FANNING THE TEACHER FIRE:
AN EXPLORATION OF FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO TEACHER SUCCESS IN FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES

by

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The University of British Columbia
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ABSTRACT

This study explores the conditions that contribute to teacher success in First Nations communities by focusing on the experiences of educators and community members from the Ermineskin Reserve, which is located in central Alberta. The study addresses the question: what factors do educators and community members identify as being major contributors to the success of teachers in First Nations communities? The study is based on a review and analysis of data obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted with twelve teachers, six administrators, six Native students and six parents of Native children. These educators and community members share their experiences and ideas about how teacher success can be optimized in First Nations settings.

The study identifies a number of interrelated factors that positively and negatively influence the work of teachers in First Nations communities. Educators and community members emphasize the importance of educators and community members working together to create a school system that not only meets the needs of students but also nurtures and validates educators, parents and the larger First Nations community. Recommendations are provided for educators, Native communities, Native school boards, and post-secondary institutions who are interested in developing, nurturing and supporting teacher success in First Nations settings.
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I would also like to acknowledge Bernadine WalkingBear and the Poundmaker First Nation for their continuous support.
DEDICATION

In memory of the late

Kevin Sparklingeyes

Whose thoughtful and sensitive nature,
Taught me to explore and enjoy
The many complexities of the teaching world.
A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

The words and terms used to identify Aboriginal people in Canada have changed over the years. Indeed the meanings of some words such as Indian, Native and Aboriginal may change according to who is speaking and the context of the situation. In his 1994 report The Recruitment and Retention of Aboriginal Teachers in Saskatchewan Schools, James NcNinch provides the following useful guidelines:

- The word Indian is currently being replaced by the phrase First Nations people because the word Indian is an obvious misrepresentation based on the misjudgment of European explorers heading west from Europe hoping to arrive in the East Indies;

- The term First Nations refers to those Aboriginals who are descendants of the original Indigenous population. The phrase is regarded as appropriate because it not only refers to the primacy of first peoples but implies the significance of their social groupings (nations), not just individuals. The term does not, at least yet, include the Métis;

- The term Aboriginal includes Indian, Métis and Inuit peoples;

- The term Native, refers to people of Indian ancestry, including the Métis. (p. 95)

I am aware that in the province of Alberta many people continue to use the term “Native” and some people use it to refer to status Indians as well as to nonstatus and Métis people. Since many of the participants in this study use the term “Native” to refer to status Indians I have decided to use the terms First Nations, Aboriginal and Native interchangeably.

In this study the terms teacher success and teacher effectiveness are used interchangeably. During the interview process I did not provide participants with a specific definition of these two terms. Rather, I was more interested in learning what these terms meant to individual educators, students and parents. Chapters 4 and 6 present summaries of how research participants define teacher success in First Nations settings.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The day of the official opening began with drumming... students in traditional dress took part in the ribbon cutting and later danced for the guests. The school's unique feather design is based on the power and vision represented by the eagle feather... the school is bright and airy with graceful curves and vaulted ceilings. An open circular gathering area with a carpeted two-tiered seating arrangement around the perimeter is the first sight that greets visitors. The vaulted ceiling is made of hanging pieces of cedar in a spiral design that again speaks of the Aboriginal belief in the strength and unity of the circle. Aboriginal educator William C. Thomas, superintendent of education for the Peguis School Board... was one of the guest speakers. Thomas praised the beautiful building but said it was just the beginning, "The real work is what you do in the building." (Hewson and Hayes, 1995, p. 10)

The October 1995 edition of Alberta Sweetgrass featured the above report describing the grand opening of the new Driftpile School in northern Alberta. As I read the article my teacher instincts urged me to skim over the physical descriptions of the building in search of details informing me about the type of educational programming that was being planned for the new school. I agree with William Thomas as he reminds us that the true measure of a school's "beauty" is based on what happens inside the school and not on the physical structure of the building. While conducting interviews for this study I listened to educators, parents and students echo Thomas' sentiments as they emphasized the essential nature of the work that occurs within First Nations schools.

In Aboriginal communities all across Canada educators and community members are striving to develop quality educational systems. At the present time, 97% of reserve-based schools in Canada are administered by band education authorities (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada [INAC], 1995c). Assuming new responsibilities for school operations presents First Nations communities with a set of new challenges.
The quality and effectiveness of any educational system is contingent upon the skills and capabilities of the educators who work in that system. Consequently, one of the key responsibilities facing Aboriginal communities is the task of finding and keeping ‘good’ teachers. Unfortunately, while many educators may possess effective teaching skills they may not be adequately prepared for teaching in First Nations settings (MacNeil, cited in Friesen, 1984). Being ill-prepared to work in Aboriginal communities is just one of the reasons why many teachers spend only one to two years in a particular Native community. High teacher turnover rates have been a concern for First Nations communities for many years (Friesen, 1984). For school boards that are attempting to revitalize their schools, confronting the conditions that lead to poor teacher retention rates is essential.

Aware of the need to establish a stable teaching force, many local school boards are seeking to create environments where educators will be able to work successfully with students, parents and community members. However, at the present time, the research literature lacks an exploration of how various factors interact to positively and negatively influence the teaching experience in Canadian First Nations communities. If community members wish to ensure their children will be taught by teachers who are able to work effectively in their schools, the community must be able to answer an important question; what are the factors that will contribute to the success of teachers in our community?

The purpose of this study is to provide information that will increase understanding of how teacher success can be optimized in First Nations schools. At the heart of the project is a presentation and analysis of the experiences and opinions of eighteen educators and twelve community members working and living on the Ermineskin Reserve in central
Alberta. The study examines the factors these educators and community members identify as being major contributors to the success of teachers in Aboriginal communities.

**Significance of Study**

A study that is able to increase understanding of how teachers can work successfully in First Nations settings has the potential to benefit a wide range of institutions, interest groups and communities. Post-secondary institutions may use the findings of this research project to develop teacher training programs that will better prepare educators for teaching in Native settings. Present and prospective teachers and administrators may use the knowledge gained from this study to refine specific work practices. The research findings might assist First Nations communities in the development of strategies to support and nurture successful teaching behaviours. Provincial school boards with high native student populations may also find the research findings helpful in the examination of personnel and school policies. This study also makes a contribution to the body of knowledge concerning successful teaching practices in Canadian First Nations communities.

**Reflexivity: Acknowledging Researcher Location**

Critical ethnographers and feminist philosophers have criticized research methodologies that fail to acknowledge the researcher's social and political location. Harding (1991) notes that many "individuals express 'heartfelt desire' not to harm the subjects they observe, to become aware of their own cultural biases . . . but such reflexive goals remain at the level of desire rather than competent enactment" (p. 162,163). Harding’s observations are accurate; I know how difficult it is for me to gain meaning
from a piece of research when the cultural beliefs and practices of the author are either not
acknowledged or are merely alluded to in a single paragraph. In an effort to break away
from this tradition of what Harding terms “weak reflexivity," I attempt, throughout this
thesis, to provide my audience with a strong sense of my presence.

The process of deciding which aspects of my personal experiences and beliefs I am
willing to share with readers has been difficult for me. While I have been working on this
study I have kept a journal where I record my thoughts and reactions to the research
process. Shortly after I began to write this thesis, I made a journal entry where I
developed a list of those personal experiences and beliefs that I thought most influenced
this research project. The following journal excerpt demonstrates my ambivalence about
sharing certain portions of this list with my audience.

- My initial feeling right now is this is too revealing -- yet, if I was reading a thesis
  that included this type of information, the research would seem so much more
  “complete” and “real.” How brave do I want to be?

Most of my hesitancy about revealing certain aspects of my personal life is a fear of
having the trustworthiness of my research questioned. I am an educator who is
conducting research in an educational setting. More importantly, I am a First Nations
woman conducting research in a First Nations setting. I think that my experiences as a
Native person and a Native educator shine a particular kind of light on my research.

However, I wonder if some readers might use my openness to claim that my research
findings have somehow been “distorted” by researcher bias. While I and others may
believe that critical reflexivity enhances the trustworthiness of research, I must also
acknowledge that, by being reflexive, I run the risk of being “othered” by certain members
of my reading audience.
Ultimately, I developed a compromise; one that I think allows me to locate myself in relation to my research and yet respects my personal boundaries. To the extent that certain aspects of my social biography seem relevant to various dimensions of the research process, I attempt to identify them. For example, in this chapter I relate how my research interest was informed by my personal and professional experiences as a First Nations educator. What I have tried to do throughout the writing of this thesis is to practice what Harding (1991) calls “strong reflexivity.” According to Harding, operationalizing strong reflexivity requires,

...that the objects of inquiry be conceptualized as gazing back in all their cultural particularity and that the researcher, through theory and methods, stand behind them, gazing back at his own socially situated research project in all its cultural particularity and its relationships to other projects of his culture -- many of which can be seen only from locations far away from the scientist’s actual daily work. (Harding, p. 163)

In many ways, as I conducted my fieldwork, analysis and writing, I was walking on two different learning paths simultaneously. Through my interactions with participants I learned a great deal about how educators, students and parents conceptualize the work of teaching. By making an effort to regularly step back and try to obtain a panoramic view of the entire research process, I also learned very much about how I view the work of teaching. In addition, I obtained both glimpses and detailed pictures of the variety of ethical, political and methodological issues that are an inevitable component of all research projects.

**Development of Research Interest**

My interest in exploring how teacher success can be optimized in Native communities has grown directly out of my personal and professional experiences during
the ten years that I have worked in First Nations settings. I came to graduate studies after being involved in the field of Native education in a variety of capacities including that of social worker, teacher and guidance counsellor.

The Lure of The Teaching Profession

Immediately after obtaining my social work degree I worked as a Native liaison worker for a large urban school board. My main role was to promote effective communication between schools and Native homes. I worked with a large number of First Nations students and families, some of who were struggling with a range of personal problems. However, despite the nature and extent of these social pressures most students displayed an intense desire to succeed in school. Native parents also consistently communicated the high value they placed on their children’s education. I soon became increasingly interested in the idea of entering the field of teaching.

While conducting an interview with one of the Native teachers who participated in this study, we discovered that we shared a similar initial attraction to teaching. During our interview I responded to one of her comments with,

- That’s exactly why I made the decision to go into teaching. Just like you’re saying -- I kind of envied teachers because they had all that time with the kids every day and I really saw it as a way to create change.

I thought that by becoming a classroom teacher I might have the potential to support Native students in a more practical manner than I was able to in my role as a social worker. I eventually acted on my “envy” of teachers and returned to university to obtain an education degree.
Identification of Research Interest

My teaching career has been comprised of working as: (1) an itinerant teacher for a large urban school board; (2) a classroom teacher on a Métis settlement; (3) a Stay-In-School Coordinator for a small rural school with a large Native population; and (4) a guidance counsellor in a federally operated reserve school. Working in a variety of educational settings has exposed me to an array of issues that are of concern to educators and First Nations communities.

Over the years I have worked with many teachers, administrators and community members who are dedicated to the development of schools that will effectively meet the needs of Native children. I have also come to appreciate the existence of factors that prevent teachers, principals and parents from working together to create positive school environments. For example, I have worked with obviously skilled teachers who had somehow lost their desire to “operationalize” their latent teacher talents. I have personally experienced the challenge of working in schools where staff tension or school-community discord serves to create a stressful working environment. However, in each educational setting that I have worked, I have always been struck by the tremendous amount of potential that was being hidden and constrained; potential on the part of teachers, administrators and community members to work together to create vibrant and successful educational systems.

As a classroom teacher and guidance counsellor I felt a limited ability to effect change in my work settings. On an almost daily basis I listened to colleagues describe a variety of circumstances that were interfering with their ability to conduct their “teacher work.” Although the schools that I worked in had a relatively stable teaching force I often
heard or read about other First Nations communities where each summer, local school boards were confronted with the responsibility of recruiting a large number of new teachers. I knew that many Native communities were facing a regular exodus of teachers, many of whom were dedicated and talented educators. After seven years of teaching, I decided to return to university. I wanted to complete a graduate program of study that would help me understand how First Nations communities could work to create school environments that not only nurtured students and community members but also attended to the needs of educators.

Overview of the Research Process

In September 1993 I began my Master of Arts program in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia (UBC). I enrolled in courses I thought would provide me with the background knowledge and research skills necessary to effectively explore my research interest. During one of my courses, I completed a brief review of the literature related to teacher success in Native communities. Conducting the literature review allowed me to further refine my research problem. As described in Chapter 2, the results of the literature review indicated a need for primary research that addressed the following question: what factors do educators and community members identify as being major contributors to the success of teachers in First Nations settings?

Since I wanted this study to explore the human dynamics of teaching in Native communities, I knew that addressing my research problem would require the use of qualitative methodology. In particular, through the use of interviews I would be given an opportunity to explore the views and experiences of educators and community members. It was very early in the research process that I decided to interview students and parents in
addition to teachers and administrators. Based on my experiences as an educator, I believe that students and parents have important views about how teachers can work successfully in Native communities. I have also come to believe that if a community is to be successful in refining educational policies, educators and community members must work together.

**Identifying a Research Site**

For a number of reasons, I decided to conduct my fieldwork on the Ermineskin Reserve, which is located 80 kilometres south of Edmonton, Alberta. I have personal connections to this research setting. The Ermineskin Reserve is one of four Cree reserves that surround the central Alberta town of Hobbema. The countryside surrounding Hobbema is known as Bear Hills and is home to the Ermineskin, Louis Bull, Montana and Samson bands. Although I did not grow up in Hobbema my late mother, Harriet Tootoosis (nee Crier), was originally a member of the Samson band and my late father, Roderick Lightning, also grew up in the Hobbema area. I completed my education in a small rural provincial school that was located approximately 50 kilometres southeast of Hobbema. I have immediate and extended family that continue to live in Hobbema.

At the present time, all four Hobbema bands operate schools on their reserves. Some people have asked me why I chose to interview only Ermineskin teachers and community members. There were several reasons for this decision. From personal and professional contacts I was aware that many teachers currently employed in Ermineskin schools have a considerable amount of teaching experience in First Nations settings. Some of these teachers have spent most of their teaching years working in the Ermineskin
community and I felt that their experiences would make an important contribution to this research project.

I was also informed that during the 1993/94 school year the education system on the Ermineskin reserve had undergone some important changes. A new school board had been elected and in May of 1994, Brian Wildcat\(^1\) was employed as the new Director of Education. I was informed that people were generally appreciative of the manner in which Mr. Wildcat and the new school board interacted with the community and the school staff. It appeared that the education system that was being developed on the Ermineskin Reserve would provide a useful setting in which to explore my research topic.

**Organization of Thesis**

I conducted my fieldwork during the month of March 1995 and I spent the next ten months transcribing interview tapes, conducting analysis and summarizing the results of the study. The next six chapters provide an overview of this research process and a presentation of the study’s findings.

Chapter 2 analyzes the primary and secondary literature that has explored issues related to teaching in Aboriginal communities. This literature is drawn from the fields of cross cultural and Native education. The purpose of this literature review is to provide a context for addressing the research question. Given the evolutionary nature of qualitative research, I continued to review new pieces of literature throughout the data collection and analysis phases of the study. Therefore, throughout the thesis, I make reference to research that is directly related to methodology issues or to the findings of the study. This

\(^1\) Brian Wildcat has reviewed and approved all references that are made to him in this thesis. He has also read and approved the use of all quotes that identify him as the source.
literature is drawn from the fields of anti-racist pedagogy, critical ethnography, feminist research methodology and Native education.

In Chapter 3 I describe the research methods used to complete this study. Keeping in mind that schools are very much a part of a larger social and political structure, I also provide a brief historical profile of the research site. Chapter 3 concludes with a discussion of how I addressed those ethical issues that emerged as a natural process of conducting this particular study.

Together, chapters 4, 5 and 6 comprise the most significant component of this study. Chapter 4 features a summary and discussion of student and parent perceptions about how teacher success can be optimized in First Nations settings. The experiences and viewpoints shared by students and parents in Chapter 4 provide a context for the exploration of those educator perspectives that are presented in Chapters 5 and 6. In Chapter 5, educators describe their initial attraction to the field of teaching and they also explain how and why they chose to teach in First Nations communities. Chapter 6 examines the experiences of teachers and administrators as they describe how various factors influence their teaching experience in Native schools.

Chapter 7 synthesizes the information presented in Chapters 1 through 6. This final chapter concludes with a set of recommendations for educators, Native communities and post-secondary institutions who are interested in developing, nurturing and supporting successful teaching behaviours in First Nations settings.
How Indians and a non-Indian befriend each other takes time -- quiet, patient, cautious observation. And what creates that threshold over which a non-Indian may step into the heart of an Indian family often takes that much more time. I had no plans to love and feel a part of a Cree family. I’m sure they hadn’t planned on me. But we spent time together -- lots of it. We grew to know what it meant to share the same space, to discuss and respect the differences between our cultures, to accept our daily, culturally influenced routines, and to have fun together, whether at a powwow or at a bowling alley, whether watching a Cree-style hand game or betting on a furious round of Yahtzee, whether laughing over dinner at a restaurant or at a traditional feast. The paradox: To be taken into an Indian family, or, for that matter, any family, is something that requires no effort and every effort at the same time. It’s interest in each other. It’s confusion. It’s agreement. It’s compromise. It’s talking. It’s silent communication. It’s shared happiness and shared sadness. No one decides such things; they either happen or they don’t -- or sometimes when they do, perhaps they were meant to. (Fedullo, 1992, pp. 225-226)

The above words were written by Mick Fedullo, a non-Native teacher who has taught in various Native American communities since 1979. Fedullo’s book, *Light of the Feather*, is an autobiographical account of his experiences as a non-Native educator living and working in Native communities. Although I read Fedullo’s book before I conducted my “formal” search and review of the literature, his work and other teacher narratives have informed my research in a number of important ways. By reading poems, stories, and autobiographies authored by educators, my understanding of the issues related to teaching in Native communities has been enhanced. In particular, I have learned the value of providing individuals with an opportunity to “tell their stories” in their own way; and my research design was informed by this notion. While the remainder of this chapter explores the “formal” academic literature that has influenced my study, I wanted to begin
this discussion by acknowledging the fundamental contribution that "teacher stories" have made to the development of my study.

In the remainder of this chapter, I examine the theoretical, conceptual and research literature that helped me to refine my original research problem and to develop a study design that would address my questions. The literature that I explore in this chapter is drawn from the fields of cross cultural education and Native education.

**Teaching Effectively in First Nations Settings: The Evolution of a Literature Base**

Over the last twenty-five years, researchers have explored a variety of issues related to the experience of teaching in First Nations communities. A large portion of this research has focused on the identification of teacher traits and teaching strategies that would ostensibly assist educators in effectively meeting the needs of Native students. A chronological analysis of the literature will reveal how this complex body of research has been afflicted with recurring problems. I chose to conduct a chronological review so that I could describe how this particular research base has moved through several distinct phases. I found that my own understanding of the literature was enhanced when I was able to place various pieces of research in a historical context. Therefore, whenever possible, I identify the political and social factors that have influenced the evolution of this body of literature.

**Kleinfeld's 1972 Landmark Study**

Since the early 1970's, researchers have attempted to develop a composite picture of the effective teacher of First Nations students. Of these studies, Kleinfeld's 1972 study entitled *Effective Teachers of Indian and Eskimo High School Students* is perhaps the
most famous and frequently quoted piece of research. In many ways, Kleinfeld's study confirms the hopeful notion that a profile of the effective teacher of Native students can be identified. Pepper (1985), Whyte (1986) and a host of other researchers have since quoted Kleinfeld's findings in their attempts to provide advice to prospective teachers of Native children. Although Kleinfeld, herself, has since openly questioned the validity of her study, other researchers continue to refer to it as "the best" of its kind (Pavlik, 1988). For this reason, I would like to assess this one particular study in isolation from the other pieces of research reviewed.

As part of critiquing Kleinfeld's 1972 study, it is important to acknowledge the educational landscape that formed the backdrop for this particular piece of research. Kleinfeld's study was conducted in Alaska during an era where most Alaska Native students who wished to attend high school were required to leave their villages and complete their education in urban centres. Teachers in these urban schools often reported that they "didn’t know how to teach" Native students (Kleinfeld, 1972, p. 16). The research literature in the late 1960s and early 1970s offered two key theories to help teachers meet the needs of Native students. The cultural deprivation theory was still being used to explain why many Native American students did not seem to be "benefitting" from the American education system. The field of cross cultural education argued against this theory by observing that many teachers used the cultural deprivation model to "rationalize [their] own teaching failings" (Kleinfeld, 1972, p. 1). The cultural-deprivation theory was slowly being challenged by the cultural-difference hypothesis. This hypothesis claimed that cultural differences between home and school environments contributed to the poor
academic performance of minority\textsuperscript{2} students (Swisher & Dehyle, 1989). Kleinfeld’s study contributed to this debate by attempting to identify teaching strategies that might be “culturally congruent” to the social relationships found in Alaska Native villages.

Various aspects of the methodology used by Kleinfeld in her 1972 study are problematic. Kleinfeld observed ninth grade teachers of village "Indian and Eskimo" students in seven different urban high schools. It is difficult to assess Kleinfeld's findings as her study does not state the sample size; we are only informed that "several teachers" were observed and interviewed (p. 6). In addition, Kleinfeld's criterion of teacher effectiveness is suspect. Teachers' levels of effectiveness were determined according to "the intellectual level of students' verbal participation in the academic work of the classroom" (p. 7). The appropriateness of this criterion is highly questionable. For example, it is unlikely that Indian and Eskimo students, in their first year away from their small villages, would engage in a high level of verbal participation in their ninth grade classes. In addition, a number of Native students in Kleinfeld's study admitted to not speaking in class due to their fear of being humiliated by their white urban classmates. I suggest that, in addition to teacher characteristics, several other factors may have been responsible for the level of student verbal participation observed by Kleinfeld. Bloom's taxonomy was used to evaluate the cognitive level of students' verbal communications. However, we are not informed of the student's verbal communication levels before their entry to secondary school. As a result, I question how Kleinfeld could claim whether a specific teacher had been responsible for a student's particular cognitive level, as identified

\textsuperscript{2} I acknowledge that the term “minority” can be misleading and inappropriate when describing individuals from groups that, in fact, form the “majority” population in specific communities.
by Bloom's taxonomy. Kleinfeld also failed to identify when the students' levels of verbal communication were measured; were these levels measured in the middle or at the end of the school year? We must also remember that the high school teachers being observed were working with Indian and Eskimo students who were adjusting to life in an urban environment. Based on these concerns, I suggest that several aspects of Kleinfeld's methodology were faulty.

Kleinfeld framed the findings of her study in terms of the cultural congruence hypothesis. The results of her study identified the ideal teacher of Indian and Eskimo students as the "Supportive Gadfly" (p. 2). Kleinfeld described her "Supportive Gadfly" as being actively demanding, while at the same time displaying intense personal warmth toward their students. According to the cultural congruence hypothesis, the "Supportive Gadfly" was successful because this teacher was using an interpersonal style congruent with the social relationships of Indian and Eskimo villages. In fact, Kleinfeld's cultural congruence interpretation is refuted by the results of her own study. She found that the "Supportive Gadfly" was also highly successful with urban white and black students who participated in the study (p. 41). Rather than possessing special traits that would result in successful teaching experiences, specifically with Indian and Eskimo students, the "Supportive Gadfly" was merely displaying teaching skills that would be appreciated by students from many different cultural and racial backgrounds.

While several contemporary researchers continue to tout the characteristics of the "Supportive Gadfly," others have described Kleinfeld's study as being overly simplistic. Calliou (1993) suggests that Kleinfeld's findings provide "an overstatement about a particular teaching style which discounts all others" (p. 23). Even Kleinfeld has since
questioned the findings of her 1972 study. In 1983, Kleinfeld reflected on the characteristics of the “Supportive Gadfly” and explained, "the cultural congruence hypothesis is so seductive, so seemingly self-evident, that researchers slip into the error of interpreting their results to accord with their theory" (p. 25). In Kleinfeld’s most recent work, which will be discussed later in this chapter, she has clearly abandoned her quest for the ideal teacher of Native students.

**Theories and Debates**

During the 1970s a number of studies claimed that Native students possessed distinctive learning styles. Therefore, if a teacher was to work successfully with Native students, they would have to match their teaching style to their students' learning styles. This research trend, like Kleinfeld’s earlier study, was part of the movement away from cultural deprivation theory toward cultural-difference theory.

Many researchers attempted to identify how Native children learned “differently” from other children. In 1972, John reported that “Indian children of the Southwest” possess a visual approach to learning (cited in Swisher & Dehyle, 1989, p. 4). Since Indian children were described as being predisposed to a visual style of learning, it was presumed they were weak auditory learners. For example, Downing (1977) reported some beginning Native readers may have difficulty learning to read because they experience “cognitive confusion.” Downing defined “cognitive confusion” as an inability to match phonetic sounds to particular letters. Having taught non-Native students, it has been my experience that many beginning readers have difficulty in associating sounds with letters. Other studies suggested that Native students prefer to learn new concepts in a
global way rather than in an analytic, sequential manner (More cited in Pepper & Henry, 1986). A review of the early learning style literature demonstrates that most studies were conducted within a particular First Nations community and the results of these individual studies were used to make generalizations about all Native children. As an educator who has taught in a variety of First Nations communities, I suggest that the early learning style literature is problematic because it encourages teachers to view Native students as a homogenous “group,” rather than as individual learners.

In the mid-1980s, researchers continued to provide teachers of Native children with lists of effective teaching strategies that were based upon the 1970s body of learning style research (More, 1987; Pepper & Henry, 1986; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989; Whyte, 1986). However, in contrast to the 1970s research, these studies encouraged teachers to view Native students as possessing specific learning style “tendencies” rather than an “absolute Indian behavioural learning style” (Pepper & Henry, 1986, p. 58). More (1987) added that an “over emphasis on learning style differences may lead to a new form of inaccurate labelling and stereotyping” (p. 27). Despite these warnings, it is conceivable that many consumers of educational research, who are eager to find “quick solutions” to their teaching problems, may inappropriately use the learning style literature base.

In the early 1980’s, a small body of literature suggested that North American Indians have dominant right brain hemisphere functions. If teachers wished to work effectively with Native children, they must use “right-brain”-oriented curriculum and teaching styles. Hynd and Scott (1980) reported that the Navajo children in their study displayed superior hearing performance in their left ears. Hynd and Scott concluded this proved the Navajo children were right-brained. However, in 1984, McKeever and Hunt found that the
Navajo children in their study displayed superior right ear performance. Chrisjohn and Peters (1986) provide a strong rebuttal to the notion of the Right-Brained Indian. Through a review of the literature, they suggest that the evidence for hemispheric specialization is too weak to support any emphasis on "right-brain" curriculum or teaching styles.

**Empowering Teachers**

In the early to mid-1980's, a small number of researchers began to seriously question whether the advice being given to teachers of Native students was based on reality. Cox and Ramirez (1981) provided teachers with the very practical suggestion of using direct observation of individual students to plan learning experiences. They encouraged teachers to match their teaching style to the learning needs of the particular students in their classroom. This idea is one step beyond the prescriptive studies that provided teachers with a ready-made list of "Native" learning styles and corresponding teaching styles. Cox and Ramirez were now encouraging teachers to develop their own observation and assessment skills.

In 1983, Kleinfeld candidly discussed the dilemmas involved in attempting to identify a typology of teaching traits that are deemed to be effective specifically with Native children. Kleinfeld had abandoned the idea of identifying effective teachers based on their students' intellectual levels of verbal participation. Yet, she was still interested in the process of identifying effective cross-cultural teachers. In a 1983 study, Kleinfeld introduced a "multiple hurdle" technique. This technique involved collecting nominations from teachers, school administrators and the local community. In critiquing her research
design, Kleinfeld acknowledged that although community nominations were solicited from local school board members and community people who were employed at the schools, nominations were not gathered systematically from students and parents. Kleinfeld described this oversight as an error in her research design, explaining that “students especially were quite knowledgeable judges of teachers” (p. 12). Kleinfeld also admitted that teachers who were not nominated may still be excellent teachers; they just might not be as well-known in the district. She also noted that the effective teacher characteristics identified by the three key groups were "too vague to be useful in teacher education programs" (p. 19).

As an alternative to conducting a search for a specific set of traits possessed by effective teachers of Native students, Kleinfeld (1983) proposed the use of the "teacher tale." Teacher tales are based on an analysis of actual teaching experiences. Kleinfeld suggested that teachers can refine their own teaching techniques by critically reflecting on the experiences of other teachers. By advocating the use of teacher tales, Kleinfeld supports Kleibard's (cited in Kleinfeld, 1983) suggestion that in all likelihood, there are no standard "best" ways to teach. Instead Kleibard proposes that being a good teacher "may involve infinite possible human excellences and appropriate behaviors, no one much more a guarantor of success than the others" (cited in Kleinfeld, 1983, p. 23).

Gardner (1986) provided a new perspective to the task of identifying effective teaching behaviours. Gardner offered a number of suggestions to teachers as part of her profile on the Seabird Island Community School. Rather than presenting a generic description of Native communities, Gardner simply suggested that teachers "must be sensitive to the dynamics of community norms and behavior" (p. 20). It is assumed that
teachers have a responsibility to learn the cultural norms of those particular communities in which they choose to work. Gardner also reminds teachers that the ultimate responsibility for education rests with the community. All too often, the research literature communicates to teachers that they are entirely responsible for the educational success of their students. Research can empower teachers by advising them to view parents and communities as partners in a collaborative process.

Researchers such as Kleinfeld and Gardner were conducting research in an era when Indian control of Indian education was being affirmed and acted upon. During the early to mid-1980s several Canadian and Native American communities had already assumed control of their educational systems or were taking initial steps to do so. In addition, the cultural deprivation and cultural-difference theories were being challenged by a notion that social and political structures within and outside the educational arena were the more powerful determiners of Native students' educational progress. Rather than being provided with lists of effective teacher traits and "characteristics" of Native children, educators were being encouraged to develop their critical thinking skills.

From Generalizations to Innovation

In contrast to the rejuvenating studies of the early 1980's, the research literature from 1986 to the present can be described as a sprinkling of innovative ideas mixed with a resurgence of problematic theories. Some researchers have based their new theories on findings from dated studies and broad generalizations continue to be made. Amidst this confusion, these same researchers are attempting to crystallize new theories that are based on actual teacher experiences.
Several people are attempting to develop new ways of looking at teacher
effectiveness by referring to the results of research findings from much earlier studies.
Whyte (1986) points to Hawthorn's 1967 report to reinforce his theory that Native
students experience feelings of alienation from the formal educational system. In
attempting to highlight the contributions of the learning style literature, Swisher and
Deyhle (1989) use Wax, Wax and Dumont's 1964 comparison of home and school
learning styles of Native children. Ward (1992) claims that Native children experience a
gap between home and school life by referring to Dumont's 1972 study of Sioux children.

While referring to past research is not always problematic, in each of the cases identified
above, the researchers have made an inaccurate assumption. They have assumed that the
characteristics attributed to various groups of Native people in previous research are
generalizable and accurately reflect current experiences of diverse groups of Native
people.

While a number of researchers acknowledge that the research literature of the past
possesses too many vague generalizations, recent studies continue to make sweeping and
unsubstantiated claims. For example, Whyte (1986) encourages teachers to maintain close
body distance and to use touch to communicate with their Native students. Whyte is
basing this suggestion on Kleinfeld's 1972 study of village Indian and Eskimo students.
While the research has not directly addressed the issue of body distance and touch, based
on my own teaching experience, I would caution teachers from acting on this suggestion
without first determining the norms of the community and the comfort levels of individual
students. Ward (1992) claims Native girls are passive learners while Native boys are
restless in the classroom. She adds that Native children think nothing of walking out of
the classroom and going home when they become annoyed in school. Ward does not provide us with an indication of the sample size of students that she is basing her claim upon; we are only told she witnesses these behaviours in the classrooms where she is a frequent visitor. Declarations such as these that are not accompanied by supporting evidence are problematic. I support Cazden and Mehan's (1989) suggestion that generalizations can contribute to prospective teachers' stereotyping of diverse groups of students.

Trapped within the web of broad generalizations and dependence upon dated research findings, some researchers are acknowledging the complexities associated with teaching in Native communities. Whyte (1986) recognizes that past research efforts have resulted in the identification of effective teacher strategies that are so vague they are of little practical assistance to teachers. Pavlik (1988) urges researchers to move "beyond the common ground" of providing descriptions of teacher traits that are merely examples of good teaching, in general. Swisher and Deyhle (1989) perceptively state: "No one source can provide the answers to the complex questions facing teachers of Indian students. The community in which one chooses to teach will provide the most comprehensive resource" (p. 11). The literature of the last nine years, although problematic, has encouraged the contemporary research community to recognize the complex nature of teaching in First Nations settings.

**Current Developments**

During the last six years, a small collection of studies has indicated that teachers must undergo a continuous and intense learning process if they are to work effectively
in Native schools. Schon (cited in Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1991) suggests that teachers who work in cross cultural classrooms need to do more than learn how to apply technical, research-based knowledge. Schon has labelled such an approach, where professional problems are solved by the application of formal research findings, as “technical rationality.” Feiman-Nemser and Ball (cited in Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1991) suggest that this perspective fails to prepare teachers for the realities of teaching in cross cultural situations. Recent research indicates that rather than relying on neat “recipes for success,” teachers must learn how to cope with competing and conflicting goals, teaching dilemmas and value commitments.

Researchers are now challenging teachers to develop their critical thinking skills. Noordhoff and Kleinfeld (1991) describe teaching successfully in a Native setting as being able to “understand contexts, consider educational goals and make instructional decisions to fit perceived contexts and appropriate goals” (p. 11). Nelson-Barber (1990) suggests teacher evaluation standards should be adapted to assess abilities of teachers to be sensitive to the variations in the learning needs of students and to be able to discover what these are in new and unfamiliar settings.

Innovative teacher education programs are being launched in an attempt to nurture the development of teachers' abilities to reflect critically on their everyday teaching experiences. The Teachers for Alaska program at the University of Alaska, encourages teachers to:

1. Identify crucial issues and dilemmas in ambiguous, complex teaching and community situation;

2. Think critically about the worthiness of alternative educational goals;
As researchers encourage teachers to practice regular guided reflection, they are providing teachers with an important strategy for internalizing knowledge about their students and the communities in which they work.

Recent reflective articles that have been written by practitioners are making valuable contributions to the research literature. Leroy and Juliebø (1991) successfully use their teaching experiences to question commonly held beliefs about Native children and their literacy. Leroy and Juliebø urge educators to "critically consider what is said" in the research literature. For example, they address the common belief that Native children do not talk sufficiently in school. They suggest that rules governing talk will vary from one Native culture to another and they may even vary from one home to another. They go on to report that Native children have been known to talk more with one teacher than they do with another. Leroy and Juliebø close their discussion by encouraging teachers of Native children, and all other teachers, to be "good kidwatchers" (p. 62). Cathro (1993b) calls for teachers to advocate the direct involvement of Native communities in educational decision-making. She includes herself when she warns that school and community relations will not be optimized until "those of us who come from mainstream cultures learn the value of sharing control of education with the people in the community" (p.45). Leroy
and Juliebō refer to a Bella Coola woman who told them, "these teachers need to learn
how to listen" (p. 62). Cathro (1993a) also encourages educators to ask Native people for
their ideas and views and to truly listen. Cultivating listening skills and dispelling research
myths by actively observing modern Native classrooms are two important steps to forming
a vibrant literature base that is based on contemporary realities.

Gaps in the Literature

In attempting to identify how teachers can work successfully in Native schools,
several questions have been left unanswered by the existing literature. Voices have been
ignored, the capabilities of Native communities have not been documented and teachers
are still left with perplexing challenges. To compound these inadequacies, there has also
been a serious lack of primary research.

Amplifying Educator and Community Voices

Researchers have provided teachers, students, parents and community members with
limited opportunities to voice their concerns and opinions. Rather than speaking to these
key groups, many researchers continue to provide their personal views of what constitutes
effective teaching in Native schools. When studies do examine the experiences of teachers
or community people, the results are often reduced to such an extent that individual voices
are muffled and suppressed. For example, Coburn and Nelson (1989) completed an
extensive survey asking how Native high school graduates felt about their school
experiences. However, the list of student phrases provided by Coburn and Nelson gives
readers only a sketchy portrait of student views. If the research community is to
acknowledge the fundamental right and responsibility of First Nations people to control
their own educational systems, then researchers must provide a forum where the voices of these people can be heard. The research field also needs more teachers, who work in Native settings, to share their experiences and opinions.

Acknowledging the Strength of Native Communities

Canadian researchers have suggested that Native communities are not only capable but are also responsible for providing an environment that will nurture the development of successful educational systems. Gardner (1986) described how the Seabird Island School Board provides strong leadership and insists on systematic communication among the local school board, the school staff and the community. The school board also emphasizes that “the ultimate responsibility for education belongs to the parent, child and community” (p. 28). In 1980, Kirkness advised that the Native school must "reflect its community, serve its community and have its community serve it" (cited in Gardner, 1986, p. 27). Further studies devoted to documenting how Native communities can support schools and teachers will be valuable.

A Lack of Primary Research

In the last four years, a minimal amount of primary research has been completed which explores the experiences of teachers who work in Native communities. Much of the literature is based upon secondary analysis of research. This results in journals filled with articles which often showcase the author's own particular point of view or feature a reworking of earlier research findings. There is a need for individuals to complete primary research that will provide accurate and rich information documenting the experiences of those teachers who work in First Nations settings.
Summary

The task of giving advice to teachers who wish to work successfully in Native communities has occupied the research world for many years. The fields of cross cultural education and Native education have provided teachers with several ideas about the learning needs of Native students: cultural-deprivation theory, cultural-difference theory, learning style theory, and even the Right-Brained Indian theory. As numerous studies indicate, much of this research has had a lasting and sometimes negative impact on the education of Native children (Chrisjohn, Towson & Peters, 1988; Kaulbeck, 1984; More, 1987).

A review of the literature also demonstrates that the quest for a single profile of the effective teacher of First Nations students continues to prove elusive. For me, the studies that best illuminated the work of teachers were those that explored the experiences of individual teachers in a comprehensive manner. Kleinfeld's "Teacher Tales" and other teacher stories contributed to my understanding of the complexities and ambiguities that form a daily part of teachers' lives.

The process of reviewing existing literature informed the evolution of my research problem and research design. Rather than attempting to identify "traits" of effective teachers of Native children, I knew that I wanted my study to acknowledge the complex nature of teaching in First Nations settings. The gaps in the current literature also encouraged me to conduct primary research that would document and explore the experiences and opinions of teachers, students and parents.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN

[I] always always remember what Grannie Rice used to -- she would say: "When road is very small, narrow road, you learn. (That means the learning of, learning, gathering knowledge, gathering.) "If you fall down, you get shamed, you get up, you go. What did you learn? Nothing. You smart, you fall down, you lay there. You touch, feel, smell, taste, eat it, and then try and look. (Ellen White cited in White & Archibald, 1992, p. 151)

The first time I read the above words I felt as though Grannie Rice was describing my research experience. As I reflect on the process of conducting this study, I acknowledge that I have stumbled and fallen at several points along the "research road." When I had the courage to follow Grannie Rice's advice and remain "on the ground," trying to understand what had caused my steps to falter, I found that I was better prepared to face additional research challenges. In this chapter, I describe the development of my research question and research design. Within this description I highlight those aspects of conducting this study that challenged me to develop new skills and understandings related to the research process.

Evolution of Research Question and Research Design

As outlined in Chapter 1, my interest in exploring teaching experiences in First Nations settings was my primary reason for enrolling in graduate studies. During my first year at UBC, I was able to complete a number of course assignments that allowed me to further refine my research interest and to select an appropriate research design.
Identifying Personal Links to the Research

In my first semester of graduate studies I enrolled in a course that investigated issues related to First Nations pedagogy. As part of this course, I was given an assignment where I was encouraged to reflect upon my own teaching experiences. I wrote an autobiographical paper that used the term “teacher fire” as a metaphor of “healthy and successful teaching.” The paper identified the following factors as contributing to my own ability to successfully complete my daily teaching duties: dedicated co-workers, competent and supportive administration, community support, acknowledgment of contributions, encouragement of professional growth and a professional and supportive working environment. In the paper, I suggested that the flames of successful teacher fires could be fueled and protected if teachers, school-based administrators, local school boards and Native communities developed collaborative working relationships. I concluded the paper with the following observation:

I am painfully aware that my story is only one teacher story. If First Nations communities are to provide the shade and nurturing required for quality teaching, what is needed is a massive flood of other teacher stories. Even then, it will not be enough to merely reflect on the experiences of other teachers; administrators and First Nations communities must use their volition to act upon the knowledge they gain from listening to teacher stories.

One of the benefits of writing this particular term paper was that I was able to acknowledge how my own experiences, values and beliefs influenced the development of my research interest. I was able to see that I had a personal “stake” in my research. Moustakas (1990) explains that some researchers possess a strong personal link to their research.

[The researcher] is not only intimately and autobiographically related to the question but learns to love the question. It becomes a kind of song into which the researcher breathes life not only because the question leads to an answer, but also
because the question itself is infused in the researcher's being. It creates a thirst to discover, to clarify and to understand crucial dimensions of knowledge and experience. (p. 43)

**Literature Reviews and Pilot Studies**

Throughout my first year at UBC, I explored the literature related to the topic of teacher success in First Nations communities. As described in Chapter 2, qualitative studies that featured a detailed investigation of individual teacher experiences provided me with increased understanding of the issues related to teaching in Native settings. Realizing that the exploration of my research interest would require some form of qualitative methodology I enrolled in a critical ethnography course. At this point, I planned to write a Master's thesis that explored the following research question: *How do teachers, Native students and Native community members describe "successful" teachers?* As part of the ethnography course, I had an opportunity to conduct a telephone interview with a non-Native teacher who had taught in several First Nations communities. This experience allowed me to critique the quality and effectiveness of interview questions that I planned to ask non-Native teachers as part of my Master's research. Completing this particular assignment enabled me to see the danger in forming categories of "Native" and "non-Native" teachers. By creating profiles of Native and non-Native teachers I was making a number of faulty assumptions. First, I assumed that a certain degree of homogeneity existed *within* the "groups" of Native and non-Native teachers. Comparing and contrasting Native and non-Native viewpoints can also suggest that these two "groups" of teachers have experiences and opinions that are completely distinct from each other.
Completing the various components of the critical ethnography course encouraged me to question my assumptions and allowed me to extend my fieldwork and analytic skills.

In the spring of 1994 I conducted a pilot study as part of the requirements for a guided study course. In this particular study, I asked: *How do teachers describe “teacher success” in Native communities?* I interviewed two Native and two non-Native educators. The results of the pilot study identified the futility of attempting to derive a single profile of the effective teacher of First Nations students. Participants described a wide range of teaching strategies that were used by “successful” colleagues. Participants also suggested that school administrators, school boards and Native communities all have important roles to play in nurturing the development of teacher success. The results of this pilot study coupled with a more detailed review of the literature encouraged me to change the focus of my research question. Rather than attempting to identify a specific set of “successful teacher” characteristics or behaviours, I saw a need to complete a research project that would capture the complexities of teaching in First Nations communities. My research interest had now evolved into a broader question: *What factors contribute to teacher success in First Nations communities?* Based on the results of the pilot study and a review of the gaps in the current literature, I decided it was important for my study to examine the experiences and opinions of teachers, administrators, students and community members. I also recognized that I would need to use a research design that would allow me to gather detailed information from these four key groups. The ethnographic interview appeared to be best suited to the type of study that I wanted to conduct.
The Research Site

As outlined in Chapter 1, I chose to conduct my fieldwork on the Ermineskin Reserve for a variety of reasons. This research site provided me with access to a number of teachers and administrators who have worked for several years in First Nations settings. I also had an opportunity to speak to students and parents who are members of a community that is striving to create a school system that reflects a First Nations vision of quality education.

I think it is important to acknowledge that school systems are part of larger social and political structures. As a result, in this section, I provide a brief description of the Ermineskin Reserve and the larger Hobbema community. I conclude this section by describing the current Ermineskin education system.

The Ermineskin Community

The Ermineskin Reserve is one of four Plains Cree reserves that are located near the town of Hobbema, which is located approximately 80 kilometres south of Edmonton, Alberta. Hobbema is flanked by the farming and ranching communities of Ponoka and Wetaskiwin. The Ermineskin reserve encompasses over 25,000 acres of land and has an on-reserve population of 1,838 people (INAC, 1995a). While many Ermineskin residents travel to Edmonton or nearby towns to do their shopping, over 20 local businesses, including restaurants, grocery stores, and craft outlets are currently operating in the community. Community facilities include a daycare, recreation centre, a variety of administration offices, and a number of public works buildings. Community members also have access to a health centre, pharmacy and preventative social services. Throughout the
year a variety of sports and social events take place, including rodeos, hockey
tournaments, pow wows and round dances.

For many people, the Ermineskin Reserve is known as “one of the wealthy
Hobbema bands.” In 1949 an oilfield was discovered at Pigeon Lake which was a
traditional fishing site for many of the people from the Ermineskin, Samson, Louis Bull
and Montana bands. By the mid 1980s the four bands were receiving $185 million in
annual oil royalties. The Department of Indian Affairs provided the bands with minimal
access to expert financial guidance. As a result, the communities were not adequately
prepared for the large influx of money. Many people believe that this lack of economic
training and planning created social upheaval for the Hobbema bands (York, 1990).

From 1980 to 1987, Hobbema had one of the highest suicide rates in North
America. From 1985 to 1987, the suicide rate of young Hobbema men was 83 times the
national average. Public health officials reported that in the late 1970s and early 1980s,
40% of all deaths in Hobbema were alcohol or drug related (York, 1990). In his 1990
book The Dispossessed, Geoffrey York quotes Louis Bull band member, Theresa Bull,
who recalls,

• When we had no money, we had a lot of family unity. Then we had all this
  money and people could buy anything they wanted. It replaced the old values.
  If you weren’t sure of the old values of the community, money brought in a
  value of its own. It doesn’t bring happiness. It put more value on materialistic
  possessions. The family and the value of spirituality got lost. (p. 90)

Over the last ten years, the Hobbema bands have developed treatment programs aimed at
stemming alcohol and drug abuse. The four reserves have also assumed greater control of
their social, economic and political development. As part of this move to achieve
increased autonomy, all four bands have taken steps to assume local control of education.
Developing a "Cree" Educational System

The Ermineskin Band is one of 31 Indian bands that are currently operating a total of 51 educational institutions in the province of Alberta (INAC, 1995c). Over the last ten years the number of band operated schools in Alberta has grown extensively. In 1984 there were only 11 schools managed by band education authorities but by 1990, 39 schools were managed by 25 local school boards (INAC, 1995c). At the present time, the Cold Lake First Nations School is the only federally operated school remaining in Alberta. The local control movement in Alberta mirrors the national picture of band operated schools. INAC (1995c) reports that 97% of schools located on Canada's reserves are now operated by band education authorities.

The Ermineskin community first started actively working towards local control of education in 1987. In order to reach their goal, the community completed study tours of other band operated school systems, conducted community workshops, composed a band petition and negotiated with INAC. In September of 1991, the band officially assumed responsibility for the operation of three schools on their reserve: the Ermineskin Kindergarten, the Ermineskin Primary School and the Ermineskin Elementary and Junior High School. These three schools had previously been operated by INAC. When the band first assumed control of the schools, a large number of teachers were replaced by new recruits. However, the band retained a small group of teachers and one administrator. At the present time, the three schools serve a population of 856 students and employ forty-nine teachers and five school-based administrators.

Community members are looking to the newly formed local school board, the Miyo Wahkohtowin Community Education Authority, to ensure their children receive the
best education possible. The Education Authority consists of six board members; four are elected by parents, one is appointed by Chief and Council and one board member is the band councillor who currently holds the education portfolio. When the band first assumed control of education, a new school board was elected on a yearly basis. However, the band is considering extending the term of service to at least two years.

The Cree words "Miyo Wahkohtowin" refer to "harmony in the community."

Brian Wildcat, the Director of Education for Miyo Wahkohtowin, explains that the Education Authority is attempting to develop a school system that reflects Cree values.

- I think the big question when you go to band controlled schools ... is trying to develop a school -- an Indian school -- for us, in our case, a Cree school. The question becomes, 'Well, what is that? What’s a Cree school? What’s different about a Cree school than any other school? And what are the things we have to do to become a Cree school?' What it means is it’s the way you do your business -- it’s the way you act and interact with other people and that is what makes you a Cree organization. So you have to bring in some of the values of your community and of your nation and decide those are the ways we will treat each other in this organization and that means becoming more Cree.

Based on my interactions with the Miyo Wahkohtowin Education Authority, I believe that they are well on their way to becoming an organization that reflects Cree values.

Marshall and Rossman (1989) describe the ideal research site as a location where

(1) entry is possible; (2) there is a high probability that a rich mix of many of the processes, people, programs, interactions, and/or structures that may be a part of the research question will be present; and (3) the researcher can devise an appropriate role to maintain continuity of presence for as long as necessary. (p. 54)

I believe that the Ermineskin school system fulfilled the above requirements. In August, 1994, I received confirmation that the MiyoWahkohtowin Board of Directors had approved my request to conduct my study within their school system.
Preparing to Enter the Field

By February of 1995, my research proposal had been approved by my thesis supervisory committee and I had received formal approval for my research from UBC’s ethics committee. I began to make preparations for a one-month period of fieldwork, which was to take place during the month of March 1995.

Approximately three weeks before I was to make my trip to Hobbema, I began to be preoccupied with a recurring set of thoughts. I recorded these thoughts in my research journal.

I have started the process of confronting a deep personal concern that I know I have been suppressing for some time. The courses in my graduate program have introduced me to various facets of research -- planning, collecting data, analyzing data, etc. I have completed my readings, written my papers and conducted my own research. Throughout all of these academic exercises, I have had an unexplainable feeling of hesitancy. I think that I can now explain this confused knot of feelings. I have finally confronted the hard question: “Does research have a place in First Nations settings?” If so, what does respectful research look like? How can an academic form of exploring and learning have a place in First Nations settings, where ways of learning and knowing are often far removed from the world of academia?

As part of my fieldwork, I will be conducting several interviews. Yet, for me, the act of interviewing people is unnatural and foreign. During my childhood, my mother rarely responded directly to my questions -- her body language and vague responses to my questions conveyed to me, at a young age, that asking direct questions was rude and lazy. I was encouraged to avoid the practice of seeking quick answers; instead, I learned that if I wanted to acquire knowledge or learn a particular skill, I must be prepared to invest my own personal time and watch, listen, practice and watch, listen and practice some more. Only then, did I earn the privilege of asking “clarifying” questions.

Walter Lightning (1992) discusses the importance of protocol. Walter defines protocol as “any one of a number of culturally ordained actions and statements, established by an ancient tradition, that an individual completes to establish a relationship with another person from whom the individual makes a request” (p. 216). In his 1992 article, Walter discusses a text that was written by the late Elder Louis Sunchild. In the text, Walter paraphrases some of Elder Sunchild’s statements: “One cannot reach truth through the vehicle of deception. That is like taking a short cut. Deception in that sense is going against the authority to use
something without protocols. I think that can be defined as deception, because one is bypassing the path to get to the truth. When the path itself is part of the ceremony or ritual, you are forced to function within the confines, within the domain, of truth . . . “ (p. 242). Walter goes on to explain that protocol “is the authority.” If protocol is not followed then truths can actually lose their meaning. Walter explains, “If someone says these things, teaches another, attempts to define the truth, or in fact describes ‘the culture’ -- without the authority to do so, it has no meaning” (p. 241). I am concerned that I will be conducting research without the use of appropriate protocols. I know the protocol that is required when asking an elder for guidance. However, what are the appropriate protocols for conducting research in First Nations settings? I know that “good” research has the potential of “giving back” to the community but, at this point, I’m not sure what “good” research looks like in Indian Country. I’m aware that I will need to address this struggle in my own personal way. I am also aware that if I choose to continue to do research that I may wrestle with this question for many years. I’m hoping that when I travel to Alberta, I will be able to obtain some guidance and insight from community people and from the research experience, itself.

(February 8, 1995 journal entry)

When I travelled to Hobbema, my briefcase was filled with cassette tapes, introductory letters, consent forms, and interview schedules. Although I felt organized, I was still somewhat uneasy about my role as “researcher.” While part of this anxiety stemmed from questioning the relevance of conducting research in First Nations settings, I was also troubled by the fact that the research world has not always communicated well with First Nations people. Researchers have been accused of exploitation, misrepresentation and appropriation of voice. I realized that merely being a First Nations person did not insulate me from being accused of these same “crimes.” Perhaps, more importantly, my Cree heritage did not automatically protect me from possibly committing these same “crimes.” So, rather than naively believing that I, by virtue of being a Native researcher, would somehow be more successful than a non-Native researcher, I accepted the fact that I would also need to be zealous in ensuring that my research was conducted in a respectful manner.
In the Field

On my first “official” day of fieldwork I met with Brian Wildcat and other school board employees. I had been expecting to conduct most of my office work in my brother’s home (where I was staying for the month). However, within a few hours of arriving at the Miyo Wahkohtowin office building, I was equipped with an office, telephone, computer and transcription machine. My office location was extremely convenient since the three Ermineskin schools are within a five minute walk of the school board offices. Throughout my period of fieldwork, school board personnel, school-based staff and other contact people provided me with information, advice and a warm, welcoming work environment.

Selection and Description of Participants

When I began my fieldwork, I intended to interview three Native teachers, three non-Native teachers, six administrators, six recent high school graduates, and six parents. However, as the interviews were conducted, I continued to revise my selection and sampling strategies. I ultimately interviewed six Native teachers, six non-Native teachers, six administrators, six parents, five high school students and one recent high school graduate.

Teachers and Administrators

Ermineskin teachers with at least two years of work experience in First Nations settings were invited to participate in the study. The school administrators had informed their teaching staff of my study several months before my arrival. Therefore, when I arrived in the community, six teachers had already volunteered to participate in the study.
Due to the high level of teacher interest, I finally decided to interview six Native and six non-Native teachers. The twelve teachers were selected by using maximum variation sampling; the final sample was composed of teachers whose experience ranged from 3 years to 25 years of work experience in First Nations settings.

Since the Miyo Wahkohtowin School District employs a total of five school-based administrators and one board level administrator, all administrators who were willing and able to participate in the study were interviewed. Fortunately, all six administrators agreed to participate in the study.

In an effort to maintain the anonymity of individual teachers and administrators, I will not provide the exact numbers of male and female educators that were interviewed. However, I believe it is significant to note that the majority of educators interviewed were women. Since 84% of the teaching staff in Ermineskin schools is female, I had a small pool of male educators from which to recruit volunteers. The majority of male teachers employed by Miyo Wahkohtowin work at the Ermineskin Elementary and Junior High School and most of these men teach grades 7 through 10. In contrast, 87% percent of Ermineskin teachers who teach kindergarten to grade six are women. The gender distribution of teachers in Ermineskin schools is reflective of the larger Canadian education system. A 1992 survey found that 83% of Canadian teachers who teach kindergarten to grade six are women (King and Peart, 1992). Although I initially attempted to interview an equal number of male and female educators, the gender make-up of the group of educators ultimately interviewed is reflective of not only Ermineskin schools but also that of the larger Canadian public school system. I provide additional descriptive information about teachers and administrators in Chapter 5.
Students

Possible student participants were identified by the use of reputational-case sampling. I met with two Ermineskin education counsellors, who were able to help me contact high school and university students. While I had initially wanted to interview recent high school graduates, the education counsellors informed me that it would be difficult to locate individuals because some students were attending post-secondary institutions in far-away locations. In addition, the Ermineskin community has had a limited number of students graduate from high school in recent years. Since I had access to a small pool of high school graduates, I interviewed five students who were either completing a provincial high school program or were enrolled in a university and college entrance program and one participant was a university student. Three students were male and three were female. The students ranged in age from 18 to 25. Five students were single and one student was in a common-law relationship. One student had children.

Parents

Parents were also identified by the use of reputational-case sampling. Each principal provided me with the names of two to three parents from their school community. I wanted to interview some parents who were actively involved in school activities and I also wanted to interview other parents who might play a less active role in the school. While I had hoped to interview equal numbers of men and women, I had difficulty in contacting some of the male parents that had been recommended by school administrators. This inability to recruit equal numbers of male and female parents was compounded by the fact that most parent interviews were conducted within the last two
weeks of my fieldwork. As the end of my fieldwork period approached and I was unable to reach potential male participants, I chose to interview female parents who had already voiced an interest in participating in the study. Consequently, most parents interviewed were women.

The parents ranged in age from 28 to 45. Five parents were either married or in common-law relationships and one participant was a single parent. Two parents had at least three children in Ermineskin schools, two parents had two children in Ermineskin schools and two parents had a single child attending one of the Ermineskin schools. Four participants reported moderate to extensive involvement in school activities, while two parents explained that they had minimal direct involvement with school activities. Two parents interviewed were also local school board members.

Role of Researcher

My relationship with research participants can best be described as that of an "outsider." Being a Cree person and having immediate and extended family who continue to reside in Hobbema does not allow me to claim insider status. I have spent most of my adult years living in urban centres, attending post-secondary institutions and working in other First Nations communities. I am a person who was unknown to most of the participants. I believe that most research participants viewed my primary role in the field as that of interviewer and researcher.

Data Collection

The nature of my research topic prompted me to select the ethnographic interview as my primary method of data collection. Schumacher and McMillan (1993) describe the
ethnographic interview as an effective method of obtaining participant meanings; a way to identify "how individuals conceive of their world and how they explain or 'make sense' of the important events in their lives" (p. 423). I was interested in exploring the values, feelings, opinions and experiences of educators and Ermineskin community members. The use of the ethnographic interview as a research tool allowed me to examine how the research participants understood the concept of "successful teaching" in First Nations communities.

The interviews were conducted using the "interview guide" approach (Shumacher & McMillan, 1993). Although I had previously selected certain topics that I wanted to explore with each participant, I modified the sequence and wording of the questions according to each participant's response to the interview process (see Appendices 1-6). The interview guide approach allowed each participant to pursue topics of particular interest to them and, as a result, each participant helped to determine the shape and content of our interview session. By using a semi-structured interview format, I was able to explore my topics of interest and, at the same time, be introduced to new issues that were important to the participants.

Each potential interviewee was provided with an information package informing them about the purpose of my research and inviting them to participate in the study. The information package contained: (1) a letter of initial contact, outlining the conditions of participation in the study; (2) a copy of a consent form (for review purposes only); (3) a participant information form, providing me with demographic information about each participant; and (4) a list of general discussion areas that would be addressed during the interview (See Appendix 7). I attempted to provide most people with at least two to three
days to review the material before I contacted them again to determine if they were interested in participating in the study.

Each participant selected the location for the interview and the sites included classrooms, offices, restaurants, participants' homes and my own office at the Miyo Wahkohtowin building. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 120 minutes in length. During the first ten minutes, we reviewed any questions that participants might have about the study and the participants signed various forms. We first discussed the contents of the consent form before each participant signed it. I also asked individuals to complete a form indicating their choices regarding disposal of transcripts and tapes. Each participant was given an opportunity to request a copy of the interview transcript so that they might review it and provide me with comments or to request that certain portions of the transcript not be used in my study. Twenty participants requested copies of the interview transcripts. One non-Native teacher and one Native teacher later contacted me to clarify how certain portions of the interview would be addressed in my study and to ensure that certain information that might identify them was not used. Although I asked each participant if they would consent to having the interview tape-recorded, each interviewee had the opportunity to respond "off the record" or to ask that the interview not be taped. Seven participants asked to have the tape recorder turned off for a few minutes during the interview while they discussed specific issues. One teacher requested that the interview not be taped and during this particular interview I recorded notes.

During my month-long stay in Hobbema, I kept a response journal where I documented the research process. I used the journal to record how and why I made specific decisions during my fieldwork. For example, I critiqued my interviewing skills,
noting areas where I neglected to “tune in” to participants’ areas of interest. I made
changes to my interview schedule based on new topics that were introduced by
participants. For example, during one of the early interviews, one teacher emphasized that
universities could better prepare teachers for working in First Nations communities. In
subsequent interviews, I encouraged other participants to explore this particular topic.
Although I did not have time to write in my journal on a daily basis, I found that when I
was able to reflect on the day’s activities, I was encouraged to shift my gaze from
individual fieldwork activities to the study as a whole. Making regular journal entries
allowed me to document how data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously.
The response journal also ensured that I kept in touch with the fieldwork experience long
after I had left the Ermineskin community.

Data Analysis

When I returned to Vancouver, I spent three months transcribing the interview
tapes. A Microsoft Word file was created for each transcript. I kept my analysis journal
beside me as I transcribed each tape and, using participants’ words as much as possible, I
jotted down themes of interest. In the journal, I also recorded my initial responses to
participants’ ideas and comments. I later began to incorporate my analytic comments
directly into each transcript. I then made two copies of the transcript; one for the
participants (minus my comments) and a “coded” transcript.

After all the tapes were transcribed, I reread each transcript, highlighting particular
portions and making notes in the margins. I then reviewed my analytic journal remarks to
As I reviewed the transcripts and my analytic notes, I identified a number of topics that appeared to be significant to participants. When specific ideas or concerns were identified by a number of different participants, I would create a "category" for that particular topic. I also created categories for some issues that perhaps only one or two individuals emphasized. I did so because I could see that for some participants a particular issue was of paramount importance to them. For example, if an individual spoke passionately about a topic and returned to the topic several times throughout the interview, I was encouraged to look at this particular topic. I also made an attempt to watch for the "margins" of my project. Those issues that contradicted current research findings or were otherwise "surprises" often turned out to be some of the most interesting and informative patterns. I eventually created a large list of patterns, topics and subtopics. When this list grew to over 100 pages, I knew that I would have difficulty in deciding which patterns to highlight in my analysis chapters.

**Writing the Analysis Chapters**

My role as researcher required that I write analysis chapters that would summarize and highlight the "major findings" of my study. I made a decision to create chapters that would allow the reader to explore the experiences and opinions of each group of participants in separate reading sessions. Consequently, in Chapter 4, student statements are explored independently from parent perceptions and together, Chapters 5 and 6 examine educator experiences and views. Although I considered presenting and
commenting on the statements of all participants in an integrated manner, I felt it was important to give students, parents and educators their own "speaking space" within the analysis chapters.

I realize that separating the statements of students, parents and educators is an artificial construction and does not accurately represent the reality of communication patterns between these groups of people. Based on my own experiences as an educator, I believe that educators and community members are often placed in positions that are oppositional to each other. As I reviewed the interview transcripts, I saw ample opportunities to create chapters that featured "debates" between parents, students, teachers and administrators. However, I did not want my research to merely reproduce these "real-life" tensions; rather I wanted my research to provide participants with a forum to voice their concerns and beliefs unfettered by a need to "defend" their views. I also recognized that since I interviewed significantly more educators than community members, an integration of participant statements may have resulted in the privileging of educator views and opinions.

**Textual Representation of Participants**

During the process of writing the analysis chapters I attempted to capture the diverse nature of the statements that were provided by students, parents and educators. While people often made claims that were supported by other participants, there were times when individuals described experiences or expressed opinions that were not echoed by other participants. In addition, a number of views were supported by only two or three individuals. Rather than disregarding these statements because they did not "fit" my set of
patterns and categories, I felt it was important to document their existence. By incorporating these “unique” participant statements into the text, I anticipate that the reader will be provided with an increased understanding of the complexities related to teaching in First Nations settings.

Quantifying Participants’ Statements

As part of textually presenting the experiences and opinions of participants, I was faced with the task of “quantifying” their statements. While I did count the number of participants that shared a common concern or experience, I avoided a large-scale use of numbers to express the “representativeness” of particular statements. Instead, I have used the words “some,” “several,” “many” and “majority” to indicate the number of participants that shared a particular viewpoint. There are times when I do use numbers to identify exactly how many participants made specific statements. For example, when there is only one participant who reports a particular concern, I acknowledge this. Similarly if a significant majority of participants agree on a certain issue, I will indicate the exact number of participants who hold this particular opinion. However, in general, I have resisted the quantification of participant statements.

My reluctance to use numbers stems from my own personal belief that numbers only tell “part of the story.” For example, if I was to state: “Two out of eighteen educators reported feeling ostracized by the community,” some readers may view this as a statistically “insignificant” finding. Yet, to me, what is significant is the fact that there are teachers who are reporting an unsatisfactory relationship with the community. Perhaps other educators also felt the same way but did not address this concern during our
interview. Or even if all of the other teachers and administrators reported a satisfactory level of community support, I would still want to explore why the two teachers are feeling ostracized. A dependence on the use of numbers to describe the “representativeness” of participants’ statements can serve to diminish or privilege the words of participants. In contrast, I suggest that the use of words such as “some,” “many” and “most” encourage the reader to focus on the issues that are important to participants.

Emergent Ethical Concerns

At various points during the research process, I was faced with making some difficult decisions. Most of these concerns revolved around my need to feel that I was conducting research in a manner that was respectful to individual participants and to the Ermineskin community.

Protecting Participants’ Anonymity

In their discussion of validity issues in educational research Eisenhart and Howe (1992) remind researchers to “give attention to the social, political, and cultural features of the contexts and individuals they investigate” (p. 661). While I have attempted to provide a detailed description of the research site, I have tried to balance “descriptions of participants” with participants’ rights to anonymity.

When participants signed the consent forms, signifying their willingness to participate in this study, they were provided with written and verbal assurances that their identity would be kept confidential. As part of the interview process, each participant was provided with an opportunity to choose a pseudonym for themselves. I informed each person that the study would only refer to them by their chosen pseudonym, thereby
protecting their identity. However, as I prepared to write the analysis chapters, I began to worry that merely providing each participant with a pseudonym may not be enough to guarantee their anonymity.

The small and close-knit nature of Ermineskin schools made it difficult for some people to "secretly" participate in my study. Although I was not formally introduced to each school staff, all teachers and administrators had been provided with information about my research and knew that my presence in the schools implied that I was most likely meeting someone for the purpose of completing an interview. Although all interviews were certainly conducted "behind closed doors," several interviews did take place in teachers' classrooms or administrators' offices. As a result, my visit with a specific teacher or administrator would have been noted by school secretaries or anyone else that may have watched me enter a particular classroom or office. Being aware of natural human curiosity, I know that some readers of this study may be unable to resist "piecing together" a particular participant's identity. For example, if I interview Susan, a young Native teacher and refer her to as "Yvonne" in several places throughout the study, I will in fact be creating a profile of "Yvonne" for the reader. It is conceivable that one of Susan's colleagues, who reads the study and remembers that I interviewed Susan, will be able to determine that "Yvonne" is in fact Susan. By simply providing Susan with a pseudonym I have failed to protect her identity.

Since the use of pseudonyms cannot guarantee participants' anonymity, I have opted to refer to individual participants as students, parents, teachers, administrators or educators. I use the term "educator" to refer to either a teacher or an administrator. Whenever possible, I also try to identify the race and gender of the participant. However,
if I am to protect the identities of all participants, there are portions of this study where I will not be able to make reference to a participant’s gender. For example, if I was to refer to a specific participant as a non-Native male administrator, anyone working or living in the Ermineskin community would be able to easily identify who I was speaking about. However, if I refer to the same person as a non-Native administrator, the participant’s identity will be much better protected. To take it one step further, if I refer to the same participant as a non-Native educator, his identity will be even better concealed.

Throughout the study, I use the non-gendered terms “Native educator” and “non-Native educator” when I wish to provide maximum identity protection for both male and female educators. I have adopted the following set of acronyms to accompany the quotes that are used in Chapters 4 through 6:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F-S</td>
<td>female student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M-S</td>
<td>male student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-P</td>
<td>female parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M-P</td>
<td>male parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-NNT</td>
<td>female non-Native teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-NT</td>
<td>female Native teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M-NNT</td>
<td>male non-Native teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M-NT</td>
<td>male Native teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNA</td>
<td>non-Native administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Native administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-NNE</td>
<td>female non-Native educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-NE</td>
<td>female Native educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M-NNE</td>
<td>male non-Native educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M-NE</td>
<td>male Native educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNE</td>
<td>non-Native educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NE</td>
<td>Native educator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Chapters 4 and 5, I do provide further details about the “group” characteristics of those students, parents, teachers and administrators who participated in this study.

Respecting Cultural and Sacred Knowledge

During some of the interviews, participants provided detailed descriptions about certain aspects of Cree culture and traditions. While a summary and discussion of some of
these conversations may have provided my study with more depth and clarity, I chose to keep these issues outside of my final presentation of research findings. I am aware that Native people possess a wide range of opinions on the issue of sharing cultural and sacred knowledge. However, based on my experiences, I am most comfortable in keeping the content of these discussions between myself and individual participants.

"Bringing Back" the Research

Too often, researchers who conduct studies in First Nations communities complete their fieldwork, return home to "write up the results" and the participants and community are left to wonder about the final outcome of the research project. I wanted to avoid conducting this type of research. During the writing process, I have tried to keep the Miyo Wahkohtowin Education Authority informed about the progress of my study. In addition to providing Miyo Wahkohtowin with a copy of my completed study, I have also offered to return to Hobbema to provide the school board and other interested parties with an "in-person" summary of the research results. I anticipate that the proposed meeting with the school board will allow the director and the board members to offer their evaluative comments about the research project. In addition, I will send a copy of the completed study to each of the 28 participants who have requested a copy of the thesis. I am aware that many researchers choose to send participants a summary of the study as opposed to the entire thesis. However, I feel that providing participants with a copy of the thesis is but a small way to express my gratitude to those individuals who contributed to my research in such a generous manner.
Summary

In this chapter I have described the evolution of the research design that I used to complete this study. By describing the social and political context of the research, and documenting the data collection and data analysis phases of the study, I anticipate that I have provided the reader with a clear picture of the research process.

In Chapters 4, 5 and 6, I use verbatim accounts of transcripts in my efforts to balance my understanding of participants’ perspectives with their actual words. I invite you, the reader, to make your own interpretations of participants’ statements as they describe their perceptions of teacher success in First Nations communities.
CHAPTER 4

STUDENT AND PARENT VIEWS OF TEACHER SUCCESS

A review of the Native education literature demonstrates that there has been minimal research documenting the experiences and opinions of Native students and Native parents. While many Native students have been the "objects" of study, researchers rarely ask these same students to discuss and describe their school experiences. Similarly, much of the literature that refers to Native parents is devoted to identifying how educators can increase parental involvement in the school system; few studies have directly examined the views of Native parents. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the opinions and experiences of Native students and Native parents as they identify those factors they believe contribute most to teacher success in Ermineskin schools. A secondary goal of this chapter is to provide a context for the exploration of those educator perspectives that are presented in Chapters 5 and 6. As indicated in Chapter 3, student viewpoints will be examined separately from parent perceptions.

Student Views of Teacher Success

During the interviews, students were asked to reflect on how their school experiences were influenced by specific teachers. As part of this process, students identified why they believed individual teachers were able to interact successfully with Native students and Native parents. Students also provided teachers, parents and community members with a number of suggestions for developing and supporting teacher success in Ermineskin schools.
Students' Educational Background

The six students who participated in this study attended school in a variety of settings. One student attended the Ermineskin Kindergarten and Primary schools before enrolling in neighboring provincial schools to complete grades 3 to 12. Two students completed their elementary and junior high education in Ermineskin schools during the time period when INAC was still operating the Ermineskin school system. One of these two students was attending the Ermineskin Junior High School the year that the local school board assumed control of education. Three students did not attend Ermineskin schools. Due to family mobility, these three students attended a combination of reserve, rural and urban schools. One of the three students reported that she and her siblings transferred from a reserve school to a “town” school because their mother felt they were not “getting the proper education.”

Five students were taught exclusively by non-Native teachers. One student who had attended two different reserve schools reported receiving instruction from Native teachers. While Native teachers currently make up 41% of the Miyo Wahkohtowin teaching staff, these six students completed most of their elementary and secondary education during an era when few Native teachers were employed by reserve or provincial schools.

As the reader reviews students’ statements, it is important to remember that students are describing experiences that occurred in a variety of school settings. Within most student quotations, I indicate whether the participant is describing a rural, urban, or on-reserve school environment. Unless otherwise noted, when students are describing teachers, they are referring to non-Native teachers.
Teachers' Affective Qualities

As students described their school experiences, their individual descriptions of “teacher success” were remarkably similar. Students explained that successful teachers were “of course” skilled educators. However, students stressed that teachers who were able to work most successfully with students were those that complemented their teaching skills with an ability to establish positive relationships with students.

When asked to describe teachers who had influenced their life in a positive manner, all six students identified the affective qualities of specific teachers. These affective qualities include friendliness, compassion and a willingness to share their own lives with students.

• [I appreciated teachers] who showed their concern -- like, they’ll sit down with you and they’ll talk to you and get to know you. [When that happens] the student feels more comfortable -- he won’t feel left out -- he won’t feel like a student. (M-S)

• The teachers [in INAC-operated Ermineskin schools] were really good -- they were supportive -- especially the teachers that opened up, talked about their lives -- the kind that really get to know you, I found were really effective. I remember one teacher . . . she was like a second mom. She joked around with the students a lot. She was friendly -- she wasn’t always serious and she would want our feedback -- like, what we would think on the topic. It was like everything was in balance -- we were equal. She used to talk about her past -- like, growing up and how she can relate to what you go through -- stuff like that is what I meant by sharing their lives -- getting to know you. She was like a mother to me at the time . . . She was a white lady and I still keep in touch with her. (M-S)

Students also spoke fondly of those teachers who were able to establish effective partnerships with students’ families.

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3 Key to Acronyms:
M-S male student
F-S female student
• There was a teacher [in an INAC-operated Ermineskin school] that knew a couple of my aunties -- he got to know us good ... he was one that would get involved with the students -- with their concerns. I started [having problems in school] and he told my mom -- like he had a talk with her. He gave my mom the understanding he had on how to deal with my problem ... so both sides [school and home] worked on it and I got the extra help I needed. (M-S)

Participants reported that when they had a positive relationship with a teacher they also tended to succeed academically in that particular class.

• I had one teacher [in an urban school] and he was really helpful ... he tried to get me into all the [extracurricular] activities. He always supported me no matter what -- like if my marks were dropping or something he’d be the one that came up to talk to me and if he said something, I never felt offended. He was one teacher I really was able to take criticism from. My grades were extremely high in that class and I think it was due to him because I actually enjoyed coming to his classes and listening to him. (F-S)

Students explained that the nature of student-teacher relationships can have a profound effect on a student’s sense of motivation.

• If me and the teacher got along good, I’d probably do a little better. Whereas, if we didn’t get along -- it wouldn’t work out at all. There would be absolutely no way -- you know? I wouldn’t want to do the work for them. (M-S)

• I felt like if [teachers] didn’t treat me right, I didn’t really take too much of an interest in their course. I just felt like another student and handed it in and got out of there. And then with my math teacher -- 'cause he helped me out so much and was always so friendly to me, I didn’t want to - not please him. So I was always getting my work in and I couldn’t believe my marks -- pretty soon, I didn’t need him helping me out -- I was just able to do it on my own. (F-S)

Students pointed out that teachers who interacted successfully with Native students also related well to non-Native students. Clearly most students will enjoy being in a classroom where the teacher is not only a skilled educator but is also friendly and concerned about students’ well-being. When participants were asked to consider the type of advice they would give to teachers who were planning to teach in Ermineskin schools,
student discussions began to move beyond “generic” descriptions of effective teaching skills.

Confronting Stereotypes

Students suggested that if teachers wish to work successfully in Ermineskin schools, they must be willing to view their students as individuals and not as “just another Native.” One participant recalled attending urban and rural schools where teachers appeared to hold low expectations for all Native students.

- I always felt like teachers always treated us [Native students] bad. I had a lot of teachers be surprised when I handed in my work or when they saw what marks I got -- they were surprised that [good work] came from a Native student. A lot of teachers really kind of looked down on Native students . . . I found that they never really took us seriously. (F-S)

The same student encouraged teachers to abandon stereotypical ideas about the learning abilities of Native students.

- I guess from what they see on T.V., what they hear -- the stories about us -- like they always have a stereotype of us and I think teachers have to break through that stereotype . . . We’re not as dumb as they think we are. If they took the time out to really get to know us -- we’re not little savages -- we’re human and we do have the capability to learn. (F-S)

Students suggested that one way teachers can “break through stereotypes” is to seek “first-hand” knowledge about their students and their students’ community.

- Teachers should get to learn the background of the students -- learn the culture -- just to know where you’re coming from. (F-S)

While students did not expect teachers to possess an abundance of knowledge about Cree culture and traditions, participants did appreciate those teachers who displayed a respect for their community’s culture.

- This one teacher [in an INAC-operated Ermineskin school] . . . I remember that he was really understanding about Native stuff. I was brought up culturally
and everything, so he was understanding with it. . . He didn't really know
much about Native culture but he was open-minded. He liked Native stuff --
he didn't understand it but he just liked it. (F-S)

One student advised teachers that linking lessons to various aspects of the
community's culture not only demonstrates the teacher's respect for the community but
can also aid students' understanding of the subject matter.

- [Teachers should relate subjects to students' culture] because it brings more
understanding of the subject. For example, in science, there you're studying
about the earth -- when you're talking about the earth you can . . . use the
medicine circle -- you can talk about the spiritual side, the physical side and
you don't just learn the science of it -- you learn the way that Natives felt
about the earth -- how we treated the earth. (M-S)

Other students supported the above statement by reporting that they appreciated teachers
who made an effort to create classrooms that acknowledged the importance of community
culture and traditions.

Responding to Students' Social Concerns

All six students spoke openly about the various social issues that they and many of
their Native friends face. Students explained that teachers must be aware that Native
youth possess important family and community responsibilities and that these duties may
sometimes conflict with school obligations. Participants also stressed that teachers need
to be aware that some of their students will be directly or indirectly affected by poverty,
alcohol and drug abuse, family violence and other social problems. Students emphasized
that teachers must be willing to move beyond the educator role and offer their students
social and emotional support.

- Teachers have to understand that students have problems of their own. Even
though a student shouldn't bring their problems to the schools -- they tend to.
And a teacher should be able to understand that -- you should deal with that
first. (M-S)
• Teachers have to realize that Natives are not as sheltered as white students are. Like, I found that Natives have a lot more problems -- they're more open to problems and [teachers] should actually take that time out and talk to students and find out what's wrong. 'Cause white students, they always seem to have a carefree life and they're so sheltered -- like their parents shelter them so much. And being a Native and living on the reserve, you're open to so much -- sorrow and despair and a bunch of things and it does have an effect on your schooling. (F-S)

Participants explained that being a “supportive” teacher means more than merely referring students to outside social services. Teachers must, at times, be prepared to assume a primary role of guidance and comfort for their students.

• In Grade 7, [INAC-operated reserve school] I was going through a lot at home. I saw school as an escape from home but the teacher wasn’t too open -- she wasn’t understanding. [What I wanted was a teacher] that I could talk to. Instead, she sent me to see the psychiatrist. I didn’t know this guy and they wanted me to tell him my problems and I thought, “Why should I?” (M-S)

• [Rural school setting] I remember Mr. ______ took my brother out for lunch so they could talk about school and about other stuff. [My brother] was having trouble in one class and Mr. ______ took him out to eat a number of times -- just to talk . . . I always thought that was really good . . . he was good like that -- nice, nice man . . . He was another really caring individual. (M-S)

Participants reported that teachers can also demonstrate support by respecting students’ family and community responsibilities.

• Teachers have to understand that when students go to ceremonies -- [the students] have to learn this -- it's a kind of "a have-to" -- so [teachers] have to understand that. And that's allowed here [on-reserve university and college entrance program] -- like if you're going to a feast -- then that's an excused absence. (M-S)

One student described the tensions that can develop between teachers and students when teachers fail to recognize the importance of family and cultural obligations.

• Teachers have to understand the extended family -- like some of them can't believe, “Oh, you're going to your aunt's funeral?” or “You're going to your friends’ mother’s funeral? You weren't close to them so why do you have to be there?” One teacher said, “Well if I went to all the funerals where people I knew died, I'd be missing class every day too.” And I was just thinking,
"We’re not going to a funeral just to go have a vacation" and that’s how they felt, “Oh these Natives go to so many funerals.” [Teachers] need to understand that it’s the way you were brought up. I was brought up with an extended family and everybody that I know and around me is important to me. (F-S)

Two other students also experienced problems with teachers who did not appear to understand the importance of the Cree cultural protocol that is related to bereavement. One student was expelled from a rural school after attending a number of funerals within a short period of time. It is evident that teachers need to be more than merely informed about community cultural practices; teachers must also be accepting and respectful of the community’s traditional and cultural practices.

While students emphasized the need for teachers to be supportive, students warned that teachers must not confuse "support" with "rescuing." One participant explained that teachers must refrain from imposing their own value systems on their students.

- Teachers shouldn’t come in thinking that they can change us and reform us to be white students . . . because the students will just look at them and laugh because we know who we are. We know what our identity is and we know that we don’t wanna be white. And if we decide to take the trail of going to university, going into the big cities -- well, that’s for us to decide and if we want to go in that direction, well, we will -- in our own way. (F-S)

Identifying Teacher Needs

During the interviews, students were able to describe their teachers in great detail, noting positive and negative attributes and skills. Participants also talked extensively about other aspects of their personal school experiences. When I asked students to identify the type of support teachers require in order to work successfully in Native communities, some students were unable to address this topic in detail. One student explained that it was difficult to put himself "in the place of a teacher." When students
hesitated answering a broad question about teacher needs, I asked them to consider the
type of support teachers might need from specific groups of people, such as parents,
administrators and community members. For some students, even these “focused”
questions were difficult to answer.

- I’ve never even -- ever thought about that -- you know -- I -- so, I couldn’t
imagine it ... I wouldn’t be able to answer that question truthfully. (M-S)

Although each of the students eventually did make some suggestions about teacher needs,
it appeared that for most students reflecting on this issue was a new experience.

**Parental Support**

Five students suggested that if teachers are to work effectively in the Ermineskin
community they will require strong support from their students’ parents. Participants
explained that parents can display teacher support in a number of ways. Some students
reported that their parents had volunteered for various school activities. Other parents
complemented their volunteer work with a home environment that promoted the value of
education.

- I know my Mom insisted on education -- she used to try her best to get us up
early to catch the bus, get us ready, make our lunches. If we had homework,
she would make us do it -- we’d have to come off the bus with something
(laugh). (M-S)

Some parents could be described as “silent” supporters.

- I know my parents encouraged me to go to school but nobody was right there
to really say or encourage me to go to school and everything. I just did it on
my own ... My parents were kind of on the sidelines supporting me -- but they
were always there if I needed them. (F-S)

Participants suggested that students benefit when their parents and teachers
establish close and positive relationships.
Parents should visit more often with the teacher — 'cause that will kind of give [the teacher] -- closeness with the student. Like the student goes to school everyday and you get to know them and then you never see their parents -- so you don’t really know the -- other half -- I mean, to see them like the way they are. If you get to see the parents more often, you get friendly -- then you understand the children more. Like, “Well, this is the way it would work best for this student, 'cause this is how the parent feels.” The parent would understand what you’re teaching them and you would just get on a friendly basis with the parent and the parent could sort of -- help the teacher along -- at home. (F-S)

Students observed that while teachers and students benefit from positive parent-teacher relationships, many teachers continue to receive minimal parental support. Four students reported that some parents only go to the school when their children “complain” about specific teachers. Students suggested that some parents “blindly” support their child without first discussing the issue with their child’s teacher.

I found that even my relatives -- they went in as soon as their child was just not happy with the teacher and I found that they should have just went in there and see what the teacher thinks. And I found that the people that were blaming the teachers, they didn’t even go to parent interviews or anything like that. (F-S)

Students reported that Native teachers might receive more parental support than their non-Native colleagues because some parents view all non-Native teachers in a negative light.

The parents should take an active role in their children’s life. Go to the school and check it out. [When there’s a problem], a lot of parents -- just because the teacher’s not Native, they’ll jump to conclusions or take their son or daughter’s side and kind of jump on the teachers. (F-S)

Three students suggested that non-Native teachers who work in reserve settings can easily have their job security jeopardized by an angry parent.

I think a lot of the teachers are intimidated by the parents because the parents have the power . . . I know a lot of parents enforce their authority to try get rid of [teachers]. Especially if the teacher is non-Native, then they have more of a fight to go teach in a Native community. (F-S)
According to students' statements, teachers and students are able to perform better when parents and teachers have formed strong partnerships. Yet, students stressed that teachers must be prepared to receive varying degrees of parental support. Participants suggested that although some schools may have minimal parental support, teachers can also receive important guidance and assistance from other members of the community.

**Community Support**

Five students proposed that a high level of community involvement in school activities will not only provide teachers with support but will also encourage teachers to become more knowledgeable about their students' community. For example, one student reported that the pow wows hosted by the Ermineskin Primary School offer teachers a welcoming environment.

- Ermineskin Primary supports teachers and helps them when they have the pow wows here. That's kind of accepting the teachers and helping them understand [the community]. (F-S)

The same student explained that it is important for elders and other community members to share their cultural knowledge and talents with students and teachers.

- Sometimes [in a band-operated Ermineskin school] an elder would come in and tell stories . . . [This would help] the teacher to understand -- like how the community feels. It's better if an elder comes in when you're in a lower class. Then you can have respect for the teachers -- like the elder tells you to respect elders and people older than you . . . (a community member) brings in more cultural stuff -- gets people to sing with him and he brought in the drum. Students like that sort of thing in the school. (F-S)

Students proposed that teachers may be treated with greater respect if students and parents are aware that the community and teachers are working together.

- As a community, we should get together and support [teachers] . . . get involved in the school and see what goes on in the school . . . When teachers get welcomed into the community, they'd have a feeling that they'd have that
support behind them if they get into any trouble with a certain parent -- that they'd have the community support to lean on. 'Cause everybody's related around here and [community members] could talk to parents and say, "Well, this is what we think" and just to offer teachers support. (F-S)

- If the community and teachers are working together, that would make it -- at ease for the children who go to school there -- 'cause they know that the community is trying to help the teachers and [this] will make the children . . . be more soft -- in their attitudes toward teachers. (F-S)

One student observed that when the community fails to play an active role in the school, teachers may assume that community members do not value education.

- If the community doesn't get involved with the school, it would probably make the teacher wonder, "What's the matter with this community? They don't really care about their children." If the community gets involved it will make the teacher feel better -- "Oh, the people care" and it'll just make her a better teacher. Then she gets to be friendly and casual with the students. (F-S)

As students expressed their views about teacher-community relationships, it was evident that many students had witnessed a lack of collaboration between parents, community members and teachers. Students stressed that if Miyo Wahkohtowin wishes to develop a quality school system, then secure and respectful partnerships must be developed between the school and the community.

- It is working together that will get the school system working. (M-S)

Describing Teacher Success

The reflections offered by this group of six Native students highlight the importance of exploring the world of teaching through the eyes of students. Educators, parents, community members and local school boards can gain new insights about teacher success by listening to candid student observations. According to students' statements, teacher success cannot be measured solely by "learning outcomes" and other common
measures of teacher effectiveness. While an individual’s instructional skills are important, students explained that a teacher’s level of “success” is greatly influenced by the type of affective qualities the teacher possesses. Students also emphasized that teachers must make an effort to become informed about their students’ community and to demonstrate a deep respect and acceptance of community norms and traditional practices. Students’ frank commentaries about teacher-community relationships demonstrate students’ acute awareness of the challenges that may face teachers who choose to work in First Nations communities. Students recommended that the development of teacher success in Ermineskin schools is a responsibility that must be shared by educators, parents, and the Ermineskin community.

Parent Views of Teacher Success

From my interviews with parents I learned that an exploration of the nature of teachers’ work in First Nations settings requires an examination of a myriad of historical, social and political forces. As I listened and talked to parents, our conversations about teacher success were transformed into discussions about residential schools, institutional racism, community social problems, reserve politics, and cultural preservation. The parent interviews also confirmed my prior belief that parents’ experiences and views provide important insights about how teacher success in Native communities can be optimized. Parents identified a number of ways that educators and the Ermineskin community can work together to foster teacher success in Ermineskin schools.
Teacher Education

Five of the six parents stressed that teacher training programs have a responsibility to prepare teachers for the realities of working in Native communities.

- I think these teachers should be having a special class and it should involve Native awareness. I really truly believe that -- 'cause a lot of them come here and they don't know the first thing about -- you know -- anything [about Native people] (laugh). (F-P)

Parents suggested that non-Native teachers, in particular, would benefit from completing courses that increased their general awareness of Native communities.

- Especially if this teacher is non-Native -- they live a totally different type of lifestyle than we do -- not necessarily everybody but still it's different. It just is. And they have to understand that these are Native children and they do live differently at home -- whether it be just for the language in the home, different meals are prepared -- it's just different. Those kinds of things, they're going to have to know that. It's just going to be different for them in a Native community. (F-P)

- I truly believe that we are not the same as a non-Native. We are made different, we're made to think different -- to feel different. A lot of people say, "We're the same" -- I say we're not and I think it takes a Native to know a Native. You can't expect a non-Native to come into a community without ever having being in contact with a Native and then start teaching them. You have to know a little about their culture first -- you gotta know a little bit about how [Natives] feel and think -- before you can even think of teaching them. (F-P)

Parents also emphasized that prospective teachers should be informed of the necessity to view community members as full partners in the educational process.

- I've seen it -- [new teachers] are so excited that they got their degrees and now they're going out there -- they're going to change the world. "I have my way of doing it" -- you know -- and before you realize it, you're butting heads and then not realizing what it is you're doing to yourself -- taking on such an overload. [I would like to see teachers come in with] an attitude where they

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4 Key to Acronyms:
F-P female parent
M-P male parent
can make a difference and allow other people to make the difference with them. (F-P)

While parents urged post-secondary institutions to offer courses in Native history and Native culture, they recognized that “generic” Native studies classes cannot, by themselves, provide teachers with the knowledge and skills they require to work successfully in specific Native communities. Parents encouraged local school boards to augment teachers’ formal education with a “community-specific” orientation program.

Community Orientation

Parents expressed concern over the fact that many teachers arrive in their community with a lack of understanding and knowledge about the Ermineskin community. Parents suggested that teachers cannot be expected to assume sole responsibility for becoming informed about the community.

- I don’t think any of the teachers would go out and [find all this information] on their own. To begin with, they wouldn’t even know where to start. I would think the onus should be on the community to say, “Well, this is us -- welcome to our community. This is what we’re about and here are some special circumstances that you should consider.” (M-P)

All six parents advised the local school board to assume a leadership role by creating an orientation program, that would inform teachers about the Ermineskin community.

- I talked to one other parent and we both felt that the teachers didn’t really have a fair understanding of where our kids were really at -- because most [teachers] are white or other nationalities and they were raised in completely different environments and they’ve got assumptions -- like their whole lifestyle is based on a completely different set of paradigms. I thought something should be in place to sort of bridge the gap or create more of an awareness between the student-teacher, parent-teacher relationship. We thought some sort of a workshop or seminar -- you could even call it a ceremony or something -- just to introduce these people to the realities that exist in this community. (M-P)
Parents proposed that an effective orientation program would provide teachers with a balance of historical and contemporary information about the Ermineskin community.

- The course could talk about our beliefs and maybe they could talk about how we lived in the past and how it’s changed -- how we live today. (F-P)

According to parents’ statements, teachers must be made aware of the social and political structures that impact upon students’ lives.

- If you look at the development of the community -- like, there’s basically five environments that make up the community -- there’s the educational environment, economic environment, political environment, the social one and the religious or cultural environment. Now all those aspects affect every individual -- young and old . . . and every individual has four basic components -- emotional, psychological, spiritual and physical. Now, how a community is set up to take care of those components that make up an individual -- basically determines how that individual grows and progresses in the community. Now if [teachers] could understand what the strengths and weaknesses [of the community and individual] are, I think -- like this is my own personal idea -- I think it would be a step closer for [teachers] to actually seeing, “Well, this is why this kid is like this. If we do this, maybe it’ll help.” (M-P)

The parent who made the above statement added that if teachers are to interact successfully with Ermineskin students, the community must provide teachers with a complete historical, social and political profile of the Ermineskin community.

- [Teachers here] have got more of a unique situation to deal with . . . the money that’s here basically aggravated any problems that were there -- it was like adding fuel to the fire. So, we’ve got per capita more instances of suicide, more instances of -- every type of abuse there is -- you know -- chemical, physical, sexual -- whatever. And the kids are being brought up in that type of environment. So, in order for a teacher to effectively interact with the kids, they’ve gotta understand what type of environment these kids are coming from. It’s not something that you could go to university and learn about. (M-P)

While participants did not provide concrete ideas about how this information could be relayed to teachers, it was evident that parents wanted their children to be taught by
teachers who were well-informed about the various forces that impact upon the lives of Ermineskin community members.

**Provision of Cultural Information**

A comprehensive exploration of traditional and contemporary cultural practices was identified as another essential component of a quality teacher orientation program. One parent explained that teachers must be informed about their students’ religious practices because, as she stated, “I believe our life is our religion.”

Parents suggested that teachers must be informed about the community’s cultural life so that they can develop an instructional style that respects and celebrates their students’ culture. One parent, after recalling his father’s stories about boarding school days and his own experiences with racist teachers suggested that some Ermineskin teachers continue to ignore the importance of their students’ cultural development.

- There’s still some of the dust in the air with some of these teachers -- the way they look at the kids -- rather than encourage them to be proud of who they are . . . they’ll focus on developing these kids from a white perspective . . . like academics is first and culture is secondary. (M-P)

The same parent went on to argue that Native students who possess a strong understanding of their traditions and culture will be better able to develop their academic skills.

- The kids who are doing that they’re stronger -- they have a stronger sense of pride, they’re more stable, they’re more relaxed, they’re more confident, they’re more secure because they know who they are, where they came from, what they are -- like if it’s Cree or Sioux or Blackfoot. And if you develop that side first, then academics come easier. (M-P)

Three parents suggested that teachers must also be trained to teach their students about certain aspects of Cree culture.
• I believe in teaching [students] that they have a way of praying, a way of respecting themselves -- their parents, elders and everything around them ... I really believe this is very very important for a child to learn in a Native school. (F-P)

Parents understand that teachers will need guidance and support as they learn how to create classrooms that nurture the development of Cree cultural practices.

• There are more than enough parents out there that are willing -- that would be willing -- myself, for one -- to come in and teach these non-Natives a little bit of what I've just talked about. (F-P)

According to parents' statements, teacher orientation programs should encourage teachers to enrich their students' cultural knowledge by regularly inviting elders and other community members to participate in classroom activities. One parent reminisced about his own school experience and how a certain elder provided him with lasting spiritual energy.

• He was an old man and he would come twice a week and he would come in very traditional dress and he'd tell us stories and he'd speak in half Cree and half English so all of us would understand. And he told us beautiful stories and it stayed with me for life -- a really strong vivid impression of this old man telling us stories and making us feel really really proud. And I saw it and I can remember it with the other kids -- it gave us -- energy -- not just physical energy but it was a sort of spiritual -- energy and boost that lasted and lasted -- in between visits that energy was constant and then he would come and tell us more stories. And -- like he's one person that I'll never forget. (M-P)

I asked the parent to explain how the elder provided him with such spiritual energy.

• Well, first of all he was an elder and he was -- pretty old -- and the way he came in -- like he just -- like his pride just shone from his face down to his toes and when you held his hand, you could just feel the warmth and the love and the way he sat and told stories -- even kids that sat far away, the kids that are shy or quiet or scared -- towards the middle of the story, everybody was sitting right by his feet and he'd always pick one child up and let that child play part of the story -- if there was a horse or whatever -- he'd take turns and he'd include everybody. And nobody was left out and even the kids that are too shy or whatever -- he'd tease them and coax them and like -- sometimes, he was even hypnotic -- like, he'd get this really timid child to be sitting on his lap and using their arms to play the story type of thing. He included everybody - eh?
And it was just like your mooshom [grandfather] coming to your class and being a part of your learning . . Like him -- just him alone helped bridge that gap -- like it was enough cultural or traditional or even spiritual exposure for the kids to absorb it and it would carry 'em through 'til his next visit. It made a big difference -- I know from my experience . . If they had something like that [today] it would make a big difference. But there's very -- very few elders left. (M-P)

Acknowledging the important role that elders could play in the education of Ermineskin children, parents urged the school board to help teachers learn how to involve elders meaningfully in classroom activities.

Nurturing Teacher-Community Relationships

Each parent urged teachers to participate in community activities on a regular basis.

- Hey, you're a teacher here, you should know the community a little bit. Don't just come to school and go home -- stick around for a little while. (F-P)

Parents suggested that teachers who make an effort to attend community functions will be better able to establish productive relationships with students, parents and community members. Parents appreciated those teachers who appear to understand the importance of participating in activities that are an essential aspect of their students' lives.

- I'm proud to see the teachers when they participate in the round dance . . It makes me proud to see that they know that this is a part of the children -- this is part of the children that they're teaching and they make it a part of them. (F-P)

Parents suggested that, as part of an effective teacher orientation program, the school board should assume initial responsibility for introducing new teachers to the Ermineskin community.

- Somebody from the school board [should] make it a point to take this teacher around . . . after all, they are the ones that hired this person -- they should
make it a point to see that this person is settled in and knows what’s going on. (F-P)

- A teacher coming in for the first year should be able to go to the board and ask them, “Okay, I want to get involved in the community -- what can I do?” I think the board should be able to give them that answer. (F-P)

While parents felt that teachers should be assisted in their initial orientation to the community, parents also stressed that teachers need to take personal responsibility for establishing positive relationships with the community.

- They can shop at our stores and they can stop and say, “Hi” to the parents when they see them in town. They can come to our functions such as rodeos, pow wows. (F-P)

- Maybe if they’re lucky, they’ll have one parent in their class or maybe they’ll have a lot -- that they can talk to and slowly, “I’m new here. I’m interested in learning a little bit more about the community. I want to learn more about my students and maybe you can help me.” (F-P)

- There’s two [local] newspapers -- they have to educate themselves. (F-P)

Many parents expressed concern about the small number of teachers who normally attend community events. They explained that teachers need to understand that participation in community events does not require a personal invitation; all members of the public are welcome to attend Ermineskin community functions.

- Community people don’t get offended by white people or anybody partaking in the feasts and the pow wows because we want people to know our culture. (F-P)

- The public is more than welcome to come to our feasts and they’re always posted up anywhere -- feasts, round dances, tea dances. If a non-Native ever walked into any of these functions, he’s not going to be told, “Hey look, you’re not allowed -- you can’t come in here.” They’ll never do that. You’ll always be welcome. That’s why I can’t see -- a lot of times, there’s functions around here and where are the teachers? (laugh) (F-P)
As parents discussed the importance of strong teacher-community relationships, their comments indicated that teachers need to view their work in a Native community as an ever-evolving learning experience. Even if teachers are provided with an extensive orientation program, parents urged teachers to accept the fact that making mistakes is a natural and inevitable part of discovering how to work in a new environment.

- You’re like a child walking into school for the first time. You’re scared -- you don’t know what to do or you don’t know if you’re going to be saying the right things. But it’s a learning experience -- you learn from your mistakes and of course, you’re going to make mistakes -- nobody’s perfect. And don’t think that you will walk into a Native community and be perfect (laugh) because none of us are perfect. (F-P)

Parent Expectations

As a classroom teacher I found that I was able to relate better to parents if I was aware of what they expected from the school and from me, as the teacher of their child. During the interviews, I asked the six parents to identify their own personal expectations of their children’s teachers. As parents outlined their views, they made minimal reference to teachers’ instructional skills. All six parents conveyed that, most of all, they wanted their children to receive individual attention and emotional support from their teachers.

One parent indicated that she expected her children’s teachers to assume a parental role.

- [I expected teachers to] take over my role as mother -- that they should comfort her when she’s scared or embarrassed . . . They had to do what I used to do as a mother. I expected a lot -- I guess compassionate teachers . . . taking care of her emotionally . . . if she got hurt in some way -- like, don’t just brush it off and say, “It’s nothing serious so don’t cry about it” because to [the child], it’s serious. (F-P)
Another parent was ambivalent about whether teachers should be "expected" to assume parental responsibilities. Yet, at the same time, she observed that, in order to meet the needs of some students, teachers may have no choice but to "act as a parent."

- Maybe at home [students] aren't taught [certain things] -- even though it shouldn't be -- but it should be the teacher's responsibility a little bit -- they act as a parent and a teacher when the child goes to school . . . The teacher not only has to teach Math, English, whatever -- at the same, they have to learn how to teach that child whatever it is that they're lacking -- whether it be the discipline or just caring if they're not shown love -- if they're abused. You'll be able to tell -- "There's something wrong with this child. I wonder what it is." (F-P)

Parents' statements indicated that the historical background and contemporary social climate of the Ermineskin community requires that teachers be willing to provide emotional support.

- Emotional support is one of the most important things especially for Native people. We're living a life that we have more or less become accustomed to -- rather than choose for ourselves. Because of being put on reservations -- it begins to play on your mentality and that mentality has been handed down from our great-grandfathers to our grandfathers and then to us. Being a Native person is hard -- and yet it has its pride -- like, I'm proud to say that I'm an Indian . . . But I think emotional support is one of the most important things anybody could do for anybody else -- 'cause it gets you through the rough spots. I think that's one of the most important things a successful teacher would do -- is being able to emotionally support children. (F-P)

- You have to understand that all these kids -- they're different -- their home lives are different and not all kids have a good life and it's going to reflect them when they come to school . . . [some] kids need extra attention and they need that teacher to understand them -- to listen to them and have patience with them. A lot of them really need that caring -- talking to them and just listening to them. (F-P)

Another parent fondly recalled how some of her children's teachers offered her encouragement and assistance during a troubling time in her life.

- [Those teachers who stand out in a positive way were those] that were friendly and they always had a smile -- they were approachable. They were always eager or willing to share some humorous things that happened in school or
with any concerns -- they’d let you know . . . It wasn’t always negative that I heard but they also mentioned the good things that [my children] were doing. [I was in a dysfunctional family growing up and I was also in a dysfunctional marital relationship]. I was always lost in thought because of the abuse that I was going through -- I was always second-guessing myself and to see somebody that’s friendly, approachable and accepting you for who you are -- made a big difference for me. [Those teachers] were always willing to help . . . It was enlightening to have people like that around. I think I probably would’ve backed away from the school if I heard all the negative about what my child is doing. (F-P)

Parents stressed that before teachers can offer their students emotional support, teachers must make an effort to become thoroughly informed about each of their students.

• You have to educate yourself about each kid because they’re all different . . . I think you have to kind of study each child a little bit. And you can’t do everything the same with each child because they’re all different. (F-P)

• Some of the teachers talk at the kids . . . they don’t interact enough . . . they don’t get a good honest feeling for who the children are. (M-P)

One parent explained that as teachers attempt to become informed about their students they must be aware that each child is an integral part of an extended family.

• The number one thing is to be involved with the child as much as you can right up to [knowing] the siblings of the child, knowing the grandparents, the whole family, as a whole -- not just the child and that’s it. Because that is the child. (F-P)

It is evident that parents value a teacher’s willingness to move beyond the role of teacher to that of compassionate supporter. Some of the parents’ comments also indicate that if teachers truly wish to become informed about each of their students, this will require the teacher to develop a comprehensive knowledge of the many family relationships in the community.
Parent Responsibilities

Each parent emphasized that a teacher’s ability to work successfully in Ermineskin
schools is strengthened if that teacher is receiving substantial support from their students’
parents. Participants explained that parental support can take many forms. Conducting
volunteer work, communicating regularly with teachers and expressing gratitude for
teachers’ efforts were identified as some of the key ways that parents can create
collaborative relationships with teachers.

Participants suggested that by communicating regularly with their children’s
teachers, parents are assisting teachers to better meet the needs of their students.

- I try to talk to the teachers to let them know where my kids are really at. So, if
  one of my kids is having a problem, at least that teacher will know where that
  kid’s coming from. (M-P)

- The parent has to give as much information to the teacher about their child so
  that teacher is going to understand where the child’s coming from. (F-P)

Participants reported that by making an effort to become involved in school
activities and demonstrating an interest in their children’s school work, parents are
encouraging their children to value education.

- [Teachers] really need a lot of parent involvement . . . because the child needs
  to know that their mom or dad is interested in what they’re doing or in what’s
  happening to them. (F-P)

- Even if a parent didn’t finish their schooling, even being involved in their
  children’s school work [by asking], “What does this mean?” And the kid feels
good teaching the father or the mother. So it’s like a cycle of education. At
the same time as you’re working with your child, then their self-esteem, their
self-confidence [develops] -- they start to feel good about themselves because
you are taking interest in them -- in what they’re doing. So it’s building
everybody. (F-P)
Volunteer work was identified as an effective way for parents to demonstrate support for both their children and their children’s teachers. One parent explained that her volunteer work also allowed her to observe her children within the school setting.

- [I did volunteer work at the school] because my children are important. I care for them and I also need to know how they are in school. Some parents don’t know what their kids are like in school. At home, they could be the perfect angels but in school, they could be totally different too . . . I guess [volunteering in the school] was my way of showing my support for [my children] -- how important their education is as well as giving support to the teachers. (F-P)

While participants acknowledged the importance of strong parent-teacher partnerships, they also stressed that teachers cannot expect to receive overt forms of support from all parents.

- The parents should come in and say, “You’re doing a good job, I notice a difference in my kids.” But you won’t get it from all of the parents. (F-P)

The above parent went on to encourage teachers to refrain from interpreting a lack of parental encouragement as a personal affront.

- A lot of people, especially Indian people -- they don’t know how to show emotion -- you know? They just weren’t brought up that way -- from the residential schools -- they’ve never showed affection and they’ve never been shown affection and in turn they don’t know how to show it -- it’s something that an Indian person has to learn. I’m not saying everybody -- don’t get me wrong, like I don’t mean everybody. But showing emotion and being able to tell somebody, “Hey, you’re doing good!” -- Because you don’t get it, so in turn you don’t give it. (F-P)

Another parent warned that although Ermineskin teachers are encouraged to conduct home visits, teachers may not be welcomed into all homes.

- Home visits -- a lot of homes don’t want the teacher in the house -- just because, “No, our house is not nice enough . . . just things like that . . . [parents] might not be comfortable . . . and that’s where that teacher has to have a little respect for the person. They have to kind of understand how Natives feel and think. [Teachers should consider], “Maybe they don’t want
me in there but it’s for a reason.” It’s not because, “Hey, I don’t want to listen to you. I don’t care about my child’s education.” (F-P)

Other participants supported the above statement and explained that parents may have a variety of reasons for being minimally involved in school activities.

- A lot of times, Native parents -- we’ve been made to feel we’re not important - afraid -- even to go to the school. (F-P)

- [Some parents] don’t want to go into a school because maybe they just don’t want to remember . . . because when they were going to school -- [like] residential school, it was really bad for a lot of them . . . Or if they went to a white school -- maybe they were made fun of. (F-P)

- There’s lots of parents that don’t get involved -- they don’t even go there to begin with. And most of that is because of the environment they live in -- so many problems . . . personal problems, personal issues -- they shy away from the public. (M-P)

Teachers were encouraged to recognize that a parent who is noticeably absent from the school environment should not be labelled as an uncaring or disinterested parent. As participants explained, prior negative experiences with schools coupled with personal concerns may prevent parents from assuming an active role in the school.

**School Board Responsibilities**

As parents discussed how teacher success can be nurtured, they talked about the need for the local school board to ensure that teachers are provided with a supportive work environment. Parents suggested that high teacher turnover rates in Native communities could be reduced if school board members made an effort to establish informal communication lines with individual teachers. Parents also advised school boards to acknowledge and respect teachers’ expertise by providing them with increased decision-making powers.
One parent who is also a Miyo Wahkohtowin board member advised other Native school systems to ensure that board members conduct regular school visits.

- [Sometimes] the school board’s not involved enough -- they have to go to the schools and take a look around -- get to know [the teachers] a little bit. [When you lose good teachers] there’s a communication gap -- the school board members have to get out there themselves -- that’s their job too. Maybe because of that communication gap, this teacher’s not getting what they want out of this school, out of their class because they don’t have that support from the board -- because it all starts from the board, the administration. (F-P)

Another board member supported the above statement and suggested that unless board members interact with teachers on an individual and informal basis, teachers and board members will likely establish superficial relationships.

- The school board has to ensure communication between the teachers and the board -- through regular visits to the school . . . [It’s important to] begin to know each other on a personal basis rather than just strictly professional. When you sit down and have coffee with somebody and find out what their interests are -- it’s not until then that you begin to know the person -- for who they are. If you don’t get out of the [school] setting, you don’t really ever find out who they are or what they’re really genuinely interested in. (F-P)

Parents encouraged school boards to provide teachers with the freedom and the resources they require to develop quality educational programs.

- A lot of times, the teachers know what to do but what holds them back a lot of times is policies and procedures -- guidelines, rules -- those are kind of like little harnesses. Instinctively, you know this is what I could do to help [a student] but you can’t do it because the administrator says, “We’re low on budget. You cannot do that.” Some of the teachers are limited as to what they can do even though they know what they would like to do -- for the students as well as themselves. (F-P)

Parents explained that providing teachers with “freedom” requires that school boards offer teachers an opportunity to contribute to the decision-making process.

- [Teachers need to know their ideas and opinions] are important because a teacher teaches everyday and is around these students -- so what you’re thinking, what your ideas are -- you want to be heard. (F-P)
One parent observed that inappropriate decisions can be made when school boards fail to acknowledge teacher expertise.

- I hate politics. They should treat teachers equally... not [present the school board as] being superior to teachers -- 'cause the teachers' ideas and suggestions matter a lot more than -- others just dictating, "Okay, we think this is what's going to be good for the school. We want you to start doing it."

And the teacher thinks, "This guy is in left field" -- you know? So [school boards should ask teachers], "So what do you suppose would work in the school?" (F-P)

At the present time, the Miyo Wahkohtowin Education Authority is using site-based management as a way to ensure that teachers are provided with input into the development of school-based programs. One board member reported that she views site-based management as a way to inform teachers that the school board recognizes and respects their knowledge and skills.

- Giving them a little bit more authority would ensure their confidence in their position. Hopefully, we are telling them that we prize their intelligence, prize their professionalism -- that it's important to us that the decisions made in the best interests of the children are being made by the proper people... because [teachers] are our front-liners. (F-P)

Several parents pointed out that if school boards wish to demonstrate their respect for teachers' work, then teachers must be provided with job security. Three parents suggested that after teachers have successfully completed a one or two year probationary period, then they should be offered continuous contracts.

- Working in a place where you're not sure if you've got your job the next year - that's gotta put... a lot of pressure on a person. [You need] stability -- you need to plant your feet on the ground -- you need to know where you're going... [It's important to feel] part of a family -- like, being part of the school -- really being part of it -- not just somebody that might be gone the next year. (F-P)
Parents urged school boards to recognize the importance of regularly providing teachers with formal and informal expressions of gratitude.

- There are definitely teachers that put in a lot of extra effort. And other teachers -- all it is -- is the nine to four and they're gone but there are teachers that really get involved and give a lot of extra to the kids. (F-P)

- On a day to day basis, everybody needs a pat on the back -- no matter who you are -- no matter how many degrees you have. Everybody on a regular basis needs to be recognized for their efforts. And on a long-term basis -- you should have the support of the principals and a year-end recognition, an awards ceremony -- something just to let people know that “your efforts are appreciated.” (F-P)

It is evident that parents view the local school board as playing a pivotal role in the development of a school system that supports and nurtures the development of teacher success.

Community Responsibilities

Parents suggested that community members can provide teachers with important support by participating in school functions and making teachers feel welcome in the community.

- [Community members should get involved in school functions] because it’s their community -- these are their people. They should be doing their best to be involved in their education. The community can also be really making [teachers] feel comfortable -- like welcoming them if they go to their functions, talk to them. If [a teacher comes in], greet them, have them sit with you, introduce them. (F-P)

- I think the community should be involved -- like every aspect of the community from Chief and Council down. (M-P)

As parents discussed how the community can support Ermineskin teachers, five parents expressed their concern about the apparent apathy of many community members.

- Sure everybody says, “Our children are our future -- education, education!” But how many of those parents who say that are really there regularly or show up on teacher interview nights and that’s it -- you know? Like our [band]
councillors, that’s all you hear our councillors say, “Education this, our children this, our children that” but once they get in there, they forget everything. Once that money starts rolling in -- all these meetings -- they kind of forget -- the grassroots. (F-P)

- Bottom line of it is that in our generation we look at our kids and we say, “The children are our future leaders.” Okay I’ve heard that -- ooh -- since I was a teenager! But as I was moving along in my life, nobody’s taught me to be a leader . . . today, they’re still saying, “The children are our future leaders” but what [is the community] doing to teach [children] to be leaders? [The community] is not walking their talk. (F-P)

One parent suggested that community members also tend to over-burden teachers.

- Parents, community, school boards, take their teachers as robots -- that they don’t have human feelings -- so they lay more and more on them and eventually they’re the ones burning them out. (F-P)

Parents emphasized that rather than “burning out” teachers, the community must work together and accept primary responsibility for the well-being of their children.

- Parents, leaders -- us, as role models, as parents, as leaders, as business people -- it’s up to us to make sure that the generation that’s following is going to be able to [be successful]. (F-P)

Optimizing Teacher Success

As parents provided suggestions for the development of teacher success, their comments and observations demonstrated their strong awareness of the challenges that face teachers who work in Ermineskin schools. Parents argued that due to the nature of the Ermineskin community, teachers must be willing to provide their students with emotional guidance as well as academic instruction. Parents noted that teachers are also expected to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for them to nurture their students’ cultural development. All parents stressed that since Ermineskin teachers possess a number of challenging responsibilities, the local school board and the larger Ermineskin
community must assume a primary role in assisting teachers to work successfully in Ermineskin schools. It was also evident that parents would like the Ermineskin community to be a place where “good” teachers want to work.

- If I was a teacher, I would like to have a strong sense of accomplishment ... If the school board or administrator or the community could foster an environment where that type of situation naturally develops ... I think you’d have a good chance of keeping good teachers. (M-P)

**Summary**

In this chapter I have examined the factors that were identified by students and parents as contributing most to teacher success in Ermineskin schools. Students and parents suggested that post-secondary institutions, the local school board and Ermineskin community members all have essential roles to play in the development of teacher success in Ermineskin schools. Yet, students and parents observed that teachers often arrive in their community without adequate teacher training and teachers often receive minimal support from parents and other community members. Students and parents explained that this lack of support for teachers is directly related to the historical, social and political nature of the Ermineskin community. Ultimately, both students and parents viewed the development of teacher success as a process that can only be possible through a collaborative effort between educators, the local school board and Ermineskin community members.

In Chapters 5 and 6 Ermineskin educators describe those influences that have positively and negatively influenced their work in First Nations communities. I anticipate that the reader will be able to relate educator views about teacher success to the perspectives that have been offered by students and parents.
In the late 1970s, researchers began to take more of an interest in exploring how educators view the work of teaching. In 1981, Goodson suggested, "In understanding something so intensely personal as teaching it is critical we know about the person the teacher is" (cited in Goodson, 1992, p. 4). During the last fifteen years, a number of researchers have followed Goodson's advice and conducted studies that feature an exploration of teachers' lives and careers. However, at the present time, the research literature lacks a presentation of how educators in Canadian First Nations settings understand and view their daily work. One of the main goals of this study is to provide teachers and school administrators with opportunities to reflect on the nature of their work in Native communities. In this chapter and the next I present an account of the opinions and experiences of 12 teachers and 6 administrators who are presently employed by the Miyo Wahkohtowin Education Authority. The educators identify and describe a number of factors they believe contribute most to teacher success in Native settings.

Having the opportunity to listen to fellow educators reflect on their teaching careers was an important learning experience for me. As individual teachers and administrators described the complexities of their daily work, many of my prior ideas about the nature of teacher success were transformed. During the interviews I was struck by the willingness of participants to tackle sensitive and troubling aspects of their work. For example, while people spoke fondly of the highlights of their teaching experiences, they also spoke openly of the challenges they have faced while working in Native
communities. As I prepared to write these two chapters, I was acutely aware of my responsibility to reciprocate the participants' candid sharing of their experiences by presenting each of their perspectives in a manner that would respect and honour their words.

In an effort to accurately present participants' realities, I have worked hard to avoid essentialized notions of Native and non-Native educators. While most participant quotes are accompanied by a code that identifies the race and gender of the speaker, the perspectives of Native and non-Native educators are presented in an integrated manner. By doing so, I anticipate that I will provide the audience with an opportunity to see the many ways in which Native and non-Native educators share similar experiences, concerns and opinions. I also want to ensure that this study acknowledges the existence of important differences in experience and privilege within the 'categories' of Native and non-Native educators. At the same time, I also want to recognize that both Native and non-Native teachers and administrators did identify race-related issues that they believed influenced their daily work. Where appropriate, this chapter and the next feature short discussions of issues that may relate specifically to either Native or non-Native educators.

The Educators

As outlined in Chapter 3, the nature of the research site has determined that if this study is to protect participants' anonymity, detailed descriptions of individual teachers and administrators cannot be provided. At the same time, I realize that the less

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5 Diana Fuss (1989) explains that "essentialism is most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the "whatness" of a given entity ... essentialism is typically defined in opposition to difference; the doctrine of essence is viewed as precisely that which seeks to deny or to annul the very radicality of difference" (pp. xi-xii).
information I provide about the research participants, the more I limit the reader’s ability
to conduct their own analysis of participants’ words. Noblit (cited in Anderson, 1989)
reminds us that readers of ethnographic accounts form their own text from the
ethnography and this text becomes a new and different account of participants’ words.
What I have tried to do is to provide the reader with as much information about
participants as possible, while at the same time being vigilant in my attempts to protect
the identity of each participant.

**Non-Native Teachers**

The six non-Native teachers who participated in this study share a number of
common characteristics in terms of family status, level of education and location of
residency. However in terms of age and number of teaching years, the six teachers can be
classified into two groups; new teachers and experienced teachers. The teachers ranged
in age from 26 to 55.⁶ Each of the six teachers was either married or in a common-law
relationship and three had children. All six teachers held Bachelor of Education degrees
and one teacher had also completed a Bachelor of Arts degree and an Early Childhood
Diploma. Three teachers had been teaching for less than five years, one had been
teaching for 20 years, one had 24 years of classroom experience and one had been
teaching for 25 years. These six non-Native educators had devoted most of their teaching
careers to working in First Nations communities. Four teachers had spent all of their
teaching years in Native schools, one had worked 12 out of 24 teaching years in Native

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⁶ Ages of participants are only an approximation as participants were given an option of specifying their
age or indicating their age range (i.e: 45-55).
communities and one had spent 15 out of 20 teaching years in Native settings. All six teachers reside in communities that are in close proximity to the Ermineskin reserve.

**Native Teachers**

The six Native teachers who participated in this study share a number of common characteristics in terms of age, education, and number of teaching years. The Native teachers ranged in age from 27 to 45. Three teachers were married, three were single and two had children. All six teachers held Bachelor of Education degrees and three teachers were pursuing graduate studies at the Masters level. All six educators could be described as relatively new teachers. Two had been teaching for less than five years, one had six years of classroom experience, two had taught for seven years and one had been teaching for eight years. Four teachers had spent all of their teaching years working in Native communities, one had completed five out of eight teaching years in Native communities, and one had worked five out of seven teaching years in native settings. Five out of six Native teachers either reside on the Ermineskin reserve or in close proximity to the reserve. One Native teacher resides in a nearby city.

**Administrators**

The three Native administrators and three non-Native administrators who participated in this study form a relatively homogeneous group in terms of residency, family status and the number of years spent in administration. The administrators ranged in age from 36 to 55. One administrator was married, one was in a common-law relationship, four were single and two had children. Three administrators held Bachelor of Education degrees and three had completed Master of Education degrees. Two
administrators had been teaching for less than six years, one had 10 years of teaching experience, one administrator had taught for 17 years, another had 20 years of teaching experience and one had taught for 28 years. While the administrators were experienced educators most of them had minimal administrative experience. Five educators had less than five years of administrative experience and one educator had spent nine years in administration. Two administrators had worked for less than five years in First Nations communities while the other four administrators had completed all of their teaching and administrative experience in Native settings. Five out of six administrators either reside on the Ermineskin reserve or in close proximity to the reserve. One administrator lives in a nearby city.

**Presentation of Educator Statements**

After transcribing and analyzing over 21 hours of educator interviews, I was left with an overwhelming amount of rich detail informing me about the views and experiences of teachers and administrators. I faced the difficult task of deciding what I could and should include in the presentation of my research findings. It was reviewing the nature and sequencing of my interview questions that eventually helped me to develop a method for presenting and commenting on the words of the teachers and administrators.

One goal of my interview schedule was to encourage participants to describe their personal and professional development as an educator (Appendices 3-6). Butt, Raymond, McCue, and Yamagishi (1992) suggest that if we are able to develop an understanding of "how teachers, individually and collectively, think, act, develop professionally and change during their careers [we might be provided with] new insights as to how one might
approach the reform, change and improvements in education that are necessary to equip our students for a desirable future” (p. 51). While listening to the tapes and reviewing the transcripts, I heard each individual describe the unique path they had taken to reach their current level of development as an educator. As a result, I decided to organize the presentation of the interview findings in a manner that allows the reader to gain an appreciation of how individual educators selected and developed strategies in their attempts to work successfully in Native communities. This chapter examines the source of individuals’ initial desires to become teachers and identifies how and why participants chose to work in Native communities. In the next chapter I explore educators’ experiences and opinions as they describe those conditions, they believe, optimize teacher success in First Nations schools.

I would like to remind readers that many of the educators who participated in this study have worked in a number of different First Nations communities. As a result, although some of their comments may describe their current work experience on the Erminskin Reserve many of their statements are based on previous teaching experiences that occurred in other First Nations settings.

**Deciding to Become a Teacher**

Educators are rarely asked to describe their initial attraction to the field of teaching. In fact, as many teachers can relate, there is a common notion that individuals become teachers primarily to reap the perceived material benefits; short working hours, frequent holidays and long summer vacations. In an effort to present an accurate portrayal of the men and women who teach in First Nations communities, I believe it is
important to present an account of how these educators view the work of teaching. By listening to participants explain how and why they decided to become teachers, we are provided with a look at each individual’s ideas about the work of teaching. For them, what does it mean to be a teacher? What was it that drew them to the field of teaching?

Many educators had a difficult time in identifying the initial forces that guided them on their path to becoming a teacher. For some people, entering the field of teaching was just something they did: an act shaped by natural desire. One Native teacher laughed as she explained, “I kind of had a focus all the time . . . I really like school -- I even like the way school smells!” Another Native teacher recalled, “I just knew that I wanted to go into teaching.” One non-Native teacher with over 20 years of teaching experience explained, “From my perspective, the only thing that I ever wanted to be was a teacher . . . I have no desires to do anything else.” When encouraged to explore the factors that may have shaped their “natural” aspirations, educators are able to identify a number of instrumental forces. Positive early school experiences, a desire to work with children, family influence and an aspiration to create change were cited as the most powerful forces that led most individuals to the work of teaching.

School Memories

Several educators attributed their initial attraction to the world of teaching to the positive aspects of their own early school experiences. One Native teacher remembered, “I always had a good feeling in school . . . I loved school.” For this particular teacher, the nature of her relationships with teachers and classmates was still fresh in her mind: “Any little good memories that I have today always go back to my little white friends that
I had -- 'cause we had little special relationships with them -- the school yard, the teachers.”

Some individuals elaborated on how their own teachers provided them with a favourable impression of school life.

- I think I had positive role models . . . growing up as a kid . . . from a child’s perspective, I found some of these teachers to be very kind -- interested in what kids did - loving kinds of people and I think that impressed me. (F-NNT)

- I think school was a safe place for me . . . [the teachers] took a big interest in me . . . and I don’t think they singled me out from everybody else but they just made me feel special. (F-NT)

Teachers who made an effort to interact with students outside of school hours were especially remembered.

- They [teachers] were generally very compassionate kinds of people. As a kid I never got home from school 'til after 4:30 . . . I always stayed and helped out and had a good time with the teacher . . . and that was the kind of people that they were. (F-NNT)

- I had a really good teacher . . . it was boarding school so she would have children come and clean up her room and give them 50 cents and back [then] 50 cents was a lot. And then we did a Christmas concert and then the hula dancing -- this little Hawaii dance we did -- was just -- it was really good for boosting self-esteem. (F-NT)

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7 Key to Acronyms:
F-NNT female non-Native teacher
F-NT female Native teacher
M-NNT male non-Native teacher
M-NT male Native teacher
F-NNE female non-Native educator
F-NE female Native educator
M-NNE male non-Native educator
M-NE Native educator
NNA non-Native administrator
NA Native administrator
NNE non-Native educator
NE Native educator

As described in Chapter 3, in an effort to protect participants’ anonymity, the race and gender of participants will not always be provided.

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Teaching has been described as an occupation that has a wide “decision range” (Lortie, 1975). Since children are exposed to the occupation on an almost daily basis, even very young children can easily imagine the idea of becoming a teacher. Some individuals identified so much with the school environment that their childhood play hours were devoted to emulating the school environment.

- We used to play school all the time. We’d steal chalk in school . . . bring work sheets home -- extra sheets that I could find in the garbage -- wherever. We used to do that and our neighbour kids used to play too. I was always the teacher. (F-NT)

Upon listening to their fond recollections of schoolmates, favourite teachers and daily school routines, it is clear that for some individuals, the decision to become a teacher was at least partially influenced by the nature of early school experiences.

A Desire to Work with Children

Teaching is one of the few occupations that involves close daily contact with children and young adults. King and Peart (1992) found that 55 per cent of Canadian teachers surveyed reported that the opportunity to work with young people was a “very important influence on their career choice” (p. 29). For some individuals in this study, their desire to work with children was recognized at an early age.

- I just had an early appreciation for young kids -- I really liked children. (F-NNT)

- Even at a young age, I was child-oriented. I used to have little kids holding hands with me all the time -- I was just that kind of a kid I guess -- always had kids around. Even in recess . . . I’d have the little kids -- the kindergarten kids, the grade one kids -- I’d always be playing with them. So I think, at that age . . . I cared for kids already and I really liked being around kids. (F-NT)
Teaching also involves interacting with a variety of adults including colleagues, parents and community members. Some teachers acknowledged that in addition to being child-oriented, their desire to work with people was another important factor that attracted them to teaching. One Native teacher explained that her decision to pursue a career in teaching was fueled by her knowledge that she was a "people person."

Family Influence

Several educators explained that their families had influenced their decision to choose a career in education. Some family members presented teaching as a "dependable career." For example, one administrator laughed as she recalled how her father encouraged her to transfer from law to teaching because he believed that "teachers can always get jobs." Other educators reported being inspired by family members who worked in the field of education. Native educators, in particular, reported that their decision to become a teacher was significantly shaped by the influence of family members.

Native Educators and Early Family Influences

Of the nine Native educators interviewed, seven people spontaneously described, in detail, how immediate and extended family members encouraged and supported their decision to enter the field of teaching. These educators recalled that, during their childhood years, a number of family members had consistently emphasized the importance of education. One person remembered listening to family members discuss educational issues:

- I think at the time you don't think it's influencing you... but [later] all those background things came into play -- you know -- listening, kind of hearing those discussions and being influenced by them. (M-NE)
Several Native participants explained that they learned about the rewards of teaching from family members who had devoted their lives to the teaching profession.

- I had an important role model -- she was my aunt and she was a teacher. I would come with her to her classroom and watch her work and I could see that she enjoyed her work. (NE)

I regret not asking Native participants to further describe why they saw their family members as “role models.” What I do know is that almost all of the Native educators reported that, throughout their school years, they were taught by non-Native teachers. So, for them, having a family member who was a teacher provided them with an opportunity to see that Native people not only could but did have satisfying careers as educators.

Further exploration of how and why Native people choose to enter the teaching field would make an important contribution to the research literature. Numerous studies have suggested the need for all schools to recruit more Aboriginal teachers. Kirkness (1986) suggested “Indian teachers are critical to the realization of quality education for the Indian population” (p. 47). While this particular topic is outside the parameters of this study, I suggest that any research project that attempts to explore this area will need to examine how Native children’s conceptions of teaching are shaped by family values and family role models.

Desire to Create Change

Teachers are often described by the research literature as being “conventional” and “conservative.” For example, Lortie (1975) suggested “teaching service is more likely to appeal to people who approve of prevailing practice than to those who are
critical of it” (p. 29). However the educators, who participated in this study talked about how they saw teaching as an avenue for creating change and improving educational opportunities for Native youth. One Native teacher described her concern for the future of young Native people,

- I always used to think preventative programs -- what's being done with these kids? I wanted to be a part of making change. . . you're in school most of your life -- you know -- where are you most of your life? You're in school. So who would have the greatest impact on kids? The teacher. (F-NT)

A non-Native educator reported that she wanted to contribute to the development of schools that were “more receptive to the needs of families and individuals and open to change.” She added that she did not have “the traditional view of schools” but instead “saw a wider community perspective.” Other educators talked about the importance of Indian control of Indian education; their statements could hardly be described as “approving of prevailing practice.”

- It was listening to her [my mom] and my dad talk about taking over the schools -- when I was a kid they were involved in a lot of that. Taking over control of education, going to meetings in Ottawa -- you know -- those things were being discussed at the table. So I grew up hearing those things and having the documents at the house and people talking like that and then my parents actually going to the meetings and being involved . . . [I felt that], “Yes, the band has to take over and run their own schools.” Of all the things we can do, taking over and running our schools is probably the single-most important thing we can do. (NE)

As I listened and talked to this particular group of 18 educators, I was presented with a sense that I was in the company of teachers and administrators who were committed to effecting positive educational change. The idea that teachers are a “conservative” lot who “reflect continuity with preceding practice” (Lortie, p.46) is not borne out by the statements provided by educators in this study.
Deciding to Teach in a First Nations Community

If there are misconceptions about why individuals choose to become teachers, there are even more damaging generalizations about why people choose to teach in Native communities. As one Native teacher explained,

- The stigma -- that's one thing we're working against. I've heard people say that Native schools are not good -- that our standards are low and that our children are learning next to nothing -- that we watch videos all day. (NT)

A non-Native teacher added,

- We're not necessarily held in very high regard by other teachers -- from other systems. They think that there a lot of people out here that don't have degrees and don't do this and don't do that. That's one of the things I don't appreciate at all. (F-NNT)

Educators who work in Native communities are often labelled as people who are either looking for an "easy" job or who cannot find employment in "regular" school settings. One participant reported that educators, who must constantly defend their decision to work in a Native community, are left feeling "belittled" and "professionally scarred."

During the interview process, 17 of the 18 participants described how and why they decided to work in Native settings. The statements provided by these teachers and administrators dispel many of the stereotypes that are currently held about those individuals who teach in Native communities.

Native and non-Native educators reported several common reasons for wanting to work in Native communities. The statements provided by participants suggest that each educator developed a set of preconceived notions about the nature of teaching in

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8 I neglected to explore this topic with one Native teacher. However, this teacher did explain that she felt an attraction to the field of teaching at an early age and that some of her early school experiences encouraged her to view teaching in a positive light.
Aboriginal communities long before they accepted their first teaching position. However, there were important differences between how Native and non-Native educators formed their prior ideas about First Nations school settings.

Source of Native Desires to Teach in First Nations Settings

Native educators identified the following factors as being most influential in shaping their decisions to teach in First Nations communities: (1) viewing the educational setting as challenging; and (2) possessing a desire to make a positive contribution to Native communities.

"There's Always Something Going On"

Several educators saw teaching in First Nations communities as a more attractive option to teaching in "normal, middle-class" settings.

- I was quite bored at that school [urban public school] -- I felt I wasn't being challenged. (F-NE)

- I [student-taught] in an upper-middle-class Roman Catholic school and one thing I do know is that I could never work in an upper-middle-class Roman Catholic school because it's boring -- there is nothing going on. (M-NT)

When these educators were asked to describe why they saw Native settings as places of refuge from the "boredom" of public schools, they often made direct reference to their teaching experiences.

- Being in the North -- there's not many resources -- so, you have to be a resourceful person ... help yourself, as a teacher, to grow. (F-NT)

- There's always something going on and sometimes it's good and sometimes it's bad but it's fun. I have fun -- all the time. (M-NE)
Reflections of Lived Experience

As the above comments illustrate, participants had difficulty in describing exactly how they knew that teaching in Native communities would be more “challenging” and “interesting” than working in other settings. However, as some participants described their background experiences it was clear that their personal lives had provided them with a dramatic preview of the challenges they would face if they chose to teach in Native communities.

- I see myself in some of the children... Being an Indian person in Canada isn’t easy and I think a lot of us have grown up with all sorts of dysfunction and all sorts of obstacles that make us not succeed. I remember even finishing high school, finishing university, I always thought that somebody was going to come in and take it away from me. (F-NT)

Some teachers recalled how school had been a bright light during what was sometimes a “rough” childhood.

- I had a good -- even if it was a rough childhood, I thought it was good -- you know -- it was nice and school had a lot to do with it. (F-NT)

The same teacher explained that she decided to teach on a reserve because she not only “wanted to teach with Native people and to teach Native kids” but she also felt that it was where she “belonged.”

Other participants expressed a desire to make a contribution to Native communities. One person suggested that by sharing her own experiences with students, she hoped to assist them in making wise educational choices.

- I felt this was an area that I could probably do the most good or the most benefit for the Native students -- Native people in general. [I wanted to] try to help my native people -- native students -- to gain a career or to see the value of education. I think from my experiences that this would be a good tool to say, “okay, this is how I went through the educational system. These are the things that I’ve experienced and hopefully you won’t make the same
mistakes or you’ll be aware of the things that are out there -- the roadblocks or the loopholes.” (F-NE)

One teacher believed that due to the social problems that face many Native communities, Native schools have a “need for good people -- healthy people -- for people that care.” She explained, “I think they benefit from people such as I, because I am committed. I’m not there for the money.” Within this teacher’s statement is an indication that some teachers who work in Native communities are not committed and are only there “for the money.” For this teacher, her decision to work in a Native school is a protective act; she wants to ensure that Native students will have the benefit of interacting with an educator who is truly interested in their academic and social development.

The statements offered by many of the Native educators suggest that their experience of growing up as a First Nations person has provided them with an ability to identify with many of their students. However, it is important to emphasize that each Native educator who works in a First Nations school possesses a unique life history. A generic ‘Native’ childhood does not exist. For example, the participants of this study were raised in a variety of different First Nations communities. Some individuals attended residential school, others attended federal schools and some completed their education in provincial schools. While some participants were fluent in their Native language, others were not. A few educators reported they possessed substantial knowledge of their culture and others explained that, due to a number of factors, their cultural knowledge was limited. Therefore, like all other educators, each Native teacher
and administrator will interact with students, parents and colleagues based on the nature of their own life experience.

Acknowledging that Native educators come from a variety of backgrounds does not preclude the fact that they have each experienced the everyday realities of what it is like to be a Native person in Canada. Regardless of their particular personal history, each Native educator has lived a life that has been partly framed by oppressive social and political structures. Therefore, for those Native educators who make an effort to “see” themselves in their students, this identification can intensify their desire to create a positive educational experience for First Nations children.

Each of the Native educators who participated in this study expressed their commitment to teaching in First Nations communities. With “open eyes,” these teachers and administrators chose to work in Native schools, they were aware of the types of challenges they might face. Perhaps, more importantly, they were also aware of the positive aspects of teaching in First Nations settings. By deciding to work in Native communities, these educators made a personal investment; they viewed the act of teaching as a way of actively contributing to the well-being of First Nations communities.

Source of Non-Native Desires to Teach in Native Settings

Non-Native educators listed the following three factors as the key forces that shaped their initial decision to seek a teaching position in a First Nations community: (1) having positive prior experiences in Native settings; (2) identifying with specific attributes of Native communities; and (3) viewing the educational setting as challenging.
Positive Prior Experiences

Most educators reported that, before their first teaching experience in a Native setting, they had minimal interaction with Native people. However, some educators explained that the positive nature of early work experiences encouraged them to seek employment in Native settings.

- There was a large percentage of Native people in the community and I got to know the people and really enjoyed them. Certain experiences I had made me realize I wanted to work with the Native population more. (F-NNT)

- I worked on two reserves as a student going to university and I chummed around with a number of Native students at university. I went into intercultural education and then I just automatically went to a reserve. (F-NNE)

Unlike most of their non-Native colleagues, these educators chose to work in Native schools based on the nature of their long-term working relationships and personal friendships with Native people.

Identifying with Attributes of Native Settings

Some educators reported that living and working in Native communities gave them opportunities to develop affinities with certain aspects of Native settings.

- I would just much prefer to work in a Native environment . . . I like the way that lessons are learned from nature. (NNE)

- I really like the connections with the family and how everybody tends to look after each other a lot . . . [I agree] that it takes a whole community to raise a child. (F-NNT)

Some educators reported that they first learned about Native communities from friends and family members who had worked in Native settings. For some of these
educators, they chose to work in Native communities because they wanted to play a role in the development of a successful band controlled school system.

- I liked the idea of them taking over local control and starting out fresh . . . feeling like I’m being part of something starting from the ground level. (NNE)

There is a common belief that many non-Native teachers arrive in Native communities with minimal knowledge of First Nations people and First Nations culture. However, the above comments illustrate that some participants chose to work in Native communities because they had come to appreciate specific qualities of First Nations culture. For these educators, their decision to teach in a Native setting was based on either having direct experience in working with Native people or possessing some type of first-hand knowledge about Native communities.

Seeking a Challenge

Like Native educators, several non-Native teachers and administrators accepted their first teaching position in a Native community based on their perception that this type of work would be challenging and exciting. One teacher explained,

- I chose to work here. I was in a white classroom and it was boring! I want more than a nice, stable, cushy kind of job. (F-NNT)

Other teachers explained that they wanted to work in Native communities because they knew that their learning would be extended.

- In those days you could pick and choose because there was a shortage of teachers. I went for some interviews [in non-Native settings] but when I went to see the facilities and to see what the programs were like I was not very enthralled. When I had the interview with Indian Affairs, I was interviewed by twelve people and I thought, “Oh, Wow! What is this?” And I thought, “I don’t know anything about these people -- I think I’d like to learn.” So I accepted their offer. I knew that I was going to learn something that year -- that I had never learned before. That’s how I went in. (F-NNE)
I'm a risk taker. I enjoy challenges -- I like a change. I saw it as an opportunity to learn and grow myself, as a person. I thought that I had... more awareness of my own ethnocentricity and how much that affects your behaviour in your transactions with others. I saw this as an opportunity to grow even further. (NNE)

As I conducted the interviews I was interested in listening to individuals describe why they thought working in Native schools would be “challenging” and would contribute to their personal development. I am aware that too often, many people (myself included), assume that non-Native educators choose to work in Native communities simply because they want to work in an ‘exotic’ setting. Uncovering the meaning behind participants’ perceptions of the “challenging” and “exciting” aspects of teaching in Native settings has helped to transform my understanding of why non-Native people choose to teach in First Nations communities.

“Unpacking”9 Non-Native Concepts of First Nations Settings

I wanted to know more about how non-Native educators had developed their concepts and understandings of First Nations settings. Therefore, I asked participants to describe their knowledge of Native communities and the nature of their contact with Native people, prior to their first teaching experience in a First Nations setting. All participants explained that they received little to no information about Native communities during their early school years. Parents, Native friends, and university settings were identified as the major forces of influence that helped to form educators’ views of Native communities.

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9 This term is borrowed from Peggy McIntosh, “White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. Peace and Freedom, July/August 1989, 10-12.
Parental Influence

Some educators reported that their parents provided them with their first exposure to Native people.

- My father bought fence posts from Native people, near where we farmed and my father always had good relations with them -- but they were sort of a distant people to me. Even though they might have worked for my father or dealt with him, they were still a distant -- mystery to me. I had no ideas about them. I had no premeditated ideas of what they were like because my parents never transferred anything -- any prejudices to me. However, I learned from other people -- later on in my life -- about their prejudices against native people. A lot of the people that farmed around where my father farmed were rednecks, sort of -- the redneck-thinking was there. And so, I heard about biased prejudiced comments from them but not from my own parents. My parents were immigrants and so they tend to identify with a lot of the struggles that the Native people have had. (F-NNT)

Although the above educator claims that she had no “premeditated ideas” about Native people, it is clear that her parents provided her with a generally positive image of First Nations people. By conducting business with Native people and identifying with Native “struggles,” the parents of this educator helped her to reconcile racist “ideas” with her own lived experience.

Another educator described how her father’s modelling of “respect for Native culture and Native values” allowed her to confront people who possessed stereotypical notions about Native people.

- My father was always very involved in Native education. It’s something that he has always had a strong interest in and he’s always been very supportive of trying to get more Native people involved in university settings. When I was growing up I always heard these kinds of things . . . that this is important and that we need to be supportive. I think my father modelled a respect for Native culture and Native values . . . I found _______ to be a fairly prejudiced town. That was a real revelation to me because in my family we never talked like that. I always assumed that people were more open-minded. Just some of the comments -- “They’re all drunks on the street.” I was really shocked by that because I knew that wasn’t true. I would say, “If you were to spend time working within the reserve or Native organizations -- you would not see
them that way. You don’t see Native people, who are working, lying around
the streets -- they’re working, they’re at home, they’re looking after their kids,
they’re living their lives.” They didn’t believe me anyway. It was really a
new thing for me and I was a little stumped about how you would even deal
with it. It helped me to realize that there really is a lot of prejudice out there.
(F-NNE)

The same educator reports that learning about the prevalence of prejudice was an
important learning experience for her.

- Even to this day, I still stop and think, “Now, imagine what it must be like --
everytime you walk into a store -- that people are looking at you with
suspicion or with assumptions -- everytime you go into a restaurant -- or to
wonder if you’re being treated in a certain way because of an assumption
about your ancestry or is it just because they’re in a bad mood that day?”
You know -- to never know for sure -- when I think about that, I think, “Boy,
that must be a really hard way to live.” (F-NNE)

As I listened to this educator describe her experiences, I could see that she had learned to
recognize that acts of racism are not always overt but are also imbedded in our social
systems. I think it is important for educators to be aware that, as McIntosh (1989)
suggests, “The silences and denials surrounding privilege . . . keep the thinking about
equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage . . . while denying that
systems of dominance exist” (p. 12). As the above educator explained, many non-Native
individuals “assume that people are open-minded” and that racism is not as prevalent as it
once was. Non-Native educators need to recognize and accept that First Nations people
do continue to confront both blatant and subversive acts of oppression. By possessing
this awareness, educators will be able to relate more effectively with Native students,
parents and community members.

According to the experiences of these participants, the manner in which their
parents talked about and interact with Native individuals provided them with lasting
impressions of First Nations people. In fact, educators later used their childhood memories to formulate their reactions to racist representations of Native people. Since we cannot assume that all parents will provide their children with accurate images of Native people, public schools and teacher training programs have an important role to play in ensuring that prospective teachers are presented with factual information about the realities of Native life in Canadian society.

Native Friends

Other participants reported that forming friendships with Native people provided them with a deeper understanding of some of the challenges associated with being a First Nations person. One teacher describes how she came to view her childhood in a different light when, as an adult, she brought Native friends to her hometown.

- ______ was quite a prejudiced place. I don't think I realized how prejudiced it was 'til I left and came back -- and then had some personal experiences -- either myself or some Native friends. [During my childhood] my best friend was Cree. She never ever made known of her nationality when we were in high school. It wasn’t until we left ______ -- now she’s a full-blown Indian! (F-NNE)

Another educator described that her prior knowledge of Native people was “your stereotypical white thing.” Although she had Native friends in her early childhood years, she reports that during high school, her ideas about Native people began to be influenced by prevalent stereotypes.

- On both sides of our house were Native people and we played with them all the time. I’d never thought of them as being Native and me non-Native -- just because I kind of grew up with them. It was more noticeable in Grade 12 because there were some Native girls who were caught drinking in the bathrooms and were passed out in the bathrooms -- and that's probably when I started thinking about Natives and alcohol and those stereotypical things. But other than that -- just the ones on T.V. -- you know -- they live in teepees. (F-NNE)
According to the above statement, the perceptions that some young adults possess about Native people are malleable and can be influenced by societal stereotypes. Simply having Native childhood friends does not guarantee that an individual’s concept of First Nations people will be resistant to the power of common stereotypes.

Influence of Post-Secondary Institutions

Some educators reported that courses offered by post-secondary institutions provided them with important information, allowing them to gain a better understanding of First Nations issues.

- I took a Native Education class. It was taught by ______ (Native instructor). He was very good. I learned a lot in that class. He was really good 'cause he taught about the treaties and history but he also did little quirks -- you know -- about why it’s impolite to point, why people don’t look you in the eye and all those kinds of things -- the things you wouldn’t know unless somebody told you. (F-NNE)

As described in Chapter 2, I am personally not an advocate of providing people with lists of Native “traits” and yet I understand that, as the above educator emphasizes, teachers do appreciate learning about the “dos and don’ts” of working in First Nations communities.

The same educator explained that completing the Native Education course provided her with an understanding of why she may not be accepted by all members of the Native community.

- I understand where that’s coming from. I understand that most people’s experiences [with schools] have not been pleasant. They have no reason to believe that I am any different than a lot of other non-Native people that have been out here. I think it’s important for people to know about the treaties and the history of them and the residential school experience. (F-NE)
For this educator, her university training provided her with an ability to cope with the stresses that are an inevitable part of being a non-Native person working in a Native setting.

One teacher explained that, although she took a university course with Native content, she felt that the course did not contribute to her success as a classroom teacher.

- It was an anthropology/Native/something or other. I remember the professor . . . I think he gave a good depiction of Natives and the troubles that they've had to overcome and their background and that. He was very pro-Native. In class, when things were brought up -- even hinting at [being anti-Native] -- he would get angry or -- you know -- kind of cut them down . . . I didn't think it was fair. It's kind of like reverse discrimination. Like, this is supposed to be a university -- you're supposed to have freedom -- freedom to think what we think and we should be able to say it. If there's a reason why we're thinking wrong, maybe you should correct us -- not cut us down. If we have reasons to back up our beliefs, then, I think it should be valid. (F-NNT)

According to the above comments, university instructors who are able to create a positive and open class climate, will be more likely to succeed in correcting students' misconceptions about First Nations people. Without being informed of further details of the above situation, what the participant seemed to be emphasizing was that instructors who react to students' ideas in a defensive manner may alienate students, to the point where prospective teachers will feel that the course has "nothing" to contribute to their future teaching practice. At the same time, I understand that it is a challenge for university instructors to inform their students of the systemic oppression of First Nations people without having their students assume a defensive stance. Leslie Roman (1993) encourages her colleagues to look at alternate ways of handling student charges of "reverse discrimination."

We (who occupy racially privileged positions) have much to learn about how to work with white students to transform their (our) desire to be included in the narratives of racial oppression as its disadvantaged victims into a willingness to be
included in narratives which fully account for the daily ways we (whites) benefit from conferred racial privilege as well as from our complicity in the often invisible institutional and structural workings of racism. (p. 84)

While some instructors are remembered for curtailing students’ freedom of speech, other participants reported feeling “inspired” by their professors.

- The first real information that I got about Native people was an anthropology course. [The professor] was very inspirational and he opened a whole new area of knowledge to me that I was totally unaware of. He was very caring and very pro Native rights. He probably had an influence on my thinking -- at least my attitude. But I think I was that way slightly anyway -- you know -- liberal minded or whatever. (F-NNE)

Within the above statement is a suggestion that university students with a “liberal” outlook will be more likely to see the value in courses that address Native issues.

Unfortunately, I did not ask the above educator to clarify her understanding of the term “liberal minded.”

The statements made by educators suggest that there are a variety of interrelated factors that determine whether individuals will be able to use “university knowledge” in their efforts to work successfully in First Nations settings. A further exploration of how post-secondary institutions can better prepare teachers for working in Native communities is provided in Chapter 7.

An Enriched Understanding of Non-Native Desires to Teach in Native Schools

Like Native teachers and administrators, non-Native educators’ prior conceptions of First Nations communities are shaped by the nature of their own personal life experiences. For the participants of this study, parental role models, prior work experiences, informal contacts with Native friends and knowledge obtained through
university courses were the *identified* key factors that contributed to individual understandings of Native settings.

I am aware that some people question the motives of non-Native teachers and administrators who decide to work in First Nations communities. For example, several people would agree with Taylor (1995) who suggests, “Many, perhaps most, non-Native teachers accept teaching positions on reserves with the intention of completing a couple of years before landing the job they really want . . . [usually a non-Native southern community]” (p. 225). While I have certainly met members of the group of teachers that Taylor describes, I have also worked with non-Native educators who displayed a genuine commitment to their students and the Native community in which they worked. I think it is important to refrain from presenting essentialized notions of either Native or non-Native educators. The statements offered by participants of this study suggest that a complex set of factors interact to encourage certain individuals to pursue work in First Nations communities. It is helpful for Native students, parents and community members to view each educator, who works in their schools, as an individual with a distinct personal history.

**Summary**

According to the statements of participants, many current portrayals of educators may present an incomplete and distorted image of those individuals who choose to work in First Nations settings. The information presented in this chapter provides a look at educators' ideas about what the work of teaching means to them on a personal level. Several educators described teaching as a career that provided them with an opportunity
to work with children and to contribute to the positive transformation of existing educational systems. Teaching in Native communities was viewed by some participants as a way to become actively involved in the movement toward Indian control of Indian education. In addition, several educators saw their work in Native schools as an attractive alternative to working in "less interesting" settings. Despite being influenced by similar forces, it is evident that as each participant was guided toward their first teaching experience in a Native community, they were walking down a unique path; a path shaped by their own particular life experiences.
CHAPTER 6

EDUCATOR VIEWS OF TEACHER SUCCESS

In Chapter 5 the statements of educators suggested that there are a number of reasons why teachers choose to work in Native schools. In this chapter, educators suggest that First Nations communities need to acknowledge that merely employing skilled teachers, who have a sincere wish to teach in Native settings, will not guarantee that these educators will be able to work successfully in their schools. Educators emphasize that local school boards, community members and existing school staff must work towards ensuring that teachers who work in their schools are provided with an environment that allows teachers to interact successfully with students, parents, community members and colleagues. This chapter examines the experiences of teachers and administrators as they describe how various factors have interacted to positively and negatively influence their teaching experience in Native schools.

Teaching Successfully in First Nations Communities

As educators described their teaching experiences, they each conveyed their personal understanding of what "teacher success" looks like in First Nations settings. A summary of these views will help to provide a context for the material that will be presented in the remainder of this chapter.

Participants emphasized that many aspects of teaching effectively in Native communities are similar to those of working successfully in non-Native settings. For example, like many educators who work in off-reserve schools, participants reported that they measure their own success by how well they are able to meet the social, emotional
and cognitive needs of their students. Participants also stressed that teachers must be able to relate well with students, fellow educators, parents and community members.

While the participants' broad understanding of teacher success is similar to that of their off-reserve colleagues, educators suggested that working effectively in a Native community requires teachers to assume a special set of responsibilities.

According to educators' statements, being a successful teacher in a First Nations community means more than simply being a skilled educator. One administrator explained that since educational systems in First Nations communities are in a state of transition, educators must be "flexible" and "willing to take risks."

- When it comes down to it -- a lot of people are competently skilled educators so we're looking past those type of things . . . We need people who understand that the community is kind of in a transition phase . . . We need teachers who can live in that kind of a situation -- they have to be flexible -- they can't be rigid and say, "Well, this is the way schools are run. This is how teachers act." We expect them to brush off some of the stuff they learned and [accept] that this is a new school system and we're encouraging people to try and do different things. (NA)

Many participants stressed that one of their most important goals is to assist their students in developing a strong sense of themselves as First Nations individuals.

- I know a lot of children that are very proud of who they are -- it's been cultivated in them since they were born. [There are] other children who don't know who they are. [Children should come through school] with a strong sense of self -- as Nehiyaw10 -- you know -- pride for who they are. (NNE)

- [I want] for our children to become better decision-makers, for our children to go through a healing process and to understand that process, for our children to understand their history -- of where they came from . . . [we should] have a strong commitment to bringing language and culture into the classroom and developing a strong sense of being Nehiyaw. (F-NT)

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10 Cree word meaning "Indian."
In an effort to nurture their students’ self awareness as Native individuals, teachers are encouraged to do everything they can to ensure their classrooms reflect the culture of their students’ community.

- Every teacher no matter what background you are -- you’re teaching in a Cree school -- you have to take personal responsibility for making your classroom more Cree. (NA)

One administrator also emphasized that teachers must see their work as contributing to the well-being of the entire Native community in which they work.

- Our concern is the whole community -- the whole society and you have a part to play in that community. (NA)

Participants explained that teachers must be provided with a work environment that will enable them to bear the above responsibilities. Educators stressed that if teachers are to “take risks” and create classrooms that celebrate the culture of the community, they need access to a specialized set of material and human resources. Participants provided detailed descriptions of the types of working conditions that have enhanced their own ability to make meaningful contributions to Native communities. As educators identified these conditions, they also identified a number of forces that have interfered with their ability to work successfully in Native schools.¹¹

The remainder of this chapter examines the experiences of teachers and administrators as they describe how their daily work is influenced by the nature of their relationships with the following key groups of people: (1) colleagues; (2) school-based

¹¹ I would like to remind the reader that participants described present and past teaching experiences. In addition, since educators from all three Ermineskin schools were interviewed, when participants describe their present work setting, they are referring to one of three distinct school environments.
administrators; (3) school board authorities; (4) students’ parents; (5) community
members; and (6) their own family and friends.

Colleagues: Pulling for the Same Team

Each participant emphasized that a teacher’s ability to meet students’ needs is
significantly influenced by the tone of the school’s work climate. Educators explained
that the quality of their work is dependent upon receiving support from fellow teachers,
teacher aides and “anyone who works in the school.”

- I expect people that I work with to understand that -- for the benefit of the
children -- we have to be able to work together as a team. (F-NE)

- To me, it’s very important that the staff get along. (F-NNT)

- You do really need that family approach -- a close working relationship.
(F-NT)

Benefits of Team Work

Several teachers spoke fondly of the positive effects of working with people who
are “pulling for the same team.”

- I think you have teachers that work together. You have a very definite sense
of professionalism in the sense that we’re sharing a lot of ideas -- a lot of
material. The teachers here are so supportive of everybody -- from lending
their themes to giving them books and advice. I think we’re all very good
problem solvers here. When little difficulties come up I think that we work
together for good solutions. We talk -- we get together and meet. (F-NNT)

- You learn a lot more as a teacher. You’re not afraid to approach someone.
You’re not afraid to learn about positive criticism and make it work for you.
(F-NE)

Working with supportive colleagues can help to counter the effects of working in
a profession that is often described as “a thankless job.”
• We recognize each other's strengths a lot -- so internally -- we get lots of positive strokes for doing a good job. (F-NNT)

• Sharing stuff means that other people notice what you're doing and say, "How did you do that?" (F-NNT)

One Native teacher effectively summarized the viewpoints of participants, when she explained that "being able to get along well" with all staff "is part of being able to come to work and enjoy it."

**Teaching in a Negative Work Environment**

According to educators' statements, an absence of a collegial environment can hamper a teacher's personal and professional development.

• You can't go to work and do your best when you're wondering what's going to happen today . . . It's really tough because you have a conversation and you're laughing and then somebody will walk in the staffroom and then all of a sudden it's quiet. An example of this type of situation (laugh) is we couldn't agree upon whether we thought we should have a speaker in our school on getting the staff together and getting us motivated, getting us back on track -- we couldn't agree on it. So when you can't agree on something that everybody knows we need -- it makes working together very tough. (NE)

• People start to form cliques and that doesn't work. People start doing their own thing -- you don't support each other and you start to create negative feelings and attitudes . . . People get community people behind them and that's the worst thing you want to do. It gets so bad -- the relationships sometimes -- that you can't trust your fellow teacher. So much backstabbing - - it is unhealthy. (NE)

• It's very easy to see which teachers in the school go home carrying around this baggage and bringing it back the next day. They're the teachers that are always sick -- they're the teachers that always have headaches . . . If you carry around that kind of baggage, you're not going to do well in the classroom. (NE)

One participant stressed, "it's important that the students and the parents and the community see the teachers as a team." Another educator explained that it is difficult to
gain community support when visitors to the school perceive the climate as being
“unprofessional and unhealthy.” Other teachers reported that disciplinary concerns may
eescalate as students “take advantage” of staff tensions.

- The kids pick up on that. The kids know which teachers get along and which
  teachers don’t. The kids know that this teacher will not let you get away with
  anything and this teacher will. (NE)

Teachers in any setting benefit from having “healthy” and “professional”
relationships with their colleagues. In an effort to better understand what these terms
mean to educators who work in First Nations settings, I asked participants to clarify how
their relationships with fellow staff members have influenced their daily work.

The Inspiration of Observing Good “Kidwatchers”

Participants explained that they appreciate working with colleagues who develop
teaching methods based on the needs of the individual students in their own classroom.
While child-centred teaching methods are an example of good teaching, in any context,
participants observed that some of their past and present colleagues fail to view each
Native child as an individual. They acknowledged that some teachers continue to base
their teaching techniques on stereotypical notions of the learning abilities of Native
children.

- I think you really have to believe that all children are innately wanting to learn
  -- like they’re just natural learners. They all have a drive to be competent. I
  think you really have to believe that and some people don’t -- they really feel
  there are these children that have deficits. (NNA)

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12 This term is borrowed from C. Leroy & M. Juliebø, “Aboriginal children and their reading: Re-
One Native teacher described her frustration with former colleagues who appeared to have low expectations of Native students.

- I was very upset as a teacher and getting these little kids -- some of them didn’t know their alphabet -- in Grade 2! So, I was really upset with the teachers that had taught them the year before and I didn’t pull any punches. I just asked them, “what the hell did you teach those kids? ’Cause they don’t know anything -- they shouldn’t be in my class.” So I had to kind of start over with [the students] and really push them -- trying to meet their needs -- make sure they were learning and making sure that they would be ready for Grade 3. (F-NT)

Participants advised teachers to “dump” their preconceived ideas about how Native children learn.

- If they come in with expectations that our children are low -- I think they’ll be pleasantly surprised . . . [I would advise] “Set aside what you supposedly know . . . take what you know about school and education and make adaptations and be creative in teaching our children.” (F-NT)

Participants’ comments support Leroy and Juliebo’s (1991) suggestion that teachers of Native students must use their “kidwatching” skills so that they may “understand and appreciate the strengths the children bring to school” (p. 62). Educators reported feeling “inspired” by those colleagues who refuse to label students and instead strive to use their listening and observation skills to make learning meaningful for each child in their classroom.

A Need for Dedicated Colleagues

Educators stressed that it is important for all members of a school staff to possess “high standards” for their own work and to “genuinely be concerned about the welfare of all students.” One Native administrator commented that teachers should feel responsible
for more than “just the 20 kids in [their] classroom” and look at how they can contribute to the “entire school community.”

Teachers admired colleagues who not only attend to their students’ academic needs but also make an effort to meet their students’ emotional and social needs. Educators explained that many of their students come to school with a wealth of resources, including the possession of “strong cultural knowledge.” While many of their students come from a healthy and supportive home environment, almost all educators reported that teachers who work in Native settings must also be able to interact effectively with students who are struggling with personal and social problems.

- We’re dealing with a population of students that come with a real diverse background. We have kids that don’t have breakfast and those types of things or they’re up all night because there’s been a family crisis and they haven’t slept. Sometimes these are pressures that don’t just last one night but they last a week or a month or two months or whatever. (NA)

Educators expected their colleagues to be “nonjudgemental” and “willing to work with what the community has to offer.”

- What we’re looking for is people who [are] understanding of the environment. (NA)

- You have to have a lot of empathy for children from a wide variety of backgrounds -- you have to empathize with the child’s life -- what he brings with him. (NNA)

Several educators reported that teachers who are adept at using humour are often able to contribute to a school environment where students can feel safe and cared for.

- I think a lot of kids don’t get an opportunity to laugh and that’s something that in my classroom happens. I guess my goal is to see them [my students] smile every day. [If] I can get a smile on their face, I can get them responding in a way -- to me -- that shows that they realize that they do have some self worth. And I think that’s very important. (NT)
• A lot of the kids bring so much crap to the school -- that you want to let them forget it -- even though they can't -- but just for that time to forget. If school is fun, if they can laugh in the school, laugh in your classroom, laugh with each other, laugh with the teacher (of all people!) -- the energy will rise -- it will be positive. (NT)

• I think there’s a lot of things that inhibit children from laughing and from having a good time. I think it’s my responsibility to help children recognize that they are very valuable and that I care about them and that there are lots of people in our world that do care about them. I try to make them think that this is a good safe environment . . . when the kids come in the door I prefer to make it the best day that they ever had. (F-NNT)

While participants described the many strategies they have used in their efforts to develop effective relationships with their students, they portrayed some of their colleagues as being “uninterested” in their students’ social and emotional well-being.

• That’s what’s so draining -- these kids need so much love . . . it takes so much energy from you. You look at another teacher -- goes home at 3:30, 4:00 -- you know that they’re not committed. They’ve got so much energy at the end of the day -- how do they do it? You can tell they don’t have that relationship with the kids, otherwise they would be as tired as you are. (F-NT)

• There are so many teachers that don’t bother putting in anything extra for the kids -- these kids do without so much. They [teachers] come in ten minutes before school starts and they leave when the bell goes and they don’t do anything for the community. (F-NNT)

Participants described the frustration of working with colleagues who appear to be indifferent to the needs of students and lack a sense of responsibility for contributing to a positive school environment.

• Everything that happens in the school affects you. [If other teachers are not committed] -- there’s more pressure on you because you’re now not only disciplining and teaching your own class but you’re worrying about the class down the hall. (F-NT)
"They're Just Teaching"

For teachers who believe it is important for Native students to have a strong sense of identity, working with colleagues who refuse to teach "beyond" the provincial curriculum is disheartening.

- I see teachers -- they're just teaching -- they're not going beyond -- they're just kind of doing their job. I think if you're in a Native community -- it's important if you find out about the culture -- that you don't just teach the curriculum and that's it. (F-NNT)

Some participants were disappointed in colleagues who were talented teachers and seemed to have excellent rapport with students but were unwilling to have their classrooms reflect the culture of the community. One educator described a former colleague who was "scared off from anything Native."

- She would have been like absolutely amazing in a non-Native school. But because you're dealing with Native kids, the more you can [celebrate your students' culture] the better. (F-NNT)

Participants recognized that developing culturally appropriate teaching methods can be daunting, especially for non-Native teachers. Educators stressed that all teachers must be prepared to learn from their mistakes.

- You don't need to get so offended about things. If someone tells you something, don't get offended about it . . . don't let that hold you back. It's an opportunity to learn. They're not necessarily trying to criticize you. (F-NNT)

- [My colleagues] have to be able to take positive criticism and not be defensive. They have to be able to change -- they can't be rigid because that would create problems for the team. I guess they have to be flexible. (F-NE)

Several participants explained that the willingness and ability of non-Native teachers to create classrooms that are reflective of their students' culture is often
influenced by the type of working relationships that have been formed between Native and non-Native school staff.

Exploring Staff Dynamics: Native and Non-Native Educators

The teaching force in most Canadian First Nations communities has experienced an important change over the last two decades. Twenty years ago, the majority of educators employed in federal schools were non-Native; today many First Nations school boards are making a concerted effort to recruit Native teachers and administrators. In addition, most Native schools employ a number of support staff, who are usually from the community. In First Nations schools all across Canada, Native and non-Native people are faced with the task of learning how to work together in a respectful and supportive manner.

I was not anticipating that the nature of Native and non-Native staff relationships would be an area that participants would choose to emphasize. Yet, 14 of the 18 participants initiated a discussion of this topic. During the interviews, many educators identified the positive aspects of Native and non-Native staff interactions. Others expressed their concern about long-standing tensions between the two 'groups' of school staff members.

- There are a few teachers at the school -- one particular white woman who has very nice qualities that I took as my mentor and I still do. She is wonderful -- Ermineskin is lucky to have her -- she has given me confidence and support. (F-NT)

- The staff situation can be a challenge. I try to have a good rapport with all staff... so, I try to make that effort. There have been some times where there was a split between Native and non-Native staff. (NT)

- We have wonderful teacher aides. There's never too dumb a question. (F-NNT)
- Our staff are kind of divided, which is kind of sad -- our Native teachers and our white teachers -- I see the division much more . . . and other people have commented. I’m starting to hear more comments that I’m not too happy about -- whether it’s humorous or not -- which I don’t appreciate. So, the Native staff and even the ones from the community don’t really socialize with the white teachers. (NE)

Underlying Tensions

A number of forces from outside the immediate work environment can “set up” conflict between Native and non-Native school staff. For example, during the latter part of my teaching career I taught on a reserve; this was the first time in my life that I was not required to pay income tax.¹³ I recall feeling somewhat guilty as I worked alongside my non-Native colleagues, knowing that they were taking home a pay cheque that was considerably less than mine. While my colleagues did not make an issue of this fact, Native educators, who participated in this study, reported that some of their fellow teachers have expressed resentment about “doing the same work for less pay.”

- I noticed that the Native teachers -- some of them -- were very negative towards the white teachers. So I tried to be between -- I never took sides. I would say, “We can’t work like this. We have to understand each other. You shouldn’t present that to the white teachers like that -- let’s express it this way” and I would say an alternate way of saying it. “What can we all do to change this?” One of the subjects was somebody said, “Oh, you Native teachers don’t have to pay income tax.” So, I said [to the Native teachers], “Well, I’ll put that up for the next meeting and I’ll tell them -- we’ll explain why we don’t pay income tax -- ’cause they don’t know.” (NE)

I suspect that for some non-Native educators merely being informed about the history behind Indian Act directives may not necessarily erase their feelings of resentment about receiving a lower “take-home” salary than their Native colleagues.

¹³ According to the Indian Act Exemption for Employment Income Guidelines, income that is earned by registered Indians, who perform at least 90% of their employment duties on an Indian reserve, is tax-exempt.
As more Native teachers are being employed by First Nations school boards, non-Native teachers may begin to question their job security.

- My main obstacle here is -- that I’m white ... To me, my job is based upon who sits on the board -- who wants white teachers and who doesn’t. I could be the best teacher in the whole world but, if a Native teacher comes along, then I’m out of there. And that’s always in the back of my mind. (NNE)

For some non-Native educators, listening to community members talk about the need for more Native teachers, can seem like a hurtful insult to the non-Native teachers who are presently working in the community.

- There were times when someone would get up and speak about how they wanted so many Native teachers and then it was kind of degrading to us [non-Native teachers] -- and that was hard. (NNT)

If some non-Native teachers are feeling like First Nations communities do not appreciate their work and that their teaching position may eventually be filled by a Native teacher, it is conceivable that these circumstances may cause strained relationships between Native and non-Native school staff.

While some non-Native teachers may view their Native colleagues as enjoying greater job security and financial benefits, Native educators reported that they sometimes feel burdened with additional responsibilities. One teacher recalled working in a school where Native teachers were assigned extra teaching duties.

- There was animosity about us [Native educators] having to teach extra classes [related to culture] -- and we weren’t given any additional time for planning and it wasn’t fair. (NE)

Native teachers may also experience the added pressure of acting as an “information source” for new staff members. As will be described later in this chapter, some Native communities have yet to develop a systematic orientation program for new
Consequently, many new teachers often turn to their colleagues to obtain important information about the community. Some Native educators voiced their willingness to help new staff learn about the community.

- I want equality -- some people prefer not to share. I think that existing staff can take on the responsibility of informing new staff of Native culture -- to provide them with resources. They need to have the proper information regarding pow wows and feasts. (NT)

Native teachers, who may not possess extensive cultural knowledge about the community they are currently working in, will need to seek assistance from community members to ensure that they are providing their colleagues with accurate information.

- After I left that school, I got a plaque from the teachers, thanking me for teaching them -- I tried to share what I could and yet not knowing a lot -- you know. I would obviously come back and ask community members, "Is this right? What do you think?" (NT)

While a comprehensive orientation program for new staff is seen as essential, some participants questioned whether Native school staff should be expected to assume full responsibility for informing new teachers about the community. For example, one Native educator expressed frustration at being expected to know "everything" about Native people and Native culture. This individual recalled feeling overwhelmed when non-Native colleagues would continually ask Native staff members for information about the community. The educator explained that non-Native educators would expect Native teachers, who were not from the community, to be able to answer all of their questions.

- They were coming to us for all this information that I didn’t want to answer -- how would I know? We had a lot of pressures because we were Native. (NE)

The same participant suggested that even school staff, who are community members, should not be expected to take on the primary role of mentor to non-Native educators.
• I think that’s the kind of pressure we got -- that I think we didn’t really appreciate and I don’t think they [Native staff from the community] should be pressured as well -- ’cause I know how it felt. (NE)

According to participants’ statements, external factors, some of which are far removed from the school environment, can create undercurrents of tension between Native and non-Native school staff. Indian Act directives, teacher contracts, division of teaching duties, and lack of staff orientation programs can play an important role in shaping interactions between Native and non-Native educators.

**Challenging the Competency Levels of Native Teachers**

Several Native teachers reported receiving praise and encouragement from administrators and fellow teachers.

• [Referring to a non-Native colleague] In a lot of ways, she’s been a mentor. Whenever we talk -- it’s usually about our favourite subject, which is -- school (laugh). [We just] throw out new ideas and support each other. (F-NT)

• I’ve heard from a large number of people, in the years that I’ve been here, that the kids are very fortunate to have me as their teacher. (NT)

While Native teachers do receive support from Native and non-Native colleagues, some participants’ statements conveyed that the teaching skills of Native educators are often questioned.

• [Describing a non-Native colleague] She’s a really good friend of mine -- it didn’t start off that way. I think -- and this has not been said but I think that there was a perception that I had a very laissez-faire teaching style and that anything went in my classroom and that I had no discipline in my classroom -- and this came from a very strict disciplinarian and which is one of the things that I’ve always admired (laugh) about her too. And then another teacher was keeping an eye on me and on my cultural units -- you know -- like, walking into my room to see -- especially that first year. People didn’t know what I was about -- people didn’t know what to expect. I think they have had some teachers who were slack or dead wood -- Indian teachers. (NT)
Some readers may point out that all new teachers, regardless of race, will be “checked out” by existing school staff. Based on participants’ statements and my own experiences, I suggest that Native teachers often face a distinct type of scrutiny; their (our) actions are often viewed as being “representative” of our race. For example, according to the experience of the above teacher, she believed that since her colleagues had previously worked with “deadwood Indian” teachers, it was assumed she would also be another “slack Indian” teacher. Native educators are often forced to work under the added pressure of knowing that any mistakes they make might be directly attributed to their “Indianness.”

Despite the fact that First Nations communities are recruiting more Native teachers, there is still a common perception that Native teachers possess poor classroom management skills and are less “qualified” than non-Native teachers.

- With some [Native] parents, they’ll prefer a white teacher over you. (NT)

- I think it’s happening in a lot of schools now with our Native teachers. One Native teacher has confided to me that the white teachers make them [Native teachers] feel inferior. I don’t know why or what they do to make them feel like that. (NE)

The pressure of being labelled as an “inferior” teacher can cause some people to isolate themselves from fellow educators.

- The Native teachers really like working with the Native kids and I think that’s probably what gets them coming to work every day because they enjoy working with the children -- but I don’t see them [Native and non-Native teachers] socializing all that much -- like even over coffee. I try to make an effort to go into the staffroom but [I] watch what I say and observe. There hasn’t been a lot of comradeship there. (NT)

The non-Native educators that participated in this study did not make statements that directly questioned the competency levels of Native teachers. However, one
educator suggested that some teachers are recruited by First Nations communities simply because they are Native. This educator stressed that hiring committees should only offer employment to those applicants who are competent educators.

- *Don’t hire a teacher just because they’re Native.* The school has had so many arguments about that -- and hire the best qualified person -- who cares what colour they are? (NNE)

One Native educator also encouraged communities to focus on hiring dependable and skilled educators.

- I don’t think Native bands necessarily need Native teachers -- they need the best qualified people for the job and [people] that they can rely on. (NE)

A Native administrator tried to explain why the competency levels of Native educators are still questioned.

- We’re trying to get away from making a division -- you know -- saying, ‘Well, there’s Native teachers and there’s good teachers.’ To me, that shouldn’t even be a question. We’re asking for the best teachers period. It’s not a matter of compromising quality to have a Native teacher. I think it’s just -- remnants of racism and Indian Affairs’ attitudes -- that idea that Native people are inferior and you have to give them special treatment or water down their courses or whatever. There’s a reputation that, “obviously they’re not as well trained” -- and all that. About 48% of our staff is Native -- I feel we have some of the most competent teachers -- Native and non-Native. (NA)

As I listened to educators explore this particular topic, I was reminded of the following statement made by former U.S. Civil Rights Commissioner, Frankie M. Freeman (cited in Hill Witt, 1984):

What disturbs me is that the word “qualified” only gets put in front of a minority or an ethnic. The assumption seems to be that all whites are qualified. You never hear about anybody looking for a “qualified white person” ... It seems that the word “qualified” sort of dangles as an excuse for discriminating against minorities. (p. 29)
When people suggest that Native communities should not “automatically” hire Native applicants but rather look for the best “qualified” candidate, within these statements is an implicit assumption that many Native educators will not be qualified.

Since more Native teachers are being employed in Native schools, it may appear that real gains have been made in terms of correcting past injustices against Native people. However, Jaggar and Rothenberg (1984) explain the danger of viewing oppression as a “historical” problem. They emphasize that “the power of the media and other institutions [often] shape our consciousness in a way that distorts our perceptions of reality” and that conscious and unconscious ideology can actually “conceal and mystify the continuing reality of oppression” (p. 4). As we look at the experiences of Native educators, it is clear that they continue to work in environments where some community members and colleagues still question the competency levels of Native teachers.

Despite facing overt and subtle forms of oppression, some Native teachers explained that they are willing to accept these challenges.

- Native people do have to try just a bit harder. I think it’s something that you have to accept -- and it is a lot of pressure for Native teachers. (NT)

Another teacher suggested that Native educators should focus their attention on celebrating the achievements of Native colleagues.

- [We need to begin] recognizing and believing in ourselves, as Indian educators. I went to a conference, Jeanette, and you should have seen! You should have seen all the Indian speakers and the local people -- that was just so encouraging. It was so nice -- it was just so wonderful to go to this conference and see people that I had gone to university with -- and they had their Master’s and their umpteen years of teaching experience. So, I think you have to recognize each other. (NT)
According to participants' statements, Native educators choose to confront the "incompetent Indian teacher" label in a variety of ways. While some Native teachers may isolate themselves from certain colleagues, others will endure a period of scrutiny hoping to "prove" and demonstrate their competence as an educator. Several participants explained that they received important support from administrators and fellow teachers. Some teachers also suggested that rather than depending solely on "outside" validation, Native educators can honor and recognize the achievements of their Native colleagues.

A "Clash of Cultures"

Several non-Native educators indicated that they have received important support from Native colleagues.

- The one teacher aide -- she really took me under her wing and really helped me . . . She would give me advice and she was a real mentor to me and still is. (NNE)

- It's not that I go to them [Native colleagues who are from the community] that much . . . but sometimes I'll say something and they [tell me] if it's okay or not -- I think that's good . . . I really like hearing what they say at the staff meetings. (F-NNT)

Other participants felt that some Native staff view non-Native teachers as a collective, rather than as individuals.

- I would appreciate them [Native staff] realizing that they're practicing reverse discrimination and [I would like] for them to appreciate us as people and not to look at us as just white -- "Oh, white teacher" -- you know? (NNT)

Non-Native teachers who are feeling ostracized by some Native staff may seek support from other non-Native educators. One teacher explained that, although a Native colleague had provided important guidance, other non-Native teachers had become primary sources of encouragement.
• [In response to the question, “Who or what have been your sources of encouragement and support?”] I hate to say it but mostly the white teachers (laugh) . . . you know if something happens, they’re “Ah, forget about it!”

[non-Native colleague] worked [in another Native community] for a while so I hear her horror stories too (laugh) -- so it doesn’t seem so bad.

(NNT)

If some non-Native teachers are receiving most of their support from non-Native colleagues, it is conceivable that a school staff could easily become divided into “Native” and “non-Native” cliques.

Some non-Native educators have developed their own personal insights explaining why ‘white’ teachers are not always immediately welcomed.

• It wasn’t my experience but what I’ve seen happen is non-Native people come into the community and they are watched. “Does this person care about us? Is this person prejudiced?” They’re watching to see if this person is prejudiced. Now, a lot of times, non-Natives may do or say things that they don’t realize are -- can be seen as prejudiced -- because of their own ethnocentricity. What I see happens, quite often, is there’s a hyper-criticalness -- and what happens [is] people will immediately jump on them and say, “You’re being prejudiced! You can’t say that. You can’t do this.” (NNE)

While participants acknowledged that some non-Native teachers may witness or be the victim of “hypercriticalness,” educators also emphasized that many of the tensions that exist between Native and non-Native educators are avoidable. Participants suggested that the manner in which a non-Native individual “prepares” for teaching in Native settings and how that individual chooses to interact with the community will significantly influence the quality of their relationships with Native colleagues.

Native educators explained that it is stressful to work with non-Native colleagues who possess minimal historical and contemporary knowledge about Native people.

• Being an Indian teacher working with non-Natives (laugh) -- that’s a trouble spot. You have different types of people. They come working for us, not understanding a lot of the social problems -- not understanding a lot of the
colonization process that we've come through -- and don't even realize sometimes how they are a part of that process.  (NT)

As the above statement indicates, non-Native teachers can "unknowingly" attempt to impose their values upon the Native community. For example, one teacher described how frustrating it can be for Native school staff when non-Native colleagues hesitate to recognize the expertise of the community.

- We were getting to ready to have a feast [in the school]. We had this practice and then we had a staff meeting after and there were these teachers all concerned about how this was going to work. They started talking about, "Well, maybe we should tell them [community members] how to serve the kids. We'll tell them how -- just a good half a ladle of soup and whatever." And I'm sitting there, like, "Oh! This is so stupid!" So finally, I said, "You know -- these people know what to do. They've been trained and they know how much." I was quite upset and I said, "You have to trust the process -- you can't go tell them what to do!" (laugh) Maybe it was all just so new to them but they just didn't understand that things are done a certain way and you just kind of let things happen the way that they're gonna happen, 'cause they're gonna happen that way anyway. The degree of control you put on things in school -- I guess, they control too much or we control too much (laugh) ... What you've got is a clash of cultures there. You've got a clash of thinking and doing things and that's what was evident.  (NT)

The above statement demonstrates how Native teachers can become frustrated and "upset" when their non-Native colleagues question long established cultural practices. The statement also indicates the need for a comprehensive orientation program for all new teachers. The Native teacher who described the above situation explained that after witnessing a "successful" feast and receiving additional information, the non-Native teachers learned to respect and value the expertise of the community.

If non-Native educators are not informed about specific community norms, it can be difficult for them to understand why Native staff would object to what some non-Native educators might believe are "universal" values.
• Comments are still made at staff meetings about imposing our culture on theirs. We were talking about having some sort of award for the kids -- you know -- academic awards. And one of them [Native staff member] said, "Just be careful whose values you’re imposing with that." And you know -- I thought it was a universal thing to do well in school (laugh). (NNT)

While I could personally relate to the above comment made by the Native staff member, I can also understand that some non-Native people might be unaware that, in some communities, recognizing personal achievements in a public manner is inappropriate.

One Native educator suggested that, when non-Native people begin teaching in First Nations communities, they are often faced with the challenge of learning a new style of communication.

• I think there’s two different approaches - Native teachers and non-Native teachers. I think Native teachers are not as vocal at meetings. These are just little observances I’ve noticed. The non-Native teachers will dominate meetings and they’ll want things to happen really fast and they want change to occur quickly. But I find the Native teachers -- they hold back a little bit more -- and when they do say something, they try to pack in a lot of stuff. There’s a different style and approach -- that’s not to generalize -- that they’re all like that. I think it’s a matter of the non-Native teachers getting used to the style of a Native community. I think in a non-Native community, being very vocal and kind of confrontational in meetings is the nature of a non-Native meeting. You know -- you have opposing sides and you argue back and forth until somebody wins. But in a Native community, decision-making doesn’t occur like that . . . it’s more a matter of hearing everybody out so everybody’s listened to -- it’s encouraging as much participation among all the groups and again not forcing people -- you know -- “This is your time to talk. You will talk.” But it’s an opening up the door to opportunity for people to contribute. You try to reach consensus but I don’t think consensus is where every single person has to agree. I think it’s more that everybody’s had their opportunity to say “for” or “against” and that seems to be enough in Native decision-style. As long as you’ve been heard, you feel better. I think that’s what [consensus] means. (NE)

As the above comments indicate, some non-Native educators must be provided with an opportunity to become comfortable with a more inclusive style of decision-making.
Although some non-Native teachers may have difficulty reconciling their own beliefs with those of the community, other non-Native educators seemed to display a “natural” respect for community norms. One participant expressed her interest in listening to and learning from Native staff members.

- I really felt from the beginning that if there’s anyone that’s from the community at the school that if they make a point, say at a staff meeting -- you shouldn’t just brush off [what they’re saying] -- ’cause they’re from here -- they’ve got a lot better idea of what the community’s gonna like and what’s a proper thing to do. Their opinions are really valuable. (F-NNT)

One teacher suggested that for some individuals, learning to appreciate “different ways of being” will occur over time as people experience personal growth.

- Hey, I was 24, 25 years old -- when you’re 24, 25 years old, you know everything -- right? [As one grows as an individual] one realizes that one does not know everything . . . one realizes that there are different ways of being and I think that helps. I, as a young person, was not open to that -- or perhaps, I was but I hadn’t formalized it. I like to think and I could be very wrong -- but I like to think that I have been adaptable and I think that is based on the roots of -- understanding that there are different ways of doing things. (F-NNT)

The above comments indicate that, although some non-Native teachers may initially have difficulty in understanding and appreciating the norms of the Native community, these same educators may eventually develop an acceptance of “different ways of being.”

Statements provided by non-Native participants suggested that the nature of their prior life experiences played a role in determining how willing they were to recognize and respect the norms of the community. For example, those teachers who had positive prior work experiences in First Nations settings or who had established friendships with Native people stated that they valued the opinions of Native staff members. Participants who had worked with Native colleagues, who were willing to share information about the
community in a supportive manner, claimed to have a deeper appreciation of the complexities of life in Native communities. Teachers who were familiar with historical and contemporary Native issues explained that this background knowledge helped them cope with the challenges of not being "immediately accepted" by all Native colleagues and community members. Of course, for some participants, their particular life circumstances included a combination of several of the above experiences. Each educator's personal history will influence how they will face the challenge of working with colleagues who may possess a set of values, beliefs and life experiences that differ significantly from their own.

Moving Beyond a "Clash of Cultures"

It is evident that the manner in which Native and non-Native school staff communicate with each other is determined by a myriad of interconnected factors. Some participants suggested that the establishment of fair teacher contracts, an equitable division of teaching duties, and the implementation of comprehensive staff orientation programs would help to eliminate many of the underlying tensions that often exist between Native and non-Native educators. Other participants emphasized that efforts must be made to ensure that school environments do not condone the perpetuation of stereotypical notions of Native or non-Native teachers. Yet other educators suggested that, with the passage of time, some educators will learn to accept "different ways of being."

The desire to work in a school where respectful relationships between Native and non-Native staff are nurtured and maintained was the common thread linking the varied
experiences and opinions of participants. Educators explained that, if they are to work successfully in Native settings, they must be provided with a work environment that promotes "healthy and professional" relationships between all staff members.

**Building a Collegial School Climate**

According to participants, when all school staff are "pulling for the same team," individual teachers are provided with inspiration and a host of resources allowing them to better meet the needs of their students. Educators suggested that the first step to creating a cohesive school staff is the establishment of a common school vision; a vision that is developed and shared by teachers, administrators, school board members, students, parents and the Native community in general. Participants explained that a school system, which is based upon a well-defined set of goals, provides school staff with clear direction.

- Everything you do -- the way you organize, the things you purchase, the people you hire, the inservicing you choose to attend, the way you relate to the children or the parents or each other or the board -- I think is influenced by that vision. (F-NNE)

Participants explained that, if educators are to maintain a cohesive school staff, they must be provided with regular opportunities to revisit and revitalize their "mission statements" or their "common school visions."

- I really think that all of us get caught up in the day to day things of doing the job and we don’t spend enough time just sitting and talking about how things are going and what we should be doing. I really think we get lost. (NNA)

- I know a lot of complaints at the teacher level, in our school, are we have too much that we have to be responsible for -- and kind of "Stay out of my way. I'm busy" sort of attitude. (NT)

- We need time to be with one another to talk, to share ideas -- to cooperatively plan. It amazes me how busy everyone is and that’s a complaint a lot of the
staff have -- how busy they are -- they're dead tired. We have to streamline and reorganize to free up more time. Everybody, including myself, we're just worked to our bone and I just don't know how we free up more time but there must be ways of doing it. (NNA)

The Miyo Wahkohtowin Education Authority recognizes the need for providing educational staff with frequent opportunities to develop and maintain a sense of school community. Brian Wildcat, who is the present director, explained that a school system based on Cree values will strive to create an educational setting where teachers are encouraged to work in a collaborative manner.

- What we want to try to create is a place where people can work together and develop collegiality. I think in traditional [school] settings, teachers are always pretty much left on their own -- you're isolated -- you have your own classroom, worry about your own students and your own kids and that's the nature of a school. That's what we're trying to change. That's why we're saying if we bring in some of our Cree values into the system [we will work towards] building a strong community where people are not so isolated from each other. This year, we're going to try setting up teams on different issues and . . . [one school] is already organizing cooperative planning activities throughout the school year.

Brian confirmed that it is important to provide teachers with more planning opportunities during school hours.

- We try to allow a lot of opportunity for planning and for meeting so that we're not asking people to do everything after hours and on weekends.

While conducting regular “visioning” sessions is important, some participants suggested that building a collegial school environment also requires that educators make time to interact with each other in “informal” settings. Participants explained that they have been provided with comfort and inspiration simply by knowing that colleagues are accessible and willing to provide encouragement, advice, or just friendly conversation.

- The staffroom was a place that everybody met in the morning by 8:30 and sat around drinking coffee, laughing, talking and there was a lot of problems
going on in the school at that time but you would never have known from what you seen and how the teachers got along. (M-NE)

- You can tell a staff is comfortable with each other when there’s a lot of laughing, joking, talking and sharing. As a teacher, there will be times when you’re down and your colleagues can help you just by laughing and joking with you. (F-NT)

One teacher recalled working in a school where school staff gathered on a weekly basis to offer each other encouragement and advice.

- We had a healing circle with the staff every Wednesday -- whoever wanted to could come and sit and talk about their week. At first I thought it was so weird -- aren’t we supposed to be professional? We can’t talk about our problems! (laugh) And then I thought -- that’s totally a wonderful idea. (F-NNT)

As participants described their interactions with fellow educators, it was evident that the nature of staff relationships can significantly influence an individual educator’s daily work. Participants stressed that their success as educators is heightened if they are able to work with colleagues who practice good “kidwatching” skills, are concerned about their students’ social and emotional health and strive to nurture their students’ sense of identity as First Nations individuals. The dynamics of Native and non-Native school staff relationships was also identified as an important indicator of how well teachers were able to fulfill the demands of their role as educators. Statements made by participants emphasized that educators who are expected to “take risks” as they contribute to the development of innovative educational systems require a working environment, which fosters supportive and respectful relationships between all members of each school “family.”
School-Based Administrators

Educators stressed that an individual’s ability to teach successfully in a Native school is partially shaped by the nature of their relationship with the school’s principal and vice-principal(s). One teacher provided a detailed description of how a non-Native administrator created a work environment that provided teachers with the resources and freedom necessary to design a vibrant classroom based on the needs of their students.

- She knew her stuff, she knew the School Act, she knew the community, she knew the people, she knew Alberta Ed’s new developments -- so, she kept on top of everything ... I really liked her whole philosophy of education ... of how it should be, could be and I liked that vision. [Administrators need to have vision because] you have to have some ideals of what will be the best situation for our children -- for all our children. You have to have a clear sense of what it is that you’re working towards ... She was very supportive -- we dealt with difficulties in a manner that, I think, saved face for everybody ... She allowed dialogue to happen -- people were able to almost, through guidance, and not even being aware of it -- kind of solve the problems, themselves. And then other times, decisions needed to be made and they were made. She was flexible enough to provide all sorts of different experiences for children. [She had] a strong commitment to bringing language and culture into the classroom -- and developing a strong sense of identity -- of being Nehiyaw. She provided that atmosphere where I could do it. (F-NT)

The above description is an effective summary of administrative qualities that were valued by many other participants. Educators held high esteem for those administrators that displayed: (1) strong interpersonal skills; (2) a thorough knowledge and respect for the community; (3) sound knowledge of effective teaching strategies; (4) a genuine desire to offer teachers continuous support; (5) an accessible and visible presence; and (6) a clear educational vision with a commitment to nurturing students’ sense of identity as First Nations individuals. Many of these “ideal administrator characteristics” have been identified in the “effective schooling” literature base (Pavlik, 1988). In addition, a small number of studies have explored the nature of effective school leadership in Native
communities (Barnhardt, 1977; Pavlik, 1988; Wildcat, 1995). Consequently, I will limit my discussion of school-based administration to a summary of those participant comments that supplement and extend the existing knowledge base.

Basic Credentials

Some Native communities may, at times, choose to recruit new administrators from their existing teaching staff. One teacher explained that this practice allows Native school boards to employ administrators who, in their role as teachers, have already demonstrated a commitment to the community.

- They don't have to have an M.Ed or M.A. behind their name -- they don't have to have 15, 10 years of experience -- just as long as you can tell the person is committed to the community, to the school, to the kids. Where else can a person learn is but through experience? A person has to be given an opportunity and a chance to get their feet wet. (F-NT)

Other educators suggested that school administrators who are able to provide teachers with adequate support and guidance are those individuals who have previous administrative experience, have completed training in school administration and possess extensive classroom teaching experience.

- They need to be master teachers -- teachers who have been in the field for a long time, who've experienced what we've gone through or are going through. I need their wisdom and guidance -- on knowing the children -- knowing the curriculum. (F-NT)

- Administrators need to come in with some administration background. [Without that background] it becomes difficult for them to make decisions. . . . Every principal should also have an evaluation and supervision course under their belt -- just in a practical sense -- it gives you a good understanding of supervision -- what it means -- evaluation and appraisals. (NE)

Educators stressed that Native school boards must be prepared to provide extensive professional development opportunities to those administrators who lack
administrative training and experience. In addition to receiving basic training in school administration, administrators suggested that their ability to provide strong leadership would be enhanced if they were able to learn from other Native communities.

- I need a chance to grow by learning from others -- that for me, is very important. [It would be helpful to get] an idea of where other First Nations schools are and what problems they’re experiencing or how they’re handling certain problems. (NA)

"They Need a Sixth Sense"

Participants emphasized that administrators can create a safe and supportive work environment simply by being visible and accessible. Teachers explained that when school administrators make an effort to visit classrooms on a regular basis, they are able to recognize both the achievements and struggles of individual teachers.

- I think they need to get involved with you more on a daily basis. I think that we’re lucky with the principal and vice-principal here -- when I need them they’ve been there -- they’ve also not been there when I’ve needed them. . . . they need a sixth sense, just like teachers do in the classroom -- most need that extra sense to know when you are struggling and to come in and say, “Look, I realize that you are struggling or something’s not going right -- what can I do to help?” I know that [this year], I would have liked somebody to come and - - [give] a little support -- even if it’s just to talk. (NT)

Several teachers expressed that receiving praise and guidance from administrators has been an important source of inspiration for them. Administrators also stressed the importance of providing teachers with positive feedback.

- I think teachers need a lot of praise because they do a lot over and above what they’re supposed to be doing. (NA)

Some administrators explained that although they attempt to provide teachers with appropriate resources, they sometimes forget to acknowledge the importance of individual teacher efforts.
• I think [teachers] need a lot of support -- whether it be inservicing needs or equipment purchases, attempts to keep classroom sizes reasonably small -- acknowledgment for work well done -- I don't know if I personally have always done that (laugh). I say that because I get so busy sometimes I don't acknowledge -- even just casual acknowledgment [is important] -- “that was a really interesting lesson” or “you've gone to a lot of trouble here” -- it has to be really genuine -- nothing phony. (NNA)

Empowering Teachers

Since administrators must be accessible to so many different groups of people including students, parents, community members and school board officials, they must be prepared to delegate responsibilities.

• I think, administratively, that if delegation is not done that plate can fill up really fast -- if you continue to say, “No, I've got everything under control” -- you are just saying that in the hopes that you're going to believe it. [For example], when you spend a good portion of every day working on discipline, administratively things will fall apart and I think that's where delegation should come in. (NT)

As outlined in Chapter 4, the Miyo Wahkohtowin Education Authority has implemented site-based management and as part of this initiative, school administrators are encouraged to share decision-making powers with teachers.

• We have to respect teacher knowledge and the teacher’s own abilities ... the principal’s job is to find ways to empower more teachers to take on more responsibilities ... principals need to let go of some of [their] authority so that teachers can make decisions. (NA)

A Call for Strong and Focused Leadership

While teachers talked enthusiastically about the benefits of site-based management, they stressed that as teachers assume greater responsibilities, the importance of a strong and visionary school-based administration is even greater.
Participants expected administrators to ensure that the teaching workload is distributed as evenly as possible among teaching staff:

- I need the vice-principal and principal to have a backbone -- meaning you can't manipulate administration. I've seen some teachers really take advantage of administration and manipulate it to their needs . . . How many times have I just been totally frustrated because the teachers know the system better than administrators -- you feel the effects of someone not working. (NT)

Administrators who were most able to provide teachers with a supportive work environment were those that possessed a strong understanding of their personal values and a clear vision of their professional goals.

- The minimum I require of my supervisors is efficient service but it's really nice if they have a vision as well -- a defined philosophical approach -- so that any decision they make is on very firm foundation. (F-NNT)

- What administrators need is to have a clear understanding of their values -- 'cause those are the things in the end that you fall back on to make a decision. [Without a clear understanding of your values] -- you're swayed by opposing values or groups. What it really boils down to is seeing administration as a moral duty -- it's not just a political thing -- well some people can survive on making it a political job -- but I think you have to view it as a moral action and a moral duty and then to do what's in the best interests of the kids -- that's the most important thing. (NE)

**Administrator Needs**

Like teachers, administrators also listed a number of factors that influence their ability to work successfully in Native communities. The following list is a summary of those forces that participants identified as contributing most to administrator success:

- Comprehensive orientation program for new administrators;
- Clear direction, strong support and honest feedback from school board and director of education;
- Adequate operating budgets to obtain resources required by teaching staff;
- Regular professional development opportunities;
- Strong involvement in the recruitment of new teachers;
• Opportunity to work with competent, experienced and dedicated fellow administrators;
• Honest and regular feedback from teachers and community members;
• Supportive links with other school boards; and
• An opportunity to work in a school system which is based upon a common vision; a vision shared by educators, students, school board officials, and the community.

While an exploration of these administrator needs is outside the parameters of this study, it is clear that school-based administrators in Native communities must be provided with access to those resources that will allow them to provide strong and visionary leadership.

Local School Board Authorities

As part of the process of developing band operated school systems, Native communities must grapple with the challenge of forming and maintaining effective local school boards. While some school boards are elected, others are appointed by Chief and Council and on some reserves the school board is composed of a combination of elected and appointed members. Most bands also employ a Director of Education, a financial advisor and other "central office" support staff. In most Native communities, the school board and central office administration usually determine allocation of school budgets, conduct teacher recruitment, develop teacher contracts and determine school policies. Recognizing the wide range of decision-making powers held by school board authorities, educators identified board members and central office administrators as the group of people who are most able to influence teachers' daily work. Participants described effective school board authorities as those who attempt to provide teachers with the following support systems: (1) material and human resources necessary for meeting students' needs; (2) fair teacher contracts; (3) an accessible and visible school board and
director; (4) formal and informal expressions of gratitude for teacher accomplishments; (5) recognition of teacher knowledge and expertise; and (6) an educational system that bases decisions upon the needs of students.

Basic Teaching Resources

- It can't be just a few teachers responsible for making a Native school and it can't just be the Native staff being responsible. (NE)

As the above statement suggests, if a school is to be a Native school, all teachers must be willing to play a key role in ensuring that the school reflects the culture of the community. Yet, Native and non-Native educators emphasized that teachers need more than "general" directives. Educators explained that if they are to contribute to the development of a "Native" educational program, school boards must provide each teacher with access to the following set of material and human resources: (1) culturally appropriate teaching materials; (2) a comprehensive orientation program that features clear and sensitive direction for addressing issues of cultural protocol; (3) strong and culturally appropriate school discipline policies; (4) family support services for students and their families; (5) an opportunity to work with competent and dedicated colleagues; and (6) professional development opportunities that are responsive to teachers' needs.

Teaching Materials

Over the last 15 years, there has been a slow but steady development of teaching materials which feature accurate historical and contemporary information about Native people. Yet many participants explained that it is still difficult to access teacher-friendly curriculum resources which recognize Native culture. For example, teachers are often
forced to choose between using provincial curriculum packages that feature minimal Native content or to create and piece together their own units which reflect the culture of their students. While many teachers in non-Native settings are accustomed to creating many of their own instructional units, most teachers are not expected to create customized units for each subject area. Creating a “Native” classroom often requires teachers to devote inordinate amounts of their personal time to the development of culturally appropriate teaching materials. Participants explained that even collecting basic information about their students’ community can be difficult.

- I thought local control meant learning about you -- about the Native child and who he is, his parents, his grandparents, the land -- that you’re bringing the school to the community and almost learning from your parents and grandparents. Here all of a sudden, we’re teaching provincial curriculum and anything about the community -- well, you have to kind of learn it on your own. (NE)

Participants urged school boards to allocate funds for the purchase and creation of Native educational materials. For example, some educators suggested that school boards fund community-based curriculum development projects. Educators talked about the importance of ensuring that students have access to current print and visual media that have been created by Native people. Teachers also encouraged school boards to provide teachers with important links to the community by employing community members as resource personnel.

A Call for Comprehensive and Sensitive Teacher Orientation

Participants suggested that school boards should create orientation programs that provide all new teachers (Native and non-Native) with accurate information about community norms and cultural protocol. Some Native communities have responded to
teachers’ needs for accurate community information by employing cultural directors, who work directly in the schools. Often these cultural directors will be responsible for leading orientation sessions for new teachers. Several participants stressed that cultural directors and other community resource people must be able to interact with teachers in a caring and supportive manner. One Native teacher recalled working in a community where the school’s community resource person was “unapproachable” and seemed to ignore the needs of Native teachers.

- He’d talk differently to a white person -- he wouldn’t even look at you -- you know -- he’d shake a white man’s hand and he wouldn’t even shake your hand so how are you supposed to feel? I had so many ideas [about what I wanted to do in the classroom] and yet you had to go through this person. (NE)

A non-Native educator remembers working in one community where she quickly learned not to ask the cultural director for assistance.

- It was my first year and there were a whole bunch of new staff and a lot of ’em were white. And one of the people [asked a question]. And he [the cultural director] just jumped at her and he snapped at her and cut her down to about this big. “Oh! You believe everything you hear! You white people are...” So, right off the first -- it’s like if I have a question, I just will stay away from it. [I remember thinking], “I’m not asking any questions!” So we need to create an atmosphere where it’s okay to ask questions -- like there’s no dumb question. (NNE)

Some participants reported that without access to “approachable” resource people, many teachers will refuse to incorporate cultural content into their lessons.

- [I thought] I won’t try and do anything [cultural] because if we do something wrong, there’s gonna be big trouble. (NNT)

- [Without access to supportive community staff], I think you would be very isolated from the community. You would not have the understanding of the community that you need to have. You would just go and do your job and leave. Which is what non-Native people have been doing for years. That’s what we’re accused of doing and what people don’t appreciate us doing but I think a lot of times, the community, themselves, don’t know what to do and how to bridge those gaps. (NNE)
Other educators explained that some teacher aides, who were also community members, have provided them with essential information and warm support.

- They are very knowledgeable about their culture -- they have a belief in it and they're willing to share. You can say, "Well, you can go out into the community and you can find out." But realistically that doesn't always happen and it doesn't -- it doesn't happen a lot. (F-NNT)

- The little things that are important, I have learned through the Native people that I have worked with. (F-NNT)

- The one teacher aide . . . was very sensitive to the differences between the Native and non-Native cultures but in a very positive and supportive way. She helped me learn to speak some Cree and if I didn't understand how things were happening, she would explain to me what was happening and why it was happening . . . Instead of being critical, she is supportive. She won't out and out say, "You did the wrong thing!" She'll sort of let me know that there are better ways to do that and some of the reasons why maybe that's not a good thing to be doing. Which is wonderful for me because then I feel, and I think all of our staff feels free to explore the community, to explore the culture, to try new things, to try and develop contacts because it's a safe environment. (NNE)

It is evident that when school boards hire community people, they are not merely employing school staff; they are also recruiting community and cultural ambassadors.

If educators are expected to use teaching methods which respect and highlight the culture of the community, it is clear that teacher access to accurate cultural information should be formalized and guaranteed. Earlier in this chapter I identified the views of some participants who believed it was unfair to ask school staff, who are community members, to assume the primary role of mentor to new teachers. Rather than expecting one group of school staff to shoulder the entire burden of dispensing community and cultural information, participants urged school boards to provide a comprehensive orientation program for all new teachers.
As part of an effective orientation, some participants felt it was important for teachers to learn about their students' culture directly from community members.

- It might be nice to have different people do some sharing about different aspects of the culture. The more that you can talk to individual people, the less scared off -- or not scared off -- but less intimidated [you will be]. Maybe have a special orientation day just for the new teachers . . . and learn about different ceremonies and the meaning of them . . . and also learn some basic things of the culture -- maybe people can sit down and say, "These are some pretty basic things that people should know -- if they don't, it will be kind of a problem in the classroom." (F-NNT)

Several participants explained that learning about historical and contemporary issues from individual community people is much more effective for many teachers than receiving the same information in a "lecture" format.

- It's helpful to have people talk about their own personal experiences -- to speak from the heart, rather than from an informational basis. When it really came home for me is when I heard people from the community -- when they talked to me about their own experiences and how it made them feel -- the school, the Indian agent -- even just going into town, years ago. I love listening to those stories -- going to town to sell firewood - 'cause it's the only way to get any cash -- that kind of stuff. I feel I learn a lot and I gain insights. (NNE)

Other educators stressed that in addition to learning about ceremonies and special community events, teachers also need to know about those "little things" that can often shape how well a teacher is able to interact with students and with the community.

- I really find when people talk about culture, they talk about pow wows and feasts -- they don't talk about daily life -- and that's what we need to know -- like "Why do people perceive schools the way they do?" (NNE)

Participants emphasized that a considerable amount of teacher stress is the result of receiving inconsistent or incomplete information regarding cultural protocol.

- I was afraid of offending and we seemed to be getting cross messages in that, "You can do this. You can't do this. Girls can do this. Boys can't do this. Boys can do this. Girls can't do this." So it really made me uncomfortable. (NNT)
Other teachers were concerned because some parents encouraged them to conduct certain traditional ceremonies in the classroom while other parents did not want their children to participate in any traditional activities.

- You have pressures that this part of the community doesn’t believe in that and you’re going to get into trouble because you’re [doing a certain thing] and that family doesn’t believe in it. (NE)

Some Native participants reported that they did not “agree” with the way in which they were being asked to conduct certain ceremonies. One participant felt that teachers were being asked to “contemporize the culture.”

With all of the confusion that often surrounds issues of cultural protocol, educators suggested that school boards and communities must work together to develop a district-wide cultural policy, which provides parents and teachers with a thorough understanding of how cultural information is to be presented in the classroom.

- You have to establish the kind of school you are so that people know what their kids are getting into when they send them to your school. (NT)

One participant recognized that school boards may have difficulty in establishing cultural policies in “written” form.

- Cultural policies have not been written or formally recognized. I think because of the conflicts of writing it down in the first place. We have many unanswered questions. (NE)

In their attempts to respect teachers’ knowledge and expertise, local school boards may provide teachers with general guidelines and minimal specific directives. While participants appreciated being able to have direct input into decisions that affect their classroom practice, educators stressed that there are some policies that must be developed largely by the community and school board authorities. As I listened to
participants, I sensed that what teachers wanted was to have access to information that allowed them to interact effectively with students and community members. They also wanted to know that the manner in which they present cultural material is sanctioned by both the school board and the community. It was also evident that the manner in which information is presented to teachers is crucial. School boards must strive to recruit staff members from the community who not only possess cultural and community knowledge but are also willing and able to share this knowledge in a respectful and sensitive manner. According to the statements of participants, school boards must provide their teachers with an ever-evolving educational program that continuously extends teachers' knowledge about the Native community.

School Discipline Policies

Like many teachers in other school districts, participants reported that they are often forced to devote much of their energies to basic classroom management.

- Teachers are pressured because we're always working on discipline -- that's one of the biggest things in the school system. (F-NT)

Educators with considerable teaching experience felt that discipline concerns had actually escalated since they first began teaching in Native communities. Some teachers suggested that the prevalence of behaviour concerns in Native schools is a direct result of the social problems that face many First Nations communities.

- Teachers and administrators stressed the need for system wide discipline policies that are based on traditional Native methods of addressing “anti-social or destructive” behaviour. Participants recognized that Western methods of discipline often focus on “controlling” students rather than encouraging students to practice self-control.
• We have a lot of suspensions but they're not working out -- they don't do the trick. That's a hold-over from a previous way of doing business. The punishment approach doesn't go over too well -- the idea here is to kind of make things right -- restore the balance. When you suspend -- you just punish but you haven't corrected what the behaviour was -- so people haven't learned from it . . . So that's one of our focuses for next year is to try [to use] the philosophy of school-based management or becoming more Cree. We will have to sit down and include everybody in the discussion -- to develop a policy. So we should include our teachers and the parents . . . plus, we have to also talk to the students and with elders in the community. (NA)

Several participants suggested that discipline policies “alone” cannot address the reasons why some students act out. Teachers encouraged school boards to establish contacts with community social service agencies so that the “many social, emotional, and physical needs” of students can be better met.

• [It would be ideal] to have a really strong inter-agency cooperation. Those support systems would have to be right in the school and be very professional and involved with families. [They would also have] a strong spiritual base. (NNA)

Educators recognized that it is difficult for Native school boards who are new to the business of developing school policies, to quickly create culturally appropriate discipline guidelines and establish links with community social service agencies. Yet, teachers emphasized that they appreciate being able to work in a school system where they know that students are provided with the resources and guidance they need to make positive contributions to their community.

The Need for Competent and Dedicated Colleagues

In the early part of this chapter participants stressed the importance of working with colleagues who were dedicated, competent and sincerely concerned about the well-
being of their students. Educators explained that if they are to have the opportunity to work with this type of colleague, school boards must develop careful recruitment policies. Participants suggested that school boards who lack training in the area of teacher recruitment may find themselves “taken in” by certain applicants.

- I don’t think [all school boards] necessarily recognize good teachers when they see them . . . a lot of community people value others for being nice -- for being nice people -- friendly people -- B.S.ers (laugh). I really do find that many people from the community are easily taken in by a fast talker and I see that reflected in some of the people that have been hired. You know -- the people who are popular are the ones who are fast talkers but they’re not necessarily the ones who are willing to do the work or to really back up what they say. You know -- to make the effort to go out and get to know people and get to understand the community and to try and meet the needs of the community. So, I think they don’t always recognize good teachers. Judgments are often made on likeableness, rather than actual job performance. (NNE)

- I don’t know how some teachers got into the system -- how did they get in? Did they just scam the school board members? (NE)

To avoid being “scammed” participants advised school boards to complete basic recruitment and evaluation tasks such as checking references and conducting regular evaluations of all teaching staff.

- When I was hired no one checked my references -- it was done solely on the interview and which frankly I find kind of frightening (laugh). It’s really hard to develop sophistication, in terms of, how do you know when to be suspicious? It takes a lot of experience to know that, “Well, this person didn’t put any supervisors down as references. Why is that?” (NNE)

One participant suggested that school boards should develop interviewing teams that are comprised of school board members, parents, teaching staff and school-based administrators. Participants urged Native school boards to provide them with colleagues who are skilled educators and dedicated team players.
Professional Development Needs

Participants stressed that professional development time must be wisely allocated to meet the changing and varied needs of educators. For example, several teachers expressed that they must develop teaching strategies aimed at meeting a wide range of academic needs.

• It is a fact that most of our classes cover a fairly wide range of ability and that makes demands upon one’s approach to teaching. Although we have many children who read well and at grade level -- we have many children who do not. (F-NNT)

While some teachers reported that they have been able to develop teaching strategies that allow them to work successfully with most of their students, other participants indicated that they and some of their colleagues would benefit from receiving additional training in child-centred teaching methods. Clearly, school boards need to recognize that teachers require the freedom to determine many of their own professional development requirements.

In an effort to use professional development funds efficiently, educators suggested that school boards create formalized opportunities for teachers to learn from their colleagues.

• I’ve actually asked for one of our P.D. days to be a sharing day -- like maybe sharing ideas for math and language arts -- all kinds of things... [There’s one teacher] and I’m really impressed with the way the kids listen really well -- she somehow has them around her little finger [and it’d be nice to know] what her trick is. (NNT)

Several educators also urged school boards to establish links with other school systems.

• I think we need to develop some support groups outside of the reserve -- [there are some] incredibly progressive school divisions. I think if we can build some connections and build some relationships -- and find some ways to do more sharing and reflection -- it would be a real learning experience for us. I think we’re really isolated out here. (F-NNE)
Obviously, all teachers require access to quality teaching materials, sensitive orientation programs, strong discipline policies and regular professional development opportunities. However, participants illustrated that teachers who work in Native communities are usually working for school systems that are striving to develop innovative educational programs that are designed to reach beyond a generic “quality education.” Therefore, local school boards must ensure that they provide their teachers with teaching materials, cultural protocol guidelines, discipline policies, and the type of colleagues that these individuals will require to effectively assume their specialized set of teaching responsibilities.

**Establishing Fair Teacher Contracts**

While job security is a concern for all teachers, many educators who work in Native communities feel that their teaching positions are in a constant state of jeopardy.

- The politics on Native reserves in Canada is just crazy and basically, as teachers, we sit on pins and needles when there’s times of elections. If a family comes in that thinks that the school is not doing a good job, they have the power to overthrow everybody and throw everybody out and we’ve seen it being done and we’ve heard of it being done all across Canada. (NE)

- Teachers need a sense of security. The first few years of local control -- everybody was just on edge. At the end of the year, there were several people that were let go and then the next year, “Well, okay, who is it going to be this year?” (NNE)

- One of the reasons why good teachers don’t come to a reserve is because they don’t see them as long-term secure positions. When you’re working in a Native community, there never is a sense of job security. You always feel like you could be out -- no matter how good you are, how well liked you are. Even if the school board likes you, doesn’t mean Chief and Council does. (laugh) (NNE)
One educator suggested that non-Native teachers are at an even greater risk of being released from their teaching positions.

- I don't believe in permanent contracts for teachers because I believe you go stagnant but it would be really nice to know that -- as long as you're competent at your job that you're not going to get laid off because a Native one [teacher] comes along. They need to keep it in mind that this person has given this many years to the community and has tried to incorporate culture and they may be white but the kids are still learning and remember that -- instead of just tossing it off and saying, “Oh, a Native teacher! Come on in.” In my mind, I’m thinking, “Why would I do extra things -- why am I doing that for the community . . . when I could be out the door ’cause I’m white?” (NNT)

Participants explained that many of their fears stem from past experiences of working for school boards where decisions were based on political agendas rather than educational goals.

- You just don’t mix education and politics -- that’s where you see a lot of the grime -- the way that decisions are based -- everything is so personal -- you always have to watch your back -- be careful who you talk to or what you say [it affects your work in the classroom because] you don’t want to take risks. (NE)

- Some boards don’t realize how a school is like a business -- you have to handle yourself like a business person to make decisions -- you can’t make it because your sister-in-law is mad at the teacher -- you know. (NE)

Educators suggested that if teachers are to feel secure and valued by the community, school boards must be prepared to offer longer teacher contracts.

For most participants a “fair” contract consisted of a one to two-year probationary period, followed by an offer of either a permanent or a five-year contract.

- By offering permanent contracts after a two year probationary period, you would maintain trust because a teacher is not going to feel part of the community if they are left out on a limb. They will not feel like planting roots and they will go somewhere, where somebody will give them that trust or that commitment. (F-NNE)
I think that teachers need stability. For me, I would like to work for a year or two years in a school system and then they come and say, “Over the last two years, we’ve evaluated your progress and we have these positive and these negative things to say -- based on these we would like to offer you your job until you get too old that you can’t even drive here anymore.” I think that’s really important -- we take out 25 year mortgages but we only have a job that’s guaranteed for two years. That’s not a guarantee. (NE)

Participants stressed that salary levels and benefit packages must be “either equal to or better” than those offered by neighbouring school systems. Educators urged school boards to refrain from cutting benefits that are being abused by a small number of employees.

We don’t have any personal days -- initially there were some, but people abused them. So, rather than getting after the people who abused them, they cut personal days . . . that’s punishing everyone for some problems with a few. (NNE)

Participants explained that fair teacher contracts and competitive benefit packages provide teachers with more than financial security.

[The school board] started to give teachers a little longer contract and [teachers] were a little more able to take risks. If you’ve got a three-year contract or a five-year contract, your teachers will feel more comfortable -- they’re willing to make a few changes and take a few risks. (M-NNE)

As I listened to educators discuss this particular topic, I sensed that some participants perceived that teacher salary levels, length of teacher contracts and quality of benefit packages are reflective of the extent to which teachers are valued by school boards and communities.

Creating Personal Links

Participants appreciated school board officials who made regular attempts to interact with teachers and students.
• You feel comfortable to approach board members -- they’re more visible. They just pop in [to the school] -- which makes it nice -- ’cause you get to know them. It’s nice to see them -- just to chit chat and I think that helps to build a lot of rapport. (F-NE)

• The director must be visible in the schools both as an observer and participant -- so that he or she can advise the board on certain issues. How can they possibly advise the board if they don’t know, through their own eyes and heart and ears -- what is taking place in the school. The board is relying on their expertise. (NNE)

Participants explained that if school board officials visit schools on a regular basis, school boards will become more knowledgeable about teacher needs and accomplishments.

• If they could talk to you more personally -- it’s nice that someone knows who you are -- that there’s a face to the typed word on the page -- you know? Maybe have a get-together of the board and everybody -- like a social event -- so people can be more personable with them. Then they’ll know a little bit more about what we’re all about. I think when you hire teachers -- if I’m ever in that position -- well, it would be a heck of a job! It’s something like choosing a spouse (laugh) -- in this one regard -- if they do something, it reflects on you -- right? If I ever hear of anything this person did, I want to be able to stand behind them and say, “Well, I’m sure that they had a good reason to do it.” And not to say, “Yeah, they could have done that” -- you know? (NNT)

• There are so few people that know what I do -- or what my values are or what I’m trying to teach children. I don’t think they [school board officials] know what we do here and I do feel, at times, a little bit of resentment that -- you know -- somebody could hold your career in the palm of their hand (laugh) and they don’t know what I do. (NNT)

Participants recognized that it is difficult for teachers and school board members to develop close working relationships when many communities elect or appoint a new school board on a yearly basis.

• If they continue to have board changes every year -- that’s not very good because there is no continuity there. (NE)
Participants stressed that when school board officials make an effort to become acquainted with educators on a personal level, teachers are presented with a message that their employers not only value teachers' work but they also value teachers as individuals.

Teacher Recognition

Participants reported that they appreciate receiving regular words of support and encouragement from individual members of the local school board. Some educators recalled working for school boards that failed to recognize teachers' efforts.

- They just didn't make you feel appreciated or worth it or wanted. I think we lost a lot of excellent Indian teachers -- including me -- there were many reasons why I quit but that was one of them. I thought, I wasn't going to work for these people anymore. (NT)

One teacher explained that the positive effects of public displays of teacher appreciation can be quickly neutralized if they are not followed up with regular and sincere forms of support.

- I think it's the private thank yous that mean a lot more in many cases than the public presentations -- we had a number of public presentations [which ended up] meaning absolutely nothing. They had a pow wow to honour the teachers, which was a very nice gesture except that at every other turn, there was obviously no respect there. It was a totally double message. (NNE)

Many educators stressed that they prefer receiving private and regular acknowledgment for work well done. Other participants felt that a combination of formal and informal recognition would be welcomed by teachers.

- Boards need to offer some kind of encouragement for working hard ... some kind of annual recognition would be good. And I think some ongoing recognition in small ways -- just people coming into the classroom [and visiting]. (NNT)

- We have a gathering at the beginning of the school year -- one year, we had a pipe ceremony -- so, I thought that was a good beginning and I think that there should be a good conclusion [at the end of the school year] for the
teachers -- feed them and just say, "Thank you" and give some recognition that you really liked these [specific things] that they did. (NT)

The Miyo Wahkohtowin Experience

Many participants praised the strengths of the Miyo Wahkohtowin Education Authority. The director and board members were portrayed as people who valued teacher knowledge and created meaningful opportunities for teachers to contribute to the establishment of new school programs.

- We have an excellent board, an excellent administration, who are very open and willing to listen to you and to listen to the changes that you might want to make. (F-NE)

- [The director] is really trying to support his teachers -- empowering them. By allowing teachers to make decisions based on their expertise -- believing that teachers do have the expertise. He’s putting faith in the people that he has hired . . . he’s giving the schools a lot of -- I wouldn’t call it power -- but a lot of opportunities to make decisions so that we can create a school that’s going to be effective and I think we’re on our way. I really think it makes a difference to have a director from the community. Maybe it’s just our director’s personality -- he seems like a very calm man. Even if decisions go bad, he’s still willing to be responsible for them and that’s something that I really admire. (NE)

During my interview with Brian Wildcat, he explained that many Native communities are presently in the initial stages of learning how to develop effective school boards.

- I have a responsibility in some ways as a teacher to the board. The main part of being a teacher of the board is you’re there to educate the board so that they become a very effective board. What you’re trying to do is try to get enough information to the board so that they can make the best decision that they can . . . You have to understand that in band operated schools, that it’s a pretty new experience -- nobody knows what their role is -- so you’re trying to sort it out with them. At the beginning, [we asked], “What are we here for?” -- [and the board] finally made a commitment to say that we are here for the best interests of the kids -- that is our only sole purpose . . . from there, you have to decide what the appropriate roles are.
Brian emphasized that he and the school board are using site-based management as a way to recognize and respect the knowledge and expertise of educators.

- Two things had to be taught to the board; one is that the board decides what the priority is and decides some general parameters, then we have to give it to the administration and teachers and respect their professional knowledge of how to do that. As a board and myself, we view our role at the end -- of values and vision and prioritizing and strategic planning -- and laying out general policies -- the more we get into the classroom decisions and the actual delivery and methods of teaching, we get out of it.

According to participants, school boards must develop an effective balance between empowering teachers and ensuring that teachers are provided with the proper resources and guidelines that will allow them to be effective educators. Participants expressed that the Miyo Wahkohtowin Education Authority is making sincere efforts to provide teachers with a supportive work environment where teachers can take comfort in knowing that all school board decisions are based upon meeting the needs of students.

**Parent-Teacher Relationships**

During our interview sessions, several participants described their vision of an ideal Native school. Most of these “dream” schools featured a high level of parental involvement, where “parents felt at home in the school and would come and go as they wished.” Educators explained that the extent to which parents participate in school activities significantly informs teachers’ daily work. More specifically, participants suggested that the dynamics of parent-teacher relationships impact on (1) students’ social, emotional and academic progress; (2) teacher-student relationships, and (3) teachers’ sense of job satisfaction.
Educators' Perceptions of "Parental Support"

Educators identified parents who support teachers as those individuals who promote the value of education to their children. Participants explained that one of the first steps parents can take to reinforce the importance of education is to provide their children with "basic" resources.

- I think there is the basics -- to make sure that kids have enough sleep, enough to eat, that they're clean and comfortable and that they come every day -- that they come on time. (F-NNE)

Educators added that "beyond the basics" parents can demonstrate their support by participating in school activities and becoming informed about their children's academic and social progress.

- Teachers would really like parents to come to parent-teacher interviews -- to be interested in what their child is doing -- just to drop by the school and have a look at their child's work -- to let their child know that they're interested in their work. (F-NNE)

- [When parents support their children's educational growth], the parents phone and are concerned when their child is having difficulty in school and they attend school functions. (F-NT)

Educators expressed that an important facet of parental support is receiving encouragement and positive feedback from students' parents.

- When I see some of the parents [in town] I feel good when they come over and talk to me and sometimes talk about the students. I've heard comments that I have made a difference. (M-NNE)

While detailing the advantages of parental support, participants stressed that it is students who benefit most from a school environment that features strong parental involvement.
Links Between Parental Support and Student Success

Teachers and administrators emphasized that when parents support teachers and the school, they are also making important contributions to their children’s social, emotional and academic growth.

- As soon as you have parental support and input -- they [students] will grow but the ones who tend to sit at the same place and really aren’t growing are the ones that don’t have parental support. As long as you’re getting parental support, the kids are happier -- they’re growing and so are you. (M-NE)

Educators explained that most of their students who have good social skills and are academically successful come from homes where parents are actively involved in their children’s educational progress. Participants added that they can usually identify which of their students have been raised in a family where education has been presented in a positive manner.

- If children perceive their parents as thinking that education is not very important then they won’t see it as very important. You can see the difference in the children between the parents who come [to the school] often and [those who don’t]. (NNE)

Participants suggested that an important way for parents to demonstrate an interest in their children’s education is to develop close working relationships with their children’s teachers.

- I think if [the students] see their parents are here and involved in their education . . . they’ll probably develop a sense of identity, self-esteem and those characteristics that go to building strong leaders. They say, “Hey, my parents have as much to offer as the next parent.” I think that’s important that they develop that [idea] -- the parents out there do have something to offer. (NA)

Educators reported that positive teacher-parent relationships can also assist teachers in communicating effectively with students.
Since parental support contributes to student and teacher success, participants reported that teachers and schools must reach out to parents and encourage them to assume a primary role in the school community.

**Developing Parent-Teacher Relationships**

Participants listed a number of strategies they have used to establish rapport with parents. Educators used telephone calls, notes, and home visits to keep parents informed of their children’s’ progress. Several teachers also attend community events so that they can relate to parents in an “out of school” context. Despite their efforts to develop regular contact with parents, the majority of participants felt that they continue to receive minimal parental support.

- For every one supportive parent I have, there’s probably two that I don’t get any support from and I think that’s one of the most frustrating parts of this job. (NT)

- I actually get very little parental support. If I had support from parents, things would go a lot easier. (NT)

Some participants expressed frustration as they described the strain of constantly trying to make parents feel welcome in the school.

- We’re always trying to make the parents feel welcome -- like, it’s supposed to be a community school but we are trying to make the parents feel welcome in their school and it shouldn’t have to be that way. I mean, we’re always trying to get them to come out to meetings and different things -- like it’s their school! (F-NNE)
Other educators were concerned about the “unfriendliness” of some parents.

- The parents still look right through me -- I don’t know what I can do about it. Not all of them -- but especially the older ones and the ones that seem to have had a rough childhood. A couple of times I’ve went to Bingo and I see them and I go, “Hi!” and they just walk right past me. That’s frustrating -- I mean you work your butt off and especially when you have their kid in your room -- they don’t come in for report cards or they won’t talk to you because -- I don’t know why. (NNT)

For teachers who are committed to meeting their students’ needs, it can be mystifying when parents refuse to acknowledge friendly greetings.

Some educators acknowledged that while not all parents respond to them in a warm manner, teachers need to become familiar with different methods of communication.

- If nobody says, “Hi!” to you when you say, “Hi!” -- it happens -- I just go, “Okay, well maybe I don’t need to say, ‘Hi’ so much (laugh) -- maybe I can just smile at someone and that’s enough.” There’s different ways of communicating that people have . . . One community where I worked -- everyone was very shy -- but you know what -- after a while -- just wonderful people if they know you -- you just can’t come on too strong at the beginning. (F-NNT)

Another participant stressed that teachers should not equate “silence” with “dislike.”

- Parents that I thought really didn’t like me -- never really talked to me -- were very quiet and at the end of the year they were hugging me -- not wanting me to go. So that kind of showed me that they really did think that I did a good job. (F-NNT)

Several educators explained that they have learned to refrain from labelling all quiet parents as being unfriendly or uninterested in their children’s education. Often with the passage of time, teachers will be able to establish increased rapport with many of their students’ parents.
Many participants suggested that parent-teacher relationships can be nurtured if teachers make regular efforts to become involved in the community.

- It’s really been a problem here getting parents’ support... I think a lot of that goes back to the fact that they don’t feel comfortable coming into the school. Whereas, if more teachers were seen out in the community more parents would feel comfortable coming in... I think a lot of them -- this is my personal opinion here -- a lot of them feel that, “Well if these teachers are only coming here from 9:00 ’til 3:30 and they’re gone -- they’re just here to make their dollar and they don’t really care about what’s going on.” And I see of the teachers that do make the effort to get out there, the parents come back in and they’re comfortable in talking to them. (NNE)

Several educators suggested that home visits can also be an effective way of developing informal contact with parents and students.

- If the teachers can get out to the houses once in a while and they see where the student’s coming from and what the family’s like -- I know they treat the student quite a bit different. (NNE)

Other participants noted that, for a variety of reasons, many parents refuse to have teachers visit their homes.

- There are people who do not want home visits and that’s okay. Actually, it’s kind of funny and sad too -- but I know people have told me about their neighbours that [they said], “Boy that white teacher she was so pushy -- she just wanted to come and visit and she insisted on coming and so when she came, I took all the kids and hid in the basement.” You know -- it’s kind of laughable when you think about it but it’s really kind of sad too that the person didn’t feel confident enough to just say, “No thanks, I really don’t want you to visit.” (NNE)

Some educators felt that teachers should not be forced to conduct home visits.

- I don’t believe in home visits... I know enough about reserves and reserve life that I don’t need to go and see a child’s home... I think some Native people find it threatening to have people in [their home] -- not all people do -- but some do. I would not want people from the community -- you know -- parents that I have to work with, dropping into my house and not because I don’t want visitors or anything like that but I don’t think that’s necessary -- I think that goes beyond teaching -- that goes into social work... I’m not a...
social worker; I’m a teacher. If the student is here, I’ll do anything I can for him and I’ll make sure that they are safe while they’re here but I’m sorry . . . I don’t think it’s fair to be a police officer to these kids. Being a teacher is tough enough. (NT)

One educator suggested that rather than immediately embarking on a home visiting schedule, teachers may have to establish contact with some parents in a gradual manner.

- I would tell teachers to be very subtle -- don’t push [parents]. Get to know your children’s parents by writing notes or phoning them and inviting them to the school. (F-NE)

Although community involvement and home visits were advocated by many participants, it is evident that teachers, administrators, school board authorities and community members will need to clarify how teachers can respectfully establish rapport with parents.

**Accepting Varying Levels of Parental Involvement**

Although educators were concerned about the lack of parental support, many participants acknowledged that there are a variety of factors that prevent parents from actively supporting teachers and the school.

- You have different degrees of parent involvement -- some parents are very involved and do a lot of volunteering and we have a range of parents who we will never see. I think that’s the first thing we have to become aware of -- we have parents in our community who have other greater issues on their plate -- than the school. I think that’s the first realization our teachers have to understand -- and it’s a matter of us just being patient ’til parents are willing to take on a greater role. But we do have some parents who already take on very strong leadership roles. (NA)

Educators observed that some parents are simply too busy to devote a great amount of time and energy to participating in school activities.
• I think we have a lot of parents that are stressed -- stressed to the max with going to school, trying to be a mother and just keeping the house together and so I think there’s a limited number of parents that are available [to come into the school]. (F-NNE)

Participants suggested that some parents may continue to view all schools as extensions of the residential school era.

• There’s still a group of people that think of the school as the residential school -- kind of the enemy -- “the place where I went and had these horrendous experiences.” (F-NNE)

• There are other negative feelings about school that tends to keep [parents] away -- I think you just have to look at the residential school system to realize why they’re not coming and unfortunately, though, it’s going to take a lot of time [before those negative feelings subside]. (F-NNT)

Educators also suggested that the school can be a threatening environment for those parents who possess low literacy skills.

• There’s some parents that think of the school as alien in the sense of the teachers being well-educated. We have a lot of parents that just feel not that confident with their own literacy skills. I know my mother felt that way -- she always felt intimidated going in the school even if the teacher was quite a nice person because she [my mother] didn’t have a lot of education. (F-NNE)

While the above statement may be interpreted as referring only to “older” parents or to grandparents, in reality the literacy rates in First Nations communities are alarmingly low. In 1990 a parliamentary Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs found that “at least 45% of on-reserve Indians were functionally illiterate” (Battiste, 1995, p. xii).

Participants urged teachers to be aware that there are a variety of reasons why some parents choose to distance themselves from schools and teachers. Living with the effects of the residential school system, possessing low literacy skills, or grappling with social and personal concerns can prevent some parents from providing teachers and schools with active and regular support. One non-Native teacher encouraged educators
to be “open-minded and accepting” of parents’ situations and to remember that a lack of parental involvement should not be equated with a lack of parental interest in their children’s education.

“Real” Parental Involvement

Participants stressed that “real” parental involvement occurs when teachers and parents are able to build strong partnerships.

- I don’t think our focus is getting parents to come in and volunteer for hot dog sales and clipping out stuff -- I mean we’ve got parents like that and I admit we need those parents but the real parent involvement is parents and teachers getting to know each other and building that partnership for their kid. I think once you build the relationship with the parent and the teacher what you’ve done is you’ve built the ties so that the kids become successful because the parents then support what the teacher’s doing in the classroom -- understand what’s going on there. Then you also get the teachers understanding the child’s life at home because they know the parents and they understand where that child is coming from. (NA)

At times, teachers and parents will establish unproductive and unhealthy relationships which fail to focus on students’ needs.

- That’s where we have a lot of problems -- to be blunt about it -- I think that’s where you get a cycle of blame occurring and then people not taking responsibility. We have this flare up every once in awhile in the school -- [parents] coming in and blaming teachers for whatever happens and there’s a crisis . . . or we have teachers at staff meetings blaming parents -- “irresponsible, bingo freaks, alcoholics” -- that kind of thing -- “we can’t take responsibility for the success of our kids because the parents are this way.” Then what happens is the big picture, of the kids, gets lost. You then become isolated. It’s a cop-out to say, “It’s the parents fault that I can’t teach the kid.” (NE)

Educators emphasized that their ability to teach successfully is amplified when parents are actively involved in the school community. Yet, several participants stressed that teachers must be willing to work with a wide variety of parental support levels.
• Once we understand the community and understand there is a range of parents out there that go from one end of the spectrum to the other -- a teacher gets a better understanding of what their role is. You have to take some personal responsibility for success. (NA)

Ultimately, teachers and parents must strive to establish productive partnerships; in the absence of these relationships, teachers must assume primary responsibility for meeting students’ needs while the students are in their care.

Community Relationships

As described in the previous section, participants stressed that if teachers wish to establish positive relationships with students and community members, they must make an effort to become involved in the community.

• [Students] get to know you -- they know that you’re a part of them -- or a part of the community and you like them. When you go into children’s homes and not only just for home visits -- where you’re made to do it but do it on your own time -- they know that you care and that you’re interested in them as people. Same with the parents. (F-NE)

Participants’ statements indicated that while community involvement is important, finding a way to respectfully gain access to the community can be a complex process.

Warm Welcomes

For some educators, developing relationships with the community seemed to be a natural and comfortable process. One educator, who has worked in Native settings for over 15 years, recalls her first teaching experience.

• I think when you’re coming to a community, it’s your responsibility to get to know the community. In university I was given the impression that you get to know as many people as you can so that you can adapt your curriculum and work with the kids accordingly. So I really went out -- I used to ride around on the school bus all over the reserve because it was a huge reserve -- just to get to know the reserve. People were really really friendly. I didn’t have to be told to go out to the community. In fact, I was reprimanded for associating
Several educators recalled working in Native schools where learning about their students’ community was facilitated by the friendliness of community members.

- [The community] organized community activities and always asked for help from the teachers and then when it was time to carry out some of these activities we certainly were welcome. I think just language was key -- you knew that you were a very valuable person there. I mean people talked to you really nicely and were glad to see you come. I think that we were really made welcome -- I think that we were part and parcel of the community. (F-NNT)

- People were really friendly. They just treated me like one of the family. (NNE)

- I was very fortunate when I came here -- I was befriended by a couple of families in the community who sort of took me in and taught me a lot and really made me welcome. Now, I don’t know if that happens to every teacher. It is a problem because no teacher is going to go to a pow wow or to a tea dance or anything else without being invited -- because they fear that a lot of Native people don’t want white people around there. Which is not true -- it’s not true. (F-NNT)

One teacher suggested the need for an “adopt a teacher” plan where individual teachers could “get to know a family.” She described how one family provided her with an unforgettable learning experience.

- They included me in some of the things that went on in their lives. One lady invited us [my family] to a feast. My entire family went and it was the first feast I had ever gone to. This was actually quite humorous -- I plunked myself down beside my husband and an elder came over and he said, “The women and children have to be on that side of the house.” So, we go over there and my husband sat down there . . . We were very interested -- we were very honoured. I think that, we felt, as a family, especially my husband and I - - the children, maybe later on in years would feel honoured -- but I felt honoured being there . . . There were all these things we experienced. One humourous thing that happened was the lard and currants came around -- and that’s just like the host -- in the church. And, so I had some and my son, who was about four years old at the time, looked at this. And this old lady, beside him, put the spoon in the lard and put it into his mouth and she said, “He will
learn the Indian ways." And at that point, I realized these people really wanted me to learn about their culture -- that she would take the time to plunk this into my son's mouth. And he sat there with his eyes as big as saucers, with his mouth full of lard, and she handed him a chocolate bar to help it go down. So, that was very interesting. (F-NNT)

When the host family and the elders demonstrated their care and concern for this non-Native family, they provided the teacher with a memorable and compassionate introduction to the culture of the community.

Outsiders

The above positive experiences were described by educators who had either worked in small Native communities or who had over 15 years of teaching experience in First Nations settings. One teacher explained that her younger colleagues do not appear to enjoy the same level of community warmth that she experienced in her early teaching days. So, while some teachers have been fortunate and have been able to find their niche in the community, other participants questioned whether people in the community really "want" their involvement.

- As outsiders who come into the community we are constantly told that we should be more involved in the community but I think the honest truth is that the community is not interested in having us involved. (NNE)

- I have an interest in the community but I don't think -- the whole community has an interest in me or other people. (NE)

- It's really interesting in that when we go to a community event -- people always come up and say, "Hello" and "How are you?" and shake our hand and that sort of thing. But they very seldom ever invite us -- in fact they don't. The only time we have been invited to any events is if it's a staff person from the school -- we are never invited . . . I think if people really wanted us to come to events, they would ask us to come. 'Cause even the posters don't come to the schools -- you know -- the posters that go up around the community -- they never bring them into the schools . . . [The message that people get is], "It's okay for you to come in and teach my child, it's okay for
you to be there at the school but it’s not okay for you to be in my home or in my community.” We are not really welcome. (NNE)

While some people may point out that teachers should understand that they don’t require an invitation to attend community events, the reality is that some teachers in Native schools, for a variety of reasons, feel unwelcome in the community.

Some participants explained that merely being visible in the community is an effective and non-intrusive way of demonstrating your interest in the community.

- I try and get involved with the community -- not so much by trying to be over-friendly with everybody. I stop at the store and buy something at Big Way. I always gas up at the gas bar there. [I would advise teachers] to be visible in the community -- like going to stores -- shopping there but not snoopy -- but to respect the Native space. (NE)

However, for some educators who might feel ostracized by the community it can be difficult to see the benefits of being “visible.”

- Walking through the [community] mall, I’ve had the odd comment. I think just twice that happened -- somebody sort of looked at me and said, “What are you doing here, you white woman?” We used to do our banking there but we don’t now. I go down to the other mall. You don’t have to walk through the whole mall -- you go right to the bank. So, it’s little things like that. (F-NNE)

It’s important to stress that the educator who made the above statement did not allow the above incidents to prevent her from continuing to explore the community. Based on her life experiences, she understood some of the reasons why non-Native educators may not be accepted by all community members. Yet not all educators will be so resilient.

Other participants explained that community involvement should be motivated by a sincere interest in specific aspects of the community.

- I have an interest in what goes on in the community but I don’t feel that I need to be visible. I don’t play politics -- bottom-line. I totally disagree with people who go to this thing or that thing because they want to be seen -- if they don’t have an appreciation for a round dance, then don’t go -- you
know? I’ll go into the community when I feel that I need to or if I feel that there’s something there that I can benefit from or that -- upon invitation, that I have an interest -- that way -- but I don’t do it for the wrong reasons, I guess. (NE)

It is evident that the process of discovering respectful and genuine methods of “getting to know the community” can be a complex and stressful process for some teachers.

**Building Partnerships**

Those participants who felt welcomed by the community were able to gain a deeper understanding of not only their students but their students’ community and culture. How can the school and community work together to create an environment where students, community members and teachers feel cared for?

- I think it’s really a two-way street -- you know, I said that it’s important for the teachers to get out in the community and I think probably the best thing is for the teachers to take the first step but I think if teachers are making the effort to take the steps -- that the community has to reciprocate and come into the school and encourage the teachers -- talk to the teachers and let the teachers know that they’re accepted and that they’re happy with what they’re doing. (NNA)

- [The community needs to] make [teachers feel] part of the community so that they have some sort of sense of commitment to the community -- to the people. [The community needs] to create an environment where it’s pleasant to work -- so that you’re a valued part of the process of educating children in that particular community. [They need to] say, “You’re a good teacher, we want you here and this is what we like about you.” (F-NT)

Participants stressed that a stronger sense of school-community collaboration could be created if more community members would come into the school and share their talents.

- There are a lot of resources in the community that have always been in the community but not in the school so we need to . . . try and pull in as much as we can. That to me is exciting. (NNA)
- People that are rich, culturally -- and I think there are a lot -- I would like to see them involved in the school. [We should look at] the school as a place -- where we just plain help children. There's a lot of people out there that can do a lot of things that our kids should be exposed to -- it would be nice if they would share some of these things. I'd just like to see more involvement with the community. (F-NNT)

While some participants felt that community members should volunteer their time to the school, other educators suggested that school boards could establish stronger links with the community by employing more community people.

- Give people an honorarium for their work -- 'cause it's not like the old times when you didn't need money -- so people need something. (F-NNT)

- I'm one of the people that believes we should employ community people on short term contracts for specific projects like drum-building or pow wow dancing. The only reason I say employ is because a lot of people are unemployed and so it would meet their need for employment and it would meet our need for their expertise . . . I believe in volunteers but I think the reality is we have people starving. Why wouldn't we want to deal with two issues at the same time? It would give [community people] such pride and confidence in themselves, as teachers -- everyone's a teacher, everyone's a learner -- you know, it fits in with traditional thinking that we all have gifts that we have to share with other people. (NNE)

Participants stressed that educators, the school board, and the community must work together to ensure that the school becomes an integral part of the community.

- [I would like] for the school to be part of a whole community approach to education so that the school building is not just open from 8:30 'til 4:30 -- it was also open during the evening -- so that it was part of a whole . . . I think in many communities, the school is isolated from the community. (F-NNT)

Educators explained that it is important for the school to be accepted as part of the community so that teachers and community members can effectively share responsibility for meeting students' educational needs.

- Everybody has to be a part of the education of that child . . . the leaders of this community, the parents, the board of education. You [the teacher] are but one aspect of that education. (F-NNT)
According to participants' statements, if teachers are to work successfully in Native schools, they must become well informed about the community. Educators reported that their ability to learn about their students' community is enhanced when community members provide teachers with a warm and supportive learning environment. Participants also called for the development of an education system that features a strong partnership between the school and the community; a partnership that requires community members to find a special place for schools and educators in the overall structure of their community.

Support from Family and Friends

During one of the first interviews, a non-Native teacher talked extensively about how her own family members have enhanced her teaching experiences in Native communities. After completing that particular interview, I began to ask participants to describe how the people who are important in their personal life have influenced their daily work.

Educators talked about the benefits of receiving guidance and support from their parents and friends.

- With my dad, I get spiritual guidance and it's really important. Sometimes when I have to try to make decisions . . . anything -- I'll go tell my dad. Sometimes we don't agree but that's okay. And my mom -- same thing -- I'm very open with them. (F-NT)

- I usually call a friend. They can help me see situations from a different viewpoint and guide me through a difficult decision. They can also tell me if I'm being too hard on myself. (F-NT)

Some teachers talked about the importance of having friends who are also educators and several spoke fondly of the friendships they have been able to establish with colleagues.
• I carpooled with this one teacher and it was really nice to talk to her - 'cause she was really supportive -- that’s wonderful -- when you have a friendship with someone . . . It’s really nice to have someone to unwind with. [When I drove] by myself, I’d come home and I’d tell [my spouse] all these things and he couldn’t really understand. (F-NNT)

Friends who were attentive listeners and offered candid advice were especially valued.

• They need to be good listeners. Sometimes you just need to let it all out. You need to be reassured and you also need people to be honest with you. I want my friends to give me honest feedback -- not to just tell me that I’m doing perfectly. (F-NT)

Participants stressed that their children and spouse must understand that teaching is more than a nine to five job.

• I know that there are times when my kids -- perhaps resent that -- two-thirds of every Sunday, of all the Sundays in a school year I’m here. I think that sometimes the children start to resent that. Yet, I think that just comes to however old they are -- ‘cause for the most part, I’ve always brought them along. But then they get to a certain age where they don’t want to come anymore -- and that’s when I think that your family life sort of interferes a bit. (F-NNT)

• My husband and I have had struggles about me working. Teaching is more than a full-time position and I heard somebody say that it’s a vocation -- it’s a way of life. I think that our families have to recognize that you’re not in there from nine to five -- that you’re not in there from June to September and that you don’t get all these holidays -- it is a way of life . . . it’s all-encompassing. (F-NT)

One teacher expressed a desire for her friends to recognize the special effort that she puts into her work.

• I come from a situation where most of our friends are teachers [who teach in public schools] and none of them work as hard as I do -- I know they don’t. Yet, I think in specific cases I think that I’ve got some real hard-working friends and they’re good teachers but I don’t think that they put the time that I put in. I don’t think they put the effort in that I do. I’m not saying just me -- I’m saying all of us here -- that our jobs are a little bit more difficult than their jobs. It’d be nice if they were supportive -- I don’t think that they really know [how hard we work]. (F-NNT)
Participants stressed that they are also appreciative of family and friends who are willing to learn about the Native community. One educator explained that it is important for family and friends to attend community events and be “interested in and positive about the Native community and the Native culture.” One teacher recalled that she made an effort to ensure that her children and husband were well acquainted with the school and community.

- I’ve educated my own family about Native people. I’ve brought them to [different community events] and brought them to school here. I have brought my daughter here -- when she was little and was off [from school] and I wasn’t, I’d bring her to school here. If my husband peeks his head in the door, I introduce him to the kids. (F-NNT)

The same teacher related that she and her husband have made friends with a few community members and as a result have been invited to several social events. By demonstrating an interest in the Native community, family and friends can help students and community members to view the teacher in a realistic and ‘human’ light.

- [It shows my students] that I’m a human being too. I have to feed my kids when I get home and discipline them and I have a husband to run after . . . and I have cows that are calving -- same as some of their dads. (F-NNT)

Educators suggested that teachers who are able to work successfully in Native settings are those individuals who have developed positive and supportive links between their personal and professional lives. At times, the teaching workload can interfere with educators’ personal lives. However, for those teachers who have friends and family who are willing to become involved in community activities, teaching in a Native community can provide a welcome opportunity to meld personal and professional interests and responsibilities.
Summary

In this chapter educators identified and described a mosaic of factors that influence their ability to teach successfully in First Nations communities. Educators illustrated how their daily work is shaped by the nature of their relationships with colleagues, school-based administrators, school board authorities, parents, community members and their own family and friends. By discussing their teaching experiences, participants detailed the type of material and human resources they require if they are to work effectively in Native settings.

As I listened to educators describe their work, it was apparent that many participants possessed a strong sense of personal agency. Even though teachers and administrators identified a complex set of boundaries that limit their work, many individuals described their commitment to meeting students' needs within these boundaries. I could see that several educators are patiently finding creative ways to work with limited resources. It is evident that these same educators could better contribute to the development of innovative Native educational systems if those factors that limit teacher effectiveness were replaced by a working environment that nurtures teacher success.

In the final chapter I explore policy and practice implications that emerge from a synthesis of the information presented by students, parents and educators in Chapters 4 through 6.
CHAPTER 7
FANNING THE TEACHER FIRE:
SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Every September, teachers in First Nations communities all across Canada enter their classrooms and greet a new group of students. Over the next ten months, teachers and students will create unique relationships and distinctive classroom environments. According to the results of this study, teachers will be expected to establish classrooms where their students' cultural, academic, social and emotional needs will be met. Students and parents will also look forward to visiting with teachers at local community events. If teachers are to successfully meet all of these expectations, they must receive strong support from many areas of their personal and professional lives.

In this chapter I summarize the factors participants identified as contributing most to teacher success in Native settings. Based on a synthesis of participant perspectives, I also provide a list of suggested "responsibilities" that institutions and communities may assume in their efforts to positively influence the experiences of teachers who choose to work in First Nations schools. Clearly, individual communities and post-secondary institutions must determine how they can best contribute to teacher success. Therefore, the following list of responsibilities is not meant to be prescriptive but is offered to institutions and communities as a potential resource.

Perceptions of Teacher Success

A synthesis of student, parent and educator views of teacher success indicates that if teachers wish to work effectively in Native settings, they must be prepared to assume a
special set of responsibilities. Participants stressed that teachers must be willing and able to:

- Develop an extensive knowledge base about historical and contemporary First Nations issues before accepting work in a Native school
- Identify and explore personal values that may influence their work in a Native community before beginning work in a Native school
- Possess and demonstrate respect for students, parents, colleagues and community members
- Offer students and parents social and emotional support
- Respect students' cultural and family obligations
- Refrain from imposing their own value systems on the community
- Assist students in developing a strong sense of being a Native person
- Create a classroom that reflects and celebrates students' culture
- Be a team player who provides colleagues with support
- Accept criticism in a positive manner
- Become informed about the community
- Accept that making mistakes is an inevitable component of learning about a new community
- Assume a role that contributes to the well-being of the entire community

A review of the above list of teacher responsibilities demonstrates that many of the recommendations made by participants could also be applied to teachers working in non-Native school settings. While participants' broad understanding of teacher success may be similar to common views of teacher effectiveness, participants suggested that the challenge facing teachers who work in Native schools is determining how to effectively meet this set of responsibilities within a First Nations community.
Factors That Limit Teacher Success

Participants also identified a number of factors they believe inhibit a teacher’s ability to work successfully in Native schools. According to participants’ statements, teacher success in First Nations communities can be hampered if teachers are confronted with the following challenges:

- Exposure to negative stereotypes of teachers who choose to work in Native communities
- Absence of a collegial work environment
- Colleagues who neglect their students’ social and emotional well-being
- Colleagues who possess stereotypical ideas about the learning abilities of Native children
- Colleagues who refuse to develop a teaching style that respects and celebrates the culture of the community
- Tensions between Native and non-Native school staff
- Colleagues who possess minimal knowledge about Native people and Native issues
- Lack of material and human resources necessary for meeting students’ needs
- Absence of a comprehensive teacher orientation program
- Unclear direction for presentation of cultural material
- Lack of job security
- Absence of positive and informal links with school board officials
- Absence of school board continuity
- Lack of informal and formal methods of teacher recognition
- Minimal parental support
- Minimal community support
• Minimal support from family and friends

Participants' statements indicated that many of the above inhibitors of teacher success could be minimized by a school climate that is based upon respectful relationships between educators, students, parents, school board authorities and community members. Participants also emphasized that if teachers are to work effectively in Native schools, the above inhibitors of teacher success must be jointly addressed by educators, post-secondary institutions, First Nations communities and teachers' friends and families.

Institutional Responsibilities

Students, parents and educators suggested that post-secondary institutions can provide prospective and practicing teachers with important understandings about the issues related to teaching in First Nations settings. Based on participants' statements, post-secondary institutions can contribute to teacher success by assuming the following set of responsibilities:

• Provide a range of courses that feature a thorough exploration of historical and contemporary First Nations issues

• Through the use of field trips and guest lecturers ensure that teachers have an opportunity to obtain Native perspectives about Native issues

• Challenge teachers to identify and explore the source of their motivation for teaching in a Native setting

• Provide teachers with an opportunity to develop an awareness of how their personal values and life history may impact upon their teaching practice

• Inform teachers of potential challenges of teaching in a cross-cultural setting

• Openly address issues such as “white-defensiveness” and possible tensions between Native and non-Native school staff

• Challenge prospective teachers to develop their ability to determine and respond appropriately to the learning needs of individual students
• Encourage teachers to critically consider what is said in the research literature about the learning needs and abilities of Native children

• Challenge teachers to master and utilize a wide range of teaching strategies

• Provide teachers with opportunities to develop the skills and resources necessary for creating classrooms that reflect and promote the culture of their students’ community

• Provide teachers with opportunities to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to provide students and parents with social and emotional support

• Encourage teachers to practice regular guided reflection on their practice

• Challenge teachers to view community members as full partners in the educational process

• Provide teachers with concrete strategies for respectfully gaining access to their students’ communities

School Board Responsibilities

While few students discussed how local school boards can contribute to teacher success, parents and educators identified the local school board as playing the central role in determining whether teachers will be able to work effectively in Native settings. Based on participants’ statements, local school boards can positively influence teachers’ daily work by assuming the following set of responsibilities:

• Ensure that the school system is based upon a strong vision; a vision that is shared by educators, the school board and the community

• Offer a comprehensive and sensitive orientation program for all new school staff. The orientation program should include the following components: a balance of historical and contemporary information about the social, political, economic and cultural characteristics of the community; opportunities for teachers to interact with and learn directly from community members; provision of a clear policy for the presentation of traditional and cultural information in the classroom (details of this policy should be sanctioned by the community); thorough “hands-on” instruction for the presentation of traditional and cultural information
• Provide educators with an on-going educational program that continuously extends their knowledge about various aspects of the community

• Provide culturally appropriate teaching materials and curriculum guides which feature accurate historical and contemporary information about the students’ community as well as other groups of First Nations people

• In the absence of teaching materials that are community-specific, allocate funds for the development of community-based curriculum development projects

• Employ cultural resource people from the community who are able and willing to sensitively provide educators with accurate information about the community’s traditional and cultural practices

• Establish system wide discipline policies that are based on traditional methods of addressing “anti-social or destructive” behaviour

• Establish strong links with community social service agencies so that the social, emotional and physical needs of students can be met

• Establish recruitment policies that will ensure existing school staff will be able to work with competent and dedicated colleagues. Specific strategies may include: forming interview teams that are comprised of school board members, parents, teaching staff and school-based administrators; a thorough check of applicants’ references and past work history (if applicable, applicants may be asked to provide references from community members at their last place of employment); an interview process that investigates applicants’ knowledge of historical and contemporary First Nations issues, explores applicants’ motivations for teaching in Native settings and invites the applicant to explain how they have created classrooms that reflect and respect their students’ culture.

• Allow educators to determine many of their own professional development needs

• Establish fair teacher contracts (parents and educators suggested that a fair contract consists of a one to two year probationary period followed by an offer of either a permanent or a five year contract)

• Provide salary levels and benefit packages that are either equal to or better than those offered by neighboring school systems

• Ensure that teaching duties are equitably distributed
- Foster healthy relationships between Native and non-Native school staff and this may involve acknowledging existing tensions and sensitively addressing the issues that are causing strained relationships
- Recruit experienced and trained administrators whenever possible
- Provide regular professional development opportunities for those administrators who may lack either experience or training
- Establish positive and informal lines of communication with individual teachers
- Provide formal and informal recognition of teacher efforts and accomplishments
- Respect and acknowledge teacher expertise by offering teachers opportunities to participate meaningfully in making decisions related to school-based programs
- Encourage and facilitate increased community involvement in the schools
- Establish links with other Native and non-Native school systems

School-Based Administration Responsibilities

While students provided minimal comments about school-based administrators, parents and educators identified that teachers depend upon their vice-principals and principals to create a supportive school environment. Based on parent and educator statements, school-based administrators can foster teacher success by assuming the following set of responsibilities:

- Possess a clear educational vision with a commitment to nurturing students’ sense of identity as First Nations individuals
- Develop a thorough knowledge and respect for the community
- Maintain an accessible and visible presence in the school
- Facilitate teacher orientation to the community
- Provide formal and informal recognition of teachers’ efforts and accomplishments
• Share decision-making powers with school staff
• Ensure that teacher workloads are equitably distributed
• Maintain up-to-date knowledge of developments in the field of education
• Develop links with Native and non-Native school systems
• Extend leadership skills by regularly engaging in professional development opportunities

Parent Responsibilities

Students, parents and educators all emphasized the important ways that parents can positively influence teachers’ daily work. According to participants’ statements, parents can provide support to teachers by assuming the following set of responsibilities:

• Provide teachers with as much information about children as possible
• Encourage children to assume responsibility for their learning
• Attend school functions
• Visit children’s classroom on a regular basis
• Provide teachers with regular encouragement and positive feedback
• Make teachers feel welcome in the community by greeting them, informing them about the community and inviting them to community events

Community Responsibilities

Students, parents and educators all stressed that community leaders and other members of the community can provide teachers with important support. Teachers and administrators suggested that extensive community involvement in the school would be of great benefit to students’ personal and cultural development. Based on participant
statements, community members can contribute to teacher success by assuming the following set of responsibilities:

- Attend school functions
- Share talents, skills and cultural knowledge with students and school staff
- Assist teachers in becoming informed about the community
- Make teachers feel welcome in the community by greeting them and inviting them to community events
- Acknowledge and thank teachers for their work

Responsibilities of Teachers' Friends and Families

Educators described the benefits of receiving guidance and support from their family and friends. According to the statements of educators, teachers’ friends and families can positively influence teachers’ daily work by assuming the following set of responsibilities:

- Demonstrate interest in teachers’ daily work
- Assume role of attentive listener
- Provide candid advice
- Recognize teachers’ efforts and accomplishments
- Be understanding of how teachers’ work can often interfere with personal commitments
- Become informed about the Native community
- Be willing to participate in school and community activities
Toward an Enriched Understanding of Teacher Success

In this section I describe how completing this study has transformed some of my prior understandings about teaching experiences in First Nations communities. I also describe how the findings of this study have caused me to ask new questions about teacher success in Native schools. Within this discussion, I identify areas for further research and relate specific findings to existing literature.

In many ways, the insights shared by students, parents and educators resonated with my own teaching experiences in Native settings. In Chapter 3 I explained that I had written an autobiographical paper, which featured an exploration of my own teaching experiences. In the paper I suggested that teacher success could be optimized if teachers, school-based administrators, local school boards and Native communities developed collaborative working relationships. In a general way, the results of this study confirmed several of my prior ideas about the factors that influence teachers' work in Native settings. At the same time, as I listened to and reflected on the views expressed by students, parents and educators, I found that my understanding of teacher success was extended and transformed. Individual participants introduced me to new subtleties and tensions that impact upon the daily work of those who teach in Native communities.

Exploring Teachers’ Lives

The statements offered by teachers and administrators indicate that each educator’s particular life experiences significantly informed their views about teaching in Native communities. For example, the majority of Native educators reported that family members encouraged and supported their decision to enter the field of teaching. Non-
Native educators explained that their parents, Native friends and university experiences were the major forces that shaped their views of Native people. Participants' statements indicate that it would be valuable for teacher training programs and Native school boards to provide prospective and practicing teachers with opportunities to explore how their personal histories may impact upon their teaching experiences. Giroux (cited in Middleton, 1992) argues:

Teaching must be viewed, in part, as an intensely personal affair. This suggests that prospective teachers be given the concepts and methods to delve into their own biographies, to look at the sedimented history they carry around, and to learn how one's cultural capital represents a dialectical interplay between private experience and history . . . [student teachers] must be given the opportunity to use and interpret their own experiences in a manner that reveals how the latter have been shaped and influenced by the dominant culture. Subjective awareness becomes the first step in transforming those experiences. (p. 19)

Research that features a detailed exploration of how teachers' life experiences inform their work in Native communities would make a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge concerning teacher success in Native settings.

As part of this study I was able to speak to a number of non-Native educators who had worked extensively in Native settings. Many of these educators discussed how their views and understandings of Native communities were transformed and enriched over the years. In their exploration of teachers' lives, Butt et al. (1992) describe how one teacher learned to work effectively in cross-cultural situations by living “the notion of teacher as learner, not only in her personal but also in her pedagogical life” (p. 86). There is a need for research that explores the evolution of non-Native educators' understandings of Native communities. Therefore, research that features a longitudinal study of the experiences of non-Native teachers who work in First Nations settings would be valuable.
Teachers and Their Colleagues

Many educators described the negative impact of working in a school environment that lacks collegiality. Research that explores the factors that influence school staff relationships would provide important information about how teamwork and collegiality can be developed and maintained in Native schools. In addition, as more Native educators are recruited by local band authorities, school boards must work to ensure that positive working relationships are established between Native and non-Native school staff. Therefore, there is also a need for research that offers a focused look at relationship dynamics between Native and non-Native school staff.

Impact of Historical, Social and Political Structures

A review of participants' statements indicates that a thorough exploration of the factors that contribute to teacher success requires an examination of the historical, social and political forces that impact upon the lives of educators and Native people. For example, all 30 participants emphasized that social problems in the Ermineskin community provide teachers, the local school board and community members with a set of ongoing challenges. Participants were concerned that many of these social problems will not be easily or quickly addressed. Therefore, teachers must be willing and able to work in an environment that asks them to move beyond the role of educator to that of a concerned care-giver.

This study has identified that if teachers are to work successfully in Native communities, several groups of people must work together to create an optimal teaching environment. Now that we know what teachers require, there is a need for research that
examines the needs of those institutions and groups of people who are responsible for
nurturing teacher success. For example, what resources do post-secondary institutions
require if they are to provide teacher training programs that will prepare educators for
working in First Nations communities? What are the factors that contribute to school
boards' abilities to provide teachers with job security, comprehensive orientation programs
and culturally appropriate teaching materials? It is evident that creating an environment
that supports and maintains teacher success in Native communities is a complex process
that is influenced by a variety of historical, social and political forces.

Limitations of the Study

Since this study uses a qualitative methodology, the primary limitations of this
study relate to issues of reliability and external and internal validity. These issues were
addressed by the design of the study and the type of data collection strategy used.

Reliability was enhanced by the use of a study design that makes the following
aspects of the research explicit: researcher role, social context, participant selection and
data collection and data analysis strategies. Reliability was also addressed by the use of
mechanically recorded data and verbatim accounts of transcripts. The description of
participants, the use of participants' language and the description of the Ermineskin
community also help to address the issues of external and internal validity.

Reflections on the Research Process

The wide scope of my research problem resulted in the collection of an enormous
amount of data. Since I chose to interview four different groups of people, I was forced
to present a small fragment of the knowledge and insights that participants shared with
me. For example, teachers and administrators talked extensively about the many enjoyable facets of teaching in Native communities. Yet, due to time and space constraints, I did not present this important aspect of educators’ lives.

One of this study’s methodological limitations was a direct result of my “spontaneous” sampling procedures during my fieldwork. Responding to teachers’ enthusiasm to participate in the study, I interviewed 12 teachers, while I only interviewed 6 administrators, 6 students and 6 parents. This sampling decision may have resulted in the privileging of educator perspectives in the final presentation of the study results.

I must also acknowledge that the final presentation of participant views is based upon my own interpretation of participant statements. Although participants were provided with an opportunity to review interview transcripts, they did not validate or comment on my analysis of their comments. At several points during the data analysis phase of the research I considered returning my analysis to the participants for their review. For the following reasons, I chose not to bring the analysis back to the participants: (1) returning the analysis to the participants would have been a “surprise” since I had not asked individuals if they would be willing to devote time to reviewing the analysis; (2) since I could not return to the field and meet individually with participants, I felt uncomfortable with “discussing” the analysis through the mail or over the telephone; and (3) I was unclear about how agreement over the final version would be reached if several participants voiced different views about the analysis. Would some participants’ views be privileged? I continue to experience ambivalence about this issue. I believe that an important component of conducting respectful research is to provide participants with an opportunity to comment on my analysis of their words.
Conducting this study has provided me with a glimpse of the many methodological and ethical issues that confront qualitative researchers. I look forward to exploring the literature and learning how other researchers have addressed those concerns that I have encountered in my own research.

Conclusion

One year after I began graduate studies at UBC, my brothers and I suffered a great personal loss; our mother died in the early hours of an August morning. I travelled to Hobbema for her wake, burial, and feast. Her wake was held at my eldest brother's home and throughout each of the days and nights before her burial a fire was kept burning to the south of my brother's house. My cousin, Johnny Crier, and several other men worked together to ensure that the embers of the fire remained strong. Sometimes, there would be several people gathered around the circle of flames; at other times, I saw a single person tending the fire.

Even when my mother and I were separated by several provinces, we remained close, often speaking to each other several times in one day. I had often thought of her death and how I would cope with it; I was sure that when the time came I would be overcome with grief. As I participated in the preparations for her burial and feast I was surprised by how calm and at peace I was. I believe that my tranquil state of mind was a direct result of watching family and friends working together to ensure that cultural protocols were followed. As ceremonies were conducted and sacred fires protected, I gained an appreciation for the strengthening and nurturing power that can be gained from a collective notion of care.
The title of this study features the phrase “fanning the teacher fire” and I have used these words as a metaphor for my interpretation of participants’ statements. During the process of conducting this study, I listened to individuals talk about the various conditions that must be in place if teachers are to work successfully in First Nations settings. Participants explained that many groups of people are responsible for contributing to the creation of an environment that will allow teachers to do their best work. In my own mind, I envision this “optimal environment” as a place where post-secondary institutions, educators, teachers’ friends, teachers’ families and First Nations communities gather together and work to ensure that the flames of teacher fires are strengthened, nurtured and maintained.
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APPENDIX 1

STUDENT INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

The sequence and wording of the following interview questions were modified according to each student’s response to the interview process.

1. Remembering back to your first two to three years of school, how did you feel about school in general?

2. What were the junior high years like for you at school?

3. You've recently graduated from high school, what were those last three years of school like?

4. How do you think your ideas about school and education have changed over the years?

5. Looking back at all of your years in school, describe a teacher or teachers who were able to affect your life in a positive way. How did they do it?

6. On the other side of the coin, did you have some teachers that you would describe as being ineffective? Describe these teachers.

7. Did you find any difference between Native and non-Native teachers? If so, describe these differences.

8. Referring back to the teachers in your life, in what ways do you think your relationships with them influenced your views and ideas about education in general?

9. What type of skills do you think are important for a teacher to have if they wish to teach successfully in your community?

10. If you were trying to encourage a specific teacher to come and work in your community, how would you describe the benefits that the teacher would gain by teaching in Ermineskin schools?

11. What kind of challenges do you think teachers may face who work in your community?

12. What type of support do you think teachers need if they are to work successfully in the Ermineskin community?

13. What advice would you give to non-Native teachers who are considering teaching in your community?

14. What do you think your community can do to keep "good" teachers in their schools?
APPENDIX 2

PARENT INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

The sequence and wording of the following interview questions were modified according to each parent’s response to the interview process.

1. If you can remember back to when you sent your first child to school for the first time. What was that experience like?

2. Looking back at your children’s’ years in school, could you describe some of the things that you have appreciated about your children’s teachers?

3. In contrast, could you describe some things that teachers may have done that you did not approve of?

4. What type of post-secondary training would you like teachers to have before they come to teach in your community?

5. What type of skills do you think are important for a teacher to have if they wish to teach successfully in your community?

6. Teachers are often encouraged to make an effort to "get to know the community." In your opinion, how can teachers get to know the community in a respectful manner.

7. Your children have had both Native and non-Native teachers. Have you noticed any difference in the way Native and non-Native teachers have interacted with your children?

8. What are some suggestions that you would give to non-Native teachers who want to teach in your community?

9. What type of support do you think teachers need from school-based administration -- their principals and vice-principals?

10. What type of support do you think teachers need from the parents of their students?

11. What type of support do you think teachers need from the community in general?

12. What do you think your school board and other Native school boards can do to keep their good teachers?

13. What steps do you think Miyo Wahkohtowin is taking to try and keep good teachers in your schools?
APPENDIX 3

NON-NATIVE TEACHER INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

The sequence and wording of the following interview questions were modified according to each teacher's response to the interview process.

1. Before your first teaching experience in a Native community, what type of contact had you had with Native people? What knowledge did you have about Native people?

2. Can you remember back to your first teaching experience at a Native school? What was it that made you decide to apply for a teaching position in that particular Native community?

3. What were your feelings about being a non-Native teacher going to teach in a Native community? What were some of the thoughts and feelings that you had as you prepared for that first day of school?

4. During your years of teaching in the Ermineskin community, what have been some of the highlights of teaching in this setting?

5. During your years of teaching in this community, what have been some of the most memorable challenges that you have faced?

6. Looking back at all of your teaching experiences in Native communities, how have your ideas about Native people changed or developed?

7. You have been teaching for several years now. Could you describe some of your colleagues that you think have been able to teach successfully in Native communities?

8. Looking at yourself as a teacher, what are some of the goals that you try to set for yourself in terms of trying to meet the needs of your students?

9. What advice would you give to non-Native teachers that are considering teaching in the Ermineskin community?

10. How do you think post-secondary institutions can prepare teachers for working in Native communities?

11. During your time in the Ermineskin community, what or who have been the sources of your inspiration, support and encouragement?

12. What type of working environment do you need in order to be able to maintain your own standards of effective teaching?

13. Following up on the last question, what type of support do you presently receive from your school administrators that helps you in your work as a teacher?
14. What type of support do you presently receive from the community that helps you in your work as a teacher?

15. What type of support do you think teachers who work in Native communities need from their families and friends?

16. What do you think Native communities and Native school boards can do to keep their good teachers?

17. If you had an opportunity to design your dream First Nations school - this would be a place that you would love to work, what would this school and community look like?
APPENDIX 4

NATIVE TEACHER INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

The sequence and wording of the following interview questions were modified according to each teacher's response to the interview process.

1. I'm interested in how you came about deciding to become a teacher. Can you describe how and why you made that decision?

2. If you can remember back to your first year of teaching, how did you feel as you were preparing for your first year in the classroom?

3. During your years of teaching in the Ermineskin community, what have been some of the highlights of teaching in this setting?

4. During your years of teaching in this community, what have been some of the most memorable challenges that you have faced?

5. You have been teaching for several years now. Could you describe some of your colleagues that you think have been able to teach successfully in Native communities.

6. Looking at yourself as a teacher, what are some of the goals that you try to set for yourself in terms of trying to meet the needs of your students?

7. What advice would you give to non-Native teachers that are considering teaching in the Ermineskin community?

8. During your time in the Ermineskin community, what or who have been the sources of your inspiration, support and encouragement?

9. What type of working environment do you need in order to be able to maintain your own standards of effective teaching?

10. Following up on the last question, what type of support do you presently receive from your school administrators that helps you in your work as a teacher?

11. What type of support do you presently receive from the community that helps you in your work as a teacher?

12. What do you think Native communities and Native school boards can do to keep their good teachers?

13. If you had an opportunity to design your dream First Nations school -- this would be a place where you would love to work, what would this school and community look like?
APPENDIX 5

NON-NATIVE ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

The sequence and wording of the following interview questions were modified according to each administrator's response to the interview process.

Teaching Years:

1. Before your first teaching experience in a Native community, what type of contact had you had with Native people? What type of knowledge did you have about Native people?

2. I'm interested in how you came about deciding to teach in a Native community. Can you describe how and why you made that decision?

3. If you can remember back to your first year of teaching in a Native community, how did you prepare yourself for working in a First Nations setting?

4. During your years as a classroom teacher in Native communities, what were some of your most positive or successful experiences?

5. Again, looking back at your experience as a classroom teacher, what were some of the most memorable challenges that you faced as you taught in Native communities?

Administration Years:

1. Can you describe how you came about deciding to leave the classroom and to enter into the field of administration?

2. As an administrator, what types of qualities do you appreciate most in teachers that work in your school? For example, when you are interviewing prospective teachers for your school, what are the criteria that you use to determine whether or not you will offer an individual a teaching contract?

3. Looking back at your teaching and administrative years together, can you describe the most effective teachers that you have ever worked with. Why were they so successful?

4. In contrast, how would you describe those teachers who have not been able to work successfully in Native communities?

5. How is effective teaching in a Native setting different from effective teaching in a non-Native setting?

6. You have worked with both Native and non-Native teachers, have you seen any differences in teaching styles between effective Native and non-Native teachers?
7. Following up with the last question, what advice would you give to non-Native teachers who are considering working in this community?

8. What type of working environment do you think teachers need in order to work successfully in this particular community?

9. What type of working environment do you think administrators need in order to work successfully in Ermineskin schools?

10. What factors do you think make it challenging to teach successfully in this particular community?

11. What factors do you think it make it a pleasure to teach in this community?

12. How can school-based administration provide an environment where successful teaching behaviours are encouraged and supported?

13. Based on your experience and observations, how does the Miyo Wahkohtowin Community Education Authority attempt to provide an environment that nurtures and supports successful teaching behaviours?

14. How do you think Native communities, in general, can sustain and support effective teaching behaviours?

15. Keeping in mind those teachers on your staff that you think are successful -- those teachers that you want to keep -- if you could develop a school that would meet their needs - in other words, a school that they would love to teach in, what would this school look like? What role would the community play in this "ideal" situation?
APPENDIX 6

NATIVE ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

The sequence and wording of the following interview questions were modified according to each administrator’s response to the interview process.

Teaching Years:

1. I'm interested in how you came about deciding to become a teacher. Can you describe how and why you made that decision?

2. If you can remember back to your first year of teaching, how did you feel as you were preparing for your first year in the classroom?

3. During your years as a classroom teacher, what were some of your most happiest or most successful experiences? What aspects of teaching did you enjoy the most?

4. Again, looking back at your experience as a classroom teacher, what were some of the most memorable challenges that you faced?

Administration Years:

1. Can you describe how you came about deciding to leave the classroom to enter the field of administration?

2. As an administrator, what types of qualities do you appreciate most in teachers that work in your school? For example, when you are interviewing prospective teachers for your school, what are the criteria that you use to determine whether or not you will offer an individual a teaching contract?

3. Looking back at your teaching and administrative years together, can you describe the most effective teachers that you have ever worked with. Why were they so successful?

4. In contrast, how would you describe those teachers who have not been able to work successfully in Native communities?

5. How does effective teaching in a non-Native setting differ from effective teaching in a Native community?

6. You have worked with both Native and non-Native teachers, have you seen any differences in teaching styles between effective Native and non-Native teachers?

7. Following up with the last question, what advice would you give to non-Native teachers who are considering working in this community? Would you give different advice to Native teachers who were considering working in this community?
8. What type of working environment do you think teachers need in order to work successfully in this particular community?

9. What type of working environment do you think administrators need in order to work successfully in Ermineskin schools?

10. What factors do you think make it a pleasure to teach in this community?

11. What factors do you think make it challenging to teach successfully in this community?

12. How can school-based administration provide an environment where successful teaching behaviours are encouraged and supported?

13. Based on your experience and observations, how does the Miyo Wahkohtowin Community Education Authority attempt to provide an environment that nurtures and supports successful teaching behaviours?

14. How do you think Native communities, in general, can sustain and support effective teaching behaviours?

15. Keeping in mind those teachers on your staff that you think are successful -- those teachers that you want to keep -- if you could develop a school that would meet their needs -- in other words, a school that they would love to teach in, what would this school look like? What role would the community play in this "ideal" situation?
March 6, 1995

Dear

I plan to conduct a research project in the Ermineskin community as part of my graduate studies at the University of British Columbia. The name of the study is "Teaching Successfully in First Nations Settings: An Exploration of the Factors That Contribute to the Success of Teachers in First Nations Communities." The study is designed to increase understanding of what people believe are the most important elements of successful teaching practices in First Nations settings. It is anticipated that the results of the study will assist the Miyo Wahkohtowin Education Authority to prepare personnel practices that will result in the identification, recruitment and retention of teachers who will successfully meet the educational needs of the Ermineskin community. The knowledge gained from the study may also assist other First Nations School Boards in their attempts to develop quality educational systems for their communities.

The selection of the Ermineskin community as the setting for my research is based on my personal and professional interests. My late mother, Harriette Tootoosis (nee Crier) was originally from the Samson Band and I grew up in the Hobbema area. In addition, over the last ten years, I have worked in the field of native education as a social worker and as a teacher. For many of the communities I have worked in I have noticed that recruiting and retaining effective teachers is a primary concern. First Nations communities want teachers who are able to work successfully with native children, parents and other community members. However, the question remains: what are the factors that lead to teacher success in native communities? The research project will ask recent high school graduates, parents, school board members, teachers and school administrators to identify and describe those factors they believe contribute most to successful teaching in First Nations settings. I believe that your experiences, ideas and suggestions will provide valuable insights into this question. I would like to invite you to take part in this study by participating in an interview.

Page 1 of 4
INTERVIEW INFORMATION

Time Required? During a recent pilot project, similar interviews ranged in length from one hour to one hour and thirty minutes. However, the length of the interview will certainly be based upon the amount of time you are able to contribute to the project.

When? Sometime during the month of March 1995.

Where? Wherever is most convenient for you (home, office, school, restaurant, etc.).

Consent Form? I have enclosed a copy of the consent form which you can look over now and then we'll review it together before the interview takes place.

Tape Recorder? I would like to tape record our interview so that I don't have to rely solely on my notes or memory. You will have the option to ask me to turn off the recorder at any time and to make comments that are "off the record". However, you may certainly request that the interview not be tape recorded.

Tape Transcripts? You will have an opportunity to review a transcript of the tape and provide me with any comments you might have about the interview. You may also ask that parts of the transcript not be used in the research.

Confidentiality? As mentioned in the covering letter, all information will be kept confidential during the study. Only you and I will have access to the interview transcripts and tapes. When I write the study, individual participants will not be identified.

Types of Questions? The questions will vary according to your own experiences and will be loosely organized around the following topics:

- *What types of skills do you think are important for a teacher to have if they wish to teach successfully in a Native community?*

- *Describe a teacher(s) who you think has taught successfully in a First Nations setting. Why was this teacher so successful?*

- *What type of support do you think teachers need in order to be as successful as possible in a First Nations community?*

- *What advice would you give to non-Native teachers who are considering teaching in a First Nations community?*

- *What do you think First Nations communities and school boards can do to keep "good" teachers in their schools?*

Although I do have certain questions that I would like to ask you, I anticipate that our conversation will be largely open-ended.

I hope that you will be willing to share some of your knowledge, experiences and ideas with me. If so, please fill out the attached form and send it back in the enclosed envelope as soon as possible. You may also call me at (604) 264-5166. After March 5, 1995 you may reach me at 585-4013.

THANK YOU
CONSENT FORM

I __________________ agree to be interviewed by Jeanette Villeneuve for the study entitled "Teaching Successfully in First Nations Settings: An Exploration of the Factors That Contribute to the Success of Teachers in First Nations Communities" under the following conditions:

1. I may refuse to answer any question asked by the interviewer, and/or stop the interview at any time, without prejudice or further obligation.

2. I may make specific comments during the interview as "off the record".

3. The interview will be taped and transcribed (or notes will be taken by the interviewer). I can request a copy of the tape and transcription, (or the notes), and I will have the right to correct inaccuracies within a time frame to be agreed upon with Jeanette Villeneuve. I may also request that parts of the transcript not be used in the research.

4. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time. If I wish to withdraw from the study, all references to me will be deleted from the research notes. In addition the interview transcripts, tapes and the computer disk will be returned to me or destroyed. My decision to refuse to participate or withdraw at any time from the study will not affect any other opportunities available to me at the University of British Columbia.

5. I understand that the study will keep my identity confidential. I understand that I will be provided with a pseudonym and I will not be written about in ways that might identify me to other people.

6. The interview material may be used by Jeanette Villeneuve in her M.A. thesis and in associated academic publications.

7. I understand that if I have any questions concerning my involvement in the research project, I may contact Jeanette Villeneuve in Hobbema at (403) 585-4013 or in Vancouver at (604) 264-5166. I understand that I may also contact Jeanette Villeneuve's Faculty Advisor, Dr. Frank Echols, at (604) 822-5759.

8. I understand that I will receive a copy of this form for my own records.

Signed ___________________________ (interview participant)

Date ___________________________