

STORIES FROM SCHOOL:  
CELEBRATING AND LEARNING  
FROM THE SUCCESS OF  
ABORIGINAL GRADUATES

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by  
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## ABSTRACT

Although the percentage of Aboriginal youth who leave school prior to completion is declining, it remains higher than that of non-Aboriginal students. The following research questions frame this narrative inquiry:

1. What are the stories of six Aboriginal students who graduated from an urban provincial high school?
2. What factors do they perceive as contributing to their success in completing an academic grade twelve?
3. What recommendations do they have for educators and schools, which would benefit current Aboriginal students?

The six participants are introduced with a narrative account of the interviews between the researcher and each participant. The researcher looked for commonalities that emerged from the participants' stories and grouped them into three broad themes: Our Environment, Our Relationships, and Ourselves. Within the themes the researcher commented on specific experiences and opinions expressed by the participants. A number of the participants' original stories are combined and included to allow their voice to authenticate the findings.

Participants revealed how interconnected relationships contributed to their academic success. Positive relationships with family, friends, and teachers were factors participants expressed most frequently as contributing to their success. Some of the participants, however, identified negative peer pressure, lack of family and school

support, and discrimination, but all participants showed ability to cope with adversity. The values and inner strength participants maintained emerged in their stories demonstrating the strong relationship they had with their inner selves.

A list of recommendations for high schools, generated by participants, accompanies each theme. Recommendations included recognizing and taking action toward issues such as discrimination, gangs, and lack of student involvement in school activities. Participants recommended alternative counselling and academic support programs. Recommendations aiding in the development of positive student-teacher relationships were generated from the descriptions of effective and ineffective teaching practices. The most significant recommendations rising from the stories of the six participants focused on building community in the school and bridging families and local resources with the school. Most importantly, participants acknowledged the need for schools to be conscious of the diversity in traditional practices, home life, and culture among urban Aboriginal students.



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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Connections

Throughout our lives we connect with others. Some of these connections form family units, while others form more formal groupings. As I reflect on the groups with which I have formed personal and professional connections, I have begun to see how a common thread runs, intertwined through the stories of my childhood, education, family, and into my career.

I am from a family of girls. When I look back through memories and snapshots of my childhood I am surrounded by a sister, numerous cousins, and aunts. My grandmothers are both great role models who lived through difficult times and the loss of their mothers. Upon reflection, my maternal grandmother became the matriarch of a strong line of women; she was a leader through example, voice, and reason. As children, we girls understood that we had choices as to what direction our lives would take. We were supported, given freedom, and encouraged to spend time with each other's families. We were loved always and scolded when needed. As we grew and distance separated us, some of us on the west coast and others on the prairies, we have remained connected despite the length between visits.

I am reminded of this connection when I look at a photograph I have. There we are: six little brown-eyed girls posing on a couch. How far our lives have taken us, how different we have become. Within society there are many definitions of success. I believe we are successful women, yet the paths we chose to take were different in high

school. Half of us on the couch chose to stay in school and graduate, the other half chose to leave school early and forge ahead. I am not able to say who had the more difficult path, but I do know the options and opportunities for the half who completed high school were greater. Given the greater variety of options for adults who have completed high school, I trust that if we had the opportunity to go back, none of us would choose to leave school early. Why were three of us successful in completing high school?

In examining our educational histories, you would see how we all made major transitions during the middle years, moving either from one city or province to another. Three of us girls from the photo, two sisters and a cousin, came together during our teen years and attended the same high school with another cousin. Of that four I was the only one who graduated. In comparing our high school completion to the national drop out rate for Aboriginal youth we fall into our respective place among the statistics identifying fewer than half of Aboriginal youth obtaining a high school graduation certificate (Statistics Canada, 1991). It is puzzling how four young women from the same family, going to the same school, could make such different choices. The girls on the couch grew up creating their own stories.

I am reminded of these choices in my daily practice as a high school teacher. I see my sister, cousins, and self in the students I teach. I have come full circle and find myself working at the same school I attended as a teen. The program I now work in was created to provide at-risk students an alternative to the mainstream semestered high school system. The program offers core curriculum subjects in a block timetable. The

students are referred to the program for various reasons, but essentially they are at-risk of not completing high school.

Looking around my class, I see young people from varied homes and backgrounds. Although the majority of the students are of Aboriginal ancestry, they come from both rural and urban communities; high to low income families; and supportive to virtually absent families. Each student has the choice each morning to come to school or not. I often see the role of our program as not only providing an alternative in education delivery, but also one that creates an atmosphere which models that of the extended family. We strive to provide the support, encouragement, and discipline young people need. As children, my family and I received this support at home, only to enter a fragmented environment that did not always provide the teachings we needed. In high school it was easy to lose yourself in the crowd, remaining anonymous. It was often difficult to initiate supportive relationships with peers and teachers when one travelled from class to class on an hourly schedule. It is apparent that schools have assumed a greater role in the raising of responsible citizens, but I am afraid that not all children respond to the same schooling.

There are many Aboriginal youth who are successful in completing high school. What I am interested in finding out is: What has helped them continue through the high school years? I have a number of suggestions I can offer through my own experience. For example, I find in my students that block schedules promote the building of relationships. Relationships grow as we get to know one another by spending entire mornings or afternoons working on one subject. Creating school communities where students, teachers, and the home have opportunities to build trust and communication

encourages student retention. In the program I work in the students host an annual Christmas potluck, they participate in student-led conferences where entire families come in, and can expect our educational associate to make contact with the home when teachers are unable. Providing opportunities for the school and home to communicate builds community. In proactive communities people have greater variety of choices. It stands to reason that students who are provided choice of subjects, schedules, and curricular material are more willing to follow through with commitments.

I understand through the experiences of my spouse and children that finding a passion for athletics or music, or expanding social relationships in school will attract and encourage them. When I ask my children about their school day they often tell me the story of what happened during band practice or recess. For the students who do not have positive stories, perhaps it is simply an inner drive that motivates them to return day after day, focused on a personal goal. I wonder, if I were to uncover stories of young people who choose to stay in school, could high schools and educators use these stories to provide other students support?

It was during the third quad of a school year that I decided to pursue this research focus. I began to explore it with my English Language Arts 20 class. They listened patiently as I went through a number of overheads citing Canadian drop out statistics and Aboriginal demographics in our hometown and province that I had prepared for a presentation I was to do at a university class that evening. I explained the problem, that although the percentage of Aboriginal youth who leave school prior to completion is declining, it remains higher than that of non-Aboriginal students (HRDC, 1995). They asked questions when they required clarification and offered their opinions

on why students leave school. Once done, I asked them to answer a question for me: What is the number one reason you are in school? As we chatted and waited for the bell to dismiss us for the day, a number of students dropped off the square of paper I had provided them for their answers.

I laughed at the first, “To get my parents off my back!” The next response, from a nineteen year old male I had known and taught for two years provoked a variety of questions. As I read his response, I wanted more details so I could piece together a story. He wrote: “I am sick of all the people telling me that I am not the school type. I’ll prove them wrong. Also I will be the first one in my family to graduate if I succeed.” We often focus on why kids drop out of school, and this student certainly had his share of obstacles to overcome, but I realized that there was so much to learn from the experiences that led him to stay in school. This brief response was enough to arouse a sense of wonderment. What is this young man’s story? Would students share their stories with me? Is it possible to celebrate and learn from the experiences of successful Aboriginal high school graduates through their stories? This led to the formation of my research focus.

### Research Focus

My research focus was the stories of Aboriginal students who were successful in completing high school. From this focus I developed three research questions. First, what are the stories of six Aboriginal students who graduated from an urban provincial high school? Second, what factors do they perceive as contributing to their success in completing an academic grade twelve? Lastly, what recommendations do they have for educators and schools, which would benefit current Aboriginal students?



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The six participants, who generously opened their lives to us, deserve special thanks. Their honesty and willingness to participate in this research is greatly respected. Thank you Martha, Donalda, Katherine, Lisa, Maggie, and Thomas. My children, Carson, Raely, and Jesse, have always known a mom who goes to school and it has not always been easy for them. Thank you for playing in another room so I could work, staying off the computer, and not complaining when I was away so many evenings and weekends. I want to thank you Mel, for the same things and add my appreciation for your support. Thank you for listening to my stories and sharing yours. I love you. I am grateful for the family and friends I have.



The purpose of this study is to create a better understanding of the factors contributing to the success of Aboriginal graduates. Narrative inquiry is best suited to answer the research questions because “people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, while narrative researchers describe such lives, collect stories of them, and write narratives of experience” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1991, p.121). The inquiry will result in a researcher’s journey of gathering and interpreting the stories of six unique individuals. These six stories will weave together to form a grand narrative of the research. A discussion of participant-generated recommendations for the retention of Aboriginal students in urban secondary schools will conclude the study.

I believe a narrative inquiry of recent Aboriginal graduates contributes to the development and evaluation of current and future retention programs in urban high schools. The research provides a base for a plan of interagency support through a School <sup>PLUS</sup> model. Furthermore, a better understanding of students’ perceptions of factors contributing to their success will strengthen the relationship between multiple parties striving to allow for and support the full potential of each child. Lastly, the voice of Aboriginal students is honoured through their stories and in so doing empowers an often marginalized group.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Background

Who are the Aboriginal people of Canada? I was asked this once when I was travelling abroad. For so many people, in so many countries, we are simply a group of people characterized by old history texts and movies. How many accounts have you heard of Canadian travellers bringing home stories they heard of the beautiful Indian princesses or igloo dwelling Inuit in Canada? We cannot blame others for their stereotypical image of the “Canadian Indian” because we too store generalized images of other cultures we collected from school, television, or family and friends. How could I begin to describe the nations of Aboriginal people across our country with their varied languages, cultures, and histories? To describe us as a homogeneous group would be insulting, but easy. As educators, we must avoid the easy road and acknowledge the diversity of Canada’s Aboriginal people. For the purpose of this thesis the term Aboriginal will represent Status Indians, Non-Status Indians, Metis, and Inuit peoples as defined by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. Consideration was taken into account that participants sometimes chose to refer to themselves with other names and authors chose different terms, therefore the original names used remain in participant stories and literature quotations.

The 1996 census calculated the Aboriginal population as representing three per cent of the national population. Saskatchewan is higher than the national average, with an Aboriginal population of 14 % (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada [INAC], 2000).

The Aboriginal population in Saskatchewan is continuing to grow more rapidly than the total population. Already in 1996, Aboriginal children under fifteen years of age accounted for 20% of Saskatchewan's children in this age group (Statistics Canada, 1996). Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (2000) in their demographic surveys estimate "from 1981 to 1991, the urban Aboriginal population grew by 62%, compared to 11% for other urban Canadians." The migration from rural First Nation communities has a large impact in Saskatchewan as the Aboriginal population is growing by 1.7% annually (INAC, 2000).

In the school division where four participants for this study have graduated, students of Aboriginal ancestry currently make up 33% of the student population (Saskatchewan Rivers School Division, 2003). There are no published statistics on the numbers of Aboriginal graduates within this division, but the Aboriginal Population Profile (Statistics Canada, 2004) states that only 8% of Aboriginal people 25 years or older in Prince Albert have a high school graduation certificate. With our growing Aboriginal population attention must be drawn to proactive approaches to retaining students because employers are often unwilling to hire anyone without a completed grade twelve.

The National School Leavers Survey (1995) reported, "fully 40% of aboriginal 18-20-year-olds were leavers (compared with 16% for the population aged 18-20 overall), and just 30% were high school graduates (versus 63% for all 18-20-year-olds)." Kehoe and Echols (1994) found "a study by the Department of Education in Saskatchewan (1985) showed the annual drop-out rate for Native students to be 43.2 percent compared to 15.0 percent for non-Native students" (p.64).

## School Leavers

Contrary to popular belief, dropping out of high school is more of a process than a decision made at a particular time. “Research suggests that the downward spiral that accompanies school failure is often set in motion years prior to dropouts’ ultimate exit from school” (Reyes, Gillock, Kobus & Sanchez, 2000, p.519). School leavers cannot be characterized as having any one reason, but a combination of factors that put them at risk. Human Resources Development Canada (2000), in a follow up to the *National Survey Comparing School Leavers and High School Graduates 18 to 20 Years of Age*, characterized the main factors associated with leaving high school prior to graduating:

- Poverty – its severity and duration
- Ethnicity (e.g. Aboriginal youth)
- Family background and other family issues (e.g., single-parent families, stability, child abuse, parenting style)
- Poor knowledge of a majority language
- A lack of connection between life in and out-of-school
- Students or parents unable to identify with educational goals or program content
- Geographic locale (e.g., urban versus rural, provincial/territorial differences)
- A lack of community support such as, poor housing, a lack of coordinated services
- School type
- Low educational attainment
- Low satisfaction and self-esteem
- A lack of involvement in school activities (school engagement)
- Excessive employment
- Teenage pregnancy
- Gender (e.g. being male)
- Behavioural problems such as aggression, delinquency
- Truancy

(HRDC, 2000, p.8)

Aboriginal youth, one of the fastest growing segments of the youth population, are burdened with virtually all the socio-economic risk factors listed in the School

Leavers Survey, and, as noted earlier have a high incidence of dropping out. Close to half of Aboriginal youth lived with a single parent or with neither parent in their last year of high school, and their parents are likely not to have completed high school. Four times as many Aboriginal youth as the general population have dependant children (HRDC, 2000, p.25). The 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (Statistics Canada, 2004) listed the following reasons Aboriginal adults in Prince Albert and Saskatchewan selected for not finishing school: wanted to work (15% and 15%), had to work (25% and 17%), bored with school (16% and 12%), pregnancy/taking care of children (12% and 14%), and problems at home/to help at home (14% and 13%).

Patrick Brady (1996) pointed out that similarities do exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal dropouts as at-risk students are not confined to one particular culture. Research indicated that students at-risk of not completing high school share common characteristics such as lack of self-esteem (Pepper & Henry, 1991), feelings of alienation (Antoine, 2000; Gillock, 2000; Kronick, 1994; Pepper & Henry, 1991), and a low socio-economic status (Gillock, 2000; Kronick, 1994). These characteristics describe a large segment of Canadian at-risk youth. Cote and Allahar (as cited in Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2001) “suggested that all youth can be considered at-risk in an economic climate characterized by rising youth unemployment, fragmentation of family life, public policy emphasis on resources for an aging population, and increasing inequalities in the general distribution of resources” (p.325). The consequences of not allocating resources to youth place future burdens on society. What most educators agree with is the notion of empowering youth. Brady (1996) noted the educational system is “failing to accommodate students who come from backgrounds other than that

of the mainstream middle class culture.” If current dropout levels continue, the prospects of Aboriginal and minority youth at-risk successfully contributing to society diminish.

Let us take these factors and add to them the following theories of what also contributes to urban Aboriginal youth leaving school early. Reyes et al. (2000) attributed the high incidence of urban, low-income status, and minority students leaving school to their inability to adjust to the transition from elementary to high school. During the transition period, students are faced with substantial changes in environment, organizational and social aspects of the new setting, and increased student population, as well as increased heterogeneity. Students entering high school encounter differing grading standards and discipline policies than their local elementary school. Reyes et al. (2000) concluded that, “individual characteristics can influence perceptions, ultimately benefiting or hindering students and contributing, respectively, to positive or negative adjustment” (p.3). Roderick (1995) found that urban, minority high school dropouts and graduates evidenced declines in grades and attendance following all school transitions. Are successful students those who possess the ability to adjust to the changes they are confronted with?

Another explanation given to the dropout phenomenon of Aboriginal students is that of cultural dissonance. This is a common theory which explains how the conflict of cultures between the home and school results in reduced academic performance and behaviour that brings the student in conflict with teachers and administrators, ultimately leading to the decision to drop out. The school culture in this theory is a reflection of mainstream society and the home is that of a minority. There are many supporters of

this theory, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. It has been argued by Corbiere (2000), Antone (2000), and Pepper and Henry (1991) that throughout history, a Euro-Western approach to education has been used to assimilate Aboriginal people in Canada. This approach remains in our current education system which is designed to meet the needs of mainstream Canadian youth coming from middle-class homes with middle class values. Wotherspoon's (2004) educational research also supported this theory:

Individuals and social groups with the lowest levels of educational attainment and involvement frequently attribute their educational difficulties to the lack of connection between their education and their daily life concerns. Many groups, including Aboriginal people, visible minority immigrants, and residents in rural and remote regions of the nation, attribute their mounting alienation and frustration to a persistent gap between their immediate experiences and preoccupations and the expectations, knowledge and procedures that prevail within educational settings. (p.15)

As Aboriginal populations in urban centres continue to rise at rates surpassing that of the rest of Canada, schools must rise to the challenge of providing support programs that nurture and promote the unique identities and potential of our youth. Dei (2003) defined exemplary practices as "strategies, which make for genuine inclusion of all students, by addressing equity issues and promoting successful learning outcomes particularly for students of racial/ethnic minority and working class backgrounds" (p.246). Wotherspoon (2004) concurred with Dei:

The most vital educational institutions are often those that can simultaneously contribute to a sense of 'place' in significant ways, providing a grounding for people in their own cultural and social environments, celebrating the unique characteristics of localities and the capacities within them, and providing a focal point for community interaction that can complement and enrich relations on a broader level, without sacrificing the development of critical understanding and social action. (p.15)



The concept of the school positioning itself as the hub of the community where all members are free to enter, contribute, and feel a sense of belonging has been relatively new. As the School<sup>PLUS</sup> model enters Saskatchewan schools, local communities and agencies are at last invited to form partnerships with the education system. Alliances between school systems and Aboriginal organizations emerge to benefit all. Dei's (2003) research of urban minority youth in Canada raised this question:

Have our schools really tapped into this knowledge? The fact of the matter is that, as we read about such changes in Canadian society, it ought to be emphasized that particular changes in the structural and organizational life of schools has not kept pace with such changes in demographics, that is the racial and ethnic mix of students. (p.243)

Dei (2003, p.244) acknowledged the difference and diversity of our nation's youth and challenged schools to take this into account instead of blaming parents and society for their child's disengagement from school. The difference between family and school expectations and worldview must be examined. Dei (2003) further stated, "As an institution, schools have a responsibility not just to take credit for their student's success, but also to accept blame and responsibility for youth failures in schools" (p.245). Kehoe and Echols (1994) had earlier shared a similar opinion:

There is increasing evidence to suggest that higher levels of achievement among Native students are more likely to occur if serious accommodations are made by schools to Native culture. The guiding principle in program development should be to change the schools to fit the children rather than changing the children to fit the schools. The process of changing the schools does not necessarily mean drastic changes would have to be made in school practices. Nor does it mean that some aspects of urban Native family culture will not change. (p.63)

After reviewing the factors contributing to Aboriginal students leaving school prior to graduation, the question remains: how do Aboriginal students succeed in graduating despite so many obstacles? The participants in this inquiry share many of

the socio-demographic characteristics, behaviours, and other factors identified as belonging to students at risk of leaving school. The cultural dissonance theory also emerged in their stories. What do my participants perceive as contributing to their success?

### Aboriginal Retention

Following extensive studies on reasons why students leave school early a number of researchers chose to look at factors that supported Aboriginal student success. This proactive shift in thought has led to a number of studies in which the students themselves were granted the role as “expert” and given a voice. When working with Aboriginal high school students Bazylac (2000) found “their insights into factors which helped them to succeed in school become a valuable tool for transforming the educational system to meet the needs of those students who have been neglected or for whom some programming efforts have been applied” (p.34).

Baptiste (1994) discussed the role cultural values factor into student success and identified four cultural groups of Aboriginal students existing at the University of Saskatchewan:

one which is traditional, one which is non-traditional, one which is striving to recapture its cultural identity, and a fourth which is attempting to achieve a combination of traditional and non-traditional values and philosophies. (p.73)

This look at people’s view of themselves certainly reflects the diversity of Aboriginal people and reminds us of the risk of generalizing a sample population. In Baptiste’s (1994, p.147) study, only one third of the sample felt culturally alienated at the university. Younger participants (25-29 years of age) did feel more alienated than older participants as “respondents indicated that they felt different, were treated different, or

were not understood” (p.149). This was not the case for all students and different factors influenced the degree individual students felt culturally alienated.

Respondents who did not feel culturally alienated stated that they take pride in and have an understanding of their own culture, that many Native students associate with each other, that they get along with everybody, that they have family support, or that they did not know or did not follow traditional Indian culture. (Baptiste, 1994, p.149)

In a 2002 study of female Aboriginal inner city high school students Bazylac (2002) analyzed the information he collected during sharing circles from a traditional medicine wheel framework. He explained that at the centre of the medicine wheel ecology encompasses all four realms: spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental. It was the strength of all four in the ecological centre that allowed the participants to develop a strong inner support system or volition (p.102). Their volition was strengthened by the medicine wheel.

The students identified spirituality as a combination of Aboriginal and Catholic teachings. This was characteristic of a new social environment which taught a freedom to live within two ideals of spirituality. In the emotional realm the students identified family, friends and development of self-identity as factors contributing to their success. The physical realm outlined the role multiculturalism had in the school, support programs played in making success a reality, and drug and alcohol avoidance had in their ability to succeed. The participants described Aboriginal teacher support, an engaging curriculum, and a grade twelve diploma as factors leading to the success in the mental realm. (pp.ii-ii)

Bazylac (2002) placed teacher support in the mental realm where “the participants unanimously identified teachers as the single most important factor contributing to their educational success” (p.93). In Duff’s (1998) research, Aboriginal high school students commented on the characteristics they thought good teachers should possess. Among the characteristics, students spoke of friendliness, patience, encouragement, knowledge of Aboriginal people, sensitivity and respect (p.82).

Although one participant pointed out that the teacher he most related to was Aboriginal, another was quoted as saying, “I don’t care if they’re Aboriginal teachers as long as they treat everyone fair, equal” (p.62). The participants in this study expressed similar opinions of good teachers and the value of Aboriginal teachers. Anderson’s (1995) interviews with Aboriginal secondary graduates revealed that most students got along with teachers and felt encouraged. During my interviews, participants shared comparable stories of teachers whom they felt comfortable with and who had provided encouragement at key times of their lives. In Anderson’s study (1995) the students who described instances of racism said they “took steps to stop it or avoid further subjection” (p.84). Participants I interviewed also recalled at times confronting people they found expressing racist comments or avoiding the environment all together.

Swisher and Hoisch (1992) as cited in Anderson (1995, p.8) examined research on high Aboriginal dropout rates and found that a main reason for leaving school was boredom, yet students did not seem happier for dropping out. Anderson (1995) suggested that Aboriginal students do see education as being valuable, but do not find the curriculum relevant to their lives. “Students who see no reflection of their lifestyle in the curriculum, except perhaps as historical curiosities, are not as likely to perceive the course content as important to their lives” (Anderson, 1995, p.7). Hains (2000) and Duff (1998) agreed that schools must provide more Aboriginal literature, history, and culture within existing curricula or develop new curricula and programs that Aboriginal students find relevant.

DeGagne’s (2002) study, *Interaction without integration: The experience of successful First Nations students in Canadian post-secondary education* outlined a

number of programs that influenced student retention. The Native Studies program provided a safe place where students could form relationships with other Aboriginal students while learning about their cultures and histories. Other Aboriginal support services helped the students “resist the assimilative forces of the university” (DeGagne, 2002, abstract). Anderson’s (1995) literature review found that the positive identity a student brings to school is preserved with the help of people in the school environment, as well as ongoing influence from the home (p.16).

Although there is a growing amount of research on the experiences of Aboriginal graduates, the majority of the studies look at post-secondary students. Few studies have focused on the factors that influence the success of secondary Aboriginal graduates. The following three studies did focus on high school students and their experiences, positive and negative. The studies concluded with recommendations for improvement.

When Shaun Hains (2001) met with Aboriginal students from an Edmonton high school in a talking circle the students were asked what the school could do to better meet their needs. The students listed the following:

- Native programming
- Curriculum changes to include more Native culture
- Teaching processes that build better relationships with the students
- Native counselling
- Bridging programs that would help to bring better racial understanding (Hains, 2002, p.46)

Saskatoon Aboriginal students in Duff’s (1998) study, *First Nations students perspectives of their educational experience*, made a number of suggestions that could influence students’ success. Among the changes, they expressed the need for more Aboriginal teachers. They also suggested the involvement of Aboriginal Elders in

curricular and non-curricular cultural programs. Students felt that Aboriginal students should take the initiative and get involved in more activities to combat loneliness and give students a sense of belonging.

The participants in Duff's study also suggested that students must not be dependant on outside influences. They acknowledged the need to set goals, take responsibility for themselves, and make the "right" choices (p.85). Anderson's (1995) study attained similar findings. She interviewed Aboriginal graduates who had left their rural home to complete high school in an urban centre. The graduates had attended different schools and achieved various marks upon completion, but all agreed that they were responsible for their accomplishment. Anderson (1995) states in her data analysis:

I believe that all of the students I interviewed possess an inner strength that allowed them to overcome the obstacles they were faced with in the city. Although most students had a wealth of family support (compared to some of their counterparts who quit school) these students still had to stand up for themselves in many different situations... The main coping mechanism used by these students was to rely upon themselves. (p.81)

This inner drive students pronounce as a constant factor in their success could be aided by many things. The six participants in my thesis research identified family and teacher support, but were modest in identifying their personal strength. Are there ways that schools assist students in strengthening their independence and resiliency?

Anderson (1995) did ask her participants what kind of support could have been provided to improve the journey throughout high school. Together, Anderson (1995) and her participants offered a number of suggestions for the retention of rural students attending school in the city. Recommendations that apply to Aboriginal students in general were to offer self assertive and self management skill training, provide ongoing

counselling and course selection services, and encourage students to become involved with school and community groups.

After a review of literature, Jones (1994) summarized the following five factors Aboriginal graduates on and off-reserve attributed to academic success:

- The support they received from their family and community. Some cited either verbal or emotional support, concrete help with course selection or homework, support by example (i.e., parents or other relatives who had persisted by remaining in school held interesting and/or well paying jobs).
- The recognition of the importance of educational qualifications to obtain an interesting and well paying job. Students employed strategies of self help such as goal setting, self discipline, and persistence in their attempts to achieve their goals.
- Most of the successful students reported receiving positive support from teachers, counsellors, and often administrative staff. In Northern areas, Native counsellors were very frequently mentioned as important sources of support by both on-reserve and Metis/off-reserve students.
- Successful students were able to find at least something they actively liked about school, be it a particular subject, sports, friends or teachers.
- Successful students were able to overcome the very obstacles that caused other students to drop out. These include: temptation to skip class, homework, shyness, unstable home environment, pressure from friends to drop out, boring teachers, boring subjects, and inflexible school rules. (pp.114-115)

### Summary

Although the literature suggests a number of factors that contribute to the success of Aboriginal graduates and offers suggestions for retention, it is not a complete list. As long as Aboriginal students and graduates continue to share their lives and experiences, the list will continue to grow. Behind every story lies another question. Previous studies have highlighted critical incidents and factors leading to the completion of high school and post-secondary programs, but they are unique to the

individuals who participated in those inquiries. I hope to draw on past research and continue to add to it to enrich the understanding of how best to facilitate the scholarly success of Aboriginal students.

Our growing Aboriginal population in Saskatchewan increases the demand for further understanding of Aboriginal student needs. Within one Saskatchewan city, I intend to focus on the following research questions:

1. What are the stories of six Aboriginal students who graduated from an urban provincial high school?
2. What factors do they perceive as contributing to their success in completing an academic grade twelve?
3. What recommendations do they have for educators and schools, which would benefit current Aboriginal students?



## CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

### Storytelling

Stories have always been a part of my life so it feels right to continue telling and reliving stories. Narrative inquiry will allow me to share and celebrate the journeys of Aboriginal high school graduates. “Narrative researchers commonly think of a life as a story in which the person is the central character and author” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p.136). Long ago, stories were passed down orally, with each story travelling miles to entertain, inform, persuade, and/or share a theory. Truth was interconnected with believable characters and the reputation of the teller. Stories evoked passion and action. In our children’s world today, stories come televised and computerized with little personal interaction between the teller and receiver, which results in a devaluing of personal knowledge and experience. We often forget the power our own stories possess as we rely on those of others.

My Grandfather has taught me much. He has always encouraged his grandchildren and great-grandchildren to share their knowledge through stories. He has told and retold stories of his life to my family and friends, as well as coming in to speak to my students. He teased me one day about writing a book. “What book?” I asked. “Well, the book about my life,” he laughed. He knows and understands that those who value stories keep them alive, thus keeping memories alive. I haven’t written down his stories, but I continue to pass them on to my children and my students. Psychology and sociology advocate, “The story *is* one’s identity, a story created, told, revised, and retold

throughout life. We know or discover ourselves, and reveal ourselves to others, by the stories we tell” (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998, p.7).

My grandfather continues to remind me of the value of story. As the two of us drove the straight stretch of highway between two prairie cities last year, I was lulled by the sound of his voice telling me about people, places, and experiences from his past. At about Duck Lake he stopped and turned to me, “You’re pretty quiet Tracy.” “I’m just listening to you,” I replied lazily. “Well, I’ve talked enough. Tell me a story,” he responded. I was surprised and a little annoyed. I was not in a very talkative mood and was satisfied being the listener. I thought for a moment before concluding I didn’t have anything worthy at the moment, “I don’t have a story.” That didn’t stop my Grampa, “Everyone has a story Tracy. Everywhere you look there’s a story. Behind every tree and hill there’s a story.” He sat back in silence waiting for my story.

### Methodology

Towards the beginning of my research journey I understood that there were two main types of research, quantitative and qualitative, but never realized each could be subdivided into so many research methods and traditions. I have never seen myself as a scientific and rational sort; therefore positivist research did not interest me. *Educational research: An introduction* (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996) verified my assumptions in the first chapter when it laid out the differences between quantitative and qualitative researchers. I could not “take an objective, detached stance toward research participants and their setting” as Gall, et al. (1996) stated because I knew I would “become personally involved with research participants, to the point of sharing perspectives and assuming a caring attitude” (p.30). Narrative research differs from positivistic research

because of the underlying assumption of narrative research that there is no one absolute truth or one correct reading or interpretation of a text. Where quantitative research avoids pluralism, relativism, and subjectivity, narrative inquiries promote this (Lieblich et al., 1998, p.2). As I extracted meaning from the stories I gathered, I invite readers to interpret the stories through their knowledge and experience.

As stated in my introduction, my interest lay in collecting the stories of six recent Aboriginal graduates. Lieblich et al. (1998) “believe that stories are usually constructed around a core of facts or life events, yet allow a wide periphery for the freedom of individuality and creativity in selection, addition to, emphasis on, and interpretation of these remembered facts” (p.8). The participants held the power to select the stories they would share. My desire was to gain understanding of how their stories of experience and critical incidents contributed to their success in completing high school. I had my theories based on personal experience and literature reviews of previous studies, but I had no predetermined hypothesis explaining why some Aboriginal students complete high school when so many of their peers leave school early. I expected and was correct in predicting that as my participants told and relived their stories, we would find multiple truths as new understandings surfaced based on lived experience and time.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) hesitated to define narrative inquiry, but offered these characteristics:

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of telling and retelling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up peoples lives, both individual and social. (p.20)

At the root of narrative inquiry lies a phenomenological base. Morse and Richards (2002) stated, “phenomenology gives us insights into meanings or the essences of experiences that we may have previously been unaware of, but can recognize” (p.47). This type of research appealed to me because it did not aim to test a hypothesis, but to represent and understand an experience through story. Van Manen (1997) further explained, “Phenomenological questions are meaning questions ... . Meaning questions can be better or more deeply understood, so that, on the basis of understanding I may be able to act more ordinarily and directly” (p.23). The meanings of the narratives will provide insight for participants, researcher, and educators. Merriam (2002) summed up what I wanted to attempt when she stated:

Thus drawing from phenomenology and symbolic interaction in particular, qualitative researchers conducting a basic interpretive study would be interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and experiences. (p.38)

How do Aboriginal graduates make meaning of their success? With this model of inquiry I was able to draw out messages from each participant, finding both similarities and differences among their educational experience and mine. As educators, we read literature citing facts on high school dropouts and successful attempts to retain them, often forgetting to go directly to the source of knowledge: the students. If our goal is to help construct a world where they will be successful, it seemed logical to ask them to share in this process.

### Research Methods

Five of the graduates were urban residents who completed high school at one of the provincial schools in the community where they reside. The sixth moved from an

urban educational system to a band controlled school in grade six and completed his education there. I was able to locate Aboriginal participants between the ages of 19 and 23 years, with a purposeful sampling technique (Morse, 2002, p. 173), purposefully selected to be communicative and to have both males and females. Initial contact was made by phone to briefly explain my research and request permission to drop off a recruitment letter inviting future participants to contact me if they were interested. In total, I made contact with eight people, was turned down by one, was unable to meet with the other two, yet found myself meeting a ninth. The ninth person became part of the study when the last person I met with to leave a recruitment letter informed me of a person he thought would be perfect. She became my sixth participant. Other than her, I was able to choose participants with whom I had had previous contact through school and community activities.

There were no future issues of power, as we would not meet in a teacher-student relationship because participants had completed high school. I thought there might be issues of power in the research process because I the researcher was the one to direct conversations and choose stories, but there was never any intentional disempowerment of the participants. I found the participants often took charge of the conversation and the direction it took. I apologized during one interview when a participant caught me asking another question before she had completely answered the previous and promptly interrupted me to let me know. Shaun Hains (2000) stated in her dissertation, "When I take part in research, the researcher is humble and great respect is shown those who share their experiences. There is no place for power and dominance in this process" (p.315).

By introducing prospective participants to the research focus and inviting them to participate, I anticipated they would bring a greater willingness to share their experiences and stories. I found this to be true, and as mentioned earlier, had one participant share more than a story. After asking, he brought a friend who he thought would be interested. She was interested and signed the consent letter shortly after she arrived. I hoped by providing both written and verbal explanations I could begin to establish a trusting relationship and address initial concerns. The six participants consented to participate in three semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately one hour in length. Three of the participants participated in all three interviews. The second and third interviews were combined for the convenience of the other three participants. These six graduates spoke from the authority of their experiences and added their voices to this narrative inquiry. The participants reluctantly and with great deliberation chose pseudonyms for themselves and any identifiers such as schools or home reserves. The reasons for some of the names could be an entirely different study in itself. The pseudonyms were used in all transcribed interviews.

The interview method I used modelled Irving Seidman's (1998) three interview series. Although this model was highly structured, I used it with full understanding that participants might change focus and direction and I could find myself on paths unknown. The first interview focused on the participants narrating early memories of home and their elementary and middle years education. Recollections of home and school were later used to introduce the participants to my readers and provide the exposition for the story that would follow. The second interview focused on bringing forward the participants' relationships with their educations through the telling of

stories. Participants were encouraged to share stories of events, people, and settings that stood out as critical incidents in their secondary educations. These stories served as the rising action in a plot that ultimately led them to the dénouement, graduation. The final interview focused on making sense of how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situations as graduates. Participants were asked to reflect on narratives from the previous interviews and question the influence they had in their decisions to remain in school. Within this deliberation, I expected to uncover multiple climactic points during their time spent in high school where successful completion was uncertain, but was surprised to find this with only three of the six. One actually left and returned to school a number of times while the other two only considered leaving. The remaining three participants completed school in one continuous progression without contemplating leaving.

“As Gubrium and Holstein have noted, the interview has become a means of contemporary storytelling” (Fontana, 2000, p.647). Although there were guiding discussion questions and predetermined prompts for the interviews, I allowed for a more reflexive interview with the participants responding in a conversational tone. It was my desire to record the participants’ narratives, rather than an exchange of questions and answers. The semi-structured interview allowed me to engage in a natural dialogue, maintaining a balance of freedom and focus. I felt free to rephrase a question if needed or share a personal anecdote to promote further contribution. I am a storyteller in my classroom and students often convey understanding and synthesis through the reciprocation of stories. Holstein and Gubrium (1997) support this mutual disclosure when they said:

The interview should be an occasion that displays the interviewer's willingness to share his or her own feelings and deepest thoughts. This is done to assure respondents that they can in turn, share their own thoughts and feelings. The interviewers' deep disclosure both occasions and legitimizes the respondent's reciprocal revelations. (p.119)

All interviews were recorded and transcribed in the following days, which allowed the freedom to engage in unstructured observation. As the initial interview began, so did the "data making". Morse and Richards (2002) challenged the qualitative researcher to make data because "to speak of data as being 'gathered' or 'collected' is to imply that data preexist, ready to be picked like apples from a tree" (p.87). This analogy reaffirmed my role as a researcher who was asking these Aboriginal youth to take a collaborative role in sharing and making sense of their experiences in secondary education.

Recollections of my own stories of people, places, and critical incidents in my life emerged as I collected experiences. Both positive and negative memories surfaced and began to nudge at understanding my own experience as an Aboriginal high school student, then undergraduate, and now graduate student. Stories are fluid, living entities which alter as time passes and reflection occurs. As both the storyteller and central character, our identities and traits now may not reflect who we were then. Just as a round, dynamic character in a good novel grows through the chapters, our characters grew and will continue to grow. When the participants' narratives were returned to them for review, the question was not, "Is this what you said?" but "Is this you? Do you see yourself here? Is this the character you want to be when read by others?" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.148).

In my experience with teaching youth, communication based on integrity is central to the facilitation of mutual trust and respect. If I expected a genuine response to



my inquiry, I had to reciprocate with unconditional acceptance. It was important to me that participants knew that I would not judge their experience or actions. I was in no position to tell people how to live their lives, or for that matter, how they should have made different decisions. I simply wanted to understand. The process of analysis was a mutual construction of interpretations. McKinley and Brayboy (2000) argued against the use of “traditional” data analysis methods when working with Indigenous participants:

We believe we must respect other’s notions of what categories work for individuals and the analysis of their experiences. Who is better, after all, to assist in the construction of categories than the very participants about whose lives we write? (p. 6)

I appreciated this honouring of Aboriginal tradition. From my experience, a story belongs to the teller and it is up to that person to decide when and with whom to share it. I could not discredit their story any more than I could my Grandfather’s because it would show disrespect. Stories and tales from a man in his nineties, some seem like myths and exaggerations once in a while, but these stories have purposes. No matter how much you might question a story, you must respect and value the lessons that come from it. In speaking with an elder or guest you do not question their actions, just as you do not question what they say. In honouring that person you must accept what they do and say as truth. Finding truth can be as easy as finding your connections to their story.

Clandinin and Connelly (1999) believed the researcher’s field texts, including transcripts of oral history and the researcher’s autobiographical journal, thread together themes, which drive the inquiry. Here they justify the inclusion of the researcher’s narrative:

throughout a narrative inquiry the *researcher's presence* needs to be acknowledged, understood, and written into the final research account. Discovering a researcher's presence in a research text has traditionally been sufficient justification to dismiss the text as inappropriately subjective. But the reverse applies in narrative inquiry: a text written as if the researcher had no autobiographical presence would constitute a deception about the epistemological status of the research. Such a study lacks validity. (p.138)

We find acceptance, encouragement, and pride through the sharing of stories.

We tell stories in times of loss, frustration, joy, and accomplishment. I tried to capture the voice of six young people to make meaning of their success. Truly, I did not expect to understand all the relationships they shared with the people, places, and events in their lives, but I located with them messages intertwined in their voices that led to a better understanding of their experience. I struggled with the risks of including my voice in the narrative, but believed that transferability was important. I drew distinctions between the experiences of the six youths and my story. Gall et al. (1996, p.30) place qualitative researchers on a side, separated from the quantitative researchers who take an objective, detached stance toward research participants and their settings. I could not deny my need to find my own meaning alongside that of the participants; therefore, my narrative came forward and connected my life experiences with those of my participants.

Each participant and I met at a location of his or her choice. I suggested the meetings take place in a location free of distraction and noise because we were audio-recording. Martha and I met three times at her home during the afternoon. Donald and I met twice at my home because she was living out of town and it would be more convenient for her to come by mid-morning before she began work at noon. We managed to discuss the questions from the third interview guide, therefore eliminating the need for a third interview. Maggie opted to respond in written form to a set of

interview questions for the first and second interview. The third interview she agreed we would meet at my home. Katherine invited me to come to her home for the first interview. The following two interviews were conducted at my home. Thomas and Lisa came to my home together for two interviews. Again we eliminated the third interview as many of the final questions were discussed during the second meeting. Both interviews occurred during the evening. The time lapse between the first, second, and third (for those who had a third) interview was roughly one month for each participant. Following the last interview, the transcriptions for each interview were printed out and packaged with the release of transcripts consent form. Participants were given the package to review at their convenience.

I envisioned the research text as one grand narrative, the participants' stories laced with connections to my own experience, the experience of this research journey, and interpretations of the lives that I meet. In keeping with the Aboriginal philosophy of wholeness, the research text was a journey of stories revealing the interconnectedness of factors contributing to the success of Aboriginal graduates. Readers will find unique stories of Aboriginal students, as well as common barriers and bridges we all have crossed. The purpose for retelling our lives "is to offer possibilities for reliving, for new directions, and new ways of doing things" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.189).

I addressed the threads that connect our narratives by constructing a string of recommendations that I took to three of the participants for examination during their third interview. The recommendations came from participant comments during the first two interviews. I asked for their response to the themes and recommendations: did they agree, disagree, or have more to add. I wanted the recommendations for change to

come from both participants and me. There were recommendations I added following reviews of the interview transcripts that were not apparent to me during the interview stage. Together we have made significant observations on what the experiences for Aboriginal students are and drawn out contributing factors facilitating their success through our narratives. Now readers are invited to honour the stories of the six participants and respect their contribution to education by acknowledging their opinions and suggestions for the retention of Aboriginal secondary students.

The participants of this study were the experts and have lived, told, retold, and relived their stories. As you progress through the introduction to each participant in the next chapter and read their collective narratives in the subsequent three chapters, I hope you will form a relationship with each participant and me. You may address issues around credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability as you read, question, and form connections with the story.

### Trustworthiness

I will conclude this chapter outlining my research methods with a section on trustworthiness. I would like to refer to Lincoln's (1995) relational views of trustworthiness and propose that readers draw on the following criteria for further evaluation of my inquiry.

*Positionality or standpoint epistemology* asks the researcher to declare who they are so readers may understand both the researcher and research. I am a First Nations woman, mother, graduate, and teacher. I was raised in a two parent home with one sister, on the west coast. At thirteen we moved to a rural town in Saskatchewan and two years later we moved again to this city where I began grade ten. The move brought us

closer to my cousins, aunts, and grandparents who lived on or around Muskoday First Nation. During my grade twelve year my parents returned to the west coast and I rented an apartment in the city with my infant daughter and remained to complete high school. Following the birth of my second daughter I began university. I received an education degree through the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program in 1997. I have since taught secondary English Language Arts and Social Sciences in both band and public schools. My husband joined our family in 1998 and we now have a son. I currently work and reside in a middle class neighbourhood. Throughout my life I am grateful to have received love and encouragement from all my family members. This is who I am.

Although in this thesis I intended on interpreting and drawing conclusions from the research text, I did not intend to find one truth or experience and proclaim it as the truth for all Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people are far more complex than the homogeneous group described in old texts. First Nation and Metis youth today live and learn in a multicultural society. Their stories may contradict our assumptions.

I was looking to share the unique experiences of six recent Aboriginal graduates because I think the lack of success for many students overshadows the accomplishments of others. It is my hope that the stories of these graduates may lead to an improved support system for current and future Aboriginal students. Regardless of the number of students who leave school early, one is too many. We must all take responsibility for providing the best possible educational environment for our students, an environment that supports the whole child. The benefits of increasing the number of Aboriginal graduates are enormous. The societal norms and economic needs were very different

when our parents and grandparents attended school and failure to complete grade twelve today can have a disastrous effect on the individual, their family, and society as a whole. Although I have strong beliefs regarding the lack of cultural awareness and anti-racist education in our schools, I am not using this project as a platform to again make this case. I do not want to prove a theory, but share the experiences of six young people and make recommendations for change that supports the success of future graduates.

The next criterion Lincoln (1995) names is *community as arbiter of quality* because of the responsibility the researcher has to the community the research was carried out in. I had a responsibility in this research to the academic, educational, and Aboriginal communities. My research builds on the research of others who have contributed phenomenological and narrative studies of Aboriginal students. Perhaps education colleges and school divisions will take the recommendations and evaluate their programs with the understanding that this list of recommendations is not a criticism, but thoughts for change (a natural process). In the last decade, the Aboriginal community has spoken out on their educational needs. With a growing Aboriginal population this study gave voice and decision making to youth. I believe that if the academic, educational, and Aboriginal communities work together, we can all find success.

*Voice* is the third criterion. I, the researcher, am ultimately responsible for expressing voice. However, the six participants in my study spoke for themselves. I have used their words in the research text. As I interpreted the stories, they were taken back to the participants and the participants accepted, rejected or changed the story. It is their words and phrases I used in the research text. Every attempt was be made to

ensure the accuracy in meaning and intent of the stories by bringing them back to the main characters, the storytellers. I did this a number of times. I introduced the recommendations I developed from the interviews to four of the participants at our last meeting. Following the conversational interviews, I took the transcriptions back to my participants and encouraged them to write what they actually meant or add what they would have liked to say. Finally, a draft of chapter four was given to five of the participants for review. In this sense, the narrative was co-constructed between the participants and myself. As much as possible under the circumstances, the participants' voices were heard.

A criterion necessary in narrative inquiry is *reciprocity*. As I wrote earlier when I described my participants, I intended to create a researcher-participant relationship based on trust and respect. We achieved this and benefited from one another's stories. I believe we were all comfortable sharing and discussing our experiences. The extent of reciprocity could not be identified, but I hoped the participants gained a renewed sense of pride and accomplishment as they reflected on their experience.

As an emerging criterion, *sacredness* addressed the spiritual element in research. It was the strong spirit of my participants that drew me to this inquiry. My overall concern was to honour the participants and their journeys. I wanted to "create relationships that are based not on unequal power, but on mutual respect, granting of dignity, and deep appreciation of the human condition" (Lincoln, 1995, p.284).

The final criterion Lincoln (1995) lists was *sharing the perquisites of privilege*. If anyone was to gain, the participant should gain as much as the researcher. I did not feel this research was simply taking from the participants because they among many,

including myself, were the benefactors. I hope the participants found this research experience interesting as well as valuable. I believe that they gained a better understanding of themselves and improved their self-worth and confidence by reflecting on their accomplishments. I thanked each participant for the role she or he played in contributing to educational research.



## CHAPTER FOUR: PARTICIPANTS

I work in a high school which houses many programs created to meet the needs of our diverse student population. When staff discuss students we often refer to students by the program they are enrolled in. Unfortunately, in trying to get to know our diverse student body we are in fact categorizing them. In an attempt to familiarize the rest of the school staff with the particular program that myself and four colleagues work within, we met at the end of the year to put together a description. We soon came to the conclusion that our program was in a state of constant change as it evolved to meet the needs of our students. We decided the only constant was that it used a block scheduling system and the majority of our students happened to be Aboriginal.

As we sat and reflected on our year, we were discouraged by the negative stereotype other staff and students were developing of our students. We could understand how easy it is to prejudge based on the actions and words of only a few, but how could we help others understand our students better? In the next hour we laughed and grumbled at our students' antics, mourned their losses, and were humbled by their intelligence and accomplishments. We ended up choosing six students and anonymously describing them in an attempt to highlight our diversity and reduce any stereotypes.

Just as we had six unique students with unique stories represent our program, in this chapter I would like to take the opportunity to introduce you to a different set of six young adults I had the pleasure of getting to know. I invite you to look at our schools

and the Aboriginal initiatives developed to support Aboriginal students with these six people in mind. Although they could all be labelled as Aboriginal graduates, you will read how different their lives and school experiences were. These individuals have unique histories and personalities that may challenge stereotypical assumptions made of Aboriginal students.

Martha: "Dance your style."

I thought I could remember Martha's house. It was a white little war-time house. My grandparents had lived in one in another part of town. I had been by to drop off a recruitment letter a couple of weeks ago, but failed to jot down the house number. Now as I crept along the street I peered at each little white house looking for a pair of curtains I might recognize. No such luck, I am off to the 7-11 down the road to use the payphone.

This is how I arrived late for the first interview with Martha. She didn't seem to mind as she greeted me at the back door and introduced me to the family dog. The front entrance had been closed and converted to a pantry, because the kitchens built for the 1940's were not designed to store much food. She poured me a cup of coffee and we settled in the living room. It was early December and the artificial tree had been set up and decorated. The tiny house was filled with family mementos and garage sale finds. During our second visit Martha revealed, "I'm a very enthusiastic garage saler. If you look around all this, nearly almost all of this is from garage saling, except for the TV, the stand, and china cabinet and um, the candles. Everything else was garage sale, even the furniture. Very enthusiastic garage saler." Martha laughed at her eagerness.

Within the first ten minutes of our meeting she described her family as weird and referenced one uncle to Cheech and another to Chong. Martha continued her description, "Well I have a very extended family. I consider my cousins and some of my nieces like brothers and sisters even though I only have three real brothers, no sisters, well I have step-sisters, but they're not, they're from my step-dad. He branched out after the divorce. He never stayed with us for more than three years." Martha's extended family also includes people she has adopted:

A Native adoption to be would consist of having a close relationship with one or more persons and in a way considering them to be like a brother or sister and by offering them a gift or offering and asking them if they would like to be a brother or sister to you; like god brothers and god sisters and god mothers would also fall under that category. I myself have six adopted sisters, and nine adopted brothers.

Martha currently lives with her mother and a younger brother, but often finds her home to be a temporary home for extended family and friends. "I consider our house a drop in for boys. I'm not lying. We have boys drop in all the time. Right now we have my cousin he's uh, on probation from the court. My mom's been granted guardianship over him because his mom decides, 'I don't care I'm moving to the reserve.'" The house rules apply to everyone as Martha explains, "He's broken doors, hit the walls. He walked in the door, the first thing we said, 'If you have a tantrum, you're out the door. If you want to fight, you're out the door. You're out the door if you do this, this, and this. We don't allow smokes, cigarettes, drugs, alcohol, any of that sort into this house.'" Staying in school is also a requirement. "We get a call and he's, 'Oh, I didn't feel like going to school.' My mom's like, 'If you don't go to school you don't stay here.' She has the same thing for his friends. If they don't go to school they don't stay here."

The family values instilled here have been strongly influenced by Plains Cree tradition and philosophy. Martha has lived in the city most of her life, but did live on her reserve twice and continues to visit often, “Um, well, my reserve...we’re called a poor reserve, but we still have lots of community events. My great grandfather was Almightyvoice. That’s strange.” While remaining connected to rural Aboriginal communities, Martha has strong ties to the urban Aboriginal community and has learned a great deal from local Elders. Martha believes Elders play a vital role in the support of Aboriginal students and should be a part of the school. “Oh yeah, I’ve been very for that. I know most, all, like if you’re being taught something by an Elder you are supposed to sit there and listen and hopefully absorb some of the stuff cause if you don’t all their teachings go through the wall and you are not going to get anywhere.”

I commented to Martha that she had a wandering spirit and she agreed. Her family has moved to the reserve and back a couple of times and lived in many areas of the city. To many people moving every year or two may seem unsettling, yet Martha seemed to enjoy the change. She said she actually enjoyed it and was proud of their ability to execute the process so efficiently, “Oh yeah, we can get everything packed up and ready in two and a half days. Like out the door and waiting for the vehicle to pick it up and we’ll transport everything by ourselves, just me and my mom, cause my brother’s kinda lazy.” Although they have been in this house a few years, I found change a constant part of their lifestyle. On four separate visits I entered to find the living room contents arranged in a new format. Martha laughed and took credit for that.

Martha’s laughter flowed in and out of our conversations. Her talent for assuming characters from her past and recreating their voices and expressions kept me

entertained as she revealed memories from her childhood, elementary and high school. Martha is a great storyteller and always managed to throw in a few strong comments now and again to keep me thinking and questioning. When I asked Martha how her former teachers would describe her she surprised me with her response, “Uh, well in high school they would call me scary. Both me and my brother have been called scary by one teacher.” She laughed and continued in the teacher’s persona, “Yeah, you and your sister are both scary.” Before I could ask Martha explained, “Because we don’t take intimidation very well. Intimidation for us is like, ‘Hm, oh well, if you want to intimidate me go right ahead. See how far it gets you.’” During another meeting Martha described herself:

I think of weird things. I come up with weird statistics and I’m very, I call myself strange because I like to. Like I don’t know why. I just do. Cause there’s no such thing as being normal. Cause if you define normal there’s no such thing. Normal would be perfection and there’s no such thing as perfection. And so you’re like, “okay you’re strange.” “Oh thank you.” You have to take everything in stride.

I had already noticed Martha’s strong character and sense of humour. I wondered if they were family traits. Martha confirmed this, “My mother, she’ll stare down anyone. Oh, but I have a weird sense of humour. I got the slapstick, gutter humour. Well, it comes from being raised in a family full of boys.” That might just do it and explain the Cheech and Chong connection.

I enjoyed my trips to Martha’s home. I met her mom when she came home during an interview. Martha’s pride in her mother was evident in the willingness she had to share her mother’s new found skill of beading with me. After talking about Martha’s experiences as a jingle dress dancer and anticipation of becoming a traditional dancer she explained how her mother was making two traditional outfits for her, one for

the day and another for the night. “She’s a natural,” and Martha illustrated this by bringing out a sample of her beadwork. However, her mother wasn’t the only artist in the house.

When asked about secondary school Martha often commented on her Visual Arts and Drama classes with fond memories. When I enquired why she found these two classes so enjoyable Martha responded, “Because it was a time when you could express yourself. You could sit there and have fun and play with all the different materials, paint, clay, different stuff like that, paper.” As Martha shared one of her accomplishments from Visual Arts she asked me if I would like to see it and promptly left the room in search of the piece. She returned a few minutes later with a clay sculpture of four feathers resting on their quills. The feathers seemed to be standing, reaching skyward. The strength and honour portrayed in the sculpture was a reflection of who I found Martha to be. The definition of success Martha gave mirrored her actions:

Ah, success, hmm. If you have a goal and you want to achieve it, um you basically strive hard and work towards it. Success is when you actually achieve your goal or you haven’t given up. Giving up would be letting yourself down, but if other people were supporting you, like you don’t want to let them down. Success is when you achieve the goals, but you did it for yourself, not for other people.

Martha is an independent young woman. Her self-determination was evident when she responded to a group of friends at a school dance:

Even in junior high, I was one of those girls where, I don’t like standing inside of a group even now. It’s, “Come dance with me,” and they come into a group. I’ll stand on the outside. “Come on” and I’m like, “Every time I do come in you guys either shoulder me so that I don’t have an opportunity to dance or you look at me strange when I do start dancing.” I’ve been complimented several times on the way I dance. That’s one thing I didn’t know I was good at until recently. When I was younger, oh I’m very into my religion, my traditional pow wows, round dances, but when I was younger my cousins said, “Oh no, you’re not

supposed to dance like that, you're supposed to dance like this." And I couldn't dance that way and just recently I was telling people, "Well listen to the announcer. What does the announcer say to you?" and it's like they start repeating what the announcer says. "Okay what's the next thing? He says dance your style." It's like, "Okay, I'm dancing my style back off."

Donalda: "Okay, just do it."

Do you know those awkward moments when you see a former student, but you are not sure how well they remember you and you wonder if you have remembered their name correctly? Well, this is not the case with Donalda. Although Donalda and I spent only a few weeks together in the classroom, we had the opportunity to get to know one another during two school culture camps. Two nights sleeping in tepees and sitting around campfires at the end of May definitely alters your rapport with a student. On every occasion I run into Donalda she greets me and throws in a little good-natured teasing.

I tracked Donalda down at her current place of employment and invited her to help me with this research. It never fails to amaze me how little we know about the lives and histories of our students. I was intrigued with Donalda's stories and how those experiences have shaped and influenced her present life. Donalda has seven siblings. For a woman with one sister, this fact alone left my imagination wondering how dynamic and animated her childhood may have been. "I think I was an angel," Donalda laughed when I asked her to describe herself, "but I don't know if other people would say that." Laughter and humour is a huge part of who Donalda is.

Donalda has spent the majority of her life moving between her home reserve and the city. Although she made many friends, Donalda wanted to excel in school from the onset:

I tried to be the best at everything. I used to get in trouble a lot. Kids used to, “She did it, she did it,” and me and this other little girl used to always vie to be the top one in the class. I was smarter than her in some things and she was smarter than me, but she started halfway through the school year. I was always known as the smart one in the class until she came then it was something that we fought for, to be the top.

Her competitive nature did not always lead to positive experiences as Donalda stated, “There was a lot of trouble there cause, well I never tried to get into fights with kids, but these kids tried to fight with me and every week my dad was at the school trying to defend me.” The frequent moves and differences in schools were difficult. Donalda recalls her early elementary years:

I started kindergarten in the city at school A. We moved from the city to reserve 1 where I started grade one in a multigrade classroom. I did grade three work because I was so far ahead of the other three students in grade one. I still lived on reserve 1, but I was bussed to the city and went to grade two at school C. After the school year we moved back to the city for about eight months and I was in grade three and I went back to school A. We moved from there to reserve 2 and I finished up my grade three school year at school D. I was supposed to be upgraded from grade three to grade five in school D. My mom and dad said, “No, because all your friends are in grade three and they’ll say you’re not good enough or you’re too smart for us. Then all the kids in grade five will be, you’re too young for us, we don’t want to be friends with you.” I went to school D for grades four, five, and six. Then we moved back to the city and I went back to school C for grade seven. We moved back to reserve 2 and I went there for grade eight and half of grade nine. I went to school E for the remainder of grade nine.

Donalda’s parents wanted her to move forward in her education, yet there were periods when family was the priority. Donalda was absent a number of school days because of family commitments:

Well I raised my little sister. She called me mom when I was in Grade 7. That’s why I spent so much time out of school, I’d watch her. She’d say, “I want Donalda.” When she started kindergarten she cried and freaked out at school. “I want my sister, I want my sister.” So I’d have to leave the high school on the reserve and go sit with her. So, I did a lot of that.



By high school, Donalda grew tired of the transitions between schools and began grade ten in the city staying with her grandmother. Two weeks into the school year her parents asked her to move home and she did, only to discontinue from school a few months later. This scenario repeated itself for grade 11. It was clear that Donalda's parents wanted her living with the family on the reserve, but Donalda wanted to attend high school in the city.

When I asked Donalda why she left the reserve school she replied, "Just the same things, growing up, people getting after me, not being challenged enough, and so I just quit. I just decided if I can't go in the city, I'm not going to go at all." Donalda's family moved into the city that spring.

What are some common recollections of a grade twelve year? Donalda's are far from typical. In twelve school months Donalda completed the 18 classes she required in order to graduate with her peers. She began upon returning to the city in the spring, by completing the first two of the 18 courses enrolled in a block program for May and June. The following September she enrolled in ten semestered courses and completed six correspondence courses throughout the year while living in an apartment with five other people. I wondered how she managed to get all her assignments done. Once again, I did not get a typical answer:

It was hard. Well what I'd do is I'd like, okay, I'd get my science mark really high, I'd go up to 80. Then I'd forget about it, go to math, and get that up to 70. Then while I was working on my math my science mark would go way down so I'd go concentrate on that and go back and forth. Commercial cooking was easy so I didn't have to concentrate on that. That wood working, construction, I didn't have to worry about construction, all these other classes cause they were easy. I'd do the work there, but my other classes like English, I would take it, do my English and get my mark high and then let it drop. I did that all year.

I asked Donalda whom she asked for help when she was overwhelmed and she answered, “Everybody and anybody who knew how to do anything.” Her reply to a typical day was to go to classes, try to get the work done, and get it in. Once again she commented on how hard it was. Donalda had a single word answer for what she disliked the most about school: work. Although she disliked work, she certainly stepped up to the plate in grade twelve. There were many instances where Donalda discontinued from school during elementary, junior high, and high school. Some of the factors influencing the decision included family moves, peer conflicts, academic difficulties, and disappointment in the perceived quality of education. What changed in grade eleven? “My dad had a grade six. My mom has a GED grade twelve. I just, Mr. D [an elementary teacher Donalda had], do you know him? I wanted to be him. He’s the saviour of the family sort of thing”. Donalda attributes her success to determination and perseverance. I asked her about students who lacked those qualities and she replied, “Um, I don’t know. It’s up to the person if they want to do it or not. You can’t really force them. I wasn’t really one of those kind of people, I always wanted to go to school and graduate.”

Donalda was future minded and I asked if she had plans to attend university, “It was the most important thing, but it never happened. By the end of grade eleven when I moved back I thought, ‘Okay, just do it.’” She recalled childhood role models of First Nations doctors and dentists and her aspirations of becoming a career woman:

I knew right when I was a little girl because my sister she was always saying, ‘I want to be this,’ and I’d say, ‘Oh, I want to be that too.’ I always looked up to my older sister, but then she dropped out of school when she was in grade eight and I thought, no, I’m not going to do that. I had goals and stuff.

Although Donalda has yet to enrol in a post-secondary program she commutes half an hour to work full-time at a retail store. She continues to live at home and contribute to the family income. Plans for university have not dissolved – they have simply been put on hold for the time being. Donalda has looked into entering a college of medicine at a couple of prairie educational institutions. Donalda described financial concerns and lack of funding as among the obstacles she has yet to overcome to go on to a college of medicine.

Maggie: “There’s a whole lot of world out there.”

Hi my name is Maggie and I was born at the University Hospital in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. I am now 20 years old. My Parents are Homer and Marge, and they have been married for 29 years. I have a brother named Bart and a sister named Lisa. As a child I also remember my auntie Thelma living with us. She was attending high school and was room and boarding in our home.

This is what greeted me when I opened the document saved by Maggie titled Interview #1. When I approached Maggie about participating in a series of interviews I could see the anxiety in her face as she searched for a way to decline. Before she had an opportunity to turn me down I proposed an option for her. Instead of sitting down for a taped interview I could give her the questions and she could write out her response. She liked this idea and completed two out of three interviews in this manner. When we were setting up the third interview Maggie agreed to sit down with me. Maggie had initially said she wanted time to think about her response and writing it down would allow her to reword her thoughts, but I believe after completing two sets of questions she came to realize that I was not looking for the one right answer, I was simply asking about her experiences.

This preamble illustrates Maggie's character. She was the first to admit that she is "quiet, shy, sometimes funny, and very independent." Maggie's humour was apparent when I read that first passage she wrote using the characters from an animated sitcom family as her pseudonyms, and why not? I had after all told her to choose the pseudonyms.

During our interview Maggie laughed a great deal, sometimes at her stories and sometimes out of nervousness.

As Maggie stated in her introduction, she was born in Saskatoon, but her home is actually a northern Dene community. Her mother was flown in to Saskatoon where Maggie was born and they were flown home soon after. Maggie moved south with her family at the age of two to begin her life in the city. The move was prompted by her parent's desire to have their three children educated in the city. Maggie remembers time spent with her father between weeks when he was away working in northern Saskatchewan:

We moved from a duplex, our first home in the city to a house in a very nice neighbourhood. This is where I learned some basics from my Father. He didn't have much education, and only went up to grade six. Although he isn't the smartest of dads, he managed to teach me my alphabet and how to count to 100 by the time I was four years old. I also learned to spell three letter words, my name, and my phone number.

Maggie referred to her family as teachers on more than one occasion. As Maggie was the youngest in the family she had a number of people to look up to, "My teachers at home were my Father, Mother, Brother, Sister, and Auntie. Everything that I am or hope to be, I owe to them. From saying my first words, tying my shoes, learning my manners, and learning life skills." It was uplifting to read passages filled with loving memories of Maggie's siblings:

I would have to say that my role model was my sister. She was older, smarter and fun to play with. I enjoyed following her and copying her, it made me feel like I was just as good as her. It annoyed her that I copied her every move, but I know that if I didn't do that then she wouldn't know just how much she really loves me as she saw my heart sink and my eyes water as she tried to get mad at me. My brother is another role model. I was proud of him and how good he was in sports and school. I remember he used to pray with me at night and tuck me in. He made me laugh and always acted silly. He always made me feel prettier than my sister, and that made our bond so special. I would always win our princess pageants. I was dressed the ugliest, but my brother always chose me as the winner. I knew then that he had a big heart for his baby sister. Me.

Of course, like any family, Maggie recalled times when her older brother and sister were not so pleasant. For example, the time when they locked her in the basement.

Maggie began kindergarten with much anticipation as her siblings attended elementary school, her aunt attended high school, and her mother attended SIAST. Maggie's father was home from work and took her to school that first day as her anticipation suddenly turned to fear. Maggie's written narration described her first school experience:

I was to begin school that fall. So here I was already to go the night before, practicing my letters, numbers, and writing. When the first sign of the sun came, I was up and ready, so I thought. Time was going by so quickly, and I was becoming a little girl. I started to get big butterflies in my stomach, and got scared as I saw other children walking to school. I dropped my bag, took off my jacket and started to hold for my dear life onto my Father's leg. I wasn't ready after all. I cried and cried and cried. I told my dad "I don't want to go to school. Everybody will make fun of me, and fight me." "I want to stay home with you." Nothing worked! I was going to school and that was it. My dad grabbed my jacket, my bag, and lifted me over his shoulder and out the door we went. I was going to my first day in Kindergarten. I cried and kicked and tried to throw myself down to the ground. Soon after that I was in the school surrounded by big scary kids towering over me. Then a nice lady walked to me and told me everything will be okay. She brought me into a room with children my height and not that big. The room had toys everywhere, tables and chairs and crayons, and colouring books. I had the best day of my life. When I went home for lunch and I wanted to go back to school with my sister. From then on I have learned so much and enjoyed learning.

From that first day of kindergarten Maggie enjoyed going to school. Maggie recalled some difficulties she experienced, "In elementary school I was a slow reader. I improved my reading after being corrected with my speech. I felt successful." She remained at that school until grade six when she moved with her classmates to another elementary school with a junior high. From there she entered high school with the same trepidation as elementary school.

I started high school when I was 15 years old. It was a lot different than junior high. There were so many people and I felt really small, because I did not know anybody. Within a week classes were in order and I had a daily schedule. I met a few people and became friends with them. There were students from my previous school who also attended my new high school. We always hung out and were in some same classes.

Maggie's concern was soon gone and she felt a sense of belonging. When I asked her to describe her high school Maggie responded, "In school everyone was like one big whole family and they all helped each other."

In Maggie's writing and during our interview Maggie referred to her grade 12 year as being the most difficult. A major transition in Maggie's life occurred at the end of grade 11 when Maggie and her parents moved back North. Maggie enjoyed the summer with her cousins, but she chose to come back to the city to complete grade 12. Throughout the year Maggie remained at the same high school, despite moving from one boarding home to another. At the end of the year Maggie had not successfully completed all of her courses and did not have enough credits to graduate. Maggie returned to the North for the summer and came back to finish the next year. When I asked Maggie if there were times when she wanted to quit she answered:

Yes. Sometimes I felt I didn't do good enough at a certain thing, because there were students smarter than me. I wasn't that great at English. It was my poorest subject. I felt there was just too much work and so little help. Teachers in my English classes seemed to help all the smart kids and never me. Maybe because

I was Native and I wouldn't understand, but not likely. I didn't read much and got lost in a novel, especially when I had no interest in it. So it was difficult to finish work. No matter how many times somebody explained it to me how to write a summary, an essay, or a story, I always left out the important part, the climax. I never got that right. But now when I look back at those difficult times, I realized I didn't push myself that much. And caused all my terrible marks. It's easy to complete something, if you put your thoughts together and use them. That's what I found out when it was too late. But I didn't quit. I stayed in school because it made me feel thoughtful, and I liked to learn more. And I learned so much.

Maggie was quick to take responsibility for her education, "I had difficulties in a few courses, but I did great in others. I didn't give up, even if I was going to fail, or do very terrible. I could always try harder or repeat a class." Maggie did have to repeat those two English courses, but she found success and recognition in others. In her response to the second set of questions she wrote:

I was really good in art & math. Those were my best subjects. In Mathematics B30, I remember getting 100% on an exam out of 3 other B30 classes. I was happy and kind of relieved that I was the only one who aced that test. My teacher had a surprise for me. She gave me a pop, 2 suckers, and some chocolates as a reward. Everybody congratulated me. And my friend Suzy wanted me to help her the rest of the semester. I was happy to help her.

Overall, her grade twelve year proved to be the most challenging and Maggie commented that at one point when she wasn't doing well she felt scared to graduate because she was uncertain of what would come after. At the end of the year Maggie realized her hard work led to the end of one stage of her life and the beginning of another:

Graduation was such a big leap into life. I was blown away by how my emotions stunned me. I felt relief, happiness, excitement, and very frightened. I had no idea what was coming next. My heart was pounding in my chest and I was breathing heavy but quietly as I reached centre stage to receive my diploma. When the ceremonies were over I thought, "That's it? What now?" and I cried as my mom gave me a big hug, because right then I knew I made her proud. She told me that everything would be all right. She said she would be there for me. After that I was all smiles and warm hugs to friends and teachers that I may never see again. I was one step closer to my goals. It was so exciting.

Among the people she acknowledges as contributing to her success are family, friends, and school staff. Each played a different role in supporting her in this time of her life, but Maggie recognized during those last few months at school that there was a main contributing factor to her success:

The #1 reason I graduated was that I felt nothing could stop me. I started to look into the future and tried to figure out what it holds in my favour. And everyday I think of what it has to offer me. And now I could do what I want, when I want and where. Until then, I will always keep my memories of growing up locked in my mind.

Following Maggie's graduation she returned to the North to live with her parents. Last year Maggie began her own family with the birth of a baby boy. This winter Maggie made up her mind to return to the South to further her education. She has applied and been accepted to a Recreational Therapist course at SIAST. Maggie currently remains on the waiting list anticipating the move to the city.

Katherine: "Success is getting as far as you wanted to go."

The three of us sat down at the kitchen table. I sipped on my coffee as Katherine mixed up the pablum for baby Lynn's lunch. Baby Lynn, with her bright blue eyes, watched her mother attentively. Throughout the interviews we watched and laughed as Lynn interrupted our conversations with energetic bursts of baby talk. It was apparent that Katherine was a skillful mother by her ability to anticipate Lynn's needs and attend to them while carrying on a reflective conversation.

Katherine was born and raised in the city. When I asked Katherine how her parents would describe her she replied, "I was very outgoing because my parents always took me to my brother's hockey game and I'd just run around. I wouldn't be shy to do anything, so that was from two years old to about eight." Katherine did have an active



childhood for she was involved in organized sports from an early age. Between her brother's hockey and her gymnastics and softball, Katherine's parents spent many hours driving.

Katherine did not recall many details about her initial school experience, but she did say she was sometimes upset during that first year, "Well it was in the afternoons I had kindergarten so it was the mornings I would be dropped off [at the babysitter's house] because my mom would have to go to work. And sometimes I would cry sometimes I would be perfectly fine." Katherine did not elaborate on the reasons why she was so upset, but did say she did not remember hating kindergarten. The family moved to a new home and Katherine had no trouble making new friends. When she began grade one at a new school she had already established friendships with some of her classmates. The social relationships Katherine developed in elementary and junior high could be attributed to her extroversive personality. When I asked Katherine how her teachers would describe her she laughed and replied:

Talkative. I got in trouble lots for talking, just because I talked too much. Regularly I was a good student; I just talked lots. I wasn't a bad student unless I didn't like the teacher. No, I wasn't a bad student for them either. I just didn't cooperate as well towards the teacher, but I think just about every other student was like that as well.

Homework was a topic frequently brought up by Katherine, "Yup, everything was fine except for my homework and that's actually what I regret. Otherwise I'd probably be a straight A student if I would have did my homework." Katherine's favourite subjects were Math, Computers, "and of course Phys.Ed." She remained involved in sports throughout elementary and junior high. Her fondest memories of middle years were the senior basketball tournament and noon hour intramurals. Interestingly, Katherine commented, "I was pretty shy up until I hit high school and

then I was a lot more outgoing and then I became a little loud.” I had not expected her to describe herself as shy given that throughout all three interviews Katherine had been forthright and candid with all her responses, but that may have come with age.

Although she had an outgoing personality and participated in basketball throughout junior high, once she began high school she did not try out for any teams or participate in school clubs.

When I got to high school that’s when I quit sports. Because I knew there was a high competition, like making the teams so I never bothered because I didn’t think I would make it because lots of the girls that went there were actually pretty good basketball players and that was the only thing I played. Um, the only thing that I was ever involved in was a fundraiser for SADD [Students Against Drinking and Driving].

Katherine really seemed to take ownership for things that were not going as well as they could. This ownership was demonstrated when I asked her to rate her high school experience. Katherine thought for a moment before answering, “A five out of ten because it was more average, it could have been a lot better. I could have actually made my high school a lot better. Just by paying attention more.” She said she went through high school earning average marks. When I asked Katherine about positive school experiences she replied:

Positive experiences, um. The only thing that sticks out is just graduating. And I guess passing my other grades too. Passing the classes I needed to pass, except for the one that I failed. I wasn’t too happy about that because I had to take it over again. Actually I failed biology so I had to take chemistry because I was better with math and there are more math equations in there.

Graduating was very important to Katherine and her family. Throughout her school years she said her parents supported her 100 percent and provided consequences for the few times she skipped class. Katherine remarked, “I know my parents were harder on me than my brother because I was the younger one and probably because I’m

a girl and he's a guy and got into more stuff than I did." She understood why her parents were strict about staying in school because she had the same objective in mind.

When I asked Katherine about her goals during high school she replied:

The fact of graduating and you need a better education in order to make a good living now. Like I know people who haven't graduated and they're doing pretty good, but you'll do even better if you graduate. That was actually my main goal, just to graduate. I didn't want to be working at a grocery store my whole life. I work with ladies that are like 40 and that's all their job is working at the store.

When I asked Katherine if there were any times she wanted to quit school and she responded, "No, not that I can think of. Even when it was really tough for me I never wanted to quit. I just like, I have two more years to go until I'm done. That's it." She had some advice for current students, "Don't listen to your friends that drop out. Those are the bad influences on you. When you think about it there's more things out in the world when we graduate than when you don't graduate because you're limited to what you can do."

When I asked Katherine if she would like to participate in this study I anticipated her experience would be different than some of the visible Aboriginal participants. Many of Katherine's experiences rang true for members in my family. This one in particular, "Some people I would tell them I'm treaty and they're like, 'What? You're Native?' I'm like, 'Yeah.' 'But you look white.'" She explained:

Like, sure I have blond hair and green eyes, but I do have a lot of features that show my Native side in me. Like high cheek bones, I look a lot more like my dad than I do look like my mom.

Katherine grew up in a family that takes pride in both her Aboriginal and European heritages and was taught to not pass judgment on to others. As Katherine

stated, "Until I actually get to know a person I won't judge them." Just as other participants did, she formed heterogeneous groups of friends:

I never went to parties where they pointed out who the white people are and who's not. It's like a lot of mixed races where I go. There'll be some people from Scandinavia, there's like African American, and Native, white, like all kinds of races. In one house I went to there was like ten people in there and there'd be like four different races in there. It didn't bother anyone. Well of course it wouldn't bother anyone because everyone was friends there.

Katherine's non-prejudicial attitude and strength of character showed in her response to a question about discrimination in schools:

I don't know. The schools that I went to really didn't, they weren't really racist. They stuck to their own crowds and stuff, but they weren't really racist towards Natives. When I heard a couple people be racist towards like Aboriginal people behind their backs or something and right away I would tell them to shut-up because I was part of that culture and I don't take racist comments very good.

I would describe Katherine as forward-thinking and independent. At an early age she knew the benefits of continued education as she stated:

When I was in grade eight I thought I'm over halfway done. I have four more years to go and then I'm done. Then whatever I am doing in university, I'll have so many years to do that and then I am done forever. Now I want to be a teacher so I'm not really done school forever because I'll be going back to school and I'll be teaching instead of learning. I will be learning off the kids.

Since our first interview Katherine has moved into an apartment with baby Lynn and her boyfriend. Lack of post-secondary funding has prevented Katherine from beginning university this fall. In spite of this set back her plan remains to continue on with her education next year when finances are more manageable and Lynn is old enough to attend a childcare centre. Katherine's maternity leave is now over and she has returned to work at the same grocery store, this time juggling babysitters instead of schoolwork.

Thomas & Lisa: "I struggled, but I just kept going."

After two participants who had originally agreed to participate could not find the time I enlisted some help and was introduced to Thomas. He had heard a little bit about my research and as I explained it in more detail he told me he had a friend who would be perfect and asked if he could bring her along. What luck I thought; I went to meet one prospective participant and I ended up with two. Thomas and Lisa both worked full time, therefore our interviews were scheduled for evenings when we were all free.

The three of us met twice at my house with my family coming and going through the kitchen. My three children were warned in advance to stay out of the kitchen because we were taping our conversation, but their curiosity got the best of them. The kids coming in did not seem to bother Thomas or Lisa, and they continued with the discussion, even pausing to acknowledge my four year old showing off his newest Barbie. They both worked with youth and were accustomed to interruptions. Neither Thomas nor Lisa had any children, although on occasion Thomas began to say, "When I have kids..." then caught himself, laughed, and added, "If I ever do," as if he was afraid of getting ahead of himself. It was a pleasure to speak with Thomas and Lisa. I never did ask how long they had known each other, but they teased, interrupted, and sometimes finished the other's sentences as long time friends do.

Thomas moved to the city in grade two and attended two elementary schools before returning to his home reserve to complete his grades six to twelve. Even though he did not attend high school in an urban setting it was interesting to listen to Lisa compare and contrast her urban education to his. When asked if the moves bothered him Thomas responded, "I can't really remember, usually when I was younger it was

hard making friends and stuff. Um, but we're a pretty tight family, that's what made it easier. Our family was so close." Thomas described his family:

I have, well I grew up with two brothers, and now I have a little sister, and found out recently I also have an older half-sister and another half-brother, so I have a large extended family. I have a step-sister and three step-brothers. So I have a big family. I think my family played a pretty important role in my education. Um, well when I was younger my parents divorced and I saw all the hardships kinda thing and after I saw that I wanted to better the situation. I think that was a major force in my education.

The hardships Thomas later revealed to Lisa and me centered on living with constant financial strain. When some kids were distressed about having brand name clothing Thomas recalled times when finding laundry detergent to wash his clothes was a concern. Despite any hardship in his family Thomas was able and also the first to graduate. His older brother graduated last year and his younger brother will graduate this year. I asked Thomas if he had chosen on his own to go to school and he replied:

Yes it was our choice. My mom would get us up for school, but then ultimately she said it was our choice and I think it was that freedom that allowed us to see which path was better and we were able to make that decision on our own.

Interestingly, later in the interview when Lisa was talking about family support she brought up a time when her mother also left it up to her to make the ultimate decision as to stay in school or quit:

My mom really encouraged me to go to school. I never really saw it as a choice not to go to school. I would see people not going and I'd think, "What do you do?" Then when I went to high school it got a little harder, I also got lazier. I didn't want to go. In grade 11 I told mom, "I'm going to quit. I'm quitting school." She just looked at me and said, "Go ahead," so I'm like, "Oh that didn't work." (laughs) I don't know why I just decided one day, "I'm not going to go back." I didn't want to go to school anymore. But then I realize now that I did want to, but at the same time I didn't want to. I don't know why. I guess I was just testing to see how much choice I did have. But then because she said that I decided, "I'm going to go back." I did finish on time. I felt supported and she was always there through everything I tried to do.

Both Thomas' and Lisa's mothers were supportive of their education, yet made them responsible for getting it. Coincidentally, a single mother led both families. Lisa recalled, "I felt supported and she was always there through everything I tried to do. She wouldn't push anything on me." Lisa's family moved around before settling in the city.

Well, my family moved around a lot so my first, like from kindergarten to grade one I was in A. Then from there, grades two to three I was in B. We moved back and forth from A to C, it's a small town. In grade four we moved to A and then I was there until grade five, then in grade five until I graduated I was in the city. I moved around a lot when I was younger. We finally stabilized when I got here.

When I asked Lisa what she remembered about her early years in school she revealed:

I was very quiet, passive. I never spoke up in class, I didn't have much friends being the fact that I kept to myself. I never really enjoyed school socially, like I would go, but I remember not really enjoying it because I didn't have the peers, the friends. I don't know if it had to do because I was Aboriginal or just because the type of person that I was. The fact that I moved around so much, I couldn't make friends. Then when I did make friends it was mostly... it was very hard. By the time I moved to the city, my first day actually, I was greeted with like open arms from my classmates and it was a change because I started making friends. By the time I hit junior high my mom was trying to move again to Regina. Then I said, "No. I'm not going through this again, trying to make new friends and establish a place for myself." I was glad when we decided to stay here.

Lisa found moving in and out of smaller communities hindered the process of developing friendships. Once she settled in the city she said she felt a sense of belonging and began to get involved in school activities. My family also moved just as I entered junior high and I remembered what a difficult time it was for me, but Lisa felt the opposite. She attributed her positive experience to the encouragement of a teacher who taught her to believe in herself:

Actually, junior high was the best school years of my school life because I was involved in basketball and that really helped me. In junior high I had a coach. She encouraged me to try out. I didn't think I would make it, but I thought I might as well. I made it and that's when I really started getting more involved. She was the main person at that time to push me. It started with sports and once she got to know me, she encouraged me to do other things, she really made me see myself. Through coaching techniques and stuff she started showing me that I could do more, that I had more potential. Teachers would say you can do more and I always was the person who wanted to blend in. I never wanted to be the person to stand out. I didn't want to make a fuss. I just wanted to get through. She pushed me to actually show some of my strengths and to be proud of the stuff I can do.

Thomas also believed that being involved in activities allowed him to find a sense of belonging and made the transition into new schools smoother:

I think what made it easier was the um, I just liked getting involved in extra-curricular activities. That's how I made friends. Everything out there. Sports, even music I was into. Anything like even that Kids For Saving Earth. It was awesome, I did everything I could. You know, in a way it was quite easy on my mom, being a single mom. One less kid to look after.

I asked Thomas if it was difficult for him to join new clubs and I promptly realized what a strong character Thomas had when he responded, "No, not really. It was just, I thought of it like if no one wants to be my friend it was, I didn't care. I was busy with other things." There was no arrogance in his answer, only laughter as he was quick to add, "Not to say I didn't have any friends." It is easy to picture Thomas as a zealous elementary student as he still had that enthusiastic look when he recollected the numerous clubs and activities he was involved in. His involvements included evenings spent dancing with his family as well.

Yeah, I was dancing since five. I spent a lot of hours doing it. We always went to dry dances and we had our, my mom had this friend who was taking SUNTEP and her kids and my mom's kids made a dance group and that's how we traveled a lot that way. So that's what we'd do, we'd have fun.

Thomas' talent and passion for dancing remains and was recognized at northern winter festival jigging competition where he placed first in the adult category this year.



Thomas and Lisa agreed that negative peer pressures were there regardless of the extra-curricular activities they were involved with, but as Thomas said, “I could have been doing a lot of other things.” Lisa added:

I think they help you make the right choices for yourself. Even unknowingly because I mean the sports that you choose to do, anything you choose to do, will give you a place to belong and that is the biggest thing you need when you are younger. It's that sense of belonging, if you don't have it that's when you start dropping out of school and not caring anymore if you do good or bad. You learn how to challenge, compete, that helps you.

Academic competition was one motivating factor for the two of them. Thomas confessed that he had to be the one with the highest marks, “Especially when I was in my high school years on my reserve. When I moved back with all my cousins, that was good competition, I liked it.” Lisa recalled getting a 50% on an assignment and feeling embarrassed when the other students revealed their higher marks. This was enough of an incentive for her to work harder. She did not necessarily want the highest marks or to draw attention to herself; however she wanted to fit in.

Once Thomas moved back to the reserve he found he did not fit in at first, “It was a major change when I moved from the city to the reserve. I was more accepted in the urban setting, because when I went back there it was like, ‘Oh, city boy, blah, blah.’” Lisa also went through a time when she struggled to find her place.

A lot of times I remember in school, although I wasn't treated as, “Oh she's the Indian girl,” you know there's a lot of times I was told, “Oh, Lisa you're not like them,” like the other Aboriginal people. So I mean in my classes I was over-dominated by non-Aboriginal people or not visually Native people. A lot of times that would be part of the reason I'd try to be quiet so I didn't have to draw attention to myself, even more than I already had. I know when I went home too, I constantly had that, “Oh you're an apple, you're like a white person.” I'm like, “What is that?” I got offended. That was part of the reason I'd keep quiet.

Although Lisa downplayed this experience, she went on to explain how she kept silent when her peers pointed out that she did not seem to fit the Aboriginal stereotype:

When I started realizing that I found myself doing that. Understanding well you are an Indian. You are going to look like it no matter what you do. It was hard though. I was such a loner in the younger years, because my old town wasn't the, it was a racist place. Everywhere you turned there was someone against Aboriginal people. I'd try to keep quiet so I didn't offend anybody.

Lisa described her struggle as an Aboriginal student in junior high:

I don't know if it's being Aboriginal, but you have to try harder. You have to try harder to be accepted and you have to try harder and conform to what they expect you to be, not who or what you were taught. You can't go to school with a bannock sandwich because that's not normal to them. You know what I mean, you have to conform to what they think is right. You have to use their language. You'd get laughed at if you didn't. I saw it so many times in elementary school. And yeah, sports did help, it was one way of saying I can be as good as you are. I had to watch other Aboriginal students not be accepted because they didn't try and it could have been for various reasons. It's like you have to try harder to not be ridiculed or teased. You get an X the first time they see you and you have to show them, "I can be like you."

This struggle continued into high school where Lisa and her best friend drifted apart:

I didn't really care to make friends with anybody else. I just found everyone so phony, trying to impress everybody else, trying to be in the in-crowd. I had the opportunity in grade 10 to be in the crowd. I made some bad choices in grade 10 and after that I realized it wasn't worth it. To pretend to be someone who I'm not wasn't worth it so I just stuck to who I felt comfortable around. We just hung out all around the school; we didn't commit ourselves to one crowd of people.

A few minutes later Thomas pointed to Lisa and presented his experience moving up into the upper grades:

Yeah, it was more or less different from Lisa. When I was in grade seven I would be looking up to the older people who were my cousins. You just know everybody except they were so much cooler. Then when I got there it's like am I cool? What's the big idea? I was in grade 12 and I'm like I don't get it. I was just beating myself up and like trying to be in the in-crowd or something. But back then on the reserve there were so little people. We were just trying to see who would be the stupidest and make people laugh I guess.

Thomas found his revelation during grade twelve funny. Thomas saw his class size drop as each grade progressed, but he never discontinued because of these reasons:

I wanted to make a difference in my family. We come from a very poor, I guess background growing up. I guess I made a pact to myself that I would never do that. If I had kids, I always say that I'd never do that to my kids. I guess that was my little pact to myself.

Lisa wanted to leave school a few times, but attributed her persistence to the support she received from others:

Like when I was growing up all I kept hearing was, "You are going to graduate, you are going to become somebody who will make a difference because that is who you are." That is what I kept hearing when I was in junior high and high school and in elementary different teachers would look at me and say that. I wanted to show them that I can do this and not let them down. There's this drive that you get from people when you hear things. Then you think okay I gotta do this.

This support at times felt like pressure to Lisa. At one point in grade twelve while contemplating the uncertainty of her future, she nearly left school:

Yeah, my mind was like I'm just going to quit. I kinda got sick of having all that pressure on me, that I'm going to do something, that I'm going to be somebody and I'm thinking well what if I don't? You know what a big deal I would think, what if I do all those things and it won't amount to anything. You know okay, I'll go to university, I'll get a degree, I'll end up with a job, then what? What do I do? The thing that made me stop and think was my mom saying, "Go ahead." She kinda challenged me. My god, I'm an adult now. She's letting me decide so I could do it for myself. That's when I realized it was for me and not for them.

I was amazed at the insight the both of them had during the final months of high school and commented on their ability to look beyond their immediate problem. It seems that so many of us allow ourselves to be consumed by our problems. Thomas agreed, "Exactly, like it clouds over their whole situation at that time and they're in a little box and they can't escape it for that moment but they have to realize that it will pass." I thought about his current job as a recreation worker on his reserve and asked him what advice he had for the youth he works for. Thomas laughed and began:

I'd ask them well what are you going to do? What are you going to do for the rest of your life? Like, for me it's frustrating when I go home like when they're

just complaining about this and that. I'm like well stop complaining and do something. You have your grade 12. They're just scared, I don't know. Even if they'd try it and even if it's too hard at least they'd have tried it. Then the kids will see them and "well I want to do that too." There's just one step and I just want to show them that there is so much out there and it's not just here and the attitude you have right now is not going to matter out there. You might be cool right now, but you're not going to be cool forever. I'll be cheeky with them, but you know it's how I get through to them. I'll ask them questions. Like where are you going to be like ten years from now? What do you see yourself doing? What do you need to do to get there? You have to stay in school then. You just have to work on it. Sure it's hard work now, I struggled, but I just kept going.

Thomas did keep going and continues to pursue his passion for sport. He will be moving in the fall to begin a Recreation and Leisure Management program at SIAST.

Going to university was always in Lisa's long term plans. She knew she wanted to work with people and thought perhaps as a social worker or psychologist. As she explores her options Lisa began taking university evening classes last year while she continued to work at a youth centre. It is interesting how chance brings people together and allows more doors to open. As a result of participating in this study, Lisa is now interested in exploring a career as an educational psychologist who works with schools to help students reach their potential. As we said good-bye after our last interview Lisa confessed that she and Thomas had continued our discussion of their school experience when they were on a road trip the past weekend. They are learning more about each other and reflecting on their own experiences.

### Weaving the Themes

I began this thesis with the statement: throughout our lives we connect with others. I believe these relationships do one of two things; they either take away from or strengthen your spirit. When I think of one's spirit, I imagine a rope. Every person is born with this rope. The rope connects us and is strengthened by our connections to

three things: our environment, the people in our environment, and ourselves. The rope guides us in positive directions when we are uncertain. It pulls us up when we are down. It is strong enough to support others when they need us. As I met with each participant and listened to his or her experiences of growing up and attending school I realized how strong their spirits are. Despite places and people who could have unravelled their ropes, they remained resilient.

I chose to organize the next three chapters around the relationships participants have with their environment, people in that environment, and themselves. Within these broad themes I will discuss smaller themes that emerged from their stories. As you read each participant's narrative in this chapter, it was apparent what diverse lives and personalities they had. As I explored each participant's story I found many ties to the others. These connections revealed both similarities and differing beliefs and experiences for each theme. Following a discussion of each theme, I have combined the voices of six participants and created a collective narrative. This narrative has been written using the words participants chose to express their beliefs and experiences. Lastly, a list of recommendations for each topic will be presented. You may find the recommendations listed in Appendix A. These recommendations will help strengthen the rope.

## CHAPTER FIVE: OUR ENVIRONMENT

### Initial Experiences

For three of the participants, their initial secondary school experience began back in junior high with the decision of which high school to attend. Discussions between the students and family and friends ensued. It was with friends that the participants shared high school tales of their older siblings or friends. Sometimes tales were told to justify the reputation the school had, therefore the positive and negative was shared. The much anticipated grade nine tours in June helped demystify the school and some of its legends.

No matter how much planning goes into the start up of the school year, for me it feels as though I am always winging it. Those new grade tens enter the school and begin firing questions at you: Where do I go? Who's Mr. Smith? Do I have a homeroom? Where do I get my timetable? By the second week everyone in the school seems to have settled into the groove and found the answers to most of the questions. The participants began high school with the comfort of reconnecting with peers from their previous school and soon found their way thanks in part to the tours in June.

One participant remembered Freshie days at the beginning of the school year as a means of finding a sense of belonging and connecting with her peers. Her recollections were all positive and she felt it was a good way to get students and staff together. Her story prompted my unfavourable memories of Freshie week. Many schools ban some of the activities my fellow students were forced to participate in. The

school this participant attended was responsive and allowed students the option of not participating, and activities focused on building relationships and school spirit. Another participant felt Freshie week was a good transitional event that allowed students to celebrate their move into the final stage of their education and was disappointed his school had discontinued it. It seems that students expected some activities or events at the start up of the school year; activities that may have introduced them to school staff and students sooner and fun events that promoted a positive school climate. Perhaps the participants left their junior high with a mini graduation celebrating their success and wanted that celebration to continue right into high school.

One participant suggested the school host social events where families are invited. This would promote community and allow families and school staff to meet in a positive and informal means. This suggestion coincides with Kronick's (1994) statement, "The school does not exist in a vacuum and is part of the community and society" (p.4). Whatever the event may be, schools need to support students in those first few weeks of high school by helping them find a sense of belonging. If students "at-risk" do not feel welcomed in those first few weeks, this contributes to the likelihood that they will leave school early. Kehoe and Echols (1994) agreed that "developing a greater sense of belonging to the school, on the part of Native children, may be an indirect means of reducing school dissatisfaction and subsequent dropping out" (p.66).

If schools focus on building school community by providing interactive and fun orientation activities the natural outcome would be a greater school spirit. School spirit and pride would be further enhanced with planned activities throughout the year aimed

at getting as many students as possible involved. Pride in one's school influences the amount of respect students and staff have towards their physical environment and the people within it.

#### Initial Experiences: Participants' Voice

*I was scared. I heard lots of bad things about that school. That it was a rough school and it, there was fighting all the time. Lot of that proved wrong. It wasn't very tough and the teachers were nice there. Some teachers were hard, but I knew quite a few teachers because they knew my brother because he went to that school too.*

*I started high school and it was big. I just heard it was more freedom. More freedom to choose your classes and choose what you want to do in the future. You have to pick your classes for your university career. It was kinda weird being so big and I wasn't really looking forward to high school. My best years were junior high and after that in high school I kinda got lost in the crowd. I didn't play in any sports. I did nothing.*

*Uh, the first day I went there I thought I was going to get lost because it's such a big school you're not used it. Actually during those tours in grade nine I didn't know where I was. Like you know we had someone guiding us through the school and I still didn't know where I was. It was like all of a sudden we ended up back in the same spot where we started, but once I figured out where all my classes were I was fine. I figured out how the school worked. It's just a bunch of squares put together.*

*I knew it was going to be kinda tough going to high school, but there's always going to be teachers around to help you. Some teachers that you won't like. Some teachers that you'll get along with perfectly fine. That's all I expected. Yeah, I think*



*the first day of school too when students are inside their class the principal will go around to each class and introduce themselves.*

*If you get too overly enthusiastic about it and it doesn't meet your expectations you either get a really big downer or you like, sulk. Whereas I didn't have any expectations of what it's supposed to be like or what you are supposed to do or who you're supposed to meet up with. All my friends had gone there a year before I had. So they were sophomore I think. Where I was just a junior. But I didn't care. Hell, I make new friends all over the place. I've met lots of people, some actors, producers, and all types of things like that. So I'm pretty much comfortable in any situation.*

*Grade nine tours, they did that in English class. That's what our English teacher did. If there was a new person you'd get assigned a person. I got assigned this one exchange student. That's who I showed around. Basically if you assign someone to someone else you don't get a gossip person who's going to leave you at the drop of a hat. "Oh, look there's my friends." You don't get a person like that. Hopefully you get a person who knows their way around the school who knows certain rules about the school so they won't sit there and gossip or see someone they like and go and come back 25 minutes later.*

*The tours actually helped with what kind of environment you are going to be in. Yeah because then they would feel they were a part of something. Like they were free to go in because then on their first day entering school they would already have more confidence because they already had contact with students. Then that'll make them a bit happier. I think the reason that students from the north left was because everything is too different and they cannot adapt to a change. I think the work was probably*

*difficult for them because I know that students in the north have just a few students in the whole school, and when they come to a high school the student population is much larger than what they are used to.*

*Students had the option to be freshied. It was fun because the new students would be participating and wouldn't feel left out. There would be face painting, and some drastic things like shaving cream or eggs in your hair. Some students would be covered in paint from head to toe. Toilet paper would be wrapped around some students too. Some kids were shy and liked to be in an orderly fashion so they would get mad if they were freshied. So then the school changed the way freshie day was. They should have barbecues, like little socials with kids and parents, where you can meet each other.*

#### Recommendations:

- Identify the reputation your school has and take action to address the issues creating any negative reputation.
- Provide tours and an introduction to the school for feeder schools in June and offer additional tours prior to start up in August.
- Organize events that focus on building school spirit, community, and pride.

#### Uncomfortable Areas

People find discomfort in many areas for many reasons. The participants in this study were quick to recall places in their high school where either they felt uncomfortable or they knew of people who were. It was interesting to find that in most cases at the root of their discomfort was territorialism. The other reason was simply overcrowding.

It is natural for people to find places where they can sit, hang out, and meet without worry. After visiting in those places for a period of time one might even get the feeling that it is their spot and feel a little frustrated when someone else sits there. Teachers see this when a new student accidentally sits in someone's desk or when a visitor parks his or her car in the teacher's usual spot. This ownership we tend to claim of public areas, how far can it go before it is harmful? From the stories I gathered all participants were aware of groups of students occupying certain areas of the school.

It is not uncommon for high schools, particularly large ones, to find their student population broken down into groups based on ethnicity, culture, or economic class. I will address these student groups and more in a section under Our Relationships. I felt that the stories of places in the school fit the theme of Our Environment because they spoke of environments students entered that evoked some feeling of unease. This unease can be connected to peer relationships and discrimination. In the following narrative you will discover many of the themes to come are embedded in their stories.

After one participant recalled an incident where a group of students assaulted another when he entered a school arcade I found myself asking if she knew of kids who were afraid to go into certain areas of the school. She answered yes, but didn't elaborate. As I came to the realization that our schools are often a reflection of our society, I was appalled. This is just not right, students fearing locations in the school. I worry for my children's safety getting to school. Safety should not be a school issue. Another participant brought up the issue of organized gangs in our schools. She suggested school staff be educated on gangs. This is not just a societal problem; it is also a school problem.

Another issue participants brought up was the overcrowding in their schools. Crowds themselves did not bother participants, but when crowds of hungry students invade the cafeteria or spill out of their classrooms into narrow halls, look out. The participants are correct; many of our schools are overcrowded. One participant avoided the cafeteria altogether because of the pressing crowd. Another participant suggested teacher supervisors be replaced with uniformed security in the schools because students were no longer complying with staff. It may be that students were more likely to comply with teachers they respected, and staff need to work on creating a positive environment through consistent supervision and relationship building. Again, a participant felt teachers were not trained to identify and take action against growing gang activities in the school during their supervision.

How do students deal with uncomfortable areas in the school? The most prevalent means was avoidance. If avoiding the area was not an option they brought a few friends along or in one case, a tough looking cousin. This response was consistent with Bazylac's (2002) participant responses. Three of the participants who spoke of areas that were dominated by certain groups were not afraid to "glare" right back or respond if they were confronted.

How do schools deal with uncomfortable areas? From surveys and observations of interactions among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in British Columbian schools, Kehoe and Echols (1994) recommended:

schools at the point of "doing something" about a specific school problem conduct a needs assessment which targets variables thought to be related to the problem. A second step is to arrange for unstructured observations in the school by "strangers" to the specific school structure. We believe these ethnographic observations to be an invaluable supplement to other forms of data collection. The third step is to review programs and research germane to the identified

problems and implement the required program. The last step is to monitor and evaluate the program. (p.73)

One participant told me that there was nothing a school could do to prevent students from congregating in certain areas of the school and creating intimidating environments, but I disagree. The first step is acknowledging the problem.

### Uncomfortable Areas: Participants' Voice

*There's this one hallway where all the jockies [male athletes] would sit and like you would never catch like an Aboriginal person walking down there alone. There was always four or five of them walking down there together. I don't know why. I always walked down there alone. I didn't care. Nobody confronted them or anything. I had my cousin. Everybody is scared of her.*

*Uncomfortable areas? Well it's the arcade. It was dominated by Aboriginal kids, but then the non-Aboriginal kids that were friends with the Aboriginal kids would come in there. Like, you know Matthew? He would be really mean to non-Aboriginal kids that would come in there. That one day they had a boy, he threatened two other boys to help him, they took this boy outside and they had him upside down hanging upside down from the steps. They were trying to empty his pockets. That boy went into seizures or something, like that. People were always stealing from there. Some people gave it a bad reputation, but when they weren't at school everybody would go there. I don't know I haven't been there in two years it might have changed.*

*Umm, I hung out in the rotunda lots. Basically that's the only place I went to. I did not like hanging in the commons or whatever. Yeah, I didn't go to the commons because everyone in there wasn't really the people I hung around with. I didn't like going in there. Some of my friends they go in there, but I didn't. I would stay away*

*from there, even though it was right next to the rotunda. Plus I didn't like going into the cafeteria because there were too many pushy people in there. It was, it almost looked like they were shoving. They were pushing around people in the cafeteria for the food, but I always just went to the store for food.*

*I didn't feel comfortable going in the lounge. I was stared down lots. Well, the majority that hung around in there were Natives and of course me, I don't look Native so like I was stared down a lot, like nobody would say anything to me. I don't think anything. If one person is going to say something I'm going to say something back. That's the way I am.*

*Maybe the lounge. I don't know why. Maybe because all of those chatty, wanna be thugs are there. Like I can interact with them, but don't really find the need to. You have someone go, "What's up, what's up." And it's like, "I don't know what is up?" Then they think oh she's not with it. But then you go up to someone else and you know the handshake and they're like, "That's my bro, that's my sister." Something like that to me and I don't care. Who cares if I'm your bro or your sister or your cousin cause most of the population, nearly half of the population of Natives there are my relatives. So I'm like I don't care. You're not getting special favour from me. I don't give special favours to anyone.*

*Oh if you look in there you'll see barely any Caucasians. You'll see mostly Indians, there's the West Side, there's the, there's not very many IP [Indian Posse gang] there, but there is some West Side Baby Thugs [gang]. There are certain areas that seem to be a certain gangs area. If you walk through there you get glared. It's*

*hard to work on me because I can glare right back, but certain people aren't that fortunate they think they're picking a fight.*

*They could put in a code where they can't wear baseball caps, they can't wear their colours, they can't wear certain things to school. Teachers should get training from one of those workers who work with gang affiliated people and see what the gangs are. They complain about this, and yet they're not dealing with the real cause.*

*You know how Mr. Johnson has good relationship with most of his classes. They didn't really consider him a teacher. If they saw him in the hallway and he told them to quit doing something they wouldn't listen to him they'd think, "Oh it's just Mr. J, no big deal." So, they need somebody they'll actually listen to and know they'll get into trouble if they don't listen. Yeah. Teachers are too nice, but that's good to have a relationship with the students. They shouldn't get teachers to be supervisors. It wouldn't work. They should get like security guards or something. Get flare guns and make them look real.*

#### Recommendations:

- Review harassment policy and take time to educate all students and staff on forms of harassment and the discipline protocol.
- Educate school staff on gangs in Saskatchewan.
- Survey students on school safety and review current student supervision practices.
- Have an impartial party identify "trouble" areas of the school and take action to address the problem.

## School Activities

I complimented my husband one day on how well he has become at public speaking. He told me the first time he was asked to speak to a crowd was at a student leadership conference. He had made the senior basketball team in grade ten and in grade twelve he was their captain so was asked to talk about his experiences in sport. What a coincidence I told him. I too spoke at a youth conference in grade twelve, only I was speaking about the experience of being a teen parent. As I started questioning him we realized we had been at the same conference and had even traveled out in a teachers car together! So much for love at first sight; we didn't even remember each other when we met again in university.

As we talked about our involvements in school clubs and activities I realized what opposite experiences we had. He spent every spare minute in the gym and I avoided it completely. If it were not for the mandatory physical education class I probably would not have gone in. My husband recalls the practices, games, and team trips as character building. The rowdy pep rallies boosted his confidence and pride. The coaches were mentors and role models and he uses their inspirational words today when he addresses his teams before a game. He has kept his old leather school jacket and wears it to the annual alumni games. I just don't get it.

Five of my participants did. Not all of them were involved in secondary sport teams, but five had spoke about being part of extra-curricular activities in junior high. For some, their best memories of school were being part of a team. They recalled how busy they were, the fun they had in school after everyone had gone home, and the excitement of preparing for a tournament. School for them was not just a place of



academic learning, it was a second home, a place where they found comfort. In this home they connected with fellow students and teachers. They found a place where they belonged.

The sense of belonging was important to the participants. Their teammates became their friends and supported them in a positive way. With so much of their free time spent engaged in positive activities they were able to resist much of the negative peer pressure. They did admit that the negative pressure was there no matter what they were involved with, but the option of belonging to a team or club was more appealing. One participant indicated that maintaining a healthy lifestyle was important to her coach and she did not want to let her coach down by smoking. Two of the participants overwhelmingly agreed that students want to belong to a group and if there are no school teams or clubs available for them they will attach themselves to less than positive groups just to find that belonging.

I found it amazing how the previous high involvement in sport changed for two of the participants when they entered high school. Both of them had been affiliated with teams in elementary or junior high school, and the community, but in this new environment they expressed feelings of loss and intimidation because of the volume of students. The thought of competing with so many students for a place on a team was overwhelming. One participant called to mind the beginning of the basketball season where she cut herself from the team because she did not believe she had the skills. She was later told by the coach that she would have made it and was encouraged to try out again the following year. With her confidence depleted she never did try out for another team. This story made me think of the many shy students I have encouraged to

enter an activity. Their hesitation came from underestimating their ability, feeling uncomfortable in foreign change rooms and facilities, and being too timid to introduce themselves to the teacher advisor to find out more information. One participant noted that it is the student who gives up on joining a team who often gives up completely with school. Results from the study comparing school leavers and graduates (HRDC, 1993, p.29) supported this participant's claim with statistics citing forty-five percent of school leavers, compared to twenty-seven percent of school graduates, did not participate in extra-curricular activities at school. It seems logical then to identify the needs and interests of all students and provide them with the opportunity and support in joining an activity.

Sports are not for everyone. I was never interesting in competing. Participants acknowledged the lack of fun non-competitive activities in high school. They suggested activities that targeted more than the athletes, allowing participation by all. Participants reminisced about intramural activities in junior high. The lack of intramural sports in high school was seen as a void. Participants in this thesis research did not discuss their involvement in non-athletic extra-curricular activities. Students do not have to actively participate to find that sense of belonging; they can discover it as spectators. Being part of an audience, supporting peers as they share their talents in athletics, music, drama, or break dancing can be just as enjoyable and provide students with that inclusion.

#### School Activities: Participants' Voice

*When I first came to high school from junior high I was kind of a sports enthusiastic so I chose the track team. All the things I did in there was the long jump, discus and shotput. I just liked getting involved in extra-curricular activities. That's*

*how I made friends. Everything out there. Sports, even music I was into. Anything like even that Kids For Saving Earth. It was awesome, I did everything I could.*

*Actually, those were my best school years of my school life because I was involved in basketball and that really helped me. So it started with basketball and from there to volleyball and then from there I joined every other team that I could. I was busy all year. Then I started joining outside things. Then I started just getting involved more in school and finding myself as a person and my strengths and stuff.*

*They give you a place to belong. That is the biggest thing because when you are growing up you need that place to belong. Like if I came here and I didn't do that any person who wanted to be my friend I would have attached myself to. I would have done just what they did to keep that friendship. It could have been a totally different outcome if that didn't happen. If what happened didn't happen. The fact that I attached myself to the type of crowd where school was an important factor, I probably would have gone the other way.*

*I think they help you make the right choices for yourself. Even unknowingly because I mean the sports that you choose to do, anything you choose to do, will give you a place to belong and that is the biggest thing you need when you are younger. It's that sense of belonging, if you don't have it that's when you start dropping out of school and not caring anymore if you do good or bad. You learn how to challenge, compete, that helps you.*

*I think what actually helps students to stay in school is sports programs. I know lots of the dropouts are into basketball and volleyball, but they just don't want to join a team because I think they don't really want to get to know the other people. Mostly it's*

*like jocks that join those teams. They try to get along with everyone else, but the dropouts just don't want to get along with anyone except who they hang around with.*

*The kids that I knew from junior high were all trying out for a team right because that's where all of them went. There was more of a competition base and I got scared I guess, that I wouldn't make it and I didn't want to fail, blah, blah, blah. So I more or less cut myself from the team right because there was this one practice and I just decided not to go. I thought I'd rather be by myself, but I just gave it all up. Not just the sports, everything. I mean I kinda just drifted through high school and decided okay I'm just going to pass.*

*When I got to high school that's when I quit sports. I knew there was a high competition, like making the teams so I never bothered because I didn't think I would make it. Lots of the girls that went there were actually pretty good basketball players and that was the only thing I played.*

*I found that they didn't have very much intramurals and I liked intramurals. I always participated in them. Even though it would be hard to kinda team up the entire school, like for the people who show up you can team up. And like put them into two different groups or four different groups or however many you need. I don't remember hearing about intramurals. When I was in junior high there was a lot more things to do. There were a lot more things going on at lunchtime than there was in high school. Besides basketball and badminton, there needs to be like fun little things. Like we had um, I don't know what that was called. They would stack a bunch of mats up and each team, there would be two people at each team standing by the mats and then there would be like five people running towards the mat and the two people would help them*

*get over. This would be at least ten feet high. You would be struggling to get up, it was a challenge. You know, little fun things like that.*

*They should have more activities that involve more than one certain group of people. Like, um instead of having intramurals, have something with the Aboriginal people and people who hang out in the gardens [location in the school], like cause most of those people are the ones I find get in trouble. And then the jocks seem to get let go and I don't find that fair.*

*They used to have that karaoke, but they quit that after awhile because students would start to sing songs that had swear words in them. They had one guy, the guy they had hired to run the karaoke. If students went up and requested a certain song, he didn't care. So, after that this guy, every week they brought the karaoke in he would go up and sing the exact same song. After a while they just shut it down. One person wrecked it for everybody.*

#### Recommendations:

- Introduce students to coaches and club advisors at the start of the school year.
- Orientate students to school facilities and allow opportunities for students to spend time and become comfortable in the areas prior to formal team tryouts.
- Identify student interests and provide supervised opportunities within the school to showcase their talents. For example, breakdancing shows, karaoke cabarets, art exhibits.
- Provide fun, non-competitive fitness activities that encourage all students to participate.

- Organize an activity fair during orientation week or grade nine tours where information on all school co-curricular and extra-curricular activities can be obtained.

## CHAPTER SIX: OUR RELATIONSHIPS

### Family

For the past four years I have been involved with student-led conferences twice a year. Traditionally it is a student's parents who attend the parent teacher interviews, but I have rarely sat down with two parents and the student. Leading up to the conferences I encourage students to bring an adult they live with or someone who plays a significant role in their care. I have had students bring their kokum, aunt and younger cousins, older brother, social worker, and foster parent. I have had boys bring their girlfriends and girls bring their babies.

I put out the cookies and juice and have a few colouring books and crayons ready for the little ones. When the students arrive they introduce their family to me and begin to go through a self-assessment and their portfolio. When the student has finished, their family is invited to join the discussion. Just when you think you know a student an entirely different perspective is uncovered. It almost seems as if the student lives in two different worlds, the school world and the out of school world, representing a different part of him or her in each.

The participants in this study gave brief descriptions of their worlds. Three of the six participants came from single mother homes, and the others were raised in two parent homes. Half the participants in this study challenge research that indicates "students from single-parent households are considerably more likely to drop out than those who come from a household in which both parents are present" (Foster, Tillecze,

Hein, & Lewko, 1994, p.81). Four of the participants had either step or half siblings in their family. Only one participant was born and raised in the city where she graduated. The five others had moved between rural and urban communities, on more than one occasion. The histories of the six participants are unique and demonstrate the diverse family units children are a part of in society today. Our Canadian culture is one that no longer reflects the nuclear family structure (if there ever was such a thing).

#### Family: Participants' Voice

*Well I grew up with two brothers, and now I have a little sister, and found out recently I have an older half-sister and another half-brother, so I have a large extended family. I have a step-sister and three step-brothers. So I have a big family.*

*I have one sister and two brothers from my mom and my dad. Then my dad has six other kids. I am the oldest from my mom's kids and I'm seventh youngest from my dad's. My dad's oldest child is maybe 31. The youngest one in my family just turned 10. My dad has 11 grandchildren.*

*Well I have a very extended family. I consider my cousins and some of my nieces like brothers and sisters even though I only have three real brothers, no sisters, well I have step sisters, but they're not, they're from my stepdad. He branched out after the divorce. He never stayed with us for more than three years. Um, well, I come from a really weird family. It's true.*

*I come from a single parent household. I was seventeen months when... after my Dad found out my mom was pregnant with another kid he decided to leave so I have a younger brother from my father, but I have two other brothers from her first marriage.*



*I have lived with my mom and dad. I have an older brother and he hasn't lived here. He moved out when he was about 17 years old. Well, in and out until he was 19. Now he has a kid and a girlfriend.*

*Like I have relatives all over Canada and all over the States, but most of them I'm like, "Who are you?" "Oh you're a relative. I'm your cousin's sister's brother." I'm like, "Okay, that makes you what? My nephew? No, third cousin removed?" This is a little joke I always like to tell people. From my family, we have to go to a different province or a different state to actually find someone to date. I'm not lying. We're related to practically all the reserves. There're people in our family, we don't like to um, if you are, my cousin is dating that person and they have kids together, we'll consider that person family therefore anyone in that family we can't date.*

*I'm not on the reserve very often. I've been there probably at least three times over my whole entire life. Once for my Granny's funeral, or no that was for her wake, I didn't go there for her funeral. Um, and then a couple times for like family reunions or something like that. We stayed at my Granny's place.*

#### Recommendations:

- Be conscious of the unique and diverse home life of our youth.
- Provide opportunities for connections between the school and students' extended family, through for example, student-led conferences where students choose the family members to bring.
- Increase the opportunities for the building of school and family connections.

## Family Support

I cannot imagine how difficult it would have been to complete school if I did not have the support of my family. From an early age I realized that school was important and my family reinforced this with their praise and encouragement. My inner strength was magnified with their support. The reality in our society is that not every parent is supportive of his or her child's continued education. For one participant, there were times throughout her middle and secondary years when her parents asked her to leave school and stay at home. They did support her education, but at those particular times she was needed at home and home took priority over school. In grade eleven she had the inner strength to confront her parents and demand they allow her to stay in the school of her choice. At that point they moved closer to where she needed to live and allowed her education to take priority.

The remaining five participants acknowledged nothing less than the full support of their families in the completion of their education. They recalled family members helping with math problems and accounting assignments. They remembered being told of the consequences of skipping classes. They thought back to the mornings they just wanted to remain in bed and how their mothers woke them up. Memories of fathers and older brothers teaching them how to count and write their names before they started kindergarten were among the first recollections of their families' support of their learning.

One of the most significant areas of family support was the freedom parents gave their son or daughter to make their own decisions. Participants felt that they were not forced to go to school, but encouraged. When one participant was contemplating

leaving school, one mother's strategy was to tell her to go ahead. The gamble paid off and the participant did stay in school realizing she was continuing for her own benefit. Family gave advice that participants could take or leave. Extended family served as role models and commended participants on their accomplishments. Participants were told of the benefits of education, and then given unconditional support in its attainment. One participant made an insightful comment about realizing she was not getting her education for anyone else but herself.

The values of personal goal setting and commitment seemed to stem from the home. Participants felt their families would accept them whether they met their goals or had to try again. Two participants had older brothers who had left school and the participants decided not to allow that to happen to them. This finding contradicts research that reports, "adolescent dropouts generally came from larger families and have older siblings who have also dropped out" (Foster et al., 1994, p.82). In contrast, two participants had older brothers who graduated from high school and the participants wanted to follow their brothers' examples.

#### Family Support: Participants' Voice

*If you don't have that support system or have someone who really doesn't care if you go to school or not it's pretty easy to drop out. If you have someone there who's maybe not pushing you to do it, but giving you encouragement then those days when you feel like quitting you think no, I'm strong, I know I am.*

*My brother was the first one who taught me how to handwrite my own name and I was probably like six or seven years old and I was handwriting my own name. I have one aunty who teaches, or who was able to be a teacher and I believe she has her*

*masters. I don't remember though. Yeah, she's able to be a professor, but she's not. She's going for something else instead. I've got lots of important help from my whole family. My brother and sister in-law helped me too. They gave me advice on how to improve my skills, and I used that advice. There was always a word of advice from somebody and I felt more together when I used this advice.*

*For me personally, support, you have to have trust with your support, cause my brother somewhat trusts me, he has to "I'm his sister." But it's not always the case with other people, if they don't have support from a brother or sister, mother or grandfather, something like that, they might feel, if they don't trust and support me enough why should I succeed, or if I don't do this I might lose the support of this person, if I don't stay in school, I'm going to let everyone down. But if I quit, the only person I'd be letting down is myself. Most people don't care if they let themselves down because it's just themselves, they'll face the consequences later. But, some people they have support from their grandparents, we'll support you through this, some people don't. Some people come from single parents or their mother, "Why don't you just quit school, I don't see why I should have to keep paying for you to go to school, why don't you just get a job?" Stuff like that. And that's why most of them quit, like cause they're so young and they have to finish school, they can't get a decent job, and most time they fear that. "I can't go back to school, I quit, they won't accept me back cause I'm a dropout."*

*They were always 100% there. If I ever had trouble with my homework, my mom was there. If I had to get someplace for a project or to the library or to someone else's place my parents were there. They supported me and all the way through high*

*school they were like, "Don't skip." And I didn't. A couple times I did. If she found that I was ill she'd make sure that to um, check things. "If you're ill you have to show me symptoms. If you have a hot head you have to prove it."*

*I felt supported and my mom was always there through everything I tried to do. She wouldn't push anything on me, but she would be supportive of extra-curricular activities or you know. My dad wasn't around much. Having an older brother who was very successful in school gave me an incentive to push harder and be like him.*

*They convinced me, "Come home, come home." So I moved back. Went to school there for another two months, then I had to pay for it all in grade twelve. We finally moved back to the city and stayed. In grade twelve I passed. I made up all the classes that I dropped out of.*

*Well I raised my little sister. She calls me mom when I was in Grade seven. That's why I spent so much time out of school, I'd watch her. She'd say, "I want my sister." When she started kindergarten she cried and freaked out at school. "I want my sister, I want my sister." So I'd have to leave the high school on the reserve and go sit with her. So, I did a lot of that.*

*My mom and dad they believe me. I worked so hard. Sometimes I would skip school to study for an exam. I wouldn't do it very often, but I'd do it. This one time, my mom and dad, we went and sat down with the principal and they told him, "We trust her. If she misses school obviously it's a good reason." Like if they'd phone the house and I was there the teachers would trust me because we went and had a meeting with the principal and my mom and dad okayed it. If I phoned in for myself they'd trust it.*

Recommendations:

- Recognize that family obligations may sometimes conflict with school attendance, therefore non-attendance should not be reflected in grading practices.
- Provide students the option of applying for adult status when it comes to addressing absences in the event guardians are unavailable.

### Peer Relationships

I remember thinking what a horrible mother I was when I dropped my oldest daughter off at kindergarten one cold winter morning. I sat in my car and watched her trudge through the snow towards the kindergarten entrance. She looked so fragile in her oversized snowsuit. It was January and she was new to this school. She had left the security of the kindergarten school on the reserve where she spent half a day in preschool with her sister and the other half in kindergarten with her cousin. Here I enrolled her in one of the largest elementary schools in the city. When I had picked her up the day before, her teacher had informed me that she was having difficulty finding kids to play with at recess. I felt helpless.

Participants identified positive peer relationships as a major motivating factor for coming to school each day. The friendships they had in school created a social environment that was preferable to staying home bored during the week. It seems this environment did not always extend into the classrooms because I know of students who came to school each day, but did not make it to all their classes. The participants I spoke to rarely skipped class because they understood the need to attend. For them, the friendships made school more enjoyable. For the participants who did not have a large circle of friends, school was less pleasurable.

Participants took notice of the influence peers had on a student's education. One participant said that the students who dropped out tended to hang around with other students who also left school. The School Leavers Survey (HRDC, 1993) indicated "most graduates had friends who strongly supported high school completion, while the friends of leavers were less clearly convinced of the value of a high school diploma" (p.30). Two other participants commented on how negative peer relationships made school uninviting, with one participant choosing to leave school a number of times because of confrontations she had with others. Another participant observed her reputation as a bully stemmed from confrontations with peers during elementary school. On the other hand, one participant identified friendships she had with students who participated in activities like weeknight drinking and drugs. Although she formed friendships with these students she did not make the same destructive choices they did. Thus, she did not confront her friends, nor did she follow them. Participants showed a variety of differences in their need for positive friends. One participant succeeded despite having few friends at school and another succeeded despite having friends from many groups, some positive and others negative.

All participants had friends or family who left school early. They identified family problems, drugs and alcohol abuse, and teen pregnancy as some of the factors leading to their dropping out. Although these people were among their relationships, they did not have a negative effect on the participant's motivation to remain in school.

#### Peer Relationships: Participants' Voice

*Before school I had a lot of friends and going to school I made a lot of friends. So yeah, I liked school. It was pretty fun because of the amount of friends that I made*

*and the amount of friends that I had. I would actually prefer being in school on weekdays than being out of school because my friends were mostly in school and I rarely hung out with anyone out of school. I was mostly with my boyfriend. I had more in school friends than I did out of school and my favourite thing in school was probably math. Some reasons I graduated are because my friends graduated too. I didn't want to stay back because I was getting older.*

*I don't think I can have really good friends because um, I have a trust issue and don't trust people too often. And if I do trust you it's because you've either stuck up for me or you've proven yourself that you are trustworthy. Otherwise I'm like, "You're not my friends." I am good at keeping secrets. I won't tell on people. I'm not a tattletale.*

*I was very quiet, passive. I never spoke up in class, I never, didn't have much friends being the fact that I kept to myself. I never really enjoyed it, like I would go, but I remember not really enjoying it because I didn't have the peers, the friends. I don't know if it had to do because I was Aboriginal or just because the type of person that I was.*

*My boyfriend's sister, she hung around with a lot of drop outs and she dropped out and he dropped out and actually I believe most of his friends dropped out and a couple of his friends graduated. I'm surprised my boyfriend didn't graduate because he tends to follow those two friends that graduated, but he didn't. They all went their separate ways with their girlfriends.*

*I had a cousin who quit school and never finished before, but now she's in school, she's 21 and she's finishing. She didn't realize what a big thing it is to finish high school and move on. I'm not sure why she quit school. She was always good in*



*her classes. She always had high marks and everything. She still quit school after that. Maybe it's because her parents don't live together and her dad has his own family and her mom was taking care of her. She's the only one there and she missed all her sisters and brothers.*

*Students who are highly addicted to drugs - yeah they'll most likely drop out. But some of my friends have done drugs and they're graduated or they're graduating. And I had friends who drank on weekdays and went to school hungover the next day. But at least they went to school the next day instead of sitting at home being hungover. I never drank on a weekday though. I didn't feel like puking in the middle of class.*

*I tried to be best at everything. When I moved to the reserve I did. There was a lot of trouble there because, well I never tried to get into fights with kids, but these kids tried to fight with me and every week my dad was at the school. Trying to defend me, blah, blah, blah. I fit right in the city. I hated the reserve. Sure I'd get the work done, but I never fit in there socially, like friends wise. I don't know why. I can't get along with reserve people. Like even today, now that we are all twenty, if I was to see them in the store they'll say hi to me and I'll say hi, but the conversation doesn't go any farther than that. Most of them, like I said before, all have kids and we have nothing in common anymore. I just never had the desire to be a young mother, I don't know. I don't know if they did and I don't want to. It's their life.*

*I've been known as a little bully since elementary because I didn't want to get picked on and some boys decided they wanted to pick on me and I basically ran them all down. To get back the item they had stolen from me.*

Recommendations:

- Recognize the positive and negative influences peers have on a student's decision to come to school.
- Provide opportunities for students to expand their network of friends with interactive classroom practices that promote in-class friendships to form.
- Provide a safe and supportive environment for students to work through a conflict resolution program.

### Social Structures

Participants in this study revealed the importance of the roles of social class and groupings play in high school with the stories they shared in our interviews. One participant stated how important it was to be the strongest in the class. To be the strongest socially allowed one to be at the top of the class without necessarily having the best marks. Being the strongest also meant there were others looking to take your place.

Participants found strength in numbers. Although they did not agree with labels and segregated areas in the school, most of them were a part of it. Only five percent of graduates from the National School Leaver Survey said they did not fit in (HRDC, 1993, p.31). Although the participants did not belong or fit into all groups in the school, they did find peers whom they were able to fit in with.

They agreed that prior to high school, students formed groups based on age and grade level rather than ethnicity or culture. We all recognize society as being divided into social groups, but the extent of it in our high schools is alarming. Participants identified the following groups in their high schools: the jockies, the prissy group, the garden people, the Natives, the hockey players, the wanna be thugs or gangsters, the

drama crowd, the stoners, the farmers, and the popular people. What is even more startling is how these groups have their own territories within the schools and in the parking areas. This is where the uncomfortable geographic areas discussed in the previous chapter originate. When one participant suggested teachers are unaware of what goes on between students in the school I agreed because “the culture of a school is so pervasive that teachers and administrators often ‘don’t see’ structures and processes which contribute to the problem” (Kehoe & Echols, 1994, p.72).

Some participants had the inner strength to resist the group dynamics. One even went so far as to invite herself into a group and challenge their behaviour. Another participant agreed that she put labels on groups who already identified themselves as a group, but did not label individuals she met. Some of the participants felt they were able to move from crowd to crowd and feel a sense of belonging everywhere in the school. The participants were not followers; they possessed the inner force to make decisions based on their goals, not the goals of a certain group. One suggested the mood she was in that day decided what group of friends she would hang around with. Another said she basically remained with one good friend and avoided the groups altogether.

Half the participants felt they were labelled as city kids when they went to their reserves, and were not fully accepted. One recalled the name calling and taunting she received on the reserve. Some of her peers felt the city had changed her and taken away her Aboriginal identity. All the participants in this study were able to maintain an individual identity. Sometimes this hurt them and sometimes it helped them.

## Social Structures: Participant's Voice

*I had to be the one with the highest marks. It's all about being the top of the class, not the top, but the strongest of the class. I tried to be the best at everything. I used to get in trouble a lot. Kids used to, "She did it, she did it," and me and this other little girl used to always vie to be the top one in the class. I was always known as the smart one in the class until she came then it was something that we fought for, to be the top.*

*Ah, junior high, let's see. I met up with a couple of friends that I consider really good friends, but since we, I really didn't really grow up with them in elementary because I kept on moving um, they kinda shrugged me off to the side, "Oh, you're not part of my crowd anymore, but we'll still be friends." Every so often it's like, "Oh hi." I don't take offence to it because it's people choose to display themselves the way they want to, it's up to them. I also put labels on people this is ah preppy crowd, um strange moody crowd, the drama crowd, but I won't give a label to a person like "Oh look that's...I know him." Just the crowds. If you're by your single person it's like, "Oh, that's Jim." Just give him a name. Give him a "hi".*

*It's the students, in elementary school we are all one big group and as you get older they start going their own ways. Me, I used to go with every crowd. There's the prissy group. I used to go sit there and talk to them. I wouldn't make them feel any better. So what if they turned their nose up to me, I'd still sit there and talk and stuff like that. That's how I would make friends. I wouldn't let them sit there and curse me.*

*In English I liked doing the magazine. We had to do a magazine and come up with our own articles and there had to be a cover and make a big cover story. Me and*

*my friend did the whole Colombine shooting and that was our main story. Then it was pretty funny because in other classes people would start talking about it. Of course I knew so much about it because of looking back on it and they blamed like video games for the shooting, but it's things like that basically you have to point fingers on the other people that poke fun of those, like outcasts and that's what they were. They were outcasts, they were just them two together. They didn't really have any other friends.*

*Everyone likes to stick to their own group so that's the only thing that's dividing everyone. I don't know because it's all those students who get it stuck in their mind that this is where my people hang out and you guys are not allowed in here. The teachers can't make everyone mesh and hang around with everyone. The only way they can do that is in their classrooms and pick groups for everyone instead of saying, "Okay we're doing a group project pick your groups." Otherwise there's nothing you can do. There's like the hicks or the farmers or everyone who lives out in the country. They all usually hung around in the parking lot. Even everyone had their own place to parking spot. Like the garden people would park by the gardens and all the jocks and their girlfriends would park on the complete opposite end of the parking lot and stuck right down the middle were people who lived in the country. In the back it was kind of first come, first serve.*

*My friends used to be called bitches, but they're some of the smartest people in the class. Ah... you know the people that'll sit there and be quiet, but if you get to know them they are really intelligent and get to meet them. I'm one of those people who go up to those people and make friends with them and everyone will call me weird, "Why do you want to associate with them?"*

*I was never part of the gossipy...cheerful, bouncy. I'm known as (hits fist against hand). If you listen to them, they're like, "la,la,la,la,la" and I'm like "oh god." I can't stand – you can only take so much.*

*I didn't choose to go sit with the popular people. I just sat in open seats, "Oh, I'll sit there." Whereas other people, "This is my friend I have to stand in that little group." I didn't do that. It's so strange, but I could never put myself in that type of situation. It gets you uncomfortable cause then you have to meet their expectations. And you don't want to do that. You'd just set yourself up for a really big downfall.*

*I wasn't really in a group I just got along with everybody. I hung out for them for a while and then whatever I knew them. I just hung out with different people I wasn't stuck with one clique. I could go anywhere and no one would really wonder what are you doing here*

*I just isolated myself. Just me and this other person and like I made friends but I never really took sides. It was just me and her. We had other friends that came with us from junior high but we just all kinda drifted by grade eleven. I didn't really care to make friends with anybody else. I just found everyone so phony, so trying to impress everybody else, trying to be in the in crowd. You don't have the opportunity in grade ten to be in the crowd, like the hockey players, all that stuff. I made some bad choices in grade ten and after that I realized it wasn't worth it. To pretend to be someone who I'm not wasn't worth it so I just stuck to who I felt comfortable around. We just hung out all around the school, we didn't really have a place.*

*Not really comfortable, I just felt like it didn't bother me. You know to be there. I just looked like the different cliques I guess. There's the Aboriginal clique, then*

*there's your jocks, then there's your stoners, then there's you know there were so many. I just kinda hung out. Whatever kind of day it was that was who I hung out with that day. I remember if you park in the front you know who you are, if you park in the back.*

*I can't say a lot, but I think that has to do with it. The pressure, maybe not the academic part, but also the social pressures that you get. Especially in big cities and bigger high schools. If you don't fall into a clique, then where do you fall? Once you reach high school there's a different mentality. You feel different, people start to see they want to be something better, you know whatever they believe is better. As the transition goes, you lose your friends. All the friends I was with in junior high a lot of them didn't graduate. A lot of them dropped out, like I graduated when I was supposed to, a lot of them went back a few years later. Eventually we just branched off. I don't think there's a way that you can stop it. You can't really stop the cliques that have been around for ages and the pressures that go along with high schools. Maybe make it harder to be... like the locker situation, parking, whatever, those little things that can make you feel degraded.*

#### Recommendations:

- Recognize the fine line between peer groups and segregation and take action to eliminate the latter more destructive issue.
- Discourage the territorial behaviour groups may have formed in and around the school. For example, assign lockers and parking spots or hold school events in the specific area that welcome all students.
- Teachers should discourage negative group formations in the classroom by assigning group members and seating arrangements when necessary.

- Teach students cooperative learning skills and conflict resolution strategies so they are equipped to complete group work and avoid destructive conflicts.

### Discrimination

Many of the themes that emerged from the stories of the six participants were closely intertwined. The social structures discussed in the previous section produced and perhaps were created out of prejudice and discrimination. I remember it clearly from high school, the division between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups. I remember saying goodbye to my friends and cousins at the bus doors and rushing to the front doors of the school to catch a ride home with my non-Aboriginal friends. I remember the words each group spoke of the other, often hurtful words.

The participants in this study spoke of what they experienced as Aboriginal students in their schools. Similar to my experience, some of the participants were unaware of any discrimination until they began their middle years. Prior to that they did not observe the prejudice that exists in our society. Their childhood innocence prohibited them from seeing differences in each other. I remember my youngest daughter coming home from the first day in grade one and for the first time seeing a difference between her classmates and herself. When I asked her about grade one she told me that she was the only person with brown skin in her class. She did not say it with the intent to judge; it was simply an observation by a five year old. It had not been pointed out to her; she had come to the realization that her new classmates were different than her kindergarten classmates at the band school she had attended the year before.



Two participants recalled specific incidents that altered their perception of equality when they were subject to racist comments by other students. As they became conscious of the prejudice around them, the participants questioned the words and actions of others and found different ways of handling it. Although some participants chose to ignore racist comments, others said they confronted the attacker by identifying their Aboriginal identity and questioning the person's motive. This was difficult for students in their younger years; for example, one participant admitted she attempted to hide her Aboriginal identity by seeking non-Aboriginal friends and avoiding any association with Aboriginal culture. Another participant confided how she feared being identified with a negative Aboriginal stereotype. She described the stereotype as that which portrayed Aboriginal students as drug and alcohol abusers who often skipped school and did not care about their education or future.

Participants identified examples of times they felt school staff were inconsistent between their discipline of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The participants felt that when altercations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students occurred, the Aboriginal student was automatically pegged as the instigator. Participants expressed frustration at the lack of investigation by school staff into incidents and the disregard of school policies when it came to certain groups of students. In particular, they felt non-Aboriginal students involved in sports were given more advantages and the imposed consequences of their negative behaviour were not as severe. Clearly, participants felt some of the accusations the Aboriginal students received were unjust and based on prejudice. Brady (1996) noted similar practices of public secondary

schools where there was an “uneven application of institutional rules and regulations” (p.6) for visible minority students.

### Discrimination: Participants' Voice

*I have been Aboriginal all my life. I didn't know I was Aboriginal until about grade three or four because I grew up around like all types of different people and never really thought about that. Then all of a sudden after grade four I noticed that certain people would look at me different. Walked by different guys like, “little Indian” and that's what they'd say to me. But then I just looked past that and I don't know, at me.*

*In my younger years, yeah. I felt there was discrimination, but I wasn't challenging anybody because I was Aboriginal and I didn't belong. Then when I moved here it was the same thing. I mean, the Aboriginal person in the corner would be picked on for not dressing properly, for not having the right haircut or the right style. So I tried to be more like them, whatever that is. Try to blend in more, to not be noticeable. It's hard at times, but you find different ways to cope with it.*

*For a long time I denied the fact that I would try to not be Aboriginal. But then I realized I did. For a long time I didn't have any Aboriginal friends. Maybe because the Aboriginal people who are going to school, wouldn't be at school. They'd drop out in grade six, there'd be like two of us. Part of it would be because the teasing they would get, like constantly, everyday they'd do that. Ridiculed by other people. They would be the minority, they would get, “Oh look at your pants.” Then eventually, if they don't have the right support or they don't have the proper, what I got they would just quit. Like there's no point in going through that, they'd quit.*

*I just worked most of the time. I didn't want to follow the stereotype of a Native student. Somebody who skips out of the school all the time. You know, somebody who drinks. Like I said before, when I went to school on the reserve before, this one time me and my cousin didn't have anything to do, we were all done our work. So the teacher said we could go play on the playground. So we're walking around. We went to this trailer and the people a grade ahead of us were in there and they were sniffing whiteout. That's the stereotype. That we're just going to skip out to go drink or to go do drugs or we're not going to show up for school because we don't care. I don't know, I just didn't want to fall under that stereotype. I wanted to go on and stuff like that.*

*Most times they do put us under categories. They go all Indians are party animals or something like that. My friends seem to put themselves under a category as well. I'm sitting there laughing because last night me and my step-sister were making a joke about this, "Yeah, everyone is joining gangs these days. Us round dancers should form a gang. We're called the RD's – Round Dancers! Are you down? I'm down." We're just laughing our heads off. And she's sitting there going, "Geeze, that would be real bad and our colour will be brown and we'll go round dancing." Most people do put themselves under a category, subconsciously.*

*A lot of times I remember in school, although I wasn't treated as, "Oh she's the Indian girl," you know there's a lot of times I was told, "Oh, you're not like them," like the other Aboriginal people. So I mean in my classes I would be overdominated by non-Aboriginal people or not visually Native people. A lot of times that would be part of the reason I'd try to be quiet so I didn't have to draw attention to myself, even more than I already had. That kind of, I know when I went home too, I constantly had that, "Oh*

*you're an apple, you're like a white person." I'm like, "What is that?" I got offended. I know that even though it wasn't a big thing that was part of the reason I'd keep quiet. I didn't want to draw more attention to myself than there was.*

*I wouldn't wear the Indian stuff, you know, be more visually Aboriginal. Even though a lot of people didn't pinpoint me like that, they would talk about Aboriginal people around me. Then I started getting mad at that probably about the middle of junior high. In the hallway they say things and I'm like, "those people you're talking about are my friends. That's me you're talking about." "Oh, you're not like them." You know. That's what I got. When I started getting that I found myself doing that. Understanding well you are an Indian, you know? You are going to look like it no matter what you do. It was hard though.*

*When I went to junior high it was a major change when I moved from the city to the reserve. I was more accepted in the urban setting than in the, because when I went back there it was like, "Oh, city boy, blah, blah." When I went back to the reserve school they would always say I was too white to be their friend. I never had the right coloured skin. I was always in between. I did have friends, people who were very accepting*

*I had my cousin. I always had friends. We were at the popular end – in the Native group. I had friends. Like I never limited my friends. I had white friends. I had friends all over. Well, when I'd hang around with my white friends they'd talk about how, they'd talk down to Natives and I didn't like that so they knew when I was around not to talk about that. It was the same thing with my Native friends, they talked down to white people and it was an ongoing thing.*

*Like I've seen fights. The Native people against the non-Native start fighting and just go at it and then, in the city, then it seems like they only punish the Native people, "Oh, you started it." Then they suspend them, let the white people go on with their classes. But, if you were involved in extra-curricular activities and you were treated the same as everyone else. So, it didn't matter if you were Aboriginal or not, you were treated the same.*

*I had a lot of hockey players in my class and they seemed to get away with a lot more than most people do. I don't know if it's because of the name or because of what they are, but that's, yeah. The teachers need to stop pointing fingers to like a certain group of people because half the group of those certain people are actually good people.*

*People don't get treated worse than anyone else unless they bring it on themselves. It's like, um, I don't know, some people do bug Natives about being very into their culture and stuff, but most people just leave it alone. It's like that's their culture and I'm not part of it, but whatever. I never really, some people I would tell them I'm treaty and they're like, "What? You're Native?" I'm like, "Yeah." "But you look white." A lot of it too is it was just passed down. Kids, teenagers see these other people saying all this stuff, then in turn they're going to think it. They're going to have that mentality, it's just passed down.*

*There's some students who are discriminating or prejudiced, but I guess it is something that their parents have taught them. Most students stuck to themselves and didn't really act prejudiced at all. Now that I'm more educated it's kind of funny of how people assume that right away. The majority of the time that might not even be the*

*issue. They could be looking at you because you are new in town. I don't always see it. Some people say this city is such a racist city, but where? I've never really experienced it, but I've heard stories and I know when we moved up the hill I had a choice to go to one of three schools. I was like no way I'm going to that school. I'd be like the only Native person there, I don't think so. That was my choice. I didn't want to put myself in that kind of situation.*

*I think teachers can take a bigger stand in it because I know these kids would be ridiculed and the teacher would be there. The teacher never questioned it. I mean, go to the office or whatever, they don't actually question them on it. I think that if these students had someone to help them understand it's okay to be who you are they would be able to be more... We need other Aboriginal people and that's when they're like wow. Especially with all these awards. It gives me so much pride when I watch the Aboriginal achievement awards you know. I think, I like the way some schools do murals and they have a large number of Aboriginal students there. So they integrate it, the culture. If it's in the murals or anything the kids are able to ask questions and then it's that awareness that they get. I see a lot of schools doing that now. Even like Native Studies, it's just opening up their mind, saying how it is. Even talking within your peers and letting them know how it was or how it is, um different scenarios. I think that the whole area of education, like it's been around in the curriculum. If you're going to have Native Studies I think that's a good idea to start.*

#### **Recommendations:**

- Provide anti-racism education for staff and students so they are equipped to recognize and respond to racism and discrimination.

- Provide co-curricular and extra-curricular activities that promote cultural awareness and understanding.
- If students are able to predict the consequences for their behavior, school discipline becomes less of an issue. Ensure the rules, expectations, and discipline procedures for all students are consistent and fair.

### Academic Support

The level of academic support participants sought varied. One participant acknowledged the need for one-on-one resource room assistance in elementary school and commented on the effectiveness of it. The other participants did not recall any major academic difficulty. For two of them achieving above average marks in their classes was a constant goal. Participants referred to seeking help in high school only when they required assistance, and not attending any learning assistance centre on a regular basis. From the stories of class assignments and grades it appeared that all participants had the academic ability to find success in coursework, but it was often their lack of effort or uncompleted homework that resulted in a poor grade. The participants were able to identify when they needed help and sought it. They gave the impression that they felt responsible for seeking help in their coursework and did not insist that the school provide it. Two participants identified assignments and courses they failed to pass. Their response was to simply try again or choose another course and keep going. Research states, "One of the strongest correlations with dropping out of school is the lack of success in school" (Foster et al., 1994, p.89). From their stories, it is my understanding that the number of courses participants were successful in significantly outweighed those that they were not.

There were instances when participants asked for help from a teacher and were refused. Two participants sensed that it was because they were Aboriginal students, but one was quick to dismiss this notion and create another explanation. One participant felt that teachers were not available outside of class to offer support. She was frustrated that they were not available during lunch hour or after school. This was not the experience for all participants for others expressed appreciation for the extra help some teachers offered.

When participants were unable to get assistance from their teachers they were often referred to peer tutors. Although one participant said she had made herself available for other students in need, she felt that most students capable of tutoring either lacked the time or desire to do so. One participant mentioned she would not be as comfortable with a peer tutor as teacher. Peer tutors may lack the sensitivity and knowledge. Access to tutor rooms with teachers who would assist students was limited to school hours, thereby forcing students to choose whether to go to class or go to a tutorial. A participant who accessed resource room help felt that teachers did not recognize different learning styles and work with student strengths. She also felt that by accessing the resource room she would be labelled as a weak student. Participants identified family and friends as another source of assistance, but one participant brought up the limited education her parents had, consequently limiting their ability to assist.

Students sought different types of academic assistance. Most students referred to the need for help with subject content. When I described student assistance centres that offered weekly classes on topics such as study skills, essay writing, notetaking strategies, and presentation methods, two of my participants thought they would be



useful. They both commented on the need for further instruction outside of class time. It is often those essential, yet basic skills students need support and practice with.

#### Academic Support: Participants' Voice

*You could do it on your own or you said you could get people to tutor you when you needed help. There was the tutor room in the other area. You got tutored in there. They had computers and teachers there who could help students, but it's during classes. So you wouldn't want to miss out on what the teacher was teaching. Well there's the library open and there's always a teacher there who can help. And there's other students.*

*There are some students who were on top of the class who were asked if they could tutor, but they have to do it on their own time. So some students wouldn't do that. I know that a couple of them were helping other students and most of those students who have higher marks are even in other things too so they didn't have time. Oh, someone who knows the material would help. If you have a fellow student sometimes that fellow student can make you feel pretty dumb. Maybe it's not intentional, but you sit there thinking, "Okay they explained this so simply, and yet I feel so dumb." There was always somebody too busy to help. If you go to get help from another student who did good in that class they're too busy with their own assignment that they can't help you. Like if anybody asked me I'd always make time to help them*

*In my math class my teacher had a favorite and this person was um, very arrogant about it. "Oh, I got this grade and I got this grade." But if you asked that person, they'd kinda look at you and go, "Well you don't know it? Well, it's simple, see this is it and this is the answer. There you go." And didn't elaborate so you're like.*

*That's why I found it so hard because no one sat there and tried to help me elaborate. In my junior high I had a resource teacher she helped me through my math and sciences, even my Englishes. That's why I did so well with them I had someone there to help me with it.*

*Yeah, like I said before, our science teacher wouldn't offer his, he'd only offer his help on certain days, at certain times. You know maybe he'd say, "Oh I have a spare in fourth." Bu what if you have a class in fourth and you can't get that help. He'd say, "Well I got to eat too." I know, but they should have a time when you can all sit down and I don't know, get tutored together. Well I know that the exchange students always have help and they should help other students.*

*Mr. Catcher. He always helped me to improve my work because I wasn't very good in certain classes. Well I wasn't very good at reading. I never understood the point of it and got the plot and all that in my head because I wasn't interested in that book. That didn't really help me out and my grammar isn't very good. He tried to help me out with that. Yeah or else he would look over my work and tell me what I had to do or what I did wrong.*

*My parents weren't ever there. I just had to do it on my own. They didn't know how to help me with my homework. I don't know, it was just too hard for them. My dad only went up to grade six and Mom went to grade eleven and the homework now is more advanced. She didn't really understand it.*

*I had difficulties in a few courses, but I did great in others. I didn't give up, even if I was going to fail, or do very terrible. I could always try harder or repeat a class.*

*My friends and teachers helped me by being there, day after day. I felt more comfortable doing homework at school than at home. I was always focused at school.*

*Actually I was really well off. In resource room teachers, not to put this personally towards yourself, but once they get a viewpoint they seem to stick with it. Like, "oh this worked for so many others it will work for you as well." I found it very, once you went to a tutorial they seemed to always mark you under that you need special help. Like if you just needed them for a certain thing they'll still mark you under that. Even if you don't need it they'll try to send you there. And you said it, different people different problems and different situations.*

*You can get frustrated with it. I was frustrated with the fact that, when you want help no one wanted to help you even if you asked, but when you didn't want it they were there just to pester you and pester you. I could never figure that out. Like what did they just pick a certain time, "She looks comfortable. I'll ask now." I should have looked comfortable all the time that way I might have got more help.*

#### Recommendations:

- Provide opportunities for students to access tutoring during the lunch hour and after school. Assistance should include both help with class assignments and skill development.
- Teachers should clearly outline times when they are available to students for assistance. If there are no predetermined times it is the teacher's responsibility to invite students to approach them to set up tutorials outside of class time.

- Peer tutors should be used only when both student and tutor agree upon it. A peer tutor association could be created where potential tutors may apply and undergo training.
- Offer open workshops on computer literacy, writing styles, organization and time management strategies, studying tips, etc.

### Non-academic Support

Whoever coined the phrase “high school is the best time of your life” should be corrected. If it was really the best time why are so many students leaving before they graduate? The participants I interviewed had a number of comments and suggestions for helping Aboriginal students deal with life’s problems. Overall, the importance of working with a variety of counselling services and people was discussed. “Coordination of services and team work is thus one strategy, albeit it a simple one in theory but one not implemented enough in practice” (Kronick, 1994, p.4).

First, participants explained that students are unwilling to share their problems with the school. Often they will deny the need for help, but the signs will come out in their behaviour in school. As one participant suggested, all they wanted was a little attention whether it be positive or negative. It would seem there might be a stigma attached to seeking professional help, a shame that might be inherent in our society. This could make students reluctant to enter a counsellor’s office for fear of other students seeing them. Is this another form of discrimination in our schools? Participants suggested the obvious; relocate the counsellor’s office to a less visible area of the school and call students down when their appointment time arrives instead of having them wait in full view of their peers.

When it came to the counsellors in our high schools participants had different experiences. One participant was quite comfortable dropping in when she had a problem. Another participant had been extremely offended that a teacher had misinterpreted a poem and sent her unwillingly to a female counsellor for whom she had to wait to see. She was not comfortable with that counsellor, but was more accepting of a male counsellor whom she felt was more straightforward and realistic.

Participants thought schools should provide people other than counsellors who students would feel secure speaking with. The point was made that often students do not need someone to help them find solutions for their problems, but simply be there to listen and acknowledge their difficulties. A participant suggested that the school provide peer support for students wanting to speak to someone they could identify with. Another participant spoke of an Elder who worked with students at her school. He provided counselling and guidance, as well as the experience of attending a sweat lodge ceremony. The Elder also worked with teachers in the classroom allowing for the opportunity to form relationships with students so they felt more comfortable approaching him.

Although one participant believed meeting with student would be more effective face to face another had a recommendation that was supported by the other participants once I shared the idea. She recommended schools look to creating a school hotline where students could call to speak to a counsellor, Elder, or peer. The idea caught on with other participants and they added the element of academic counselling to the phone line for students having difficulty with homework in the evenings or weekend. The

phone line could also act as a referral agency and help make appointments with counsellors or other agencies within the community.

Participants accepted responsibility for their success in school as well as their failures. I was told on more than one occasion that if a student chooses to quit, there is very little the school can do to prevent it. All the school can do is be ready for that student when he or she comes for help and work on proactive approaches to retaining students.

#### Non-academic Support: Participants' Voice

*We're all little punks, we all want to get on your nerves, basically we all wanted attention. I know that's how it was for people in my class.*

*I don't know. Ask a kid who is going through it. I guess it's the school's problem too. Even if you had counseling set up for them at lunch time or after school, the person is going to be too embarrassed or too scared somebody might see them going into that particular office. The kids that are too shy, pull them out of class and talk to them then. If you phone a teacher who's to say it's not their grandma calling. Then they won't say, "Were you in the counselor's office?" Sort of thing. When I was in high school I'd sit there, "Is anybody going to phone me in this class?" The phone would ring and I'd think, "is it for me."*

*Well, I talked with a counsellor, I first tried to talk to that – counsellor, nope, no such luck, I don't want to bother talking to that chick no more. I went and talked to a male counsellor and he just gave me straight, straight facts. I'm very good at dealing with straight facts. All this emotional stuff - out the window. I can't stand dealing with*

*emotions. When I was there, I had to wait for a while, just for her to say, "Hi, I'll get to you sometime later." So like, "No forget it, I'm leaving now."*

*It's not really the school's fault that they're not graduating. It's the student. They could have people that, more people to talk to that understand more their problems and just someone who just does regular counselling. Like say, a high school dropout, adult or Elder. Someone like that, that knows what they're going through. Yeah. Like someone who is easier for them to talk to. There're lots of pressures in schools.*

*There was an Elder in our school and he helped out the teachers. I think there was an Aboriginal counsellor, but I never went to her. He did like sweat lodges, counselling, you could talk to him about problems, he'd support you or try to get support for you and he did arts and crafts with students. He'd teach Cree classes sometimes. He was there in the mornings, but in the afternoons he was at a different school. You could just go knock on his door. Just students who were having troubles and stuff. They would go to sweat lodges just to feel refreshed.*

*I know that most people won't agree with this, but I think, when they do the exams see what level where they should be placed. They should do another type of test saying how much you would be able to handle on your own without the help or how much support you can get, in case you do get stressed out from other things like that. Either that or, I know this is going to sound weird, but I'm thinking this from volunteer first aid, I have a friend who works there, and it's called the phone tree. She'd be able to have someone you can talk to, who can understand and maybe relate to similarly that kind of stress that you're going through, but not to be too sympathetic, because people*

*don't like sympathy. It's like "I know what you're going through, but if you try this you might succeed or just to talk about what's stressing you out cause sometimes that works miracles for people."*

*Make sure it's someone that you won't know. You can give a person options, you can talk to an Elder, an adult, a male, a female or a fellow peer. Even if it was school related, a retired teacher with certain topics. Those options, or if you want to talk to a counsellor - something like that. But, most times people see that as a weakness. I don't personally care. Considering persons I talk to have worse problems than I do. So, I don't want to go too far into the issue, but still enough to help relieve my stresses. It would work except for it would be better to be sitting in front of a counsellor because if they see that you are struggling with something they could comfort you. They're there.*

*Everything has repercussions, you know, its sort of hard to say. You just have to do it and see if it's successful or not. If it is then expand it to other schools. See what other schools are doing and try it in your school. There has to be that one school that first tries it.*

#### Recommendations:

- School counsellors and staff should be trained in multiple counselling methods and strategies.
- Expand the support staff in the school to include Elders, addictions counsellors, public health nurses, and youth workers.
- Consider developing a peer support and mediation program. Models and training are available.



- Support teen parents through parenting classes and support groups.
- Consider working with community agencies to develop a local 24 hour hotline for youth to access counselling and referrals.
- Research student support initiatives and programs at other high schools.

### Positive Teacher Relationships

Everyone has an inspirational story of a teacher who helped him or her overcome some obstacle or a teacher who went out of his or her way to offer support. If you ask a student, sometimes those teachers are referred to as the fun or easy teachers. Whoever they may be, they somehow made a connection with that student and influenced them in a positive way. When Hains (2001) asked Edmonton Aboriginal high school students about their school experience “students whose teachers had built relationships with them and showed support for their cultural ways recalled positive memories of their schooling” (p.45).

When participants reflected on teachers from their schooling they revealed how motivating the encouragement they received from that teacher was. The support and positive reinforcement they received from school staff increased their drive. Participants who had teachers who told them they would succeed and go on to post-secondary were empowered by their words and looked at the future with an opportunistic attitude. Two participants identified a teacher as their role model.

Participants recognized specific traits of who they considered to be good teachers. These teachers built relationships with their students by greeting them at the door and treating them as individuals. Good teachers did not discriminate or acknowledge any one student as a favourite. Teachers who gave students options for

assignments and encouraged creativity were appreciated. Participants recognized teachers who were sensitive to students' comfort level and personal difficulties. Good teachers were nice and cared for their students. They supported students in class as well as expressing an interest in students' extra-curricular activities and personal interests. Humour was important to participants because it allowed them to interact with their teacher in an informal and comfortable manner. Positive teacher-student relationships were marked by the capacity of some participants to tease and joke with their teacher.

Participants respected honesty and appreciated teachers who were straightforward. One participant reflected with appreciation how his teacher challenged him to work as hard as he could and be a leader in the class. Other participants also welcomed teachers who challenged them to participate in class in a meaningful way. They felt their teachers helped them reach their potential.

#### Positive Teacher Relationships: Participants' Voice

*I don't know if it's the school or the people in it. You know, you've gotta have that encouragement from the people you look up to. Sometimes you hate your teachers, but sometimes you're looking to them for advice, some kind of direction.*

*I think my success has a lot to do with the supports that you get as you are growing up. Like when I was growing up all I kept hearing was, "You are going to graduate, you are going to become somebody who will make a difference because that is who you are." And that is what I kept hearing when I was in junior high and high school and in elementary, different teachers would look at me and say that. I'd think okay I gotta do this for them. There's this drive that you get from people when you hear things. Then you think okay I gotta do this.*

*In junior high I had a coach. She encouraged me to try out. I didn't think I would make it, but I thought I might as well. I made it and that's when I really started getting more involved. She was the main person at that time to push me. It started with sports and once she got to know me, she encouraged me to do other things, she really made me see myself. Through coaching techniques and stuff she started showing me that I could do more, that I had more potential. Teachers would say you can do more and I always was the person who wanted to blend in. I never wanted to be the person to stand out. I didn't want to make a fuss. I just wanted to get through. She pushed me to actually show some of my strengths and to be proud of the stuff I can do.*

*Then as well, in junior high being around other teachers who knew my brother would tell me I had the potential to do more than I gave myself. They started pushing me more academically so that's when I started realizing well, I don't have to be that quiet person. I could start, even though I didn't do it like real pushy, I started coming out of my shell. Part of becoming my own person, not just another person in the crowd. I started making a lot more friends and doing a lot more. Realizing what I could do.*

*The teachers were really nice to students. I know there were maybe one or two teachers that were discriminating, but then if you just get past that and don't really pay attention to them. You know all students have favourite teachers. There were other teachers who were really nice and they never had kids for a favourite or anything.*

*My favourite teacher was Mrs. Sinclair. She was the Native Studies teacher and she's really nice. She was a young teacher and she was quieter and she didn't raise her voice or yell. She'd always give you options.*

*They were supportive. Well, like when you are doing assignments or something and you'd come up with ideas of your own instead of say them giving you ideas or something and you don't want to use their ideas and they'd be like, "Oh, yeah great idea," and they'd help you along with it. They also support out of school activities and stuff, but I found teachers let a lot of sport people get away with a lot more than people who are not in sports.*

*Good teachers greet students and they make them feel like they belong to class and they don't single them out or leave them out of any activities they try getting everyone involved with everything and like when I went there I thought I was going to be completely lost and not know what to do and who to talk to but, mind you I knew Mr. Jones.*

*They would help, they wouldn't take you out as an individual in a class and sit there and bug you, but like if you were having trouble in the class they would either say like come here at lunch and I'll help you or after school you'd have to make arrangements for the teacher and um, I don't know. The easy teachers were the ones I got along with the most.*

*All I did was pick on him. He picked on me. Might as well be even. Um, a little bit of back talk, you know, he'd say something, you'd contradict him. And then he'd find that annoying. Or um, haggle him when you know he did something wrong when you'd sit there and haggle him instead of sucking up to him. Um, haggle, rattle his chains, stuff like that. Oh, sometimes I did get in trouble.*

*Usually the teachers will know if a student is too shy to come for help on their own, so a teacher will ask if anything is wrong. The teachers made it possible to help*

*me achieve my best, and showed me that there's a lot more out there than books and studying.*

*My Native Studies teacher. She gave me a picture and on the back it said, "To future leader," and that was it. She just kinda wrote it on the back and I didn't look at it for a while. She was one of the main people who helped me. She's one of my role models. She's one of the reasons that kept me going and the stuff she would say was encouraging.*

*My teachers...I was interested in going into this one thing. She helped me by saying yes she would help me with the required materials, she'll help me study, she'll help me do this. I wanted to go a competition for commercial cooking and she was the teacher for the class. She said, "Yes you can have extra lab time. I'll help you study for the things. I'll help you get the guidelines down because we had it here last year. If you need to talk to your parents or see if you can get funding through the reserve. I'll help you, but you yourself have to do it." I said okay.*

*He encouraged me. Sometimes he made jokes like, "I hope that doesn't fall over." Stuff like that. He made it a fun class to come to. Um, he didn't put such a rigorous timetable sitting there going, "You have to have this and this and this done." Most times I had things done ahead of time because I enjoyed the class. Most people came there, most Native students came there thinking this was an easy class and they were going to breeze right through it. When it came down to doing the project they didn't do any thinking beforehand of what they were going to do and they came up with weird things. Most of them because of their, because they are artistic in their background, so that helped them around. Some of them didn't even try.*

*I was given a special assignment in theatre arts class. It was requested by a teacher if I could make a decapitated head. Well, it was for science class. It was supposed to be one of the scientists because he had come up with the periodic table I think. You can still go see it in his class. It's just basically a head on a pole and it looks like the dead scientist's head. I was given leeway to work on that project and my teacher came by, "Oh, isn't that gruesome." And I'm like, "Right on." He was the kind of guy who said, "Do you have any brothers or sisters coming up? Send them to my class." I think he changed his tune later when my brother came.*

*There's two of them. I always thought I didn't have a role model or someone to look up to and when I think about it it was this person. Probably my grade eight teacher. She's very strict she's really stern woman, but all along she would just question me. Like, "why did you do that?" I don't know. I guess she really challenged me. Yup and then she's like, she pulled me aside and said something like, "When you pay more attention the rest of the class will pay more attention so I need your attention."*

*For my teachers it was the ones who challenged me. I would sit there and whatever. They challenged me and made me work to my potential. They wouldn't just let me settle for whatever was there. They made me strive and push and work hard. It wasn't because of the marks, they would just question me. They wouldn't let me come to class and plop down. They would actually make me get involved.*

*Things like that do make a difference. In university I'll hand in my papers and when I get them back I actually like the professors who write something on them. I like this one prof, he writes a good comment and then he writes about the bad stuff, but he*

*always tells about the good points and he always writes your names. I thought that was so nice. Making that little connection you know maybe he only remembers you for that class when you get that paper back you feel like a kid again. Like getting that little gold star.*

#### Recommendations:

- Acknowledge the time and effort school staff put into building positive relationships and environment.
- Advocate for students in need.
- Continue celebrating student success.

#### Negative Teacher Relationships

“The quality of school is, of course, a major factor influencing the dropout rate, as are the classroom practices and attitudes of teachers” (Foster et al. 1994, p.97). Just as stories emerged of favourite teachers, participants had stories of teachers they did not care for. Results from the national school leavers survey said, “while the majority of all students got along with most of their teachers, over seven times as many leavers (15%) as graduates (2%) reported that they did not” (HRDC, 1993, p.27). The participants in this study were graduates and fell into the 2% who had negative experiences with teachers to report, although the participants’ comments were directed at specific teachers and not the majority. Participants commented both on the teachers’ teaching methods as well as their personal traits. Participants included the treatment of their classmates in their descriptions of teacher behaviour. Participants in Hain’s (2001, p.46) study identified poor relationships with teachers as a factor contributing to the Aboriginal students leaving school.

Among the qualities disliked by participants were prejudicial assumptions. Participants recalled teachers who assumed they would have previous knowledge or opinions on Aboriginal issues because they were Aboriginal students. Participants also remembered teachers withholding assistance because students were expected to have acquired the knowledge in a previous grade. Participants felt teachers were impatient with student progress and set expectations too high; consequently, students felt they were not given an adequate amount of instruction in class.

Participants were frustrated with the apparent inequitable attention students were granted in class. A participant noted that students involved in sports were given preferential treatment and not reprimanded for late assignments. Participants also stated teachers had favourite students they were willing to help without question. Two other participants felt they were ignored because they were Aboriginal.

Critiques of teaching methods and assignments were among the stories. Participants recalled unrealistic essay assignments that demanded far too much work for the little amount of time given. They appreciated the freedom to choose topics they found interesting and relevant, but disliked assignments unrelated to their life or interests. One participant in this study recalled no difficulty when she attempted assignments she found important, but easily lost interest when she could not find a connection. The teachers who were not thorough with their explanations or whose teaching catered to one learning style were noticed.

Participants were divided in their opinion of the need for Aboriginal school staff. Participants recalled experiences of discrimination based on their culture. One participant recalled two examples of school activities she was not comfortable



participating in because they conflicted with cultural teachings. In elementary school she lacked the courage to explain it to her teacher and was refused participation marks. In high school she spoke to the teacher and alternate activities were arranged. The teacher she had respected her beliefs. Suggestions from Edmonton Aboriginal high school students included providing “bridging programs that would help to bring better racial understanding” (Hains, 2001, p.46).

Participants acknowledged the need for students to have teachers they could identify with. We discussed the positive connections Aboriginal students may make with Aboriginal teachers. The participants were thoughtful in their considerations. They felt that students can have positive relationships with their teachers regardless of their cultural background, but students may find the initial contact more comfortable and be able to establish trust sooner with Aboriginal staff. A participant suggested it was because students would be more relaxed. Two participants included the view that it was more important to hire staff who were able to develop positive relationships with all students, rather than an Aboriginal staff member who was not qualified.

#### Negative Teacher Relationships: Participants’ Voice

*You have to have a teacher you like. Like my construction teacher, I never got along with him. I just did the work. He used to get mad at me, but I shrugged it off. I don’t know. Well, they weren’t discriminative, they wouldn’t single out people. I had a teacher, he would not look at me. I’d sit at the back of his class, right by his desk and I’d put up my hand. He’s like, “Okay, do your assignment.” He wouldn’t explain how to do it or anything he would just expect us to do it. I didn’t know what to do and he didn’t help. There was me and two other Native people in that class. I got kicked out. I*

*never wanted to go back to his class. We'd always skip that class because we didn't want to go because we weren't getting help and he wouldn't teach us, he'd just expect us to do it.*

*The teachers they weren't too focused on helping people who needed it, more they focused on their favourites. There were lots of teachers who did that. They had lots of favorites. "Oh, this person does this better than you so you should get help from her, but I'm not going to help you." That was basically what they were doing and their favorites were not very helpful.*

*Some of the assignments. Teachers would say, "Okay, you have a 1000 word essay due two days from now." Well, how are you supposed to do a 1000 word essay on something you don't even know you are going to do? Like you know, just give us a week. Some teachers do give like two weeks for something like that, but I did have one teacher who said, "You have an essay due two days from now." And I was lost. I am horrible with essays. And horrible with tests too.*

*I know there was one teacher who was really loud and he's always right in front of the students when he's talking to them, not really talking, but yelling. Those students were intimidated and scared, but then they always listened to what he said because he was there again. I think he's the only loud teacher.*

*They have to have patience. Lots and lots of patience. And a certain understanding of what you have to go into for all good Cree for example. You may know how to talk the language, you may know how to write the language, but when it comes to people who don't know how to sometimes they just don't have enough patience*

*for that person. Or if I can learn it, you should learn it too. They may find it frustrating and get over dramatic about trying to teach it.*

*Yes, most times, expectations are really too high. I find the teacher has normal expectations, like you're a student and I'm here to teach you, you may have some previous experience to this, but that doesn't mean anything, I'm still coming to teach you like I'm teaching everyone else. Even if you've got previous experience, you shouldn't give any person leeway, cause their teacher from previous [classes] might have skipped a couple of things and they'd be lost in the dark, and you'd be sitting there going, "but you should know this." That's how it was with me, I knew some stuff and teachers like "oh yeah, I don't have to teach her all of this" Gave me leeway, that's why I wasn't so good at English during Grade 11 cause I was very good at my English during my Grade 10 years, and my teachers' like, oh, this is the same teacher I had the very next year, and she decided that since I excelled in previous class, that I would excel in this one, so she didn't help me through it. Even though it's a whole different year, a whole different study course, she still figured that I should know it. It's not true. Too much expectations from one person.*

*The frustration of knowing that you just can't do it doesn't mean that you can't try, but, see teachers think, not personally, I'm not trying to offend anyone. I'm just trying to say it in simple facts that certain teachers think that if you don't try and succeed on the first time, it's not worth you trying again. Even if you know personally that if I do this again I know I'll succeed.*

*Everyone likes certain things about English, I like that you can make up stuff and they won't be too critical about it, but I had this one poem. It was, we were doing*

*situations and um the causes in my one class and we had to pick a category. Some people picked depression, some picked suicide and other things like that. I picked depression. But I guess it was a little too believable because my teacher thought I was depressed and suicidal so she sent me to a counsellor. And my counsellor thought I was threatening her even though I was talking just like this. She thought I was threatening her. I'm like, she said, "Don't raise your voice at me." "I didn't believe I was raising my voice." She's like, "Don't talk back to me either." I was like oh, that one got some issues.*

*[I asked: How would you rate your high school experience?] On a scale of one to ten? About seven. Well I enjoyed it all, but sometimes you sit there and go, um I'm one person in a crowd, now what do I do? I have a tendency to just float around in the background and do whatever. Well if you had certain classes with certain teachers you could go, "Oh right on I can do this now." But if you had the teachers looking at you as if you were going to commit a crime or something you couldn't get away with nothing, even if it was just like a ...passing a note or something. I had a fairly good time with my teachers and I was one of those types of people who could get along with almost anyone. Everybody who didn't like you just ignored you so I had a good time with that.*

*In my Native Studies class my teacher he assumed all the kids in his class knew what was going on. When that SIGA, we didn't know what was going on. He's sitting there, "What do you think about it?" It just started this morning and we're like, "About what?" He had to explain it all to us. He expected us all to sit there and have a really good opinion about it. If it was a couple provinces away he expected us to know about*

*it. If it's not impacting us immediately or have a direct impact on us most times us teenagers won't care. It's like if it had something to do with our province we care, but if it has to do with some tribe down by the coast and it had to do with that tribe and their land or whatever we really didn't care.*

*They should ask on the first day of class if there are any requirements that certain students have for their culture. Like, um, for Natives. When I was in grade 6 I told my teacher I was not allowed to do this. We had to log roll and someone had to jump over us. I told her I can't do that and she's sitting there giving me a lecture about this. I sat there and said I can't do this, I was taught not to. She said then you have to sit out the class. She didn't give me anything to do instead, just sit out the class. I lost marks. I showed up, but got marked absent.*

*Um, well, speaking from experience I had to actually help some teachers because all the female Aboriginal students didn't mention it. When you are in your gym class and you are on yours and you have to take swimming class you're not supposed to go in the water, but she basically said, "You know you are the only one who has ever said this to me. I didn't know this." I was like you didn't know this and yet I've been lectured this for many years.*

*I think having Aboriginal teachers is a major issue especially if they have like 30% Aboriginal students. That's a big number and they have to start looking at hiring more Aboriginal teachers and guidance counsellors. For some kids it would make a difference because they are used to being around Aboriginal people all the time and it's somebody that they can relate to. They'd feel more comfortable and they'd probably listen better because they're supposed to be nice to your Elders. It wouldn't matter for*

*some. Well that's a bad example, I'm just saying if you have an Aboriginal person there that kid might be more willing to open up to an Aboriginal person than a non-Aboriginal person.*

*Why would it help kids more? I think it doesn't really have to do with their race or nationality. It's just how that teacher gets involved with that student. When I was growing up I didn't have much Aboriginal role models at all, but I knew there was always that one teacher who....So if they were a good teacher, they're a good teacher and it doesn't matter who they are. You have to be careful who you hire. You just don't want to hire an Aboriginal and then they could be just ...without that connection.*

*I think that's what I mean the connection you get. I think more non-Aboriginal teachers need to get more involved with their Aboriginal students cause a lot of the times even though there's not a lot of Aboriginal teachers the non-Aboriginal teachers won't acknowledge Aboriginal students. In my classes the only way I'd get acknowledged is if they would ask me an Aboriginal question. Like what do you feel about this treaty, blah, blah, blah? I'm like why are you asking me? Just because I'm brown? That really pissed me off a lot of times. They'd put me on the spot and I'd be like one of the only visible Aboriginal person who would actually come to class. Then there'd be some teachers who would ask me and it wouldn't have to be an Aboriginal question. It's just the connection the teacher has to make with all the students.*

*I think another thing too that teachers have to realize is when life hits you bad and a student is seen in the category as bad or a trouble maker that hurts.*

Recommendations:

- Provide opportunities for students to choose topics and resources that they find relevant.
- Identify student learning style whenever possible and offer instruction and assignments that promote student engagement and success.
- Provide students with a teacher assessment form at the end of each term they may choose to complete anonymously.
- Encourage staff to establish personal professional growth goals and utilize opportunities for development.
- Provide staff with cross-cultural education and encourage students to share cultural protocol with school staff to avoid misunderstandings.
- Increase Aboriginal staff to reflect the Aboriginal student population.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: OURSELVES

Graduation is a new beginning  
Like being reborn  
You advance to a new level  
And decide where you stand  
You accept change  
But are the unique person you are meant to be  
It's like being successful  
Where everything is possible when you try  
Your opinions and ideas are heard and shared  
Paths are opening everywhere  
And nothing stands in your way  
There are obstacles to overcome  
But you will always get by  
So just think of how far you got  
And remember that special day  
Cause you're going to conquer the world  
Using knowledge in your own way

By Maggie

### Struggles

Just as Maggie states in her poem, there are obstacles to overcome and you will always get by. The participants in this study knew that despite obstacles, despite struggles, they would graduate. There were times during high school when participants struggled with learning something new, completing schoolwork, and family matters. There were times when life just was not as easy as we would hope. It was during these times that these young people looked beyond the immediate problem and kept their goals in mind.

When I asked participants if they had ever been unsuccessful one participant basically told me she rarely set herself up for failure. Although she tried new things,



she knew her restrictions and did not place herself in situations she could not handle. This participant used athletics as an example. She understood what her physical abilities were and what she was capable of. This was true for other participants as they shared stories of cutting themselves from teams during tryouts and for some not even going so far as to tryout for sports they had previously enjoyed. Rather than enter into tough competition and risk failure they withdrew. Two of the participants upon reflection expressed feelings of regret. If they could go back, they said they would have pushed themselves harder and found the confidence to try out. There were people who had encouraged them, but they chose not to do it.

Extra-curricular activities were challenges participants did not need to undertake to graduate. When it came to assignments and homework participants did work through their difficulties. There were cases where participants were not successful in passing a class, but they either repeated it the following semester or chose another class. For example, one participant failed a biology class and chose a chemistry class the following semester because she felt her mathematic abilities would allow her more opportunity to be successful. Even if some of the participants chose to not complete the odd class or assignment, the fact remains that they did persist and complete the required credits to graduate.

When participants encountered difficulties with assignments they sought help from teachers, peers, and as one participant stated, “everybody and anybody who knew how to do anything.” Five of the six participants were able to acquire the twenty-four credits necessary to graduate with their peers. The remaining participant graduated the following year. These participants did not give up when they were confronted with

academic struggles; they found ways of overcoming them. One participant went so far as to prepare herself to take a leave from school when her grandmother passed away. I am not sure if teachers were aware of her intentions, but when her grandmother was critically ill she worked extremely hard to earn above average marks so when she missed assignments when she would be away she would not fall below a passing mark. Participants acknowledge that the assignments they completed were not always a reflection of their true abilities. They admittedly slacked off at times and regrettably failed to complete homework.

As young adults, participants also encountered negative peer pressure. They told me that the pressures are there regardless of who you are and they just had to make positive choices. Not all students are strong enough to say no to friends and it becomes even more difficult when it comes to family. One participant knew that if she wanted to reach her goal of graduating and going on to post-secondary her chances of being successful would increase if she remained in the public high school. It was there that she found academic support and additional course options. To do this she had to deny her family's request for her to move home.

Included in their conversations of struggles in high school was the constant stress they felt because of high expectations. Others voiced these expectations, but the highest expectations came from themselves. Each participant set personal goals and worked hard to achieve them.

#### Struggles: Participants' Voice

*Hm, let me think. What didn't I succeed in? Well I basically knew my own restrictions so if I knew I wasn't going to succeed in it I didn't try out for it. I knew*

*what I was good at and if I knew that I wasn't able to do that I might attempt it. I tried javelin. I swear no one can try that sucker. You go like this and you flip it like that and you're like hopefully it'll stick. Hopefully it doesn't come flying back at me. You're just hoping that it'll do something, but you have to have a special run and make sure you don't go over the line. I don't know. It was interesting to learn considering they were trying to teach you inside. It was interesting because they didn't give you anything. You just had to practice with thin air. And you're like, "Okay, I get to use a stick now? Wow."*

*I needed help when my Grandma died that year, just before finals. The midterm finals just killed me. My marks went all the way down. I had to make up for that. My finals, I made sure that my marks were high enough because everybody knew she was going to go. So I got all my marks up to 70's so if I totally bombed it's 20% so I'd still have 50%.*

*I was always very organized. Teachers used to look through my binders and ask me to do presentations on how to keep your binder neat and that. I'd get so shy and be like, "No." But time wise? There is never enough time cause you are trying to do to do two assignments in science that are due on Friday and three assignments for math and I'd juggle back and forth. I'd quit and concentrate on math and try to get my mark up and it worked.*

*Um, the major assignments the teachers assigned at the end of the year were hard cause it puts lots of pressure on you, especially if you are working. It's hard, but I guess you have to do what you've got to do. Yup, everything was fine except for my*

*homework and that's actually what I regret. Otherwise I'd probably be a straight A student if I would have did my homework.*

*I didn't read much and got lost in a novel, especially when I had no interest in it. So it was difficult to finish work. No matter how many times somebody explained it to me how to write a summary, an essay, or a story, I always left out the important part, "the climax". I never got that right. But now when I look back at those difficult times, I realized I didn't push myself that much and caused all my terrible marks. It's easy to complete something, if you put your thoughts together and use them. That's what I found out when it was too late.*

*Practically all my friends were on the honour roll. And there's little old me, I'm like, not even close. It's not that, I really didn't try that hard. I excelled in the stuff that I enjoyed and if I didn't enjoy it I found it hard for myself.*

*They were always there, like the drinking, the smoking. It was just a personal choice I had to make due to I think what my mom instilled in me. Sports would help a little because I didn't want to get stuck smoking because my coach would smell it and would she put me on. You know. They helped a little, but I think it was more the upbringing that my mom gave me. The values she instilled in me. They were the things that helped me get through those negative pressures, but they're constantly there no matter who you hang around with. They're always there regardless of the extra-curricular activities you do. I just always think that they did help a lot in... if they weren't there I could have been doing a lot of other things.*

*I would go back and get involved like I did in junior high. That is my biggest regret, the whole sports thing, I gave it up and that was one of my passions and I*

*haven't got back into it. That's when I stopped caring. I did the school work and did enough to pass but I stopped caring about what the school was about. That's the trouble with a bigger school, you get lost and you are known by a number and not by your name. If you're not a really good student teachers don't remember who you are. That's one of the drawbacks...it's so easy to get lost. You don't have that constant push.*

*Stress wise for Aboriginals, they might have stress being put on from their parents, from friends, peers etc. It's like, "I'm not going to do this - well you shouldn't do this either" or from the parents, "I expect you to graduate with honours, I expect you to do this, and this, and this" and you've got stress from teachers, some teachers are not very patient with Aboriginal students, some are, some of them they feel that you should have help from fellow students-it should be a group effort. Sometimes that doesn't work, some people need hands-on individual help. Also, the stress of knowing, I should know this, personal stress. Or stress from outdoor – things. I need to get good grades so that I can do this, or that I can do this. I need to do good grades so I can achieve this, or so I won't have to live at home anymore, or I can make money for myself, so I can move and get out of the situation that I'm in right now.*

*Well I graduated, but other than that I didn't accomplish anything.*

#### Recommendations:

- Allow opportunities for all students who try out for a team to play on a team by creating additional levels of teams in the school. Additional teams may not play in an organized league, but should have the opportunity to be coached and develop their skills and fitness level during scrimmages and exhibition games.

- Take into account adaptive dimensions in teaching and provide alternative programs and assignments for students who are absent for extended periods of time.

### Quitting

I don't think quitting was an option for me, but I did drop out of school and drop back in the following semester. The multitude of reasons high school students leave school is unfortunate. I left because I chose to have a child and remain home with her for the first five months. I know girls who were unable to return to school because they lacked childcare. I have had students leave because they were transferred to a new foster home out of the school district. Older students have left school to find work and support their family. I have also known students who have discontinued school because they don't believe in themselves. They quit before they fail.

There was a participant in this study who left schools a number of times. She left schools to go to a different school because of family moves and she also left schools because she personally did not want to be there. The five other participants remained in the same high school they began in grade ten. They never left school, but some came close. For one participant it was during grade eleven she thought about quitting because of personal difficulties. She had lost a family member and could not find anyone she was comfortable with to talk to. She felt isolated and discouraged. For another participant, it was during grade twelve that she was not successful in passing all her classes. She was overwhelmed with the level of difficulty her classes presented and allowed herself to fall far enough behind that she was unable to catch up and complete the required assignments. She masked her difficulties and did not seek help right away.

Another participant seriously contemplated leaving school in grade twelve. She was frustrated with the social pressure in her high school and did not want to be a part of it. She also faced the uncertainty of her future and was frightened by it. She questioned the value so much time and effort into her education would amount to. She had reservations as to her desire to carry out that effort. Until her mother gambled with a little reverse psychology and told her to go ahead and quit if she liked, the participant had not realized the personal benefit she was attaining. She came to understand her level of education was not going to affect her family's future, only her own.

Although leaving school was an option, the participants refused it. Two of them said they never considered it. They did not encounter obstacles or setbacks that warranted this option. They had the self-confidence to see past any problems.

#### Quitting: Participants' Voice

*Yes, of yeah. You now how I kept dropping out of school and going back and that? When I was in grade 12 I did lots of credits in one year so everything was just piling up and I had like six classes and the year before when I was in grade 11 when we were trying to move back to the city I was doing two correspondence classes too and I just wanted to graduate. It's so stupid.*

*I think it was in Grade 11. I was frustrated, I felt like I didn't have any support. People that I knew were not very, I would tell them something, and they would go and tell the person I would tell them not to go and tell. My dad's ex, she was a counsellor, but she didn't keep her counsel where it's supposed to be. She would tell the person you didn't want to, I felt betrayed, I had just lost my favourite uncle, and that gets to a person, so you're sitting there going "Oh, why should I continue to go to school when I*

*can go out and look for a job.” Still now, going to look for a job is still hard, even if you have a high school graduation, it’s still hard. You have to have personal experience and all this, and you don’t really have that.*

*Eleven or 12 I can’t remember exactly which year. Christmas time of 11 or 12. I got sick of all the pressures high school gives you. You constantly have to be in, have the hairstyle and be, you know, noticed. I got sick of it, the whole pretending to be...I didn’t like it.*

*Yeah, my mind was like I’m just going to quit. I kinda got sick of having all that pressure on me, that I’m going to do something, that I’m going to be somebody and I’m thinking well what if I don’t? You know what a big deal I would think, what if I do all those things and it won’t amount to anything. You know okay, I’ll get a degree, I’ll go to university, I’ll end up with a job, then what? What do I do? The thing that made me stop to think was my mom saying, “Go ahead.” She kinda challenged me. My god, I’m an adult now. She’s letting me decide so I could do it for myself. That’s when I realized it was for me and not for them.*

*You feel like you don’t belong. When you feel like you don’t belong that when you feel like quitting or thinking you can’t do it. Maybe it’s just the fact that I’m going to get out of here. It wasn’t a horrible experience, but I wouldn’t go back and do it again.*

*No, not that I can think of. Even when it was really tough for me I never wanted to quit. I just like, “I have two more years to go until I’m done. That’s it.” No. I had my heart set.*

Recommendations:



- Assist students in finding motivation with intrinsic rewards.
- Acknowledge student resiliency and offer support.
- Accept that students may choose to leave school despite school efforts. Invite them back and be there to welcome them at their return.

### Future

It always amazes me when I meet people who are working in a profession they have always dreamed of. Professions they role played in childhood games. The lives they imagined as kids have somehow come true. The reality for Aboriginal youth is not so promising. Statistics reveal a future of low educational attainment and high unemployment rates. I have met students whose dream of a NHL career has permitted them to believe education is not necessary to achieve fame and fortune. I have met students who have given up their dream because they do not believe they have the potential or are worthy of success. Sadly, I have also met students who do not have a dream. They are trapped in a cycle of hopelessness.

It was uplifting to meet these participants who had such realistic goals and who were so future minded at such a young age. They may not have known what profession they would enter, but they were laying the foundation for when they knew. The value of education was strong for these individuals and their motivation came from many places. The longing they had to live an affluent lifestyle was motivation for some. Just as my grandparents growing up during the depression wanted better for their children, three participants did not want to remain in the lower income bracket. They understood the correlation between levels of education and standards of living.

Quite inspiring was the motivation they also had to provide their service to their communities. One participant found her role models in the few health professions from her reserve. Another participant wants to obtain training so she could return to her reserve to provide a service and expand the economic development. Another participant has already returned to his reserve to work with youth and is furthering his education in a field that supports wellness.

Wealth to my participants was defined by more than monetary accumulation. Wealth meant having the means to give back to people and support their families with a healthy lifestyle. Most importantly, participants were seeking careers that would give them personal satisfaction and enjoyment. Participants in this study not only had dreams, they had the maturity to develop a plan in which to obtain that dream.

#### Future: Participants' Voice

*I wanted to be farther than my mom and dad. I don't know. Just to get farther in life than they did.*

*Like on the reserve, out of how many people, there's only like eight or nine doctors, only seven dentists. There's only that very minimal amount of people that actually go somewhere and do something and so I wanted to be in that category. I always said I would be in that category. I don't know why I chose to do that. I was very determined to do it.*

*The fact of graduating and you need a better education in order to make a good living now. Like I know people who haven't graduated and they're doing pretty good, but you'll do even better if you graduate. That was actually my main goal, just to*

*graduate. I didn't want to be working at a grocery store my whole life. I work with ladies that they're like 40 and that's all their job is working at a grocery store.*

*Um, yeah, I would like to open my own restaurant, but the thing is I don't want to open it in town. I want to open on reserve. My reserve gets lots of business, but the have only a gas station, confectionary store, plus a health centre and that's all our reserve has. We have no restaurants, um, no place for people to sit down and eat. We get lots of truckers. We get lots of people coming to round dances and pow wows.*

*I don't know. Cause I wanted to make a difference in my family too. We come from a very poor, I guess background growing up. I guess I made a pact to myself that I would never do that. If I had kids, I always say that I'd never do that to my kids. I guess that was my little pact to myself.*

*Well, I had a plan, I'm not too sure about my friends. Most of my friends are just happy to be graduating and living on their own. Living a party life and work. That's about it. I have my daughter so I have, I can't have a party life. Even when I do have spare time I don't go out and party. I go out and dance and that's about it.*

*Oh yeah, my brother was in university. There's a big gap between us, he's 30 something and I'm 23. He was at university and I was just starting junior high and I always knew when he started talking about it that I was going to go do that. My aunties and uncles would say, "That's what you are going to do too." That's when I started thinking ahead. I can't remember a time thinking I'm not going. I think there are a lot of people, even the kids I work with they're like, "Me, university?" And I'm like it's so easy. Just finish school and you can go. They don't see there's an option. They don't*

*see differences after high school, they don't see any more than that. They just get the diploma and that's it.*

*I was very excited because it was my last year and I wanted to graduate and I wanted to go through that whole process. And looking forward to getting the paper rolled up, but we didn't get a rolled up paper, we got a folder. I was actually disappointed to get a folder, but there was more than just your diploma in that folder. Stuff from the Saskatchewan government.*

Recommendations:

- Be a positive role model.
- Provide opportunities for students to learn about career choices and visit post-secondary institutions.
- Assist students in identifying their strengths and finding occupations that suit that individual.

### Inner Strength

Time and again, participants told me I couldn't force a student to stay in school and learn. I felt like they were giving me permission to let the students go. It's hard to let them go sometimes. I've spent many starry evenings with my friend, a teacher, drinking tea on my deck talking about our students who had left. Sometimes they said good-bye, but more often they just disappeared from our classrooms and eventually, if we were lucky, we got word of their whereabouts from a friend or cousin or counsellor. In my first two years of teaching I had a student each year attempt suicide. In my third year one was successful. The shock, the anger, the sorrow resonated through me. I

remember sitting beside colleagues on the hard funeral parlour pew, listening to her two year old son cry for his mother. I haven't let that student go.

Participants spoke of people and places from which they found support. Only one participant spoke of a time she felt isolated, alone, but that was only a short period in her life. She managed to move on. They all managed to pull themselves up when they found themselves down. Although participants often took responsibility for their failures, they were reluctant to praise their own resiliency. Participants found it difficult to explain the inner drive they felt. How do you describe that little voice in your head that tells you to keep on going? Of course participants credited their mothers, teachers, Elders, and friends for strengthening their inner strength, but ultimately they had what it took to complete school. They told me they just knew they had to finish school. They said it was just another thing they had to do. They believed they always wanted to graduate.

#### Inner Strength: Participants' Voice

*There was a little thing in my mind saying okay I'm not going to be here forever. It wasn't really a chore and I didn't really like learning. I basically thought of it like I went through this many years of school already I might as well go through this many more. After high school, thinking about it I have cousins who are struggling through school and cousins who are dropouts and I just shake my head. What made them quit or what is making them struggle? I tried teaching my younger cousin that doing your homework will always help you a lot better.*

*I just think of it as, no I gotta do it, like think something like it's another thing I have to do. Um, just like, kinda attempting to go to university or college. It's just*

*another thing you have to do. That's where it depends on the person. If you have the will to go you will go. You can't will somebody to go. If you're doing that you're basically just, they don't want to go to school.*

*Even teachers, they try their hardest to keep students in school, but it is their choice. If they don't want to be in school you can't force them. If they don't want to learn you can't force them to learn either. It's a big world out there and they have to get ready for it. They need to get ready for it. It's up to the person if they want to do it or not. You can't really force them. I don't know. I wasn't really one of those kind of people, I always wanted to go to school and graduate.*

*Some people were willing to bend to everyone else's rules. Like, "Oh, my friend wants you to do this." And they'd go along with it. Whereas I had some really high principles and I won't bend them for no one. If you say, "Just tell them that. It won't mean anything." It's like, "No." "Come on be a buddy." "Well I can be your buddy, but I won't do that." Stick to your guns. Because either way, if you lie for them they'll think they can take advantage of you. If you don't stand up for what you believe in you're not going to have anything to stand on. And if you try and do not succeed. Still try some more because the next time you will succeed.*

*Ah, success, um. If you have a goal and you want to achieve it, um you basically strive hard and work towards it. Success is when you actually achieve your goal or um, you haven't given up. Giving up would be letting yourself down, but if other people were supporting you, like you don't want to let them down. Success is when you achieve the goals, but you did it for yourself, not for other people.*

*Success? Success to me is having a job and having a happy home. Those are the two things that I was used to growing up. I think if I was to have that, a good job and have that love and support for my kids, if I ever have any. Achieving your goals. Getting as far as you wanted to go. Yeah, happiness and being happy. Not being really outstanding but being able to look back and say, okay I did the best that I could and I didn't let fear stand in my way. Going for your goals. Like I said earlier.*

*I wanted to achieve my dreams. Whatever that was, whatever. There was always this dream to get beyond and to do something significant. I still don't know what it is, but that's mine. Did I make you cry? (laughs)*

#### Participant Advice to Current Students

The participants had such good advice for schools and current Aboriginal students. The advice for schools is presented throughout chapters five, six, and seven as lists of recommendations. The advice for students I have summarized as follows:

- You are not going to be in school forever, so just do your work and get it over with.
- Completing your homework will always help.
- A grade twelve certificate will allow you more choice when it comes to looking for employment.
- It's a big world out there and you have to get ready for it.
- Uphold your principles when you feel negative pressure from others.
- Stand up for what you believe in because if you don't you won't have anything to stand on.
- Dream, set goals, and when you do, work hard to achieve them.

- If you try and do not succeed, try again.
- Success is happiness.
- Success is when you achieve the goals, but you did it for yourself, not for other people.
- Success is not necessarily being really outstanding, but being able to look back and say, okay I did the best that I could and I didn't let fear stand in my way.



## CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

At the end of our last interview Lisa thoughtfully gave Thomas and me her definition of success. We listened respectfully, and when she was done we sat in silence for a brief moment before she interrupted with, “Did I make you cry?” We sat back and joined in her laughter. I think that is one of the greatest gifts all my participants possessed. It is the ability to reflect with all seriousness on critical incidents from their lives and express their inner values then lighten the mood with a bit of humour. It was as though they knew the exact moment when to inject some comic relief. When I reflect on the last few months and the connections I made with Martha, Donalda, Maggie, Katherine, Lisa, and Thomas I am honoured that they shared so much of who they are with us.

This study was undertaken to explore the school experiences of six Aboriginal high school graduates. As you recall, the research questions that guided the study were:

1. What are the stories of six Aboriginal students who graduated from an urban provincial high school?
2. What factors do they perceive as contributing to their success in completing an academic grade twelve?
3. What recommendations do they have for educators and schools, which would benefit current Aboriginal students?

When I invited young men and women to take part in my study and dropped off the recruitment letters the first thing I noticed was they did not come knocking on my door

the next day. When I spoke to them a second time I realized their hesitation came from the word “success” I included in our conversation. They were unsure of my definition of success. They knew I was a teacher and I believe they thought I was referring to high academic marks and their accomplishments since graduation. They spoke with modesty about their achievements and did not fully understand my request. I explained to a few participants that their grade twelve average was not a factor in my definition of successful graduates and I wanted to use their educational experiences to create awareness and understanding to better assist current Aboriginal students. It was at that point they realized I was asking for their stories. I think some of my participants remained sceptical of how their stories could help others, but they trusted me and agreed to participate. I was reminded of this trust the other day when Donalda stopped by. I wanted her to read her story in chapter four, but she refused. I showed her how I had organized this thesis and explained how I wanted her to ensure the accuracy of her story and character. She said she would read it when the thesis was finished and printed. “I trust you,” she told me and got up from the table.

My participants trusted me to portray their experiences accurately and fairly. The consent forms they signed initially were important, but once they read and approved their stories I felt that was when I truly received their permission. I wanted you to read their stories and hear their voices for these people represent a growing segment of our population. So often we fail to include the voice of Aboriginal youth in our discussions of how best to meet their needs in school. The six participant stories show the diverse lives and experiences of Aboriginal youth.

I identified three main themes the participant stories fell into: our environment, our relationships, and ourselves. Participants talked about their school environment, they described people in their home and school environments, and shared personal goals and philosophies. It was these relationships that stood out to me. When considering the factors that contributed to the participants' success in completing high school an examination of all three relationships was necessary. A common belief in Aboriginal cultures is that everything in our world is interrelated. This principle is revealed in the interconnectedness of the sixteen sub-themes I documented.

Within their environments, participants expressed the need to feel a sense of belonging. Initial positive school experiences and interactions with peers and staff gave participants a greater sense of belonging. The higher the comfort in their environment the more confidence they had to seek help and participate in school activities. Participants expressed the opinion that there was a lack of non-competitive extra-curricular activities. Insightfully, they believed the more students participated in school activities the more successful they would be. The overall school environment was a factor in the participants' enjoyment in school.

Outside the school environment were the participants' families. The support and encouragement participants received were vital in developing their persistence and determination. Participants described parents who balanced clear expectations and boundaries with trust and confidence in their children. Family values of respect and equality were reflected in participants' reactions to unfavourable people and incidents. Positive relationships with peers and staff in school allowed for participants to freely express their individuality and find acceptance. Participants demonstrated restraint

when they were confronted with negative peer pressure. Support from family, friends, and teachers was the factor participants expressed most frequently as contributing to their success. Availability of academic and wellness counsellors was noted as lacking in schools, yet it did not hinder participants' ability to find assistance when they needed it. Despite stories of discrimination and negative teacher relationships, participants continued with their education.

At the centre of factors contributing to their success was their own inner strength. It was not a factor participants identified often. Rather, it emerged in their stories of resilience. When many of their cohorts were discontinuing school because of the negative relationships they had with their environment and the people in it, the participants in this study took responsibility for their role in their education. They had the insight to recognize their future was shaped by the choices they made in their present situation. They displayed fine decision making skills and the ability to predict the consequences of their actions. They were able to let go of negative influences and embrace the positive. Participants in the study dreamt big and did not let anything crush their dream. Although their goals of attaining a high standard of living are ever present, they also define success by internal satisfaction and the wealth of family and friends.

The six young adults in this thesis research all displayed incredible willpower. One participant explained, "If you have the will to go you will go. You can't will somebody to go." At an early age participants resolved to finish school and they did. This strength of will and future-mindedness came from within. The stories participants gave of school proved they were able to cope with adversity and take advantage of support and opportunity. These abilities came from their spirit, but could have been

enhanced by the positive relationships to their school environment and people around them. Responsibility for student academic success lies with all parties, including the student. A Canadian study of 18 000 school leavers and graduates eighteen to twenty years of age emphasized the importance of a student's school experience:

Schools obviously have no control over some of the factors that may be related to early [school] withdrawal such as family structure and socio-economic status. However, education practices and policies can be changed if elements in the school environment contribute to students leaving before they graduate. And in fact, there are striking differences in the school experience of leavers and graduates, ranging from their ability to get along with teachers, to interest and attendance in classes, participation in school activities, friendship networks, and a sense of belonging. The two groups tend to have perceptions of and reactions to the school environment. (HRDC, 1995, p.27)

I believe it is our responsibility as parents, educators, and community members to strengthen our children's spirits by providing a caring and supportive environment in and out of school. Participants in this study provided recommendations to schools and advice for students so we may each play a role in reducing the number of Aboriginal students who leave school early. If we keep the metaphor of the rope in mind, and how easily one's spirit can be unravelled, it may assist us in ensuring our words and actions continue to strengthen the rope.

It is my hope that this narrative inquiry of recent Aboriginal graduates with recommendations will encourage the development and evaluation of current and future retention programs in urban high schools. This narrative inquiry can provide an additional resource for those interested in understanding the lives and experiences of urban Aboriginal graduates. Based on this study, further research could include additional narrative inquiries of a larger population of urban and rural Aboriginal high school graduates. Further research could involve looking at the relationship between Aboriginal students' inner strength and their concept of spirituality. Ethnographic

studies of the multiple worlds Aboriginal students relate to would also be beneficial. Program evaluations of current effective practices for the retention of Aboriginal students would also be valuable. From this study there are a number of recommendations calling for both quantitative and qualitative research projects that may provide further statistical analysis and insight into effective education practices. Based on the recommendations from the participants, there is much to do to enhance the educational experience for Aboriginal youth.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Recommendations

Recommendations are listed in the order in which they appear in the body of the thesis.

- Identify the reputation your school has and take action to address the issues creating any negative reputation.
- Provide tours and an introduction to the school for feeder schools in June and offer additional tours prior to start up in August.
- Organize events that focus on building school spirit, community, and pride.
- Review harassment policy and take time to educate all students and staff on forms of harassment and the discipline protocol.
- Educate school staff on gangs in Saskatchewan.
- Survey students on school safety and review current student supervision practices.
- Have an impartial party identify “trouble” areas of the school and take action to address the problem.
- Introduce students to coaches and club advisors at the start of the school year.
- Orientate students to school facilities and allow opportunities for students to spend time and become comfortable in the areas prior to formal team tryouts.
- Identify student interests and provide supervised opportunities within the school to showcase their talents. For example, breakdancing shows, karaoke cabarets, art exhibits.
- Provide fun, non-competitive fitness activities that encourage all students to participate.
- Organize an activity fair during orientation week or grade nine tours where information on all school co-curricular and extra-curricular activities can be obtained.
- Be conscious of the unique and diverse home life of our youth.
- Provide opportunities for connections between the school and students’ extended family, through for example, student-led conferences where students choose the family members to bring.
- Increase the opportunities for the building of school and family connections.
- Recognize that family obligations may sometimes conflict with school attendance, therefore non-attendance should not be reflected in grading practices.
- Provide students the option of applying for adult status when it comes to addressing absences in the event guardians are unavailable.
- Recognize the positive and negative influences peers have on a student’s decision to come to school.

- Provide a safe and supportive environment for students to work through a conflict resolution program.
- Recognize the fine line between peer groups and segregation and take action to eliminate the latter more destructive issue.
- Discourage the territorial behaviour groups may have formed in and around the school. For example, assign lockers and parking spots or hold school events in the specific area that welcome all students.
- Teachers should discourage negative group formations in the classroom by assigning group members and seating arrangements when necessary.
- Teach students cooperative learning skills and conflict resolution strategies so they are equipped to complete group work and avoid destructive conflicts.
- Provide anti-racism education for staff and students so they are equipped to recognize and respond to racism and discrimination.
- Provide co-curricular and extra-curricular activities that promote cultural awareness and understanding.
- If students are able to predict the consequences for their behavior, school discipline becomes less of an issue. Ensure the rules, expectations, and discipline procedures for all students are consistent and fair.
- Provide opportunities for students to access tutoring during the lunch hour and after school. Assistance should include both help with class assignments and skill development.
- Teachers should clearly outline times when they are available to students for assistance. If there are no predetermined times it is the teacher's responsibility to invite students to approach them to set up tutorials outside of class time.
- Peer tutors should be used only when both student and tutor agree upon it. A peer tutor association could be created where potential tutors may apply and undergo training.
- Offer open workshops on computer literacy, writing styles, organization and time management strategies, studying tips, etc.
- School counsellors and staff should be trained in multiple counselling methods and strategies.
- Expand the support staff in the school to include Elders, addictions counsellors, public health nurses, and youth workers.
- Consider developing a peer support and mediation program. Models and training are available.
- Support teen parents through parenting classes and support groups.
- Consider working with community agencies to develop a local 24 hour hotline for youth to access counselling and referrals.
- Research student support initiatives and programs at other high schools.
- Acknowledge the time and effort school staff put into building positive relationships and environment.
- Advocate for students in need.
- Continue celebrating student success.
- Provide opportunities for students to choose topics and resources that they find relevant.

- Identify student learning style whenever possible and offer instruction and assignments that promote student engagement and success.
- Provide students with a teacher assessment form at the end of each term they may choose to complete anonymously.
- Encourage staff to establish personal professional growth goals and utilize opportunities for development.
- Provide staff with cross-cultural education and encourage students to share cultural protocol with school staff to avoid misunderstandings.
- Increase Aboriginal staff to reflect the Aboriginal student population.
- Allow opportunities for all students who try out for a team to play on a team by creating additional levels of teams in the school. Additional teams may not play in an organized league, but should have the opportunity to be coached and develop their skills and fitness level during scrimmages and exhibition games.
- Take into account adaptive dimensions in teaching and provide alternative programs and assignments for students who are absent for extended periods of time.
- Assist students in finding motivation with intrinsic rewards.
- Acknowledge student resiliency and offer support.
- Accept that students may choose to leave school despite school efforts. Invite them back and be there to welcome them at their return.
- Be a positive role model.
- Provide opportunities for students to learn about career choices and visit post-secondary institutions.
- Assist students in identifying their strengths and finding occupations that suit that individual.

## Appendix B: Interview Guide

### Interview 1

- Tell me about your family background (birthplace/moves/parents/primary caregiver/siblings/etc.).
- Tell me about your childhood (character/non-school teachers/role models/etc.).
- What are your memories of beginning elementary school?
- Tell me about a time you felt you were successful in elementary school.
- Why do you think you achieved that success?
- What did you dislike about elementary school?
- What are your memories of junior high (grades 7 to 9)?
- Tell me about a time you were successful in junior high.
- Why do you think you achieved that success?

### Interview 2

- Tell me about starting high school (environment/climate/teachers/extra-curricular/social relationships/etc.).
- Where did you feel most/least comfortable? Why?
- What do you think helped you stay in school?
- Were there times when you wanted to quit?
- Why did you choose to continue with school (or return to school)?
- Tell me about a positive/negative experience from high school. Something that stands out in your memory.
- Tell me about the events and your feelings leading up to graduation.
- Do you feel you were successful in high school? Explain.
- What are some reasons you graduated?
- What are some reasons you think other Aboriginal students didn't graduate?
- What advice would you give current Aboriginal high school students?
- If you were to talk to the administration at your old high school, what would you tell them to change so other Aboriginal students could experience more success?
- Are there any other stories from high school that you would like to share with me before we end today?

### Interview 3

- How would you rate your high school experience?
- Can you tell me about an experience when you felt you didn't/did belong in your school? Did you see others who may have felt they didn't belong? Who did?
- Tell me a story about an event/person/thing that you feel contributed to your staying in school.
- Can you recall anything more that you found helped you succeed in high school?
- What do you think high schools need to do to help Aboriginal students?
- I have prepared a list of suggestions for high schools. I'd like to go through them with you and add your suggestions.
- What do you feel the role of the school is?
- What kind of school do you want for your children/siblings?
- Is there anything more you would like to share with me before we end?

## Appendix C: Letter of Recruitment

You are invited to participate in a research project on Aboriginal high school graduates. I have taken a year off from teaching to work on my master's thesis at the University of Saskatchewan and would like your help. I am investigating the factors that may have accounted for your recent success in completing high school. As you know, there are many reasons that may prevent a person from completing high school, but the focus of this research is on your experiences and how they may have contributed to your success. In this research I hope to address these questions:

1. What are the stories of Aboriginal graduates of an urban high school?
2. What factors do they perceive as contributing to their success?
3. What recommendations do they have for educators and schools, which would benefit current Aboriginal students?

If you would like to participate in this study, it is important for you to be aware that:

- We would arrange three interviews (each lasting about one hour) at a location of your choice. During the interviews I will be asking you to share stories and answer questions about your school experience. I will also be asking you for suggestions to improve the high school experience of Aboriginal students.
- The interviews will be recorded so that I will not need to take notes. The tapes will be transcribed (typed) for analysis. You may refuse to answer any question. You are free to stop the taping of any interview at any time. Also, if you later choose to withdraw from the study all tapes of your interviews will be destroyed.
- All interview transcriptions will be given to you for verification. You may change, add, or delete anything you had said in the interview so it represents your true intentions. We will meet briefly for this.
- Your identity will be protected by a pseudonym (false name). Any people and places that you mention during interviews will also be given pseudonyms.
- You may withdraw from the interview and discontinue from the study at any time. All interview tapes and transcriptions would be destroyed at that time and would not be used in the study. Your withdrawal would not result in any loss of service, benefits or penalty.
- The results of the study will be made available to you. If you would like a copy of the thesis, I will have one printed for you.

If you have any questions about the study, you may call me at [phone number], or my advisor from the University of Saskatchewan, Janet McVittie at [phone number]. If you are interested in participating in this study I invite you to contact me as soon as possible so we may set up our meetings. We will also go through and sign the consent form. I would like to meet with you for the first interview around the beginning of December. The second and third interviews would take place in January 2004.

Thank you for your consideration in assisting me in my research. I look forward to sitting down and talking to you about your school experiences. I really believe that understanding your success will lead to improved experiences of other Aboriginal high school students.

Sincerely,

Tracy Mercredi



## Appendix D: Letter of Consent

You are invited to participate in a study entitled: "Stories from School: Celebrating and Learning from the Success of Aboriginal High School Graduates." Please read this form carefully, and feel free to ask questions you may have.

1. I know that the researcher for this study is Tracy Mercredi. I may reach her at home at [phone number] or on her cell at [phone number].
2. I am aware the following research questions are to be addressed with this study. First, what are the stories of Aboriginal graduates of an urban high school? Second, what factors do they perceive as contributing to their success? Lastly, what recommendations do they have for educators and schools, which would benefit current Aboriginal students?
3. I understand that I am being asked to participate in three interviews each lasting approximately one hour. The focus of the interviews is for me to share my schooling experiences. The location of the interviews are to be agreed upon by Tracy Mercredi and myself.
4. I understand this study poses no foreseeable risks to myself. I am free to share only that which I am comfortable with sharing. If any of the questions asked cause negative emotions, the researcher will assist me in contacting an appropriate counselling service. Prince Albert has the following services if needed: Iskewew: Women Helping Women (953-6229); Native Co-ordinating Council Family Services (764-1652); Prince Albert Mental Health (765-5574).
5. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time and to refuse to answer any question for whatever reason. I may choose to stop the taping of an interview at any time. If I withdraw, my data and interview tapes from the study will be deleted and destroyed. My withdrawal would not result in any loss of service, benefits or penalty.
6. I understand Tracy Mercredi will take all necessary precautions to protect my confidentiality and anonymity. My name and the names of people and settings I mention will be given pseudonyms.
7. I understand the data collected from the interview tapes will be stored in a locked cabinet in the office of Dr. Janet McVittie at the University of Saskatchewan for a minimum of five years upon the completion of the study.
8. I understand the data collected is intended to be used in the researcher's thesis. The data collected may also be used in journal articles, research and professional conference presentations, graduate classes, and workshops for teachers. All the results will be shared with me. If I would like a personal copy of the thesis I may request one.

9. I understand I will be advised of any new information that will have a bearing on my decision to continue with the study.
10. I understand that this study has been approved by the University of Saskatchewan Advisory Committee for Ethics in Behavioural Sciences Research on \_\_\_\_\_.
11. I understand that if I have any questions regarding this study or my rights as a participant I may contact:

Office of Research Services  
University of Saskatchewan  
(306) 966-2084

Dr. Janet McVittie  
Research Supervisor  
[phone number]

Tracy Mercredi  
Researcher  
[phone number]

The study and consent form have been explained to me. I understand the contents of this consent form and a copy has been provided for my records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
date

## Appendix E: Letter of Consent for Release of Transcripts

I appreciate your participation in this research study. I am returning the transcripts of the tapes of our interviews for you to read and for you to return for use in the study. I will adhere to the following guidelines which are designed to protect your anonymity, confidentiality, and interests in the study.

1. Would you please read the transcripts for accuracy of the information. You may add to or clarify the transcripts to say what you intended to mean or include additional comments. You may also delete any information that you may not want to be quoted in the study.
2. The interpretations from this study may be used in journal articles, conferences, and teacher workshops. Your participation will remain confidential. Your name will not be used in the final report or in any articles or presentations.
3. In accordance with the University of Saskatchewan Guidelines on Behavioural Ethics, the tape recordings and transcriptions made during the study will be kept in a locked file until the study is finished. After completion of this study, the tapes and other data will be kept for five years at the University of Saskatchewan and then destroyed.
4. Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse permission at this time for me to use the transcripts. If this is the case, your comments on the tapes will not be analyzed and the tapes destroyed.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ understand the guidelines above and agree to release the revised transcripts to the researcher. A copy of the transcript release form has been provided for my records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Tracy Mercredi, Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
date