ABORIGINAL PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT
IN CALGARY CATHOLIC SCHOOLING

by

Rhonda Elser

Bachelor of Arts, (Psychology), Athabasca University, 1990

Bachelor of Education, The University of British Columbia, 1993

Masters of Education, University of Calgary, 1998

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine educational practices relating to parental engagement from three perspectives: Aboriginal parents, district personnel, and district administration. This research gives voice to the educational concerns of rural and urban First Nation/Metis/Inuit [FNMI] parents of the Calgary Catholic School District. This qualitative study examined the challenges and the successes of Aboriginal parent engagement in the Calgary Catholic School System. As a Cree woman, I chose to frame the research study and methodology around the Cree Mikowahp teachings. The four Cree laws of nature, wicitowin (sharing), kiseywatisowen (caring/kindness/generosity), kweyaskatesowin (honesty) and sohkisowin (strength/determination), form the theoretical base for the research. The literature review provides an overview of promising practices in Aboriginal parental engagement and the barriers that obstruct authentic engagement. I chose to rename and reclaim the stories of Cree history using our own terms: the Dog Days, Coming of the Witigo, Following the path of the Buffalo, and Walking through the Storm. Within each of these sections I uncovered a long history of trauma and oppression that influences parental engagement today.

The research findings clearly indicate that Aboriginal parents want to be involved in their children’s education. The participants’ responses were respectfully bundled into four bundles for safekeeping, similar to how the sacred medicine bundles are hung in Cree Mikowahps (shelters). The four bundles represent the following themes: Aboriginal Social Context, Relationship Building, Indigenous Culture and Language, and Reciprocal Responsibility. The development of the Mikowahp Tripod Framework was created from participant responses to highlight three key Mikowahp values that support parental engagement practices and programs: obedience, humility and respect. The Mikowahp Tripod Engagement Tool was developed to facilitate relationship building in schools and communities and to overcome some of the barriers identified by participants: lack of trust, stereotypes and assumptions of Aboriginal people, socioeconomic factors, historical trauma, residential school and gender roles. This research represents a move towards parental engagement as a process of relationship building that honours the Indigenous values of humility, respect, and obedience.
Preface

This dissertation is an original intellectual product of the author, R. Elser.

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Finally, I would like to acknowledge my late father, Prosper and mother, Mary who believed in me and who gave many life lessons. My dad said that "we are placed here by the Creator for a reason", and this has moved me to where I am now: A humble and thankful person.
Dedication

To our angel Luna Hummingbird

and to our future generations.
Chapter One: The Journey is the Way Forward

E-manakwyan: I am Setting up Camp

This thesis is both a reflection and representation of who I am. I am a Cree First Nation person, a woman, a mother, and an educator. This is a bold statement of myself. This thesis is the story of my learning, helped along by the generous voices of significant others associated with Aboriginal parental engagement in a large urban Western Canadian Catholic School District. With you, the reader, in mind, I have chosen to use the Mikowahp as a metaphor of the research process to help make sense of this complex issue of parental engagement.

The Mikowahp is, simply, a traditional Plains Aboriginal shelter. This portable conical structure was covered with buffalo hides sewn together with sinew. Peeled lodge poles held up the conical- shaped shelter. Although in modern society the Mikowahp, or tee-pee, has been reduced to an “Indian Icon”, it has much depth and richness and is of great functional and symbolic significance in the First Nations Cree culture. The Cree used the Mikowahp protective outer structure and safe inner circle to create a pedagogical space – that is, a place of, and for, teaching and learning the values and traditions. As well, the Mikowahp is closely entwined with the role of the Cree woman in the Cree Women’s Society.

The Cree word, iskwewowin, refers to womanhood. The root of the word derives from the word iskotew (fire). The fire in the Mikowahp symbolizes the woman and her responsibilities to provide physical and emotional warmth to the community (Makokis, 2003). As a Cree woman, and, as an educator, I accept the gift of the Mikowahp and the responsibilities inherent within it. This thesis is, metaphorically, an extension of the process of creating space. I will share what I have learned about Aboriginal parental engagement in the education of Aboriginal children in a large Catholic school system.

In this chapter, I invite you into the Mikowahp, or E-manakwyan; I am setting up camp. What follows in this chapter is my framing of the research space wherein I seek to dwell, and the topics I seek to understand. This research space is framed by the three supporting poles of the Mikowahp, which symbolically gather the words, and image stories in the following ways:
• Pole 1: frame the need for, and the relevance, of this research in response to the sense of urgency of many Aboriginal parents today as they look for ways to take responsibility for the education of their children. This pole is a locator for an examination of traditional and contemporary Cree parental practices. I also provide descriptions of my personal experience of parental engagement and education in order to communicate my deep sense of responsibilities for this topic. Additionally this section contains illustrative stories that I hope add to the reader’s engagement with the topic.

• Pole 2: presents the research statement, the research problem, the research objectives, and the research questions as a process of discovery of the current state of parental engagement in a Catholic school district.

• Pole 3: frames the research responsibilities and limitations within the pedagogic space of the Mikowahp, providing a sense of the journey moving forward.

My research journey parallels the setting up and taking down of the Mikowahp. Once the Mikowahp is utilized, it is respectfully undressed and the poles are deconstructed and bundled together for the next time. Also, just as the Mikowahp is a process that can be set up for multiple purposes, this research seeks to offer different pathways to increase parental engagement in the Calgary Catholic School District [hereafter referred as CSSD]. The first physical aspect of setting up the Mikowahp is laying out the poles and stretching out the canvas. In this chapter, I am laying down and stretching out my research by first introducing my research statement and then by setting it up so the reader will have an understanding of the impetus for my research study.

**Taking Care of Our Children**

This research represents my ongoing commitment to improve Aboriginal education. My Elders speak to the importance of maintaining and asserting our voice in our children’s education. It is through the teachings of the Elders and stories that we are reminded of the importance of cultural identity and ways of knowing. Traditionally, the role of the Elders was to help take care of their grandchildren by teaching those stories and skills. For the survival of the Aboriginal community it is important for young children to learn the knowledge and wisdom from Elders (Safaric, 1997).
There are many stories in Cree about the “Mistainiyak,” the big stones. These stones are known as our grandfathers. Cree Elder, Henry Cardinal from Saddle Lake First Nations, and, Stan Cuthand from Little Pine Reserve in Saskatchewan, were among many Cree who passed down these community stories (McLeod, 2007). The “teachings” of stories, speak to our cultural values, beliefs, and lessons that are passed forward from generation to generation (Archibald, 2008). Donald (2009) reminds us that rocks are considered helpers. They should be respected and honored for the guidance that they offer. He asserts that rocks are “animate entities that have energy and in forever in flux- constantly changing, transforming, combining and recombining.”(p.13) These rocks are Elders and the place name stories continue to be relevant teachings in regards to the importance of kinship. To many Cree people, “rocks remind us of the creation of the world and human kinship with all forms of life stemming from creation and the work of the creator” (Hill, 2008; Little Bear, 1988, p.18). Just like the rock, parental engagement is in forever in flux from the influences from past history, colonization, and socio-economic tensions. The encouraging factor is, like the rock, we can transform, combine and recombine our parental engagement practices and create a place where children are at the forefront. To illustrate the importance of a community’s commitment to children, I would like to share a story that comes from the Cree people of Alberta and Saskatchewan.

**Grandfather Stone (Mistasiny) - The Story of Paswaw-Mostos Awasis: Buffalo Child**

A long time ago a small band of Crees were crossing the prairies. An old lady was with them and with her there was a small child, a boy. She was leading a big dog on a leash and the dog was pulling the child in a travois. All of a sudden the old lady, lost her hold on the leash, and the dog went off to chase the buffalo. The buffalo stampeded. She lost the child. The dog went for miles chasing the buffalo until he stopped to drink from the water hole. There were no wheels on the travois, just two sticks. They got stuck and the dog crawled out of his harness, leaving the child behind in the carryall. The dog came home but the child was never found. In the meadow there were two bachelors, an old bull and a young bull- we speak of buffalo as if they were people- and as they grazed around they heard the child crying. The older bull said, “You know, I feel sorry for this child. Let’s raise him up as one of our own.”(Cuthand, 1979, pp. 31-34)
Henry Cardinal (2000) says that there was a dispute about the decision to keep the boy. To settle the matter the two bull bachelors challenged each other to a race. The older bull won the race so he was the one who raised the boy. The old Cree woman who had lost the boy asked the medicine man to locate the boy in a shaking tent ceremony. The people went out of the valley to search for him and instead they found a great rock in the shape of a great buffalo. This rock is symbolically the boy. It has since become a key marker in the landscape and a place of ceremony in Qu’Apelle River Valley in Saskatchewan. Other Cree stories about Grandfather Rock have different versions; however, there is a common teaching. In all versions, the Grandfather Rock tells the young boy that he will provide for him. The Grandfather Rock reminds us of the importance of the sacredness of the buffalo and kinship to the territory.

Kinship is a prominent and reoccurring lesson in Cree culture as it is important to care for those with no one to provide for them. This teaching is reflected in the practice of extended family relations and guardian relationships in Aboriginal community life. The adoption of the boy by the buffalo is similar to adoption in Aboriginal communities. It is often in a social manner rather than a legal sense, where an individual is “adopted” or “taken in” by a family, clan or community (Alberta Education, 2005).

The Grandfather Rock is also a physical reminder of the connection between humans and the rest of creation, particularly the buffalo. As well, it is a physical reminder that we as educators, need to engage with Aboriginal parents. The statement of “the child was never found” in the story implies that the parents and extended family searched for the child and cared deeply for his well-being. It is analogous to some Indigenous parents and community members who play vital roles.

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1 In a shaking tent ceremony a special barrel shaped lodge was built and at dusk a medicine man was bound and placed inside. The rest of the ceremony participants would sit in a circle around the lodge. The campfire was extinguished and the spirits were summoned. When the spirits came, the tent would shake. The medicine man conversed until the last question was answered and the fire was relit. The medicine man was then unbound.
in their children’s educations through providing support, insight and direction. “Parent engagement” implies that the parent is ‘engaged’ and is an internal and essential part of the process and brought into the act of decision-making because of their care and commitment (Pushor, 2007). The context of internal, in this sense, refers to parents having primary and essential roles at all levels of discussion in their children’s education. “Brought into the act” of decision-making refers to the parents being involved at the forefront and not as an afterthought to discussions/policy-making, or, as an act of tokenism. In order to communicate my research interests about parental engagement in public education, I will discuss the cultural perspectives of “onekihikomawiwin” (parenthood) and engagement in the next section.

**Onekihikkomawiwin- Parenthood and Engagement**

"Kisewatotowin" is a Cree word that refers to great love and respect for all living beings. It means giving love, care, respect, generosity, patience, trust, respect for the child, for family, community, nation and the universe. A Cree Aboriginal parent handbook (1997), called Kisetotowin identifies the northern plains Cree traditional childrearing methods as a holistic concept where the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions of a human being are connected and the balance of all aspects create a healthy individual. Parenting is described as teaching the child values, morals, and wisdom as the way of life. Role modeling plays a vital role and is exemplified by the following saying, “If you take a young willow you can bend and shape it like a circle. It is up to you as a parent to show your children the values and traditions that you want them to live by” (Safarik, 1996, p. 22). I remember as a youth going to general band meetings where the Elders at that time would speak of the importance of Opiknawasowan, a Cree word meaning “child rearing way”. They spoke of the importance of raising children with discipline and self-discipline. Discipline is referred to in the Cree sense as taking the time to speak to the youth in a calm manner and through using our traditional teachings. They also said that it important not to "kispewew" (be overprotective) of the child.

Parental teachings are aligned to the stages of child development from prenatal to adulthood. These teachings were passed down from generation to generation with the purpose of ensuring the transmission of culture from one generation to the next. Leona Makokis emphasizes in Jobin (2005) that the Mikowahp is the basis of home and society. It shapes our worldview about relationships and how we have to work together as community to, ultimately, improve our
community. The Mikowahp teachings are based around the core values of the Plains People. The values are: obedience, respect, humility, happiness, love, faith, kinship, cleanliness, thankfulness, sharing, strength, good childrearing, hope, and ultimate protection. The core principle ‘we are all related’ includes nature and anything in existence.

The interconnectness of the principle of ‘we are all related’ can be shown through the medicine wheel. The Plains Medicine Wheel may vary from Aboriginal Nation to Aboriginal Nation, however, they all share similar universal teachings. The medicine wheel is a common Indigenous model in use today that helps explain our journey through life from childhood, adolescence, adulthood, to the Elders’ stage. Each stage is represented by color, animal symbols, and teachings. The medicine wheel explains the significance of the four directions as representative of human developmental stages, learning processes of the individual, and the four dimensions of a human being. Although the term “medicine wheel” was not discussed in isolation in my household, the principle of interrelatedness and values of the Mikowahp as they related to the medicine wheel were emphasized.

Parenthood and rearing of the child is the responsibility of the parents, grandparents (Elders), and extended family. This community-based approach requires the participation and inclusion of all, as in a series of circles. The concentric organization of the circle is: the child in the inner circle, the next circle includes parents, grandparents and extended family, and the outer circle is the community. The child is seen as a gift from the Creator to be treasured. The role of the outer circles is to nurture each child's gifts that they bring to the community. Traditionally, the extended family guided the child because the child represented their future. The knowledge and the life experiences of Elders guide young people to find their balance within themselves. Today Elders are still honored, however, many children have limited access to them because of urbanization and socio-dynamic family situations.

In many Aboriginal communities, our identity is based on our relations to nature, the spiritual world, and others. How we see our self in relation to others and the teachings from those in the circle, develops our sense of identity. Madeline Dion Stout (1994), a Cree educator, identifies and clearly reveals this teaching in her Indigenous model of human relations. She states that as Aboriginal people it is important to acknowledge our self worth as it relates, and is interconnected to, others in the family, community, the world, our past ancestors and the
generations yet to come. The Cree cultural framework was developed to reflect this cultural
definition of health and well-being and depicts the natural world as a circle, with the focus on
First Nations people placed in the center. MacLeod (2007) reinforces the importance of
Indigenous developmental models and the relevance of narrative in the world of modernity. He
states,

One cannot maintain a distinct identity without knowing the past; one will simply
have a distorted sense of one’s place in the world, shifted and transformed by a
colonized understanding of the world wherein in the memories and narratives of
ancient ancestors are shrouded. (McLeod, 2007, p. 92)

Therefore, the Plains Medicine Wheel, teachings of the Mikowahp values, and stories can be
seen as relevant as it was in the past and as vital in the formation of our children’s identity as
Indigenous people. In his writing of “Cree Narrative Memory”, McLeod (2007) brings to the
conscious level the importance of narrative in developing an Indigenous identity. He states that
Indigenous spiritual and spatial exile was reinforced by government-imposed policies that aimed
at stripping Indigenous people of their roots. He speaks to the notion of “coming home” as both
spatial and temporal which is closely tied to land, songs, ceremonies, language and stories. In
essence, British colonization of Cree territory immobilized the Cree from rightly governing
themselves and to practice their collective traditions. The temporal process refers to how we
layer our experiences onto former ones (collective narratives) and maps our way through life in
our changing landscapes. The inequality and imposition of colonization has hindered access and
space for Indigenous people to reclaim their “collective sense of dignity” (McLeod, 2007, p.54).
The following story of the Witigo, a human-eating being, is analogous to the devastating effects
of colonialism of Indigenous peoples. As Aboriginal people we often use story to express our
teachings and to make sense of the world in which we live. The Witigo ravishes his/her victims
much like colonialism tried to ravish and kill our spirit as Indigenous people. It brings to light the
devastating practices that ultimately affected parenting skills and community wellness of
Indigenous peoples. This story was passed down to me by two of my family members, my
mother and my brother. This story is a teaching story and I was given permission from my family
to share it.
The Witigo

There were these powerful medicine people in the village who constantly tried to outpower each other. Finally it came to be that they focused on this one medicine person and they brought that person down by cursing her. As a result, she turned into a Witigo a destructive being that was shunned and killed by the people…

The “Witigo” was used in my upbringing as a threat to discipline our behavior. If I were to summarize the characteristics of the “Witigo” it would be: selfishness, greediness and destructiveness. This being pays little regard to others and feeds on its greed for power and control. This is analogous to the experience of the Aboriginal people and the coming of the Europeans. They came and tried to consume and break the spirit of the people through the introduction of the Christian missions and Euro-Western thought. As the missionary schools expanded to Western Canada they ripped children from their homes and attempted to civilize them by stripping their cultural beliefs and practices with replacing it with Eurocentric thought and practices. It stripped many from the language, family practices and traditional parental skills, knowledge and connection to the land. Students who did practice their traditional beliefs were severely punished (Assembly of First Nations, 1994; Chrisjohn & Young, 1997).

My community in Alberta experienced the same assimilative and oppressive practices of the missionary schools and government Aboriginal educational policies. Like many families, my grandparents had no legal choice but to send their children to residential school. My mother, father, sisters and brothers also went to residential school throughout Alberta. My mother does not speak much about her past unless she is asked, and even then, she shares very little. The parenting style of my parents, and those of that era, was very punitive and authoritative. Here is a story that my mother recently shared with me; it was the first time she openly talked about her experience. Imagine the sadness in her eyes and in her voice as she told this story.

One night the girls and I… a… small group of girls went down to the kitchen and stole some bread, we snuck back up to the room and there…at the end of the hall stood the nun. She commanded us to kneel. We knelt holding up the bread. We knelt for a long time. Then…she said to eat the bread…we went to bed. We were always
hungry. Your dad really suffered too. (Mary Pasquayak, personal communication, July, 2009)

The day my mother closed the mud log house door of her home and went to the residential school, she must have sensed a feeling of exile: both in a physical and spiritual sense. McLeod (2007) states, that residential schools both exiled the child from their physical and spiritual space. The purpose of residential schools was to ‘civilize and take the Indian out of the child.’

One of the many traits of my mother, and those who have had to endure the hardships of residential school, is the resiliency and determination to push forward and to assert their rights as sovereign people of Canada. In Cree, the words which best define resiliency are sohkatisowin (to be strong spiritually, physically and emotionally) and sohketamowin (to be strong mentally) (Leona Makokis, 2000).

The survivors of residential schools and our Elders in the Aboriginal communities can be seen as the “echo of generational experience” (McLeod, 2007, p. 6) as they model for us resilience in the face of hardships. McLeod (2007) uses this metaphor to describe how we as Aboriginal people have, and continue to use, stories and words to ground us and to bind us to the land and language. Stories such as my mother’s struggle and determination to survive in residential school and her continual struggle to make space for the next generation, serve to challenge us to continue on as educational advocates. These stories drive us to “challenge the social space around us and the way society structures our world” (McLeod, 2007, p. 99) and returns the responsibility to Indigenous people to voice their parental rights and engagement in the educational system and society.

**Personal Experience of Parental Engagement and Education**

In the 1960s there was minimal Aboriginal parental engagement in the schools. My mother used to say that once we step in the school, the teachers are like our parents. The school is responsible for our education. Her statement reflects that of a residential school survivor who experienced oppression and paternalism. In my era, we had the choice of going to the reserve day school that was run by nuns, or to go to one of the local district schools. I attended the reserve school for three years and transferred to a local school district where I endured much discriminatory behavior from the teachers and students. I attended two schools; the first was very stressful. To ask to go to the bathroom was a big ordeal. My cousin needed to use the washroom, but she was
too intimidated to speak, or to ask for permission. Consequently, she wet herself and her desk area. Needless to say, I was asked to help her clean it up. My cousin, like many of us spoke very little in the class. Rarely did any Aboriginal parents come to the school for parent interviews or celebrations. My parents, and I am sure many other residential schooled parents, believed that when you get on the bus you become the responsibility of the school. This way of thinking may be attributed to the oppression and sense of helplessness they felt. The advice from our mom was to "do your work, don’t speak and you won’t get into trouble". I was brought up with the lesson of “speaking with purpose.” A person who speaks just to hear himself/herself talk is not respected and is described as having clown behavior. Needless to say, I felt that I never really had anything to contribute that I thought the teacher would understand or appreciate. I was voiceless and may as well have been invisible. In retrospect, it was probably how the early residential students felt, but just in a different time and location. The Witigo was still alive but in disguise. With higher education and teachings from my community, I now can voice my concern, knowledge and experiences about Indigenous education.

As an educator, I have observed the challenges of parental involvement and have reviewed differing degrees of what parental involvement entails and its impact on students. A common comment from my students was “Indians don’t go to parent interviews.” As a result, they set low expectations for themselves. In my experience as a teacher over the past 13 years, I have found that some parents may be reluctant to communicate with teachers because they feel that it is an attack on their parenting skills and that the schools only call when there is a problem.

When I was a consultant of the First Nations Team for the Calgary Catholic School District I was often approached by the schools to consult on attendance, behavior issues, and parent/school engagement. However, there was a limitation of our services: there were too few workers compared to the number of schools that have First Nations, Métis, Inuit (hereafter, referred to as FNMI) concerns. Currently, there is an estimated 30 schools with self-identified FNMI students, and this number fluctuates throughout the year. In an attempt to address FNMI student success, which includes parental engagement, CCSD has increased professional development (PD) sessions for administrators and school personnel. The mandatory PD sessions are well attended, but the optional PD sessions have a small turnout ranging from 4-28 educators. One Tsuu T’ina Parent noted:
Parent involvement is the key that opens doors to success. If parents are not involved then there is no movement towards higher education, no matter how many meetings, workshops and conferences are held. (FNMI Policy Framework, 2002, p. 14)

I believe that FNMI parental engagement is a collective responsibility between the school and the parents. Statistics show that the Alberta population is significantly growing faster than the non-Aboriginal population, (Alberta Chamber of Resources, Aboriginal Population in Alberta) however, their exists a substantial education gap between the two populations. Approximately one Aboriginal child in five currently attends on-reserve schools; four in five attend off-reserve schools. “While younger Aboriginals are seeking more education than previous generations, they have not kept pace with the increase in education among other Canadians. An examination of the achievement gap that exists between Aboriginal and non- Aboriginal learners underscores the need for strong affirmative action on the part of school boards.” (Alberta School Boards Association, 2011, p.2- 9) Schools have had to develop better ways to attract parents to school programs and to encourage parents to take an active role in their children’s educational activities (Cavanagh, 2012). Pushor & Ruitenberg (2007) emphasize that power and authority be shared by parents and educators which will be mutually determined and beneficial. In my experience most of the schools try to involve parents in various capacities, however, “hospitality and invitation remain empty gestures until they are made with genuine intention to open up the school space and agenda to co-create it with parents and other caregivers as well as with students” (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2007, p.7).

According to the FNMI policy framework (2002) parents should have “ease of access to information concerning all aspects of their children’s education” and “ have meaningful opportunities to participate actively in decisions that directly impact their children’s education” (p.14). The application of these policies may be hindered by district preparedness and parent educational experiences. My study is needed to identify the factors that hinder and contribute to parental engagement at a district level.

**Stretching Out the Canvas: Research Objective and Questions**

My main research objective is to identify factors that contribute to and hinder Aboriginal parental engagement by individually interviewing parents and school personnel and conducting
focus groups. An examination of these factors will provide the school district with an opportunity to learn from this information and work towards strengthening the relations with Aboriginal parents, thereby potentially increasing parental engagement and Aboriginal student success in the CSSD. This study will also provide teachers with the general understanding of Aboriginal parents’ concerns and ways that they can improve parental engagement. One of the outcomes is to bring to awareness the parents’ own issues regarding their engagement with the school, and the importance of building relationships. This study is focused on the following research questions:

1. What facilitates and hinders Aboriginal parental engagement in the Calgary Catholic Separate School system from the perspectives of Aboriginal parents and district teachers and leaders?

2. What does successful Aboriginal parental engagement look like from the perspective of Aboriginal parents and district/school teachers and leaders?

3. How could parents, district/school teachers and leaders create a plan for achieving meaningful Aboriginal parental/school engagement?

Community Context and Calgary Catholic Schooling

In Calgary there are approximately 105 Catholic schools. Many of them serve Aboriginal students along with a range of other cultural groups. There are an estimated 1046 self-identified Aboriginal students, which represents an estimated two percent of the student population. Of these, there are about 953 Aboriginal urban students and 93 on reserve students. Parents are given the choice to self-identify their children as Métis, First Nation, or Inuit descent. The tribal/Nation affiliations are mainly from the Treaty 7 area. Treaty 7 First Nations people are the Blackfoot, Blood, Tsuu T’ina, and Nakoda. The reservations are east, west, and south of Calgary. The urban Aboriginal population consists of those who reside in Calgary and whose children attend these schools, and are either transitory or have lived in Calgary all their lives. The majority of FNMI students are from Tsuu T’ina First Nation Reserve. Primarily, they attend four Catholic schools in the southwest quadrant of Calgary. Parents in the area have the choice of sending their students to public, separate (Catholic), or their local First Nation School. Although there are many reasons Aboriginal parents’ chose Catholic schooling for their children, one could
surmise that their choice was a faith-based decision, and/or, an intergenerational practice stemming from the residential school era. The schools of primary interest for this study have a good representation of students from both the urban population and rural on-reserve population.

**Rationale for School and Student Selection**

The schools that I have chosen have had Aboriginal programs implemented, and/or, have access to the district’s First Nation, Metis, and Inuit Team. The chosen schools have a higher population of Aboriginal students than other district schools. Three of the schools presently have an Aboriginal Pride Program and learning support teachers to address the cultural component and academic needs of the students. The Aboriginal Pride Program’s goal is to increase retention and graduation rates by providing the academic and cultural support to Aboriginal students. Four of the schools with the Aboriginal Pride Program are in the southwest quadrant of Calgary. The elementary and junior high schools are feeder schools to a high school in the southwest. The other three schools are located in the north, east, and southeast feed into the two high schools in that district. The difference between the southwest students and students in other quadrants is that these populations constitute more urban Aboriginal students. I believe it is important when addressing parental engagement that both urban and rural perspectives are represented. To give a fair representation of Aboriginal parents in my study, both groups must be included. The urban Aboriginal population is more of a heterogeneous cultural group, whereas, the rural group is more of a homogenous cultural group. The rural group comprises of different cultural backgrounds, and the rural group comprises of mainly one rural community group. However, the slight difference between the groups can largely be summed up as a difference of locations. At the end of each school day, rural students return home to communities with well-developed networks of support, whereas, the urban students often live in areas that may lack community and cultural support specific to their backgrounds.

**Statement of the Problem**

Alberta, like many other provinces, has developed educational frameworks to address the challenges Aboriginal students face in the educational systems. The degree to which they are implemented varies from district to district. Numerous studies indicate the correlation between the educational success of students and the level of parental engagement (Graue, Weinstein and Walberg, 1983; Iverson and Walberg, 1982; Klienfield, 1985; Pearson, 2007; Walberg, 1984).
Melnechenko and Horseman (1998) stated the determiner of student success is the influence of the family. The establishment of effective working partnerships between schools, parents and communities is dependent on the formation of a climate of relational trust. Additionally, previous educational experiences of parents or community members strongly influence the potential of the school to build effective partnerships with parents and community members. This is particularly significant given that many Aboriginal communities have had negative experiences in which education was used as a tool of assimilation (Melnechenko and Horseman, p.35).

**Gaps in Knowledge/ Future Research**

Although there has been an increase in interest and research in the area of parental involvement/engagement, there are few studies about Aboriginal parental engagement. Pushor states that future research and parent engagement literature can inform the development of policies and practices in school jurisdictions. Although it is useful to be informed about other jurisdiction practice, Pushor (2007) emphasizes that it is more useful to have research that is “more closely reflective of the children, families, schools and communities of those jurisdictions” (p. 9). In so doing, Pushor, (2007) identified five gaps in knowledge in relation to parental engagement/involvement research in Canada:

1) The limited amount of research and literature in the Canadian context.

2) Parental engagement is examined through the eyes of educators rather than through the eyes of the parent.

3) Although there is an extensive body of knowledge on teacher knowledge there is no corresponding body of literature on parent knowledge. Teachers are positioned as the knowing professionals while parents are positioned as less knowing, about children, learning and teaching.

4) The fourth gap in knowledge concerns how and what are the benefits of parental engagement. When parents are engaged in their children’s schooling, there is a potential for reciprocal benefit for parents, families, and community as well as children.

5) Research on the influence and conditions that effect students’ achievement which are from outside the school boundaries and agenda. Schools have the challenge to address these complex social factors in their traditional ways (pp. 11-12).
In my view, Pushor’s five identified gaps of knowledge in relation to parental engagement research underlies the need to create a comfortable space where parents can meet to share their insights and their knowledge of ways to support their child’s education. Creating a comfortable space where parents can share their aspirations requires the acknowledgment of their ways of knowing. For example, the Cree ways of knowing, as described by Kovach (2009) in the consultation with Elders, is the “importance of respect, reciprocity, relation, protocol, holistic knowing, relevancy, story, interpretive meaning and the experiential nested in place and kinship systems” (p.67). Pearson’s (2007) study was primarily to “determine what factors are needed to guide the practice of non-Native educators to build a positive relationship between a First Nation community and as well as encourage and support parent involvement” (p.ii). Her study focuses on the non-Native educator and how that educator can work respectfully with First Nations People. Her study provides an insight on new ways of thinking about First Nation parents in the public school systems. Primarily, the Aboriginal parent framework that she developed is based on understanding Aboriginal knowledge, having personal critical awareness, and working with purposefulness (p.iii). My study is similar in that I would like to influence teacher’s perspectives and practices when they engage with Aboriginal parents. Similarly, my interviews, although they include district principals, focus primarily on parents’ views on what facilitates and hinders Aboriginal parent engagement. My study aims to identify successful Aboriginal parent engagement practices from an Aboriginal perspective. Pearson discusses the salient issues of being a Non-Native researcher and being in a position of power as a Non-Native administrator. As an FNMI consultant for the CSSD district, I add not only district policy knowledge, but also a work history of the district’s relations to the FNMI community. As an Aboriginal researcher I have prior knowledge of appropriate Aboriginal Cree protocols and practices to help guide my research.

The main difference between Pushor, Pearson, and my study, is the scope of the research. Pushor (2007) and Pearson (2007) chose research sites that were based at one local public school, whereas my study was based amongst seven schools in an urban city. My study will contribute to the existing knowledge of parental engagement by:

a) Identifying the various perspectives of FNMI parental engagement of parents and district staff;
b) Reporting the differences of FNMI parental engagement from the elementary to high school level.

My research study addresses the gaps in knowledge and adds to the existing Canadian research of Aboriginal parental engagement. My research provides both a rural parental perspective and urban parental perspective of what facilitates and hinders parental engagement. It is unique in the sense that I have not come across any studies that have studied both populations in one study.

I agree with Pushor’s finding that the lens to examine parental engagement was mainly that of educators. For this reason, I believe that it is time to use a ‘binocular approach’ to parental engagement. An analogy to this is the eyesight of the buffalo. The buffalo has monocular vision. Each side sees something different and yet it is able to navigate through a panoramic view of its landscape. The limitation of their eyesight is the lack of their ability to judge depth. The analogy can be made that parents and teachers have their own monocular lens of what they define as parental engagement. My research provided a space where the parents can express their views of effective parental engagement practices and some of the barriers that prohibit parental engagement. It is essentially bringing the parents and educators perspectives together to see how we can develop an educational landscape where there can be a shared vision of effective parental engagement and practices.

My study provides this depth of understanding and will validate parents’ voice and knowledge of parental engagement. It is understood that student achievement is influenced by social factors and environment. This study discusses the similarities and differences between the students coming off the reserve and those who live in the city. I have had the opportunity to examine the different experiences and living conditions that may influence their learning.

Although Aboriginal support services are in place within the CSSD school district, it appears that discourse is needed to establish a definition and shared understanding of parental engagement. Although gains have been made in working with individual families, the development of organized parental forums and parent advisory structures have been difficult to sustain at the district level. One of the struggles in establishing parental advisory committees in our district is the lack of purpose and process in establishing such a committee. The parents need to know that their time and knowledge is utilized in an effective manner. Wanda First Rider (2009) expressed frustration about the past parental committees that struggled and then ended because it was hard to get people to attend after work. It is apparent families from throughout the district, from all
quadrants of the city, all have their own school and educational concerns that still need to be addressed.

**Organization of Thesis**

This study aims to establish a clearer understanding of the definition, expectations, and means of parental engagement. The challenge is to not only to come to a shared understanding of parental engagement, but also to develop strategies that will develop and enhance relationships with both urban and on-reserve First Nation, Métis and Inuit parents and community. The six chapters, as outlined below, describe the pathways of discovery used to explore parental engagement in the CSSD.

In Chapter One: E-manakwyan; I am setting up camp. I introduce myself as a Cree woman, I introduce my research study including the statement of the problem, site of research, research objectives and questions, and current gaps in parental engagement knowledge.

In Chapter Two: Acimowina; Hearing stories around the fire provides an examination of the current literature relating to Aboriginal parental engagement. Included in this chapter is an exploration of the barriers that Aboriginal parents encounter. I chose to address the historical and educational phases that Aboriginal people have experienced because it gives a foundation of understanding of the Aboriginal educational experience.

In Chapter Three, I introduce the base of the Mikowahp as theory and methodology. I introduce Mikowahp as theory and methodology as a way to guide the epistemological, conceptual, and methodological, and theoretical processes of my research. The use of the Mikowahp is based on the belief that Aboriginal people have their own distinct perspectives based on their knowledge, history and culture that should be reflected in the research.

Chapter Four: Acimostakewin - Being informational, introduces the bundle themes that emerged from the analysis of participants’ responses. Part one of this chapter includes various perspectives on successful engagement. The first bundle theme is Aboriginal Social Context (Social Dimensional Need). Subsequent bundles reflect Parental Engagement in the Calgary Catholic School District, including the themes of Relationship Building and Indigenous Knowledge. The final phase, Activating Parental Engagement, discusses the need to implement the bundles by co-constructing a plan.
Chapter Five: Ewi-miskawasimitan - Sharing new information to one person (the reader). In this chapter I introduce my Mikowahp Tripod FNMI Parental Engagement Framework. Included in this Framework is the importance of the three poles that establish a solid tripod in relation to Relationship building, Elders’ Teachings, and Leadership. The development of the Mikowahp Educational Matrix Tool is introduced to support the Mikowahp Tripod Framework.

Chapter Six: Tawayiyak- (we will pack): Taking down the Mikowahp. Presents a summary of the research study and a review of both the limitations and the contributions of the research study.
Chapter Two: Literature Voices in Review

Preamble: Acimowina - Hearing Stories Around the Fire

It was customary for the Cree, as a hunting and gathering people, to divide up into small bands during the summer. During that community gathering time they would seek trades with other small groups, possibly meet a mate, participate in ceremonies, and sit around the fire sharing stories of their experiences and journeys. Although my review of the literature on Aboriginal parent involvement does not include the physical aspect of gathering around a fire, metaphorically, it is as if I have been given the opportunity to listen, or discover through a review of the literature, what parents and academia are saying throughout Canada and globally about parent engagement and the history of Aboriginal education.

This chapter includes a section on Indigenous education that focuses on parental rights to involvement in their children’s education that have been enshrined in charters, but yet, are often denied by many bureaucrats and educators. Understanding the historical context of Indigenous education and its many reforms allows us to bring forth, at a conscious level, the past and present tensions between Eurocentric educational practices and the impact on Aboriginal parental engagement. Therefore, the first part of the literature review will briefly address the struggles that Indigenous parents have endured since, during, and as a result of colonization. This part includes the historical and pedagogical research related to salient issues in Indigenous Education by different and differing theorists who have addressed parental engagement and student success within education systems. The second part of this review focuses on literature about specific Aboriginal parental involvement and engagement practices. The third part of the review includes what I think and feel are the most relevant literature voices / stories within Indigenous education, yesterday and today, being shared about Aboriginal parental engagement.

Part 1: The Literature Voices of Indigenous Education and Parent Engagement

This section identifies the four areas of Indian education that I have renamed. Hampton (1988) identifies four specific areas of “Indian Education” which I will refer to as “Indigenous Education” are reviewed and these areas include: (i) traditional education, (ii) schooling for
assimilation, (iii) education by Indians, and (iv) Indian education *sui generis* (Barman, Hebert and McCaskill, 1986; Hawthorn, 1966-1967). Yet, please allow me to re-name these “Indian” areas with labels more meaningful, for myself, and my people. To give Indigenous voice, the significant themes in “Indian Education” I thus rename them as: (i) The dog days, (ii) The coming of the Witigo, (iii) Following the path of the buffalo, and (iv) Walking through the storm.

Why this re-naming? As Cree people, natural, un-natural and super-natural phenomena have been traditionally explained through using narrative and/or story. Our stories and the metaphors helped make meaning of our experiences. I have heard many stories during my time by Elders, such as one about the dog days, of the Witigo, and of the buffalo. Therefore, I chose these titles to reflect and honor an Aboriginal lens. These four areas of Indigenous education represent how the literature at hand both reflects and represents the evolutionary phases of Aboriginal parental involvement and engagement in their children’s education and schooling from pre-contact, through colonization, to the present.

**The Dog Days: Traditional Education and Parent Engagement**

Dog days refer to the time period when the Plains people used dogs to pull their travois to haul their personal belongings. In the past fifteen years of working within the Calgary Catholic System I have had the privilege of listening to a variety of knowledgeable Elders and educators speak of the traditional ways of the Plains people. Traditional forms of education prior to contact were generally characterized as: teaching stories, oral histories, ceremonies, apprenticeships, learning games, formal instruction, tag along teaching and tutoring (Buffalohead, 1976). Tag-along teaching and tutoring is where the child follows the older children or adults and learns by observation. This method also taught children how to become a member in the community and the responsibility of caring for others (Anderson, 1987, p. 13). Each member (aunties, uncles, Elders, mothers, fathers and extended community relations) had gender specific duties in educating the children. One of the Elders’ roles was to teach the principles of reciprocity in relationships. The children were given responsibilities and tasks that facilitated their learning (1987, p. 73). The pedagogy of Indigenous knowledge is generally contextual to tribal affiliation and location (Bastein, 1986; Stairs, 1988). Learning occurs through observation and imitation of the parents’ behaviors and is embedded in everyday activities. The parents and community
served as a valuable resource for the child. “The Circle of Learning” not only exemplifies intergenerational teaching (Stairs, 1988) but also places the responsibility on individuals to learn the stories, traditions, ceremonies, language, songs, dances and ways of knowing. The Indigenous belief is that human existence is transformational, life experiences are challenges, and that learning opportunities provide balance for oneself, and others (Bastein, 1986). Parental engagement in this era was a communal responsibility and the child was the community’s primary concern. The parents and Elders were the ones who transmitted the traditional knowledge. Various Indigenous groups and academics have used several definitions of ‘Indigenous’ and ‘traditional knowledge’. The term Indigenous Knowledge generally encompasses relationships with people and spirits, the ecosystem, and with all that share the land. Indigenous Knowledge is specific to the territory and Indigenous groups. The stories of a particular Indigenous group emphasize the importance of language and the transmission of specific traditional knowledge (Batiste & Henderson, 1993).

In this era, the children had a strong attachment to the parents and their community. If there happened to be an orphan in the village the child would be absorbed into another family. A colleague of mine told me a story about the lineage of her grandmothers. She said there were two sisters both about the same age but one of them could not bear children. So the one sister had twins and gave one of the girl twins to her sister. This child was my colleague’s grandmother. This story exemplifies the importance of having a family to experience the sacred bond between the child and parent. The sister who lovingly gave her child away was ensuring that her sister’s future generations would continue with numerous children and grandchildren. This act of compassion was not uncommon because kinship was a primary value. The belief is that if your mother has sisters, then, they too, are your mothers. This kinship rule still exists today, which often causes confusion among staff that may not be aware of the tradition. Traditions and culture were vibrant. Everyone was interconnected and had the inherent right and voice in each child’s upbringing.

**The Coming of the Witigo**

The coming of Europeans marked the beginning of the barriers of parents’ rights to make decisions about the child’s education and upbringing. The core of the community was torn out the day the missionaries and government policies enacted legislated compulsory attendance to
residential school. As noted in chapter one, the Witigo is symbolic of the ravishing effects of colonization on Aboriginal people. The Witigo left behind a trail of fragmented and torn communities. Makokis’ (2001) findings exemplify how the “gradual imposition of a foreign value system has resulted impoverishment (material and spiritual) and a pervasive sense of helplessness in all of Canada’s First Nation communities.” (p.196). The community no longer was able to pass on the knowledge, language and ceremonies to the children. According to many studies, “the residential schools taught Aboriginal children that their rituals, coming-of-age ceremonies, and seasonal ceremonies were works of the devil” (Assembly of First Nation, 1994; Chrisjohn & Young, 1997; Miller, 1996; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015)). The parent-child attachment was broken. The brainwashing of children to believe that their parents were savage, dirty, and pagans, ripped the relationship ties into fragments of self-hate and shame of their own families and culture (Assembly of First Nation, 1994; Chrisjohn & Young, 1997; Miller, 1996; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Many parents no longer understood their children and many children no longer regarded their culture as viable in the new world. The fabric of the community was divided into those who followed the European way and those who tried to hang on to the traditional ways and language. The residential school trauma affected how the next generation of Aboriginal people parented their children. In the early sixties there was a move to try to assimilate the “Indian” into mainstream culture by integrating them into the public education system.

What replaced the wagons and trucks that hauled the students to residential school? The yellow school bus was the contemporary replacement. The yellow school bus, although a common site in most communities, evokes negative memories for myself, and many from my generation. This differs when my own children used to watch the show, “The Magic School Bus”. Ms. Frizzle the teacher, enticed students to go on a fictional journeys to learn about the past, the natural world, and all kinds of magical adventures. It made me think of the dichotomy between my experience and theirs. The yellow magic school bus opened up imagination and offered an exciting way to learn and explore, whereas, I dreaded to get on the bus. It brought me to a place where I was teleported to a not so magical place, where I became the alien or foreign being. Unlike Ms. Frizzle, who captured the imagination of children and engaged with her class on the bus, my
teachers rarely spoke to me, and, in turn, I rarely ever spoke. I became the invisible girl who occupied a space of loneliness, confusion, shame, and isolation. My saving grace was that every day I was able to go back to the reserve. As I got off that bus I metaphorically stripped off the grunge of my experience.

**Schools of Assimilation**

Canada’s public school system has had assimilation of First Nations as one of its goals since the early 1960s. Assimilation is defined as a process in which a minority population is absorbed into a prevailing or dominant culture (Wary, 2007, p. 33). Historically, public schools have been controlled by the dominant society and have promoted its own interests. Within Canada, the provincial school systems, including the Catholic school systems, began integrating Aboriginal students into existing school systems that promoted the language, values, and goals of Euro-Western society. During this time, Aboriginal parents and communities had little input into their childrens’ education. Provincial school districts were not accountable to education departments on First Nation Reserves. Likewise, band educational departments felt they had no authority to ask for any type of educational agreements or accountability from Provincial School Districts. These boundaries were premised on the Constitution Act, including the Indian Act of 1867, where there was a jurisdictional agreement between federal and provincial authorities that assumed power over the lives of Status Indians in Canada. Kovack (2009) in her article, “Being Indigenous in the Academy: Creating Space for Indigenous scholars” concludes that these acts provided the educational systems a framework to try to eradicate and diminish Indigenous peoples and there culture (p. 55).

Poor school–community relations and negative attitudes towards Native culture were prevalent. The lack of success is often attributed to a deficit within the student, and not, a reflection of the educational institution’s pedagogy. The deficit model theory highlights the learner as the problem. Nagler (1975) acknowledges the colonial impact of previous educational policies but states that the problem is that the Aboriginal people “are not ready to integrate culturally with the larger society, and that society is not receptive to what are considered socially and culturally alien peoples” (as cited in Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 21). Time and time again I have heard teachers reiterate that Aboriginal parents do not care about education, or, that they are mystified why Aboriginal students do not just come to the school like everyone else. The focus
should be on moving away from the deficit model towards a holistic model. During the first few decades of integrated schooling, many Aboriginal parents did not engage with the schools unless it was for discipline problems. From my experience, these schools were hostile places where Native students and parents were seen as inferior from the mainstream. The curriculum was not inclusive and often culturally incongruent for First Nation students.

In contrast, Mapp (2002) has cited three decades of research contradicting this deficit model theory. There are three misleading dangers around this concept: that culture develops in isolation and remains static over time; that the dominant culture and its standards are neutral or superior; that success depends on the people’s ability to assimilate into it, and the failure to acknowledge the richness and diversity of other cultures (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).

The research of Forman and Lewis (2002) on parent engagement reveals that regardless of socio-economic, racial/ethnic and educational backgrounds, there appears to be a link between educational benefits and family engagement (Cochran & Henderson, 1986; Eagle, 1986; Epstein, Simon & Salinas, 1997; Gotts, 1989; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hewitt, 1978; Ho & Willms, 1996; Jordon, Orozco & Averett, 2002; McDill, Rigsby & Meyers, 1969; Melnick & Fiene, 1990; Mowry, 1972; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1992). From my experience, Aboriginal parental involvement in this era consisted of sending their children to school. One of the memories from my elementary years was that of plagiarizing my mom’s signature on everything school related. I spent hours practicing her signature. I used to write my own permission letters to leave school grounds at lunch. This may appear deceptive but the truth of the matter was that my mom told me to write the letters myself. She did not have the time to do it. In retrospect, the teachers probably knew the letters were not from my parents, but, at that time, teachers rarely ever contacted our parents. In my mother’s defense, her involvement consisted of encouraging me to do well in school and stand up for myself.

**Following the Path of the buffalo: Education by Indians**

It is said that the buffalo herd are very protective of their young. Whenever they sense danger they place all of their young into a circle and then they surround the circle. They offer their lives to protect their young. (Ammsa, 2000, p. 3)
The protection of the young is symbolic to Aboriginal parents voicing their concern about the quality of education their children were receiving. Elders often use the phrase “Education is our Buffalo” to signify the importance of education to their communities (Christensen, 2000). One of the Treaty 7 members stated: “I believe that education is our buffalo. If any changes for the good are to be made it will be education that does the job. It doesn’t matter where you send your kids; you need to support them to succeed - to give them a chance to succeed (Alberta Education, 2000, p. vii).

The 1960s was a watershed decade for Aboriginal civil rights. There was a movement towards reclaiming the Indigenous right to an equitable education. Hampton (1988) refers to this time period as education by Indians rather than simply the education of Indians. This concept is reflected in the high number of band-controlled schools in Canada. The problem here is the continual dissemination of dominant cultures’ curriculum and pedagogy. Parents and organizations such as the National Indian Brotherhood (now Assembly of First Nations) were taking action to change the state of Aboriginal Education. The National Indian Brotherhood’s (NIB) 1972 policy paper Indian Control of Indian Education called for more Aboriginal teachers, the promotion of Native languages, and the development of appropriate curriculum. This policy reflects First Nations bringing to consciousness the struggle of Aboriginal people at a national level. Gramsci (1971), would term this as “war of maneuver” where the people who are oppressed take a stand against the dominant society’s position. The Federation of Saskatchewan Indians (1961) and the NIB (1968) brought forth Aboriginal issues. In 1969 the Trudeau government introduced the White Paper on Indian Policy, which called for a repeal of the Indian Act. This act intended to relieve federal responsibilities and terminate Indian status in Canada. Under Trudeau’s vision of a “just society”, Aboriginal people should stand equally with other Canadians, and, that the Indian Act was a barrier to that vision. Aboriginal people responded negatively with a publication of Citizens Plus, which is known as the Red Paper. The Red Paper advocated for the reaffirmation of rights and status for First Nations in accordance to the treaties. Protests and marches marked this era; communities banded together to assert their control over their destinies.

In 1969, twelve Alberta communities staged a sit-in at Blue Quills Indian Residential School. The community wanted control of the school and to assume the responsibility of educating their
own children. Blue Quills School is in Northern Alberta and became the first Native-run school in Canada. As a participant in the sit-in and as a former student, I believe that the actions of the Elders of the communities have instilled in others the belief that as Aboriginal people we can resist and question the status quo of the dominant society. The following story speaks to the strength of the collective identity as well as patience and humbleness.

The Baby Chicken Story

*My memories of the sit-in are selective, considering I was just six years old. I do remember sitting outside the school with my parents and other aunties and uncles. There were pockets of people sitting inside the school and outside the school. The one significant memory I have is ‘the baby chicken story’. When the government reluctantly agreed to sign over the school to the community, we had a feast at the school to celebrate. My mom and family were sitting waiting for our plates and when it came, it was a surprise. My mom looked at it and said in Cree, “Ah, look at this poor baby chicken.” My aunties and mom discussed this chicken and realized that it was a grown chicken but a small one (Cornish hen). They felt pity for the chicken and humbleness that they were each honoured with a Cornish hen. I think that the ladies were honoured to receive such a meal and that it was a recognition of their resiliency for standing up for their children’s education.*

The action taken is an example of First Nation parents’ activism that aimed to transform and make changes at a grass roots level. The emancipatory action led the way for other bands to assert their rights for control over their children’s education. I have observed that Aboriginal parents will unite when they face adversity; however the struggle of getting parents to become actively involved in education still remained. Although the schools were on the reserves, the curriculum and pedagogy reflected mainstream standards. The teachers at that time were ill-equipped to deal with the students and parents. The important lesson that I learned from this experience is the strength of a collective community, and the importance of not giving up. An Elder’s words of wisdom reflect on the importance of moving forward:

*It would be so much easier to fold our hands and not make this fist… To say, I one man, can do nothing. I grow afraid only when I see people thinking and acting like*
this. We all know the story about the man who sat beside the trail too long, and then it grew over and he could never find his way again. We can never forget what happened, but we cannot go back nor can we just sit beside the trail. (Poundmaker, Plains Cree Chief, 1880s)

**Walking Through the Storm: Indian Education Sui Generis**

Many years ago, traditional leader, Pablo Russell shared with me the teaching of ‘walking through the storm’. He said that the buffalo was one of the few animals that walk through a storm. The teaching is that there may be some resistance on our path, but we must keep moving forward. I believe that we are now walking through the storm of educational transformation. We need to identify the perceptions of parental engagement, so that we develop something that is a ‘thing of its own kind’. *Sui generis* is about transforming people and their relationships with others and the wider community. Indian education *sui generis* implies that education is a ‘thing of its own kind’ (National Advisory Council on Indian Education, 1983). For this reason the First Nations people asserted the objective of *Indian Control of Indian Education* in 1972. The aim is the development of Native education methods and structures through increasing the number of qualified Native personnel and appropriate Native content in the curriculum.

Currently, there are many provinces that have developed Aboriginal Education policy frameworks, however, my contention is that although policies can be made, the site of struggle remains the implementation of the policies in the schools. One example in the Alberta FNMI Policy framework (2002) is one of the learning focused strategies, to “provide FNMI learners access to culturally relevant learning opportunities and quality support services” (p.8). Although the goals are clearly stated, there remains mistrust within the parents and a lack of knowledge of Aboriginal people and history amongst staff, thus inhibiting communication between parents and teachers in schools.

The Aboriginal parents need to have a voice and to be given the strategies to participate and engage in their child’s education. (The Parent Inclusion Manual, 2009; The First Nation Education Council, 2009). The advice of Aboriginal parents to other parents is to let their voices be heard by the teacher and administration. They state that this is the only way to make positive changes in the education of their children (Alberta Education, 2005, p.167). In addition, the school personnel need to understand the barriers and interests of the Aboriginal parents. My
The study provides the opportunity for parents to talk about their educational experiences, their definition of parental engagement and to share approaches that promote parental engagement.

The first phase of Indigenous education illustrates how Indigenous people traditionally had a social structure that fully supported parental engagement and accountability. The second phase, the coming of the Witigo, is a pivotal point in time when colonial educational practices and government policies ravished the identity of many residential school children. The role of the parent changed from one of total participation to that of minimal parental engagement. The third phase, Following the Path of the Buffalo, signifies parental resurgence to reclaim the inherent right to having a voice in their children’s education. The activism of Indigenous parents emerged as collective resistance to current colonial educational practices. Some parents demanded appropriate curriculum and pedagogy that reflected their culture. Despite the efforts of the Aboriginal parents and the National Indian Brotherhood, the colonizing powers maintained their status quo. The fourth phase, Walking through the Storm, signifies a push towards systemic transformational change in parental engagement practices. The challenges of implementing policy frameworks that support parent engagement includes the fundamental lack of understanding and knowledge of Indigenous people’s unique and complex historic, political, social, and economic issues that impact the level of engagement of parents and schools. Another challenge that we face in the storm of parental engagement is promoting parental engagement from the lens of Aboriginal parents. One of my colleagues said we are in the perfect storm. She called the perfect storm a crisis that results in something significant being learned or changed in FNMI education. What is a perfect storm? A “perfect storm” according to Wikipedia is “an expression that describes an event where a rare combination or circumstances will aggravate a situation drastically” (“Perfect storm, 2014, “Definition”, para 2). In many ways, the perfect storm is the perfect metaphor for the extraordinary opportunity we have to combine forces as educators, parents, and school district in order to address how we can collectively lessen the FNMI educational gaps. Pushor & Ruitenberg (2007) go on to say that Canada’s diversity includes a high population of Aboriginal people “and a vast number of representation of cultural groups, with rural and urban communities, with multitude of family structures, and with a portion of our families living in poverty, this is a finding of note. It tells us that engaging families in schools has the potential to serve as one means of reducing the achievement gap between discrepant student populations” (p.5).
So, what can teachers, parents and school administrators do to navigate through the Aboriginal education storm? Steinhauer (2012) simply states administrators need to consider that their perceptions and definitions of parental engagement are different from Aboriginal parents (p. 82). Identifying the differences of perceptions of parental engagement will open a clear view of what lies ahead of the storm.

**Part 2: Academia Fuels the Fire**

**Terms of Engagement**

The term parent involvement is predominantly used in the research field and is used to describe a wide range of activities from general communication with parents, to levels of involvement, and, at times, includes parental engagement in the core work of teaching and learning (Pushor, 2007, p. 4). Parental involvement has been described as “relational phenomenon that relies on activity networks” (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis & George, 2004, p. 3). Joyce Epstein of Hopkins University helped to bring the issue of parent engagement to the forefront. Epstein’s (1995) identified six types of parent involvement: parenting (parent education), communicating (home to school), volunteering (recruit and organize help), learning at home (how to help at home), decision making (parent representative), and collaborating with community (integrating resources and services in school programs).

The term “parental engagement” and “parental involvement” are terms that have been used interchangeably. Pushor (2001) argues that implications and meanings of “parental engagement” and “parental involvement” are different. She argues that parent involvement implies that the parents serve the school’s agenda. She cites McGilp & Michael (1994) who stated that schools use the parents to “serve as: audience, spectators, fundraisers, aides, and organizers.” (p.2). Pushor argues Epstein’s types of parental involvement serve, primarily, the interest of the school agenda by “doing the things educators ask or expect them to do-volunteering in the school, parenting in positive ways, and supporting and assisting their children at home with their school work - while the knowledge, voice, and decision-making continue to rest with the educators” (Pushor & Ruitenber, 2005, p. 12). The concern for Pushor (2001) is that Epstein’s notions of parental involvement perpetuate a hierarchical structure. She states that the hierarchical structures establishing the educators as the experts, reinforces the notion that they know what are
the best interests of the child versus the less knowledgeable parent. The school and teachers are the ones who have the control and ultimate decision-making as to the level of parental involvement. She prefers the term “parental engagement” because it implies that parents are a part of the process in decision-making and take their place alongside educators. Pearson (2007) chooses to use the term “involvement” in her studies of parental engagement. Pearson (2007) rationalizes her use of parent involvement her writing citing that there is very little found in the literature using the terminology “parental engagement” and noting that Pushor uses both terms in her writing. Ferlanzo (2011) highlights two dictionary definitions to illustrate the differences of parental involvement and parent engagement. To *involve* is “to enfold or envelope”. In contrast, he views the term, *engage*, or “to come together and interlock” as implying a partnership, as in “is doing with”, versus involvement, which implies a process of “doing to”.

In my research I have chosen to use the term “parental engagement” for several reasons. The term, “engagement” seems more action-oriented, whereas “involvement” lends itself to more of a controlled process, leading to a more passive position on the parents’ part. Family engagement is taking the time to listen to the parents’ perspective, concerns, and to the information they are sharing about their child. As an educator, there were many instances when a parent would share what his/her child’s gifts were and his/her aspirations for the child’s future such as their involvement in sports, reading, music, rodeo, or culture. Ferlanzo (2012) points out that:

> …when schools involve parents they are leading with their institutional self-interest and desires – school staff are leading with their mouths. When schools engage parents they are leading with parents’ self-interests (their wants and dreams) in an effort to develop a genuine partnership. In this instance, school staff is leading with their ears. (p.1)

My experience with listening to Elders has taught me that certain key principles of communication are essential: the act of sitting still, the act of listening, the act of thinking about the purpose of the story or teaching the importance of reflecting on what needs to be done, as well as the act of doing. I had the honor of listening to Sykes Powderface, a respected Elder from Nakoda Nation, Alberta. He phrases this process as: the spirit speaks, the heart believes, the mind thinks and the body does (Calgary Catholic Presentation, 2011). He spoke to the teachers about the need for humility and having the willingness to learn about First Nations people and
the community. The value of humility was referred to in the sense that teachers need to have the willingness to change their approach or strategy when engaging with the student, parent, and community. Also, staff should have the flexibility to change their thinking and understanding of Aboriginal peoples’ culture and colonial history. Parent engagement in the schools should reflect the identified needs, projects, and goals of both the parents and the school. Each parent has the right to choose to what extent they engage in the school, in order to benefit their child’s success and wellbeing.

From my perspective, respect and reciprocity are important principles for developing parental engagement. Pushor (2007) contends that, “when parents are engaged with their children’s schooling, there is a potential for reciprocal benefit for parents, families, and communities as well as children” (p.10). Within respect comes a need to build reciprocity, which requires some authentic understandings and acknowledgements. It is a demonstration of respect to acknowledge that parents are the primary persons in the child’s life and that they should therefore be included on an ongoing basis. Creating that web of relationship between the child, parent and school is essential to parental engagement. The premise is that reciprocity requires a level of trust and that process must involve activities that will initiate positive collaboration over a period of time. In conversation with Wanda First Rider (Elder), she states that from her experiences with parent and schools she has learned that the problem of trust is often fear based. Sometimes the parents are reluctant to share their personal home life or their issues with teachers in fear that they may make negative judgments, or possibly report them to social services, or even expose that personal information to other staff members. As a teacher and parent, I believe that teacher integrity is essential in developing the trust and relationship with parents.

From a provincial perspective, Alberta Education defines parental engagement as inclusive and transparent. In working toward the policy framework goals, Alberta Education states that their aims are to be transparent and inclusive:

First Nations, Métis, Inuit parents are aware and have ease of access to information concerning all aspects of their children’s education. First Nation, Métis and Inuit parents and communities will have meaningful opportunities to participate actively in decisions that directly impact their children’s education. (First Nation Inuit Education Policy Framework, 2002, p.14)
Aboriginal parental engagement is an evolving process and journey for both parents and educational systems.

**Barriers to Parental Engagement**

Pearson (2007) states that we need to position ourselves differently in relation to parental involvement. Pearson has worked extensively in the education system in Canada. Her thesis titled “First Nations Parent Involvement in the Public School System a Personal Journey of a School Principal” focused on the need to bridge the gap between Aboriginal parents and schools. She also states that other administrators commented that she was “opening a can of worms” and that she would regret it (p. 9). Another criticism made of the educational systems is the lack of parental involvement in planning Aboriginal programs. Any Aboriginal school program should reflect the Aboriginal population’s culture and educational needs. Taking the time to invite parents into the school to discuss their ideas about an Aboriginal program validates parent cultural knowledge and builds positive working relationships. Pushor (2007) states that their needs to be a shift away from the scripted story of schools and start to look back at what they are doing. Pushor (2007) uses the metaphor “protectorate” to describe the typical ways the schools are and continue to be lived out: essentially meaning that the schools have all the control of what parental engagement looks like and why they are doing it. Pushor (2007) emphasizes the need to create a counter-story of the “protectorate.” A move towards co-creating a plan of parental engagement requires trust and the building of relationships, hospitality, and good intentions to open up the schools’ space and agenda.

It is my experience that schools are reluctant to change and many are still working within a hierarchical structure wherein the parents are at the bottom of the hierarchy. The absence of their Aboriginal voice and engagement in the schools is the result of a colonial past with unbalanced power relationships. At the top of the hierarchy is the principal of the school. Parents in Friedel’s (1999) study felt that mainstream administrators had predetermined perceptions of Aboriginal parents. Having little trust in the principal creates a huge disconnect between the school and the parent. Pearson (2007) shares her experiences as a principal and her difficulty of connecting with parents. She says, “In my attempts to involve parents in decision-making, I hit resistance; they did not seem to want to get involved.” (p. 9). In her study, one parent revealed that the First Nation people have a fear of school, teachers, and especially administration, because of their
horrific experience of residential school. Mistrust and lack of relationships creates a disconnection between these schools and the parents.

Pearson (2007) cites other research to support and identify the barriers to parental engagement. Parents are not likely to get involved due to: negative school experiences, (Finders & Lewis, 1994; Hare, 2003), lack of support from the school staff, (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Fullen, 1991; Patrikakou et al, 1999); lack of education, (Comer, 1980), differing traditional ways, protocols and communication styles (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Mackay & Myles, 1995); economics, financial resources (Adelman, 1994; Baker, 1997; Patrikakou et al, 1999; Pena, 2000); and, racism (Razack, 1999). In an Alberta case study of Aboriginal parent participation in public education some of the barriers identified were: the negative attitudes and perceptions of staff, stereotyping, low expectations, paternalism, no collaborative decision making between school and parents, and the devaluation of Aboriginal community and culture (Friedel, 1999). Although this study is older, I surmise that many of these factors persist in our schools today.

Shelly Robinson’s (2003) “Dialogues with Students, Parents and Educators about Parent Involvement at the Secondary Level” identifies some barriers to engagement from a parental perspective. The participants in my study differ from Robinson’s study in that I interviewed parents and administrators from elementary to high school. However, her findings are applicable to my study. The parents expressed that at the high school level they felt inhibited by some of the teacher’s personality. Robinson (2003) used Berger’s (1995) identification of teacher roles to describe these teachers as being in the “Busy-Teacher Role”. She recognized the impact of the lack of communication between the teacher and parent. In her study, the teachers interviewed expressed concern about the time it took to organize volunteers and questioned the competency of the parents at the high school level. Conversely, the parents also were reluctant to become directly involved because of their children’s’ unwelcome reception at the schools. Berger (1995), as cited in Robinson (2003), identified parent roles that interfere with school and home interaction:

1) Protector (over protector);
2) Inadequate (avoid school contact);
3) Avoidance (Due to bad history);
4) Indifferent parent;
5) Don’t make waves (concern for negative implications for child if they become involved) and
6) Club–playing advocate (expresses views through confrontation and power plays).

These findings relate to Aboriginal parents and their communication with teachers and school districts. Aboriginal parents, like any other parents, may feel inadequate in terms of what they contribute academically. Certainly the colonial experience and the racism parents faced as students would impact their attitude and behavior towards their child’s teacher and school. Some parents may feel afraid of making waves because of past experiences, such as previous federal residential school policies of mandatory attendance, as well as the Sixty’s Scoop, a period when children were apprehended by social services, at times without cause. Lastly, Aboriginal parents may seem overprotective of their child’s social and emotional state in the school setting. In my experience, I have witnessed parents coming to their children’s school to address issues of discrimination by the staff or conflicts with the other students. It is not to say they are not concerned with the academic success of their children, but perhaps they are on guard because of the discrimination they had experienced in school and in mainstream society. When a parent exhibits reluctance to engage, it is generally a matter of the lack of trust, and, perhaps poor relationship efforts on the part of the parent and the school.

Robinson identifies five roadblocks that teachers put up that deter them from forming positive and effective relationships with parents.

1) Authority figure role (lock parents out of decision-making process);
2) Sympathizing counselor role (Focus on inadequacy of the child to console the parent);
3) Pass the buck role (refers concerns to other departments);
4) Protect-the-empire role (united, invincible staff); and
5) Busy-teacher role (no time to communicate).

In my experience as an educator I have heard the frustration from Aboriginal parents that the teachers do not listen and that they have a preset agenda in the programming of their children’s education. It is extremely difficult for parents with children with special needs who may be required to move to another school to receive alternative programming. In cases such as these, if
the parent is resistant or frustrated by the lack of understanding of the assessments and process, the schools will often call the First Nations, Métis, Inuit team to intervene. Often the liaison, through active listening and mutual respect in dialogue, will uncover the reasons for the parent’s frustration with the school. It could be that the parent does not want to separate the children and prefers the child in a school that is populated with other Aboriginal students from their community. If the teacher or school had the trust of the parents and were reciprocal in dialogue they would be able to handle situations like this one.

In a general study of minority parents and community engagement (National Education Association of the US, 2010), it was found that there were levels of mistrust and lack of understanding between parents and school officials. The common barriers identified as hindering parent engagement were:

- a) Lack of relationships building between and school officials and parents;
- b) Lack of trust in school officials;
- c) Parents’ and school officials’ beliefs and assumptions engender fear and mistrust;
- d) Lack of cultural competency creates unwelcoming environments for ethnic minority groups;
- e) Lack of roles of understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the local school board and school districts;
- f) Lack of funding and coordination of resources to provide services to parents;
- g) Failure to prioritize parent engagement, and;
- h) Failure to adjust to the role of parent involvement in the 21st century (pp. 27-35).

These findings reflect the barriers of four ethnic groups: American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, African, African Americans/Blacks, and Hispanics/Latinos.

It is apparent that these groups share common barriers and some of the problems are interrelated; however, I would like to reinforce and caution that we should not categorize First Nations as just another minority group. The United States may see their First Nations as a minority group, but in Canada we see First Nations as distinct sovereign nations who are not classified under immigrant minority groups or programs. In the Calgary Catholic School District we classify students who are English Language Learner First Nation, Métis, Inuit and special needs, as diverse learners. The challenge is to recognize the unique culture and history of First Nation, Métis and Inuit
people when working with the student, parent, and community and not assimilate them into a category.

**Approaches to Parental Engagement**

There are several studies that support the need to involve parents in the education of their children (Amendt & Bousquet, 2006; Kavanagh, 2003; Saskatchewan School Trustees, 2002; Robinson, 2003). These studies suggest approaches to parental engagement. Pearson (2007) cites recent research studies that identify how to involve Aboriginal parents in the school system. The three approaches are: to first to connect with people, then build family networks, and then follow up with the creation of non-threatening environments (Amendt & Bousquet, 2006; Kavanagh, 2003; Saskatchewan School Trustees, 2002). Pearson (2007) advocates that relationship building is paramount to parental engagement. Her case study identifies four factors that educators need to take into consideration when building positive relationships – making an effort, being welcoming, knowing the people, and being respectful. Her study further identifies three themes that emerged from her study that will guide Non-Native educators to build relationships with Aboriginal parents: understanding Aboriginal knowledge, having personal critical awareness, and working with purposefulness. Having personal critical awareness is to be sensitive to how educators react and the way we perceive things. Mezirow (1990) clearly states that critical reflection is a way of transforming and challenging our way of thinking. Wanda First Rider (personal communication, May 21, 2010) shared a belief with me in a smudge ceremony. She said that when we smudge, we smudge all parts of our body and spirit. She said that we, as humans, think too much from the head and not enough from the heart. We are in a rush to make decisions and do not look closely enough at the real situation. We need to be reminded of the teachings and ceremonies that remind us that we need to be more reflexive in thoughts and actions. There is a cultural saying about our sister, the Mouse. She has huge eyes and can only see what is in front of her, but she has a big heart. She is sacred in that she is close to Mother Earth and is a humble being. One story I shared with my students and colleagues is from the Blackfoot People: Great Wolf and Little Mouse Sister. In brief, Little Mouse Sister pitied the foolish Wolf that lost his eyes so she gave her eyes to him. After his rejoice, he noticed her dilemma. They decided to travel to the Sacred Lake where she would ask for help. They did eventually arrive there and they prayed to all the directions. The Great Spirit took pity on the
mouse and for her unselfishness he transformed her into a great eagle. One of the lessons to be learned is to be self-reflective when working with parents. As educators, sometimes we generalize and do not see what is in front of us. The mouse teaches us humility and awareness, of putting others’ needs at the forefront. Wanda First Rider, (personal communication, May 21, 2010), states that we have to take time to self-reflect before and after we speak to parents. We need to slow down and think from the heart. The heart is where self-reflection resides. It is important to be aware of Aboriginal parents’ diverse needs and to be aware of the differences between urban and rural populations’ needs. There have been some studies in Alberta that investigated parental engagement; however, if teachers do not have access to information then it is difficult for them to implement any of the findings from these studies. The Alberta First Nation, Métis and Inuit School- Community Learning Environment project, “Promising Practices” (2007) identifies FNMI Parent and Community Engagement as one of the prevalent themes that emerged from their literature review. Within their literature review they highlighted two key points: strong working partnerships among the school, the parents, and community and the need to create a school climate of relational trust.

Some of the promising practices employed in the two pilot project schools were: Elder in residence programs, one to one contact with parents, increase of computer access by FNMI parents, and reserved FNMI positions on local school councils. Alberta Education defines parental engagement as inclusive and transparent. In working toward the policy framework goals, Alberta Learning aims to be transparent and inclusive. “First Nations, Métis, Inuit parents are aware and have ease of access to information concerning all aspects of their children’s education. First Nation, Metis and Inuit parents and communities will have meaningful opportunities to participate actively in decisions that directly impact their children’s education” (FNMI, 2002, p.14).

In a British Columbia study, “The 2002 Synthesis, A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, & Community Connections on Student Achievement, Parent and Education Partnership Project” (R. A. Malatest & Associates) looked at 51 studies and one overarching conclusion emerged:

Taken as a whole, these studies found a positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and benefits for students, including improved academic
achievement. This relationship holds across families of all economic, racial/ethnic, and education backgrounds and for students at all ages. Although there is less research on the effects of community involvement, it also suggests benefits for schools, families, and students, including improved achievement and behavior. (p. 24)

Within high-performing schools there were several key characteristics identified with academic improvement, of which “engaged parents” was one. This study recognized that all parents, regardless of income, education level, or cultural background, are involved in their children’s learning and want their children to do well in school. The recommendations for action in parental engagement from this study include:

1) Creating programs that will support families to guide their children’s learning, from preschool through high school;
2) Working with families to build their social and political connections;
3) Developing the capacity of school staff to work with families and community members;
4) Linking family and community engagement efforts to student learning;
5) Focusing efforts to engage families and community members in developing trusting and respectful relationships;
6) Embracing a philosophy of partnership and be willing to share power with families. Make sure that parents, school staff, and community members understand that the responsibility for children’s educational development is a collaborative enterprise;
7) Building strong connections between schools and community organizations; and
8) Designing and conduct research that is more rigorous and focused, and that uses more culturally sensitive and empowering definitions of parent involvement. (p. 61-72)

Engagement strategies vary from district to district however some common strategies were classified under these headings: governance initiatives, Aboriginal support services (FNMI), school orientation/activities, and cultural awareness/culturally inclusive activities. Although the study did not provide a precise definition of parental engagement, it shared positive engagement strategies that were premised on open communication with parents and teachers. The document
did confer that parental engagement requires the collaboration of schools and parents as partners in the successful education of their children. Creating partnerships with parents and school districts creates opportunities for shared-decision making and creates space for mutual contributions to the systems goal setting, problem solving, accountability frameworks and educational outcomes.

There are numerous communication-related issues regarding parental engagement. The primary position is that parental engagement requires a foundation of trust, reciprocity, relevant engagement for both parents and schools interests, and respect of the differences of worldviews. Creating meaningful and authentic relationships requires an underlying reciprocal respect between parent/caregiver and teacher/school district. School districts need to be clear about the purpose of the engagement and protocols are needed to guide engagement processes, especially at a district level. The important thing to keep in mind is that relationships take time, and, the process of engagement is relational to time and place. Aboriginal parents have always wanted the best education for their children despite the colonial barriers they have faced. We are at a time when Aboriginal communities and parents are asserting their voice to provincial school districts as to the distinct needs of their children. Indigenous people have the inherent right to a high quality education and to be treated in a respectful, non-paternalistic manner.

**Part 3: Summary of Lessons Learned from Attending to the Fire Stories**

Part One of the chapter provided the reader with a glimpse of the historical phases of education from my Aboriginal perspective. By re-naming the repugnant “Indian” eras of history with my more meaningful names as, the dog days, coming of the Witigo, following the path of the buffalo and walking through the storm, I positioned history from an Aboriginal lens. The renamed phases reflect the evolutionary phases of Aboriginal parent involvement from pre-contact through colonization to the complex present.

Part Two focused on the literature that voices the different perspectives of the two terms, parent engagement and parent involvement. The question of the use of the term, engagement or involvement can be an ongoing debate. What is evident from the research is that the standard norms of parental engagement practices are not as effective with FNMI parents and community.
The barriers of engagement can be attributed to the parents’ and teachers’ differing perceptions, assumptions, belief systems, values, and worldviews in how they define parental engagement. The literature suggests that FNMI engagement practices must be culturally sensitive and must empower the parents to be involved on an equal footing. The themes supporting cultural responsiveness and empowerment include: importance of leadership, importance of integrating Indigenous Knowledge and pedagogy into the school, and relationship building.

Pushor’s (2007) argument that Epstein’s (1995) notion of parental involvement perpetuates a hierarchical structure is a valid argument. The fact is that Epstein’s (1995) model is standard in many schools. The challenge is to reshape Epstein’s model so that it reflects and is sensitive to the unique cultural worldviews of the families we work with on a daily basis.

Aboriginal cultural worldviews reflect the teaching of “power with” rather than “power over” (Alberta Education, 2005. p.18). The concept of the circle is used to illustrate how all-living things are viewed as equal in the circle of life. “Power with” is described as a dialogue, where everyone stands on the ground face to face. In contrast, the pyramid image is often used to illustrate “power over” – where those at the top hold the power. The literature shows that when we validate the parents as equal partners and collaboratively work together it increases the quality of student learning (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 18). “Power with” is like the structure of a Mikowahp. If the tri-pod poles are not securely tied than the structure is weak and subject to collapse. A pyramid and the Mikowahp may appear to have similar shape in that the top part of each is narrower but that is the only similarity. The notions of power and how power works and is distributed is entirely different. Once we have a basic understanding of standing face-to-face, parents and teachers are open to building a relationship based on equity. I would like to say standing face to face is a good metaphor, but I think standing heart to heart reflects a sincere acknowledgement and commitment from both parents and teachers/schools. From my perspective, I tend to hold things closer to my heart than my mind. Within prayer, we hold our hands to our hearts after the prayer to acknowledge the prayer and the wisdom that is being shared. Wanda First Rider says that we are taking the person’s (creator’s) prayer to our hearts to show our appreciation and connection with spirituality (personal communication, May 13, 2014). If we, as educators and parents connect heart to heart we can reshape parental engagement practices, reinforce student success rates, and rebuild the relationships between the parent, child
and teacher/school. Validating and harmonizing Indigenous worldviews in the education system is a step towards transforming the state of FNMI parental engagement. These stories that were shared while sitting around the fire has opened our minds and our hearts to the issues surrounding parental engagement. In the next chapter we continue build the Mikowahp as theory and methodology.
Chapter Three: Mikowahp as Theory and Methodology

As an Indigenous person growing up on a First Nation reserve I have observed business people come into our communities and exploit our resources, all in the name of economic development. The community at large did not benefit economically. The words “economic development” and “economic consultant” were negative terms in my house. In much the same way, Linda Smith (1999) describes how “research” is often perceived in Indigenous communities: The term “research” is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, “research is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world’s vocabulary” (1999, p.1).

In the past, research on Indigenous people was filled with Eurocentric bias. Battiste and Henderson (1999) refer to this as Eurocentric prejudice and they advocate for “the need to replace Eurocentric prejudice with the new premises that value diversity over universality” (p.133). A step towards balancing this inequity was made on a national level through the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP, 1996). The Commission, with the advice of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, recommended a set of ethical guidelines to guide research in Indigenous communities. Specific to the guidelines was the understanding that Aboriginal people have distinctive perspectives and understandings based on their knowledge, history, and culture embodied in their languages. In this research, I have carried out the recommendations made by Battiste and Henderson and RCAP through communicating my research processes and findings using a theoretical and methodological framework that privileges my knowledge and experiences as a Cree person. In this chapter I share how the Mikowahp Research Framework was used to guide the epistemological, conceptual, methodological, and theoretical processes of my research.

The Base of the Mikowahp: Four Natural Laws

In the Cree culture, one of the attributes of being a good Nehiyaw (Cree person) is to be a contributing member of the community. The Cree term, wicihitowin, exemplifies the act of helping by sharing and caring. My research honours this traditional teaching by taking the time to sit with parents in talking circles and discuss how they engage with schools and how we can improve parent engagement in the Calgary Catholic School District. In addition, my intention is
to share the findings with the parents, school district and other Indigenous communities. Wilson (2008) states that the source of Indigenous research comes from the heart and mind of the researcher, and “checking your heart” is a critical element in the researcher, “a good heart guarantees a good motive, and good motives benefit everyone involved” (p.60).

Research as ceremony, as described by Wilson, exemplifies that we, as Indigenous people, inherently have had our own research paradigms and methodologies. An Elder speaker at a post-secondary Aboriginal conference in Calgary reinforced my belief in this statement by speaking of the importance of knowing our culture and the importance of following protocols in life. He stated that although there are many universities out there, we, as Indigenous people, have our own university called the “University of Natural Laws”. Throughout my life I have received so many valuable teachings from the “University of Natural Laws”. My father was a pipe holder and a sweat lodge owner. He spoke to the importance of how we live our life and that we all have a purpose and responsibility as a Nehiyaw. In residential school, my late Aunt Alice Makokis (a residential school board member), along with the Elders, would haul us into the gym and speak to us about living a good life. I raise my hands in a respectful manner to them for ensuring that I was able to hear and learn those important teachings. My life journey has brought me to this point where I embrace the responsibility and feel honoured to be able to conduct my research using an Indigenous theoretical framework.

Therefore, I have chosen the Four Natural Laws of the Nehiyaw people as the epistemological base for my research to guide my path and help me interpret the findings in a Nehiyaw way. Chisen (2001) and Makokis (2008) emphasized utilizing our processes inherent in our Nehiyaw ways of knowing. I agree with J. Makokis’ (2008) point that we need to move away from existing colonial research methods and move towards “uncovering and revitalizing ancestral methods of knowledge acquisition and transference and putting it into contemporary practice” (p.42). The four Cree Natural Laws, or iyintoweyasowewina, encompass the laws that govern our behavior and relations to oneself, others and nature. The term iyintoweyasowewina is derived from the root word, iyinto, which means natural and common and laws (Makokis, 2001, p.94). The Four Natural Laws, which form the base of my Mikowahp Research Framework, are summarized as follows:
1) Wicitowin (sharing): The first principle of wicitowin (sharing) was instilled in me by my parents who always emphasized that as a Cree we need to help each other and not always expect anything in return or by doing things that are just self-serving. This was exemplified by how they lived their daily lives on the farm. My uncles and other community members would come out and help harvest the garden and fields. Everybody participated in the task and my role was to help out in the kitchen by making meals and cleaning. Another experience of wicitowin was when my aunt Josephine would buy chicks with my mom. When it was time to process the chickens she would come and camp out at our farm and help us out. I was raised in a world of wicitowin, therefore, when I made the commitment to go on this research journey my first intention was to help the FNMI parents voice their issues and suggestions of how we can better serve FNMI students in the school district. I acknowledge that going on this journey has enriched my life through the people that I have met and the experiences I have had with the participants of the research.

2) Kiseywatisowin (caring/kindness/generosity): The second Cree natural law that guides my research is kiseywatisowin. According to one of Makokis’ study participants, carrying out this principle requires humbleness and kindness (p. 97). In my research I acknowledge that my role as a researcher was to help and serve the interest of the participants by listening without any agenda. Makokis (2008) clearly illustrates that as a researcher we frame our minds so that we are learners first, and researchers second (p. 41). My research was conducted in a way that incorporated culturally appropriate protocols, processes, data collection, and Indigenous frameworks that reflect my ways of knowing. Showing kiseywatisowin means to me giving total commitment to the research and giving information back to participants that can be shared in a meaningful way.

3) Kweyaskatesowin (honesty): The third teaching of kweyaskatesowin in research means being ethically accountable to the participants, the university, and the FNMI community. Honesty is about having ethical relations with all life through relational accountability at a personal level and at a collective level.

4) Sohakisowin (strength/determination): The fourth teaching of sohakisowin relates to the impetus of oneself to carry out a behavior despite obstacles that may present themselves. It refers to the strength of the mind (Makokis, 2001, p. 99). In research, sohakisowin is to have
the determination and strength to journey forward to seek out the knowledge from the participants by carefully analyzing their experiences and stories.

For many years I have shared with my FNMI students the significance of the Mikowahp teachings and the importance of validating our worldviews in order come to a better understanding of the environment and ourselves. I stressed that our knowledge systems and ways are as applicable as other theorists that exist in academia. The Western people may have Piaget, but we have our teachings from the Elders about the human life cycle. Through grounding this research in the four Cree natural laws, and, by using the Mikowahp Teachings as both theory and methodology, I model the efficacy and relevancy of our Cree ways.

**Indigenous Research Methodologies**

Three distinct aspects of my Indigenous research are my cultural knowledge, life experiences, and educational experiences. These experiences have guided my research choice, my methods used in searching, and the way I interpret knowledge. I join forces with the many Indigenous scholars who are forging their cultural way of research within the academy. Kathleen E. Absolon (Minogiizhigokwe, 2011) examined the work of eleven scholars from different nations who use Indigenous worldviews to theorize and create Indigenous methodologies. Absolon’s Petal Flower Holistic Framework integrates some of the collectively identified tendencies of the researchers that she interviewed. There are six subsections to her flower that discuss common tendencies of Indigenous holistic research:

1) **Roots**: Foundational elements- all of the methodologies were rooted in Indigenous methodologies and worldviews.

2) **Flower Center**: Self as central to the search - Indigenous re-searchers recalled memories, motives, personal responsibility and their need for congruency in the search process.

3) **Leaves**: The journey, process, transformation – The leaves embody the journey of the self through the research process and a journey of who they are and what they know. The leaves are interdependent of the environment getting nutrition from the sun and roots.

4) **Stem**: Methodological backbone and supports - The backbone of research comprises a critique of colonialism, imperialism, and Euro-western research on Aboriginal peoples. A critical consciousness among the re-searchers expresses a commitment to “rewriting and re-
righting” our histories, experiences, and realities. The stem/consciousness holds it together and it is the connecting pathway between the paradigms, researchers, process, academia, and methodologies.

5) The Petals: Diverse ways of search for knowledge - The petal represents the diversity of Indigenous re-search methodologies.

6) Environment: Academic context influences the life of Indigenous methodologies in the academy and affects Indigenous researchers who are trying to advance their theories and methods. The environment can be intolerant, harsh, chilly and antagonistic towards Indigenous research and methodologies. (pp.67-119)

Absolon firmly asserts that Indigenous research is holistic, relational, as well as interdependent with Indigenous philosophies, beliefs, and way of life. All the exemplars of her study have achieved precedent-setting recognition for their methodologies and worldviews in their research. Absolon’s examination of researchers’ common tendencies is vital for existing researchers and future researchers in academia. For too long Indigenous knowledge and ways have been disregarded and not seen as valuable in academia.

As individuals and communities, we have been given the teachings to contribute to academia and to carry out our responsibilities to our communities and Indigenous peoples. The four attributes that I see in existing Indigenous scholarly research include our creative spirit, emotion, intuition and wisdom. Each attribute correlates with one of the four directions in the medicine wheel teachings as illustrated below. The definition of the term ‘intuition’ in the Webster’s Dictionary is “act of contemplating 1a; immediate apprehension or cognition. 2. Quick and ready insight.” Intuition for Indigenous people is a way of knowing. It is through our imagination that the feelings, which come from within, guide us. It can be described as historical knowledge that is guiding us and telling us what to do to make things better. From our Cree perspective, intuition is one way of knowing when your spirit guide is trying to tell you something (Steinhauer et al, 2001). It is during the moments when we share and exchange ideas that our spirits touch. As I read the works of scholars such as Kovach (2009), Smith (1991), Archibald (2008), Anderson (2011), and Battiste (1995), I appreciate the strength of the collective to create space in the academy and to validate our own Indigenous Knowledge (wisdom) through the context of academic research despite the colonial policies, structures, and barriers in diverse contexts. My
father used to say, “I know nothing, but I’ll tell you what I know”. His teaching is one of humility and the notion that individually we know little, but collectively we know a lot (Steinhauer, 2001).

**Indigenous Conceptual Frameworks and Methodologies are Inter-Related**

Kovach (2010) points out that our chosen cultural conceptual frameworks allow researchers’ tools to show that their methods are being aligned with a particular way of knowing. Kovach identifies the challenges that we face as Indigenous researchers. In customizing our Indigenous framework to our tribal paradigms we must keep in mind that we also must communicate our process to Western academia (p.43). Reflecting back to my early years of university, I now understand why I struggled through some of the courses in academia. What were missing was the reciprocity, respect, relevance of the curriculum, and lack of communication or relationship between the instructors and me. The results were a fear of failure on my part, and perhaps fear on their part because they did not know how to approach or understand my culture. Things changed when I started implementing Aboriginal viewpoints and culture into my studies. It gave me the courage to teach fellow students a little about Aboriginal culture and how it is needed in our curriculum. In the past few years I found myself in a familiar situation in the doctoral program.

The challenge was finding a way to customize my Indigenous framework while effectively communicating the process to Western academia. During this time, I had heard the question “what is the conceptual framework for your thesis”? I pondered on the definition of ‘conceptual frameworks’. As I read the work of Margaret Kovach in *Indigenous Methodology, Characteristics, And Contexts* it became evident as to where my confusion stemmed. When I think of the word “conceptual”, I immediately think cognition, and, as Kovach has pointed out, this term privileges thought as the main pathway to knowledge and places the spirit, feelings, and experiences as secondary. I have heard the Elders speak to this point by saying that when we come to make a decision we have to think from the heart as well as the mind.

Kovach (2010), states that applying conceptual frameworks to Indigenous inquiry can be problematic and thus requires the ‘unpacking’ of the term and its intention. I believe that inquiry heavily relies on our humanness: mental, physical, emotional and spiritual. At times, it may appear that one realm is elevated; however, it is often the case that all realms work together as a guiding force for its direction. The way we come into research symbolically reflects the way we
go into ceremony; we all have differing levels of knowledge and purpose for participating. My research is guided by my cultural knowledge and educational experience. Both guide my research choice, my methods used in searching, and the way I interpret the knowledge in order to offer it back in a purposeful, helpful, and relevant manner. My experience with the teachings of the Mikowahp has influenced me personally and my professional pedagogy. I am not saying that I am the expert around the teachings of the Mikowahp; however, I have had the honor to learn from several people from different First Nation groups and have applied this knowledge in my research process.

It is customary in Cree culture to acknowledge the people or the source of the information from which a person is going to share. Therefore, I wish to acknowledge the people in my educational travels that have shared their teachings of the Mikowahp. Within the Calgary Catholic School District, I have had the honor of receiving some Mikowahp teachings from presentations given by Leonard Bastien (Piikani), Wanda First Rider (Kainai), Ivan Eagletail, (Tsuu T’ina), Shirley Meguinis (Cree), and Josh Littlechild (Cree). I also refer to Elder Mary Lee’s “The Four Directions Teachings” (year). Although I have received many teachings about the Mikowahp, for a few months during the research process I struggled with how to respectfully incorporate them into my thesis as both a conceptual/theoretical and methodological framework. While I was searching for how to communicate how my teachings and beliefs are interconnected within the research process I had the opportunity to go to the Blue Quills Residential School-Healing Jamboree in May 2011. As Indigenous research is a natural process in which ideas come forward in its own time and place, I have found that ideas have been presented to me in many ways. As I travelled up north from Calgary in my motor home on the Queen Elizabeth II Highway, I had different thoughts running through my mind. Firstly, I thought about how colonized Canada is in that they named a highway after the queen. It should have been named Warrior Trail instead. As I drove I realized that this was the first time my sister, mother, and I have had time to spend together to reflect on and share our residential schooling experiences. Our journey leading to the camp was one of reconnecting with each other, reestablishing old friendships with friends and relatives, and having the opportunity to have a spiritual experience through ceremony. Although I felt humbled to be in the company of many traditional people and Elders, there was still a part of me thinking of my methodology. Little did I know that my experience at the residential healing camp would enlighten me and guide me in the right direction.
Personal Story of the Ghost Dance

One of the ceremonies that I had the privilege to attend was called the Ghost Dance. I had never been to a Ghost Dance before and so I inquired about it. I spoke to a woman I had just met in the residential school cafeteria food line. As I stood in line I turned around and saw some of my fellow classmates and relations standing in a straight line; it brought back old memories. The woman looked at me and essentially said that the Ghost Dance had something to do with horses and they dance in a specific manner. My first thought was, “how could dancing horses participate in a ceremony?” I acknowledge that my understanding is limited in regards to many Indigenous stories, however, I did not think this ceremony had anything to do with horses. I later asked my cousin’s wife about the Ghost Dance and she said there is dancing and a feast. The Ghost Dance is a ceremony where they have a food offering to those who have passed. There are certain practices and protocols in the Ghost Dance, but it is not culturally appropriate, nor my right, to share them within academic circles. At the time, I had limited ceremonial knowledge and protocols of the Ghost Dance, and therefore was very observant of others’ actions and behaviors. Upon entering the Ghost Dance I sat with an older lady whom I assumed had experienced a Ghost Dance, but it became evident that she was also experiencing it for the first time. I quickly glanced across and saw my aunties, cousins and other Elder women sitting there. Needless to say, I was glad they sat ahead of me so that I could observe what to do. The experience was humbling and illuminating for several reasons. As the ceremony progressed, I came to feel more at ease. Once the lead person explained, through prayer and ceremony, the purpose of the Ghost Dance, I understood my place in it that day. It gave me a sacred place to pray and heal from the loss of my sisters, my brother and my father. There were many people in the Ghost Dance Lodge: Indigenous, non-Indigenous, young and old, some were seasoned, and some of us were just beginning our Ghost Dance experience. The commonality that connected us that day is the respect and gratefulness for being a part of the ceremony. Everyone had his or her own personal reasons and motives for attending: for me it was a cleansing feeling for my spirit.

So, what is the significance of my Ghost Dance experience in relation to Indigenous conceptual research? As we go through life, our energy is drawn from many realms between the spiritual and the physical world. After attending the Ghost Dance I came to several realizations. Firstly, my journey was predetermined by a prophetic dream that had come into fruition. In my dream, I was in a ceremony similar to that of the Ghost Dance. Secondly, it was a lesson in taking time to
listen to my intuitive dreams. The Ghost Dance and my dream both signified the importance of
ceremony lodges. Ceremony highly reflects how we see and make sense of the world. As such,
my methodological framework would have to be applicable in my research and reflect who I am
as an Indigenous Cree woman.

Indigenous people have such distinct places and lodges for ceremonies that are not only physical
structures, but are representative of our Indigenous ways of knowing. I agree with Kovach that
Indigenous ways of knowing are internal and personal, and, I would add, experiential. Creating
one standardized framework for Indigenous research is not possible. Therefore, my research
approach is based on my Cree set of beliefs and values about the world that have guided my
actions throughout.

**Mikowahp Methodology**

As a Cree woman, I based my methodology on the Mikowahp framework. In the first part of this
chapter, I discussed how the four natural Cree laws form the base of the Mikowahp and guided
the conceptual/theoretical component of my research. In this section of the chapter, I focus on
how the Mikowahp Teachings are inter-related to my methodology. The Mikowahp is symbolic
of the woman and her responsibilities to community. The Mikowahp base can be seen as the
conceptual and theoretical guide to conducting research by following expected Cree protocols
and ethics, thereby upholding the values and teachings of the Mikowahp. The Mikowahp values
have guided my research and interactions with all stakeholders. Research is about seeking
knowledge, forming relationships with the knowledge holders, and understanding the ethics that
guide the search. In ceremony, the ones who are learning, who are receiving teachings and
knowledge, are called oskosikiskewakekwa apewisak, or, the researcher, the helper, the
learner. (Blue Quills First Nation College, 2015, p.11)

My use of the Mikowahp as a research methodology serves to encourage future educational
inquiry through Indigenous methodology. In utilizing the Mikowahp framework that is centered
on Cree knowledge, I have adhered to the key qualities of Plains Cree tradition. The key qualities
identified by Kovach (2010) are (a) holistic epistemology, (b) story, (c) purpose, (d) the
experiential, (e) tribal ethics, (f) tribal ways of gaining knowledge, and (g) an overall
consideration of the colonial relationship (p.44).
The Mikowahp teachings are extensive and, like Kovach, I will share those that were shared by my family, colleagues, and research literature. The Mikowahp framework encompasses all of Kovach’s aforementioned research qualities. The poles of a Mikowahp structure are representative of the Plains Cree values. Each pole has its position within the structure. The main three or four poles must be tied in a certain way and positioned within the circle. All of the remaining poles must also be carefully positioned. If a Mikowahp is not set up properly then it becomes a danger to all who are in it, and to those around them. In essence, it’s like Indigenous research: if it is not ‘done in good way’ than it can do the community more harm than good. Research that is done in ‘a good way’ is premised on helping and meeting the needs of the people. The utmost of importance is to follow the protocols of the participants when conducting the research.

**Mikowahp Teachings**

The Mikowahp teachings comprise a holistic framework that is grounded in Indigenous epistemology. In essence, it is my Cree Indigenous way of knowing. I use the term holistic in reference to the Indigenous Natural Law of Living; all life is living and interrelated. In addition, my father used to say that before you can understand or love someone else, you will need to understand and like yourself and who you are as a Nehiyaw. As a Nehiyaw, we are taught to be humble as we are a part of bigger circle of life. So to understand yourself as a Nehiyaw is to understand the history and place of our people: it’s about kinship, language, spirituality, story, and what he termed “wetcetowin”, or coming together to support each other’s needs in the community. The Mikowahp represents and guides my methodological process. The following parts of the Mikowahp that will guide my method in conducting research are:

- Mikowahp Poles: Values and Structure;
- Bundle: Protocol and Ethics;
- Buffalo Robes: Engaging Community; Interviews; and Focus Groups;
- Fire: Situating Myself in the Research

The following diagram illustrates the relationship between the pole teachings and the stakeholders in the Mikowahp Methodology Framework (Figure 1).
Mikowahp Poles: Values and Structure

The values underlying the teachings of the Mikowahp poles include: love/ kindness, honesty, sharing, and determination/strength. These four poles are bound together to support the structure. It serves to teach us that the child needs the support of the parents to create balance in life and to create that sense of family. Research must be cognizant of the different perspectives, much like the different directions where each pole is situated in the structure of the Mikowahp. Each pole is located in one of the cardinal directions and each direction has its own teachings from the medicine wheel, as noted earlier. Elder Marie Lee (2006) states, “we are like those poles” (p.4); we need the strength from each other, and we need to support our families and communities. At the top of the Mikowahp where the poles come together is symbolic of an eagle nest. Inside the eagle nest are the eggs, representing our children who need our support. As Indigenous people
we recognize that we have our own journeys and we point in different directions according to our community needs.

**Bundles: Protocols and Ethics**

Mikowahps often have sacred bundles placed within them containing items used in ceremony or for spiritual protection. There are certain responsibilities in terms of their care and placement in the tee-pee, but often, the bundle is placed in the back. Bundles contain their own songs and different sacred items from Mother Earth. The bundle protocol differs from nation to nation. In our community, the yearly smudging (cleansing ceremony) of the bundle includes the singing of the bundle song and prayer. It is not my intention to state a full understanding of the bundle protocols, but to relate how I’ve used the bundle to represent my process of creating a respectful research space grounded in the Four Natural Laws and the Mikowahp Teachings. Research ethics and methods used in obtaining Indigenous Knowledge and their resulting data have been a concern for Aboriginal people. Battiste and Henderson (2000) address the need for legal and policy reforms to protect Indigenous Knowledge and heritage. Western paradigms often see knowledge as an individual entity, obtainable, and which can be individually owned. Conversely, Indigenous people often think of Indigenous Knowledge as relational knowledge (Wilson, 2001). As Indigenous researchers, we must not only acknowledge ourselves, but also our position within community and amongst our relations. It is not expected that we possess the absolute knowledge or answers. The Creator has gifted us with being a human and, with that, comes knowledge tempered with humility and patience.

As an Indigenous researcher I believe in this holistic approach towards research; how we approach one part of the research affects the whole. I believe that “primacy of place” and relational accountability is required in Indigenous research. We are accountable to our people (our relations). It is not just about reliability and validity but is part of fulfilling our responsibilities and our relationships with our world around us (Wilson, 2002). An Elder once expressed to me that each of us as human beings have our own path and must walk our own path in life. Although our paths may be slightly different, we all are accountable to the Creator and to life as it exists. In essence, it is relational accountability and responsibility placed upon us by our ancestors to keep our Indigenous way of knowing. In this sense, as a researcher, it was my
responsibility to create dialogue and to follow both the school district’s policies and procedures, UBC research ethics, as well as the protocols of the Indigenous community.

As an Indigenous person I adhere to the holistic approach, primacy of place, relational accountability, patience, and humbleness and these four principles: respect, responsibility, relevance, and reciprocity (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991). These are general principles that an Indigenous person should be cognizant of when participating in the discourse of Indigenous research methodology. Some of the suggested principles articulated by Weber-Pillwax (1999) are:

- The interconnectedness of all living things;
- The impact of motives and intentions on person and community;
- The foundation of research as lived Indigenous experience;
- The groundedness of theories in Indigenous epistemology;
- The transformative nature of research;
- The sacredness and responsibility of maintaining personal and community integrity; and,
- The recognition of languages and cultures as living processes. (pp. 31-35)

As an Indigenous researcher it is important to collect data in accordance to cultural protocols. An example of the difference of protocols is smudging. Traditionally, the Blackfoot used sage to smudge and the Cree used sweetgrass. I chose to use sage in the smudge bowl. From my experience, another difference is when a Blackfoot person prays everyone stays seated whereas in Cree country they stand. Our data collection demonstrates our way of knowing, being and doing (Martin, 2002). In doing my research I tried to be very respectful to the differences in tribal protocols. The Cree in Treaty 7 territory includes the Blackfoot, the Tsuu T’ina, and the Nakoda (Stoney). I also acknowledge the differences in protocols and context of the urban community that are comprised of other First Nation, Métis, and Inuit families. It is protocol to offer tobacco prior to asking for a ceremony or request. In my case, because of the diversity of the population in terms of religious faith, cultural experience, tribal affiliation and socio-economic needs, I decided to accommodate this situation. Prior to, and throughout this research process, a smudge of sage was used before writing, to clear the mind, spirit, heart, and body. Before each focus group I smudged to thank the Creator and asked for a blessing for the
participants. At the beginning of each talking circle session, I explained the talking circle protocols to the participants. The protocols include:

- what is said in the circle stays in the circle (with the exception of my transcripts),
- no judgmental responses to another participant’s opinion,
- taking turns speaking in a clockwise manner, and,
- respecting the purpose why we have come into the circle.

The last item of respect was especially important because I wanted to ensure that the circle honoured everyone’s voice and I did not perpetuate the devastating trauma that society and residential schools have put upon our people. It is customary as well to feed and offer a gift or small honorarium in respect to visitors. I opted to give the parents a small honorarium to cover travel costs to the school, made a homemade lunch for the rural parent group, and supper for the urban/rural group.

**Buffalo Robes: Engaging Community**

In the past, Indigenous traditional day-to-day living was one of subsistence. Our need to never waste and be respectful is part of our Indigenous ontology and epistemology. The Plains people used most of the parts of the buffalo. We shaped and used the buffalo bones and parts for our basic tools. Buffalo robes were used as a place to sit and sleep within the Mikowahp. Although everyone had designated places within the Mikowahp according to their needs and responsibilities, no one was considered more important than another. Within this research I use the buffalo robes, and how they are placed within the Mikowahp, to represent the research participants and the processes I have used to engage them in this study. I include an Elder robe within the Mikowahp for several reasons. As part of my initial journey, I approached an Elder for advice and a blessing for my study. I also had an Elder as part of one of the participant groups who was co-guardian of her grandchildren. Most importantly, Elders are key to engaging community. Although I did not have an Elder group, I acknowledge the stories and teachings that the participants share stem from the Elders’ teaching and knowledge. The methods or research tools used to gather the data are aligned with the Indigenous values and teachings of the Mikowahp as noted above. Wilson (2008) states that, “Methods are the particular tools and techniques you use to gather information.”(p. 39). Therefore, the buffalo robes in this qualitative
study identify and represent the coming together of parent talking circles, FNMI talking circle, and the district personnel interviews.

**Focus groups: Talking Circles**

My research strategy included using the talking circle as an Indigenous way of bringing the participants together to dialogue about parental engagement. The advantage of using a talking circle is that many Indigenous people have had experience with talking circles in their workplace and in their communities and appreciate the protocols associated with it. As is customary, a brief explanation of talking circles and protocols was given prior to starting each talking circle session. Each participant in the circle had the opportunity to speak while the others listened. My experience with talking circles is that they are based around respect and non-judgment. Using the talking circle helped create an environment in which the participants felt comfortable to express their experiences and thoughts about parental engagement. I found that the participants were very respectful of the protocols of the talking circle and, as we went around the circle, each person expanded upon and supported the last person’s statement.

My study consisted of three focus groups and six individual interviews with district administrators. The interviews were conducted between May 2 and June 26, 2011. The three focus groups were: an urban parent group, rural parent group, and the Calgary Catholic FNMI team. The participants were invited formally by written invitation, followed up by phone calls and emails. This procedure was approved by the UBC ethics and approved by the CSSD school Board. The parents were separated into rural and urban groups mainly for convenience. Logistically, it was more practical to group the rural parents together so that the focus groups could be at convenient locations. As well, in terms of district FNMI services, it has been a longstanding practice to group the populations as rural and urban. Parent involvement was based on random selection. I obtained the parents’ phone numbers and addresses from the school secretaries and I numbered their names starting from one. Some schools had more FNMI parents, but I elected to have equal representation by selecting five participants from each school. My intention was to have 15 participants for each parent group but the numbers turned out lower than expected. Although I did not get five participants from each school I decided to go with the participants who agreed to the interviews. In retrospect, I think that having the smaller groups was an integral part of creating a comfortable and safe environment to share their educational
and personal stories. In total, there were 12 parent participants; seven rural parents and five urban parents. Of the seven, two of the female participants from the rural parent group could not make it due to their employment obligations. I arranged with them a separate interview at their workplace. All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. A copy was given to the supervisor of the study to comply with UBC ethics. At the request of some parent participants, I chose to audiotape the talking circles rather than videotape the sessions. However, since the parent groups were relatively large groups, I could not be 100% accurate in my labeling of each participant’s remarks, therefore I elected to code them in two groups, rural and urban FNMI. In contrast, the one-on-one interviews with staff and administrators were easier to identify, thus making it easier to assign individual codes. As well, I was very familiar with the FNMI Team participants and was confident that I coded them accurately.

**Focus Group: Rural Parent Group**

The parents I interviewed have child(ren) attending one or more of four schools in the Southwest of Calgary. We had seven parent participants with representation from each school as identified. There were six female participants and one male participant. Two of the participants requested me to go to their workplace for the interviews. I arranged a time to meet both of them together. The other five participants agreed to meet at one of the schools. One of the female participants was an Elder and grandmother. Initially I was going to have an evening talking circle, but, due to a death in the community, I respectfully rescheduled it to a lunch hour meeting a week later. Unfortunately, the day I rescheduled it to be on was also the day Tsuu T’ina Chief and Council were having a meeting that the staff were required to attend. However, two parents of the group were excused from the meeting in order to attend my interviews. I appreciated that the Chief had the flexibility to allow these parents to participate. The downside to this was that one participant could not get time off work to participate. The lesson I learned was to have a contact on the First Nation reserve with knowledge about events in the community. On the meeting day, as the parents/grandparents entered the school, I greeted them at the school entrance. I then escorted them to the classroom where the meeting was held. Prior to the parents’ arrival, I prepared some smudge and the food/water. Before we began the interviews I lit the smudge and placed it on the table and offered it to the participants, if they chose to smudge. The prayer was given by one of the participants. The participants ate before we started the interviews. The pre-talking circle
discussions amongst the participants allowed them to relax and set a positive, calm climate. I believe that knowing the participants on a professional level, and being Indigenous, contributed to the trust they had in me as researcher. Absolon (2001) acknowledges that ‘Indigenous worldviews have commonalities across Indigenous nations, but there are also variations’ (p.57). I did recognize that the Cree have similar protocols and practices as that of the FNMI participants. Each person’s introduction of themselves, Nation, family, school(s) their child/children attended, provided me a cultural context of the discussions and the stories that were shared. As an Indigenous researcher I anticipated some themes that would emerge from the talking circles. I felt that my role was to let the knowledge and stories emerge as organically as possible. They spoke of colonialism, residential school trauma, poverty, personal experiences, importance of culture and language in school and in their community.

**Focus Group: Urban Parent Group**

Initially, the urban parents’ meeting was going to take place at the Carriage House Inn in Calgary, but one of the Diverse Learning teachers suggested that we meet at the one of the Elementary /Junior high Schools in the South East. This school was chosen because it was more central for the parents. An FNMI teacher suggested that it would be more convenient for those parents involved. The focus group included three parents from three southeast elementary/junior high schools, and two parents from southeast and northeast high schools. There were four female participants and one male participant. I was anticipating a few more participants; however, I understood the reluctance to come that evening because of a blizzard.

**Focus Group: District Focus Groups**

The district focus groups included Aboriginal professionals in the Calgary Catholic School District (CCSD). An invitation to participate was dropped off at each school and given to the secretaries. The district Aboriginal education team at that time consisted of: supervisor, consultant, four liaison workers, three school-based Diverse Learning support teachers and two Aboriginal Pride Coordinators. The CSSD, through a partnership with the United Way, had developed an Aboriginal Pride Program at three of the schools with high populations of Aboriginal students. Therefore, it was beneficial to have these three workers join the focus group and give their cultural input and concerns. The Elder in this focus group was both a member of the district education team and a bundle holder in her traditional society. There were nine focus
group participants: four liaisons, two Aboriginal Pride Coordinators, and three Diverse Learning Teachers. One of the concerns that I had with interviewing the participants was my pre-existing relationship with all of them. I knew about their roles, sites of struggle, and, somewhat, the concerns they had around parent engagement. My fear was that they would not fully disclose what they knew because they knew that I was aware of the struggles in their workspace. When the focus group/talking circle was held, I was at that time the district FNMI consultant and was overseeing the FNMI team. I was faced with being their supervisor, friend, and researcher. I felt it safe to just ask the questions with little prompting on my part. At first they were very serious and some looked a little nervous as well. I surmised that they knew the significance of the study as it reflected their professional experiences working with FNMI families. Once the first person answered the first question with a bit of humour, the atmosphere changed to a more relaxed environment where they could openly express their concerns and share their knowledge of parental engagement. What was evident was their passion of what they do in the schools and the frustration they face trying to convey their knowledge to others in the school district.

**One-on-one Interviews: District Personnel**

District personnel interviews were conducted with principals and with the FNMI district supervisor. I had planned to interview seven of the principals and the First Nation, Metis, Inuit supervisor individually. Two of the high school principals chose not to participate in the study. One principal commented that he had participated in a lot of studies lately and I commented to him that this was an FNMI study. He referred me to the FNMI Diverse Learning teacher whom I later interviewed. The other high school principal questioned if I had permission to do the research. I responded by having the supervisor in charge of research in the district resend her the letter of permission. We then set a date for the interview and later it was cancelled. It was unfortunate that I was not able to interview all three high school principals, as it would have given a richer understanding of how principals at the high school level define FNMI parental engagement and barriers to parental engagement. The following table lists the focus groups and participants of the research study.
Table 1: Calgary Catholic Separate School District Parental Engagement Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th># of Schools and School/District Roles</th>
<th># of Participants (N=28)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural Parent Focus Group</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6 female (elementary to high school children)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 male (junior high and high school children)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Parent Focus Group</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4 female (elementary to High school children)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 male (junior high to high school children)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District FNMI Focus Group</td>
<td>FNMI consultant, four liaison workers, three school- based diverse Learning support teachers and two Aboriginal Pride Coordinators.</td>
<td>7 female 2 male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Personnel-</td>
<td>1 FNMI Supervisor, 5 principals, 1 Aboriginal Pride worker.</td>
<td>4 male (one Metis principal) 3 female (one Aboriginal Pride worker)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Interviews</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Fire - Situating Myself in Context to the Research

Fire provides warmth to the Mikowahp and is symbolic of the protection a woman provides. Women are symbolic of the fire in the center of the Mikowahp. The fire provides warmth, and her skirt (the tipi covering) provides ultimate protection. The men also have a place and responsibility for the well being of all in the Mikowahp. Like the fire, the researcher has the responsibility to ensure that all the participants are comfortable in the research environment. The researcher provides an environment that is conducive for mutual sharing of information. As the fire (researcher), I can absorb the different parental engagement perspectives and use this knowledge to probe further for a better understanding. In addition, as a learning support teacher for the Calgary Catholic Separate School district for 15 years, I have come to know many people in the Aboriginal community and in the school district. Albeit, my position and experience helped forge community connections, it was a limitation in that I needed to critically reflect upon
how my relationships to participants could affect data collection and analysis. During the data collection process, I was cognizant of my existing relationships with some of the parents from the rural group and wondered if our prior relationship would have an impact on the answers they gave to the questions. However, on reflection I think that they were more open to me because we did have an existing relationship. They first thanked me for inviting them and, surprisingly, they spoke quite frankly about what they thought about their experiences. I attribute this frankness to the fact that they knew each other from the community and they were comfortable with me as an Aboriginal researcher. Although I did not know all of the urban and rural group members, they appeared to be comfortable and open to discussing their experiences and became, at times, very emotional. For example, during a talking circle, when emotions were high, the participants comforted each other, often with a light touch on the shoulder. Everyone was silent until the person felt ready to resume. At one point I asked the participant if she wanted to continue. She said “yes” and we continued on with the talking circle. I was humbled and I honored the participants for sharing their personal experiences. I thanked the participants by giving a small honorarium and by shaking their hands at the end of the talking circles.

Prior to conducting and developing the semi-structured and open-ended focus group/talking circle, I consulted my colleagues and a cultural advisor in order to ensure the questions were respectful and appropriate. As a beginning protocol, I approached one of our traditional leaders within the district and he agreed to pray and give a blessing ceremony to this research project. Hampton (1995) states, that all researchers have motives and are driven by their own emotional reasons. I concede that as an Indigenous person that I am biased in my worldview and carry with me my own motives for the research. When the Elders speak and tell their stories they begin with a statement like “I know nothing, but I will tell what I know”. This humble statement signifies two main aspects. First, the acknowledgement of our vast oral history and Indigenous Knowledge, and second, that each person can only encapsulate a certain amount of memory narratives and experiences in a lifetime. In my research I understand the difficulty of encapsulating all that is shared. Often, certain Elders will share the same stories over again or repeat certain aspects several times. This strategy challenges the listener to unravel deeper meanings of what is being said. As a researcher, some of the interviews had similar responses and themes; however, I felt that it was important to reflect on each individual story for any slight differences. My understanding as a Cree researcher is that I am accountable to the Creator, to
myself, the Four Natural Laws, the Indigenous communities, the Calgary Catholic School District, and the UBC Ethics Board.

Although I had planned the interviews and focus groups in advance, there were still some challenges. For example, one of the challenges I had was with the recruitment of participants. One of the main challenges was finding a time that would accommodate everyone in the two focus groups. One consideration to take into account when working with rural parents from First Nations communities is to be aware of upcoming events that may interfere with parents participating in the study. In retrospect, if I had known about a Band meeting that coincided with a focus group date, I could have rebooked the meeting. However, since I was notified of this at the last minute, I did not want to miss the chance of speaking with the parents that could attend. I also wanted to honor their interest in participating in the research so I continued on as scheduled.

As a researcher, I wanted to ensure a specific time and place for the interviews, although I know that flexibility is part of what I was taught growing up. My father and mother in their discussions would talk about their future plans with a comment like “if things are meant to be, or, if we are given the opportunity”. I felt I made the right choice to continue with the talking circles, for the people that did attend were meant to be there in that time and place.

One of the differences I noted between the district principal meetings and the focus group/talking circle was in the structure of the interviews. I found the principal interviews were more formal in structure and their responses more precise. Having the interviews conducted in their offices may have contributed to the formal structure, whereas, in the talking circles we had the opportunity to smudge and eat together and establish an atmosphere where everyone had a chance to contribute and shape the conversation. As I interviewed the principals I did not want my connection to the First Nation community to shape their responses and therefore I felt I had to be more careful in my responses - which may have contributed to making it seem more formal. However, I must say that all of the principal participants were very receptive, and very interested in discussing the FNMI engagement in their schools. Upon reflection, I could have held a third talking circle for the principals; however, the scheduling of the time and place would have been problematic. By carrying out individual interviews I felt that I would get more participants. In order to get a holistic account of Indigenous parent engagement in the Calgary Catholic School District, I chose to separate the parent voices from that of the district principals and district personnel for
the following reasons: to allow a clear understanding of multiple perspectives, to identify the many factors involved in their particular situation, to allow me to draw on multiple perspectives to create a larger picture of the study, and to focus on the meaning of what participants expressed on parental engagement. The next chapter will present the participants’ perspectives.

**Conclusion**

My use of the Mikowahp to frame my conceptual theory and methodology encapsulates my natural progression and development as an Indigenous researcher. Kovach (2010) validates my thinking and actions by explicitly stating;

> Conceptual frameworks make visible the way we see the world. Within research, these frameworks are either transparent (i.e. through form) or not, they are always present. The rationale for explicit representation of one’s conceptual framework is that it provides insight into a researcher’s beliefs about knowledge production, in general and how those beliefs will impact the research project. (p.41)

The Four Natural Laws form the foundation of the Mikowahp Research Framework. As we enter the Mikowahp we sit on the ground and begin connecting with Mother Earth and our relations around us. The people within the circle come together for a purpose and a sense of responsibility to create change. Archibald (2008) sums up the responsibility and connection we have to our past, present and future within the circle:

> The never-ending circle also forms concentric circles to show the synergestic influence and responsibility to the generations of Ancestors, the generations of today, and the generations yet to come. (p.11)

The Natural Laws grounded and guided me to conduct research that was culturally appropriate for both the researcher and the participants. The four laws of nature of the Cree Mikowahp: wicitowin (sharing), kiseywatisowin (caring/kindness/generosity), kweyaskatesowin (honesty), and sohxisowin (strength/determination), are infused in me and thus became an integral theoretical and methodological part of my research. I put these Cree natural laws into practice before, during, and after the focus group/talking circles and individual interviews. I treated the research participants with respect, ensured that they were comfortable, and that their opinions
were valued. The Mikowahp methodological framework that includes the Mikowahp Poles: Values and Structure; Bundle: Protocol and Ethics; Buffalo Robes: Engaging Community; Interviews; and Focus Groups; Fire: Situating Myself in the Research, were all integral parts that make up the Mikowahp. The Mikowahp methodology aligns with my Cree teachings, ethics, protocols and values. The values represented by the poles create a safe space where the participants can come together in traditional talking circles.

Each area of the Mikowahp reflects the importance of who I am as a Cree woman, as an educator, and as a researcher. It reflects the values and respect for my culture, my Elders, my ancestors, my communities, and my responsibility of giving back to society. The Mikowahp as theory and methodology contributes to the movement and validation of Indigenous research methodologies and our ways of knowing. As I move forward in the process of conducting the interviews is the challenge to listen and weave together the responses of the participants in manner that will make meaning to others and contribute to Indigenous research.
Chapter Four: Acimostakewin - The Act of Storytelling

Let your voice be heard by the teacher and, if need be, by the administration. If you have a concern, continue to speak up, as it is the only way positive changes will happen. (Alberta Learning, 2000, pp. 30-31)

This chapter presents the voices of the Aboriginal urban and rural parents and District personnel from the Calgary Catholic School district. As stated in the methodology section, this study was focused on three research questions:

1) What facilitates and hinders Aboriginal parental engagement in the Calgary Catholic Separate School system from the perspectives of Aboriginal parents and district teachers and leaders?

2) What does successful Aboriginal parental engagement look like from the perspective of Aboriginal parents and district/school teachers and leaders?

3) How could parents and district/school teachers and leaders create a plan for achieving meaningful Aboriginal parental/school engagement?

As I reflect on the act of research it brings me back to my younger days when people would camp at treaty days, cultural ceremonies, pow-wow days, or just as small families gathering for special celebrations. Camps are where people gathered together for a purpose. The word ‘camp’ signifies not only coming together in a physical sense, but also in a spiritual, mental and social sense. Camps are full of energy and are fueled by Elders stories, prayers, laughter, and a sense of collective well-being. As a researcher, it was as if I was going into three camps to listen and learn from the stories and experiences of the FNMI parents, the FNMI Calgary Catholic School District Team and, the Administrators.

Data Analysis

A set of interview questions was developed to facilitate the individual interviews with the administrators and the focus groups. These questions were reflective of the three research questions as noted above. The focus groups and administrative interviews were each approximately one hour of audio recording. In total, eleven hours of audio taped interviews were
transcribed. The resulting thematic analysis was initially organized by research questions. The eleven transcripts were carefully reviewed in order to analyze all participants’ comments. After the transcripts were transcribed I read through each of them many times throughout the process. I chose not to use APA formatting that indicates “personal communication and date” for individual quotes, in order to not disrupt the flow of the participants’ perspectives. I highlighted some responses that jumped out at me in terms of the major questions. Some thoughts that came to me were related to the literature review and to my personal knowledge and experiences. For example, as I came across a response that seemed like a barrier I wrote the question number that it pertained to. The participants’ responses were organized according to the main points that I extracted from interviews. The challenge was to amalgamate the participant responses in a respectful way so that all participants could be heard. At first, I tried to group the responses into camps: urban, rural, and administrator/ FNMI team camp. I then tried bundles as subheadings for each, but I still felt it wasn’t giving a cohesive picture. After revisiting the data and questions, I decided to unite them under one “big top”. A “big top” is a place where everyone comes together to celebrate through dance and song. Under the big top is also where the powwow takes place, when people of all walks of life come together to share their talents, stories, and laughter. The powwow brings the circle of people together to celebrate their culture through dance. In this sense, I wanted to have a venue where all of the participants’ stories were placed in the circle to show the vitality of voices.

In packing up the different camps I wanted to somehow symbolize each camp’s stories and knowledge. I created four sections that reflected my questions and within each section I chose a bundle that best reflected that section. The bundle themes came from the idea of respectfully gathering all of the data in a collective manner, as if I were bundling up precious objects that would be needed for future use. A teaching my mom gave me is to bundle things up after their use, whether it be ceremonial items such as smudge material, beading supplies, or sewing that was done that day. It is a way to appreciate and cherish what we have. However, the bundles in this section are different than the ceremonial bundle described in chapter three. The participant response bundles are used for a practical purpose, to help keep things organized, rather than a spiritual purpose. However, they hold one similarity: all the bundles are treated with respect. Therefore, I have chosen to use the term ‘bundle theme’ as a respectful way to present the participants’ common ideas that align together in special way. I examined the responses to the
questions through an Indigenous lens. Looking through an Indigenous lens means that I looked at the responses again from my cultural teachings from the medicine wheel that were described in chapter one. I saw these responses as reflections of participant’s dimensional needs. For example, I observed when the responses addressed the spiritual, physical, mental, or social needs.

Looking at the data/ideas from a holistic perspective, I divided them into four working themes reflecting the four areas of the medicine wheel. In the following section I present the participant data as bundles that are organized according to the four dimensions of the medicine wheel.

1) Physical Dimension: Aboriginal Social Context Bundle
   Various perspectives on successful engagement

2) Emotional Dimension: Relationship Building Bundle
   Parental engagement in Calgary Catholic School District

3) Spiritual Dimension: Indigenous Knowledge: Culture and Language Bundle

4) Mental Dimension: Reciprocal Responsibility/ Co-constructing a Plan Bundle

**Physical Dimension: Aboriginal Social Context Bundle**

Prior to the talking circles and interviews, I was aware that there would be various perspectives based on the participants’ experiences and personal backgrounds. On one hand, we have the Aboriginal perspectives, and on the other, there are the non-Aboriginal educational perspectives. The term ‘Aboriginal Perspectives’ is not easily definable due to the diversity of the Aboriginal parent participants in this study. Another factor to consider is that Aboriginal perspectives “cannot be fragmented from culture, language, and philosophy that are influenced by ancient epistemology and ontology” (Ottmann & Prichard, 2010, p.6). Ottmann and Prichard (2010) also reinforce the fact that “Aboriginal perspectives are multi-layered and diverse, there are some common threads in Aboriginal philosophy (this including spirituality) and practice that contribute to a broad definition of Aboriginal perspectives” (p.6). In this section, Aboriginal perspectives will refer to the parental participants’ ways of knowing that are derived from their worldview and experiences. Worldview, in this context, refers to how the Aboriginal participants see the world and interpret their environments based on their beliefs and values from their
collective communities. The first bundle, called Aboriginal Social Context, explicitly refers to the parental participants’ educational experiences with schools/staff and how external factors have improved or hindered their parental engagement. The diversity of the FNMI Calgary Catholic School Board population varies substantially in regards to socio-economic status, cultural knowledge and practices, FNMI political affiliations, and spiritual choices.

Although there has been a push to strengthen the district’s communication with FNMI parents and to increase parent/Elder roles in decision-making at the district level, it appears from the comments of the participants that a fundamental component seems to be overlooked. Although professional development opportunities are offered to district staff to address Aboriginal culture and history, there still seems to be some misunderstandings and misperceptions about FNMI people. Wherner and Smith (1992, as cited in Ottmann, (2010) clearly articulate how easily it is to subconsciously substitute our truths about others without any substantial information to base it on; “When we don’t know each other’s stories, we substitute our own myth about who that person is. When we are operating with a myth, none of that person’s truth will ever be known to us, and we will injure them-mostly without meaning to” (p.24).

This section gives light to the social context that influence parental engagement practices. The major issues that parents and administrators discussed were stereotypes and assumptions, socioeconomic factors, gender roles, and historical trauma and personal experiences.

**Stereotypes and Assumptions**

From my point of view and experiences, many people in Canada today have misinformed perceptions and misjudgments of FNMI people. For some reason, I seem to attract people on the street, in social gatherings, and in educational institutions who feel privileged to make some stereotypical comments about FNMI people. Many of the comments imply that FNMI people’s struggles are due to their own actions and that FNMI people get everything free without paying taxes. In some of these altercations I simply clarify their misinterpretations, but, in some, if I find the person is not willing to listen, I simply walk away. Literature, such as Fleras (2001), suggests that this in some part stems from the portrayal of Aboriginality as a category of “one size fits all.” He states that this “creates a controlling effect by way of coverage that is systemic and institutionalized- institutionalized because the coverage is routine, repetitive, and impersonal rather than random and intentional; systemic because it supports the dominant, Eurocentric
ideology as normal and superior, while Aboriginality is dismissed accordingly” (p.195). Both
parent groups spoke about the assumptions and stereotypes the schools have about their lives
outside the school doors. One of the participants shared her story of how the school made an
assumption that her family needed a program that connected the children and parents through
positive play activities. The parent was mystified about how this assumption came about and
why her family was chosen without any consultation with her.

They had us on a list and then they were relentless in phoning us. We went to one of
their group sessions and we really didn’t like it because it wasn’t age appropriate....
And me and [my husband], we don’t have time to do that and nobody enjoyed it. But
they kept calling us, day after day, leaving messages, filling up my answering
machine, telling us they needed to help us and things. And I really didn’t appreciate
that. (rural parent)

This parent’s body language showed that she was still affected by this: I noted that she shook her
head in disbelief when recalling this incident. This parent’s experience is an example of how
some school personnel lack an understanding of Aboriginal context, both personal and cultural.
As a result, incorrect assumptions are made about the families and their children that could
potentially alienate parents. It’s important to uncover what messages are being sent to FNMI
parents, and how they are being interpreted. This reflects the misperception that FNMI parents
do not have the same parental skills and cognitive abilities to carry out their parental
responsibilities. Wotherspoon (1998) cautions that broadening the definition to a wide range of
individuals and circumstances lead to the potential for intervention without critical assessment.
According to this argument, Aboriginal parents, despite their individual strengths, are blanketeted
under the “at risk” designation. Although extra support is needed for some families, it is critical
to contact, consult, and co-construct any programs developed at the school level with parents.
Unfortunately, there is a long history of these misperceptions. The District personnel and leaders
agree with the parents’ belief that there is a lack of understanding of Aboriginal history and
culture among teachers and in the general public. This is reflected in this administrator’s
statement:

In my experience ...not just at this school, the biggest roadblock is the lack of
understanding [shown by] non-First Nations peoples. There is an ignorance that is
rampant and I don’t mean [just] Calgary Catholic. I think, I’m referring to society in general.... And as long as that ignorance continues, it’s going to be very difficult for any FNMI parent to feel welcome in the school….we make some assumptions that culturally, they are very Canadian. (A4)

The parents expressed repeatedly that teachers need to respect cultural and community differences. They suggested that teachers take time to learn about First Nations cultures and communities. Although each school varies in the level of FNMI professional development and cultural activities, there have been some schools that have really made an effort to embrace the FNMI community. I asked one of the administrators how she tries to bring parents into the school. She stated, “We have gone out to the reserve and met with parents… that is a goal in the future that we would like to do more of… to do more exchange” (A5). This administrator discussed the challenges of meeting all parents’ expectations. She stated that having parent gatherings allowed parents the opportunity to speak about their educational experiences and their aspirations for their children. She addresses the parents’ diverse perspectives on the implementation of culture in the school and curriculum. She stated that one parent did not want her children to be taught FNMI traditions and culture in the school. In this situation, the child wanted to participate, but the school had to comply with the parent’s wishes. This particular example reflects the hegemonic impact of assimilative structures still present. The existence of cognitive imperialism must be addressed, as they affect students, as well as their parents.

Some of the initiatives inclusive of the cultural understandings in this school were traditional feasts, FNMI presentations, student led cultural nights, and parent and Elder meetings. This school was fortunate to have a liaison FNMI person to address issues such as student retention, cultural protocols, Indigenous Knowledge, community practices, and socio-economic issues that deter parental engagement.

**Socioeconomic Factors**

Based on the responses of the FNMI participants, the influence, or the perceived influence, of socioeconomic status played a significant role in the engagement parents had with their child’s school. Factors such as parental stress, poverty, work-related fatigue, and sometimes addictions, can prevent parents from being available to engage with the school:
I think some of the struggles and barriers, definitely that we have seen in the school, are poverty, addiction, fear, and intimidation, not being comfortable in the school…they encourage their kids to come to school but they’re not really comfortable with it, themselves. (A5)

Transportation, employment requirements, and childcare costs are often barriers for school engagement, particularly for parents living on reserves. However, these same barriers apply to some urban parents as well. Schools and teachers that lack recognition of these factors can add further stress on the family. In my experience, parents do want to attend school but, at times, external factors outside their control impede student attendance. One of the administrators clearly states the frustrations of transportation issues:

Well, transportation is a huge issue, you know. If the weather is bad or the roads are bad, lots of times the kids want to come to school, the parents want to send them but the bus doesn’t go out to pick them up at their house. And that’s a common complaint with us and we’re constantly dealing with the transportation component of it. (A3)

Transportation and distance from the school seems to be a factor for both parent and students. Teachers need to understand that some rural students travel an hour to get to school and if they are late they should be treated with respect. One parent shared her daughter’s negative experience:

The teacher ostracizes them when they come in and so they, like well, on one hand it motivates them to try to get there on time but then they dread going there in the morning. …they welcome them but in a really sarcastic way…yeah like, “Oh you’re finally here, sit down, and thanks for coming today…. I wish the teacher would come and talk to me instead of treating them like that. (rural parent)

The parent elaborated that she understands it’s her responsibility; however, if the school or teacher had communicated with her she could have explained her home life situation with caring for a sick husband, having to juggle work, a recent move to her new house, and problems transporting her children to school in the city. She was quite concerned about her daughter because after the incident the daughter was afraid to go to school, especially if she was late.
On the other spectrum, there are many ways support is provided by the school for parents and students who are confronting socioeconomic challenges. The schools are often the first point of intervention when problems arise. School personnel provide emotional and practical supports for social issues/problems to both parents and children. One role of the school should be to act as a social agency and to mediate between service agencies, connecting families with service providers to help them meet their needs. Often schools have access to outside agencies that can assist the students’ and parents’ needs. This access is especially important for transitioning urban families. One administrator highlighted this role, and the importance of the school as an intervention point:

I think we are sort of an outreach for parents as they don’t really know where to go or where the resources are for their son or daughter ...so they will look for us and ask, “How can you help us?” So we will do what we can at the school level and give them more resources to go to. (A4)

It became apparent from the responses that some families are reluctant to access these supports due to a lack of trust, or fear of reprisal. There has been a historical fear of institutions, in particular the fear of having a child apprehended by child and family services. Resistance and fear of child and family services stem from memories of the “Sixties Scoop”, an era when unprecedented numbers of children were removed from their homes. Sinclair (2009) connects this period to historical residential school trauma, remarking how the “Sixties Scoop” of Aboriginal children has now evolved into the fear of a “millennium scoop” by many parents. The fear of having their children apprehended is still a major concern and reality for many FNMI parents. One of the concerns identified by an administrator was in having to report parents to social services when issues arose, and how this action created barriers between parents and the school:

I think families are very guarded with respect to [social services]. I think ... their fear of that particular authority in our society, child welfare, and kids being taken away and things like that…it’s not a trusting relationship. I think ... there’s no trust between child welfare and Aboriginal families, which is unfortunate.
I really feel on both sides we’re battling ignorance. We need to make sure that we are representing an image where this is not residential school. You don’t have to be afraid. We’re not, you know, every time I call Social Services, whether it’s an attendance issue or there’s another problem going on I still feel, what message are we really sending? We say we’re safe and it’s not residential school but now I’m on the phone with Social Services and threatening to apprehend the child because of maybe it’s the poverty on the reserve that’s impacting it or maybe there is something that I don’t know about. I think battling the ignorance on both sides will be the first thing to bring the parents in. (A4)

Creating trust with parents is difficult if the schools have limited knowledge about parents’ social contexts or when principals show a lack of judgment about when to call Social Services. Epstein (2001) states that, “Educators need to understand the contexts in which students live, work, and play. Without that understanding, educators work alone, not in partnership with other people in student’s lives. Without partnerships, educators segment students into the school child and the home ignoring the whole child.” (p. 3-6). One of the urban mothers, who has seven children in different schools and programs, talks about the importance for parents to advocate for themselves in these types of situations:

The reason I went to talk to him because I was really upset because child welfare was called….And so my son doesn’t dress up to par, so he has smelly feet now and then but he’s a boy you know. But that’s all it took, sitting there thirty minutes with him [principal] and I could tell he had a different thought of me from that time…he made a bad judgment call. (urban parent)

This parent is actively involved with her children’s education through phone communication and one to one when necessary. She is breaking through the parental engagement barriers that exist. She is moving towards building relationships and communication with the school and trying to diminish the stereotypes and assumptions that engender fear and mistrust in FNMI parents. Research has shown that parents felt that administrators have predetermined perceptions of Aboriginal parents (Friedel, 1999; Pearson, 2007). Various researchers recommend creating a nonthreatening space to develop contacts with people from the Aboriginal community and to build the family networks (Amendt & Bousquet, 2006; Kavanagh, 2003; Saskatchewan School
Trustees, 2002; Robinson, 2003). In addition, as educators we must be mindful of Wanda First Rider’s teaching of being self-reflective when speaking to parents. This self-reflection, or critical reflection (Mezirow, 1990), is a way of transforming and challenging our way of thinking.

**Gender Roles**

Another issue that surfaced was the stereotype of men’s roles in education. One of my interests in regards to parental engagement is the inclusion of the male perspective about this topic. In my talking circles I ensured that I had at least one male per group. One of the participants was a rural, single father who was quite active in his children’s schools. The other male participant in the study expressed that he would like to be more active in the school, but felt that he wasn’t able to due to employment and to the negative stigma associated with taking on a role many assume is for women. I decided to ask him, if from his experiences, he thought fathers participated or engaged with their children’s education in the same way as some mothers:

Oh I would definitely say it’s true, there’s a lot of it being a social barrier, right, a lot of it being straight employment barrier, right. There’s a little bit of both inside of it that should be addressed through the school system, one of it should be there is things that are offered after school for the working parent, there isn’t enough of that there….Other than that, we have the macho attitude that the kids deal with the school and do this and do that and we’ll just go to work. We’ll pay for it, and that’s an old school kind of way of thinking but it’s probably still there… There’s some stigmatism with male involvement, right, and the stigmatism doesn’t just come from the male himself, it comes from the female also. I know my wife, she likes to get involved, she’s here all day to begin with, so she’s involved all the time, and a lot of the time she considers it, if I do want to get involved it’s like “No, I’ll go” and she thinks it’s her role in order to do that, so you get kind of pushed aside and whatever, you go ahead, happy wife happy life, right? (urban parent)

In contrast, one of the rural female parents stated that her husband is the one who takes care of school activities and fieldtrips. She talked about how her dad was the one who also attended to school matters. She said: “He deals with all the teachers and talks to them and I don’t….He has
better rapport with people on an interpersonal level.” Another rural parent expressed her desire to have more male figures engage with the schools.

For me, something that would be ideal would be a gender base for male contact, male influence…if we could get something going to entice men to be involved, would there, I don’t know that would work but getting the Indian men in there to have some involvement with the teachers. (rural parent)

One may argue that since the single father was the sole guardian, he had little choice but to be involved; whereas, the working, married father had a spouse that could take on the responsibility for the children’s educational needs. Nevertheless, what is evident is the need for school initiatives that help increase the participation of Aboriginal fathers in schools. Prior to taking action there are a few underlying factors that Ball (2009) has identified in her study of male father involvement that are applicable to educators working with Aboriginal families:

- The impact of colonial interventions that placed many of these men or their parents in Residential school who were subject to abuse.
- Lack of father role models for boys growing up.
- Lack of socioeconomic support that is skewed by legislation, policies and social and health services that favor mothers.
- Disruption of traditional male parenting skills.
- Parenting programs need to be led by men, and preferably by Indigenous men who understand the conditions affecting Indigenous men’s involvement in family life. (pp. 3-25)

To entice Aboriginal fathers into the school there needs to be some initial collaboration with the Aboriginal community to establish protocols, assess the need, and to develop relevant programming. To increase Aboriginal fathers sustained engagement with their children’s education, the program must be authentic in that it meets the needs of both the child and the parent. As stated earlier, the colonial experience has left some parents with the legacy of trauma, thereby, impacting all aspects of their life and their children’s lives.
Historical Trauma and Personal Experiences

The Aboriginal parents in this study expressed having negative or traumatic experiences within their own schooling, with many of them also sharing how they have learned not to engage from their parents. As a result, they do not perceive school as a welcoming place, or see a role for themselves in it. Residential school experiences were identified as a major barrier for parental engagement. The participants were quite open in their discussions of their residential experiences. One of the grandmothers stated how her experience in residential school, and her lack of dealing with the trauma, now has an energy of its own she called intergenerational energy:

I think it’s worth mentioning that some children are raised by their grandparents. There’s still little bit of residential school residue that occurs, like, if the grandparents not engaged fully or welcomed like we mentioned was, there’s a certain amount of condescension, I guess that you just don’t want to go there. It almost like an intergenerational energy. That’s just how they know. Or that’s just how they’re taught, you know. Like, there’s something that we, we learned from our grandparents that we didn’t know ’til the residential era came up and were like, that’s why, you know, you kind of make that connection after awhile so it’s like, okay well, it doesn’t have to be that way anymore. (rural grandmother)

Another young mother stated how her mother’s residential school experience impacted how she raised her children. She states that this intergenerational impact shows up in the school. The FNMI team spoke of the importance of the district to learn about the impacts of residential school and FNMI history. FNMI team member #6 states,

Can we say that they (school District) need to be aware of the colonization that occurred with FNMI people because the studies that have occurred saying the issues we are talking about now stem from colonization, and, as time moves on, residential school as well. We are dealing with now is post-traumatic stress.

In this sense, it is important that educators understand the impact of the “colonial enterprise historically aimed at eliminating the ‘Indian problem’ in this country and in the context of the
systemic inequalities inherent in the current education that pose significant challenges to the educational success of Aboriginal children and youth (Hare, 2011, p. 91).

…what she said is really truly. There’s a lot of things that, there, you know, affecting us, that we don’t really realize, even as a survivor. I was a survivor; my mother was in residential school. I was in residential school and then I had my kids. So I never realized in what I learned from my mother and my dad. For what they went through in school. Like they never gave me a hug and I hear this all in the stories, so many times over and over. Mom and dad never gave me a hug. They never know how to love me and that really affected the kids. It, we saw what we were doing wrong, you know, to hug our kids and but they really needed that. That was missing and he can, he knows and my other son knows. My daughter knows. I have three kids and I never hugged them because you couldn’t show affection when you were in residential school. It was bad. So for my parents knew it so well so they wouldn’t dare hug us, hey. And we would sit by them and they would talk to us. They would show us in some other way and so, they, my son and my daughter, my son’s day, they went through that. I never hugged them even though so really difficult. You know, to do that, to show that affection. So, and it’s, it hurt. They have a hurt. They have to live through and I probably, it’s intergenerational. I said, it shows on these kids now that they are in school. And when are we gonna break it, you know? We have to go through, now that we know, and they know and so how do we begin to heal? (rural parent)

When the urban parents discussed what hinders parental engagement it became clear that there was a slight difference in the dynamics of the group. All of the participants, with the exception of one parent, have never lived on a reserve and primarily resided in urban centers. This was evident in focus groups as there were slight differences in personal opinions and experiences with historical trauma that led to slight personal differences and impacted engagement. The consensus, however, is that schools need to be aware of the parents’ negative and traumatic experiences with schooling and its impact on their role or ability to engage with the school(s). One of the parents, who was raised on a First Nation reserve, shared her experiences with residential schools and the disengagement of FNMI Families:
As a descendent of residential school myself, attending Catholic school in my life as well, it’s quite overwhelming sometimes when I think about the difference in the education back then than it is now… from our Aboriginal kids that attend these schools and for all the trauma that we’ve gone through over the years and the generational stuff, it’s quite ironic that my kids are doing so well in this system... There was just never any relationship between the parent’s and the kids and I think it dates back to residential schools because the kids were taken, or they had to go and the parents never were involved in their education. (urban parent)

This next parent identified the impact of trauma on the current generations and suggests that parental engagement is a learned behavior and that this behavior may have not been modeled in some parents’ families. She observed that the other parents with urban upbringings listened attentively; they seemed to appreciate her sharing her thoughts about why parents don’t engage. She continued to say:

And you know, some of our kids come from really horrific backgrounds and some of our kids have experienced death and losing their parents and losing their first cousin, and then the next week their aunt, and then a week ago their uncle, but yet they’re expected to come to school and perform. And then I think there needs to be more awareness in regards to how we grieve as Aboriginal people and how close we are to our family. And even with our kids may still have a father out there, but their father’s not there and they’re still grieving and I think my kids have come a long way in the last year and a half and, you know, now I hear them having goals and they never used to have that. It’s a very difficult, and I think that’s why a lot of times parents don’t really engage, it’s because of their own experiences with what we went through in school and then what our parents went through in school and just that bad karma that was there. And I think, because I can remember with my mom, she never even went to parent-teacher interviews because it wasn’t expected. And I think because of that I kind of picked up on that too, it’s a learned behavior. (urban parent)

Four of the six administrators acknowledged the trauma of residential school and the impact of residential school. The FNMI District Team also discussed the fall-out of residential school, but they also focused on what should be done to address the issues:
Can we say they [schools] need to be aware of the colonization that occurred with FNMI people because the studies that have occurred saying the issues we are talking about now stem from colonization…. [what] we are dealing with now is post traumatic issues……That is where the historical teachings come in..I think administration, principals anyone dealing with our students has to get that historical perspective on where our families are coming from. (FNMI 6)

Couldn’t we focus on departments; administration, secretaries… educate them bit by bit. Go inside the school and do it. That is the only way they are going to be culturally sensitive. (FNMI 5)

I think it comes down to educating both sides, educating the schools with historical traumas and educating parents. (FNMI 7)

Based on my experiences as teacher and FNMI consultant, there were promising practices happening in the Calgary Catholic District schools and within their central office as well. I have had the opportunity to see and experience some of the successful parental engagement practices, but also have witnessed some of the gaps in parental engagement. As an Aboriginal person and an educator, I am aware of the distinctions between the perspectives of the parents and the district teachers’ perceptions. It was important to me to hear the voices of the parents and district personnel first hand, in order to confirm or negate some of my own observations.

**Various Perspectives on Successful Engagement**

There was considerable discussion about what Aboriginal parental engagement looks like from the perspective of district/school teachers and leaders. I believe that the emotional bundle (relationship building between the school/district and FNMI parent community) is paramount to successful engagement. The data suggests that successful engagement includes strong and consistent interactions between parents and school staff that build relationships, trust, and a sense of participation in a community. Successful engagement also includes cooperation and teamwork. Successful parent engagement opens the doors for parents to feel welcome. It’s a process over time, and includes inclusive cultural activities and programs. One administrator shared the importance of cultural activities as a way bringing parents into the school:
We have Traditional Aboriginal Feasts that bring, not only just the parents of the Aboriginal students but... the entire school community. So we see a lot of parents here. But we also see Elders and just members of (a reserve) coming... Relationship, trust, and cooperation-teamwork. You know, that we’re in this together. (A5)

I asked this administrator, “How can we sustain relationship building”? She stated:

…some parents are struggling with their own educational experiences and that we need to build our capacity for understanding where people are at, accept them, and help them no matter what.

In order to develop a trusting relationship, a level of reciprocal responsibility is needed. The participants identified that this reciprocal action must include many culturally-appropriate opportunities for parents to have input into the further development of Aboriginal programs. These opportunities for input can include community events that teachers can attend, or school events designed to increase comfort for Aboriginal parents and children. It should include asking Aboriginal parents and students about their preferences for how meetings, and other school engagement activities, are conducted. It should involve meeting with Aboriginal parents in groups rather than individually.

To have them come in as a community and not just separately to talk, and “Let’s all come together”. I think they like that - it is less threatening because there are probably other people they know in the community there and they can talk to them at the same time. Aboriginal people really like their roots so I think that is a good approach and it really work[s]... a collective... We talk about the direction. They would give the direction of where they would like to see the program go and if there are certain activities... the FNMI culture that could be addressed and put emphasis on. They would definitely bring that to the table. We take those requests and ideas and take them into our consideration when we are planning for the year. It’s been going well with our program. (A6)

The emphasis from the parents, administrators, and the FNMI team was that successful engagement of parents and community requires a cultural approach. The meetings should be culturally focused, and could include: engaging the Elders for prayer and input, feasting, talking
circles, gifting and following protocols. Parent engagement should use traditional Aboriginal protocols, such as offering food to participants. One of the FNMI Team members emphasized the need for coming together as a community, to eat together and work together, for the best interest of the students:

I think by sending out a positive message out to parents. I remember one night when a group of liaison workers did a bannock and stew night for parents for meet the teacher – meet the TA and parent teacher interviews after the report cards. So I think stuff like that -by feeding people because feasts are very cultural. (FNMI 7)

Developing a parental engagement school policy could be a way of encouraging school staff, particularly the Pride Program workers, to have positive contact with parents early on. These contacts would occur before any calls about student problems at school have to be made. Although at present the Pride Program does not exist, it still provides a good example of how teachers can make initial contact with the parents. Successful engagement includes the recognition that Aboriginal culture has its own history and ways of knowing and educating and that parents can share this knowledge with the school to build understanding and collaboration.

Well, I think Aboriginal parents recognize that education is very important for their children. But they also recognize that there are different ways of learning, different ways of knowing and they are very concerned that these strategies and philosophies are not implemented in schools. And in terms of, like, the whole view, schools that do inquiry based learning strategies are much more successful than other strategies. (A2)

Another recommendation that was made by an FNMI participant was in regards to parental engagement planning and policy: the schools should not exclude Aboriginal children from school activities for financial reasons.

I think that schools put up barriers that they do not see as barriers. When it comes down to financial [matters], you have a school [policy] that if you do not pay your school fees you do not get to go on the big field trips. It’s a poor school - I understand that - but you’re limiting the people who can’t go to that stuff. If your fees are 200 dollars and your activity fee is 50 dollars - really is that a fight you want
to fight? They [might] waive the fee but they don’t let the kid go on the stuff because the fees have not been paid. And they won’t let them graduate unless those fees are paid. Or textbooks. It’s a never-ending battle of money. The schools do not get that part of it. (FNMI 4)

In my experience as a consultant, I have definitely seen some high school principals change their policies to accommodate FNMI parents and students. I believe the changes are partly due to the work of the FNMI district team who advocate for the students and enlighten the principals about the family situation. The team and district have been focusing on the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge and culture in the school and district office. This promising practice includes the implementation of special projects and administrative structures that recognize and incorporate the unique nature and needs of Aboriginal communities, families and children. An example of this is the following project shared by an administrator;

..we had [an event] and all of the students in the school were working on inquiry based projects and parents were bringing in very valuable artifacts from their families and traditional outfits for their children to share and show with the school and, again, this was an evening celebration. A lot of parents came to look and see what their students were learning. I saw [this event] as an example of very successful parental engagement. (A2)

Bringing parents and schools together as a community to share in student learning increases parental engagement. The responses to the question of whether Aboriginal knowledge and culture should be introduced in school were extensive. The recommendation is that the school should include opportunities for Aboriginal parents who have had little exposure to, or knowledge of, Aboriginal culture – especially those raised in urban environments - to have their children learn about it from specialized school staff and programs.

Or dancers are another example of understanding and we have a variety of different kids participating in Pow Wow dancing and ... teaching the dancers and they are not all Aboriginal. We have a variety of different students participating in the dancing and when we have our Feast many of the children come and they dance in outfits and perform for the people that are at the Feast. And the boys at the feast aren’t all
Aboriginal either. That’s where they have their friends come and they teach their friends about the tradition of the boys serving. And they help that way as well, so it’s really quite a unique and diverse understanding of culture. (A5)

I believe that with the resurgence of our cultural ways comes the importance of preserving Aboriginal languages. Parents do believe that some aspects of the culture and languages of Aboriginal peoples must be preserved and be taught in the schools. The parent participants have expressed their concern that their culture and their languages are being lost and they would like to see these implemented in the schools. From the administrators’ perspective, the district is aware of the importance of finding ways of implementing language and culture in the school. They support the FNMI team’s role in supporting teachers and staff’s understanding of Aboriginal ways/culture and language. Over the years that I have been working with the district this has been a request from the parents and FNMI team. The barrier that emerges is the decision of which language to teach, and the challenge of finding the human resources to teach those languages. In my opinion, if there is a will, there is way. It is clearly evident that there needs to be progressive movement towards taking the initiative to meet with FNMI community, parents, and district personnel to create a plan to develop of language programs in the Calgary Catholic School district.

The parents I interviewed were not short of words in regards how to involve parents and ways to improve student success. FNMI curriculum and mentoring programs were identified as important elements to the success of the student and families. From my perspective, the schools should include some flexibility towards academic requirements with specific personnel/roles put in place to support implementation. Staff in these specialized roles would preferably be Aboriginal. These positions could include cultural workers and language teachers who may, or may not, have teaching degrees. In order to engage more parents it was suggested by parents that extensive after-hours programming is needed, especially in junior high and high school. This would ensure that working parents, especially fathers, could be involved at the school:

There’s not a tremendous amount [of after-school activity] in high school. High school is probably lacking more than anything else. In the junior high, like when you’re in the elementary [grades], there are a lot of things that are offered during the day. [But] there are a lot of people who cannot be there during the day… I don’t have
The last recommendation for successful parent engagement is to provide continuous professional development for school personnel. Professional development should include training for teachers in active listening.

I also think the message has to be [that] the parents are welcome to come, that we want them to come into the building, that we want them to be part of the community. And more important than anything else is that they have a voice that we’re going to hear… [staff] are working really hard with our FNMI population to stop talking and sometimes just sit in the silence for awhile. Because when you sit long enough, out of that, comes a lot of conversation. It’s really interesting to watch. It’s not something we’re trained to do or too comfortable with, but there are lots of times I can just sit. And when we sit, [we] say, ‘You know, if you want to think about it for a bit and …tell me how you feel.’ And then we can sit. It’s a lot better. We need to sit and listen...We have to begin to hear it. Even if we don’t like the answer, we need to start hearing what the answer is. (A3)

**Emotional Dimension: Relationship Building Bundle**

**Relationship Building Between the School/District and FNMI Parents/Community**

Relationship building was one of the key themes that emerged in the study. The parents expressed that the personal support they received for their children from school staff members made them feel heard and respected. This personal support builds trust and a sense of confidence for building partnerships. Strong community, parental involvement, and youth engagement are needed to maximize the contributions that they can make to address the needs of the FNMI students.

The rural Aboriginal parents who have children going to several schools in the district have expressed that having an employee from the Tsuu T’ina Nation improved the relationship between the school and Tsuu T’ina Nation. One of the parents expressed this by stating:
The relationship between Tsuu T’ina and like, this school for instance. There are both schools that my girls go to, there’s a Tsuu T’ina connection to begin with. When (daughter) went to (school) (Diverse Learning Teacher) was there, and he made it, he made it comfortable and you know, he gave them a little incentive or but he was close to them… But with (second school) because (DLT #2) is here and she is doing so awesome with the kids, you know, it’s really good. (rural parent)

One of the urban parents expressed her appreciation of the direct personal support for her and her children. She made an impassioned reference to a particular support worker, who, although she was not familiar with her children’s culture, was still able to provide some of the cultural teachings through the Pride Program. The Aboriginal Pride Program was implemented in three schools in the district with a high population of FNMI students. Its focus was to provide academic, cultural and personal support to FNMI families and the schools. She comments:

[School staff member] has been really good with helping my girls embrace their culture. Because …their dad passed away, so… I don’t know, it’s meant a lot. I’ve found that the Catholic community and the Aboriginal community has really boosted me and my girls up and it just means a lot.

Another urban parent from this particular school supported the previous parent’s comment by adding:

This school is so involved in trying to make sure that my family is safe and functioning well and [my children are] doing well and I’ve never seen so much support from a school.

The notable difference between the urban and rural groups in terms of building relationships with the school staff was the diversity and uniqueness of each group’s needs. The rural group participants are mostly all from Tsuu T’ina Nation. Tsuu T’ina Nation and the Calgary Catholic School District have an existing tuition agreement that stipulates that the Calgary Catholic School District will employ a Tsuu T’ina Member as a Liaison for the parent/community and the schools. The findings suggest that having a liaison position within the school mediates and provides the school and parents a ‘buffer zone’ when problems or situations may arise. The liaison usually can mediate, or provide a ‘buffer’ between the parents and schools. The parents
feel supported when they have someone who understands their culture and social context. However, it should be noted that the parents have the option to use the liaison service. The urban parents have access to the FNMI District team liaisons that are distributed throughout designated schools. The difference in service is that the District liaison may have to build relationships with urban parents, students’ backgrounds and culture as opposed to the Tsuu T’ina liaison who may have established familiarity with his/her parents and students. The liaison has an advantage in that he/she belongs to the Tsuu T’ina community. The urban liaisons deal with the constant turnover and retention of the urban student population. Another difference between the two groups is Tsuu T’ina parents and families access support from their community, whereas, the urban group rely on the schools to provide some cultural and personal support. Both groups differed in their relations with the schools. When speaking to administrators about the rural parents, they referred to them as a group. It seemed that the urban parents’ needs were generally addressed individually.

Another parent responded that school climate is also important in forming relationships. Pushor (2007) states that we need to change the story that schools are institutions and move towards a place that welcomes parents as partners in the education of their children. The findings suggest that relationship-building starts from the moment parents walk into the school and engage with all school personnel, from the secretary to the principal.

Right from the time you walk in, like, the secretary just knows you... Yeah. They say, hey how ya doing... Yeah they’re really welcoming. (rural parent)

In my discussions with all the participants one of the key relationships identified was the engagement with the principal. When school staffs, especially the principals, are outgoing and friendly, it makes it much easier for Aboriginal parents and children to engage with the school.

One of the parents commented on how the principal and teachers she has encountered have taken the time to know all of her children, not just the student they were teaching.

Yeah even the principal, she’ll come out and that’s the same thing at (other school).

Oh I haven’t seen you in a long time… (rural parent)

A second parent appreciated that her children were recognized as a family unit as opposed to individual students. In First Nation communities’ kinship is a value that is taught to the children
at a young age. As an educator and parent, I always thought it was important for schools to recognize that family/community dynamics can have an effect on parent and student engagement with the schools. It is common for a teacher to only know their student’s name and not the student’s other siblings who attend different classes. Pearson (2007) identifies four factors that facilitate relationship building: the act of making an effort, knowing the people, being welcoming and respectful, and encouraging parents to feel that they can come into the school without apprehension. These are evident with the following comment about one principal’s behavior.

Yeah, Yeah, it was the principal that, right there, yeah exactly… Yeah the teachers knew my name, knew all of the kids by name. (rural parent)

During the interviews I asked the parents how can principals and schools engage parents in the school community. The responses revolved around trust, respect, honesty, being genuine, and being transparent. In my interviews with several administrators it was evident that they had an understanding of some of the issues of FNMI students and the importance of extending themselves to connect with parents. One of the principals states his stance in regards to how he provides support and tries to empower his staff to connect with FNMI parents:

I say to the staff all the time that the most critical thing for family is knowing that some adult knows their kid well and cares for them at the school…. A parent, when they send the kid to school that’s got almost 1500 kids, they don’t care about the other 1499, they care about their own kid and they want to know that someone knows their kid and if their kid needs help or needs…just that they are connected to the school. (A1)

One of the main barriers that the administrators identified was the limited level of comfort and trust that FNMI parents have in the schools; primarily the lack of trusting relationships and understanding between parents and school staff. One of the administrators questioned, with genuine concern and passion, why parents would want to bother engaging with the school if it was all just going to be negative.

A lot of the struggles and barriers are again, trust, relationship. If [parents] have no relationship or have no trust, then there’s no reason to engage in the school. If the
schools are only communicating negative feedback in terms of report cards or attendance or family issues then there is a barrier for them coming into the school. (A3)

I think, honestly, I think the biggest barrier is a lack of communication between us and parents or parents and us. To overcome or to build that trust and to start building that relationship... I’ve had grandparents in here that have been survivors of residential school. (A4)

…There’s a distrust. That’s the biggest barrier. There seems to be a distrust that we’re trying to overcome. Sometimes when parents do come in there is certainly a difference in what they want for their kids versus non-Aboriginal parents in terms of supporting program. So an Aboriginal parent might come in for...it will be more about their experiences, what they have gone through at their children’s age. They’re really looking for us to support the relationship. It really gets around to the point, well, actually the reason we’re talking is because of a math mark or a social studies or a report card. [For them] it’s more about experiences. What they experienced. What they think their children are experiencing, the interactions with other students. Not about the academics. (A6)

I asked the rural group what makes successful parent engagement. One rural parent stated the need to build this trust and open up communication. She said:

I think just communication. Like that. If you don’t have communication with your kid’s school you don’t know what’s going on. Then you don’t have trust. You know, you wont trust the school for, you educating your child all day or you won’t trust them for like, whoa is my daughter there…. Because there are some schools that really don’t care that they are in.

The FNMI team spoke to the importance of taking time to contact the parents to introduce themselves. They spoke of the miscommunication with the school and the parents:

I think teachers put up barriers that they don’t see as barrier. When it comes down to financial…I don’t think they see it (engagement) what they expect it to be, so the
things that parents do that are engaging to the kids are what we see...are not what a regular person would see. It is not what they expect and what parental engagement is. (FNMI 4)

I think the district has to recognize the efforts of FNMI parents and value their hopes and don’t look down on them if they don’t come to parent teacher night. It’s ok to meet not on structured basis...they are still making the best effort they know how to. (FNMI 2)

Many interviewees commented on the importance of creating open communication and a welcoming environment for parents and students. The barriers of mistrust that are due to historical educational experiences, as well as the differing perceptions of parental engagement, were evident in many of the conversations. All the administrators believe that they are engaging with FNMI parents, however, they still see the need for improvement. Many of the administrators that have students from Tsuu T’ina believe there has been an improvement in parent/community relationships. Many of the administrators spoke of the district parental engagement initiatives that facilitated positive relationships such as feasts, Elder dinners, Elder trustee meetings, Tsuu T’ina Elder meetings and the Aboriginal Pride Program. As Pearson (2007) points out that if the schools do not have a plan and a well-articulated policy for parent engagement it is unlikely to be sustained (p.134). Other barriers that may deter parent engagement is the turnover of principals and staff at the schools. The Aboriginal Pride program is an example of the type of supports Aboriginal parents and students have identified as successful. The problem with short-term programs is they are not sustainable. Parachute programs leave the parents with a void and impacts the parent engagement with the school.

**Spiritual Dimension: Culture and Language Bundle**

**Indigenous Knowledge**

Parent participants expressed a need for harmony and balance, and inclusiveness of Indigenous knowledge in the schools. They emphasized that Indigenous knowledge should be foremost, and not be treated as an “add-on” to the current curriculum. Indigenous knowledge needs to be to be embedded in the ‘heart of the programs’ in the schools. The Cree, Medicine Wheel Teachings are symbolic of how we balance our physical, mental, social/emotional, and spiritual self. It is
also how one journeys through the stages of life. I believe that it is important that we are mindful when we attempt to harmonize Indigenous knowledge within the structures of Western educational institutions. Foremost, the process must be respectful, genuine, purposeful, sustainable, and represent the knowledge in pedagogy as well in content knowledge. It is not surprising that “increasingly and all across Canada, conversations about Indigenous Knowledge are becoming the dialogue about mainstream education” (Brayboy and Maughan, 2009). There is a push to incorporate curriculum and strategies to enhance the academic success of Aboriginal students.

The participants in this study spoke highly of schools that are embracing Aboriginal community and culture. Some of the inclusion practices identified by parents and administrators (A2)(A3)(A4) were following protocols, setting up traditional feasts and the willingness to use Aboriginal culture to inform practices for parent/teacher/Elder meetings. Examples include setting up meetings with groups of parents rather than individuals, locating meetings in informal settings away from the school, and incorporating Aboriginal practices such as smudging, or the offering of food:

> It was a really good lunch meeting with parents, administration, district personnel - to see kids in a different setting, outside the classroom, and engage with them as just kids. I think it gave the administration of the school an opportunity to not only [learn] about the issues that affect the kids but also ask questions that maybe they were intimidated to ask before. There has been inquiries about when can we do this again. It is one step forward and we can’t afford to stop there and say that everything is fine. We need to go on and do more. Whether it is in the school or we have more parent/Elder dinners. (FNMI 3)

> I think at the district level they are actively trying to bridge the gap. I think the district is doing a lot actually to support communication and the very fact that we have a supervisor of FNMI…and a whole team working with her, deliberately is aimed at helping bridge the gap between understanding the cultures. (A4)

The findings suggest there is a need to support staff in their cultural learning and encourage integration of parents in the schools. The parents discussed the importance of coming into the
school and sharing their cultural knowledge and giving the school the opportunity to know their community:

…Yeah, well, it’s, as parents we have to make it happen. You know, like, we have to offer our resources, offer our time and offer, you know, our skills and you know, give the district or the school the opportunity to get, give them a chance to know Tsuu T’ina, as well. (rural parent)

One parent spoke about the importance of making curriculum and assignments relevant to the students. Ottmann (2010) identifies culturally responsive teaching practices when working with FNMI students. This includes teachers developing their cultural competencies and reflective practitioner skills. She cites research that exemplifies culturally responsive teaching as:

• using resources, teaching materials, and instructional strategies that respect the culture;
• life experience, and the learning needs of each student;
• acknowledging the contribution that each student has made to the culture and learning dynamic of the classroom;
• consistently maintaining high expectations for all learners; and,
• the formation of relationships with students that are genuine and caring (Ladson-Billings & Gay 2000; McKinely, 2005; Shade, Kelly & Oberg, 1997 as cited in Howard, 2007).

It is important to address all the above strategies when working with students and it is equally important to include Aboriginal parents and community as an intrinsic part of curriculum development. One FNMI team member stated that school staff may not realize that parents are always watching what is going on in the school. Parents may not be physically present in the school, but they are physically present for their child. One of the rural parents commented on how pleased she was that her daughter had the opportunity and support of her teacher to share her knowledge of her culture in her assignment. She states:

…And [teacher] got [my daughter] involved in the school newspaper and he really supported her in writing about her culture and about current events with Aboriginal
Rights, you know, things like that. So it’s really helped her identity, made her really proud. (rural parent)

The rural parents believe that there is a lack of teaching of Aboriginal history in the schools and in our society in general. They would like to see the teaching of Aboriginal history and culture become part of the curriculum systemically. The suggestion is to infuse Indigenous knowledge and culture through the implementation of Elders in the classroom or resource people to reflect relevant content specific to the Tsuu T’ina people. They also emphasized the importance of having a space in the school that their children can learn about their language and have an advocate in the school to keep track of the students’ wellbeing. One such program that was highly respected by the parents was the Aboriginal Pride Program that was led by a CSSD Tsuu T’ina employee. An urban parent also agrees about the importance of having a program to support her child:

Well in my daughter’s high school I really didn’t have too much engagement there, but, ……when I found out about the Pride room and things like that I was so happy that [son] might be able to engage in some sort of cultural learnings because I can’t teach him because I have no idea, and…[FNMI teacher] has helped so much and my son’s been going through some of his own emotional stresses. But he knows that he can go to….[FNMI teacher’s] room and talk to her and he learns a lot of things and he is more relaxed, and it’s nice to be able to have a child go somewhere where they can relax. It’s not just to not do anything, he’s going there and he does actually have to do school work and things like that, but he’s learning other things at the same time. I’ve had a lot of things going on in the past year, I’ve only been in the school a couple of times to be able to volunteer and do those things. But even those couple of times, being able to help out [FNMI Teachers] with different things was just enough for me to feel good about myself and have my son sit there and be proud of me, to be there as his mother and you know, a lot of children at that age would say….but I’m trying, by the end of the school year I wanna come in once or twice just to show [son] that I wanna be here for him just as the Catholic system and the Pride room are there for us, as a family. It’s not just for the children, they’re there for all of us,
they’re there for the whole family...[FNMI teacher] has, we have ‘wrap around meetings’.

This discussion led to a discussion of inclusion of FNMI history and knowledge in the curriculum. They would like to see the teaching of Aboriginal history and culture become part of the curriculum systemically. Ideally, they would like their children to grow up well versed in both Aboriginal and white culture.

I don’t think that there’s enough educational component in the school system on Aboriginal peoples and the history behind it. Because there are so many Canadians, especially this being such a diverse culture now, that do not understand anything at all about Canadian history, starting with Aboriginal rights. (urban parent)

Another parent adds:

It’s not taught that well, it’s just a breeze over, and let’s learn about...what he [son] said was “I learned a lot about China”, because he came here in high school, so he learned a lot about China, but he didn’t learn anything about here. It doesn’t carry through. There are small little portions of it here and there. (urban parent)

One parent suggested that an Aboriginal studies class be offered in the schools, not only to educate Aboriginal students so they, and their children, are not faced with some of the experiences that they have had in the urban setting. In my experience, it is challenging to deal with people who have little understanding of FNMI issues or culture. Misunderstandings and lack of knowledge can cause tensions between FNMI people and the mainstream community. Hare (2011) believes that “the legacy of schooling for Aboriginal people must be understood by all Canadians as we strive for equality and mutual respect for all learners in our schools today and improve relationships with Canada’s Aboriginal peoples” (p. 91). An urban parent stated the horrific treatment by non-Aboriginal people in the mainstream community:

I think there should be one whole class on Aboriginal studies, period. And educating, because what I don’t like...I’ve had this discussion many times and especially in Forest Lawn, [laughter] but what I don’t like is when you start getting nasty people saying “Why don’t you go back to that reserve you came from, blah blah blah...” and
then I just shake my head because I think ‘well obviously you’ve never gone to school because...’

There are diverse populations as well as diverse FNMI cultures and practices in the urban FNMI population. However, there are slight differences within the rural parents as well. Generally, the rural students have access to cultural information from their community, whereas, the urban students come from many diverse FNMI groups. For example, the urban parents brought up the concern that their children are seeking cultural information from unreliable sources. One urban parent expressed her concern when her son came home with misinformed education:

I think people need to be educated about our history and where we come from and why we’re still here today. And I think our kids need to know this stuff, because I have my kids one day and my son says he was politically incorrect when he mentioned something about the Blackfoots and the Cree. And I asked him “Who told you this?” and he goes “My friend from Morley”. I said “Well now I know who told you from Morley. It’s that guy who’s never gone in school a day in his life, and he’s a gangster.” (urban parent)

One of the urban participants stressed the importance of having Aboriginal role models for the children. Having an Elder in the school can fill a gap in a child’s life; for example if a child has no grandparents, an Elder can be a good role model.

[My daughter] really enjoyed how [the school] were bringing in that kukom [grandmother], because my girl doesn’t...her grandma has had a real rough life and she’s a very mixed up woman and she’s just not a healthy person for her to be involved with my children. So for them to have...for her to have that positive role model is something she just needs. (urban parent)

It is important to have a role model program in the schools because some family units have little or no family in the urban area. It has been my experience that all students benefit from having an Elder come into the school to share life stories with the children, whether it is about residential school, or about their culture and history.

Although there have been District- wide Aboriginal professional development opportunities, there is still a relational gap between parent and school personnel. Most school staff don’t have
enough training in Aboriginal culture to work effectively with Aboriginal parents and students. Staff turnover makes it necessary to be constantly in training mode, which can prevent progress:

Sometimes it seems to me as an observer [that] we are never inventing a new wheel. The issues are always the same. [Aboriginal staff members] think that educators are not aware of the issues that our people encounter and then they get into those positions. I get frustrated that we have to go through the same training of these individuals. I feel like we take a long time to go from a to b. But I think currently we are at a pretty good stage here with our students and hopefully we can move forward and have better literacy and academic skills. (FNMI 6)

I think [training] needs to be constant. There is constant turnover of district staff. I am not saying it is high, but there is always turnover - people retiring, new people coming in that are not aware of this training. The message of historical trauma needs to be constant. Every year. (FNMI 2)

Another barrier is teacher education. They do not understand the culture. I think the best example is if there is a funeral and [students] are going to be gone for a week, not one day, but ...one week. And that is a cultural aspect they just don’t understand. Or why aren’t they handing in work? We had one student who did all the work and [was] too scared to hand it in for certain reasons… probably self esteem. I found a lot of Aboriginal students hid that fear. I think [teachers] need to kind of have an open mind and understand the historical barriers and trauma those types of things. And they just don’t get it. (FNMI 7)

I think that the parents and administrators understand the importance of providing cultural activities and support in the school, but there still needs to be some fundamental understanding of Aboriginal ways of thinking around parent engagement and the Aboriginal community. Cultural activities in the school definitely benefit all students and school personnel as long as it is presented in an authentic and purposeful learning activity. In its delivery, it should be wrapped with the intended teachings to maintain its cultural significance. Many people use the phrase that culture is more than ‘beads and feathers’. Minimizing the significance of one’s culture diminishes the understanding of its people and influences how one reacts according to these
cloudy lenses. One administrator who has had extensive experiences working with FNMI students clearly emphasizes:

The problem is, I think, that the culture is very oral based. So parents lead very much by a nurturing, caring, explaining kind of model. I don’t think that all the staff quite understand the role of the parent in the [Aboriginal] family. It’s not heavy disciplined based. It’s much more trying to lead the child on to the right path, show them where they need to go as opposed to pointing [to] the sign and forcing them down the path. So our staff certainly struggle with it… There’s a lot of cultural nuances and the staff are not aware of those nuances... They don’t understand that family network [is essential] to the success of a child... Family is absolutely the important part and they learn a lot of things from sitting with the family and learning from their parents and the grandparents and their uncles and their aunts. And we don’t build in [a different] attendance schedule for them to be able to go to [family events]. There are cultural activities certainly that they should be participating in, but it’s not built into the time frame, you know. It should fit in Monday or it should fit on Easter Holidays. It doesn’t fit in Easter Holiday break and we don’t have any way of sort of building that room in for them. (A3)

It is apparent that we need to move to a place where we recognize, as educators and parents, that Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum and within pedagogical approaches are crucial for our students’ success and place in society. The participants’ recommendations and experiences established that what is occurring in the district is both positive and negative. The participants of the study recognize the tensions of parental engagement, however, they also realize that they have the responsibility of committing to change. The Elders always speak about the needs for our survival today but also the survival of the next generations.

**Mental Dimension: Reciprocal Responsibility Bundle**

**Co-Constructing a Plan**

Firstly, I would like to preface what activating parental engagement means in this context. It entails re-scaffolding and strengthening the efficacy of parental engagement, which ultimately will improve the educational outcomes of the children. Perceptions of parental engagement will
transform generalized notions of parental engagement to more of a unique approach that will suit the needs of both the parents and schools. Kovach (2009) illustrates this by stating; “Education is powerful in its ability to stifle or, conversely, spark the social transformation necessary for a society to respect the diversity it holds” (p. 51).

The purpose of conducting this particular research was to understand the ‘multiple perspectives’ of FNMI parental engagement, which includes the perspectives of the rural and urban parents and the FNMI district personal and district leaders. The four bundle themes (relationships, reciprocal responsibility, Aboriginal context, and culture and knowledge) were pervasive in all three focus groups and district interviews. As I listened to the participants I reflected on their perspectives and how we can move forward to create a plan for achieving meaningful Aboriginal parental engagement. The talking circles allowed the parents/grandparents and FNMI personnel to unpack their experiences, emotions, and thoughts on the current state of FNMI parental engagement. I am humbled and honoured to have had the opportunity to listen and learn from the participants. When I first entertained the idea of my research, I remembered the teachings of Sykes Powderface. His message was to look inward and listen to what your spirit is saying, then move forward, in what your heart believes needs to be done, use the mind as a guide, and take action. We have come to a point in the journey to sit back down and share the recommendations of how we can improve parental engagement in the CSSD. The following are the recommendations for how parents and district/school teachers and leaders could create a plan for achieving meaningful Aboriginal parental/school engagement. The parents identified some considerations when creating a plan for parental engagement. The recommendations include:

1) making the plan systemic, district wide and carried out by each school;

2) engaging cultural, educational and social supports in the school;

3) developing programs that are more experiential/hands-on; and

4) collaborating on and developing language and cultural instruction and practices.

The following are parents and administrators voices that support these recommendations:

1. Make the plan systemic rather than individual school-based. The rural FNMI students have a choice of attending different schools in the district. Each school differs in the FNMI programs,
and resources they offer. And, in my experience, some schools are more open than others to implementing FNMI initiatives.

I think the involvement is much more school based as opposed to district based and I think that the focus is on each school’s relationship to form a relationship to the [FN]. I don’t think we’ve ever really look at it systematically...through our district. I think it’s always been an individualized approach to working with the Nation. (A3)

If you want to have a system where all children succeed make sure you put the resources and people behind these programs. (FNMI 3) I can tell you that this year we have added the Ben Calf Robe Society to the school. We have a Head Start Program here and certainly they’ve become a dynamic part of our school culture. They are housed here. We have a lot of meetings that are involved from here and they are really trying to envision how we can continue those kids right through our structure. The district actively went out and sought out these groups. [Program] was seeking a home. We were looking for a better connection to try to encourage parents. So I think that that’s a really positive program force. It’s an example of what we are doing. (A3)

2) Aboriginal parents and children should sit down with teachers and system personnel to work out some new teaching possibilities for Aboriginal language instruction, cultural instruction and arts instruction. In the past there was a Tsuu T’ina language program at one junior high school. In my experience working within the district, I have heard parents express that they wanted a language program at the high school level. The district has considered it, but the choice of a specific language and qualified instructor poses a problem.

I like the idea of exploring more courses. I think the District should look at that, and maybe even have a teacher that floats around and teaches some of these courses at some different places. It could be somebody that’s on the Aboriginal team. Maybe they could do a ...quarter course here and one at [other schools]. (A1) Strengthen the FNMI team so that it can be more active across all schools. And, you know, I think it’s important to, you know, to continue to have an FNMI team. (A4) Have ceremonies for Aboriginal students that are cross-school, not just a single school. (rural parent)
It’s easy enough to get the nominal roll from the education office hey, to get a list of all the parents and have a little Pow-Wow at the end of the year, or something. Or mid, and then that would be, like a good social mixer for all the kids, too. (rural parent)

3) Work together to make education more visual, hands-on and off-site.

I would make the student’s education more hands on. ‘Cause when they are visual, like, visual learners, hearing learners, you know, all those different levels - touch on all of those as a person is. I would make education hands on. I would make it off site. (rural parent)
I used to have this little guy at [school]. I used to actually take him outside the classroom and teach him and do the schoolwork with him off site and he can make the connections when we were sitting in the grass. (FNMI1)
Let students do their own research for further education in order for them to own it. Or have their parent grab their hand and say, “Let’s go and do this together”. Give the kid choices but at the same time make them own their own education on any topic. Or [practice] storytelling with parents. (A2)

4) Work together to increase the Aboriginal cultural education provided in the schools.

It’s so rich, our culture...often you think about it... who I forgot to teach us our ways, all of our ways, like, drumming, singing. We make connection to Mother Earth and, they didn’t grow up with that, cause they weren’t given the opportunity to do that. But it’s so important to introduce it in their education system. We need to, so they can [say], “This is where we came from. This is what made who we are”. (rural parent)

Co-constructing a Meaningful Aboriginal Parent/school Engagement Plan

It is critical that schools, parents and community utilize decolonizing strategies to lessen the colonial impact and intergenerational trauma on First Nation, Metis, Inuit people. Schools need to provide opportunities for parents to voice when, and how, they engage in the schools and district. These strategies will create the synergies to create effective parent/school and community engagement. Essentially, what I heard from the various camps is the importance of building social connections in order to develop effective relationships.
The complexity of planning and developing a process to increase parental engagement has been expressed by the participants as having to be a systemic and a collaborative effort involving the school district personnel, parents, students, and community resource people. In consideration of my findings and future planning, I must reiterate the message I heard from the participants: the parents are aware that education should provide the skill set for their children to participate rightfully in society, yet they also see a need for acknowledging Aboriginal worldviews and values. In the present study, it is clear that the participants acknowledge the need to improve FNMI parental engagement by building relationships, taking reciprocal responsibility, understanding differing social contexts, and the need for FNMI culture and infusion in the school system. In this study there were many insights of what works and what needs to be changed or recreated. The consensus I believe is to take this information and move forward to create the transformative changes that are needed. Patrick Loyer (2012) from the Alberta Teacher Association PD E-News insightfully shares his thoughts on change. He explains that, “change must first come from within. Change is necessary, and it is our obligation as profession” and as Aboriginal people “to embrace that change. We can open our minds to new perspectives, we can change for the betterment of all our students” (p. 1).

Summary: Transformative Action

Transformation requires us to be like the buffalo walking through the storm. As Indigenous people we have weathered through many storms of oppression, racism, and marginalization. What pushes me forward is the belief that ‘humanness’ still exists in this time and place. The necessity is to get past the ‘politics of distraction’, the feeling of being in a position of limited influence and the fear of the disruption that may arise when suggesting change. It also means that one can get embroiled or distracted by other issues that take one away from the focus or goals. I was first introduced to the term, transformation action by Graham Smith in a critical theory course at UBC. My hands go out to him for validating my vision of creating Indigenous “space” in the Calgary Catholic School District. How do we create Indigenous “space” in an educational system that perpetuates the status quo of mainstream Euro-Western values and worldviews? I believe that, generally, transformative changes can be implemented according to the needs of the school district.
Six principles in Kaupapa Maori praxis

Graham Smith’s Kaupapa Maori Transformative Theory is applicable to the findings in this study and to the development of successful transformative change within the Calgary Catholic School District. Smith (2005) articulates six principles that are change factors in Kaupapa Maori praxis:

1) self-determination;

2) validating and legitimating cultural aspirations;

3) incorporating culturally appropriate pedagogy;

4) mediating socio-economic and home difficulties;

5) incorporating cultural structures which emphasize the ‘collective’ rather than the individual (such as the notion of the extended family); and,

6) a shared and collective vision/philosophy. (pp. 8-10)

I chose to use his principles as a way to guide the formulation of a FNMI parental engagement plan. The following discussion outlines the process of community engagement and the challenges that will have to be worked through.

The Principle of Self-Determination or Relative Autonomy

The participants in this study have certainly held the element of renewed commitment. The parents spoke of the need to develop positive relationships with the teachers/schools and District personnel, so that they can work together and make decisions about the education of their children.

The Principle of Validating and Legitimizing Cultural Aspirations and Identity

The participants’ recommendation to harmonize FNMI culture and knowledge into the curriculum, programs and services validates and legitimizes their cultural aspirations. The CSSD Support Program’s web page states that the district works collaboratively with the Alberta Education and the FNMI Community to support the success of FNMI students and it also discusses the supports that the FNMI team provides, which include some of the recommendations above. However, there seems to be some inconsistency in the delivery and
longevity of cultural and language programs and supports. For example, the Pride Program was extremely effective in implementing culture in the schools and fostering parental engagement but due to it being a funded project it had a limited time for implementation. The recommendations were to have ongoing district wide initiatives that were sustainable. The big contention is the need to have language courses offered in the schools, especially at the high school level.

**The Principle of Incorporating Cultural Preferred Pedagogy**

The parents stated that they are willing to work with schools to share their culture, whether it be within the classroom, program planning, professional development or the assessment and education of their children. The administrators also support the idea of having more professional development on Indigenous Knowledge, worldviews and pedagogy.

**The Principle of Mediating Socio-economic and Home Difficulties**

Although the FNMI team, as well as some schools, have, and continue to, address these issues, the data shows that the schools and the teachers need to become more cognizant of socio-economic factors, residential and intergenerational trauma, and the financial and transportation issues that affect parental engagement. The data suggest that talking circles, family gatherings, ceremonies and access to community resources would alleviate some of the socio-economic and personal/family issues.

The last two principles I will briefly mention is the principle of incorporating cultural structures which emphasize the “collective” rather than the “individual” such as the notion of the family and the principle of a shared a collective vision. The participants did mention the importance of parents gathering as an FNMI community and to implement programs systemically and not in isolation or school specific events. As previously mentioned, FNMI communities believe in collective identity. Although there is a diverse population of Indigenous groups in Calgary there are commonalities in protocols, philosophies, educational experiences and aspirations of parents of their children to be successful in education without compromising their Indigenous identity. The collective vision of parents is for their children to succeed within a system that is inclusive of FNMI culture, pedagogy, language, and to participate fully in schools and in society. A recommendation would be to have round table meetings with parents to develop a mission
statement of parent engagement aspirations and implement this mission into the Districts’ FNMI program’s website.

This thesis opens up the conversation with schools and parents and is meant to create space for transformational change. Underpinning the principles described above is the push to bring to the conscious level the need to bridge the gap between differing worldviews, and, ultimately, lessen the educational achievement gap between FNMI students and non-FNMI students.

In the next chapter I will focus on the process of engaging parents using Indigenous pedagogies and the tripod Mikowahp framework.
Chapter Five: Ewi-miskawasimitan - Sharing New Information

As I reflect on the conversations with the participants in my study, I am humbly reminded of a time and place that I hold sacred and close to my heart. In my childhood, I would go with my parents to our reserve band meetings hosted by Chief and Council. The meeting hall had two long rows alongside two walls. The Chief and Council sat in the front. I could tell the two opposing camps by where they sat. Either you physically sat on the pro side or the other side of whatever issue was being discussed. It was a time when people would gather, the young and the elderly, to share with one another their views on life and our responsibilities as Nehiyawak (Cree people). I would sit and listen to the Elders and, at times, I would drift in thought, until, sure enough, the animation, the crying, or the laughing would recapture my attention. The stories and teachings they told were that of resiliency, to survive as Nehiyawak in a changing world. They spoke of the importance of language, about how we must revitalize it in our youth. As some of the woman would speak they would shed some tears and urge the younger families to care for their children, teach them ways of our culture, and not to kispewew (be over protective of his/her children). In Cree, they spoke of how residential schools tried to take the Nehiyaw (Aboriginal) out of them and how they, as children, were taken from home and how their children were taken too.

The conversations and messages from the participants in this study were like an “echo” of these past meetings. Concerns such as education, racism, poverty, addictions, cultural revitalization, language and parenting are still as prevalent today as they were when the Elders were young. McLeod (2007) explains that the Cree storytellers use the “echo” metaphor as a way of describing how our past values perpetuate to the present through our life stories. It is clear to me how the “echo” of our ancestors still resides in many of us who have listened to the Elders and still it guides us in our daily lives. McLeod (2007) elaborates on how these stories can help reshape our experiences and interpret the world we find ourselves in. In comparison, the stories that the parent participants shared mirrored the Elders’ experiences, albeit in different social and cultural contexts.

In this chapter I will discuss how the Mikowahp values can form the basis of the Mikowahp Tripod of Parental Engagement framework to promote FNMI parental engagement. The chapter
is divided into three sections. Section one establishes the importance of the three value poles that form a solid tripod in relation to relationship building. Included in the framework are concepts of Elders and Leadership. Section two illustrates how the Mikowahp tripod values are bound together to form the basis of the Mikowahp Tripod of Parental Engagement framework to promote FNMI parental engagement. The tripod framework serves as a support for the implementation of the other value poles. Section three is a description of the Mikowahp Parental Engagement Tool that has been developed around the Mikowahp Tripod of Parental Engagement framework and its use of the tool to assist schools in implementing their parental engagement plans.

In order to identify meaningful directions for future changes in FNMI parental engagement we must understand our FNMI parents’ situations, identify the factors that lead educators there, and then move on to a place of collaboration. As previously stated, there are cultural teachings that transcend generations. It is important that these values be incorporated within the educational system and strategies for parental engagement.

**Relationship Building Through the Mikowahp Tripod**

Although the Mikopwahp values of obedience, respect, humility, happiness, love, faith, and kinship seemed to resonate from the responses of participants in this study, I recognized that the three core values of obedience, respect, and humility were expressed as being significant to both the parents and district personnel. Serendipitously, these three values echo the tripod of the Mikowahp teachings as outlined by Elder, Mary Lee (2006):

1) **Obedience:** Obedience means accepting guidance and wisdom outside ourselves, using our ears before our mouth. We learn by listening to traditional stories and life experiences of our parents, Elders and community role models. Obedience requires the individual to have an open mind and heart so that she/he can understand what is being taught. We learn by their behaviors and reminders of what is right and wrong.

2) **Respect:** We must give honour to our Elders and to the knowledge they share with us. Wilson (2001), states that relational knowledge is owned by one person but is a shared with all creation and is not just interpersonal relationships. Respect is honouring other peoples’ rights to participate fully in the community and society.
3) Humility: Knowing that we are not above or below in the circle of life, we are just a strand in the web of life. Understanding this idea helps us to respect and value life. We are humbled when we understand our relationship with creation.

Elder Lee (2006) states that the placements of the Mikowahp poles are important, or rather, their relationship to each other, are of key importance. She notes that, if the poles stood straight up and down, they couldn’t support the Mikowahp “but if they are balanced together they can properly support each other” (p.3). Lee also emphasizes that in order to make a family you need three; the two parents and the child, to make the balance. Although family dynamics have changed, it signifies the importance of the parents to the child. With life’s complexities it is crucial that children access supports from their parents and families but also from people they engage with in the community and educational setting.

The tripod framework, therefore, can be viewed as representing the foundational values that support parental engagement practices and programs. Miyo wicehtowin (good relationship) is a teaching that was instilled in my childhood household. It is premised heavily on the values of obedience, humility and respect. Aboriginal parents, like all parents, want their children to succeed even though each family’s involvement in our schools varies from minimal to active in activities and contact. Steinhauer (2012) asserts that parents are involved, but not in the traditional way that educators and administrators perceive as signs of parental involvement.

The four key themes that emerged from the participants’ experiences: creating meaningful relationships, creating culturally relevant and self sustaining programming, developing capacity of parents and teachers, and understanding the Aboriginal social context can be seen as connected to the Mikowahp tripod. Rebuilding the relational infrastructure between schools and parents/communities requires a solid foundation to work from as represented by the Mikowahp tripod of respect, obedience and humility.

**Tripod Pole 1- Value of Respect**

1a. Entering the Mikowahp with Good Intentions

Relationships need to be developed to ensure Aboriginal community members, parents, and students are able to contribute to the organization and implementation of
initiatives that seek to address the needs of the FNMI students. (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009, p.9)

The tripod value of respect can be seen as the first step in relationship building. From my findings it is clear that positive relationships should include strong and consistent interactions with parents and school staff in order to build trust and a sense of participation in a community. Direct personal support for parents and their children from school staff, help the parent feel heard and respected. It builds trust and a sense of confidence in partnership. From my study there were many conversations about the need to engage parents in the development of programs and district wide initiatives. One of the identified strategies to encourage parent involvement was direct personal support for parents and their children from school staff and outside community agencies. Clearly the barriers of parental mistrust associated with the colonial impact on FNMI people and the current FNMI education gap is a challenge we will face for many years to come. So what should be done? If we take the tripod values to guide relationship building, then the first stage in the process would be establishing mutual respect. Taking time to get to know each other is a reciprocal process wherein all stakeholders take the time to listen, share their visions, collaborate and celebrate their accomplishments. Certainly there is no quick fix or set formula to address all school districts’ needs. However, research in Aboriginal parental engagement (Pushor, 2007; Pearson, 2007; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009) supports my findings that there are some common strategies that help increase parent relationships and engagement:

- Include Indigenous Knowledge as a part of the curriculum including culture/language programming;
- Include parents in the programming and decision making process at the school, community and district level;
- Employ First Nations, Metis, and Inuit people in the educational system;
- Engage in partnerships with other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community programs into the schools;
- Make the plan systemic rather than being individual school based;
- Implement Aboriginal professional development for all staff by FNMI Elders, Aboriginal scholars and/or FNMI Team;
- Create after school supports and programs for working families;
• Create father role model programs and Elders in residence program; and
• Have a designated space for parents to meet with teachers, other parents or students.

Although there may be many other promising practices within other diverse educational systems there are a couple of basic underlying understandings that we should consider when developing relationships and developing new programs. First, is the understanding that each of us comes into a relationship with differing ontological lenses. Our understanding of parental engagement is based on our individual perceptions, set of beliefs, and observations. Respecting that everyone is coming into the relationship with a unique perspective is the first step towards parental engagement. If we take an epistemological glance to parental engagement we can appreciate our different ontologies and work towards a better understanding and validation of Aboriginal worldviews and pedagogies in our school systems. We can create something that is ‘real’ by working together, as parents, with the educational systems. This teaching signifies the importance of working with parents on an equal footing and recognizing the fact that parents are primary educators and decision makers for their child’s education. Reciprocity is a large component of respect. Dorion (2010) defines reciprocity as “the belief in retaining balance in a continuous cycle of give and take when you take anything something must be given in return.” In Cree tradition, for example, we give tobacco as an offering when we pick sage, or seek out guidance from an Elder. I was taught only to take what you need. In this sense, reciprocity is the communal learning and exchanging of ideas in a respectful way that balances the parents and educational institutional needs to reach the common goal of strengthening parental engagement. It is a process where parents can sit down with school personnel and feel comfortable sharing their views and experiences within their own boundaries.

1b. Respect as Creating Meaningful Relationships Through Partnerships

Finding Our Place in the Mikowahp


If we sat in a circle and put an object in the center of the circle and we all described what we saw, everyone would see different points of view from each other. Some would even see opposites because they would be sitting on opposite sides of the
circle. In other words, you don’t have to see what I see to be right. In fact, everyone in the circle is right based on their own point of view. If we are willing to listen to everyone’s point of view, then we can get a more accurate description of the object in the center. This is one way to put our minds-together. When we get clarity from each other, we should give thanks and be grateful to each other. (p.20)

I chose this quote because it teaches us and reminds us as educators, parents, students, and Elders that we may have some differing views of parental engagement but we have shared responsibility to come together in a good way to ensure the best quality of education for FNMI students. The children are like the object in the middle of the circle. This teaching is in alignment with the Mikowahp teachings as it suggests that everyone has a place and has contributions to make in the Mikowahp. We all have different positions and perspectives, however, if we show obedience by listening and learning from each other than it will lead us to the clarity mentioned by Elder Irving. In Cree, this would be described as ahtapiwin pl. ahtapiwina (NI), the act of changing a sitting position or moving to sit in another location. The challenge for parents and educators is to appreciate and acknowledge the differing positions and perspectives in the circle.

Battiste (2005) states that there has to be a common ground of knowledge when one wants to engage Aboriginals parents with schools/district. Building relationships and partnerships with staff, parents, Elders, community and agencies is a necessary component to parental engagement and to the overall well being of the students. Miyo wicehtowin (good relationship) is a teaching that was instilled in my childhood household. It is premised heavily on the value of respect, the first step in relationship building. The participants in the study commented on the importance of feasting together, celebrating students’ accomplishments, not just their faults, and the importance of getting to know each other at the beginning of the year. The building of trust opens the dialogue to develop appropriate programs with students and families. However some participants cautioned that though family programs that work for the general public may not be applicable, nor culturally sensitive, for FNMI families. Suggestions were made to include practical programs, such as providing parent-mentoring programs, parent resources, talking circle nights, Elder programs, pow-wows, parent teacher “bannock and stew” meetings, and community workshops. To develop a meaningful relationship one must have the willingness to listen. In life, there are many paths and journeys one may take. My parents always stated that when one
follows a path that causes them harm and difficulty, it is a result of them not listening to the teaching and values.

**Tripod pole 2 - Value of Obedience**

**2a. The Willingness to Listen**

In the context of parental engagement, the second tripod value of obedience represents the act of listening, or the willingness to hear what the parents are saying without going into discussions with preset outcomes. One of the important aspects of obedience is the simple act of listening to others with respect to their right to maintain their own perspectives in decision-making, and, in their views of the educational path of their children. The participants expressed the importance of: having an advocate in the school who will take the time to talk to the parents and the students, being heard, and of being part of the processes in regards to their children’s educational needs. Parents, as well, need to take their place in the circle of the Mikowahp and listen to what is being shared by administrators and staff.

The Mikowahp value of obedience represents the active process of care-giving, listening and responding to the needs of others. This can be strengthened through restoring traditional parenting practices that are based on the Mikowahp teachings.

Obedience combined with the first pole of respect supports our ethical relations with all life through accountability at a personal level and at a collective level. Obedience, not in a submissive way, validates our commitment to listening and acknowledges that Mikowahp values are present when we step foot into the Mikowahp circle. At a conference in 2010, Elder George Calliou eloquently stated that when we look at each other we should be doing so from spirit to spirit. He says we cannot get upset when we look at each other from spirit to spirit. This approach leads to more effective communication and dialogue with students, parents, district personnel, and community. Some say we should bring the "humanness” back into education, but, I would contend, we need to bring back the “spirit” in education. Yet, how do we bring back the spirit into education? As educators, Elders, parents and students, we can come into the circle with an open mind and an open heart. Obedience is the willingness to come to the circle without an agenda and be cognizant that this experience may cause a level of cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is used to describe the feeling of mental discomfort that results from
holding two conflicting beliefs, attitudes and behaviors (Wikipedia Foundation, Inc). When there is a discrepancy between beliefs and behaviors something must change in order to eliminate or reduce the dissonance. Walking into the unknown usually causes this discomfort. Unfortunately, many educators have had minimal contact with Indigenous people. They may not have had the opportunity to learn about Indigenous people in grade school, high school or at the post secondary level. Therefore, being presented with differing beliefs and worldviews may cause discomfort, resistance or confusion on how to navigate between both worldviews. Ottmann (2002) refers to this as jagged worldviews colliding, where “indigenous ways of knowing (epitomology) and ways of being (ontology) and ways of being (ontology) differ in many ways with western ways of knowing and being.” (p. 7) My father used to say that MOONYA (white man) will never understand us until they come to listen. He said that they don't listen because they think their way is the right way. I believe as Indigenous people we have weathered the storms and we are in a time and place where changes are occurring in Indigenous education. The challenge now is for educators and parents to walk straight through the storm like the buffalo do. To reduce the level of cognitive dissonance, my suggestion (so that we may truly listen) is to first remember the purpose, or the big picture of why we are coming together. Our purpose in knowing, being, and doing, is to create a better understanding of where we are at and where we want to go. The purpose is to come together and unpack our *par fleche or, survival bag*, and reduce, recycle, and reuse strategies and skills that increase student success and parent engagement. As we share our knowledge and skills it is evident that there will be differences, however, the focus should be on finding commonalities and shared visions. As teachers and parents work through this process they will have a better understanding that this vision is not just a local vision but is consistent with other provincial and national visions and educational frameworks. Looking at exemplars within our district, provincially and nationally could serve to motivate and may help decrease apprehension and cognitive dissonance that may be experienced. For example, the Calgary Catholic School District has been working towards building stronger relations with the Elders. Elder dinners with the CSSD trustees were an act of commitment on both sides to sit and listen to each other’s stories. As we sat around the table I sensed a little discomfort or apprehension of what the evening would present. The dinner started with a prayer and the room was ceremonially smudged. The room felt like it became calmer as it was apparent that both the Elders and CCSD Trustees were making a commitment to share and listen to each
other’s commonalities and visions to increase the success of FNMI students and parental engagement. I have the utmost respect and honour for the Elders that came through the doors to work together in spite of their past negative residential and educational experiences. There is strength in the word of the Elders. They are the ones with the knowledge. We are the ones who should feel privileged to listen to their advice and stories.

2b. Obedience as Listening to the Elders: Kihtehayah

Elders have always been inspirational in my life. My first teaching from one of the female Elders was the discipline of just sitting in silence and being respectful around Elders. As a very young child I would go weekly to this Elder’s place for recyclable cans. She always opened the door and invited me in to sit with her. She drank her tea and she would ask me questions and I would nod yes or no, being the shy girl that I was. Sometimes we just sat on her couch in silence. I could feel the peacefulness and content in her heart. That to me was worth more than any amount of cans she had that day. In retrospect, those moments I had with this Elder has helped shape who I am today and it reemphasizes the importance of Elders in our lives, schools and in our communities. I believe that Elders play a pivotal role in helping build a strong foundation for parent/school and community engagement in our school district through modeling for us the value of obedience. The tripod value of obedience focuses on the act of learning to listen in order to create meaningful relationships. We have come from a culture where Elders are highly regarded and respected as our mentors and role models. As we know, Elders play an important role in our survival and transmission of Indigenous Knowledge. We rely on them for prayer, words of wisdom, and promotion of cultural traditions and protocols in our schools and communities. The Elders were traditionally the ones who taught the younger generation the traditional teachings and stories. Heavy Runner and Morris (1997) (as cited in Ottmann, 2012) reinforce that importance of Elders:

The Elders teach us that our children are gifts from the creator and it is the family, community, school, and tribe’s responsibility to nurture, protect and guide them. We have recognized how important it is for our children to have people in their lives that nurture their spirit, stand by them, encourage and support them. This traditional process is what contemporary researchers, educators, and social service providers are now calling fostering resilience. This resilience is not a new concept to our people; it
is a concept that has been taught for centuries. The word is new, the concept is old.

(p.1)

Returning the Elders back into the school system can create a more resilient child, stronger parental engagement, and cultural connections with educators. The importance and benefit of having Elders in the school is that students see their culture respected and reflected in the school setting (Saskatchewan Education, March, 2001). In addition to this, parents also see their culture reflected and respected in the school. It sends the message that we are all committed to working together. As with any new venture there may be some hiccups along the way. A concern that school districts may face is the identification of Elders in the urban areas. Another concern is that the schools may lack knowledge of the resource centers that have access to Elders in the community. In my study the rural parents have more access to their Elders in comparison to urban parents who may have limited access to Elders due to geographical barriers. Some rural parents stated that they would prefer to have their teachings taught at the community level by community members. In contrast, the urban families appreciate Elders coming into the school as guests and role models. It is always a concern, and a caution, to not minimize the Elders by giving them the role of the token Elder. Organizations that have token Elders are those institutes who just bring them in for prayers and ceremonies and very little interest is given to their Indigenous knowledge and teachings. It is important for schools to be authentic and respectful about the reasons they want Elders in their school/district. They are not just to be invited on culture day or Aboriginal day. Some district personnel expressed the over reliance on the liaisons to get Elders and bring them into the school and the lack of knowledge or the fear of offending the Elder in some way. Research shows that Elders play a key role in enhancing cultural perspectives, building relationships with the community and the school, promoting awareness of culture and traditions, and addressing social and cultural issues. They provide a mentor/role model and the promotion of harmony among a diverse population (Saskatchewan Education, March, 2001).

In my experience there are several issues that need to be addressed prior to developing an Elders’ program or having Elders in the schools. The first task is identifying the Elders in the community. In Calgary Catholic we have a diverse First Nation, Métis, Inuit population and we have generally relied on the liaison workers, consultant and other FNMI district workers to set up
the initial contacts. One contention I come across is the question of giving of a financial
honorarium to the Elders that come to the school. My suggestion is integrate this into the yearly
budget just as they would any other presenter. It is common for Elders to be driven or be
accompanied by another person (traditionally called a witness) and the honorarium often offsets
the transportation cost and time. If you can pay the Clay Lady, pay the Elder. Around six years
ago, the district superintendent and central office personnel went to visit the Tsuu T’ina Elders in
their community. Prior to the visit, I, as the consultant, discussed the upcoming visit with one of
the liaison workers. We discussed the importance of central office being aware of certain
protocols before being in the presence of the Elders. Part of the protocols was the importance of
obedience and having the ability to listen without interrupting, respecting what is being said by
acting on their recommendations. We stressed that in order to maintain Elders in the schools
programs there needed to be continuous recruiting and mentoring of new Elders to the system by
existing Elders and by district personnel. This may involve a ceremony that initiates and
welcomes the Elders to the school community.

**Tripod pole 3 - Value of Humility**

**3a. Doing Things in a Good Way**

Engaging First Nations and Métis peoples in educational planning and decision-
making will increase the learners potential to experience both Indigenous and
Western methodologies within the educational setting. (Inspiring Success, 2009,
p.11)

Doing things in a good way allows for meaningful engagement and reflects the voices of all
decision makers. The third tripod value of humility represents the process of taking action and
taking responsibility to carry through with collective decisions and initiatives. Humility must be
a foundation to guide our work with Aboriginal parents, partnerships, and Aboriginal
communities. Absolon (2011) defines humility as the act of asking for permission and giving
thanks for receiving. As educators we must be aware that Indigenous worldviews and knowledge
have codes of conduct and ethics embedded in them (Absolon, 2011). In the context of parental
engagement, humility can be seen as the way we conduct ourselves as we work for the
betterment of others. In relation to school meetings and gatherings it is protocol to offer a gift as
way of showing respect and to acknowledge their time and participation. If you are offered tea take it! Understanding the protocols is one of the first steps towards bridging the gap between the parents and the schools. We must realize that no one person is above, or removed from the issues, and that parental engagement is premised on the process in which the relationship is developed between the parent and the teacher, school personnel, and/or school district. It is a process that is negotiated. From the data of my research it is clear that the participants felt that parental engagement is influenced by the attitudes, norms, values, and cultural competence of all stakeholders. When we sit amongst each other we bring with us our own par fleche of personal attitudes, societal norms, values and basic assumptions that influences the degree of authentic inclusion of parental engagement. Ottmann (2012) states that there needs to be some affective growth and commitment to improving the overall practice and quality of First Nation, Métis, Inuit interaction (Zone 5, Alberta Consortium meeting 2012). Ottmann with Pritchard (2009) refer to the affective domain as aspects such as attitudes, feelings, and values. In order to move towards affective growth, there needs to be a challenge to question what is in the par fleche and repack the par fleche with additional skills and knowledge. This requires educators to self reflect on their educational practices and pedagogy and its impact on students, professional colleagues, parents and community engagement. The Mikowahp tripod value of humility represents how the process for developing stronger relationships between stakeholders will be carried out to ensure a positive future for Aboriginal children.

3b. Humility in Leadership: Nikaniwin

Just as each value in the Mikowahp tripod of Parental Engagement has its place; leaders have an important role to play in increasing parental engagement. ‘Doing things in a good way’ has been a teaching that is stressed when approaching any task. In regards to leadership, ‘doing things in a good way’ is based on the value of humility in that it indicates an openness to listen and learn from the parents and Elders’ stories of their educational experiences and their ways of knowing. The need for transformational leadership rests on the facts that despite the efforts of local school boards and FNMI Policy Frameworks implemented at the provincial level there still is a gap in the graduation rates and a noticeable lack of knowledge of First Nation Peoples, cultures, histories and worldviews in the schools. In order to increase parental engagement it is the responsibility of the principal to build the capacity of the school staff from the custodians,
secretaries, teacher assistant, and teaching staff. Research shows that ‘significant leadership provides a mechanism for schools and school divisions to define and empower leadership within their own professional community and to build capacity to ensure authenticity and sustainability and a clear connection to a continuous improvement planning cycle’ (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010, p.11). Social scientist D.A. Schon (1992) affirms that effective leadership requires practitioners to use “reflection-in-action”, meaning how practitioners are aware of changes needing to be made and set out to develop strategies to solve the problem. The capacity for practitioners to do the right thing he labels as, “knowing-in-action” (p.11). This type of leadership is encapsulated in the Cree word; “Wicihitowin” which means to engage, with introspection and mindfulness of how to help others. Leona (2001) defines this term as the act of “having everyone involved” (p. 97). This concept and teaching is embedded in the Cree First Nation worldview and culture. The teaching of being helpful reminds us that individually, we possess gifts and we have the responsibility to contribute to the greater good of the community.

Leaders would need to possess certain qualities and strengths to effectively create change. The literature supports the need to examine leadership from both an Indigenous and mainstream lens to establish more effective communication between parents and leadership. Bryant (1996) affirms that we must move away from the assimilation model of the dominant culture and work towards developing a model that matches “western conceptions of leadership and local culture” (p.9). Ottmann (2002) states that matching both perspectives “would require commitment to co-operation and to understanding one another’s cultures and perceptions on issues such as leadership, on the part of First Nations and the dominant group” (p.8). In essence, this coming together in a purposeful and meaningful manner reinforces the teaching of doing things in a good way. Research has shown that leadership is value based (Leonard, 1999; Sergiovanni, 1996; Ottmann, 2002). The following tripod values, with supporting literature, and participants’ responses, identify qualities of an effective leader:

- Obedience: Listening with an open heart and mind for the betterment of the people.
- Willing to learn from, and understand, the knowledge of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit culture and their social context.
- Honesty and Genuineness –authentic, being open about intentions and free from pretense. (Parents)
• Trust: Taking the time to build relationships with parents and community. A level of understanding and patience. (Principals and parents)

• Humility: Leadership is a position of honour that requires humility. Does not seek self projection, (Bryant, 1998, p.3) working with parents on an equal footing rather than in an authoritative manner. Down to earth.


• Respect: means giving honour to the Elders, students, and parents. Respecting parents’ rights to make decisions based on their cultural practices, such as accommodating student’s absences for cultural events and ceremonies.

Working collaboratively and having shared understanding of leadership can have a profound effect on the present and future generations and may empower parents, Elders, communities and school district. Sinclair (2007) succinctly states: “Leadership can liberate us from confining or oppressive conditions – imposed by structures, others and ourselves. Rather being used as means to compel compliance and conformity to dominate or prescribe, leadership can invite us to imagine, initiate and contest” (p.xix).

Leadership plays a pivotal role to provide mechanisms to increase parental engagement, such as events like feasts, gatherings, talking circles, community involvement, and school planning workshops. Out of these gatherings of minds we create a synergy of hope, strength, and action planning. We move towards a place of humility where we come together and understand that we are equally invested in ensuring the best interests of all stakeholders.

The challenge, therefore, is for Elders, school districts, parents, and community resource people to commit and collaborate with each other and to create that ethical space to dialogue with each other and to reach a common understanding of each other’s cultures and their leadership. Reg Crowshoe (Elders Summit, 2014) spoke about the Mikowahp as an ethical space and venue for dialogue.
Section Two- Lashing the Mikowahp Tripod Together

The Mikowahp tripod values of obedience, humility, and respect, are bound together to create a balanced framework of values that promote collaboration and communication. The tripod value poles act as structural support for the other value poles to be integrated throughout the process of building parental engagement. As in the raising of teepee poles, the additional poles are added one at a time. Mary Lee (2006) describes the significance of the rope that ties the poles together as being a sacred bond:

For every time that a pole is added, a rope goes around to bind that pole into place.
You have to be there and see it to appreciate that teaching. That rope is a scared bond, binding all the teachings together until they are connected. (p.7)

The rope is symbolic to the strength and commitment it takes to create that sacred bond of trust with parents to increase mutual understanding of the path we are on and the direction we would like to take collectively in regards to parental engagement. The dynamics of the tripod is a three-part process. Each pole is interrelated and bound together making a strong foundation for the other value poles. Respect is the process of how we enter the relationship. We enter with a spirit of reciprocity and collaboration. We enter with a clean mind and a sense of peace so that we encourage each other to move towards positive engagement. This means accepting each other as we are and working towards a mutual understanding of needs. Respect is the process in which we begin to work together and depend on each other to develop a sense of belonging to the school community.

Obedience is the engagement process of relationship building. In this sense, I refer to obedience, not in a punitive way, but as an authentic act of willingness to listen and respond to the needs of others. During this process we engage with the Elders, parents, teachers, Aboriginal community, and educational partners to restore accountability at the personal level and at a collective level. Humility is the process where we take action and demonstrate responsibility by carrying through with the collective decisions that are made. During this process, we develop the capacity of parents, teachers, students and community through professional development and school programs. It is important to gather and celebrate the accomplishments along the way.
The lashing of the tripod poles provides a strong framework for the other value poles to be added. The rope binds all the teachings together until they are all connected. Mary Lee (2006) says that each pole points in a different direction and that we are like the poles: we need the strength of others in the communities. Although we may have different journeys, the rope binds together our shared aspirations to create meaningful relationships. The three poles lashed together is symbolic of the building of relationship with parents and district personnel (respect), Elders (obedience) and Leadership (humility). Each person brings forward knowledge and experiences that contribute to the strengthening of the tripod. Each institution will have unique challenges and leadership styles, however, through working together, everyone will move forward. In order to help move in this direction I have created a Mikowahp engagement tool to assist administrators in implementing parental engagement plans with the support of parents, FNMI teams and FNMI partners in the community.

Section Three - Mikowahp Tripod Engagement Tool and Applications in Education

The CSSD has a unique opportunity for moving forward with these goals. The historical relationship, commitment to change, and having a smaller school district is ideal for enacting transformational change. In particular, leadership from principals, administrative staff and policy makers can effectively model leadership by taking reign of the rope of the tripod and strategically strengthening the tripod model by incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing into the development of pedagogical practices, leadership practices, and Elder and parent engagement initiatives. The Tripod Engagement Tool helps to establish a respectful environment for dialogue between staff and parents. The following diagram illustrates how the tripod values connect to educational practices that enhance parent engagement (Figure 2).
In the next section I provide additional details on how the Mikowahp Engagement Tool can be implemented in order to support parental engagement.

**Mikowahp Engagement Tool**

In chapter Two, I referenced Epstein’s (1995) six types of parental engagement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community. Epstein’s parent engagement model is traditionally used in many school systems. My contribution, like Pearson’s (2007), was to develop a tool that parents and schools can use to increase parent engagement practices. Pearson (2007) developed a *Handbook for First Nations*
Parent Involvement in the public school system. The purpose of her handbook was to provide the guidance to non-Aboriginal educators who work with First Nation parents. The handbook gives valuable research about the importance of parental engagement, First Nation history, and effects of residential school. Pearson’s handbook offers a guide for schools to that help increase parental engagement. She provides a process to introduce parents and staff to the concept of parental engagement, with a particular focus on the social and cultural contexts of FNMI communities. Her handbook helps to create space for dialogue that will be beneficial for schools to work through prior to implementing my Mikowahp tripod tool. My engagement tool can be seen as an extension of what she has developed. In the development of the Mikowahp Engagement Tool (Table 3) the pole teachings were used to organize educational objectives for improving parental engagement. The engagement tool is divided into eight categories:

1) Name of Mikowahp pole,
2) pole teachings,
3) application in education,
4) action steps,
5) targeted audience,
6) start date,
7) outcomes, and
8) improvements.

In the following table, the Mikowahp tripod values of respect, obedience, and humility are used to illustrate how the engagement tool can be used to promote parental engagement.
**Table 2: Mikowaqp Engagement Tool-Tripod**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pole</th>
<th>Pole Teaching</th>
<th>Applications in Education</th>
<th>Action Steps</th>
<th>Targeted Audience</th>
<th>Start Date</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Improvements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obedience: Nanahitamowin</td>
<td>Accepting guidance and wisdom from outside ourselves.</td>
<td>Active listening, sharing knowledge between parties.</td>
<td>Encourage parent feedback, i.e. survey participation.</td>
<td>Parents of grade 1-4 students.</td>
<td>Sept. 10, 2014</td>
<td>Low parent involvement due to online nature of survey.</td>
<td>Example: Low survey participation. Follow up with phone calls and plan one-to-one contact. Instead of a survey, schedule sharing circle. Invite Elders to be part of the circle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect: Kisteyihmatân</td>
<td>Honour basic rights of all others.</td>
<td>Respecting differences and acknowledging biases, teachers learning about FNMI cultures and communities.</td>
<td>Encourage professional development for increasing knowledge of Indigenous history and issues. Resource people including parents as resource people. Back to school gathering- Feast for all school families.</td>
<td>Teachers, Elders and parents.</td>
<td>Sept. 20/14</td>
<td>Increased dialogue and communication between staff and parents in a non-threatening environment.</td>
<td>Plan quarterly gatherings. Have an open microphone meeting to discuss the practices that are working.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humility: Tapwahteyimowan</td>
<td>We are not above or below others in the circle of life.</td>
<td>Willingness to change and flexibility in teaching ideology and pedagogy.</td>
<td>Increase in one to one support. Use of traditional knowledge and practices in classroom setting. (Talking circles, storytelling and hands on activities.) Flexible assessment methods and feedback from parents. Professional development for leadership regarding Aboriginal leadership styles and culture.</td>
<td>Teachers and parents</td>
<td>Oct. 5/14</td>
<td>Improved student reports, active participation of parents in decision-making. Increased conversations with Elders and leaders.</td>
<td>Principal role to organize on going conversations with staff about teaching pedagogy. Principal to acknowledge the inherent philosophical and cultural differences in how Aboriginal people think about leadership.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The application of the framework can be adapted to schools and communities needs. It is not intended as an all inclusive checklist, but rather as a living document to be used in conjunction with other tools to meet objectives set out by parents, teachers and Elders. The engagement tool is intended as a guide for facilitating meetings, discussions and workshops. The benefit of this engagement tool is that it truly highlights traditional teachings and validates the legitimacy of Indigenous Knowledge in public education. This engagement tool is based on the teachings of the Cree Plains Mikowahp. It serves to exemplify how Indigenous models from any Indigenous group can be developed and implemented into public education.

An exemplar of the application of this tool is given in the third column of Table 3 titled, “Applications in Education”. The exemplar illustrates how one could use the teachings of obedience and applications in education to guide their planning action steps. The act of active listening and mutual sharing of knowledge between teachers and parents demonstrates the teaching of accepting guidance and wisdom from others. The action plan would be the organization of talking circles and initiating sharing circle events with parents to encourage their feedback. For example, to solicit parental feedback, a survey can be given out to parents. The parents can be contacted in person either at the school or in the community at community workshops or events, through texting, or through online social networking sites. The example shown in Table 3 is targeted for parents that have children in grades one through four. The hypothetical outcome shown is low participation due to the online nature of the survey. Despite the low participation, the responses received highlighted the need for better transportation to and from school, more cultural activities, and increased sensitivity to family situations. Some suggested actions to rectify the low survey responses would be to follow up with phone calls and plan one-to-one contact and/or schedule sharing circles in an appropriate location for the parents. This is just one exemplar from the engagement tool. In the previous model (Figure 2), the three tripod poles are used to illustrate how values relate to parental engagement. Since some schools may be already doing some of the teaching pole action steps, I have provided an outline of the engagement tool using all of the Mikowahp poles in Appendix C. It is suggested that schools choose the value poles they may want to further develop. It is not intended that schools target all teachings poles at once. The example responses aim to provide some ideas on how to use the
Engagement Tool in order to strengthen meaningful engagement. As previously discussed, the Mikowahp teachings were used to teach life lessons. The purpose of the tripod engagement tool in Table 3 is to provide a reference to the teachings and demonstrate their possible applications in education.

**Kinanaskomotin - I Thank You**

To conclude this chapter I acknowledge the participants who openly shared their responses with me, allowing me to share with the reader new information based on my data, personal and professional experience, other scholars’ contributions and cultural teachings. All of these experiences guided the development of a Mikowahp framework for FNMI parent engagement. The framework is an example of how an Indigenous model can be used to strengthen relationships between FNMI parents and school systems. The tripod foundational values of respect, obedience, and humility provide a foundation to build (Miyo wicehtowin) good relationships with parents, Elders, leaders, schools and community. Creating a relational infrastructure provides a base to create and shape parental practices and programs. In section one, I introduced the tripod value pole framework and the inclusion of concepts of leadership and the importance of including Elders and communities in parental engagement. In the next chapter that I have named ‘Tapiciyak’, we will move on and reflect on what learned along the way through a brief summary of the chapters. It will also contain the contributions and significance of the study, transportability of knowledge, personal reflection and, to conclude, a section on future research and practice.
Chapter Six: Tapiciyak - We will Move Now

‘We will move’ now is symbolic of packing up all our stories and teachings we have learned along the way and moving to a place of transformative praxis of parental engagement.

The notion of strategic positioning as deliberate practice attempts to contain the unevenness and unpredictability, under stress, of people engaged in emancipatory struggles. The broader vision of the Kaupapa Maori embraces that sense of strategic positioning, of being able to plan, predict and contain, across a number of sites, the engagement in struggle (Smith 1999, p.186).

In essence, Smith (1999) asserts that in order to create transformative praxis we must strategically position ourselves by bringing to the front and center the engagement in struggle. Emancipation gives greater control over the oppressed peoples’ lives and humanity (Smith, 1999, p.186). I began my journey by introducing the Mikowahp metaphor as a way to guide my research forward, to create a learning and teaching space to explore the area of Aboriginal parental engagement. In positioning my place in the Mikowahp, I brought in the Mikowahp tripod poles to represent the examination of the research problem, objectives, and questions. The poles indicate the current gaps in Aboriginal parental knowledge. The underlying premise that lay at the base of my Mikowahp is that schooling is a critical site of social participation in its own right, affecting a person’s orientation of self, and to the world in general. The prospect of transformation continues to depend on our commitment, our taking responsibility and our continual determination for social justice in the education system. In this chapter I wish to journey my study by first giving brief chapter summaries and then to leap forward to the reflective analysis of the research. The summary of the chapters reflects the act of moving forward from a place of intention to a place of transformation. This conclusion, in light of current knowledge in the field, will provide a comment on the significance and contribution of this research, comments on strengths and limitations of the research and my personal reflections. In Chapter One, a way to identify the research objective and questions, I used the metaphor of stretching out the canvas. One of the tasks of the FNMI team was to stretch out the canvas of the Mikowahp to check the condition of it before other schools/personnel would utilize it. We checked for wear and tear and any other damages such as mold stains. It gave us an indication as
to the environmental conditions when it was last set up and/or taken down. Metaphorically, when I was stretching out my canvas, I was looking to see the possible stressors and damage that the past educational practices have had on the current parental engagement. And, like we did when we stretched out the Mikowahp, I also checked for durability. The long lasting durability of the canvas reflects the existing promising practices of parental engagement. In Chapter One, I laid out my main objective of the study: to identify the factors that contribute to and hinder Aboriginal parent engagement. In preparation for my study, I developed three major questions that guided this Indigenist doctoral study. The questions that guided my study were:

1) What facilitates and hinders Aboriginal parental engagement in the Calgary Catholic Separate School system from the perspectives of Aboriginal parents and district teachers and leaders?

2) What would successful Aboriginal parental engagement look like from the perspective of Aboriginal parents and district/school teachers and leaders?

3) How could parents and district/school teachers and leaders create a plan for achieving meaningful Aboriginal parental/school engagement?

The focus of the study was to gain and develop a transparent understanding of parental engagement from FNMI parents’ perspectives and CSSD personnel and to see how this has impacted the relationship between the FNMI parents and the CCSD school District. In my work experience within CCSD I have seen successes and challenges in regards student achievement. This study was to try to find out from the participants how we can support students’ academic, social, physical, and spiritual needs. My overall sense from the study is that parents and administrators do want students to academically succeed however they also see the needs for other supports; social/emotional supports, spiritual guidance and access to Elders, physical supports (food, clothing, transportation). In my experience and in the responses of some of the administrators, engaging the parents would help improve the following:

- student attendance,
- sense of belonging,
- build and reinforce the importance of positive relationships with teachers, students and parents.
The ember that fueled my journey forward was the need find out how to foster FNMI parental engagement within the Calgary Catholic School District. I set the context for the discussion of parental engagement as an Aboriginal teacher working with the Calgary Catholic School District. I identified the importance of including parents’ voice in my study and, as well, the district personnel in attempts to get a panoramic view of the parental engagement in the Calgary Catholic School District.

As I was setting up camp, I reflected back on the stories that I have heard in my life journey about collective responsibility and community-based approaches to parental engagement. The stories shared the importance of having Elders and other community members as supports in childrearing. I chose to include the cultural perspectives of “onekihikomawiwin” parenthood at the beginning section as a way of educating the reader of the existence of traditional practices that have been handed down for generations prior to the coming of Euro-Western thought. The Witigo contact story was my way of retelling our Indigenous history from a Cree perspective. It animates how the ravishing effect of colonialism impacted Indigenous spirit, body, heart and mind. Euro-Western thought penetrated and challenged the existence of traditional parental practices, such as childrearing, and the collective well-being of the community.

Chapter Two, Acimowina: Hearing stories around the fire, asserted ownership of my pedagogical process in my writing. I chose to invite the reader into the Mikowahp and sit around the fire to hear the historical context of Indigenous education and parental engagement through an Indigenous lens and from existing research and literature. In the first section, I chose to rename the phases of the history of Aboriginal education using terms that I have heard in my educational travels: The dog days, The coming of the Witigo, Following the path of the buffalo, and Walking through the Storm. I then examined the existing literature relating to Aboriginal parental engagement. Works of Pearson (2007), Pushor (2001), and Freidel (1999), highlighted the barriers and benefits of parental engagement in the public system schools. Primarily, the studies revealed there are numerous communication issues to address, and fundamentally, it comes down to creating positive relationships with parents and teachers. The literature reveals that building relationships with Aboriginal parents’; understanding Aboriginal knowledge; having personal awareness; and, working with purpose, will increase parental engagement. Some promising practices identified were: programs that included governance initiatives, Aboriginal support
services, school orientation/activities, cultural awareness, partnerships with outside agencies and communities. The literature points out that there is still mistrust and lack of understanding of Aboriginal peoples’ struggles and colonial oppression, and, that these issues impede parental involvement.

In Chapter Three, Respecting the protocols of the Mikowahp, I refer to Kovach (2009) and Wilson (2008) to emphasize the importance of locating Indigenous Methodologies in qualitative research. I introduce my Mikowahp approach as a research guide that adheres to the Nehiyawak values, protocols and ethics. As I stated in chapter one, I use the Mikowahp as a methodology and the base of the Mikowahp as theory. The interrelatedness of my methodology and theory is premised on the necessity to present my study in holistic respectful manner. The Mikowahp has many parts that have significant teachings and are intimately interconnected. Each part of the Mikowahp is based on the knowledge history and culture of the Cree. An important part of the Mikowahp, also known as the Four Natural Laws, guided my theoretical processes of my research. Before starting to set up camp, the preparation of the space needed to be established. Traditionally, the grass on the ground would be patted down in a circle before erecting the Mikowahp. In my case, I was patting down what I believe were the important values that lay at the base (theory) of the Mikowahp Indigenous research. Kovach (2009) refers to this as research preparation- when a researcher “describes the experiential aspect of the research”. She adds by stating that research preparation would also include the miskasowin, a Cree word which means to go to the center of yourself to find your own belonging. (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 21).

In regards to my research, the Four Natural Laws grounded and guided me to conduct research that was culturally appropriate for both the researcher and the participants. The four laws of nature of the Cree Mikowahp: wicitowin (sharing), kiseywatisowin (caring/kindness/generosity), kweyaskatesowin (honesty), and sohxisowin (strength/determination), are infused in me and thus became an integral theoretical and methodological part of my research.

Chapter Four, Acimostakewin- Being informational, presented the perspectives of parental engagement from two parent focus groups, a FNMI district focus group, and six district leaders. The data was grouped under four main underlying themes; relationships, reciprocal responsibility, Aboriginal context, and Indigenous knowledge and culture. The participants spoke to the importance of building trust, maintaining the support offered by FNMI programs,
improving access to resources in schools for the students and families, Aboriginal professional development for CSSD district staff, inclusion of Elders and community resources, and FNMI inclusion within the school curriculum and pedagogy. The summary section described transformative action by using the principles of Kaupapa Maori praxis: self-determination, validating and legitimizing cultural aspirations, incorporating culturally appropriate pedagogy, mediating socio-economic and home difficulties, and incorporating cultural structures which emphasize the “collective” rather than the individual.

In Chapter Five, Ewi-miskawasimitan - Sharing new information to one person, I introduced the Mikowahp Tripod FNMI Parental Engagement Framework. Included in this Framework is the importance of the three poles in establishing a solid tripod in relation to Relationship building, Elders, and Leadership. As stated in chapter five, it is important to include concepts of leadership and to include Elders in parental engagement. To support the Mihowahp Tripod Framework is the development of the Mikowahp Engagement Tool. I would like to make it clear that for this tool to be effectively utilized, parents, teachers and Elders/community must be included. It is a starting point in developing the process of relationship building based on tripod values of respect, obedience, and humility. Co-creating a plan to decide on the values of the Engagement Tool that could be implemented first is a starting point for positive change. It is not a one day professional development exercise but an ongoing process of revisiting, modifying what works and what needs to be changed to improve parental engagement.

Chapter Six, Tawayiyak-we will pack; Taking down the Mikowahp, is a presentation of a summary of the research study, a review of both the limitations and the contributions of the research study, transferability of findings, and personal reflections.

**Contribution and Significance of Dissertation**

As a Cree woman, Indigenous researcher, and educator I have presented the Mikowahp Tripod as a new perspective in the field of parental engagement. This thesis makes a contribution to the literature as it provides some insight to the complexities of First Nation, Metis, and Inuit parent engagement from both rural and urban perspectives in a large school district. As stated in Chapter One, there has been an increase in interest and research in parent engagement, however, there is limited research about Aboriginal parent engagement. In Chapter One I identified Pushor’s five gaps of knowledge in relation to Aboriginal parental engagement. My study adds
to existing Indigenous research and literature of parental engagement in a Canadian context. My study examines parental engagement through the eyes and experiences of the parents and, secondly, through the eyes and experiences of the educators. I felt that having both representations gave a wider spectrum of Aboriginal Parent Engagement in CSSD District. The study also adds to the body of literature as it reflects parental knowledge as opposed to solely focusing on teacher knowledge of parental engagement.

This research is an important step towards the development of district-wide plans of parental engagement that are inclusive of both the urban and rural parents and the experiences the school district leaders. Many school districts in Alberta have a combination of urban FNMI students who reside in small towns or cities and FNMI students who live in First Nation Reservations and Metis settlements. The study gives the district, and other school districts, knowledge of the subtle differences of urban and rural students within parent engagement. However, it must be acknowledged that the Calgary Catholic School District is increasingly promoting parental engagement at the school level and at the district level. My contribution and significance of this study was the engagement of parents from the grassroots level, with everyone in the circle of the Mikowahp having a say and being listened to. In my professional experience as an educator, colleagues often asked me how they can involve Aboriginal parents and students. This study provides educators a glimpse of parents’ aspirations for their children’s education. The talking circles created a venue where parents had the opportunity to voice their opinions and allowed them to become involved with their children’s learning. Pearson (2007) encapsulates the critical role that parents play in the development of the plan and cautions ‘not to tell them’ what to do but “ask them” what they can do. Most importantly, it is my hope, as well as one shared by the participants, that these discussions will provide a platform for continual dialogues and transformative practices within the Calgary Catholic School District. The research should be used to build upon the future education of our FNMI students, through inclusive practices of our education systems in regards to parent engagement. As stated previously, there are diverse FNMI populations in the rural and urban settings with differing contextual situations and educational needs. My Cree Mikowahp Tripod framework is an example of how we can create our own Indigenous educational frameworks that encompasses and reflects Indigenous knowledge and values within educational institutions.
Another significant contribution of this research is that it moves towards the understanding and the validation of Indigenous scholars using Indigenous research frameworks from Indigenous perspectives. Absolon (2011) states, that using Indigenous frameworks validates Indigenous methodologies and helps set the path for future Indigenous researchers. As I shaped the chapters I felt that it was important to integrate Cree terms as chapter titles and key concepts. As a Cree woman, with parents who spoke to me in Cree, I felt that the teachings they shared with me would be lost in translation if I just put them in English. Many images come to mind including social and cultural protocols, memories, and stories. For example, in a singular Cree term like “onekihikkomawiwin” (parenthood), using Cree terms honours these teachings. I take what I know and present it in a way that reflects who I am as Cree woman. I must state that I am not a fluent speaker but was brought up in a house where Cree was spoken daily. The Cree words that were used are imbedded with who I am, my feelings, and my cultural and spiritual worldview. It validates the importance of languages and its place in academia.

Journeying to the Next Camp - Transportability of Knowledge

As I pack up camp, I certainly believe the findings of this study could be impetus for other school districts and other educational institutes to reflect upon their own educational context. Although the Mikowahp Engagement Tripod was specific to this study, the three core values certainly would be relevant in many settings. For example, many school districts in Alberta have First Nations that are familiar with the Mikowahp teachings. The transportability of knowledge, implementation of my research and engagement to tool can be used across sites that involve parents/family, FNMI staff and administrators.

Limitations

This thesis is limited in terms of the scope the study, the 36 participants in the study are but a small fraction of the parents in the district and the District personal. In retrospect, I could have put all the district FNMI parents in the draw for random selection however I thought prudent to chose specific schools that have high populations of FNMI students. The one population that was not represented was the Inuit population. Some of the participants that I selected were unable to attend because of work responsibilities and some said they would prefer not to participate and stated that they deal strictly with the school. I thought about this and wondered if that meant they
would rather not be under the FNMI Umbrella of services. Perhaps they just wanted to be part of the mainstream. I felt that it was not my place to dwell deeper and to respect their choice. As well, there are some parents who do not self-identify their children upon school registration. In hindsight, perhaps I could have asked if the CSSD could place an announcement of my study on the district web page.

**Personal Reflection**

When I first chose my research topic of parental engagement I felt a little apprehensive and unsure of the direction I would follow over the next few years. The one thought that lingered was the need to be transparent about parent engagement from the parents’ perspectives and the district staff’s perspectives. I also wanted to do a study that respected the protocols of both the district and the urban/rural Aboriginal parents. In past analysis of intellectual sources I have made the analogy of the importance of looking through different lenses, such as the buffalo’s monocular vision. Our need to centralize and address Indigenous educational issues has unfolded many perspectives, theories and practices on how to fix what was once known as the “Indian Problem”. The impetus of my study was to bring a more panoramic view of the differing perspectives of parental engagement. The advantage of having a panoramic vision of existing perspectives is that we are able to move forward and make collective decisions in planning an educational path that meets the needs of our Indigenous students, parents, and communities. The greatest challenge, as clearly expressed by Bastein (2002), is to create a blended educational context that respects and builds upon Indigenous and Eurocentric knowledge systems. I believe that schooling is a critical site of social participation in its own right, affecting a person’s orientation to self, to others, and to the world in general. So far, in my life’s journey, I have been fortunate to be surrounded by Elders and knowledge keepers of all ages. As I began this research journey, my objective was to create a study that would allow CSSD parents and district to share their personal educational experiences and contributions to increasing parental engagement. As the study unfolded I found it necessary to include my stories, and other relevant stories that I heard along my life journey. At first I was apprehensive to tell my stories and I questioned their relevance. Perhaps this stemmed from the oppressive experiences I have had in educational institutions and within society. What bolstered me forward were the teachings of my father. He would tell me that we are born with a brain and a mouth and to use them to help people.
Furthermore, I thought that if I can’t take the leap to tell my stories then how can I expect the participants to tell their stories. Being an Aboriginal researcher gave me a subjective view of the participants’ responses. I could relate to their stories because I lived, learned, and worked in the district their children attend. It was as if I was on the inside looking out and not on the outside looking in. The challenge was the realization that the parents knew I worked for the CSSD. I was concerned that they may not share openly with me or that they would think I had a district-motivated agenda. Ultimately, I think being Aboriginal and knowing the school district helped them feel at ease.

**Future Research and Practice**

One of the areas of interest for further research is father parent engagement in educational institutions and/or decolonizing father parental engagement practices. Transformative action requires us to take the responsibility and resilience from the ancestors, our present families and communities and the future generations. Smith (2003) suggests that “When Indigenous people are in educational crisis, Indigenous educators and teachers must be trained to be ‘change agents’ to develop transformation of the undesirable circumstances” (p.14). The knowledge gained from this research gives the CSSD School District additional feedback to move forward in developing stronger and more efficient FNMI parental practices.

In conclusion, I would like to revisit the inspiring words of Elder Sykes Powderface that inspired me to go forward with this research. He stated that, the spirit speaks, the heart believes, the mind thinks, and the body does. The spirit is your guide to what needs to be done, and your heart is the conviction to make a difference. The mind thinks of all the possibilities and the desire to create change. The body creates the action. It propels us to create change in order to better others and ourselves. Smith (2003) states that in order to make change we need to shift away from waiting for things to be done. We need to be proactive instead of reactive by shifting away from negative thinking to being positively motivated.

*Nanaskomowin (I am being thankful)*
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Cardinal, H. Interview with Richard Lightening in *Saddle Lake Interviews*. Indian History Film Project, SIFC Library, Office of Specific Claims and Research, 1975, IH-220.


McIntosh, J. (2008). *Family background, parental involvement, and academic achievement in Canadian schools* (Unpublished study). Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec.


Pushor, D., Ruitenberg, C., with co-researchers from Princess Alexandra Community School. (2005). Parent engagement and leadership (Research report, project no.134). Saskatoon, Canada: Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation For Research into Teaching.


Appendix A: Focus Group and Interview Guide for Parents and CCSSD Personnel

Parent Focus Group

1. Please tell me how many children you have attended or are attending the Calgary Catholic School District?
2. Why did you choose the Calgary Catholic Separate School District over the Public System?
3. Tell me about the relationship between the Tsuu Tina Nation and school district.
4. Can you describe the types of parental engagement in your school? Of these types are there any that result in good quality parental engagement? If yes, please tell me what makes them successful. If they don’t result in positive impact, what prevents them from being successful?
5. Does the school encourage parental engagement? If yes, how do they? If no, why do you think that the school does not?
6. Do you feel comfortable going to your child’s school? Do you get involved with school activities? Why or why not?
7. Can you give me an example of seeing or experiencing successful parental engagement with the school? Please tell me about.
8. From your experience can you identify some struggles and barriers that prevent Aboriginal parents from fully participating in their child’s education? Can you give an example and tell me about it.
9. What are the ways that you support or are involved with your child’s education? Do you feel that the school teachers or principal know about or recognize these types of parental engagement? Why or Why not?
10. To what extent is First Nation, Metis, Inuit culture being taught in the school? Do you feel it is important? Why and why not? Does the inclusion of Aboriginal culture make any difference to the extent and quality of Aboriginal parental engagement with the school?
11. If you were principal trying to encourage First Nation, Metis, Inuit parent engagement, what would you do? Or if you could send a message to the principal to help him or her encourage FNMI parent engagement, what would you say? Why would you encourage your suggestions?
12. What would be your ideal image of successful Aboriginal parental engagement with the school?
13. Is there anything else that you would like to say regarding Aboriginal parental engagement with the school?
**District Personnel Interview and District Personnel Focus Group**

1. Tell me about the relationship between the Tsuu Tina Nation and the school district. How would you characterize the relationship as it is today? (rural focus group only and designated schools)

2. Can you describe the types of Aboriginal parental engagement in your school? Of these types are there any result in good quality parental engagement? If yes, please tell me what makes them successful. If they don’t result in positive impact, what prevents them from being successful?

3. Does your school/district encourage Aboriginal parental engagement? If yes, how do they? If no, why do you think that the school does not?

4. Can you give me an example of seeing or experiencing successful Aboriginal parental engagement with the school/district? Please tell me about.

5. From your experience can you identify some struggles and barriers that prevent Aboriginal parents from fully participating in their child’s education? Can you give an example and tell me about it.

6. Are there any differences between Aboriginal parental engagement of those who live on reserve or in the city? If there are differences, are there any reasons for them?

7. What are the ways that you see Aboriginal parents/caregivers support their child’s education? Do you feel that the school teachers or staff know about or recognize these types of parental engagement? Why or Why not?

8. To what extent is First Nations, Metis, Inuit culture being taught in the school? Do you feel it is important? Why and why not? Does the inclusion of Aboriginal culture make any difference to the quality or extent of Aboriginal parental engagement with the school?

9. As principal/administration/district personnel trying to encourage First Nation, Metis, Inuit parent engagement, what do you do? If you could send a message to the staff or district to encourage FNMI parent engagement, what would you say? Why would you encourage your suggestions?

10. How could the Calgary Catholic School Board increase, strengthen, and sustain Aboriginal parental engagement? What would be your ideal image of effective Aboriginal parental engagement with the school?

11. Is there anything else that you would like to say regarding Aboriginal parental engagement?
## Appendix B: Mikowahp Pole Teachings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Mikowahp Poles</strong></th>
<th><strong>Mikowahp Kiskinînhamâkewin - Pole Teachings</strong></th>
<th><strong>Mikowahp Akwamohcikewin Kiskinohamâkewin - Applications in Education</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nanahitamowin - Obedience</td>
<td>Accepting guidance and wisdom from outside ourselves.</td>
<td>Active listening, sharing knowledge between parties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kisteyihtamân - Respect</td>
<td>Honour basic rights of all others.</td>
<td>Respecting differences and acknowledging biases, teachers learning about FNMI cultures and communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tapwahteyimowan - Humility</td>
<td>We are not above or below others in the circle of life.</td>
<td>Willingness to change and flexibility in teaching ideology and pedagogy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiyatikwemowin - Happiness</td>
<td>Enthusiasm to encourage others, our good actions will make both our community and ancestors proud.</td>
<td>Positive contact with parents, students, and community. Promote self-discovery and encourage positive cultural identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sakitowin - Love</td>
<td>Accept one another; be good to one another and to ourselves.</td>
<td>Promote a positive, nurturing educational environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tapowakeyihtawowin - Faith</td>
<td>Believe and trust in others and to believe in a power greater than ourselves.</td>
<td>Building trust with parents, students and communities. Consistent and sustainable initiatives that form strong foundations for trust in the educational system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wahkohtowin - Kinship</td>
<td>Family is important and gives us roots to the Earth. Family extends beyond the immediate family, and includes the entire community.</td>
<td>Acknowledging the importance of community and family relationships within FNMI childhood development, as well as with parent involvement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kanateyimowin - Cleanliness</td>
<td>Clear thoughts come from a clean mind and this comes from our spirituality. We do not inflict ills on others and take care of our bodies when we have a clean mind.</td>
<td>Open mindedness to the particular social context and impacts on FNMI students that may impede their learning. Using strategies to promote positive responses to these barriers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanaskomowin - Thankfulness</td>
<td>Allow to be thankful for the things we have and for all the kind things others do for us.</td>
<td>Special celebrations in and out of the community to acknowledge student achievement and promote community involvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wicihitôwin - Sharing</td>
<td>Working together so that we all may prosper. Family and community share and take responsibility so that all members are taken care of.</td>
<td>Both parents and teachers need to create bonds by finding common ground from life experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sohkeyihtamowin - Strength</td>
<td>We must learn to be patient in times of trouble and not to complain but to endure and show understanding.</td>
<td>Understand family dynamics and how they may impact learning, retention and parent participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miyo-ohpikinâwasowin - Good child rearing.</td>
<td>Children are gifts of the creator. We are all responsible for their well being; spiritually, emotionally, physically, and intellectually.</td>
<td>Collaboratively identify and provide resources and program supports at school and in the community; Cultural, educational and health workshops.</td>
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<td>Hope</td>
<td>We must look forward to moving toward good things. We need to have a sense that the seeds we are planting will bear fruit for our children, families and communities</td>
<td>Planning and regular communication with parent in regards to students learning and well-being (social, mental, physical, spiritual)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kanaweyimikosowin - Ultimate protection</td>
<td>This is the ultimate responsibility to achieve the balance and well being of the body mind and emotions and spirit for the individual, the family, community and the nation.</td>
<td>Recognition that the parent is primary teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mamaweyitotawin - Control Flaps</td>
<td>We are all connected by relationships and we depend on each other. We cannot exist alone. Flaps represent which First Nation it belongs to- hole or pocket.</td>
<td>Each adult in the school or home has influence with the parent and student. Acknowledge that each First Nation, Métis, Inuit groups have their own culture, language and social contexts.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
## Appendix C: Mikowahp Engagement Tool - All Poles

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mikowahp Poles</th>
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<th>Start Date</th>
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<th>Improvements</th>
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<td>Topowak^Kwawin - Faith</td>
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<td>Building trust with parents, students and communities. Consistent and sustainable initiatives which form strong foundations for trust in the educational system.</td>
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<td>Kanawayikonsowin - Ultimate protection</td>
<td>This is the ultimate responsibility to achieve the balance and well being of the body mind and emotions and spirit for the individual, the family, community and the nation.</td>
<td>Recognition that the parent is primary teacher.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mamawayikakwahn - Control Flaps</td>
<td>We are all connected by relationships and we depend on each other. We cannot exist alone. Flaps represents which First Nation it belongs to: hole or pocket.</td>
<td>Each adult in the school or home has influence with the parent and student. Acknowledge that each First Nation, Metis and Inuit group have their own culture, language and social context.</td>
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