacher and child results in a classroom dynamic in which the student is called on less often, acknowledged less often, treated in a way that s/he doesn’t understand, and ultimately, marginalized from classroom interaction.

Based on his research with people of Algonkian Nations in Northwestern Quebec, Francois Larose (1991) describes how the Euro-American style of educating young people differs from traditional Aboriginal approaches:

In a standard classroom setting, or in curriculum planning, we tend to overcompartmentalize subject matter, and further to overcompartmentalize the content within subjects. Learners are unable to establish a relationship, for instance, between what they learn in mathematics and in geography. Even when some teachers use direct modelling in their teaching, they generally restrict the behaviour to the reproduction of sequences and do not foster the generation of rules. (p. 90)

Larose’s research finds that there is a function of generalizability in traditional Aboriginal

instructional modes that is achieved through direct and vicarious modelling. His point is that, although the inclusion of cultural content such as story-telling and “Native technology” (p. 89) build respect for traditional practices and enhance national pride and identity, to authentically adapt formal education to be more compatible with traditional approaches,

Modification of teacher behaviour and change in the organization of the curriculum might improve the quality and the quantity of academic skills mastered by Indian students. In this sense, clarifying the relationship between subjects and among classroom content might be an important first step. (p. 90)

In a “Heritage Language” instructional model similar to that used in my community, Wright and Taylor (2001) have assessed the impact of the transition of a group of Inuit children from an almost exclusively Inuttitut-medium program in grade two to a grade three program that is predominantly English or French. The results of their research indicate that “the scope of this change places serious demands on the children” (p. 3). At the end of their first year of second language medium instruction, the Inuttitut-speaking students in the study had significantly lower scores in measures of personal self-esteem in comparison with their scores of one year earlier. The scores of the other students, for whom the target language was mother-tongue, did not change. The transition from a culturally and linguistically familiar environment to one with which they had little in common appears to have affected the self-concept of the Inuttitut-speaking students negatively.

Cultural discontinuity and institutionalized racism are recognized as components of Ogbu’s “cultural-ecological theory of school performance” (Ogbu & Simons, 1998), but these researchers and others (Barrington, 1991; Gibson, 1991; Kramer, 1991; Ledlow,

1992) also place the links between identity, engagement with school, and academic success in the historical context of the relationship between the minority and the dominant group and the circumstances by which a people *become* a minority. The cultural-ecological theory differentiates between voluntary minorities (for example immigrant populations) and non-voluntary minorities (for example colonized Indigenous People and African-Americans who are the descendants of former slaves). Voluntary minorities, as a group, tend to experience academic success and use schooling instrumentally to enhance their social and economic status and to integrate into the dominant society. This is their goal. This group chooses a new homeland and cultural milieu for themselves and their descendants. The situation for involuntary minorities is much more complex and problematic. These are cultural groups that are “brought involuntarily into a subordinate relationship with the dominant group” (Gibson p. 365) through a history of exploitation, conquest, colonization, and ongoing discriminatory practices. They did not historically choose to be assimilated into another culture; to take on the values, norms, practices, language, and other cultural expressions of another people. They do not wish to stop being who they are. Ogbu (1991) uses the term “secondary cultural system” to describe the framework that evolves in opposition to the dominant culture and its institutions and for the purpose of maintaining the cultural integrity of the involuntary minority:

The secondary cultural system, on the whole, constitutes a new cultural frame of reference or ideal way of believing and acting that affirms one as a bona fide member of the group. Involuntary minorities perceive their cultural frame of reference not merely as different from but as in opposition to the cultural frame of reference of their dominant-group “oppressors.”(p. 15)

In relation to formal schooling, an institutional construct of the dominant society, Ogbu states,

while they generally verbalize their desire to make good grades, there is less community and family pressure to achieve this goal. As for peer groups, their collective orientation is actually the opposite of what it is among the immigrants: it is anti-academic success. (P. 22)

This presents a dilemma for the individual who wishes to excel in the formal education system. She risks the criticism of her peers for (in their eyes) emulating the dominant group and rejecting their shared identity. This theory posits that there is an 'either/or' dynamic at work: renounce your cultural identity by accepting the institution of formal schooling and all that it stands for, or retain your membership and support in the group by being in opposition to this system. The oppositional response to formal schooling described here harkens back to the kinds of active and passive resistance to which Cummins (1989), Delpit (1995), and Lewis (1993) refer earlier in this section. In her study of Navajo and Ute school leavers, Deyhle (1992) acknowledges the role of a culture of opposition legitimizing, in particular, the rejection of school by the Ute students. This population was "most likely to feel school to be either a threat to their identity or irrelevant to their lives" because they were "the most disjointed and fractured culture" (p. 19). In contrast to the Navajo students, they were unlikely to speak the Ute language or to have been raised in homes where their traditional culture was transmitted. Although the oppositional stance of the students and the links to historic relationships presented by the proponents of cultural-ecological theory resonate with me, I am somewhat uncomfortable with the researchers' seeming assignment of agency to the 'involuntary minority'.

Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac and Zine (1997), in their ethnographic study of Black students' disengagement from school, review the cultural-ecological theory and others related to the alienation of some minority students. They conclude that there is no "single notion" (p. 225) that can satisfactorily account for the complexity and multiple manifestations of this problem. These researchers, while confirming the implication of power structure, status, historic relationship, institutional structure, and socio-cultural-linguistic factors in the aetiology of 'dropping out', emphasize the importance, of *race* as a salient factor *in and of itself* that is absent from other theories/analyses/positions. They also warn against the danger of essentializing the conditions leading to dropping out (p. 225).

Further to the caveat against essentialism, a careful reading of Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, and Zine leads me to understand my discomfort with the language used/stance taken by those who examine the experiences of minority groups through the cultural-ecological theoretical lens. I present the following two research questions as examples of two ways to frame a problem.

this volume addresses the central question of why some minority groups do relatively well in school, in spite of facing substantial barriers related to such factors as their different culture and languages, the prejudiced attitudes of the dominant group toward minorities and unequal access to jobs, while other minorities confronting similar barriers do far less well in school. We believe that this question can be answered to a large extent by examining and comparing the school-adaptation pattern of minorities who are relatively successful academically with the adaptation patterns of others who are less successful. (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991 p. ix)

And:

We believe that schools can respond effectively to the diversity within and among all social groups if there is a clear and a priori understanding of how

the structural processes of delivering education impact differently on various groups. We need to know how it is that schools engage some students while at the same time disengage others. (Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine 1997 p. 4)

In the first example ownership of the problem is assigned to the community and in the second example it is assigned to the school.

The developmental norm and the pathologization of difference are implicated in the marginalization of students by mainstream schooling structures and practice (Fine, 1992; Walkerdine, 1986). Walkerdine addresses the influence of developmental psychology on past and current educational thought and practice in general terms and, more specifically, as appropriate / acceptable / *normal* gender roles are defined. This reality is played out in the classrooms that I visit as I observe that boys are permitted more leeway before they are sanctioned and, as in Walkerdine's example of report card comments (p. 71), girls are rewarded for compliance, neatness, and quietness; and they are used as 'socializers' for the boys. Girls who are expressing their own individuality, or who are taking a critical stance, are often identified as potential problems by teachers (Walkerdine).

The rule of the norm and its exclusionary function is evident in Fine's (1992) report of a culturally-diverse urban high school's drop-out rates being justified by students' "lack of ability" or "personal choice" (p. 106). She asks, "Would the public accept "lack of ability" or students' "personal choice" as sound justifications if two-thirds of a white, middle-class student body disappeared prior to graduation?" Fine illustrates how, in a climate where "artificial dichotomies" (p. 128) are normalized, diversity and complexity are not tolerated and certain students, whom she calls "the discarded others"

(p. 113), become expendable and disappear. This structuralist paradigm of binary oppositions defines some students *in opposition* to the school system and thereby unable or unfit to benefit from its services. The school is divested of responsibility through the deficit-orientation of norm-based developmental psychology and the school-leavers become mis-fits. Wehlage and Rutter (1986) point out the number of studies of drop-outs that assume deficit in the individual student, parents, or community culture, absolving the school and education system of any causal role.

John Reyhner (1992) identifies and addresses the “school-based reasons that push Indian students out of school” (p. 37). “Particularly critical factors for Indian students include large schools, uncaring and untrained teachers, passive teaching methods, inappropriate curriculum, inappropriate testing/student retention, tracked classes, and lack of parent involvement” (p. 39). Reyhner’s recommendations include small schools, caring relationships with teachers, active teaching methods, valuing of community culture and its inclusion in the school curriculum, and an advocacy approach to testing. Consistent with these is Cummins’ (1989) description of an *empowering* educational experience for minority-culture students as one in which: a) the minority language and culture are legitimized and honoured; b) the cultural community is invited and welcomed to participate and collaborate in the educational project; c) an *interactive/experiential* learning model is used to put students at the center of their own learning and to incorporate and develop language, in meaningful contexts, across the curriculum; and d) assessment adopts an “advocacy” (p. 65) rather than a deficit orientation, that is, an ecological approach will assess the learning environment for disabling practices/

influences as well as identifying the students learning needs and abilities.

Connection is found to play a key role in school success. Research about school children and resilience (Edwards, Gfroerer, Flowers, & Whitaker, 2004) links the ability to cope with adversity and ‘social interest’: a construct of Adlerian psychology that comprises understanding, empathizing, intervening on behalf of others, sharing, taking responsibility, and other “active approaches to life’s problems” (p. 188). Edwards et al. point out that the term *social interest* is not used in the literature in reference to children and adolescents. Social interest as it applies to childhood is regarded as *belonging*. These researchers find that school connectedness, as one manifestation of belonging, is critical to school success. This finding is supported by Osterman (2000) in her review of research related to “students’ need for belonging in the school community” (323). She finds the strongest relationship between *experience of relatedness* and *student engagement*. When comparing support from peers, family, and teachers, teacher support has the “most direct impact on student engagement” (p. 344).

Margaret Waller’s (2001) examination of the resilience literature and the “evolution of the concept” supports the importance of *interrelatedness* and *interdependency* between individuals and their environments. She rejects the deficit orientation of much of the early literature and uses the term ‘ecosystemic context’ to identify the sites where positive change may occur and identifies ‘protective factors’ that “are thought to facilitate positive outcomes by operating as buffers between individuals and the risk factors impinging on their well-being” (p. 292). There is space for the realization of positive change in the information she presents about the interrelatedness of

systems: a supportive person, action, or environment in one system can influence resilience to adversity in another system. She also points out that the young person's *perception* of support is important. Waller supports the need for more research that explores subjective, narrative accounts of individual experience.

Laursen and Birmingham (2003) confirm the protective role of caring relationships in their ethnographic study of 23 young people: "The results of this study indicate the importance of caring relationships as a protective factor for all kids and accentuate the enormous influence a caring adult can have on kids who are especially challenged by familial or personal adversity" (p. 246). Their analysis presents seven characteristics of caring relationships: trust, attention, empathy, availability, affirmation, respect, and virtue; and the behaviours and beliefs associated with each as identified by the participants.

Connectedness as a critical condition for engagement is recognized by many researchers in Aboriginal contexts (Bazyluk, 2002; Bergstrom, Cleary, & Peacock, 2003; Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Crook, 2000; Haig-Brown, Hodgson-Smith, Regnier, & Archibald, 1997; Kanu, 2002; Wall & Madak, 1991; Waller, 2001; Wright & Taylor, 2001). In their study of Joe Duquette High School, Haig-Brown et al. report on a school environment that is welcoming and characterized by caring relationships, personalized and individualized teaching approaches, authentic cultural and linguistic contexts and styles of interaction, and a commitment to the needs of the whole person. These attributes are supported by the Aboriginal participants of other studies who report that they are most successful as students in an environment that is sensitive to and respectful of cultural

heritage and incorporates relevant context and traditional teaching styles (Bazyluk, Bergstrom et al., Crook, Kanu). The components of successful practice have been recognized for some time. Barman, Hebert, and McCaskill (1987) in their presentation of the realities of Aboriginal education in the 1980s stated the following:

Quality, effectively implementing an Indian philosophy of education in the classroom, is critically dependent upon teaching and administrative styles consistent with traditional Indian learning styles. Some of the most successful patterns of classroom interaction have been pupil-centred, focused on the development of the potential in each child and so reinforcing the belief common to all cultures that the child is born with an identity and a spirit, with talents and character. The teacher's responsibility, in co-operation with school administrators and community members, is to facilitate the fulfillment of that potential. (p. 12)

Students experiencing family, social, or other stressors benefit from a supportive sense of *community* in school. Waller (2001) uses the example of the Dine culture and its communal structures that shape personal and group identity in different ways than identities are shaped in Euro-American culture. The Dine *self* is actualized *in-relation* to others. This concept is understood in the context of many North American cultures and explains the degree to which social support is identified as important to staying in school by Aboriginal students (Bazyluk, 2002; Bergstrom, Cleary, & Peacock, 2003; Haig-Brown et al., 1997; Kanu, 2002; Wall & Madak, 1991). Related to this is what Cleary (1998) refers to as the “nurture a seed” metaphor (pp. 248-250). She comments on the number of times that Elders, when speaking of education, compare the child to a seed that needs nurturing and support until it has developed into a plant with strong roots and can stand on its own.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

My Conceptual Framework

The events of my life have provided me with the opportunity to observe and marvel at the unsurpassed complexity of human experience. Yet I practice my vocation within a profession that is beguiled by the packaging of theory and method: theory and method that assume (a) the universality of their own relevance, and/or (b) the necessity of all students to conform to their singularly important parameters. Decades have passed since I last embraced an *ist* or *ism*. I find, however, common ground with researchers and theorists that I have discovered through my recent studies.

I am on common ground with Walkerdine (1986) as she deconstructs the structuralist organizations and classifications that determine what and who may be *normal*; and with Vickers (1986) whose rebellions against the positivist research paradigm include the honest and unmasked use of language, the valuing of contextualization, and the questioning of commonly-believed ‘universal truths’; and with Fine (1996) as she supports researchers who are “critics of categories, advocates for students, and participants in debates about how to make schools better” (p. xvii). These researchers situate themselves within the discourse of feminist thought and action. Fine’s (1992) statement that “feminist psychology presumes that social activism is the project

within which we conduct our work” (p. viii), and her presentation of the politics of diversity and the dangers of essentialism confirm and help me to clarify my own thinking.

I respect the work of Indigenist researchers and writers and agree with Linda Smith (1999) that “research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions” (p. 5). I understand how the community in which I live is situated in place and time: the family and community connections to land, the colonialist presence of this country in collective memory and daily life, and the valuing and maintaining of links with time immemorial.

This work began with statements about the absence of the voices of those who are marginalized. Graveline (1998) speaks of “respectful listening” (p. 138). She reminds us that only by allowing another person the freedom to express herself in a secure, respectful, and uncritical setting; and by fully attending to the communication can we begin to understand the other person’s experience and respond meaningfully. The perspectives of the feminist and Aboriginal researchers presented here provide the critical framework that I require in order to respectfully hear and re-present the lived experiences of the young women who participated in this research.

Method and Process: My Research Journey

I chose to use the qualitative methodology of narrative inquiry as most appropriate to the purpose, the participants, and the cultural context of this research. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) describe narrative inquiry as a collaborative relationship between participant and researcher that: respects voice; recognizes the reciprocal nature of language in the exchange of stories and meanings and the interplay of listening and

speaking; and empowers the participant. Patton (2002) presents the following as the central questions of narrative analysis: “What does this narrative or story reveal about the person and world from which it came? How can this narrative be interpreted to understand and illuminate the life and culture that created it?” (p. 133). From the perspective of this study, the “world from which it came” and the “life and culture that created” each participant’s narrative constitute the “ecosystemic context” (Waller, 2001) in which she became alienated from formal schooling.

I chose to refer to the young women who contributed their stories to this study as *participants* rather than *subjects* because the word implies more agency and my intention was to include each person in the research process.

Recruitment: My first attempts at recruitment were only partially successful. A prepared announcement (see Appendix A) describing the proposed research and inviting participants was submitted to the local radio and cable television stations to be read/posted. I was also invited to speak on the radio and answer questions about my research interests and to describe the process that I intended to follow. I used this opportunity to again invite young women and their parents to contact me if they would like to attend an information session. The recruitment document also appeared in the local monthly newsletter. Several young women and/or their mothers contacted me and expressed their interest in the project, but were unable to keep appointments for meetings. I decided to postpone my recruiting attempts as we were in the month of December and the Christmas season - a very busy time in our community. I did not want prospective participants to feel pressured by my calls and the inconvenience of trying to reschedule

when there were already many demands on their time and energy. In the new year I sent ‘word-of-mouth’ invitations to those who had approached me before (and any others who they wished to invite) to a dinner/information session at my house. This strategy was successful and in the following days the five young women who participated in this research study contacted me and stated their wish to join me in this endeavour. We then made appointments for private meetings to examine the letter of information (Appendix B) and consent form (Appendix C) and to plan for the first interviews. At this first meeting each participant was given a copy of the Interview Guide (Appendix F).

Participants: The five young women who gave voice to the experience of disengagement from school ranged in age from 15 to 28 years at the start of this study. Four of them were aged 18 or younger. At times, as I lived with their words, the voices spoke in unison; the message carried in a chorus of common experience and themes. At other times there would be a single, clear, contrapuntal line running through and beside the others. With the expression of divergent views or experiences the result was a kind of five-part harmony; dissonant at times but nonetheless rising from a common desire: to be heard. Susan Chase (2005), in her discussion of small samplings, presents different views regarding *representativeness* and *generalizability*. She counters the more traditional view that a single narrative may be understood as representative of a specific population with: “Contemporary narrative researchers occupy a different social and historical location. Under the auspices of the narrative turn, they reject the idea that the small number of narratives they present must be generalizable to a certain population” (p. 667).

I face a dilemma when choosing a way to introduce the participants in this study. I

long for each to stand before the reader as the singularly important person that I have come to know and admire. My pledge that “all efforts will be made to keep your identity confidential” (LOI, Appendix B) prevents individual and separate introductions and necessitates a degree of disguise. I will begin with the commonalities and the particular will be revealed through their own voices in the data.

These five young women are all Aboriginal People. Four are bilingual in Cree and English and one person is trilingual in Cree, English, and French. They live in the town in which this study takes place and their public schooling took place there and in two other Cree communities under the jurisdiction of the Cree School Board. They all grew up in a Cree cultural milieu - four in this town and one person in a smaller and more isolated community.

There are commonalities and individual differences in the circumstances that affected their disengagement from school. Four of these young people were caught in the vortex of alcohol and/or drug use that persists in many mid-northern communities. In the context in which these choices were made they describe the power of peer pressure, relational bullying, and depression related to family problems or break-up. One participant of the five experienced the sudden death, under tragic circumstances, of a person who was very close to her and another was the target of embarrassing and insulting comments from teachers. Disengagement from school for all participants took place between the ages of 13 and 15 years, while they were in Secondary I, II, or III (grades

seven, eight, and nine)². In some cases students were away from school for extended periods of time on more than one occasion. In relating their stories of disengagement from school, the young women used such words as *regret* and *angry*.

Four participants attempted to re-register in high school and one was successful and went on to graduate. Of the others, two people were denied re-entry in spite of the fact that they were of school age, and the other person, although re-admitted, experienced apathy from staff and, while still in mourning, cruel gossip about her tragedy that sapped her ability to overcome her personal loss and focus on her classes.

Three of these young women are mothers. Two of these young mothers spoke at length about their hopes and aspirations for their children. All three are proud of their status as parents and their ability to carry this responsibility.

These are people who value friendship, kinship, and respect for others. During our meetings each expressed her respect for grandparents and family and I witnessed expressions of genuine respect and admiration toward Elders when I accompanied two of the participants on visits to the ‘Elders’ Camp’ near our town.

The youngest participant collects poems about friendship and love from internet sites and gives them to her friends. The eldest talks to her young nieces about relationships and taking care of themselves.

Ethical Considerations: Three issues were of central importance to me in the planning

2

In the Province of Quebec secondary school starts at the seventh grade and the eleventh grade is the graduating year. The secondary levels in my region are commonly referred to with roman numerals, e.g. Secondary I, II, etc.

and carrying-out of this research study: 1) the need for access to *psycho-emotional support*, if required, for the young women participants; 2) *storage and identification of data* by means that would respect the confidentiality of the participants' identity; and 3) gaining *community consent* to ensure that the community in which I live is informed about and agrees to this study. The following paragraphs elaborate further on these concerns and present my response to the issues.

1) Psycho-emotional support: The participants represent a vulnerable population because of their ages; their cultural minority status in this country; and their marginalized status in their own community by virtue of being labeled as 'drop-outs'. For this reason an ombudsperson was recruited who is female, respected in the community, and actively involved with young people. This person's role was to provide simultaneous interpretation if desired by participants; participate in recruitment if a 'middle-person' was required; and generally be available as a 'third party' if any participant wished to send me a message that would make her uncomfortable in direct communication (e.g. if someone wished to withdraw or express discomfort with any part of the process). The ombudsperson was to be privy only to information that was interpreted or otherwise communicated at the participants' request and an agreement of confidentiality was required of her (see Appendix D). All participants were informed of the availability of this person and informed that any participant may request her presence/intervention at any time. In fact, her services were not requested or required. Participants were also provided with telephone numbers and contact information for Social Services and Youth Protection services in the community to use in the event that they experienced distress as a result of

the interview process and wished to speak to a counsellor.

Each participant was assured that she was free to withdraw from the study at any time by verbal notice and to disallow the use of her data. To ensure confidentiality of the data each was assigned a letter of identity known only to her and to me in lieu of names and each person's data is identified by this letter. Participants were given the option of choosing pseudonyms or having pseudonyms assigned by me and they declined that option. Each participant is unaware of the identity of the others with the exception of two young women who are close friends, responded to the recruitment posting together, and wished to participate in the interview meetings together.

2) Storage and identification of data: Digital recordings of all interviews are stored in my personal computer, identified by participant-letter, interview number, and date.

Transcripts of interviews and other correspondence with participants (e.g. 'Wholistic Impressions' reports) are identified in the same way and stored in a locked file. Narrative samples that are used in this report are identified by participant-letter, interview number, and page number. For example, a narrative sample that is identified as (PE#1, p. 16) is taken from Participant E's first interview, page 16.

Anonymity was an important concern for some participants and, in the case that a narrative sample was important to the thesis but contained some words or phrases that could identify the speaker if read locally, we agreed on a slight change that would not compromise the message or the identity of the speaker.

3) Community consent: In recognition of the right of First Nation communities to control research activity in their territories, and in respect for the community in which I live,

consent for this research was requested and obtained from the Chief and Band Council with the agreement that a copy of the final document will be given to the Band and an informal report of the findings will be presented at the request of the Band Council (see Appendix E).

Data Collection: The processes of data collection, analysis, and reporting were guided by the words of Kirby and McKenna (1989):

Participants should have access to the research process; progress and focus should be as open as possible to participants. Since there are no hypotheses to prove and no experimental groups to influence, an overt and mutually interactive experience between the participant and the researcher is best. Participants need to know enough about the research focus to want to participate, be able to share in the information gathering process and, ultimately, to see themselves in the final report of the study. The researcher's key responsibility is to the participants. (p. 104)

There are two sources of data for this study: the transcripts of audio-recorded open-ended interviews with each participant and written summaries of each interview called 'Wholistic Impressions'.

The recorded interviews were guided by a prepared list of questions and topics (Appendix F) that was given to each participant in advance. The intent was to follow the 'general interview guide approach' described by Patton (2002) whereby "an interview guide is prepared to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed. The interview guide provides topics or subject areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject" (p. 343). Participants were invited to make suggestions for other topics related to the research purpose and choose which questions/topics were most pertinent for each. They were also informed that they could choose not to discuss topics in

the outline that they did not wish to discuss and furthermore, at the beginning of each interview, each was asked if she wanted to follow the outline or simply tell me about her own experience in her own way. All but one person wished to follow the interview guide although, during each interview, some ‘branching out’ occurred with the result that each story was further enriched and personalized.

Kirby and McKenna (1989) stress the importance of recording impressions and reflections immediately following an interview. The ‘Wholistic Impressions’ documents (example Appendix G) are based on my immediate reflections after each interview. Each was written immediately following an interview or the following morning and always before playing back the recording. They resemble letters in that they address the participant. The content represents my immediate recollection and impressions of what was said and is loosely organized under headings. Also included, when appropriate, is my recognition of the courage required to share certain life experiences and my thanks for the sharing. The Wholistic Impressions reports were delivered to each participant the day following each interview so that comments and/or corrections regarding my impressions of her narrative could be made at our next meeting. These reports served as a connecting link between meetings and also as a bond of trust between researcher and participant as I strived to include each person in each step of the process.

In the following I will elaborate on 1) the selection of the site for our meetings and 2) the meetings themselves.

1) The site: Each young woman who wished to participate was consulted about the site for our interview meetings. Several options were discussed; among them a local coffee

shop, the local Drop-in Centre for teens, my home, their home, My objective was that they would feel secure about confidentiality and about 'comfort level' in the participant-researcher relationship. Each participant chose to come to my home on the appointed days. At times the interviews were conducted at the kitchen table over a meal or snack. Others took place in the living-room. In hindsight I recall animated, energetic talk punctuated often with laughter and joking asides at the table; and long, pensive, quiet sharing in the evening light of my living-room.

2) Our meetings: Kirby and Mckenna (1989) define *intersubjectivity* as "an authentic dialogue between all participants in the research process in which all are respected as equally knowing subjects" (p. 34).

Meetings with each participant were of four types consisting of a) introductory meetings, b) interview meetings, c) meetings to review the preliminary analysis, and d) a final meeting to view and comment on the treatment of the narrative segments as they are presented together in this thesis. In what follows I will elaborate on each of these.

a) Introductory meetings, as stated in the *recruitment* section, allowed me to describe the research project to each participant: to review the letter of information and consent forms; discuss logistics such as meeting times and place; answer any questions from the participants and, in the case of those who were of minor age, their parents; and to tell about my own background and motivation in relation to the study. The ethical considerations of confidentiality and access to the ombudsperson and to counselling services were also presented.

To further situate the participants in their understanding of a qualitative research

project, I shared with each a copy of a Master of Education thesis that had recently been completed by another member of this community. I explained my intention to produce a similar document with the help of the participants and directed their attention to the way that the other participants' words and stories were presented and analysed. Each was assured that she would receive her own copy of *our* completed document and also that she would be involved at every step of the process regarding the presentation and interpretation of her story.

One participant in particular at her introductory meeting showed great interest in the content of my 'example', a "qualitative emergent study (that) investigated the perceptions of involvement of Aboriginal community members in the formal secondary education system" of our community (Pashagumskum, 2005, p. 1). This young woman extended her visit by almost an hour as she turned the pages of this study, her head bent over the text, searching out samples of narrative and commenting on what parents and other community members had said about our school system. Her engagement with this text was a moment in time that I am privileged, as a teacher, to have witnessed.

b) During the interview meetings I was guided by the words of Connelly and Clandinin (1990).

These inquiries need to be soft, or perhaps gentle is a better term. What is at stake is the creation of situations of trust in which the storytelling urge, so much a part of the best parts of our social life, finds expression. (p. 12)

At our interview meetings my goal was to create a space where there was, as described by Linda Cleary, "enough time, privacy, and trust so the participant could relate his or her experience, reflect on that experience, and, to some extent, make sense of it"

(Bergstrom, Cleary, & Peacock, 2003, p. 177). This space was constructed by us over time; falteringly at first. As I re-read and listened again to the first interviews, I realized that the interview guide had its own presence - almost a persona - *guiding*, but also confining, our narrative goals. For example I heard myself say, “As it says here ...” and, “My question on the paper is ...” and, “The next question is ...” Albeit that participants were asked whether they would like to choose a topic on the guide to speak about or be asked the questions and all but one chose to respond to questions; the piece of paper seemed to be setting the priorities rather than the two people trying to express and make meaning of particular experiences. A freer and more open pattern of exchange developed during these meetings as each relationship evolved, as I became aware of the limitations of the interview guide, and as the participants and I gained experience in this mode of communication. I became more mindful of the teachings of other researchers that the participant knows her own story, that the story will flow in a particular way for a particular reason and therein lies the message, that critical and respectful listening is vital, and that thoughtful silences are a natural element of meaningful communication (Bergstrom, Cleary, & Peacock, 2003; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Chase, 2005; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Graveline, 1998; Kirby & McKenna, 1989).

At each interview meeting after the first, participants were asked to comment on the Wholistic Impressions report from the previous meeting; to confirm or correct my understanding of their statements and stories. As the transcripts for each meeting were completed these were also presented to be read for comments and suggestions. The appearance and apparent lack of structure of written speech on the page was a source of

interest and humorous comment for some participants. We became aware of our frequent use of “um”, “ah”, “like”, and re-starts. These were uniting moments as each participant discovered that I was as prone as she to these little strategies for ‘thinking on your feet’.

During the interview meetings I found myself, on occasion, faced with the same dilemma as that described by Amy Rossiter (1988):

Another constant source of tension in the interview process came from the fact that I was both an experienced mother and a social worker with rescue tendencies. Usually, I felt great relief that my job was to listen and make sense of the subjects’ difficulties, without the need to intervene; but there were times when I could make no clear distinctions between myself as Interviewer, as Sister/Mother, and as Rescuer. (p. 28)

How was I to react, for instance, when a fisted hand fell soundlessly and repeatedly on the arm of my sofa while its young owner, her voice barely audible, told of her anger with herself and with the circumstances that led to her school-leaving? She had made attempts on her own to re-register in school and had been unsuccessful. I may understand intellectually that formal schooling is not the only path to learning but, as a Mother and Teacher, I have an emotional understanding of the currency of High School Graduation for a young person. After our interview she accepted my offer of help and we embarked on a round of appointments with school principals and adult education personnel. As she had so generously agreed to participate in my project how could I not intervene to further hers? Other interventions occurred as relationships evolved and needs were expressed - chats about the joys and challenges of parenting, fostering participation in elder-youth gatherings, cooking sessions, and sharing a meal to reminisce after the death of a mutual friend - all outside of ‘interview time’.

Chase (2005) asks “How does power operate in the research relationship” (p. 655)

and Rossiter (1988) reports that, in her experience, the kind of researcher-participant relationship that evolves cannot be determined in advance. The researcher-participant relationships that evolved during the interview meetings of this study were each very different. They ranged from collegial to what could be described as student-teacher or youth-elder relationships. The types of intervention described above may be understood in the context of this 'range' and, parallel to these, there existed a 'power continuum' of which I was very aware throughout the interview stage. Within her five lenses through which narrative researchers view stories, Chase describes narratives as "both enabled and constrained by a range of social resources and circumstances" and "socially situated interactive performances" (p. 657), reminding us of the researcher's role as both audience and interpreter. There is no doubt that the participants' stories and responses to my questions were enabled *and* constrained by the relationships that evolved between us. Power is structured into all relationships and affects all interactions and the potential for an imbalance is greater where one actor is older, has achieved more of the conventionally perceived goals of life, and has a certain status in the community. Although I strived to minimize the potential for an imbalance and although the participants had the power to withdraw at any time with their data, I know that there were times during the interviews when the story was affected by the silent presence of our differences: perhaps a little aside that indicated a fear that I would judge a relative badly or disapprove of a friend, a small retraction, an assertion that the hard times were really an opportunity for learning: "no regrets", or that those who may have hurt us in the past really had our best interests at heart. There was also an occasion when the future readers of this thesis became actors

when a participant stopped herself short of a statement saying, “I’d better not say that, they’ll know who it is.”

I return to Connelly and Clandinin’s (1990) words *soft* and *gentle* with which I opened this section to remind myself of the lessons that I learned from and about the participants during our interview sessions. In the soft and gentle manner of their speaking they taught me about their respective circumstances and I observed their courage and sense of determination to share their stories and opinions in spite of the occasional awkwardness and potential for inequality in our relationships. Through our combined efforts we succeeded in the creation of *situations of trust*.

c) Kirby and McKenna (1998) advise that participants should be involved in the interpretation of data and Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggest that the narrative researcher “bring written documents back to participants for final discussion” (p. 12).

When the preliminary analysis of the transcripts had been completed, each participant was invited to review my meaning-making of her transcripts for the ‘ring of truth’ or “verisimilitude” (Connelly & Clandinin, p. 7) and to comment, ask questions, or correct my interpretation. Two participants were not available for this review. Those who were able to participate were satisfied with my work and made such comments as, “This is really me” and “You really got me right.”

d) Participants were invited to a final review meeting when the analysis of all transcripts had been integrated into a format that became Chapters Four and Five. For the first time each of the young women saw her own words arranged on the page with the words of others who had shared a similar experience. My organization of the various themes under

broader categories was explained and the opportunity for comment or revision was again offered. I also illustrated, where necessary, the way that sensitive and recognizable personal material had been disguised. Each person was interested in the process that had brought these stories together and in the similarities and differences and had no desire to make revisions. The participants who were unable to review my initial analysis were able to participate in this last meeting. My observation is that, at each stage of the process of interpretation and review, our relationship to ‘the words’ evolved somewhat so that we experienced a process of releasing them into the larger body of work. This was not a loss of ownership, but a recognition of the original intent of the project: discovering the web of meanings and investigating what can be learned from their stories.

Data Analysis: Chase (2005) refers to “a narrator’s active construction of self, on the one hand, and the social, cultural, and historical circumstances that enable and constrain that narrative, on the other” (p. 667). These are precisely the elements that I believe are of value and useful to the analysis of each participant’s experiences *as they are related by her*.

In the proposal for this study I blithely stated that I would follow the process described by Kirby and McKenna (1989) of organizing the data from small units of information called *bibbits* into common *properties* and from these form *categories* (p. 135). In reality, when faced with the pages of transcripts, I could not see a clear way to begin and discovered that a process that had seemed clear before was, in fact, not as obvious. I was committed to an inductive mode whereby “the data more clearly tell their own story” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 11) and I agreed with Kirby and McKenna

(1989) that “the voices of the participants need to be given priority” (p. 156). Again I shared a dilemma with Rossiter (1988): “Before I could write, the data had to teach me, and I had difficulty finding a method which allowed for my instruction by this mass of pages” (p. 29). Rossiter resolved her difficulties through a process of copying, cutting, and pasting. From other researchers I learned of sticky-notes, different coloured inks, highlighters, and notes in margins (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Patton, 2002). All resources advised multiple readings to “get a sense of the whole” (Patton, p. 440) and when I immersed myself in repeated readings of the transcripts shapes began to form: words and images that, in time, became the themes that carried each participant’s messages.

At this point I was prepared to record these emerging forms and devised my own method for making notations parallel to each participant’s transcripts by providing an ‘annex’ to each page with a glued-on paper strip. On these strips I made my notes beside significant lines of speech using key words and phrases such as ‘family’, ‘teacher’, ‘proud’, ‘Cree language’, ‘respect’, ‘adversity’, and ‘learning’ for example. Subsequent readings of each young woman’s words produced more notes on these annexed margins: questions, linkages with other parts of her transcripts, my own thoughts about what direction this particular path may take, and significant segments of her speech. It was my intention to allow each participant’s voice to emerge to the greatest degree possible: to discover *her* themes and *her* reality before conducting a more global analysis of the commonalities and differences across the group. I agree with Chase (2005) as she states that, “In one way or another, then, narrative researchers listen to the narrator’s voices - to the subject positions, interpretive practices, ambiguities, and complexities - *within* each

narrator's story" (p.663). During this process the 'Wholistic Impressions' reports were also re-read, without notations, to provide a reminder of 'first impressions' of each interview and its priorities.

The key-words and phrases that emerged from each transcript flowed across interviews and between participants. Narratives organized around them. Although *selves* were constructed and expressed variously and separately, the common themes became the contextual markers for the circumstances that *constrained* or *enabled* (Chase, 2005) each. These themes became the 'properties' described by Kirby and McKenna (1989).

Using the annexed transcripts of all participants, sections of narrative and dialogue were organized on chart papers according to the 'properties' identified in the original readings. This permitted the realization of the range of experience and influence affected by each property within and between each narrative and I began to appreciate more clearly not only the unique qualities of each young woman's experience but also the circumstances that linked her to her co-participants.

Finding an over-arching organizing principle for the properties outlined on many large charts involved "living with the data" (Kirby and McKenna, 1989, p. 109) for many days. The charts covered the walls of a large room and I was literally surrounded and immersed as I repeatedly read the discrete segments of narrative distilled from each transcript. The themes that emerged as I listened to and read each personal account are: family, teachers, learning, coping with adversity, respect, helpers, feelings about disengagement, friends and peers, language of instruction, and pride of accomplishment. Re-reading my purpose for this study and the questions that I had asked myself revealed

the foci around which these properties naturally organized themselves and my task became to devise a way for the voices of the young women participants to express their stories to others.

The next two chapters present the participants' stories in their own voices. Rather than presenting each person's story as a single narrative unit segments of the narratives are arranged and presented thematically. This approach is taken to provide anonymity for the participants given my intention that their messages will be heard, and this report will be presented, locally.

The organization of the themes presented in the following chapters relates to my research questions concerning the web of meanings constructed by each participant *about herself* based on school experience and in other learning contexts (Chapter Four) and my questions *about schooling* concerning the participants' views of the role played by school in their experience (Chapter Five). Together these two chapters represent a distillation of the data presented and recorded for this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

Presentation of the Self: “You can help me a little bit, not too much though, so I can learn”³

How do these young women define themselves as students and learners? How do they remember the time when they were engaged/happy in school? What are the characteristics of their most enjoyable and/or successful learning experiences?

Selves-as-learners

“I’m still learning right now.” (PA#1, p. 1)

This young woman began her first interview with this statement and repeated “still learning” six more times in other contexts throughout our three interviews. Our last taped conversation ended with her recognition that, in the process of coping with the difficulties in her life, she has gained an air of confidence that she had lacked as a young teen. Her final statement echoed her first:

Yes, I think I’m still learning - to try to do stuff more. Then I can encourage my friends to do the same too.(PA#3, p. 4)

In her repetition of “still learning”, this participant clearly articulates a message that runs through all participants’ stories. They continue to seek out learning situations. Participant E tells about learning to cook from her Grandma, C talks about her pride in

³Participant A, interview number 1, p. 1

signing up for Adult Education and completing Secondary II in three weeks:

C: I did Secondary II for three weeks then the teacher put me to Secondary III.

S: OK. That's good news. How do you feel about that?

C: Good. I'm happy that I went back to school. I regretted quitting school for two years. (PC#1, p.9)

D is involved with training in a helping profession while preparing herself to go away to college and pursue her vocational goals as well as examining her own life and learning lessons from the past:

*It's kind of like, for the past month I've been, "why am I going through this, I'm twenty-eight, I have a child, and why am I struggling?" So I was, like, not to use anger, just try to learn why I'm going through this, now that I'm going into my thirties.
(PD:#1, p. 3)*

In addition, Participant B illustrates the desire to keep learning, the need to advance one's knowledge and skills:

S: Tell me about something you've learned in the last little while.

B: I learned how to make mittens. And I learned how to set up a rabbit snare. And I learned to cook really well. And, ...

S: You've learned a lot lately.

B: Yeah. Since I was in school.

S: Can you describe to me a little bit about how you learned to do those things?

B: I learned those from Elders. Elders - that's when I started learning these things. My friend's Grandma, she told me how to make mittens, and I love to try and make something. And I tried to make mittens with her and I finished those mittens. I finished

two mittens. (PB#1, p. 6)

As learners, participants are engaged in their own learning plans to achieve their own learning goals. Participant A relates how she approached an Elder to learn to do hide work:

I asked her and she was very happy about it and she said that "I'd love to teach you. I enjoy teaching stuff." She told me that it wasn't going to be easy. That it was hard work. Yeah, it was hard work. You can help me a little bit, not too much though, so I can learn. (PA#1, p. 1)

In their present lives, participants have learning objectives that relate to real need or functional application. Their learning is authentic, situated, and instrumental. They are in control of the process.

There is an element of security in controlling the process or choosing your own learning path. It is a way of maintaining personal integrity/self-esteem. For these young women, past negative experiences in school have included threats to self-esteem that prevented them from learning:

They kept on teasing me. So I just ignored them. I used to tell the teacher and she just told me, "ignore them," Sometimes I wouldn't go to school because of that.(PC#1, p. 7)

Participant B tells about her favourite experience in high school -an art project - and why she did not finish it:

B: Because sometimes I didn't want to go back. I skipped classes when there was Art because I didn't like the teacher. He was ... I don't know ... mean.

S: In what way? Can you give me an example?

B: He always embarrassed people.(PB#1, p. 3)

She also speaks of the event that caused her to avoid school altogether:

B: Or, I don't know how to say - when I was in Secondary II, my teacher told me that I was stupid but I didn't want to go back to school.

*S: He said that **what** ?*

B: That I was stupid. Then I didn't go back to school. That's when I left the school. (PB#1, p. 3)

Gossip is another esteem-destroyer that makes learning difficult:

I think it's one of the reasons why I kind of dropped out. One of those four topics - the rumours, the gossip. Cause I didn't want to be around people who were like that. It hurt. You know? It hurt so much to hear people talk about my sister or my Father or my Mother, you know? (PD# 1, p. 5)

Participant A describes the dilemma one faces when pulled between her desire to achieve in school and pressure from her friends:

It was getting more tough when I got older. When I .. When I ... it was tough. Tough in school. Like I had to choose which is more important - getting an education or with my friends having fun. Like I had to choose things that ... didn't feel alone. It was tough for me.

Later in the same interview Participant A returned to this theme:

I think it was tough for me because, like I said, I wanted to be accepted because I didn't want the school to be hard on me because that's when I grew up, grow up. If I had friends, I wasn't going to get picked on or something. I wasn't going to get teased on if I had friends. (PA#1, p. 7)

These young women see themselves as life-long learners who pursue their own learning objectives in a context that is emotionally rewarding and authentic.

Three participants have incorporated a teaching role into their 'self-as-learner' identity. They are willing and proud to share their learning with other significant people in

their lives. Participant A describes her pride in Cree literacy and the fact that she still journals in Cree, and then how she shares her expertise:

A: Yeah, sometimes my mother, who's trying to be a teacher now - trying to finish her ...

S: her degree, eh?

A: Yeah. I try to teach her.

S: With her Cree, eh?

A: Yeah. Sometimes she asks me to help her - how to write - to read her journal, if she wrote it right. I'm so proud of it that I can teach my mother too! (PA#1, p. 3)

At the time of our interviews Participant B was spending time with her friend's grandmother learning how to do hide-work. She was making a pair of mittens for her younger sister and decided that she would also teach the eight-year-old how to sew.

Participant D has learned from her own experience as a young mother who struggled to finish high school and is concerned about young people today being better informed than she was. She also knows that many young people are not comfortable talking to their parents about relationships, pregnancy, or safe sex:

And right after I had my child, that's when I learned about biology - what the boy's body's going through (laughing) and so, there wasn't really a message out there for me to learn about teenage pregnancy or safe sex or all that. I don't think it's really out there. So that's why I'm kind of protective toward (younger people I know). They come to me, you know, because they know I had that experience, and they talk to me. And they're comfortable, you know what I mean? (PD#2, p.4)

For two participants, their self-image as learners is tied to their parenting role. It motivates them to continue learning, or has motivated them in the past to continue:

I just want my child to know that s/he comes first. I just want to try - I think I want to go back to school and try to finish so when s/he grows up s/he can, that s/he should know that s/he could try too. (PA#3, p. 2)

....it took me a while to get my diploma ... because I experienced teen pregnancy too. ... But in a way s/he kind of helped me get my diploma too, you know what I mean? (PD#1, p. 2)

Memories of School Days

How do these young women remember the time when they were engaged/happy in school? Participants' recollections of their enjoyable and productive school days centre around personal achievement, enjoyment of a particular subject or favourite teacher, and sports.

Stories of personal achievement include completing a two-year program in one year and meeting the challenge of a move to Montreal:

I'm proud of myself because when I was in IPL, when I passed IPL, I was in Secondary II, I didn't even go to Secondary I. Because I did a lot of work there because I learned fast. When there was exams, I was the first one who finished because I kept my mind - I studied all the time. So, ...hmm. (PB#1, p. 6)

Participant B's pride in this accomplishment is well-deserved as it represents an achievement that is rare in our schools. As Participant A describes in the following, she also triumphed over a challenge that seems daunting to many young people in the North: leaving home and attending a 'Southern' school:

Probably when I was in grade six. I went to school down south in Montreal. It was a new school - kind of new experience for me. I was kind of shy. I met new friends, I was kind of scared the first day. I missed my friends here. When I started there a lot of girls came up to me and they made me feel at home. I made a friend there who was kind of like a best friend - yeah she was a best friend. So. We used to do stuff like help each

other with homework or while we were doing stuff in the classroom. We also did a play - that was the first time that I ever did a play, so it was a good experience for me. So, yeah, it was only for a year, but it still was a good experience. (PA#1, p. 4)

Participants B, C, and E describe the fun they had at the Cree Culture camp as elementary students. Each reminisced about the snowshoeing, playing outside, and acquiring useful knowledge and skills:

B: Yeah, they used to take us there. When we had Cree Culture. I really liked Cree Culture because we used to, ... how do you say that? (Motions) sewing?

S: You used to do sewing?

B: yeah, making ... moccasins and slippers, ... how do you call that? Biichipquan?

S: shell bags?

B: Uh-huh. That's what I used to make. I made one for my Grandpa. I wrote " Grandpa ____ . " (PB#1, p. 5)

Good memories of favourite subjects or classes generally relate to a teacher.

Participant C tells about her enjoyment of grade six because the teacher spoke to them in Cree and explained things in a way that the students understood. They also had fun in this class:

Because he talked in Cree not English. He always talked to us in Cree. He always explained something. If we didn't understand he explained three times. It was fun. We had fun!(laughter) (PC#1, p. 2)

This participant had a favourite subject in Secondary, again because of the teacher:

C: I loved (secondary teacher) teaching me math.

S: Can you say why?

C: Well I always had trouble with math. He helped me ...

(PC#1, p. 12, 13)

Participation in sports, especially basketball, is included in Participant C's and Participant D's good memories of school days. Both played basketball in high school. Participant D valued the coach's guidance and her closeness with her team-mates:

He was here for many years. His name was _____. He helped a lot of kids. When he left we were like ... (sigh). Everybody was disappointed. It was sad when he left.

And ...

... because I really enjoyed playing basketball with him, I enjoyed having a team with me.

(PD#1, p. 7)

Positive Aspects of Learning

What are the characteristics of enjoyable and successful learning experiences as described by the young women who participated in this study?

The teaching-learning process that these learners favour is a combination of *relationship* and *support*. Since leaving school, they choose situations in which relationship, trust, and personal interaction are important with a family member, an Elder, a friend, or another person who they respect. These attributes are also clearly present in the situations that the young women present as their most memorable school experiences. Both in and out of school, they describe certain modes of learning that may be classified as *pedagogical aspects*. The relationship and support favoured by the participants may be expressed under the sub-categories of *socio-emotional* and *pedagogical* although one recognizes the inter-relatedness of these two elements.

Socio-emotional Aspects: The term ‘socio-emotional aspects’ refers to the affective domain and the teacher-student relationship. When Participant A speaks about her favourite school learning environment the relationship between the teacher and the class was the important part of the experience. He gave them a vision of the future - they saw themselves through his eyes/vision and the image was a good one. This teacher encouraged and challenged the students to do their best, talked about values and topics outside of the curriculum, opened their eyes to other issues and ideas outside of their experience, and showed that he cared about them:

I remember being in grade five, grade five probably, yeah - grade five. We used, ... My teacher used to teach me a lot of new things, neat things. He was kind of, um, very supportive, very. He was so much, let me see, he liked talking about us, about in the future, and how well we could do. He also did tests, told us how proud he was about us and what he wanted to see when we grew up. We were close, the students and the teacher. We were very close. I'm still happy about it. (PA#1, p. 3)

Her out-of-school learning relationship with an Elder has similar characteristics:

A: Yeah. She was very good. (Laughter)

S: And I imagine that in that kind of learning situation a type of relationship developed also.

A: Yeah. I think I could respect her more. She always told me stories, how she taught her daughters, how they grew, um, loving it. (PA#1, p. 2)

Both of these teaching/learning relationships approach a personal level for this young learner where there is trust and emotional security.

Participant B explains why English Language Arts was one of her favourite subjects and the role played by the teacher in her enjoyment of the subject:

B: We used to read and our teacher used to ask us to - like, um, I don't know how to call it - we used to read like (pointing to books on the table) those books, and she would ask questions and we answered the questions by doing it in a paper. That's what she used to do. And if I'm not finished, I used to stay after school, (laughing) ...

S: Because you wanted to work on it or because the teacher made you?

B: (laughing) The teacher made me.

S: Ok. The next part says how did you learn this skill or how did you become knowledgeable about this topic. How did you come to enjoy English so much and books and responding to stories?

B: I don't know. My hobby is I like to write - a lot. And, ... I don't know. Because I loved that teacher. She's nice, but she's old now. And if I'm not doing my work she would say, "Do your work or else you're not going anywhere." So I started working in my book, papers, and my work, not going anywhere or anything.

S: Just finish up your work.

B: Yeah.

S: Is there a reason that you liked that teacher so much?

B: Yes, she's helping me a lot. When I don't understand she will explain it to me. (PB#1, p. 2)

The teacher was strict about getting work done, but this did not deter the student. It was all part of a caring relationship. This young woman also remembers her Elementary years fondly because of her teachers:

When I was in grades four, five, and six - I didn't like when I was in grades two and three - but I liked four five and six because my teachers were nice. And ... they would always take us out playing baseball or going sliding, and we used to go to the gym. And one of my teachers - when I was in grade four -

they used to give us a birthday party (laughing). They always gave us presents. When I was in grade five - I don't remember who was my teacher - but I loved it. I still miss school.(PB#1, p. 3)

and,

They would always help us with things that we didn't understand, and, they used to take us out, play outside and go sledding. They would take us, ... we would walk around, and, ... I don't know. They were fun! We had fun teachers. (PB#2, p. 2)

Participant C responded that Math was her favourite subject in high school because, although she had difficulty with Math, she appreciated the way that the teacher helped her to understand.

Participant D attributes her success in high school and the fact that she was able to solve relational problems in a very courageous way to the guidance of her coach:

My coach was the one who kind of helped me through my attitude problems. And I think - yeah that's what - I enjoyed playing basketball and volleyball and all these different kinds of sports. I enjoyed playing and that helped me a lot just to realize that - I was a bully too! I realized that I was going that road with the bullies and I realized, "what am I doing here?" and those girls I bullied, I apologized. Even to my teachers. I apologized because I felt guilty what I did to them. And I changed my road and I became best friends with the girls I bullied because I didn't want to be with the bullies. So, I think my coach was the one who kind of guided me to go in that positive direction instead of negative direction. Yeah, the coach. (PD#1, p. 6-7)

This young woman also appreciated "having a team with me"; a sense of belonging to a *community* of people with a common purpose or interest. Membership in a particular group and the enjoyment of belonging is a component of many happy memories of school. Extra-curricular interests provided a space for people to build relationships and interact with others who were not necessarily their classmates and teachers: an alternative to the

routine of the regular school day and an opportunity to develop and display talents. For some students, membership in after-school groups and on teams also provided a psychological space: a much-needed break from the anxiety of family and relationship stressors:

A: Well for me it was helpful.

S: I think it was helpful for a lot of people.

*A: Even in tough times, to get their minds off some things ...
(PA#1 p. 5)*

Although not a school experience, the most significant event in the life of one participant has been her annual involvement in the ‘Winter Gathering’ that occurs every year between two neighbouring communities in the month of March. This event, designed as a vehicle for developing and enhancing community wellness in a traditional setting, brings together Elders and young people at a large bush camp over a two-week period. I accompanied this young woman on visits to the local Elders’ camp near our town to listen to their planning for the Gathering and to inquire about signing up. Her air of comfort and warm response to the attention and affectionate inclusion of the group demonstrated to me more than her words could say how she could thrive in this kind of community. She describes her enjoyment of last year’s Gathering; joining in with the chores, the religious service, and the fun:

E: We went to get water, driving around (snow machine), went to get boughs. How do you say ‘church service’ also?

S: You had a prayer meeting or a service, like a prayer service?

E: Yes. There was a big teepee. We played games (laughing) - telephone. There were lots of kids there. It was lots of fun

helping to clean up. That's all. (PE#1, p. 16)

One young woman described an experience of community and community-building in the school that affected her and others profoundly. Her account of this experience follows. Her telling is preceded by her description of her Secondary I year which wasn't going very well, but she managed to turn things around at the end and pass. Her telling of this story is by way of explaining how she was able to cope with other stressors and pass the year:

A: I joined a group - I don't know - Turtle Concepts. They brought Turtle Concepts, that's where I went, they, somebody signed me up. I had a friend there too, a cousin of mine. And, I think that's where it got a little different too. I noticed it was different. I liked it there.

As she continues she describes the over-all objective of the program; to build self-esteem, "to be proud of yourself", and some of the activities that provided the context for the achievement of this goal. Interpersonal skills were developed through social activities such as playing games, cooking, and group discussions. Intrapersonal needs were also met as the young people learned to take pride in appearance and presented a fashion show to the public:

A: Yes. And they also played games with us, played games and talked about stuff that they wrote on the board - and what we thought. And they used to do these activities: cooking. And they used to give us like a little make-over, with clay mask and let's say - (laughing) - something like that. Just like a little spa. That's what they did. Then after, at the end they told us that they would be doing modelling here in _____ at the auditorium. And I was one of, I was part of that. They used to do this little modelling at the commercial centre. We walked and modelled. (Laughing) I was scared! (Laughing) We used to wear dresses, did our makeup, did our hair. And at the end we did a fashion show - modelling - at the auditorium. There was a lot of us, like thirty or over. Around, ... there was a lot of us. A lot of girls, a lot of boys. I noticed the boys that they were different too, they were acting

different.

S: In what way? Can you describe?

A: They used to be, like, they used to do, ... they used to be, teasing. Teasing a lot of ... adults, kids, or teenagers. They were acting different. I noticed that they were acting - nice. They respected a lot of people. They were, ... kind.

As this young woman continued to describe her experience with this program, her voice expressed amazement at times at the positive outcomes that had been realized. She continues by relating how she and her friends felt after the experience:

A: We were happy. We enjoyed it. We talked to a lot of people that we didn't talk to - when we see each other, when we saw each other, we talked. We had a conversation. There were a lot of people that didn't talk to each other. We started to talk. (Sounds of amazement/amusement) I never really thought that I would be able to talk to most of those ... hm! (amusement)

S: And so, what did you learn from the Turtle Concepts experience?

A: What I learned ... that I could ... do things. I started to try a little bit harder in school too, when it started again, to be, ... I tried to respect the teachers again too, tried to be nice. That I shouldn't put myself down, because I (PA#2, p 1, 2)

Three of these young people mention family members or the support of family in general as an important element of educational success or encouragement. Family members often play a teaching role; especially in the learning of traditional skills and knowledge:

A: I'm also learning how to cook - cooking with traditional food. I'm kind of happy with that too. I'm still learning, not a lot though, but, um, most of it I can remember - how to do it - sometimes I still ask my Mother to help me - how much I can put. I'm also starting to learn sewing, how to make a little blanket for a baby. I'm trying to learn that too. And ...

S: So you continue to learn all the time.

A: Yeah, I'm still learning.

S: How about, for instance, with the traditional cooking - How would you say you learn to do those things?

A: From my Mother, from my other family, even my Father, even my brother, he teaches me. They even teach me how to clean the food - how to clean the traditional food. (PA#1, p. 3)

Family plays an important motivational role in relation to school success. One person mentions her Mother often when relating her school experiences:

B: When I was in Secondary II I started not to go into classes. But my Mom used to, my Mom always told me to go to school. And I would skip classes. Because I didn't like the Secondary II teacher. I didn't like her that much. Because she told me that I was stupid. I told my Mom what she told me and she called _____ (guidance). _____ said, ... they were sending me books - what you call? Then I didn't touch those books. Then I started not going to school. Just sometimes I went to school, but I didn't like it. I only went to English and Art and Gym. I didn't go to the homeroom class. Then I started not to go. I stayed home. I felt bad when I left school.

S: Bad in what way? Sad, or angry, or, ... ah?

B: I was angry at myself - for leaving school. I always told my Mom, when I was in grade six, ... "I'm going to finish high school and graduate and go to college." That's what I used to say. Then I started not going to classes. Sometimes it was boring go to classes (PB#2, p. 1)

The experiences of other family members can also provide encouragement. Participant B had been unsuccessful in trying to re-register at school and we considered adult education as an alternative:

S: What do you think about going to adult ed to find out what they have to offer?

B: Well it would be ok. At least I'll be going to school.

S: M-hm. It's a way of moving forward.

B: Yeah.

S: Do you feel kind of stuck right now?

B: Yeah. (friend's Mom) wants me to go to school. She said, "I don't want her to be like ... ending up like me - not going to work - not working." That's what she said. Now she's forcing me to go to school.

S: Do you feel bad about that?

B: Yeah..... No! I don't know. (Laughing)

S: Because I think you, it sounds like you want to go to school and finish too, eh?

B: Yeah.

S: So, how do you feel about what _____ said?

B: I don't know! (Laughing) I just want to finish high school, that's it. And get a job! (Laughing) ... My two Uncles finished high school. My Uncle - the first one - graduated. He finished in adult ed. And now he's in college. And now he drives around with a plane. ... He finished the plane test. (PB#3, p. 5)

I would like to comment on Participant B's statement that her friend's Mom is "forcing me to go to school." The word 'force' is often used in this region by second-language speakers of English to mean 'strongly encouraging' or to imply that a person is obliged to carry out an action. In the context of the statement to which I refer, the power that is usually implied in the word is not intended.

Trust and security are very important in the relationship between teacher/mentor and student. Family often provides this kind of security. The following expresses this well:

S: Are there particular people in your life who you go to, to learn things?

B: My Mom. ... And - yeah, my Mom. Only my Mom. ... I think. No, _____, my boyfriend. Those two.

S: Why do you think you choose those two people?

B: Because they're important. And they understand what I'm saying and they listen to me. And they're helping me - a lot. (PB#1, p. 7)

One participant attributes the personal-social and academic difficulties that she experienced as a young adolescent to *lack* of family support and inadequate involvement of her parents in her life. Her message is important and quoting her comments directly would breach confidentiality. The following is from the post-interview 'wholistic impressions' summary that she read and approved. The words are mine:

You talked about the importance of communication in families and the danger that, when everyone becomes too involved in her/his 'own thing', family cohesion is sacrificed and children can feel unsupported. It was difficult growing up in a family in which both parents were very busy and one in particular had very demanding jobs that involved serving the community, locally and regionally. The child-parent relationship was not always there and, as a teen, you resented the fact that this parent had time for others, but not for you and your siblings. You stressed that you are not laying blame, but pointing out the importance of a close and communicative relationship in families. (SR: Wholistic Impressions, PD, Feb. 28, 2006)

The final word in family support goes to Participant A whose Father actually sat in on a class for her to see for himself the behaviour of a teacher who was 'playing favourites' and not respecting certain students:

A: ... I used to hear about it all the time. She didn't pass people that much - cause, she didn't like, she didn't like the kids. Aww... I don't know why.

S: It wasn't really about your achievement, it was more about whether she liked you or not? Is that what you're saying?

A: Yes. Kids didn't, ... Then my Father didn't, my parents didn't believe me at first. Then I told my Father to ... he took me there, then he saw for himself. Then after that he believed me. (PA#2, p. 3)

For the young women participating in this study the relational aspects of learning are important: the support of skilled and caring teachers, a sense of community, and the involvement and support of family.

Pedagogical Aspects: In the context of this section I use the term 'pedagogical aspects' of learning to refer to elements of curriculum and instruction that are believed to enhance the learning process.

The learning experiences described by the participants of this study are often *situated* in a *meaningful context*: the knowledge and skills acquired are considered useful by the learner in their own right or because they will be instrumental in achieving other educational or personal goals and the learning takes place in the context of applying the knowledge and skills as they are learned.

The setting often has the air of *workshop* about it. When Participant B describes her Art project, she is describing work that she did as part of an enterprise. While learning to work with clay she was participating in a wider project in which students designed, produced, marketed, and sold crockery and other items on-site and over the internet. She mentions Art class four times during our interviews and ends the second session by telling me again that she was happiest doing her pottery work, "And I still miss Art." (PB#2, p. 8)

Cree Culture classes meet the same criteria of situated, experiential learning in a communal workshop setting - whether in a classroom or a cabin in the bush. Four of the young women described their enjoyment of these classes and similar experiences such as

learning from an Elder or family member. The traditional knowledge and skills learned in these contexts are not only useful - their acquisition is a source of pride and status. When the Cree Culture classes are offered as one period on the time-table rather than in longer blocks of time, they are less satisfying when compared with a more authentic setting such as working in a group of friends with an Elder:

S: How recently did you join the group - the sewing group?

A: It wasn't that long ago. I did it before but I wanted to learn more, to do more things. I used to do it in school, too. They used to teach us in school, but it wasn't - I thought it wasn't long enough for me for one hour - one hour of teaching.

S: during Cree Culture?

A: Yeah. And they didn't have much stuff, like there's more things to do that she's teaching me. (PA:#1, p. 2)

Throughout her high-school years Participant D regularly participated in local and regional public speaking competitions. Her work in these projects may also be defined as instrumental and situated in her own experience and interests. She used the public speaking as an opportunity to research issues that concerned her and inform the general public about her concerns:

I think those four topics - especially judging people - I think that one - and I remember speaking - I went to three public speaking contests and I talked about that issue. I guess I was not heard! (Laughing) I was in Secondary II I think. ... Yeah, judging. (PD#1, p. 6)

Not only is much of the students' significant learning contextualized and meaningful, but it is *supported* in such a way that the learners can explore new territory comfortably and anticipate success:

Probably I like somebody demonstrating it for me first, then trying a

step and that's how I think I will ... I think that's how I will learn more - doing steps.(PA#1, p. 8)

This learner described how she learned from an elder also by being helped “a little bit, not too much though, so I can learn.” (PA#1, p. 1) and Participant B’s description of her hide-work sessions are similar:

B: I just looked at those things and I asked her, “Can I make mittens?”, and she showed me a pair. And she told me how to make those. First there was the hide, and we cut the thing that we made. Then I started making the flowers with a pen, tracing, and then I started - I don't know how to say it (hand motions) ...

S: Embroidery?

B: Yeah. Then I finished and I started the ...(hand motions)...

S: The hand part?

B: Yeah. Then I finished it, then I went to the other. Then I learned to do things. (PB#2, p. 6-7)

She later explained that the Elder had instructed her to decorate her first pair of mittens with embroidery because it was easier than beadwork. She wanted the learner to be able to execute the whole job and then to learn the more demanding skill at a later time. When four of the participants name Cree Culture classes among their favourites, this is the kind of learning that they would have experienced: guided step-by-step instructions with demonstration, constant observation, feed-back, and a clear knowledge of what the outcome should be. Art classes, named by three participants would also have followed this format and it is also present in a description of the work done for a favourite teacher in a favourite subject, English Language Arts:

We used to read and our teacher used to ask us to - like, um, I don't know how to call it - we used to read like (pointing to books on the

table) those books, and she would ask questions and we answered the questions by doing it in a paper. That's what she used to do. (PB#1, p. 2)

Participants often referred to their enjoyment of activities related to Language Arts; stories, poetry, writing:

S: I brought home some writing books. If you take a writing book, do you think you can think about some of these things (both interrupt enthusiastically - yes) and write later for me?

C and E in unison: Yes! I like to write.

S: Ok. I know you like to write. You told me you do lots of writing.

E: I have a whole bunch of books at home (indicates a pile with her hands). Poetry?

S: Oh, I'd love to read them. Do you show them to anyone?

E: M-hm.

S: Who do you show them to?

E: My friends.

*C: I have many that she brought to my house.
(PE and PC#1, p. 3-4)*

and from Participant B:

My hobby is I like to write - a lot. (PB#1, p. 2)

Participant A elaborates on her enjoyment of stories and journalling:

Um, I enjoy learning probably Math ... Math. I used to be good in Math. When I got older when I started doing like fractions I wasn't that much good everything else. I liked doing English um, reading and writing, studying about stories, doing a journal, and I think that those are generally two that I enjoyed doing. (PA#1, p. 1)

SR: Did you enjoy Cree Culture when you were in school?

PA: Yeah. I enjoyed also writing and doing a journal. I liked it. I'm very proud that I still know the Cree language - the writing - So yeah, I'm very proud of it. (PA#1, p. 2)

Participant D's appreciation of language-learning is seen in her involvement during her high-school years in public speaking: her writing of her speeches and her concern for getting her message across.

The expressive functions of language, writing and speaking, are areas of the curriculum that have provided success or enjoyment for all of these learners and a vehicle for expressing and exploring *self*. In addition the participants have described themselves as active learners who take pride in accomplishment. They favour supported, scaffolded learning that has authentic purpose. Learning in community is important to the participants as is the intervention of caring teachers who respect their ability to meet high standards.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Role of the School: “If the teacher was ... respect me ... I would still have been in school”⁴

What role did school play in the past experience of the young women who participated in this study? How is the formal education system implicated in their leaving school? These are the questions about formal schooling that I asked myself at the outset of this research.

The school (and by extension the education system) played both an active and passive role in the alienation of the young women of this study. There are the obvious actions by the school related to the application of various policies, administrative practices, or disrespectful treatment by staff, that directly resulted in the leaving of a student. There are also the more passive actions that implicate the school as the *site* of disengagement from formal education for these young people: the place where, over time, marginalization occurred and each student found herself on the outside. Broadly, one could say that the active and passive roles played by the school include, respectively, acts of *commission* and acts of *omission*.

⁴ Participant B, interview number 2, p. 5

The Active Role of the School

The Role Played by Teachers and Administration: One student tells about her experience with a teacher who arbitrarily passed or failed people according to whether she liked them, and how she learned to pass that teacher's course. At the time this student was also experiencing depression brought on by problems in her personal life:

I was in Secondary II. When I started Secondary II, I sort of ... liked it. Enjoyed being there. But most of my teachers, ... one of my teachers, I didn't really like her. I felt she was not that good a teacher. Like, she only passed most of the kids that she only liked. Some of us that she didn't like she failed. And she kicked us out for no reason and none of the teachers or the Principal, or, didn't believe us. Because, I don't know. Maybe because we were just - they thought that we were just only kids - or lying. ... I started to act again like that - when I was in Secondary I - the same. Then I started to act the same, because I, same thing, family problems. Then I got depressed again and the more I acted different ... it wasn't that much though, in Secondary II. It was more in Secondary I. In Secondary II, the teacher that didn't like me, ... ?? Then when I acted different, when I started to keep quiet, then try to respect her more, the more I did that, the more she passed me. I did the same work as always. I don't know why suddenly she passed me. (PA#2, p. 3)

This is the teacher who she asked her Father to observe, as described earlier, in an attempt to convince the adults to believe what the students were saying. Although the behaviour of this teacher did not cause the student to leave, it confirmed the students' impression that the school establishment did not respect their opinions and was not prepared to acknowledge and support their observations.

When Participant B was embarrassed by her Art teacher and called "stupid" by her home-room teacher, the school's response was to send work home for her to do so that she did not have to attend the home-room teacher's classes. She was expected to attend English, Art, and Gym classes. She was fourteen years old at that time. She "didn't touch

those books” and eventually stopped going to school altogether. She didn’t like only going to some classes and having to avoid others. It is not clear what arrangements were made for home-schooling in the home-room teacher’s subjects and how her progress was to be monitored. The young woman appears to have no knowledge of how or why this particular plan was designed for her, nor who had input. We do not know whether the teacher or her parents were involved in discussions with the administration that resulted in a ‘home-schooling’ agreement. It seems unlikely that a student of this age could meet the requirements of the grade eight curriculum without instruction, but that is my understanding of the expectations for this action.

The Impact of Administrative Practice: Another action by the school also affected Participant B in Secondary II. Cree Language Arts and Cree Culture, two of her favourite subjects, were not offered:

B: When I was in Secondary II, I didn’t go to Cree Language. And they told me that, “when you’re in Secondary IV you’re going to go to Cree Language.” I don’t know why they did that. Nobody went to Cree Language in Secondary II. But I still have my Cree writing. And - I used to love this class. And Cree Culture is ... that’s the first time I knew how to make something. I was starting to make some gloves.

S: Do you feel that you might have been able to stay in school if you’d had the opportunity in Secondary II to go to Cree Language and Cree Culture?

B: Yes.

S: Maybe it might have helped?

B: Yeah. (PB#2, p. 4)

Cree Language Arts is a compulsory subject in this school board. It is recognized by the Ministry of Education of Quebec as ‘Mother Tongue’ in terms of high-school credits and

is required for graduation on the successful completion of Ministry-approved summative exams. It is weighted the same as English or French in other jurisdictions. The act of removing Cree from the curriculum for two years in high-school deprived this student of the much-needed motivation of a favourite subject and could possibly have jeopardized the opportunity for other students to achieve graduation. Two years without instruction and practice in Cree Literacy in a sea of English-language instruction would surely have an impact on the compulsory exam results.

This school board's Cree Language of Instruction Policy (CLIP) has not been received in the same way by all participants. Literacy is a source of pride for Participants A and B:

I really enjoyed the teachers who teach Cree Culture and Cree Language. We always learned new stuff. Even now that, like it's important. I think it's better to know the language than to lose it. Because it's part of, it's part of us. (PA#2, p. 8)

Although Participants C and E were also educated in Cree in the early grades under the CLIP, they do not express the same liking for the language classes in spite of their previously stated enjoyment of Cree Culture activities. In fact, the opposite: they begin to laugh when I ask how Cree Language relates to their enjoyment of school/school experience:

C: Cree Language - I didn't know how to read, how to write it...

E: Me too.

C: because I would never listen to the teacher, I would always fool around, didn't like doing Cree Language work, I don't know why. I didn't know how to read it, that's why I didn't want to do the work.

E: Me too

S: Because you were both in Cree from pre-K all the way through grades one, two, and three. Did you know how to read and write back then when you were little - in Cree?

C: Yeah, one, two, then I forgot. In secondary, that's when I forgot - I forgot all of it. How to do it again. Kept on asking me, "what's this, what's that?" I don't know. (PC & E #1, p. 14)

Participant D left the community after high-school because she wanted her child to be educated in English:

I left right after high school. I wanted my child to learn English as much as possible, then at the end of my (stay) I realized that (child) didn't want to lose Cree. And I guess the reason why (child) kind of like threw little tantrums (laughing) at me, telling me, "why do I have to speak English and I can't speak my Cree?" (PD#1, p. 1)

The CLIP did not affect this young woman's school experience because she attended Elementary school before it was implemented. As a parent she talks about 'balance' and that traditional and contemporary life are equally important. She feels that there is an over-emphasis on Cree in the school now and that the students aren't achieving the mastery of English or French that they need to be successful. She gives examples of friends who have gone to post-secondary institutions in the 'South' for higher education and training. When they return to fill positions in the community, they cannot stay because they or their children are unhappy with the school situation. She identifies bullying and the language policy as the major problems. (PD#1, p. 6)

Procedures followed to respond to attendance and socio-emotional difficulties affected Participants C and E. They both experienced difficulties that will be related in the following section and were, "expelled for the whole year" (PC#1, p. 8) and "expelled for the school year." (PE:#1, p. 10) Both relate that this is the message that their families

received from the school, but there is a problem with the terminology. Expulsion is a legal procedure that requires the approval of the school board members, a well-documented file, and the collaboration of other institutions such as social services, the police, youth protection, and/or youth court. This procedure is rarely applied and only in very exceptional circumstances involving the personal safety of the student and others. The alternative to expulsion, and the likely action by the school, is suspension. Suspension is, under law, a temporary measure (three to five days) intended to provide “time out” in order for problem-solving and intervention to take place. There is confusion in these two cases and it seems unlikely that a formality was followed. However, the exact proceedings are not known. What we know is that two young people were sent home from school in their early teens and did not attend high-school again.

Participant C later attended Adult Education classes in another community after making an attempt to re-register in her home high-school. She had been out of school for two years and had been in Secondary II when she left:

C: ... And I tried to register this year and they told me that I was too old to be in Secondary II. And (a former teacher) told me that they weren't supposed to, ... well, they supposed to put me in Sixteen Plus, but (teacher) told me that they're not supposed to do that. Cause I almost finished Secondary II. I was in (teacher's) class in Math.

S: I remember that.

C: And I told (asked) him to talk to them but I don't know if he did.

S: When you tried to register yourself was that at the beginning of the year?

C: Yeah

S: How old were you then?

C: Eighteen.

S: Ok.

C: They said I was too old for Secondary II.

S: Can you tell me, see if you can describe to me why you wanted to register this year.

C: Cause I wanted to go back to school. And I regret quitting.(PC#1, p. 9)

She continues to tell about her accomplishments in Adult Ed. that have been reported earlier and repeats the word “regret” twice in her final statement:

I’m happy that I went back to school. I regretted quitting school for two years. I would have graduate this year, but ... I regret it. (PC#1, p. 9)

An explanation of the term “Sixteen Plus” is necessary to the understanding of this student’s and others’ situation. Sixteen Plus is a two-year individualized occupational program open to students aged sixteen or over who do not wish, or for various reasons are unable, to complete and graduate from high-school in the academic or vocational stream. Students in this program usually follow functional Math and Language instruction while receiving a variety of work experiences through community placements and in-school training. At the end of the two-year period they leave school with an Attestation of Skills. There are many reasons why 16+ is a great alternative for certain students, but this path does not lead to graduation and post-secondary education.

Young people of this community who have been out of school and wish to re-enter are obliged by school policy to register in 16+ if they have turned 16 since leaving. These students usually regret leaving and want to finish school and graduate and don’t see 16+ as

an option.

There are other experiences of attempts to return to school:

S: Was there a time when you tried to get back into school?

B: No - Yeah, here.

S: Ok, and what happened?

B: They said I was too old.

S: How old were you?

B: I was sixteen.

S: Did they give any other reason, or,...?

B: No,

S: Would you like to go to school here?

B: Yeah. (PB#2, p. 2)

She relates that she was supported in her attempt to return to school by her Mom and her boyfriend, but her meeting with the Vice-principal was disappointing:

B: He said that I was too old for Secondary II. And he said I would be in Sixteen Plus if I try to go there.

S: Do you still have the same goal that you had in grade six - you would like to complete secondary and go to college?

B: Yes. (PB:#2, p. 3)

When this young woman first approached me with an interest in this research, she told the story of her attempt at re-registration. At that time she related that she had not only been told that she would have to register in 16+, but she would have to wait for a place to be available. During our last meeting together I confirmed this with her:

S:(reviewing what happened) and they told you that you could go back into Sixteen Plus if an opening came up.

B: M-hm. I just said, "No."

S: Can you tell me one more time why you said no to Sixteen Plus?

*B: Because I wanted to finish my education. And I didn't want to get stuck there. Because people - (a close friend) was in Sixteen Plus. That's why he dropped out of school. ... Even his brother. That's why I didn't want to go to Sixteen Plus. I wanted to finish my education.
(PB#3, p. 4-5)*

The practice of limiting the re-registration of people over the age of sixteen to the Sixteen Plus program, if there is an opening, effectively bars any student who wishes to continue her education in the youth sector from doing so. These students are sometimes advised to register in the Adult Education program and some try it for a while, as Participant C did, but there are many reasons why this avenue is not successful for them. Independent study modules designed for adults are not appropriate for most sixteen-year-olds. It's not high-school.

The situation of young people who have been denied a second chance at high-school in the recent past may be contrasted with the experience of the eldest of the five young women of this study:

I dropped out of school twice: 1993 (16 years) and 1996 (18 years), and I failed twice: 1991(14 years) and 1992 (15 years). Those are the years at that time I faced the peer pressure and exploring drugs and alcohol, and when I had my child in '96 turning 19 years old. I returned the following year when my child was a year older but it took me awhile to get my diploma (23 years old). I was not the only one that faced teenage pregnancy in my class. There were others in my class. It was not too complicating for me to get back to school in order to get my diploma. I guess I was one of the few lucky ones. (PD: email message June 3, 2006)

Ten years ago the practice of barring those who had turned sixteen from returning to school was not in effect. This participant admits in her interviews that her path was not ideal:

Yeah, I think it has to do with peer pressure in school. When I got influenced by - when I got introduced to alcohol and drugs, you know, when I dropped out twice. So when I look back now it's like, "Why did I do that? You know? Why did I went through that?" I could have been, have a nice home, or, you know? For my child, and it's just ... But I don't have regrets. (PD#1, p. 2)

This young woman is now pursuing her goals of higher education and a professional career with a strong sense of her own worth and without regrets. High-school graduation, however late, opened those doors for her.

Another administrative structure encountered by some of the participants is called Individualized Pathways for Learning (IPL). There are two IPL models offered in this school board: one is commonly called 16+, as described above, and the other is a two-year program at the beginning of secondary, commonly referred to as IPL. This program is intended to offer individualized support to students who do not pass grade six and have reached age 13. These students are required to attend secondary school. The objective of IPL is that the students will receive the remedial help that they require and be reintegrated back into the mainstream; most desirably into Secondary two. Participant B has already described her pride in passing to Secondary II after only one year in IPL. Her success is probably the exception, not the rule. IPL is problematic. It is a structural model that does not achieve its goals and, in this system, becomes a dead-end for many students. The placement is highly stigmatized and poorly understood. Among the students it is known by other names such as 'Idiots Please Learn'.

Although she was not placed in IPL herself, Participant A has friends who were affected by this placement and she is concerned:

A: Well for me I think it's not good for the students. I just think they're, I don't know, left out, or they're just going to stay there, like they're not going any where. They're just going to stay in IPL.

S: That's how they feel?

A: Yeah. A lot of people that told me, who went to IPL, that they didn't really like it. I don't know, they felt dumb or something. Maybe because it's not explained to them well. It's not explained to them well because, I don't know, some times I feel that the school is just lazy - lazy to talk about it. (PA#3, p. 3)

The Passive Role of the School

As the participants in this study so frankly and openly spoke to me of their experiences and the events leading to their disengagement from school, the images played out in my mind *in the setting* of the various schools that they had attended. The schools provided the stage. On this stage were carried out negotiations for power and status in the social realm utilizing teasing and relational bullying and, at the intrapersonal level, struggles for emotional security and personal integrity.

Teasing and Relational Bullying: When asked what was most important to her in elementary school, one participant named family, her after-school sport, and “To be respected. To be respected by friends and my classmates. Not to be judged.” She illustrated her statement with the following example:

Like, they used to tease people who I hanged out with who were my friends, my other friends outside of school. They used to say stuff about that, how I write sometimes. They picked ... even who I admired, I don't know, who I respected. Even the teacher. They used to say stuff about me because I respected that teacher. They used to say, “how could you

.....?” *Aww (disgusted). They used to say stuff about that.* (PA#1, p. 5)

This young woman excelled in her after-school sport and had a group of friends who also participated in that sport who were not her regular school friends with whom she had been friends since early childhood. She also described how the school friends tried to discredit her achievement in her sport and her new friends by putting down the sport itself. She returns to this theme twice: friends pressuring her because she liked a certain teacher and had other friends or interests. She believed that the adults, parents and teachers, were not aware that the teasing and manipulation were happening. She also did not confide in an adult for fear of reprisal or losing friends:

No, that’s my best friends. Then, ... not adult. I couldn’t speak to an adult. Maybe if I did, ... if I spoke to an adult, she, like my Mother, if I spoke to her, she would confront the parent and talk to the parents of the children who teased me, and they would talk to their children and they would say stuff about me. (PA#1, p. 6)

Another participant did tell her teacher about the teasing that she endured in Elementary school and was advised, “ignore them.” This did not cause the other students to stop teasing and she often stayed home because of it. (PC#1, p. 7)

When Participant A chose and excelled at a different after-school activity than her regular friends, they resented her achievement and new group of friends and made her the object of their gossip and teasing. Participant D presented the acts of social control that most troubled her in high school and her theory about the reasons that people participate in these acts. She named them “rumours, gossip, jealousy, and judging people” (PD#1, p. 5). Her unhappiness as the object of gossip about her family was presented earlier:

I think myself it has to do with skills. I don’t know if it’s sad, but if someone has skills like really good skills or talents, they kind of like, I

don't know, "oh she's better than me" or "you're better than me" or, - people think like that. You know? Think like that. I kind of have that impression, um, how do you say that - intimidated. People intimidate people around here. I think that's why they don't want to express themselves really or overcome their shyness. (PD#1, p. 5)

For the young women who participated in this study the school was a site for intimidation: the quest for or expression of power, whether by teachers or classmates, at another's expense.

Personal Struggles: Two participants spoke of family difficulties that affected them emotionally. Their anxiety was expressed through their actions and choices and played out in school:

When I started secondary, when I was in Secondary I, I um, I started to act different too. I noticed that too. I remember that I, I wasn't, I don't know, I don't know what to say. I didn't respect my teacher. I don't know why. Maybe it's because I had problems in my personal life, I had family problems and my friends started the same thing. They said ... and I had this new friend who was kind of different from my other friends. She was different - kind of what I described the girls in elementary school that didn't respect the teacher. And I started doing the same thing too. Maybe it's because, maybe it's because I was sad. I was depressed. Cause I learned stuff in my family that I, that I couldn't, I couldn't. That's when I started, my grades were slipping, they were going down. And I only had a little, and even my teacher told me that I only had a little chance of passing, so I started trying again. (PA#2, p.1)

In Secondary II the depression returned:

Then when I got depressed I started skipping, started not trying to go to school. The more depressed I got, the more I skipped school - the more I didn't want to. Then I started to drink. I was so depressed. The more I drank, the more I wasn't sad. There were most times that I was happy. Then I ... I got pregnant. When I was about fourteen. When I got pregnant I was so scared. My heart was racing. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to feel. I didn't know what to feel. I started to tell my boyfriend. He didn't believe me at first. Then I went back to the hospital. My Mother was there. I was so afraid of her. I

was so afraid of my parents, what they would do - if they would kick me out, or, I don't know. I guess I thought they would stop loving me, or (PA#2, p. 4)

She continues by relating her decision to go through with the pregnancy and, “My Mom told me she would be behind me 100%”:

Then I go through with ... had my pregnancy. I started taking care of myself, going to school, doing all of the work. Then my grades went up again. (PA#2, p. 4)

Difficulties at home, lack of communication and support, also affected Participant

D's school experience and her vulnerability to risky activities:

So, my parents were always working for their people. I remember when I was back, when I was in high school, I could always throw tantrums to my basketball coach, or to my teachers. I was - I got so angry one time - I was telling them that, “My family's never there! My family's never there!” their attention was, the community, you know? So I was kind of like, angry. I had a really big behavioural problem in high school (laughing). I got really mad. (PD#1, p. 3)

and in an earlier interview:

Well I dropped out twice, I think, while I was in high school. It was not, like, a choice for me. It was just - pressure I got from friends. ... And I got easily influenced by ... Like, alcohol is better than school. You know? So I kind of like, went that way. I kind of like went that way for a while and realized that it wasn't a really smart choice, smart move, I guess. But I listened to those people that told me that, “alcohol is more fun than school.” So I experienced that part and (PD#1, p. 2)

Although they do not suggest a cause, a similar pattern is reported by Participants C and E. Throughout the telling, C does most of the talking and E interjects periodically in Cree to say, “Me too” or confirm that she did the same:

S: What was your secondary experience like and how did you come to leave school?

C: From drinking, me. My friends always used to drink and I would

just follow them.

E: Uh-huh.

C: Go with them, or just, go smoke weed. And go to school stoned.

E: (interjects - confirms same for herself)

C: Didn't do any work, or get out of the room, walk around, get kicked out, ... that's when I started quitting school. From the booze and the drugs. I always used to go to school drunk. Sometimes my Mom sees me, would see me, in the commercial [shopping mall] . She said to go to school and I used to go to school but just walk around, don't go to class. That's all. The booze.

S: And did that start as soon as you started secondary, like, in Secondary I?

C: M-hm. Then it got worse in Secondary II. I just went to school, well, I went to school for two months then I quit. Then I left the community for a while. After three months I came back and my Mom registered me again then the teacher said that I was expelled for the whole year.

S: Did they say why you were expelled?

*C: I was drunk. I was talking back to the Principal.
(PC&PE#1, p. 7-8)*

Later in our interview Participant C tells me that she started using drugs when she was in Elementary. I naively ask, "How does that start? Are there kids with drugs in the school?"

M-hm. My friends. And I used to go with them and they used to set me up, go to school, and I ... start (PC#1, p.10)

Erratic attendance patterns accompanied the other difficulties that these students experienced, beginning in Secondary I (grade seven) and increasing into Secondary II, the last year of attendance for most. Participant E related that she was not attending in the mornings and that this is what led to her being expelled/suspended:

I didn't go to school in the mornings. Only in the afternoons I went to school. I didn't like the other class. I went home and the school called - that I don't go to school that much in the mornings, and skip. Expelled for the school year. (PE#1, p. 10)

Throughout the interview we also learn that, from grade three on, she went back and forth from her home community to another Cree community, the home of one of her parents.

She seems to have followed the same attendance pattern in both schools.

Returning to school after a personal tragedy required courage for Participant A. Her Mother suggested that she should try to go back because, "Maybe I would feel different":

Then I went back. I was so afraid. It was like the first time going to school. Going back to school. Even though I knew those people. They, also, ... they were new to me. And that day was so, it was like a long, long day for me. Because I was so scared, my heart was beating fast. Whenever I tried not to think about it, tried to focus on the work, I still thought about it. When I tried, like I couldn't take it. Then after that it got a little more, a little easier for me. (PA#2, p. 5, 6)

She was then the object of cruel gossip in the school related to the tragedy that she had endured and:

Then I started to get depressed again. Because then we heard more stuff. And I just couldn't take it. Even the teachers told me that I should keep trying then, that I'm, they told me that I was smart, that I could do it. There was a teacher told me that if there's anything that I want help with, that I should ask her, "Whatever you need, come by and talk to me." I tried my heart, my best, I tried my best, even though I couldn't do the work that I used to do. I tried so hard. I just couldn't keep my mind on task. My mind was in a different place. Then I didn't go back to school. I didn't try to go back. I couldn't go back because of some things that happened. I didn't, the school had finished and I didn't pass. Then I went back to school. I was still in the same grade. I'd gotten more depressed, the more my family, after my family, ... more family problems. Even though they tried to hide it I still, I knew, the more I got depressed. I started drinking again. Then I didn't, then I didn't go back to school after that. That's when I quit. When I quit school. I didn't go, I just didn't want to try no more. I couldn't take it even though that support was there. I just couldn't take it. (PA#2, p. 6)

In conclusion to this chapter, although many problems are not the result of direct action by the school, young people spend their days in school surrounded by professionals, sometimes enacting in various ways the pain and anxiety of their personal lives. The space itself is a player and cannot be regarded as neutral. By responding or not responding, by omission or commission, by seeing or not seeing, or by providing or not providing a safe place in which these difficulties may be expressed and addressed, the school is an actor.

CHAPTER SIX

Analysis: Connecting with Themes from the Literature

The messages conveyed in the previous two chapters are all about connection: to family, teachers, community, and peers; and connection is implicated at more than one level. First, it is contained in my overall objective to interpret the messages conveyed by discovering the connections between the statements of lived experience related by the participants in this study and the experience of *other* researchers and participants. At a second level connection (or its absence) becomes the *subject* on which certain outcomes such as school success, school leaving, or personal learning are predicated. To restate Patton's (2002) question about narrative analysis, "How can this narrative be interpreted to understand and illuminate the life and culture that created it?" (p.133).

The following examines the themes presented in Chapters Four and Five, linking with the themes from the literature. How are the experiences related? Are the findings consistent with other studies? Are there differences? How can the work of others help us to understand our own experience? The material is organized, as before, under the two categories of: 'Presentation of the Self' and 'The Role of the School'.

Presentation of the Self: the Personal Experience of Learning

Connection is implicit in each participant's story and presentation of her self: as a learner, as a child and young woman, and as a student in school. Henderson (2000)

explains that,

Within the vast fabric of energies, life forms, families, clans, and confederacies, every person stands in a specific, personal relationship to all the others. Thus, Aboriginal thought values the group over the individual and the extended family over the immediate or biological family. (p. 270)

The image of each participant standing “in a specific, personal relationship to all the others” is compelling and resonates with the elements of each person’s narrative: the importance accorded to family and the acquisition of traditional skills; the importance of *relationship* to all learning; situating one’s self in time by accepting the responsibility for the transmission of knowledge/skills to others; and concern for the wider community.

As the participants formulated images of themselves as learners, they spoke of their self-directed learning projects, their school-days, and the learning situations that were most significant to each. The significant elements identified by each, as one might expect, were present in all of the above-mentioned contexts and consistent, with a few exceptions, across the group.

Chase (2005) reports that interview-based studies are moving “away from a traditional theme-oriented method of analyzing qualitative material” (p. 663) and avoiding the identification of distinct themes across interviews and between individuals. Kanu (2002) presented the data from her ethnographic study as it clustered into themes of preferred pedagogical practice and socio-cultural mediators of learning, while stressing the importance of sensitivity to individual differences and cautioning against the stereotyping and essentialization of Aboriginal learning styles. I propose that the *fact* of commonalities is itself data to be recognized and also that the identification of *significant elements* of experience that are consistent across the group does not necessarily constitute

commonality. For example, although *family* is an important element of each person's construction of herself as a learner, the role played by family is complex and different from one individual to another and from interview to interview.

The significant elements of experience that have contributed to each participant's construction of her self-as-learner are elaborated in the following with reference to the themes in the literature. I will examine the influences of family, teachers, learning contexts, peers, and community, beginning with the role of the family.

The Role of the Family: When speaking of the important influences in their lives, or relating stories of important events, participants referred to 'family' more frequently than any other element of their narratives: immediate family; extended inter-generational family; family members as teachers, advocates, and role models; and the responsibility and joy of parenting. The anguish that results from 'family problems' and lack of family cohesion was also expressed. From these young women we learn of their need for family and of the importance of family to their own 'narratives of becoming'.

Graveline (1998) illustrates the construction of 'self-in-relation' and the situation of the individual in the world in an outward-moving spiral with the self in the middle and family in the next ring out from the centre, the rest of the spiral widening out to encompass next the community and ultimately, at the outside, the world. The juxtaposition of this image and Henderson's statement above help us to understand the centrality of kinship to the life-path of a young Aboriginal person.

Bergstrom, Cleary, and Peacock (2003) also discuss the importance of family support for young people in particular encouragement from parents and grandparents, role-

models within the family, and positive expectations. When families cannot be supportive, these authors warn, young people may look elsewhere for support and validation and be negatively influenced by peers. Three of the young women who participated in this study gave very frank accounts of their experiences with drugs and alcohol, acquiescing to the influence of their peers, during times when their families were experiencing difficulties or too engaged in other activities to offer support.

The extensive reporting of the importance of family in this study does not occur in other studies of this kind included in the literature review. For instance in the two studies found to be most similar to this (Bazyluk, 2002; Kanu, 2002) researchers and participants identified other key influences on school success with very little mention of family; limited to “family involvement/lack of family involvement” (Bazyluk, p. 149) as an influence offered by the author. Of interest is a study conducted in our community, itself part of a wider study, of the effects of media and popular culture on a group of pre-adolescents (Bajovic & Elliott, 2006). These researchers found that, although the young people were influenced by popular culture, “This study also indicated that family and community members influenced preadolescents’ future aspirations” (p. 180). These young people spoke of the importance in their lives of the traditional activities in which they were engaged with their parents and grandparents.

Although the role of family is not highlighted by the participants of other studies, the central importance of family and kinship ties to the young women of this study is clear in their own voices.

*I'm trying to pass on what my Mother taught me, trying, ... trying, ...
and I'm still learning as (my child) grows up. I don't know what I'd do*

if my Mother wasn't there. (PA #1, p. 9)

The Influence of Teachers on Learning Success: As each participant formulated an image of herself as learner, a particular cluster of traits for 'teacher' came into focus. As learners, in formal schooling and other less-formal settings, these young women experienced success and satisfaction when their teachers had the following four attributes:

1. They were clear about their expectations and firm about the standard of work and performance expected. We hear of the teamwork and level of performance demanded by Participant D's coach, the favourite English teacher who was 'strict', and the Elementary teachers who clearly outlined their expectations for the future.
2. They were able to socialize and have 'fun' with their students. Participants recall enjoyable social activities, games, and good humour when they recall their best memories of school.
3. They explained concepts very thoroughly and, where necessary, gave very detailed, step-by-step instructions. This is evident from, for example, the reports of work done with Elders as teachers or the teaching of traditional skills in Cree Culture classes, Participant C's report of her favourite Elementary teacher who explained things three times, and Participant B's report of the way her favourite Secondary teacher organized her English Language Arts learning.
4. They showed a personal interest in the welfare of their students beyond the academic requirements of their mandate. As learners participants were most receptive to teachers who built relationships with students, talking to them about their hopes for the future and offering guidance in the students' personal lives. Participant A's grade five teacher

and Participant D's coach are good examples of this kind of caring relationship. The students were encouraged to be confident in their own ability by the teacher/learner relationships.

Participant B provided an example of what can happen when one's integrity is threatened by a teacher. This student left school when her teacher told her that she was 'stupid'. This was a clear case of bullying made worse by the fact that the young adolescent was sent home to try to follow that teacher's program on her own and told to come into the school to attend her other classes. The teacher remained in the school and followed her regular duties with no change. Participant B paid dearly for the teacher's inappropriate behaviour and her story illustrates the power that teachers have and the potential for harm if it is misused.

Findings of other studies that investigate the role of the teacher in the education of Aboriginal students are in accord with the messages conveyed by the participants of this study. Learners consistently attribute their success to teachers who are emotionally supportive, have high expectations, respect them, use humour, have a clear direct communication style, scaffold learning with a gradual move to independence, and have a warm personal style (Barman, 1987; Bazyluk, 2002; Kanu, 2002).

Successful teachers of Indian children, whether or not they are Indian, are characterized by their ability to create a climate of emotional warmth and to demand a high quality of academic work. They often take the role of personal friend, rather than that of impersonal professional, and use many nonverbal messages, frequently maintaining close body distance, touching to communicate warmth, and engaging in gentle teasing. After establishing positive interpersonal relationships at the beginning of the year, these teachers become demanding, as an aspect of their personal concern in a reciprocal obligation to further learning. Highly supportive of any attempt students make, these teachers avoid even minor forms of direct criticism. Thus, these teachers are effective because of their

instructional and interactional style, and not because of their ethnic or racial group membership. (Barman, 1987, p. 13)

Optimal Learning Contexts: Optimal learning contexts for participants often presented aspects of *workshop* or *enterprise*. Lave (1993) posits a theory of “learning as situated activity” (p. 6) in which learning is an on-going process of change that occurs as a result of our interaction with each other and the objects around us in our physical, natural, social, and cultural environment. She speaks of learning as being “an aspect of everyday practice” (p. 8) and compares the theory of situated learning with the more conventional theory of “learning as decontextualized activity” (p. 6) that reflects the reality of most formal schooling. Lave supports the investigation of the nature of learning in real-life settings such as the workplace to compare this to the ways that learning is structured in conventional school settings. The theory of situated learning supports the concepts of *authenticity* and *meaningful context*.

The young women of this study know all about the experience of situated learning. When Participant A reminds us repeatedly that she is “still learning”, she speaks for all of us in the on-going process of change that is lived experience: Participant D’s lessons from life and sports; the learnings of others while engaged in meaningful activities with Elders and family members; significant memories of school such as Art class, cultural activities, drama productions, and project work; and our engagement in this study as an exploration of our own learning.

The overcompartmentalization of subject matter and content identified by Larose (1991) as a function of the Westernized education model may also be understood in terms of Lave’s decontextualized activity. Larose suggests that a more culturally-relevant

approach to the education of young people of Algonkian ancestry might utilize direct modelling and ‘abstract modelling’ or ‘vicarious learning’. These two modes are described clearly by Participant A in two very different contexts. She described her learning from an Elder as a combination of demonstration and step-by-step instruction (direct modelling) combined with the Elder’s stories of how she had taught her daughters and how they had loved to learn (indirect modelling). Not only was the student guided through the learning process, acquiring knowledge and skill; she also learned to value the act of learning and vicariously experienced someone else’s learning and thereby extended her own. The second context she describes is in the classroom of her favourite Elementary teacher who, during and between their other projects, talked to the students about related ethical issues and his hopes and visions for their future accomplishments. In both of these contexts, more is being learned than the job at hand and learning is extended and generalized outward.

Peers and the Importance of Belonging: Friendship and belonging were vitally important in the early adolescent culture described by all five participants. Participant B experienced the positive aspects of belonging to a group of friends who were mainly her cousins and other relations; listening to music, having fun, going for long hikes, talking about boys, and being at camp together. Her friends are not mentioned in relation to her school experiences or her construction of herself as a learner except as comrades who shared her enjoyment of Elementary school. They are benign.

Participants A, C, D, and E all reported extensively on the influence of peers on school success and their development as learners. In their early- and pre- adolescent years, beginning in Elementary school and continuing into Secondary, they were pressured by

their friends to take an oppositional stance to school. This pressure included mocking achievement, making fun of one's name, social isolation, gossip, discouraging cooperation with and admiration for a teacher, 'setting up' with drugs and alcohol, and encouraging 'skipping'. This kind of social control may be described in terms of the *culture* of the early- and pre-adolescent groups to which the participants belonged. It is possible that their friends who were said to be applying pressure to conform would also have described themselves as victims of the same influences. There is no evidence of the latter in the data but for the glimpse that we spy in Participant A's report about her Turtle Concepts experience. It seems that others experienced the same liberating effects as she; participating in group activities, greeting one another, and taking time to converse with others. We may imply that such a program was useful and needed for many young adolescents.

The kind of social pressure described by the participants is bullying in the form of emotional violence. Garbarino and deLara (2002) warn of the academic and social consequences for some students:

The damage can include (but is not limited to) shame, lessened self-esteem, impaired self-image, and learned helplessness. The basic components of learned helplessness are the beliefs that one has no control over what is happening, that a bad event will continue to recur, and that nothing can effectively happen to change the situation. As a result of these damaging perceptions, kids begin to make important choices that hurt them academically and socially, perhaps in ways that affect the rest of their lives. (p. 25)

The experiences and consequences related by participants are typical of those in the literature. For instance, many young people will not report incidents of bullying for fear of reprisals, as Participant A declined to tell her Mother or another adult because the bullies

might have found out and her situation would have worsened. Participant C was told by her teacher to “just ignore” repeated teasing and finally began to stay home to avoid it. Teachers are encouraged to acknowledge and clearly define bullying when it occurs, to engage with the perpetrator to stop the harassment, be vigilant for repeated incidents, and provide support to the victim (Garbarino & deLara, 2002; Olweus, 1993). Telling an eleven-year-old to “ignore it” is an abdication of adult responsibility and akin to ‘blaming the victim’. Participant D acknowledges her good fortune in the intervention of her coach who recognized that she was both victim and perpetrator in the bullying cycle and gave her the guidance and support to break the cycle.

The fact that the young women of this study dedicated so much of their attention to relationship; family, teachers, peers, highlights its importance to their construction of self-as-learner. To *belong* and to be accepted into a community is central to each person’s well-being and ability to move forward academically and in life.

Building Community and Supporting Learning: As young adolescents the participants felt the pull of two very different kinds of community. One of those was a community of peers that placed itself in opposition to the school and family aspirations for school success. These are the friends who exerted pressure to “skip”, use drugs and alcohol, reject the friendship of teachers, and disrespect the teachings of school and family. The culture of this adolescent community is comparable to the secondary cultural system described by Ogbu (1991) as a function of his cultural-ecological theory of school performance (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998). That is, the participants of this study and their peers are members of a wider cultural community that is an “involuntary minority” as described by Ogbu. There is

a sense that the school represents *other* or *not us* and is therefore to be rejected. The either/or message is strong: become a school girl or retain your membership in your community of peers and, by implication, your true identity.

The other kind of community that attracted participants could be described as pro-social, welcoming and re-affirming of participation in the school community or the wider community of learners. Participant A's rich description of her involvement in the Turtle Concepts project is a description of community-building. The students involved became a community as they moved through the program building self-esteem, communicating with one another, acquiring interpersonal skills, and bonding as a group. Becoming a member of this supportive community enabled her to pass a year that she had been failing.

Participant D credits her membership in a sports community and "having a team with me" for getting through high school. I observed on two occasions the impact of the community of Elders on Participants C and E: their enjoyment of the group, their interest in the talk and proceedings of the group, and their proper and respectful responses when included.

Participant E also describes her participation in the Elders' Winter Gathering as her most enjoyable activity of the past year. Participant B is supported by the community around her that is a network of kinship and friendship intertwined.

The existence and strength of supportive communities is important in the studies of resilience in children and adolescents. Waller (2001) supports the importance of interrelatedness and interdependency between individuals and their environments and the experiences related in this study are consistent with her presentation of resilience nurtured in ecosystemic context. That is, protective factors work across systems. The self-affirming

experiences and relationships experienced by membership in the supportive communities described by the participants served as protective factors against the kinds of adversity that challenged school success and self-esteem. In Participant D's situation, her sports community provided protected factors strong enough to support her achievement of High School graduation. As an elementary student with 'family problems' Participant A credited her after-school activity group with a helping role for herself and others "in tough times - to get their mind off some things" (PA # 1, p. 5). All of the participants benefitted from their experiences of supportive community and remember those experiences fondly.

The elements of the communal experiences enjoyed by the participants are also those which are associated with *social interest*: understanding, empathizing, sharing, taking responsibility, and being pro-active (Edwards, D., Gfroerer, K., Flowers, C., & Whitaker, V., 2004). They are found by these authors to be related to young peoples' ability to access coping resources and thereby become more resilient to the challenges in their lives.

The Influence of the School on Learning Success

The role played by the school in the alienation and departure of the participants has been described as both *active* and *passive*.

The School's Active Role: Actions taken by the school establishment, as perceived by the participants in this study, include: a) allowing students to be disrespected and bullied by teachers with either no consequences or consequences that alienated the students; b) removing a key compulsory (and culture-based) subject from the curriculum; c) not responding to the difficulties encountered by students in a key compulsory subject; d)

suspension and/or expulsion of students with no clear follow-up; e) denying access to school in the Youth Sector for young people aged sixteen or older; and f) placements in programs that did not respect the students' academic goals.

The School's Passive Role: In its passive role, the participants perceived the school to have failed to respond to relational bullying carried out by the peer group against three of the participants and was the site where students expressed obvious distress as a result of depression or psycho-social difficulties.

Discussion of the Impact of Formal Schooling on the Learning Successes of the

Participants: Response to the inability of the school to support the formal learning path of the five young women participants will return to the topics of *community* and *school culture*. Repeatedly in the literature, connection and relatedness are key to engagement. Findings and theory that resonate with the experiences revealed in this study will be discussed.

Osterman (2000) investigated how schools respond to “a basic psychological need, the need to experience belongingness” (p. 323) and asked, “do students currently experience themselves as members of a community?” and, “how do schools influence students' sense of community” (p. 324)? Osterman reports the important link between students' sense of relatedness and academic engagement, stressing the need for schools to enhance student engagement through community-building policies and actions. She recommends the following: schools should provide opportunities for frequent and positive interaction socially and in cooperative and experiential learning situations; schools should be the site for dialogue, discussion, and practicing respect for individual and group voice;

and schools should engage in teaching and modelling acceptance and interpersonal skills. Osterman finds that “there is relatively little attention to developing sense of community by enhancing peer relationships among students themselves” (p. 361). The need for a safe environment for individual and group expression, free from conflict, teasing, and other forms of social pressure was expressed in the studies reviewed by Osterman as clearly as it is expressed by the young women of this present study.

Students’ perceptions of *engagement* are significantly influenced by the institutional culture of school as reported by Brady (2005). The model of school culture employed by Brady operates on three levels that he identifies as *artifacts*, *espoused values*, and *basic assumptions*; briefly described below.

1. Artifacts: These are the ‘official’ administrative policies and procedures under which the school operates. They define rules of conduct for students and staff and all other operational and management guides.
2. Espoused values: These are the “actual day-to-day practices” (p. 296) that may or may not conform to official policy, but are understood to be acceptable and have become normalized over time. Brady refers to these values as “the corridor curriculum” (p.308). They mandate and sanction how people will be valued and treated within the system: students and staff.
3. Basic assumptions: These are “preconceived ideas as to how schools should operate” (p. 296) for example instructional paradigms, rationale for the grouping and placement of students, and the assignment of academic and social status within the institution.

Students who are engaged, as defined by Brady, are those who have a sense of

membership in the school community. They believe that their school encourages all students, they participate in extra-curricular activities at school, and they feel respected in school. The institutional culture of the school is welcoming and affirming for them.

Where the institutional culture takes on an *exclusive* persona according to Brady, it can “engage in administrative and pedagogical practices that effectively exclude individual students or groups of students from taking full advantage of the benefits of formal education and school membership” (p. 308). Not all students have the cultural capital to become full members of this kind of community and to negotiate their way to school success. This exclusion can result in “diminished academic achievement, diminished participation in the life of the school community, and its most extreme form, withdrawal from the process of formal education” (p. 308).

The school system of which the five participants were students could be described, in Brady’s terms, as having an exclusive culture. The young women were effectively marginalized by ‘espoused policy’ and ‘basic assumptions’ masquerading as ‘artifact’: the ‘aged 16 policy’ that denied re-entry, the improper use of suspension, the removal of an important Cree curricular element, and the refusal or inability to properly respond when students were harassed by teachers or other students.

Brady’s ‘basic assumptions’ are comparable to LeCompte’s (1996) “core of rather deeply held meanings constructed by the staff” (p. 137) of a school in a Navajo community. The context of LeCompte’s statement is her exploration of the failure of the educational community to implement educational reform in a “culturally compatible curriculum” (p. 127) model. The desire for educational reform in that community was

generated by concern about the high number of students who were ‘dropping out’ or not academically successful. LeCompte’s theory about the ‘core of constructed meanings’ as a barrier to change is also about cultural hegemony and the invisibility of privilege. I believe that it is important to the understanding of the experiences recounted by the young women of this present study. In LeCompte’s words,

These constructed meanings, which impeded implementation of a new curriculum, were variously shared by different members of the teaching and administrative staff. They created a “known world” (LeCompte, 1994b) of partial and biased knowledge which shaped their experience and made them impervious to contradictory or even additional information. I believe that part of the problem is that Anglos in general do not consider *their* beliefs and behaviors to be culturally specific (see Nieto, 1992). Therefore, the “known world” which Anglos in Pinnacle constructed was one in which Anglocentric notions of how the world works were held to be self-evident truths, not cultural constructions. (P. 137)

LeCompte’s summary of the ‘self-evident truths’ includes collective beliefs that question the importance and viability of the Navajo Culture and Language and assert the superiority of English, question the utilization of Navajo Culture and Language in the education of Navajo children, and question the right of Navajo and ‘outside’ people to critique or define their work. School staff also assume to know how Navajo parents want their children educated, claim that the demands of the state and district requirements do not allow them time for cultural adaptation, and believe that all children should be treated the same.

The latter, as described by LeCompte, is a discourse that, as a set of basic assumptions in a school, clearly defines who will thrive and who will not and who is in charge. In relation to the events and circumstances that shaped the educational outcomes of the five young women who participated in this study, I ask whether there was a similar underlying set of assumptions at work in the schools that they attended. There was

certainly the devaluing of the usefulness of Aboriginal Language and Culture in the curriculum and one perceives a willingness to exclude students who may, for a time, have required alternative or adaptive support to achieve their goals.

I do not assign responsibility to staff and administration exclusively for the exclusionary practices experienced by the participants-as-students, although school personnel were the agents of those exclusionary practices. The actions (or inaction) that are inherent in the narratives of this study are a function of a particular construct: the traditional Westernized mainstream formal education system with its “Anglocentric notions of how the world works” (LeCompte, 1996, p. 137). A system functions to perpetuate itself and the roles of its members are defined for that purpose particularly as they are themselves products of that system. It seems further evident that the ‘system’ encountered by the participants-as-students was a rather rigid, conventional, and unforgiving model. One acknowledges the existence of more ‘inclusionary’ models as described by Brady.

It is difficult to reconcile the practices reported in this study, and the institutional assumptions that those practices imply, with the stated philosophy of the school board under whose jurisdiction they occur. That philosophy, introduced earlier, highlights the uniqueness of the Cree child, the valuing of the Cree Language and Culture, the child’s entitlement to emotional and social support, and the child’s entitlement to Mother-Tongue instruction.

The question is, “Why is there such a profound disconnect between the stated and sincere intent of the people of this region, as they are represented by their school board,

and the reality of the student experience?” The words of Gregory Cajete (2000) as he offers his thoughts as an Indigenous educator are helpful.

We must examine our habitual thought processes. We all are creatures of habit. Institutions and organizations get into habits of behaviour because the people who run them get into habits of thinking. We have to examine those habits because we have been through the Western educational system and have been conditioned to think in a certain way about education, life, ourselves, the environment, and Indigenous cultures. We have to reexamine that way of thinking. We have to do it honestly even if it hurts. This includes thinking about things such as racism, sexism, and ageism. It includes learning things such as the battle that some Indigenous people have between being both the colonized and the colonizer, (p. 189)

The people who negotiated and achieved the dream of this Aboriginal school board spent their own school days in residential schools and/or boarding with non-Aboriginal families far from home and attending public schools in ‘white’ communities. They overcame homesickness and disorientation and strived to excel in an institutional culture that was created by Others - the only formal education system they had ever known. It was sincerely believed that a Cree education system, honouring and promoting the Cree Language and Culture, and ensuring academic success and a bright future for Cree children could be realized in this Westernized North-American-styled institutional structure.

The possibility that Cree young people, living in their home communities and immersed in their own Language and Culture, would not experience *community* in their home school was unforeseen by the early planners of this system. The alienation of the five young women of this study is not exceptional. As disengaged and marginalized students they are in the majority. The school board’s own statistics show that, for the school in my community, 67.3% of the students who enter Secondary School ‘drop out’ between Secondary I and Secondary V (grades 7-11). Most of these students are no longer

registered by the end of Secondary III (CPGP, 2004). These numbers do not include the students who have stopped going to school before reaching Secondary. An analysis of student data for the whole board from 1991 to 1998 showed a graduation rate of only 11.2% (CPGP, 2003).

A model is required of an educational project in tune with its community. Joe Duquette High School, an inner-city high-school for Aboriginal students in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, is described as “a contextualized response to a clearly articulated local need” (Haig-Brown et al, 1997, p. 169). I do not present this example as a model for a school in a remote Northern community to copy. It is an urban school. Its value is in the way that institutional culture is pragmatically and intentionally constructed to create a school community that will engage its members and advance their cause. To apply Brady’s (2005) model as a template, at Joe Duquette High School the congruence of ‘artifacts’, ‘espoused values’, and ‘basic assumptions’ is built into the system. For example, there is a code of ethics that governs all activity and interpersonal communication and applies to everyone. The outward signs of community include the presence and authentic participation of Elders; childcare for students on the premises; regularly-scheduled whole-school gatherings; consensus-oriented planning and problem-solving; active involvement with the geographic and cultural communities that ‘feed’ the school; active Parents’ Council with real influence; sharing of responsibilities within the school e.g. childcare, clean-up, meal preparation; openly democratic structures such as shared common areas and the absence of a separate ‘staff room’; and the validation of Aboriginal Language and Culture through daily use and instruction and communal celebration.

The school culture of Joe Duquette School accommodates the belief that lifestyle challenges and socio-emotional barriers to academic success have to be resolved first with an ecological approach that provides or accesses services to support and restore the individual and the environment around her. Students and staff strive to build a sense of welcoming and belonging in the school. This school provides a model in which day-to-day practice, policies and procedures, and basic assumptions converge to answer the needs of the whole person in a community of learners.

The following chapter presents recommendations for constructing an inclusive community of learners: a school culture that attends to the needs expressed by the participants of this study. The themes focus on issues of engagement between people and between people and the institutional culture. There is a need to acknowledge a nurturing, person-centered role for the school as well as an academic role.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Recommendations: Constructing an Inclusive Community of Learners

This chapter will begin with a story: an account of my early experiences with interviewing and narrative analysis. The lessons learned from those early experiences are related to my first and most important recommendation.

Some years ago I set myself the task of teaching each elementary teacher in our region to use ‘miscue analysis’ as a means of better understanding the reading processes at work in her/his classroom. My aim was to give people a tool that would inform their day-to-day practice. At that time I was informed by the writings of Marie Clay (1985) and Constance Weaver (1988). The notion of socio-psycholinguistics (Weaver) captured my attention and still interests me today.

My *modus operandi* in each classroom was the following: break the ice by reading a story to the whole group; ask, “Who would like to read to *me* now?”; take each of the volunteers to a quiet place in the school; explain the process and its value; and conduct the reading/interview/response activity with print materials chosen by the child from my ‘book bag’. Each session was audio-taped and in the evenings I completed the analysis and scoring. The next day the teacher would listen to the tapes and ‘walk through’ the process with me, trying the scoring and analysis her/himself.

I recall imploring each person with whom I worked on this project to use this

procedure in order to experience the two great benefits that I had discovered. The first great benefit, however painful, is the *self* one discovers in the tapes: the ‘teacher-self’; that repetitious, interrupting, not-waiting-long-enough-for-the-answer, manipulating, and controlling individual (I speak of the self that *I* heard). The second great benefit of this exercise is the *person* one meets in the form of the student: courageous or reticent, wanting-to-please, full of a myriad of experiences, possessing unique interests and knowledge, and vulnerable.

We rarely get an opportunity to listen to ourselves as we interact with our students and there is much to learn. On those first occasions of listening to my teacher-self I learned how I imposed myself at times and created a barrier to meaningful communication; a barrier that prevented the student from being the most important person in the room. That imposition may have prevented the student from demonstrating true ability and possibly engendered a sense of frustration or inadequacy. I also learned to monitor myself and to be aware of the dynamic at work in those exchanges: the balance of power. That old teacher-self could still be heard as I listened to the taped interviews of this study, but I also heard the monitoring, the stepping back, the longer waits, gentler prompting, or acceptance. In the words of Participant A, I’m still learning.

I encourage each person who works in a school to listen and attend to her/his own *relational voice*: that part of a communication that expresses the unspoken. It is the subtext that defines the relationship, values the Other, and invites mutual respect. My first recommendation is about how we may meet and come to know the *person* who is each of our students.

Build Connections: Listen

Throughout this research project I have wished that others could know the participants as I have come to know them. I wonder whether their school experience might have been different if they had been heard in the same way at school. *Listening* is more than hearing. In the vernacular when someone says, “I hear you” as we describe our problems it means that they understand what we are ‘going through’ and empathize. We need to hear students on that level and respond and Participant A tells us that it won’t be easy.

I don't think that kids, or the students, are not going to go to the teachers or the guidance, or the principal. They're not, they're not going to ... spit their guts out. They're not going to tell why they're doing that, why they're acting like that. I think they should try to, try to look for it. Try to talk to them, try to find out why. It's not like I, ... they want, I don't know, like they want to do it on purpose, it's just the way that they're trying to reach for help. It's not like they're going to go for it. It's not like they're going to go to the teacher and tell them why they're doing that. (PA# 2 p. 9)

The kind of communication conducive to authentic helping requires a climate of trust in a school culture that promotes security, caring, and respect. Discussions need to take place within the school among teachers, guidance, administration, and other staff about how student voice will be heard. Students need to be consulted. Some questions that may guide the discussion are the following. How will teachers and others learn about student experience? How can the school structure situations and conditions for students and staff to listen to each other meaningfully? What are the specific characteristics of trust and caring relationships that can be promoted in our school? How can helping resources in the school be structured so that they are more attractive and accessible to more students - so

that they *will* ‘go for it’? What changes to the bureaucratic, academic, and social structures in the school will be necessary to affect the level of connection and personal support required to engage **all** of the young people of school age in our town?

I know that most teachers think that, I don't know, that "They're that way". Maybe because the kids, the student has a problem, something like personal problem outside of school. I think they should try to talk to that student to ask why he or she is doing that. Ask why is she acting or he is acting like that. There's always a reason why a student is acting that way. (PA#2, p. 8)

Provide a Viable Re-entry Point

Young people who have left school and wish to return need a viable re-entry point. That is, a welcoming and functional arrangement that will offer them the best possible opportunity to succeed. Those who have been away and wish to continue their education are often between the ages of sixteen and eighteen and, as the experiences related in this study illustrate, the only options open seem to be the two-year occupational program of 16-plus in the youth sector or adult education night-school. Young people of this age who have experienced academic and/or personal difficulties in the past are best served by an educational structure that includes personal and social support, opportunities to socialize, guidance services, and an interactive learning experience within a comprehensive curriculum. As the young women explained in their interview narratives, they regret leaving and they want to complete their dream of high-school graduation.

A multi-level class group with flexible and individualized timetables would meet the needs of these students. The teacher responsible for the group would be a generalist and would work with other resources in the school to assess need and build an individual plan for each student. Students wishing to ‘fast-track’ some subjects would have that

opportunity and receive enriched instruction in areas of greater need. There would be the opportunity for 'flow' in and out of the group to join other groups where appropriate. Very important to the success of these individuals would be a process of self-monitoring of progress helped by the teacher, guidance counsellor, or other appropriate resource person. Student participation in all decisions affecting her academic plan would be necessary. It is very difficult, no matter the resolve, to return to a closed system like a school after being 'on your own'. Autonomy and personal growth must be respected to the greatest degree possible.

Provide On-site Childcare

One of the greatest difficulties facing some young women who wish to return to school is childcare. They often cannot afford to pay the fees of an accredited centre and are obliged to accept less-than-reliable arrangements. This affects their decision to return and it affects their attendance and success when they do return. Inadequate childcare is also the reason that some young women leave school. On-site affordable accredited childcare would offer a further incentive for young mothers to return to or stay in school. It would also provide a dimension of 'family' and caring for others that would benefit the school as a whole.

Pedagogy: Examine Ways of Teaching and Learning in the School

Provide opportunities in the school for conferencing among teachers and between teachers and students to discuss ways of teaching and learning: what educational experiences have they found to be successful, fun, engaging, or memorable? What are the elements of those experiences? What suggestions do teachers or students have for a

different/new approach to learning a curricular segment? Learn to look with a critical eye and listen with a critical ear: teachers would ask themselves the question, “would I love to be a student in my class?” and students would ask, “would I love to have me as a student?” How can each become more actively engaged in the learning cycle?

As students the participants of this study favoured authentic and meaningful learning contexts. They valued teaching approaches that modelled, provided examples, utilized a group dynamic, supported learning in a gradual progression to independence, flowed across disciplines, and involved the sense that the teacher was genuinely interested in their work and their progress. When participants reported on occasions when they experienced a sense of accomplishment or satisfaction in school there was a caring and attentive (and often demanding) teacher involved. There was also a ‘multi-generational’ or ‘mixed-age’ aspect to some learning stories: working with an Elder or parent and teaching a younger sister or passing on knowledge to the next generation.

The messages about learning in this study support the recommendations that the school find ways to incorporate more interdisciplinary project- or workshop-oriented learning situations, involve family members in learning activities, encourage teachers to realize their important role and take a personal interest in their students’ achievement, and inject fun and humour into classroom activities.

Promote a Stronger Traditional and Cultural Presence within the School

Hold consultations with groups of Culture and Language teachers, students, extended family members, and other interested people. Discuss issues such as how to offer a traditional cultural curriculum within the construct of formal schooling. Can this be

done? Are the present programs mere tokenism? What are the community's expectations for the school in terms of the transfer of Traditional Knowledge? What aspects of local Culture are important for the school to respect and how should the school pass these on to the students? How can the community enhance a cultural presence in the school and how can the school serve the community's objectives for culture transmission? Discuss how each can help the other.

There is more to this discussion than the content and delivery of the specific Language and Culture curricula. What is the cultural imprint on all aspects of school life? Do math and geography teachers (for example) understand the strength of kinship ties in this community? Perhaps grandparents and other relatives may be invited to classes at regular intervals to review the students' learning from 'the curriculum'. They may be invited to enrich the curriculum with their own knowledge and accounts of life-experience.

There is a need to blur the lines between community and school and to conduct discussions about how to do that. We must remember that the construct of formal schooling that exists in our community has evolved over hundreds of years within a different culture. It carries the imprint of that culture in many invisible ways and serves and favours people of that culture well. It is clear that the people of this community want their children to benefit from "a formal education system which prepares their children for successful participation in both Aboriginal and mainstream societies" (Pashagumskum, 2005, p. 44). Discussions about 'blurring the lines' may start with the question, "How will this community put its own mark on the school culture so that it serves all of the young people of this community well?" My offering of this question implies the inclusion of the

many young people who share the experiences of alienation and marginalization expressed in the narratives of this study.

Construct a Pro-social Environment: Respect the Person and Build Community

One of the young women I interviewed described how, since leaving school, she had gained in self-respect and confidence.

Well I learned, ... I think what I learned was that I should respect myself - that I can do what I want to do. I used to be, I don't know, kind of shy - not that shy, but a little shy. Like when, ... it's not that long ago that I just started to do stuff. (PA#3, p. 4)

She described how she once worried about what other people would think and how that worry affected her participation in various activities. As a young adolescent she had struggled with the dilemma of wanting to be accepted by her friends and wanting to do well in school. The two appeared to be mutually exclusive.

Another participant clearly defines the kinds of social pressure that prevent people from reaching their potential.

The other thing I wanted to share is that I think we'd be more advanced if there was no rumours, gossip, jealousy, and judging people. Those four topics generally. Big issues, you know. Like their energy is mostly in that. Instead of being positive, to build, you know. I don't know, I just believe that someone sends a message out there not to put energy mostly on positive things. (PD# 1 p. 5)

She confirms that the hurt she endured from gossip is one of the reasons that she dropped out of school and continues by discussing her theory that intimidation, motivated by jealousy, is used to control people in and out of school.

The latter comments are about the pressures one experiences from peers and Participant B offers very clear advice based on her experience with teachers.

To the teachers, to tell them what they should do to their students. Just respect them and don't embarrass them in front of their classmates. (PB# 2, p. 5)

All of the participants found that school was not a secure place in which personal integrity and self-esteem were protected and enhanced.

These young women may have been helped to stay if their schools had recognized the existence of bullying and coercion and if steps had been taken to reduce or eliminate this stressful climate. I recommend that schools critically examine their own psycho-social climate and design policy that clearly outlines how to identify bullying in its various forms; verbal, physical, and relational; and what steps will be taken if it is observed or reported. A good way to start is with one of the many student and staff surveys available. This will help to identify *which groups* are most vulnerable, *where* in the school bullying is taking place and *when*, and *what types* of bullying are most prevalent in the school. The survey results will help to define what actions should be taken and how policy will be designed.

I also recommend that discussions take place with groups of teachers, guidance personnel, and interested others around the goal of implementing pro-social education in the school. The focus of this education may be the areas of greatest need indicated by the survey: age group, gender, type of bullying, or other. A successful example of this kind of education was richly described by Participant A when she spoke of her experience with 'Turtle Concepts'. Based on her report a successful program would enhance self-esteem; challenge young people to 'stretch' their abilities by learning and trying new things in a secure setting; teach and model appropriate social skills; incorporate fun/playfulness; and

take a ‘wholistic’ approach of developing body, mind, and spirit within community.

Yeah. Try to find ways to keep the students more interested. Have fun with them. Try to be their friend, I don't know, I think that's important. I think that's what they should do. I think it helped a lot when I went to school; that the teacher should try to be like a friend to them. (PA#3, p. 3)

Provide a Broad Spectrum of Opportunities for Self-expression

There is more than one way to communicate. The kind of “I hear you” listening described in the first recommendation does not have to be auditory. Participants at various times expressed their enjoyment of drama, writing, visual art, the production of useful and attractive items, and movement in the form of sports, snowshoeing, and other physical activity. There are many ways to communicate one’s identity and emotions and schools usually offer a rather limited choice. I recommend that students be offered many options to explore and many media through which to say, “This is me. Here I am.”

Participants particularly emphasized their enjoyment of writing. Authentic writing opportunities can be encouraged when students are reticent to express themselves orally or face-to-face. Procedures for exchanging written communication with student counsellors or key teachers can be built into a student’s support plan or written exchanges through journals or other means may take place. Public message boards in the school may also provide a forum for those who wish to voice an opinion or post a piece of writing, favourite poem or song lyric.

A range of alternative modes of expression may be offered in a school in a variety of ways. Students and teachers may attend after-school or lunch-hour workshop sessions to learn about and practice, for example, dance, movement, drama, story-telling, drawing,

painting, traditional creative arts, different writing genres, calligraphy, singing, drumming, other musical instruments, construction with wood or any other media, and so on. Students who wish to do so should be allowed and encouraged to express/illustrate/demonstrate their learning in alternative ways. Staff should be allowed to benefit from professional development about multiple intelligences and explore alternative ways of learning and assessment with their students. The five young women of this study expressed a remarkable range of learning interests and an enjoyment of a variety of expressive modes. We should follow and learn from their example.

Create Opportunities for Reconciliation and Change

This recommendation relates to what is usually called ‘discipline policy’ in schools. It is the last recommendation and in this and all the others I hope that a movement toward an inclusive school culture as described by Brady (2005) can be discerned. The statistics shown earlier indicate clearly that a great percentage of the school-aged population in this community is not in school. Although the participants of this study report that their learning continues in significant ways, a common desire to finish school is expressed. All of these young women found themselves on the outside because there were no systems in place to satisfactorily resolve conflict and support personal healing and resilience. They very frankly detailed experiences with drugs and alcohol, opposition to school authority, absenteeism, truancy, and the pain and anxiety that resulted from family problems and tragedy. They also reported the barriers thrown up by unfeeling school staff.

Waller (2001) writes about *risk* and *protective* factors in systems. I am uncomfortable with the term ‘at risk’ as it is often used to imply an inherent attribute of

certain individuals. I support the term in relation to systems as it is used by Parsley and Corcoran (2003), that is, the at-risk student is “one who operates within a system, whether the family, community, or school, that discourages him or her from succeeding academically” (p. 84). Waller discusses the various stressors that are risk factors within systems and she also identifies the protective factors within family, community, or school that may off-set those risk factors. Waller presents an ecosystemic theory of resistance that is useful and hopeful in the context of this recommendation: a protective factor in one system can reduce the impact of risk factors in another. Participants have described how supportive and caring teachers have influenced them and, in the case of Participant D, affected her ability to finish school. How can we build more protective factors into our school system?

The first step is to keep the students *in* the system so that their difficulties may be mediated through positive action. A safe and tolerant environment must be provided where people can act out their personal struggles, be respected, have their pain recognized, and receive help. At the moment the school’s only recourse in response to some students’ distressed behaviour is suspension. That is because there is literally no *place* for them in the school. This is not a criticism of the people in the school, it is a statement about the way that *school* in our community is structured. That structure does not reflect the reality of this community. In this community there is no viable infrastructure to support young people in distress. Their best hope is that the school will orient itself to accept a ‘healing’ function.

I recommend that a space be designated in the school as the safe environment

described above and staffed with teaching and counselling personnel. This would be a closed area that would function much like the 'in-school suspension' models that exist in other places. The primary functions of this space would be to provide respite from personal crisis and to support the student in a personalized process of reintegration. The reintegration plan would focus on psycho-social needs and academic needs, the greater need taking precedence. Participation in this program could be both voluntary and by placement according to criteria identified by school policy. The duration of stay would be determined by need: days, weeks, or months but all placements would be temporary, the objective being eventual autonomous participation in the life of the whole school. The student would be involved in all decisions and participate closely in a gradual reintegration plan. The tone of this centre would be nurturing, encouraging, and incrementally challenging. It would reflect the elements of pro-social development presented in the section above. Participants in this program would continue to be monitored and supported as needed after reintegration.

Whether a plan for a reintegration program is adopted or not, the stories of school experience described in this study indicate the need for a process of reconciliation. When there has been an 'incident' or conflict between a student and a staff member or between a group of students, a mediated meeting between the parties will often affect 'closure' to the incident and prevent further clashes from occurring. The participants' reports identify the importance of building connections between teachers and students and the need for more positive relationships between students. Properly mediated sessions of reconciliation will contribute to building these connections and positive relationships and at the same time

encourage healthy personal growth and the understanding that every act has its consequences.

In Summary

The recommendations made here are specific to place: the schools that the young women of this study and I know in this region. These recommendation are meant to respect and further advance the intent inherent in the Philosophy of Education of this school board.

Five participants is a small number. I would not presume the implementation of change in any system based on the experiences of five people were it not for the fact that the statistics of this organization indicate that there are large numbers of young people who are similarly alienated from school. The advantage of the small number of participants in this research study is in the quality of relationship that was privileged by the luxury of time available to us all of which resulted in the richness and depth of the narratives and thoughtful responses. In the statement of purpose for this research I asked, speaking about the young women who are the participants, “How can their stories inform practice?” Others *should* benefit from the thoughts and experiences expressed by these five. They shared what made them strong in the face of adversity and their stories pointed the way to measures that may build resilience for themselves and other young people. I will end this section with one more comment about resilience and the above recommendations.

Everyone loves a Cinderella story whether it be about the girl who married the prince, or her Algonkian counterpart, Little Scar Face, who triumphed over the persecution of her selfish and cruel sisters and won the admiration and love of the great and powerful

Invisible Being. We are meant to learn that adversity may be overcome by sheer determination and goodness of heart, but of course Cinderella had help in the form of her fairy godmother (and in the Disney version many cunning and resourceful animal friends), and Scar Face was helped by Mother Nature herself. The help of others is important to the accomplishment of any challenge, as the narratives of this study testify, but so too is goodness of heart as it is manifested by openness and the ability to relate to others - *connectedness* as they are termed in the resilience literature (Edwards et al, 2004). These are the qualities that may be nurtured in the school environment suggested by the recommendations offered in this chapter.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion

This study sought to understand the lived experience of disengagement from formal schooling of five young Aboriginal women in a mid-Northern community. The research was motivated by earlier encounters with other young women who were alienated from school and wishing to re-engage. Knowing that there were many more who shared this experience, I wished to have the luxury of *time* to engage people in conversation and allow their stories to emerge in a context that would permit a greater understanding of each person's reality.

As each young woman's story unfolded a *self-as-learner* took shape; an identity formed by learning experiences in and out of school. The personal histories of learning shared by the participants enabled them and me to identify attributes of their best-remembered learning experience and successes and some elements that contributed to their marginalization and dis-continuing of school.

Key elements for each learner clustered around *relationship* and *connectedness*. By relationship I mean that optimal, memorable learning was often supported by a caring teacher or mentor, a respected Elder, or a favourite family member. Success in school or in other endeavours occurred when participants experienced connectedness: a sense of

belonging in a community that supported self-confidence, interpersonal skills, sharing, and common purpose. When meaningful relationship and supportive community were elusive, engagement was threatened. The rejection of friends, the frailty of family, the loss of community, coupled with personal stressors and the absence of a protective factor such as a key teacher or mentor often resulted in periods of dis-engagement.

Contexts of optimal, memorable learning were revealed in the narratives: characteristics of teaching-learning style, content, and situation. These characteristics were described as authentic, situated, experiential, guided, and often within a cultural context. The recommendations of the last chapter were shaped by the needs and preferences expressed by the participant-learners and by the institutional circumstances revealed in the narratives that affected engagement and dis-engagement.

Why is this research important?

I felt that I should share my experience that I had to go through in order to get my diploma. I thought it would be nice to help you and for me to find myself, especially since I'm in that stage of 'what do I want in life'. I'm glad I had these interviews. They helped me in a way to discover myself and they helped me to grow. (PD, email June 3, 2006)

I identify four important benefits of this study. The first three are specific to the individuals involved, the participants and me; and the place, our community and regional school system.

First, the process was helpful and enjoyable to the participants. We do not always have the opportunity to review the events of our lives in a secure context in which there is both the freedom to control the flow of information and a format that helps one to focus, as I hope was provided by the interviews and the guide. In his discussion of 'narrative truth',

Bruner (1990) reviews the work of social psychologists and comments on our capacity for *reflexivity* in viewing the past in the light of the present and to “turn around on the past and alter the present in its light” (p. 109). Bruner summarizes that “our past encounters may be rendered salient in different ways as we review them reflexively, or may be changed by reconceptualization” (p. 109). This is a hopeful and optimistic statement that supports the value of the narrative work done by the participants of this study. They very frankly and thoughtfully unpacked critical and sometimes painful incidents from their past in the light of the present project and offered those experiences, as they had lived them, for the benefit and enlightenment of others. Past experience was reconceptualized in two ways: first, it was *acknowledged* and validated by the telling and, in some instances, other outcomes were envisaged as a result of the telling for example a re-visiting of educational options; and second, through their telling some unpleasant and hurtful experiences were put to the service of good by informing others.

The second important benefit of this study is my own learning. I have already described in the last chapter, when speaking of my ‘teacher self’, the personal growth that accrues from the process of analyzing one’s communication with another. With each interview I became more aware of my role as the ‘listener’ and better able to allow the speaker her space. As an educator I benefitted greatly from this research - from the body of knowledge and experience of other researchers and theorists surveyed in the literature and, as was my hope, from the participants themselves. The lessons learned, as described in the foregoing chapters, will influence my professional decisions into the future. The *value* of stories of personal experience to the creation of successful and accessible learning systems

is one of the most important learnings for me. It is the reason that more activity of this kind should continue: in the service of practice informed by the intersection of the experiences of others and thoughtful analysis.

The third benefit of this study is in its value as a *medium* through which the voices of the young women participants may be heard by their community. In granting approval for this research to occur, the Band Council of this community stated its desire to be informed of the outcomes and to be given a copy of this report. Early in this work I stated that, although the large number of young people who are not in school is seen as a problem in the community, the voices of those young people are not heard. This is not by design. It is a function of marginalization.

There is a sense in which *voice* is related to *power*. When we say, “they have no voice” we refer to those who are not part of the decision-making process. Their opinions are not sought or valued and, the corollary of this omission, they often de-value their own experience as not worthy of the attention of others. Speaking out is an act of courage and by agreeing to participate in this research study, and in articulating their experiences eloquently, the participants of this study have spoken and provided another dimension to the discussion: lived experience. They have put a human face on school alienation as it is experienced in this community and perhaps this will serve to advance the agenda for change in new ways.

The fourth benefit of this research is that it contributes to the existing body of research about school-leavers, especially those who are Indigenous People and female. Other researchers may find it useful because of the findings or as a methodological

example. Educators may find that there is an echo of their own experience in these pages and be motivated to take a ‘first-step’ along their own path of inquiry. They may also hear familiar refrains in the participants’ stories and be inspired to work with the young people who they know to give voice to their *own* experience. There is as great a need also to provide an opportunity for young men who are marginalized from school to tell their stories. This is important work for further research.

In closing I quote Vanaja Dhruvarajan (2003) as she states, “An important first step in this project is the clear rejection of the discourse of inevitability that is debilitating any meaningful resistance” (p. 188). The discourse that surrounds the ‘dropout phenomenon’ in my community is influenced by the daunting statistics about retention quoted earlier - the knowledge of the sheer numbers of young people who are not in school. We are immobilized. There is a sense of sadness and inevitability when the topic is discussed. Vickers (1986) challenges us to rebel against “linearity, inevitability and laws” (p. 51) and states that, “the issue in much feminist research is to distinguish between things governed by “laws” (that is, which cannot be changed) and things which have only seemed to be universal” (p. 52).

Rossiter (1988) talks about the centrality of language in all meaning-making and, of discourse, “language makes up *discursive fields*: areas of thought or ideas bounded by language. Within these discursive fields are *discourses*: things that can be said - or not said - about a certain thing” (p. 213).

I propose and conclude that the point of departure, the clear rejection of the sense of inevitability in the public discourse around school disengagement can be found in the

language used by the young women who participated in this research study. That language is infused with an appreciation and desire for learning. It recognizes and seeks out opportunities. It expresses pride of accomplishment. It welcomes company. We may construct a new discourse: the things that we say and the ways that we think, if we listen.

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APPENDIX A

Invitation to Participate in a Research Project

Getting the Message: Narratives of Young Aboriginal Women Who Are School Leavers

An opportunity for young women of fourteen to seventeen years to tell their stories
Watchia.

My name is Susan Runnels and I am inviting your participation in a project that will study the early learning experiences of young women who have left school. The ultimate goal of the research is to understand your experience better so that I may learn how our education system can help you and others who may benefit from your telling of your story. I hope to include eight participants all together.

I wish to enlist your help to discover the characteristics of learning activities and learning situations that were helpful and enjoyable when you were a student. We will investigate your favourite ways to learn and the skills and knowledge that you have learned well and are most proud of. I will also ask you about leaving school: How did you come to leave and what is that like? What do you want other people like parents, friends, teachers, principals and the public to know about your educational experiences and choices? How might you have been helped to stay?

The research will be conducted with taped interviews. We will meet together three or four times for about one hour each time. This kind of research is called “narrative analysis”. Narrative is a person’s story and I choose to do this kind of research because I believe that your story is very important and not well known.

All information will be confidential. That is, no one will be able to identify your words because we will use a pseudonym, or false name, that only you and I will know. I will not divulge the name of any participant to the other participants or to anyone else.

If you would like to participate, or if you are a parent and you would like your daughter to participate, please call me to arrange an information meeting.

Thank you for listening to/reading this announcement. Susan Runnels **855-2563**.

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT'S LETTER OF INFORMATION

Getting the Message: Narratives of Young Aboriginal Women Who Are School Leavers

I am writing to request your participation in research that will study the early learning experiences of young women who have left school. The ultimate goal of the research is to understand your experience better so that I may learn how our education system can help you and others who may benefit from your telling of your story. I hope to include eight participants all together.

My name is Susan Runnels and I am a member of this community. I have worked in _____ as a teacher and education consultant for many years. I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education, Queen's University, in Kingston Ontario and I am conducting this research in partial fulfillment of a Master of Education degree. This research has been cleared by the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board, and also by the _____ Cree Nation Band Council.

I wish to enlist your help to discover the characteristics of learning activities and learning situations that were helpful and enjoyable when you were a student. We will investigate your favourite ways to learn and the skills and knowledge that you have learned well and are most proud of. I will also ask you about leaving school. How did you come to

leave and what is that like? What do you want other people like parents, friends, teachers, principals and the public to know about your educational experiences and choices? How might you have been helped to stay?

The research will be conducted with taped interviews and I will also make notes at the end of each interview. We will meet together three or four times for about one hour each time. There is an attached “Interview Guide” with sample questions that we will follow and you may add to it if there is a related item that you wish to address. The first two meetings will be to tape the interviews. Our conversation, your words and mine, will be transcribed - I will type them out - and I will read them and search for the important meanings and messages that will help to answer my questions about your experience of school leaving. During the third meeting, I will share my interpretations with you. You may participate in the process as much as you wish. This kind of research is called “narrative analysis”. Narrative is a person’s story and I choose to do this kind of research because I believe that your story is very important and not well known.

All of this information will be confidential. That is, no one will be able to identify your words because we will use a pseudonym, or false name, that only you and I will know. I will not divulge the name of any participant to the other participants or to anyone else. My notes of our meetings will be written up and maintained in a computer file on my personal computer. The taped interviews will be transcribed and the tapes will be destroyed at the end of the research study. None of the data (notes, transcriptions) will contain your name, or any other information that could identify you. All data will be kept in a locked box in a secure place. All efforts will be made to keep your identity

confidential. If you should wish to disclose your identity as a participant in this study (for instance by telling a friend), the possible consequences of that may be that other people in town will come to know as well. It is very unlikely that anyone outside of our community will ever be able to identify you as a participant.

There is one possibility that may necessitate the involvement of a third person: Our interviews will be conducted in English because I do not speak Cree well enough for such an important task (although you may always try Cree and evaluate my comprehension). There will be an “ombudsperson” who is prepared to interpret for you if you require interpretation for certain topics. She will be a person who understands the need for confidentiality and will sign a confidentiality agreement. I will choose a person who I know to be respected by young people in the community. This person will be available at your request if you feel that you need help to communicate with me or if you need to send me a message through another person.

After we have completed the interviews and the tapes have been transcribed, I will invite you to a fourth meeting: a ‘writing session’ to produce a short piece of writing of your own for the research. This writing would be as long or as short as you like and it will simply express what you believe to be the most important message about your experience. You may re-listen to your taped interviews or re-read the transcripts. You may write on your own or dictate to me. The rule of confidentiality would also apply to your writing piece. It would be included in my research report with your pseudonym. You do not have to do this writing if you don’t want to.

I do not foresee risks in your participation in this research. Your participation is

entirely voluntary. You are not obliged to answer any questions you find objectionable, and you are assured that no information collected will be reported to anyone who is in authority over you. Nor am I in authority over you. You are free to withdraw from the study without reasons at any point, and you may request removal of all or part of your data.

This research will be reported in writing in my Master of Education thesis. It may also result in other publications of various types including journal articles, professional publications, newsletters, books, and thus be available to the general public or as a secondary source for other researchers. Your name will not be attached to any form of the data that you provide. A pseudonym will always replace your name on all data and your identity will never be disclosed by any of these means of publication.

If you have any questions about this project, please contact me, Susan Runnels at (819) 855-2563, or my thesis supervisor, Dr. Magda Lewis at (613) 533-6000 ext. 77277. For questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, contact the Dean of the Faculty of Education, Dr. Rosa Bruno-Jofre, (613) 533-6210, or the Chair of the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson, (613) 533-6081, email stevensj@post.queensu.ca.

Sincerely,

Susan Runnels

APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS AND PARENTS/GUARDIANS

For: Susan Runnels

graduate student, Faculty of Education, Queen's University, Kingston, On

Title: Getting the Message: Narratives of Young Aboriginal Women Who Are School Leavers

I have read and retained a copy of the letter of information concerning the study "Getting the Message: Narratives of Young Aboriginal Women Who Are School Leavers" and all questions have been sufficiently answered. I am aware of the purpose and procedures of this study, and I have been informed that the interview will be recorded by audiotape.

I have been notified that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any point during the study and I may request the removal of all or part of my data without any consequences to myself. I also understand that all efforts will be made to keep my identity confidential.

I am aware that if I have any questions about this project, I can contact Susan Runnels at (819) 855-2563, or her thesis supervisor, Dr. Magda Lewis, (613) 533-6000 ext. 77277. I am also aware that for questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, I can contact the Dean of the Faculty of Education, Dr. Rosa Bruno-Jofre, (613) 533-6210, or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson, (613) 533-6081, email stevensj@post.queensu.ca.

Participant's Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THIS CONSENT FORM AND THE
PARTICIPANT'S LETTER OF INFORMATION AND I AGREE TO ALLOW MY
DAUGHTER TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Signature of parent/guardian: _____

Date: _____ Telephone number: _____

APPENDIX D

AGREEMENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY, OMBUDSPERSON

Getting the Message: Narratives of Young Aboriginal Women Who are School Leavers
Researcher: Susan Runnels

I, _____, agree to serve as Ombudsperson for the research study named above. My roles will be:

1. To provide simultaneous interpretation from Cree to English or from English to Cree during interviews between researcher and participant **if this service is requested by a participant.**
2. To communicate a message on behalf of the participant to the researcher, if requested to do so (e.g.: the participant is uncomfortable about some aspect of the process or wishes to leave the research and would rather not discuss the matter 'face-to-face').
3. To be available in the event that a 'disinterested third party' is required as a consultant by the researcher (e.g.: the researcher senses that she or the research process may have caused offence or discomfort and she wishes to discuss the matter with the ombudsperson and seek advice).

I agree that any information shared with me about any participant, the contents of the interviews, or any other communication pursuant to my role as ombudsperson will not be disclosed to any other person and shall remain confidential.

I am aware that if I have any questions about this project, I can contact Susan Runnels at 819-855-2563, or her thesis supervisor, Dr. Magda Lewis, 1-613-533-6000 ext. 77277. I am also aware that for questions, concerns, or complaints about the research ethics of this study, I can contact the Dean of the Faculty of Education, Dr. Rosa Bruno-Jofre, 1-613-533-6210 or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson, 1-613-533-6081, email: stevensj@post.queensu.ca.

I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THIS AGREEMENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY AND I AGREE WITH THE TERMS STATED ABOVE.

Signature of Ombudsperson: _____

Date: _____ Telephone number: _____

APPENDIX E

BAND COUNCIL APPROVAL, CREE NATION OF _____

For: Susan Runnels, graduate student, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario

Title of research study: **Getting the Message: Narratives of Young Aboriginal Women Who are School Leavers**

On behalf of the Cree Nation of _____, I give consent for the research study "Getting the Message: Narratives of Young Aboriginal Women Who are School Leavers" to be undertaken in the community of _____ by Susan Runnels.

The _____ Band Council has been presented with a copy of the research proposal and 'Participant's Letter of Information'. We understand that the findings of this study will be presented to the Council prior to dissemination.

We are aware that, if we have any questions about this research study, we can contact Susan Runnels at 819-855-2563 or her thesis advisor, Dr. Magda Lewis, 1-613-533-6000 ext. 77277. we are also aware that for questions, concerns, or complaints about the research ethics of this study, we can contact the Dean of the Faculty of Education, Dr. Rosa Bruno-Jofre, 1-613-533-6210 or the chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson, 1-613-533-6081, email: stevensj@post.queensu.ca.

Name:

Position:

Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Getting the Message: Narratives of Young Aboriginal Women Who Are School Leavers

Susan Runnels

First Interview

The first interview will focus on early school experience and out-of-school learning experiences.

Tell me about a skill that you have learned that you do well or that you enjoy doing.

How did you learn this skill? - become knowledgeable about this topic? Was another person involved? - develop further - context, kind of experience, e.g. text-based, demonstration, practice, artistic expression, etc.

Let's talk about school learning. Think about when you were in Elementary school. When were you most happy in school? What was that like - classroom, activities, materials, context, language, favourite memories of that time, e.g. subjects, teachers, events, ...

What is the best experience that you ever had in school? - develop - Under what circumstances did you accomplish something great?

What was important to you when you were young in Elementary school? - friends, family support, sports, bushcamp, reading, ...

What other information do you think is important about your early years in school?

Suggest sentence-starters: "When I was in Kindergarten ..."

"When I was in grade three ..."

Is there a relationship between the skill/learning that you described at the beginning of the interview and the early learning accomplishments from Elementary school? - way you learned it, your talent, the teacher-learner interaction ...?

Favourite ways to learn - favourite place in which to learn

Accomplishment you are most proud of? - expand

What role do other people play in your learning? Who do you go to when you need information or need to learn about something? Why do you think you choose these people as helpers?

Second Interview

The second interview will focus more on the experience of school-leaving and the path of disengagement.

In the last interview you described the good experiences you had in school. What about a school experience that was not fun? - develop: context, other people, setting, ... What could have made that experience better for you? Teacher? Principal? Other kids? Parents?

Please tell about how you came to leave school. (possible prompts - happen suddenly? over a long period of time? Did the leaving start at a particular time? "When I was in grade ..."

Relationships with teachers - positive , negative

Relationships with other students, administration, other school staff

What are the characteristics of a good teacher for you? How do you like to be treated by teachers? Say? Do? Language? Kind of classroom, learning experience?

Have you re-entered school at various times or tried to go back? How did that work out? How were you helped?

Do you have comments or thoughts about the Cree Language and Culture that relate to your school experience or yourself as a learner in general?

How do your parents talk to you about school? What do you think about that - how do you respond?

In your opinion, does gender have anything to with your decision to leave school? Is your experience special because you are a girl? Talk about the experience of being a female student in our school and in our community.

What would you like to tell people about your experience of school-leaving? - parents, teachers, principals, other young people and children,

How might you have been helped to stay?

School is not the only place for learning. What new skill/information have you learned lately and how and with whom did you learn it?

What are you most proud of at this time in your life?

Tell me a story about something that you have done recently that was really enjoyable - a lot of fun.

APPENDIX G

WHOLISTIC IMPRESSIONS SAMPLE

Feb. 7, 2006

Interview #1, Participant E

Wholistic impressions

These are my 'first impressions' of the information that you provided during our first interview. I would like to remind you that your identity is confidential in this report and all other written material. Your name will not appear. Please let me know if I have left out important information or if you have more to say about any of these topics. You may wish to reply to me by writing in your journal.

1. School-leaving

You told me about your time in Secondary I, missing a lot of school and being suspended for attendance and other reasons. You told me that you were expelled and then you didn't go back after that. Maybe the next time we meet you can tell me more about what happened.

2. Other school experiences

You attended school in two communities: _____ and _____. You were in _____ for a while in Elementary and again for part of Secondary I. You don't remember your elementary teachers except for your grade four teacher whose class you enjoyed very much. Maybe you can tell me more about this class and why you liked it next time we meet - or write about it in your journal. You are hoping to go back to school in _____ Adult Ed.

3. Activities you enjoy

You used to play broomball - that was your sport while you were in school. You don't play any more because there is a rule about school attendance for participation and tournaments.

Last year you participated in the Winter Gathering between _____ and _____. That was very enjoyable and you liked learning traditional things and helping out with the work around camp - getting water and gathering boughs. You also described the services in the main tent. When you are talking about the Gathering, I sense that there is something about bush life and being with the people there that is very special for you. Can you tell me more about that or write it down?

4. Special interest

Poetry is your special interest. You collect poems. You look for poems on the internet and keep a collection of those you like. You especially like poems about friendship and love and you sometimes send them to friends. You agreed to show me your collection at our next meeting and I'm really looking forward to that because I am also a poetry-lover! I will show you my favourite books of poetry.

Thank you for meeting with me and sharing some of your experiences and interests. Your story is important and I hope we have another chance to meet together. Please let me know if I have left anything out or misunderstood your words. I hope that you will write some more in your journal and perhaps some poems as well.