IMPROVING EDUCATION THROUGH DIALOGUE AND ORAL TRADITION: BRIDGING COLONIZATION AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OKANAGAN STUDENTS, PARENTS, COMMUNITY AND NON-ABORIGINAL SCHOOL LEADERS

by

MARK MACDOUGALL EDWARDS

B. A., Carleton University, 1984
M.T.S., The Vancouver School of Theology, 1989

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ABSTRACT

This study is a response to the inadequacy of education processes and outcomes for Aboriginal students, and particularly Okanagan students. It builds on the premise that the failure of mainstream Canadian schools to meet the educational needs of Okanagan students is a consequence of the distance between schools and community created by colonization and cultural difference.

This study proposed to find ways to bridge this distance. It takes its initial insight from a process in which Okanagan students, families, and Elders successfully connected with non-Aboriginal educators. From this process emerged the recognition of the importance of understanding, relationships, and communication processes for bridging distance. This historic process further induced the development of a theory based upon conceptions of dialogue—Gadamer (2002), Buber (1970), and Freire (2000)—and Aboriginal oral traditions—as theorized by Archibald (1997), Sterling (1997), Lightning (1992), Armstrong (1996), and Hart (1997). The study’s purposes were two-fold: use a dialogic process to determine how to improve understanding, relationship, and communication between Okanagan students, families, community and non-Aboriginal school leaders; and enact and test the induced theory by implementing it as research method.

Thirty-five volunteers, including Okanagan students, parents, educators, Aboriginal educators, and non-Aboriginal educators, participated in two interview-conversations followed by conversations for feedback on representations of their meanings in subsequent study drafts.
The study enabled remarkable conversations and a concomitant growth of understanding and relationships. The enacted theory worked, and was augmented by significant discoveries regarding shared emancipatory purpose and participant agency resulting in the revised PURC-A framework. Participants’ perspectives on improving understanding, relationships, and communication processes included deeper understanding of Okanagan culture, history, and tradition, greater knowledge of the situations of Okanagan students and families, and commitment to the self-work necessary to become aware of the prejudices that constitute one’s consciousness. Respect and trust were found essential. Many suggestions for improving the education of Okanagan students emerged.

With courage, sincerity, and passion, participants in this study make public silenced criticisms, perspectives, and dreams. Their voices—this study—constitute a provocative and generative moment in the on-going transformative conversation that will improve education for Okanagan students.
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PREFACE

At the heart of this study are a series of private dialogues with people deeply concerned to improve the lives of Okanagan students. We all knew that you would be joining our dialogue, that you would read our words someday. Yet, the making public of these private conversations is not without risk and anxiety. Our context holds historic antagonisms and antipathies that remind us of the possibility of harm. So, I would ask that you join us, if you can, in the spirit of dialogue that allowed us to open up to each other and share the narratives and truths that unfold in these pages. Our conversations were marked by deep respect and care for one another, acknowledgement of our differences, and a passionate commitment to our shared purposes: improving understanding, relationships, communication processes between Okanagan students, families, community and non-Aboriginal educators; and ultimately improving the educational processes of Okanagan students. Please join us.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study is the result of the remarkable collaboration of 35 participants who gave extensively of their time, and with courage and sincerity shared of their lives and voiced their perspectives. To each of you I turn and acknowledge your kindness, your trust, and your faith that together we could create something that would make a difference for Okanagan students. I acknowledge that my words here do not do justice to the strength of your thinking nor the depth of your wisdom; there is much more that needs to be said. I look forward to advancing our conversations and working together in the years ahead.

I wish to acknowledge the Band and the School District for their permission to conduct this study. Their gracious support, personified by their respective representatives, facilitated the process of this study tremendously.

There were many whose friendship carried me across the years of this work: John, Michael, Anish, Laurie, Erica, Bob, Jennifer, Bill, Pat, Eric, Melanie, Bernie, Jeff, Carol, Corine. Thank you each of you for your care and for inspiring me with your examples and your hopes for this work.

The academic journey that has culminated in this dissertation was profoundly guided by Dr. Jo-ann Archibald, Dr. David Coulter, and Dr. Carolyn Shields. This was a difficult journey; I was not the easiest of students. I am grateful to you for your thoughtful and challenging guidance, your knowledge and expertise, and ultimately for not giving up.

Finally I turn to my family and acknowledge your tremendous sacrifices and your love. I could not have done this without you. But this work has taken our time, taken from our lives together. Was it worth it? I hope one day we may say yes.
DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to Okanagan students, families, communities,
and the educators who serve them.
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

My name is Mark MacDougall Edwards. My ancestors came to what became Canada between 1776 and 1880 from the United States as loyalists, from Scotland, from Ireland, from England, and the latest as immigrants from Germany. My ancestors thrived in this land and took pride in the country they created with others. My ancestors thus share in the responsibility for the policies and the practices that impoverished the Aboriginal Peoples in Canada, that seized territory, confined Aboriginal Peoples to economically inadequate Reservations, sought to destroy Aboriginal cultures, and assimilate Aboriginal Peoples into the British/European civilization.

I was born in the traditional territory of the Blackfoot. I was raised in the territory of the Musqueam and the Okanagan. I moved my young family back to the territory of the Okanagan to farm and to begin a teaching career. Our farm bordered on the Reserve of the Okanagan people who joined me in this study. We were neighbours, and we depended on each other as country neighbours will do. The Okanagan were excluded from the creek, the forest, the fields and the abundant wildlife of our farm in about 1896 to make way for settlers.

I loved teaching in high school. Being vice principal at Beta secondary was one of the most challenging, rewarding, frustrating, fulfilling things I have ever done. We worked hard and as a staff we were proud of our school. About 36% of Aboriginal students graduated while I was working there.

I engaged in this study because I thought my experience and position as a former administrator might be of use to the Okanagan students, families and community who were
my neighbours, and of use to the educators and leaders of the school district who were my colleagues. I have high regard for all of these people, and I thought that working together we might be able to make a significant difference for Okanagan children. I hypothesized that my learning, coming from my White, mostly Anglo Canadian background, would be useful to other educators who share the same cultural location, and to the Aboriginal students whom they serve. I also engaged in this study because my ancestors have left a debt unpaid.

**A Need for Change**

That educational processes must improve for Okanagan students, and Aboriginal students in British Columbia and Canada generally is well documented. Most educators point to extremely low graduation rates to make this point. In British Columbia for the year 2003/2004, 46% of self-declared Aboriginal students graduated within six years of entering high school, and the average for the previous five years was 43% (BC Ministry of Education, 2005). These figures are well below the provincial average of 80%. The numbers of Aboriginal students successfully completing upper level academic courses such as Math, Biology, or English emphasizes this disparity. One Aboriginal student for every five non-Aboriginal students successfully completed Math 12 (BC Ministry of Education, 2005).\(^1\) One Aboriginal student for every 2.7 non-Aboriginal students successfully completed Biology 12 (BC Ministry of Education, 2005).\(^2\)

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1. This statistic is derived from taking the province wide participation rates and success rates of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students over the period 1999/2000-2003/2004, and averaging these respective rates over the 5 year period. 8% of Aboriginal students attempted math 12 and 6% of Aboriginal students successfully completed this course during this period. 35% of Non-Aboriginal students attempted math 12 and 30% successfully completed it.

2. 12.4% of Aboriginal students attempted Biology 12 with 8.5% successfully completing it. 29% of non-Aboriginal students attempted this course with 23% successfully completing it. Again these are province-wide averages over 5 years.
students successfully completed English 12 (BC Ministry of Education, 2005).\textsuperscript{3} If the something near 50\% of all Aboriginal students already excluded from these ratios (43\% graduate versus 80\% of non-Aboriginal students) are included, the ratios become one Aboriginal student succeeds for every nine non-Aboriginal students in Math, for every five in Biology, and for every 3.4 in English. In British Columbia, K – 12 public schools are not succeeding with Aboriginal students.

In the school district of our study, the numbers tell a slightly more positive story, one that shows an improving trend over the past five years. In 1999/2000 only 40\% of Aboriginal students graduated, while in 2003/2004 55\% did. The five-year average was 53\%, well above the provincial average (School District Report, 2006). The five-year average over the same period for non-Aboriginal students was 85\%. However the ratio of Aboriginal students completing English 12, 1 to 3.1, was significantly lower than the provincial average. The math completion rate (4.7\%) was also below the provincial average, though the ratio to non-Aboriginal students was the same. When one factors in the improved graduation rates, and therefore, the greater number of Aboriginal students participating in school, one Aboriginal student for every 4.7 non-Aboriginal students completes English 12, and one for every 6.4 completes Math 12. These figures would indicate greater success in keeping Aboriginal students in school, but a roughly similar picture (worse in English, better in Math) when considering academic achievement. But clearly, there is much work yet to do.

There are other indicators that educational processes have been failing Aboriginal students. An Aboriginal person in Canada is, proportionally, more likely to commit suicide (Centre for Suicide Prevention, 2003; Chandler, 1998; Coulthard, 1999; RCAP, 1995, White

\textsuperscript{3} 38.8\% of Aboriginal students attempted English 12 with 35.4\% completing it. 68.6\% of non-Aboriginal students attempted English 12 with 63\% completing it. Again these are province-wide averages over 5 years.
& Rouse, 1997), more likely to be unemployed (RCAP, 1996), less likely to attend post-secondary education (RCAP, 1996), more likely to experience poor health, more likely to live in poverty (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2001), and more likely to commit a crime or be the victim of crime than a person from any other sector of the Canadian population (Brzozowski, et al., 2006; Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2001). I take these facts as indicative that the educational processes available to Aboriginal children in British Columbia are not working well.

And there are still other indicators. Aboriginal languages continue to decline with several teetering on extinction (Battiste, 2001; RCAP, 1996; Nicholas, 2001). Nicholas (2001) observes that this decline has accelerated in the past 30 years even with the call for a focus on First Nations control of education and a commitment to competence in Aboriginal cultures and mainstream society (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972; RCAP, 1996). Along with the decline of languages there is an increasing sense of urgency among Aboriginal Peoples to connect First Nations children with their culture (Battiste, 2000; Nicholas, 2001; RCAP, 1996). The failure to support the sustainability of First Nations cultures and communities is a further indictment of the educational processes provided to Aboriginal children.

In summary, poor outcomes in public schools, unhealthy and impoverished personal life chances, and weak competency development for participation in Indigenous cultures, all are indicative of a need to improve educational processes for Aboriginal children.
Why Public Schools Fail Aboriginal Students

Education must affirm Aboriginal people as members of historical nations with distinctive cultures, while equipping them to reach out and participate in a global society. The authentic self-expression of Aboriginal people, as individuals and collectivities, must be heard in councils and public media and seen in history books, art galleries and on ceremonial occasions, signaling that the phase of displacement and denial of their presence in Canada has been put behind us forever. (RCAP, 1996, p. 2)

I submit that the failure of public schools to provide appropriate educational processes for Aboriginal students comes down to the public education system's failure to engage two interrelated but distinct realities: the genuine differences between Western and Aboriginal cultures, and the historical and on-going colonization of First Nations Peoples by Western, and specifically Canadian and British Columbian societies.

Indigenous Peoples in North America, or “Turtle Island” (Mitchell, 1998), had been flourishing societies for millennia before contact with Europeans (RCAP, 1996). Such an ancient history developed complex knowledge and practices that enabled survival and cultural continuance across hundreds of generations. It should be no great surprise then that Indigenous Peoples evolved distinct worldviews and cultures different from European or Western Peoples (Alfred, 1999; Battiste, 2000; Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Brown, 2004; Cajete, 2000; Cohen, 1998; Hampton, 1995; Henderson, 2000; RCAP, 1996; Smith, 1999; Sterling, 1997). This is certainly true of the Okanagan People (Armstrong, 1996; Cohen, 1998; Carstens, 1991; Louis, 2002; Maracle, 1994; Teit & Boas, 1973). Indigenous worldviews are manifested in oral tradition, language, culture, values, economy, epistemology, spirituality—in short in all aspects of human being/living. The knowledges and practices of these ways of being have been generally absent from K – 12 education.4

4 This remains true even after the Royal Commission on Education in 1988 called for a dramatic change in educational processes for Aboriginal students (1988). However, it is important to acknowledge that several steps were made from 1991-1996 to begin to address this deficit. These included the institution of Aboriginal targeted funding, the development of a mandatory First Nations unit in grade 4, and the development of First
The absence of these knowledges and practices is a consequence of the second reality which schools have failed to appropriately engage: the historical and on-going colonization of Aboriginal Peoples by Canadian society. It was the intended policy of Canadian governments from Confederation to at least the 1969 federal White Paper to assimilate First Nations people (RCAP, 1996; Milloy, 1999; Miller, 1996). John A. MacDonald announced that it would be his governments’ goal to “do away with the tribal system, and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the inhabitants of the Dominion” (RCAP, 1996d, Policies of Domination and Assimilation). Of the first Indian Act (1876), the Department of Interior Annual Report noted:

Our Indian legislation generally rests on the principle that the Aborigines are to be kept in a condition of tutelage and treated as wards or children of the state... It is clearly our wisdom and our duty, through education and other means, to prepare him for a higher civilization by encouraging him to assume the privileges and responsibilities of full citizenship (Report on RCAP, 1996d, Policies of Domination and Assimilation).

“Full citizenship” did not mean remaining Aboriginal. The Indian Act(s) (1876, 1880, 1884), ostensibly created to protect the rights of Aboriginal peoples, established the state’s legal authority and were used as means of control.

This policy was built on the racist premise that Europeans were superior to Aboriginal people (Francis, 1997; Milloy, 1999; Willinsky, 1998). British Columbia premier Smithe reflected this prejudice clearly when he stated to a meeting of Nisga’a and Tsimishian chiefs

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5 Assimilate and colonize are simple words whose devastating meanings can be missed in their innocuousness. They represent a vast spectrum of practices and actions—aggressive and passive, overt and covert, violent and pacifying—all intended to erase Aboriginal Peoples and their culture and that left no aspect of an Aboriginal person’s collective or personal lifeworlds unaffected. “Assimilate” and “colonize” entail domination, subjugation, oppression—all justified by racist notions of superiority.
in 1887 “When the whites first came among you, you were little better than the wild beasts of the field.” (Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, 1993, p. 3).

Education was the primary instrument of this policy through residential schools (Miller, 1996; Milloy, 1999; RCAP, 1996), through educational programs set up to educate for inequality (Barman, 2003) and through schools’ de facto enactment of assimilation via “cognitive imperialism” (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Battiste, 2000) and displacement (if only Eurocentric knowledges and practices are taught, and if only these are deemed important, eventually Aboriginal knowledges and practices will become irrelevant to children). The intent and the effect of Canadian education processes on Aboriginal Peoples has been described as “cultural genocide” (RCAP, 1996). The violence inflicted on persons and families by educational processes that forcibly took children from parents beginning at age five for a period of ten months at a time, which instilled a profound sense of inferiority in all, and which brutally destroyed the well-being of many, is a matter of public record (Ing, 2000; Miller, 1996; Milloy, 1999; RCAP, 1996; Secwepemc Cultural Society, 2000). It is remarkable that Aboriginal Peoples continue to exist and is testament to their resilience, resistance and adaptation (Christian, 2000; Haig-Brown, 1988, 1996; Secwepemc Cultural Society, 2000).

It is also remarkable that non-Aboriginal Canadian society has remained, until very recently (taking the first minister’s meeting of October, 2005 as testament to a growing public awareness), quite ignorant of Aboriginal Peoples and of the racism which has guided Canadian policy making since Confederation. This ignorance certainly may, in part, be attributed to an educational system that provided history and current events only from the colonizer’s perspective (Francis, 1997), and provided little knowledge of Aboriginal People
But further, as legal historian Constance Backhouse (1999) noted, in Canada racism has been hidden by a “stupefying innocence” and a successful national “mythology of racelessness” (1999, p. 14). Combine these with the unabashed sense of entitlement⁶ that accrued to all who were indoctrinated into the master narratives of British superiority and the grandness of the British Empire (Francis, 1997), or the supremacy of Eurocentric science and technology that somehow imparted cultural superiority (Battiste, 2000), and one has some basis to understand Backhouse’s observation that “the use of racial hierarchy to foster privilege and maintain subordination is remarkably similar across past decades” (1999, p. 11). The ignorance of this racist discourse amongst non-Aboriginal Canadians, even as we (I include myself in this) enact it, is a significant part of why public schools have failed to engage Aboriginal culture, or to engage the effects of 150 years of attempted assimilation.

In 1972 the National Indian Brotherhood stated categorically that education must change. Indian Control of Indian Education (1972) articulated a new vision of education that would counter the oppressive, colonizing educational practices of the previous hundred years and revitalize Aboriginal cultures. The Royal Commission (1996) re-iterated this vision:

They want education to prepare them to participate fully in the economic life of their communities and in Canadian society. But this is only part of their vision. Presenters told us that education must develop children and youth as Aboriginal citizens, linguistically and culturally competent to assume the responsibilities of their nations. Youth that emerge from school must be grounded in a strong, positive Aboriginal identity. Consistent with Aboriginal traditions, education must develop the whole child intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically. (p. 1)

This vision poses the challenge for schools set out at the start of this section most clearly: find a way to move beyond the racist experiences of 130 plus years of colonizing Canadian education and bring to life in each Aboriginal child his or her respective, distinct culture. And simultaneously, prepare students to “participate fully in the economic life of their

⁶George Frederickson (1997) refers to this sense of entitlement as the “hardcore of racism” because this sense of entitlement legitimized the sense of superiority over others no matter what the basis for discriminating.
communities and in Canadian society.” Importantly for public schools, this vision expresses a fundamental tension: Aboriginal students must be able to participate fully in both Aboriginal and Canadian societies. Not either/or, but both. In order to achieve this vision, which I believe is foundational to improving educational processes for Aboriginal students, First Nations communities, families, and students and non-Aboriginal educators must find ways to work together to mutually redefine education.

**A Basis for Change—Understanding, Relationships, and Communication**

Non-Aboriginal ignorance of cultural difference and colonization distance public schools from Aboriginal communities. Generations of negative experiences with schooling have further distanced Aboriginal Peoples limiting their effective knowledge of school systems. There is a need for greater understanding between non-Aboriginal educators and Aboriginal Peoples, if they are to work together. Relations have been corrupted by racism, assumptions of superiority/inferiority, exclusion, oppression, and economic destitution. New relations are needed. Historically, non-Aboriginal society and schools have communicated what works for them without hearing the Aboriginal response. Schools have communicated what is good for Aboriginal students. One-way communication processes have worked to strengthen or maintain ignorance and exclusion. Communication processes must also change.

Considering understanding, relationships, and communication as the basis for change in this context arose from an experience with Okanagan families and educators while working as a vice-principal at Beta secondary. My early reflections on this experience led

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7 Beta is a pseudonym for the secondary school of this study. The school had a student population of about 900. 6–7% are Okanagan students. Alpha is a pseudonym for the elementary school of this study. Alpha had a student population of about 230 students, and approximately 24% are Okanagan students (2003 conversation
me to theorize that it was its dialogic nature that enabled a successful bridging across colonization and cultural difference. When I thought about taking this idea back to the community to investigate this further, my research into dialogue led me to believe that particular sorts of understanding, relationship and communication were essential dimensions constitutive of dialogic events. I then found support for these themes, though not necessarily together, in the Aboriginal change literature (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; National Indian Brotherhood, 1972; RCAP, 1996; Smith, 1999), and in the leadership and school leadership literature (Donaldson, 2001; Fullan, 1999, 2001; Gardner, 1990; Greenleaf, 1991; Schein, 1992; Senge, 1990). Thus, I proposed raising three primary questions with study participants: What would improve communication? What would improve understanding? What would improve working relationships? The title of the research project that I proposed to participants stated just this. It was: Improving Communication, Understanding, and Working Relationships between Okanagan Students, Parents, Community and non-Aboriginal School Leaders. Answers to these questions, I conjectured, would give a strong basis for working together for change. Thus seeking answers to these questions became one of the purposes of this study. A second purpose was to enact and test the very theory proposed to improve communication, understanding, and relationships by implementing it as research method. If participants and I were indeed able to improve communication, understanding, and relationships between us, the process that enabled this to occur would itself be an important discovery.

The conversations that resulted with Okanagan students, parents, educators, Aboriginal educators, and non-Aboriginal school leaders and school educators were

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8 I will elaborate on this further in Chapter 2.
remarkable. I have organized the major themes of these conversations into the four “data” chapters. Chapter four presents Okanagan student perspectives. Chapter five presents Okanagan parent perspectives. Chapter six presents the perspectives of Okanagan and Aboriginal educators. Chapter seven presents the perspectives of non-Aboriginal school leaders and educators. Their length and detail, though not initially intended, result from an important discovery.

In the process of these conversations, Aboriginal oral tradition and world views became increasingly obvious as very significant to any bridging process. As a consequence, the literature review, which was drafted after the four data chapters were completed, reflects a further engagement with Aboriginal oral tradition. This helped give needed research and theoretical context to the findings, and to the unanticipated length of the study. Of particular note, was the realization that the narratives shared by Okanagan participants were inherently of value to a community that is just beginning to gather its understandings of education, and were equally valuable for a non-Aboriginal community that is just beginning to open itself to understanding the lived experience of Okanagan people. The depth and range of narratives were a remarkable and unexpected outcome of our shared inquiry about improving communication, understanding, and relationships.

Another unexpected outcome was the clear articulation of a third purpose for the study by participants as the study progressed. Although our stated purpose was to improve communication, understanding and relationships with a hoped outcome of improving education for Okanagan students, many Okanagan participants were clearly in the study to improve educational processes for Okanagan students and they thought communication, understanding and relationships were important too. Thus, the perspectives chapters include
participants’ thoughtful views on how the educational processes of Okanagan students may be improved, as well as on how communication, understanding, and relationships may be improved.

This participant re-shaping of purpose was itself a significant discovery, and it marks an evolution in the communication, understanding, relationship dialogic framework that resulted while analyzing our conversations. By study’s end, this framework had expanded to include purpose, elements of Aboriginal Oral tradition, and a recognition of the importance of participant agency.
CHAPTER 2
Seeking A Gathering Place for Authentic Meeting

Symbolically, the *Sacred Tree* represents a gathering place for the many different tribes and peoples of the world. The *Sacred Tree* provides a place of protection in the world, a place of peace, contemplation, and centering. Like our mother’s womb, which provided nourishment and protection during the earliest days of our life, the *Sacred Tree* may be thought of as a womb of protection which gives birth to our values and potentialities as unique human beings. (Bopp, Bopp, Brown, and Lane, 1984, p. 22)

In a successful conversation they both come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were. (Gadamer, 2002, p. 379)

**Bridging Colonization and Cultural Difference**

Cultural difference, colonization, and non-Aboriginal ignorance of these, distance public schools from Aboriginal communities. While I was working as vice principal at Beta, there evolved a sequence of events that, in retrospect, bridged this distance. The heightened degree of engagement between non-Aboriginal school personnel and the Okanagan students, families, and community that resulted was startling. This sequence, now bundled together in my mind as a single process, was a “Eureka!” discovery. Making sense of what happened there and why it worked is the beginning place of this study-journey.

The process had several stages. First, a planning relationship formed between an Okanagan educator/facilitator (Mr. Mitchell) and the vice principal (me). We shared a commitment to improve the learning situation for Okanagan students. Our shared planning resulted in a series of four one and a half hour sessions facilitated by Mr. Mitchell and attended by 11 Beta educators (teachers, administrators, and support teachers). Mr. Mitchell’s partner joined in too. After working with the group for these four sessions, Mr. Mitchell felt
that it would be worthwhile to organize a gathering of this study group with several Okanagan Elders, parents, Beta Okanagan students, and younger children. This session was followed by a professional development day for the whole Beta staff that began with an overview of the historical relationship between the settlers and the Okanagan People. This presentation was followed by a two hour talking circle session with half of the staff in the morning, and the remaining half in the afternoon. In all, the sequence of events spanned a period of about six months.

Afterward, several teachers noted how powerful and important the professional development day had been for them. Participants in the Beta study group were thrilled by the gathering with Elders, parents, and children. I was impressed by the way in which the progression of meetings prepared participants to hear the Elders and parents and children during the gathering, and how the preparation and experience of this core group of staff made it possible for the whole staff to risk an authentic engagement with the topic of educating Aboriginal students. The experience created a new foundation for Beta to improve educational processes for Okanagan students in particular, and Aboriginal students in general. This foundation was composed of an improved capacity for Okanagan and Beta educators to connect with each other.

I refer to that historic process as the “Beta Dialogue.” In the years that followed, I have sought out the words and theories that could help make sense of it, and that might make the process meaningful to a larger audience. Early on my thinking found a theoretical home in the research about dialogue.

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9 We had talked about this as a possibility early on, but Mr. Mitchell had insisted that we “wait and see” if it was appropriate.
A Call for Dialogue from Four Directions

When I turned from my own experience to face the research winds of our times, it was difficult not to be swept up by the theoretical excitement around dialogue. Several Western philosophical trends seemed to have reached an impasse regarding the relativism of truth claims (Bernstein, 1983; Vokey, 2001). Claims to universal truth made by the grand narratives of European tradition—Christianity, Marxism, Capitalism, Western Imperialism, Enlightenment philosophy, Science—have been deconstructed and disrobed within the global intercultural, “post-colonial” (Fanon, 1977; Smith, 1999) and “post-modernist” (Foucault, 1995, 2000; McHoul and Grace, 1993; Robinson and Garratt, 1999) frame of the moment. Knowledge within this “post” paradigm is perceived as a social construction, mutable with history, frequently structured by power relationships serving particular interests (Burbules, 1993; Sidorkin, 1999). Apparently incommensurable pluralities have resulted. A significant outcome of this critical effort has been the validation of historically marginalized cultural epistemologies and traditions. Consequently, there is a need for engaging the distinct knowledge and ethical traditions that have emerged out of the shadows of the dominant European narratives.

Dialogue presents itself as the vessel for this process, enabling engagement across potentially incommensurable differences (Burbules, 1993). Thus, for example, the Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) called for dialogue between First Nations Peoples and non-Aboriginal Canadians as a means to both recognize the distinctness of First Nations Peoples and to enable Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to begin connecting across their substantive differences.

Levinas (1999) described the challenge of meeting the other in her/his difference as follows:
The presence of persons in full force of their irreplaceable identity, in the full force of their inevitable responsibility. To recognize and name those insoluble substances and keep them from exploding in violence, guile or politics, to keep watch where conflicts tend to break out, a new religiosity and solidarity—is loving one’s neighbour anything other than this? Not the facile, spontaneous \textit{élan}, but the difficult working on oneself: to go toward the Other where he [she] is truly other, in the radical contradiction of their alterity. (pp. 87-88)

Levinas’ context is dialogue between religious communities that have truth claims not recognized by each other, and which therefore, stand incommensurably, if not antagonistically, apart on significant, “insoluble” issues. David Lockhead (1988), who also shares this inter-religion context, maintains that it becomes possible to engage the authentic differences between divergent religious traditions within dialogue because of its commitment for understanding the other authentically, within the other’s own terms.\footnote{I consider the religious context as bearing some significant parallels to a cross-cultural/history of oppression context. These parallels include incommensurable truth claims, strongly held values and ethical norms, and histories of antagonism including attempts to dominate each other. Lochhead notes that religious traditions tend to manifest relations that at best tolerate, but at worst attempt to diminish or destroy other traditions. As a side note, this inter-religion dynamic would seem to be present, in varying degrees, in Aboriginal communities as Christianity and traditional spiritualities uncomfortably co-exist.} Thus, sociological researchers such as Roman (1993) and Fine (1994) identify the necessity of processes that enable participants to have \textit{voice} and speak their truths. Dialogue, from this direction, is a process for encountering truth claims, and in this encounter, also a furnace for the forging of new positions relative to these truth claims.

From another direction, dialogue was being called upon by organizational and educational leadership theorists to improve the effectiveness of organizational performance. In particular, the widely influential work of Peter Senge (1990) promoted the discovery, and consequent theorizing, that organizations that develop internal dialogical processes become more creative and learn more effectively than typical scalar chain organizations, giving them a strong competitive advantage. Senge, working from empirical and theoretical work in dialogue by Bohm (1996), identified that in the process of dialogue participants let go of
assumptions and were open to knowledge from other sources that otherwise would have been ignored. For Senge the dialogic working relation was a powerful corrective to the historic, stultifying limitations to communication imposed by the bureaucratic structuring of organizations. The further efforts of Senge (2000) and of Dufour (1998) and others advanced Senge's notion of dialogue within the K-12 educational leadership context via their work on learning communities. Carolyn Shields (2003) advanced dialogue as a necessary response to the remarkable diversity inherent in schools.

From a third direction, educational theorists were positing the significance of dialogue for learning. Burbules (1993), Palmer (1998), and Sidorkin (1999, 2002) all explored and established the powerful significance of dialogue for the teacher-student learning relation. In the dialogic classroom students bring their unique identities (culture, gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability) and their genuine questions to the learning moment and teachers respond to these questions authentically, openly, building knowledge together with the student from their particularity. As empirically demonstrated by Bishop et al. (2003), the learning outcomes of students, and in his research Indigenous students in particular, are improved. These theorists argue that the dialogic medium is also the message; that learning to be dialogical is an important educational outcome.

The fourth direction called for dialogue in contexts of racism and oppression. The work of Paolo Freire (2000) remains the strongest and most influential statement of the importance of dialogue for situations of oppression. He argued that those who have been part of the oppressor community must meet the oppressed in genuine dialogue if they would be teachers with such communities, families, and students. African-American education scholars

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11 There is a strong substantive connection between dialogic learning theory and constructivist learning theory, vis a vis, engaging the student's unique learning identity/location and the "zone of proximal dissonance" as described by Vygotsky (1978).
such as Delpit (1993) and Ladson-Billings (1995) called for dialogue as a response to the failure of White educators to understand and engage the learning needs of African-American students. Lisa Delpit elaborated the potential of such a dialogic encounter for children in cross-cultural and oppressive situations when she said,

And finally, we must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness....Teachers are in an ideal position to play this role, to attempt to get all of the issues on the table in order to initiate true dialogue. This can only be done, however, by seeking out those whose perspectives may differ most, by learning to give their words complete attention, by understanding one's own power, even if that power stems merely from being in the majority, by being unafraid to raise questions about discrimination and voicelessness with people of color, and to listen, no, to *hear* what they say. I suggest that the results of such interactions may be the most powerful and empowering coalescence yet seen in the educational realm—for *all* teachers and for *all* the students they teach. (p. 101)

Delpit dives down to the depths of what is meant by dialogue to surface that extraordinary human experience where through *hearing* and giving *voice* participants gain a profound new understanding of themselves and each other. This understanding is so powerful that participants are changed, and consequently the world they act in will also be changed. Her description is congruent with what I observed in the Beta Dialogue.

Given my location as a non-Aboriginal educator, administrator, and graduate student concerned to bridge the distance between Aboriginal students, families, community and a non-Aboriginal school, one can see how strong winds from these four directions in the research literature would quickly snatch up my bundle of experiences and give them theoretical flight. From their work, dialogue emerged as an important concept for understanding the Beta experience.

**But What Is Dialogue? Theorizing from within My Tradition**

If the claims we are making here for dialogue are a cause for surprise to the reader, the reason may be that dialogue has been equated too exclusively with the conversational parts of a play. We think of it differently—as the serious address and response between two or more persons, in which the being and truth of each is
confronted by the being and truth of the other. Dialogue, therefore, is not easy and comfortable to achieve, a fact which may explain why it occurs so rarely. And its rare occurrence accounts for the frequent absence of its benefits in our communication with one another. (Howe, 1963, p. 5)

The Oxford dictionary (Sykes, 1986) defines dialogue as “conversation.” However, as Howe states, the “dialogue” of interest to theoreticians, and to me, refers to conversation that distinguishes itself from chit chat by the depth of engagement it permits participants—“the being and truth of each is confronted by the being and truth of the other.” Delpit (1993) observes that in this conversation the voiceless speak and are heard. Levinas (1999) notes how the absolute alterity of the other is encountered. Dialogue, or a species of dialogue, represents a profound experience.

The Greek etymology of the word reveals a significant constellation of meanings. Dia is a preposition that meant “between,” “across” or “through.” Logos meant “word” or “speech” and also “thought,” “reason,” and “judgment” (Burbules, 1993, p. 15). Thus dialogue refers to a process where word, speech, reason, thought, judgment pass between, across, or through participants.12 The Socratic dialogues written by Plato exemplify the essence of this rich basket of definitions and connotations—through dialogue Plato examined the essential meanings of life. Across 2400 years of Western history, dialogue has carried forward the remarkable experience of engaging the essence of our human existence in conversation.

There is no question that the Beta “dialogue” touched the core of my life, and moved others to reflect on their own. When I reflected on what occurred for me, three general

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12 To this collection I would add the philosophical connotations attached to Logos by the philosophers of the Hellenistic period who used the term to refer to the fundamental order or Reason of the universe. This meaning was then taken up by the writer of John’s Gospel who combined this philosophical connotation with the person of Jesus, equating Christ with the Logos. In both of these cases, the process of engaging the nature of reality, or the meaning of life, surfaces and gives basis for the theoretical appropriation of “dialogue” to describe “the serious address and response” that goes to the very heart of one’s Logos or truth claims.
themes caught my attention: understanding; relationship; and the communication structures (events) that had enabled them. My own understanding had increased. My relationships with Okanagan students, families, and leaders improved. This had happened through presentations about Okanagan history and experience (particularly during the past 150 years of colonization), deep listening, carefully planned interactions, and through structured conversations. I theorized that a successful dialogue of the sort I experienced would be signified by an increase in understanding among participants, and an improvement in their capacity to be in relationship with one another. And I speculated that if this was an effective means for improving understanding and relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada, then this was an important process worthy of further study.

**Understanding: Fusion of Horizons**

Don’t judge another man until you have walked a mile in his shoes.

*(Ascribed to North American Aboriginal tradition. Source unknown)*

I have taken this traditional adage for most of my conscious life as expressing an important virtue—seek to understand before judging or acting. Here it symbolizes ironically our challenge, Aboriginal tradition expressing in English to an English speaking audience the necessity of putting on the life-world of an Aboriginal person in order to understand. I take it also as a time worn signifier of what understanding means: to understand is to experience or know life as another knows it. But if we do take this metaphor seriously, how do we then ‘put on’ another’s moccasins? What are the conditions that enable understanding to occur within the human mind and heart, and between each other? What is the nature of understanding?

For this study, I have drawn heavily from the work of Hans Georg Gadamer (2002) and his work on philosophical hermeneutics to develop a conceptual basis for making sense of ‘understanding.’ Although his primary goal in his work *Truth and Method* was to establish
the conditions which enable the understanding of traditionary texts, he developed a series of arguments and concepts that profoundly illuminate the process of understanding. He helps us begin the process of 'putting on' another's shoes by observing that we are an unremovable part of the process,

For what do we mean by “transposing ourselves?” Certainly not just disregarding ourselves. This is necessary, of course, insofar as we must imagine the other situation. But into this other situation we must bring, precisely, ourselves. Only this is the full meaning of “transposing ourselves.” If we put ourselves in someone else’s shoes, for example, then we will understand him—i.e., become aware of the otherness, the indissoluble individuality of the other person—by putting ourselves in his position. (p. 305)

In order to understand an other, we must first become aware of ourselves.

Seeing One’s Horizon

Our prejudices “constitute the horizon of a particular present, for they represent that beyond which it is impossible to see” (Gadamer, 2002, p. 307).

Gadamer (2002) makes the case that when we understand, we understand from our point of view. And, Gadamer says, in the process of understanding, the fact that we have a viewpoint is frequently invisible to us.

In our understanding, which we imagine is so innocent because its results seem so self-evident, the other presents itself so much in terms of our own selves that there is no question of self and other. (p. 300)

He argues that if we are truly to understand another we must become aware of our point of view and how it is influencing our engagement. To exemplify this reality, he restates the metaphor of the “horizon,” which he notes was used by Nietzsche and others to “characterize the way in which thought is tied to its finite determinacy, and the way one’s range of vision is gradually expanded” (p. 302). The metaphor aptly portrays that my knowledge of a particular subject is always limited, but that by gaining new knowledge—by moving—my horizon will extend. So, when I think back to my horizon regarding the Okanagan People during the first
session of the Beta Dialogue, its small scope is breathtaking, and the process of the Dialogue extended this scope significantly.

Gadamer (2002) makes the case that before I even engaged in understanding the topics of the Beta Dialogue, I approached them with a horizon, or consciousness. He argues that my consciousness was “fore-structured” by tradition and by history. Tradition and history instill prejudices that determine my understanding. These terms are essential to Gadamer’s work and for our study, and merit some explanation here.

Gadamer understands tradition as that which is “handed down”\(^{13}\) and has some influence on the present. It is a broadly inclusive term. For example, he speaks of “linguistic traditions,” “cultural traditions,” and tradition as the “real force of morals”—“this is precisely what we call tradition: the ground of their [morals’] validity” (p. 280). Gadamer wrests tradition from the Enlightenment’s prejudice against tradition and custom by arguing that tradition is an omnipresent, and frequently positive (because tested by history), force in every human society. He writes,

That which has been sanctioned by tradition and custom has an authority that is nameless, and our finite historical being is marked by the fact that the authority of what has been handed down to us—and not just what is clearly grounded—always has power over our attitudes and behavior. (p. 280)

He goes on to say that tradition, “in large measure determines our institutions and attitudes” (p. 281). Gadamer notices that we are always situated within traditions and they consequently become part of us.

We are always situated within traditions, and this is no objectifying process—i.e., we do not conceive of what tradition says as something other, something alien. It is always part of us, a model, or exemplar, a kind of cognizance. (p. 282)

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\(^{13}\) From the Latin traditionem which means “delivery, surrender or handed down” (Harper, 2001)
His recognition of the significance of tradition for institutions and attitudes helpfully illuminates a fundamental aspect of the Beta Dialogue; namely, that very different traditions were present and having significant influence on our interactions. The Beta Dialogue introduced the non-Aboriginal people to this awareness; for Mr. Mitchell it was a lived reality.

Gadamer (2002) argues that tradition shapes the consciousness of every individual through language. He establishes that language is present in the very act of thinking, and thus consciousness itself is profoundly shaped by language, even before it becomes conscious of itself. The consequence of this is that “language is not just one of man’s [humanity’s] possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that man [human consciousness] has a world at all” (p. 443). Gadamer also establishes that language itself is produced by tradition. “Verbal form and traditionary content cannot be separated in the hermeneutic experience. If every language is a view of the world, it is not primarily because it is a particular type of language (in the way that linguists view language) but because of what is said or handed down in this language” (p. 441). And he posits that, “the essential relation between language and understanding is seen primarily in the fact that the essence of tradition is to exist in the medium of language” (p. 388). As language is both the product of tradition and its medium, and as consciousness is essentially shaped by language, consciousness itself (no matter how independent it may believe itself) is shaped by tradition. Reflecting on the Beta Dialogue, I wonder what it means for Okanagan tradition to be accessible to the non-Aboriginal participants only through conversion into English? We shall return to this question in the section below.
As an individual is always situated within a tradition, Gadamer (2002) also makes evident that individuals are also always situated within history. He writes,

We are always already affected by history. It determines in advance both what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation. (p. 300)

Consequently, he says “we should learn to understand ourselves better and to recognize that in all understanding, whether we are expressly aware of it or not, the efficacy of history is at work” (p. 301). In Gadamer’s writing the term history frequently refers to the collective history of a society or civilization, and he sometimes has in mind the grand sweep of all civilizations that taken together constitute human history. He also has in mind the particular history of an individual, which he will identify as an individual’s “situatedness” or “situation.” Gadamer notes that it is essential to be aware of our historical nature, and of how our history influences our understanding. Yet even historical consciousness does not give one an outside view of one’s historical moment:

To acquire an awareness of a situation is, however, always a task of peculiar difficulty. The very idea of a situation means that we are not standing outside it and hence are unable to have any objective knowledge of it. (p. 301)

Simply put, Gadamer’s (2002) argument is that tradition and history are powerful influences in the formation of the consciousness of every individual. So, if I return to the opening moments of the Beta Dialogue with these terms in mind, non-Aboriginal educators were coming to this situation with traditions and histories that were very different than the Aboriginal participants. Thus, though we shared some of the same topics, such as Okanagan student learning, the horizons that constituted our perspectives on these topics were remarkably different. Just how different was the basis of why the Beta Dialogue was so deeply experienced. Mr. Mitchell intentionally engaged participants in Okanagan tradition and history. He provoked our prejudices.
It should be apparent by now that Gadamer (2002) believes that consciousness is much more an actor in the play of tradition and history than the playwright.

In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it...The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his [her] judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being. (p. 277)

Tradition and history fore-structure our consciousness. Gadamer (2002) called the resulting fore-structures prejudices. Conscious of the negative connotation prejudice has held since the Enlightenment, Gadamer counters that understanding is always a consequence of prejudices making sense of situations and meaning. “All understanding,” he writes, “inevitably involves some prejudice” (p. 270). Prejudices are necessary to enable understanding but they also may hinder understanding. Furthermore, Gadamer observes, our prejudices are not easily identified. Like the process of understanding, we are innocent to their existence because they shape what we understand before we are even aware of them in action. In his words,

The prejudices and fore-meanings that occupy the interpreter’s consciousness are not at his [her] free disposal. He [She] cannot separate in advance the productive prejudices that enable understanding from the prejudices that hinder it and lead to misunderstanding. (p. 295)

If we recognize that prejudices are always operative in our understanding, Gadamer says this helps us recognize that we must always be working “toward escaping their thrall” (p. 490). As he writes with regard to a text, we must endeavour to be aware of our biases so that another person can present himself or herself in his or her otherness and assert his or her truth against our fore-conceptions.

The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text [other] can present itself [himself, herself] in all its [his, her] otherness and thus assert its [his, her] own truth against one’s own fore-meanings. (p. 269)
Awareness of one’s prejudices so that the other may assert its/her/his truth is the first, last, and constant requirement of one who will understand. But this is no easy task! Often our prejudices must be “provoked” if we are to become aware of them (p. 299).

Thus to every topic I would understand I bring a *horizon*, constituted of prejudices, themselves a product of the traditions and history in which I am immersed. But this is not all that constitutes our consciousness. Gadamer (2002) argues that whenever we understand we always *apply* what we understand to our situation. “Application,” he writes, “is neither a subsequent nor merely an occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but codetermines it as a whole from the beginning” (p. 324). When I consider my situation as non-Aboriginal vice principal during the Beta Dialogue, I was constantly filtering what Mr. Mitchell was saying according to the priorities of my identity and my work. For example, I recall thinking ‘This knowledge suggests a different avenue of responses next time there is a land claims protest. No wonder our students get wound up.’ Gadamer recognizes that the situations from which we understand influence what we can understand, because our situations place demands upon our understanding. Our situations determine relevance and significance. Furthermore, Gadamer maintains that one has not understood something until one has taken seriously the truth claims of the other’s perspective and *applied* them to—i.e., let them challenge—one’s own truth claims. Thus, the situatedness of *application* also defines our horizon.

Every time I seek to understand, Gadamer (2002) reminds me that I must remember that it is “Mark Edwards” who is understanding. I bring to every topic a *horizon* of meanings that is fore-structured by *tradition*, by *history*, by *language*, by *prejudices*, and by my *situation*. The challenge, he observes, is that though I ‘see’ everything within my *horizon* its
finitude and its structuring are largely invisible and therefore require that I constantly make conscious its influence on my understanding. This involves suspending biases when they are known, and being open to the possibility that my prejudices are resulting in misunderstanding. Most importantly it means allowing the truth claims of the other to challenge my horizon, so that my understanding is determined as much as possible by the meanings of the other.

Acknowledging Another's Horizon: Putting on Another's Shoes

If I have an horizon that determines my understanding, so too does any other person whom I may meet. Thus, given that this person's horizon regarding a topic is equally shaped by tradition, history, language, prejudices and situation, it follows that making sense of another's point of view on a topic will require gaining knowledge and developing an understanding of these. Gadamer (2002) outlines what is required with these words,

If we fail to transpose ourselves into the historical [and traditional] horizon from which the traditionary text [the other] speaks, we will misunderstand the significance of what it [he or she] has to say to us. (p. 303)

In other words, “we try to transpose ourselves into the perspective within which he [she] has formed his [her] views. But this simply means that we try to understand how what he [she] is saying could be right” (p. 292). It follows from this that in order to understand what is said by another, we must endeavour to gain knowledge and understanding of the tradition, history, and situation from which what is said has emerged and makes sense. It is in this way

14 I am joining 'gaining knowledge' and 'understanding' here in order to distinguish two different processes that are sometimes both implied by the word 'understanding'. One may gain knowledge about history, tradition, and another's situation from sources outside the person. However, one may understand what a certain history means for another person only through interaction with him or her. When I understand I share meaning. When I gain knowledge (e.g., the statistics regarding Aboriginal student graduation rates, or a description of traditional Okanagan family structures), I have background information that may help in understanding an extended family’s concern for their child’s education. Gaining background knowledge is important for understanding; understanding what this background knowledge means for a person is also important.

15 See also Gadamer’s discussion of Aristotle’s notion of sympathetic understanding (sunesis) pp. 322-323.
that another may be understood in her or his “own terms” (p. 291, 303) and thus be “taken seriously in [his or her] claim to truth” (p. 297). It seems to me this is where we put on another’s shoes and walk through their world.

There is an onus on dialogue participants to prepare themselves in this way. “Why do we constantly have to explain ourselves to White people? When can we expect you to do some of this learning for yourselves?” Dialogue with participants who are largely ignorant of a topic or of other participants’ horizon can trap participants at a level of engagement that is trivializing and disrespectful. Gaining knowledge and understanding of another’s horizon is necessary preparation for meeting.

Just as I can anticipate that my prejudices will influence my understanding, so too can I anticipate that another’s prejudices will equally be influencing his or her understanding. In both cases, there is a need for the opportunity to allow our prejudices to be provoked, surfaced, suspended, and reconsidered in light of each others’ truth claims.

**When Horizons Meet: A Process of Understanding**

Understanding is always the fusion of these horizons. (Gadamer, 2002, p. 306)

The task of hermeneutics is to clarify this miracle of understanding, which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning. (Gadamer, 2002, p. 292)

Understanding means to share in a common meaning with another. This is what I take Gadamer (2002) to mean when he speaks of a “fusion of horizons.” The fusion of horizons metaphor illustrates that when participants’ different horizons of meaning regarding a topic are mutually understood their preliminary horizons do not remain the same. These different horizons do not lose their distinctness in Gadamer’s notion of fusion, but rather they determine the breadth of the horizon that supersedes them. Even when these preliminary

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**16** Voiced by an African-American academic during the presentation of a White academic’s study of African-American school leaders at UCEA, 2002.
perspectives are incommensurable, “alien” or “antagonistic,” participants’ new, shared horizon is expanded in a way that includes them (p. 387). Fusion means neither submission, nor loss of integrity of the distinct truth claims of different horizons. Nor does fusion mean agreement with the truth claims of a different horizon. The fusion of horizons metaphor illustrates the expansion of comprehension that is necessary to, and results from, sharing in common meanings.

How do we move beyond the finitude of our fore-structured horizons and achieve understanding? Coming to an understanding is an active back and forth process that provokes our prejudices, tests our developing conceptions of meaning, and confirms that we share a common meaning. Gadamer provides several concepts which help delineate this process.

**Openness**

When you and I meet and begin a conversation about a particular topic, we have begun the process of understanding. The first condition of understanding, Gadamer (2002) writes, is to be addressed by another. But being addressed requires of us a particular *openness* that recognizes the validity of the other’s truth claims. Gadamer notes that this is, in effect, to recognize the other as “Thou.”

In human relations the important thing is, as we have seen, to experience the Thou as a Thou—i.e., not to overlook his [her] claim but to let him [her] really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs....Without such openness to one another there is no genuine human bond. (p. 361)

By referencing Martin Buber’s (1970) *Thou*, Gadamer signals the importance of relationship to the process of understanding. Thus, at one level, being *open* to another is to be in a moral relation with another that acknowledges his or her inherent right to assert his or her own truth claims.
We have already gone to some length to establish the nature and significance of our structured horizons for understanding. At another level, being open means being self-aware of one’s own horizon. Gadamer (2002) says that the process of understanding requires “the fundamental suspension of our own prejudices” (p. 299). He also says that our prejudices must be “provoked,” and that it is only when our prejudices are placed at “risk” that understanding becomes possible. This “testing” of our fore-meanings and prejudices is an indispensable part of coming to an understanding.

At a third level, being open means being prepared to repeatedly revise and refine one’s conceptions of what the other means. In the process of understanding, Gadamer (2002) observes that we move from our fore-conceptions, to new conceptions regarding a topic, by first construing what we think is meant, and then by testing this understanding with the other. We are open in this third sense, when we are willing to continually refine our conceptions of what is meant in this back and forth process with the other. Thus, being open to another is an active process of recognition, self-reflection, and commitment to refine one’s thinking based on feedback from the other.

Being open calls for each participant to be authentically present to the other. Gadamer (2002) makes clear that “true” conversations that generate understanding are genuine, mutual events where participants are not disguising their truths. He writes,

Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself [herself] to the other, truly accepts his [her] point of view as valid and transposes himself [herself] into the other to such an extent that he [she] understands not the particular individual but what he [she] says. (p. 385)

Gadamer does not problematize the nature of being open insofar as it requires a degree of vulnerability for individuals to disclose themselves to one another. Given Gadamer’s primary interest in the hermeneutical task of understanding texts, exploring the conditions which
permit individuals to be open to one another in conversation was not of primary significance to him. However, these conditions are of critical importance for this study, and I shall consider them with reference to Martin Buber (1970) and Paolo Freire (2000) below.

**Dialogue as a Process of Coming to an Understanding**

Our first point is that the language in which something comes to speak is not a possession at the disposal of one or the other of the interlocutors. Every conversation presupposes a common language, or better, creates a common language. Something is placed at the center, as the Greeks say, which the partners in dialogue both share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one another. Hence reaching an understanding on the subject matter of a conversation necessarily means that a common language must first be worked out in the conversation. This is not an external matter of simply adjusting our tools; nor is it even right to say that the partners adapt themselves to one another but, rather, in a successful conversation they both come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were. (Gadamer, 2002, p. 378-379)

Conversation, or dialogue, is a process that generates understanding. Gadamer (2002) observes that in this process there are several things going on that deserve attention. First, is the to and fro dialogic movement by which participants are able to refine their conceptions of what the other person means. It takes time for participants in conversation to move from their fore-conceptions through various trial conceptions that are continually refined through back and forth confirmation. Gadamer observes that for some topics, the back and forth process necessary for full understanding may never end.

Second, Gadamer makes note of the hermeneutical circle that consciousness travels while developing a new conception of what the other means. Consciousness experiences a part of what is meant, and based on this part conjectures what the whole of another's meaning is likely to be. The longer the conversation goes on, the more parts will be fit into the conjectured whole (remember that this conjectured whole is influenced by one's horizon, particularly in early stages). The conjectured whole will act to order the parts so that they fit
coherently together. However, frequently the parts won’t fit the conjectured whole, and the whole will have to be re-conceptualized in a manner that allows all of the parts to be coherent with one another and with the whole. Gadamer maintains that “the harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding” (p. 291). It is in this way that one moves beyond the finitude of one’s horizon, constituted by the prejudices of one’s tradition and history, and understands the other’s meaning as the other does, in his or her own terms.

Third, Gadamer (2002) emphasizes that understanding occurs through language. We noted above how language shapes consciousness and is constitutive of our “world”. But he observes that it is the very verbal nature of our worlds that makes it possible for us to expand our horizons to understand them. This essential capacity of language to enable the sharing of meaning is the basis for understanding.

It is true that those who are brought up in a particular linguistic and cultural tradition see the world in a different way from those who belong to other traditions. It is true that the historical “worlds” that succeed one another in the course of history are different from one another and from the world of today; but in whatever tradition we consider it, it is always a human—i.e., verbally constituted—world that presents itself to us. As verbally constituted, every such world is of itself always open to every possible insight and hence to every expansion of its own world picture, and is accordingly available to others. (p. 447)

Gadamer’s optimistic claim here is based on his observation that when a subject is considered by participants in a conversation, their linguistic communion generates new language—a shared language—to represent their shared meanings regarding the subject. This is what is meant when, in summarizing a conversation between two participants, he identifies that their conversation generates a common diction (language) and a common dictum (content).

Reaching an understanding in conversation presupposes that both partners are ready for it and are trying to recognize the full value of what is alien and opposed to them. If this happens mutually, and each of the partners, while simultaneously holding on to
his [her] own arguments, weighs the counter arguments, it is finally possible to achieve—in an imperceptible but not arbitrary reciprocal translation of the other's position (we call this an exchange of views)—a common diction and a common dictum. (p. 387)

Reflecting back to the Beta Dialogue, I don’t believe that we generated any new words (perhaps the names of Okanagan leaders were new to participants), but we began to use words differently, more conscious, I would say of wider implications that the words now carried. From Gadamer's view, genuine dialogue generates language specific to the shared meanings of the community of participants. However, it is apparent from the Beta Dialogue that lifetimes would be necessary if we were to enact seriously Gadamer's optimistic belief that Okanagan tradition could be translated through English to impart to non-Okanagan people its manifold meanings. We just opened a door sufficiently to glimpse the world beyond.

Fourth, for Gadamer understanding is always about a shared topic. Understanding in conversation is based on what the other says and means. It is not about empathetically joining with another so that one “mystically” enters into the life of the other. “To understand what a person says is...to come to an understanding about the subject matter, not to get inside another person and relive his [her] experiences” (p. 383).

Finally, in the process of coming to an understanding in conversation we are changed and something new emerges. “We do not remain what we were” (p. 379).

Dialogue Is Understanding

Improved understanding was an outcome of the Beta Dialogue. In retrospect, the process of developing an understanding appeared to me an essential part of the experience. Gadamer (2002) has delineated a set of concepts which illuminate this process in a valuable way, and which provide a powerful framework for this study. He brought attention to the
significance of tradition, history, our situatedness, and the prejudices these engender, in determining the horizon of meaning that we have for every topic we might venture in dialogue. These concepts have particular salience to the cross-cultural and colonized situation that we are interested in. Gadamer noted that we must be constantly aware of our horizons, suspending their biases and assumptions when we are conscious of them, so that the meanings of the other may be understood in the other’s terms rather than our own. Not an easy task when our prejudices are invisible to us, often until they are provoked. Gadamer also introduced the importance of “transposing” ourselves into the horizon of the other. Through this process of acknowledgement, we gain background knowledge and understanding that helps us make sense of what the other says. Gadamer also identified critical aspects of the process of coming to an understanding through conversation: a to and fro process of checking meaning and confirming understanding; the hermeneutical circle that consciousness traces as it seeks coherence for experienced parts and conjectured wholes; the necessity of openness; the importance of language and the creation of new language; the final emergence of shared meaning as a fusion of horizons. These concepts give us a way of illuminating the potential for communication events to generate shared meanings— to be dialogic.

Relation: Telos of and Condition for Dialogue

In human relations the important thing is, as we have seen, to experience the Thou as a Thou— i.e., not to overlook his [her] claim but to let him [her] really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs....Without such openness to one another there is no genuine human bond. (Gadamer, 2002, p. 361)

Above we noted that Gadamer (2002) identifies the significance of a Thou relation to being open in conversation but doesn’t develop the nature of this “Thou” relation upon which openness depends. During the Beta Dialogue, I became very conscious of the relational dimension of the interactions. There was discomfort for Mr. Mitchell and for Beta
participants as prejudices were provoked and participants' consciences tried to make sense of being the beneficiaries of a colonizing history that had plainly harmed the Okanagan People. However, the defensiveness that often blocks further engagement with such troubling knowledge was not invoked. Regard for Mr. Mitchell grew; trust between all participants grew; the group reached a stage of openness in which Mr. Mitchell was willing to invite Elders and families to come to the school to meet with Beta participants. In effect I believe Beta participants extended to Mr. Mitchell the recognition and regard called for by a "Thou" relation.

Buber's (1970) concept of the I-Thou relation matches the ideal condition of openness between dialogic participants. The I-Thou relation is predicated upon a profound respect and regard, even reverence, for the other. Gadamer (2002), as we have seen, interprets this respect as recognizing "the truth claims" of the other. As Buber described the relation, it calls one to be authentically present to the other—giving one's absolute attention. Indeed, Buber says, the other "is Thou and fills the firmament. Not as if there were nothing but [the other]; but everything else lives in [the other's] light" (p. 59). Starratt (1991) uses the phrase "absolute regard" to represent the meaning implied. To be open to another in this way, Gadamer says, is the basis of every "genuine human bond" (p. 361). For Buber, as also expressed here by Gadamer, such a relation is an end-in-itself—a way of being that is inherently good. Thus, as conversation is a process for coming to an understanding, conversation is also a process for coming to a relation. As the pursuit of understanding is a reason or telos for entering dialogue, so too is the pursuit of an I-Thou relation.

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17 Buber frequently moves between the I-Thou as spoken between humans, and the I-Thou spoken between a person and God. By doing so he suffuses the I-Thou relation with qualities of, and anticipations of, the sacred. It calls forth the best that we are.
My experience of the Beta Dialogue was that a spirit of respect was present from the start and as the Dialogue proceeded this respect deepened and participants were increasingly authentic and present in their engagement. The possibility of the Thou relation was nascent within our group, and the process of the Dialogue both built on this and helped a Thou relation grow.

**Openness in a Context of Oppression**

I credit Mr. Mitchell’s leadership in the Beta Dialogue, because I have come to believe that the *openness* Gadamer (2002) calls for is far from easy in contexts of colonization and oppression. Under what conditions would a person, whose family has been ravaged by the oppression of a dominating society for generations, become open to the very people (teachers and administrators) who have been the instruments of this harm? Given what Gadamer reveals about unconscious *prejudices*, it would seem that an Okanagan person would just be opening themselves to further instantiation of colonizing ways of thinking, whether or not it was intended by a non-Aboriginal Canadian educator. Given what Gadamer reveals about the influence of situatedness on how we understand, it would seem inevitable that the values of Western schools (the situation of *application* for teachers and principals) would just overwhelm an Okanagan person’s openness. Given the past history of oppression, it would make more sense to assume that being open in dialogue would just provide more knowledge for those with power to maintain their status quo. Instead of openness, these situations call for resistance!

Paolo Freire (2000) applies Buber’s I-Thou dialogic theory to situations of conquest and oppression and helps clarify the conditions in which dialogue becomes a basis for emancipation rather than further colonization. Freire argues that particular relational virtues
combined with a clear and shared emancipatory purpose develop the trust necessary to openness and dialogue.

Freire (2000) recognizes that in situations of domination, oppression and invasion\textsuperscript{18}, the Thou of those invaded—their humanness—is stripped away. They are reduced to objects of the oppressors’ perception—mere “its.” His foundational assertion is that for liberation (“humanization”) to occur collectively and personally, the oppressed must regain their capacity to be the “Subjects” of their own destiny, that is, their capacity to be self-determining agents. Thus, as a first condition of openness, genuine dialogue will enable participants’ agency as “Subjects”.

Dialogue, when it enables both participants to speak their truths, undermines the top down, monologic communication pattern that proclaims the truth claims of the oppressor and denies the perspective of the oppressed. Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1986b) explication of monologic versus dialogic thinking\textsuperscript{19} states the case clearly:

\begin{quote}
Any object of knowledge (including people) can be perceived and cognized as a thing [monologically]. But a subject as such cannot be perceived and studied as a thing, for as a subject it cannot, while remaining a subject, become voiceless, and, consequently, cognition of it can only be dialogic. (p. 161)
\end{quote}

In dialogue, the voiceless speak their truth claims. In Gadamer’s (2002) terms, their history, traditions, and situatedness become a defining part of the interaction. Freire (2000)

\textsuperscript{18} That Freire does not have a naïve notion of the conditions and challenges of such situations is made evident by his clear understanding of the dynamics existent in cultural invasion. “All domination involves invasion—at times physical and overt, at times camouflaged, with the invader assuming the role of a helping friend….Cultural conquest leads to the cultural inauthenticity of those who are invaded; they begin to respond to the values, the standards, and the goals of the invaders. In their passion to dominate, to mould others to their patterns and their way of life, the invaders desire to know how those they have invaded apprehend reality—but only so they can dominate the latter more effectively. In cultural invasion it is essential that those who are invaded come to see their reality with the outlook of the invaders rather than their own; for the more they mimic the invaders, the more stable the position of the latter becomes. For cultural invasion to succeed, it is essential that those invaded become convinced of their intrinsic inferiority….Homes and schools (from nurseries to universities) exist not in the abstract, but in time and space. Within the structures of domination they function largely as agencies which prepare the invaders of the future” (pp. 153-154).

emphasizes the significance of the “situationality” of the powerless, and becoming critically aware (Conscientização) of this situatedness. He also emphasizes that it is in the traditions of the oppressed that “their own generative themes are found” (p. 109). Thus, a second condition of openness is the authentic engagement of the situatedness of the oppressed. A third condition of openness is anticipating and engaging the generative capacity of an oppressed person’s own traditions and history.

Freire (2000) establishes a clear set of relations or relational virtues that he posits are necessary for dialogue. They have particular salience for an individual’s willingness to be open with another in dialogue and provide a valuable elaboration on the I-Thou relation. He writes, “founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence” (p. 91). I believe that love, humility, and faith in the other, indicate to individuals that they may trust one another, and openness follows trust.

Freire’s (2000) work recognizes the potential for dialogue to harm the vulnerable and further instantiate colonization. He clarifies important conditions that are necessary for dialogic openness in contexts of colonization. Participants’ must be able to actualize their agency as “Subjects”. The situatedness of colonized participants’ lives must be critically considered and addressed. The generative capacity of colonized participants’ own traditions and history must be engaged. Relational connection through love, humility, and faith in the other is necessary to build mutual trust. Freire identifies one final condition of significance to

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20 See also Bishop & Glynn (1999).
21 Freire’s definition of trust is worth noting: “Trust is contingent on the evidence which one party provides the others of his [her] true, concrete intentions; it cannot exist if that party’s words do not coincide with their actions. To say one thing and do another—to take one’s own word lightly—cannot inspire trust” (p. 91).
22 See also Jones (1999), and Foucault’s (2000) analysis of “pastoral power.”
our study, namely that shared purposes aimed to transform colonizing relations and humanize the life situation of the colonized are required.

**Dialogue Is Relation**

We have used Gadamer's (2002) recognition of the importance of openness for understanding between individuals as a basis for introducing the significance of the relationship between participants for dialogue. Genuine dialogue depends upon the presence of relational conditions that enable respect and trust. In this discussion I have also introduced at several points the observation that dialogue itself facilitates the development of positive relations—it deepens trust, respect, and openness as it proceeds. Dialogue is a matrix for an I-Thou relation.

**Shared Purpose as a Condition for Openness and Dialogue**

Ultimately, Freire (2000) establishes that for the oppressed to risk vulnerability in openness, there must be a clear commitment to the shared purpose of emancipation. Put bluntly, at best dialogue that maintains the status quo is a waste of precious time that could be spent transforming colonizing relations by other means. At worst, dialogue merely serves to provide knowledge that further strengthens colonizing relations. As he says, “the important thing is the continuing transformation of reality, in behalf of the continuing humanization of men [humanity]” (p. 92). He states emphatically that dialogue between antagonists who intend to remain antagonists is dangerous to the vulnerable: “Once more, let me repeat that this dialogical encounter cannot take place between antagonists” (p. 129 footnote). Dialogue may hold the potential for being a powerful process for communion and transformation, but it is limited by the authenticity of the commitment to work together for a shared purpose.

Gadamer (2002) makes a similar claim in his analysis of Aristotle’s notion of sympathetic understanding (*sunesis*). Gadamer says a person has sympathetic understanding for another
“only if he satisfies one requirement, namely that he too is seeking what is right—i.e., that he is united with the other person in this commonality” (p.323). From Freire I infer that purposes that serve the interests of the less powerful are an essential condition of openness and of dialogue in contexts of oppression, domination, and colonization, and as Gadamer and Freire both say, these purposes must be shared.

Communication Processes

My third concern as I reflected on the Beta Dialogue has been to wonder how could that event be replicated? Being an administrator, I asked myself what communication processes enabled the Beta Dialogue to occur? And what structures and resources lie behind those processes? If I put the same structures together would dialogue occur for others?

The Beta Dialogue looked like a basic graduate seminar in some respects. It was composed of monologic moments where presentations were made, but these were held within a dialogic sphere of inclusions, and interactions. Questions were frequent. People were often seated in a circle. The formal talking circle protocol was used at one point. Participants volunteered their time. We listened. We talked. We listened more. There was a definite process of building knowledge toward something—a preparation process for increasing risk-taking and openness.

Gadamer (2002) and Buber (Sidorkin, 1999) refuse to provide a recipe for dialogue. Gadamer writes,

We say that we “conduct” a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never one that we wanted to conduct....No one knows in advance what will “come out” of a conversation. Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us. (p. 383)

Following their lead, I think we could say that any structures that work for participants to enable a genuine conversation to conduct itself, well there you have it. Moreover, they would...
probably say that any set of structures we create could be used for “monologic” purposes (Bakhtin, 1986b). Is there any point in pursuing the question of structures further?

Sidorkin (1999) and Shields (2003) respond to this challenge by reference to Bakhtin’s work on Carnival. Bakhtin argued that Carnival, and situations like it, broke down the ordered world of relations sufficiently to allow genuine dialogue to occur. Sidorkin writes,

I see it [carnival] as a cultural device specifically aimed at creating some rips in the fabric of the I-It world. Carnival is the mechanism that creates the possibility for the genuine dialogue to happen. It may not guarantee it, but it can occasion dialogical meetings by creating an appropriate time and space [italics added]. (p. 136)

I share Sidorkin’s and Shields’ contrary response. We may not be able to force dialogue to occur, but if you can’t make a horse drink, neither can it drink if you don’t provide any water. It is my observation that some communities ritualize certain protocols in order to support the possibility of dialogic encounter. In Western tradition I think particularly of the Quaker tradition that has ritualized collective silence, deep listening, considered speaking, and consensus decision-making across five centuries (Brinton, 1994). The tradition of the talking circle that was used in the Beta Dialogue seems to share similar purposes. I shall address it further below. I believe that cultures, sub-cultures, even individuals in personal relationships, develop communication practices that enable efficient dialogic engagement. For example, consider how efficiently emergency medical staff can communicate their meanings to each other. Those who do not share these practices are excluded from this possibility.

Sidorkin (1999) suggests that carnival “creates an appropriate time and space.” It is apparent to me that if the opportunity to hear another’s point of view and to dwell with it in a significant way over whatever time this takes is not available, then genuine conversation is not possible. How often are we cut off from dialogue because an agenda has not provided
sufficient time? As a school administrator, it's very easy for me to remove the possibility of dialogic interactions amongst staff—just provide an overload of accountability-type busy work. Finally, to these observations I would add that I believe that there are communication structures that do not promote dialogic engagement: meetings where only one person speaks; television; and automated phone messaging, to give a few examples. Communication structures may prohibit dialogue more than support it, and perhaps for this reason alone, they deserve special attention.

**Dialogue as Living System**

A key component of Gadamer's (2002) thinking regarding understanding is the dynamic movement of processes: the back and forth of dialogue in which participants confirm or expand on each other's perceptions, the circling between parts and wholes that consciousness does as it makes sense, the refinement of understanding that begins with partial knowledge and moves toward fuller knowledge. Similarly, there is a dynamic, reinforcing movement between the processes of coming to an understanding, and the processes of strengthening positive relation in dialogue. A little understanding fosters an inclination toward respect; a little respect fosters greater openness; more openness fosters greater understanding. The converse is also true: lack of trust will decrease openness and decrease the potential for understanding. From Freire (2000) we have also identified the importance of an overarching purpose or commitment to transformation of social injustice to this dynamic. And supported by the work of Bakhtin (Sidorkin, 1999), Sidorkin (1999) and Shields (2003), I have affirmed that communication structures also influence the potential for dialogue. These elements interact with one another in synergistic ways, their discrete health contributing to the vitality of the whole.
Figure 1. Purpose, understanding, relationship and communication structure and influence each other in a dynamic living system.

- Understanding
- Purpose
- Relationship
- Communication

Acknowledging an Aboriginal, Okanagan Horizon

History, Situatedness, and Tradition

"Why do we constantly have to explain ourselves to White people? When can we expect you to do some of this learning for yourselves?"23

As we have seen, the Beta Dialogue was a meeting of two different traditions and histories. The horizon that Mr. Mitchell brought to those conversations was one constituted by Okanagan traditions and history as well as the Western traditions and history that had been required of him since childhood to survive in British Columbia. Mr. Mitchell began this study-journey for me by insisting that I become aware of the possibility of an Okanagan horizon and by leading me to understand some of the Okanagan tradition and history that constituted his horizon.

To make further sense of what he shared, it was necessary for me to gain knowledge about the history in which Mr. Mitchell's horizon was situated. To this end I presented a paper that proposed that there were 10 stages of preparation required of a non-Aboriginal school leader if he or she were serious about engaging in dialogue with Aboriginal students,

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families, and communities (Edwards, 2003). If the Beta Dialogue had provoked my
prejudices, engaging in this research into the history of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada did so
even more. From that investigation there emerged six themes or points of inquiry that I found
necessary for my making sense of the Okanagan horizon as it had been introduced. These
points of inquiry were: four stages of Aboriginal history in Canada; Residential Schools;
Intergenerational Effects of Residential Schools; Indian Control of Indian Education (1972)
and The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996); “Sui generis” Aboriginal
education (Hampton, 1995); and, Aboriginal traditions of ‘dialogue.’ This work emphasized
the importance of gaining knowledge of tradition and history for understanding, as Gadamer
says, how what a person is saying “can be right.”

The four stages of Aboriginal history are expressed by the Royal Commission (RCAP, 1996) as “Separate Worlds,” “Nation-to-Nation Relations,” “Respect Gives Way to
Domination” and, “Renewal and Renegotiation.” The first two stages recount the
independence and integrity of Aboriginal communities, the third stage recounts the processes
of colonization and domination that set out to destroy Aboriginal Peoples, and the final stage
puts a positive frame on the situated present as one of re-integration and renaissance. Unlike
Eastern Canada, for the Okanagan People the Nation-to-Nation stage was very short and very
recent (1820 – approx 1850). The colonization/domination stage begins almost immediately
after contact. There are still stories of grandparents who remembered when they saw their
first white person. In other words, life before contact is just a generation or two removed
from living memory. The effects of the period of colonization are well summarized by Smith
(1999): “imperialism and colonialism brought complete disorder to colonized peoples,
disconnecting them from their histories, their landscapes, their languages, their social
relations and their own ways of thinking, feeling and interacting with the world” (p. 28). The 1994 re-publication of the following words written by the Okanagan and Thompson Chiefs to Wilfrid Laurier exemplify the spirit of resistance and renewal inspiring the Okanagan in the current period:

We condemn the whole policy of the B.C. government towards the Indian tribes of this country as utterly unjust, shameful and blundering in every way. We denounce same as being the main cause of the unsatisfactory condition of Indian affairs in this country and of animosity and friction with the whites. So long as we consider justice is withheld from us, so long will dissatisfaction and unrest exist among us, and we will continue to struggle to better ourselves. (Maracle, Armstrong, Derickson, Young-Ing, 1994, p. 115)

Critical awareness of the status quo and the history that has structured was a vital aspect of Mr. Mitchell’s horizon.

The residential schooling experience of Aboriginal children in Canada is, in Milloy’s (1999) words, “a national crime.” The nation-wide residential school program was devised as a means for eradicating Aboriginal cultures and promoting assimilation of Aboriginal peoples into White society (Milloy, 1999; Miller, 1996; RCAP, 1996). It was also structured to under-educate Aboriginal children to ensure they remained lower class (Barman & Gleason, 2003). The physical violence, sexual abuse, and emotional trauma experienced by children attending residential schools was horrendous and wide-spread. All of this is recounted in the history of a local residential school, as retold by some of the Okanagan people who attended (Secwepemc Cultural Education Society, 2000). Michael Marker writes that “this schooling history has been and remains, the most decisive arena for understanding the negotiated relationships between European and Aboriginal people” (p. 81).

The inter-generational effects of the residential schools are also deeply etched in the lives of children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren of those who attended residential schools (Christian, 2000, Ing, 2000, RCAP, 1996).
What happens is that the traumatic effect is passed on to each successive generation unattached to a verbalized memory experience that could help the next generation make sense of the feelings and place them in proper context....By the time the traumatic effect has reached the third or even worse the fourth generation the effect is passed on automatically without any cognitive framework that would help the child make sense of what he or she feels. (Christian, 2000, p. 204)

Ing (2000) identifies 27 negative impacts of residential schooling still evident in the lives of adult grandchildren (3rd generation). These impacts include: denial of First Nations identity, shame, poor self-esteem, communication difficulties, violence and physical abuse in families, anger, guilt, poor interpersonal skills (p. 104). Residential schooling without question is of serious consequence for Aboriginal and Okanagan families and their respective horizons.

In 1972 the National Indian Brotherhood published Indian Control of Indian Education. This document declared that First Nations should take over responsibility of the education of their children. It recommended that First Nations children should be competent in their First Nation culture and also in Canadian society. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) repeated this recommendation. These recommendations were largely ignored by provincial education bodies. First Nations children have not received education within the public system that would allow them to become competent within their own traditions, nor has Aboriginal control of educational processes for these children been achieved. Assimilation has remained the de facto position of public education. Desire for a different sort of educational program and for the ability to direct this educational program I infer as another influence on the horizon of the Okanagan.

In 1995 Eber Hampton (1995) outlined an Aboriginal educational program that would be generated from within Aboriginal traditions. He called this a sui generis education program. The Maori of Aotearoa/New Zealand have been engaged in just such a process since 1982 with the founding of the Te Kohanga Reo or language nest schools. The Maori
language immersion program which began in pre-schools has now extended to secondary and post-secondary education. I surmise that the successful possibility and desirability of such a program may be of significance for the Okanagan community.

The Beta Dialogue felt like a university seminar, a little. But it was also being structured by norms that Mr. Mitchell introduced from his own tradition. These included sitting in a circle, respectfully allowing any speaker to speak until completely finished (a good lesson for a group of teachers), deciding what he could share with us based upon our readiness. This led me to realize that I also needed to investigate Aboriginal and Okanagan traditions of ‘dialogue.’ The following sections expand on this, given its centrality to the purposes of this study.

Background knowledge in these areas required that I restructure my conceptions of Aboriginal experience in Canada. The result was a much deeper appreciation of what Mr. Mitchell had been presenting to us, a sense of the wider implications for education, and a greater openness to what might be ahead in my conversations with Okanagan students, families, community members, and non-Aboriginal school leaders. 24

Aboriginal Oral Traditions

First we need to acknowledge and recognize the oral tradition as a record of history remembering that written and oral accounts come from the same source, human memory. Second, we need to hear those local First Nations histories, by First Nations in and out of the classroom. Third, we need to consider the implications of the stories in terms of human rights, the rule of law, ethical and moral obligations, self-determination of peoples. Fourth we need to take political, social, legal, educational, and economic action to right the wrongs. Narratives by oppressed peoples is a good place to begin. (Sterling, 1997, p. 178, italics added)

I believe the Beta Dialogue worked because it blended Okanagan and Aboriginal traditions with Western approaches. There was a shared intersection of values and traditions

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24 This process was essential to the conversations with Okanagan people that followed. Without this background knowledge I do not believe I could have shared as openly or deeply with participants, and I know there was still much beyond my understanding that could not be said, or that I could not grasp the significance of.
that were common to both. Further, there grew synergistically out of the inherent possibilities within these shared elements and certain other aspects of oral tradition and Western notions of dialogue (imagine, if you will stem cells that have enormous potential to grow complex, highly differentiated interaction), a unique process that worked for all participants. These shared elements and other aspects of Aboriginal oral tradition and Western notions of dialogue I believe hold significant promise for bridging the distances of culture and colonization between community, families, students, and schools. In my survey of the literature, I found these shared elements and aspects of Aboriginal oral tradition represented and further developed in the concepts of spilaxem, storywork, mutual-thinking, talking circles, and communing.25

**Spilaxem, Storywork, and Mutual Thinking**

Stories, and understanding stories, figure prominently in Aboriginal oral traditions (Archibald, 1996; Kulchyski et al., 1999; Miller, 1990, 1990a; Robinson, 1989, Sterling, 1997). Marsden (2005), who also uses dialogue as one of the bases for her research with Aboriginal people, notes the significance of narrative for representing the lived experiences of people.26 Collections of narratives regarding residential school experiences, such as *Finding my talk* (Grant, 2004) and *Behind closed doors: Stories from the Kamloops Indian Residential School* (Secwepemc, 2000) reflect the power of narrative for relating personal realities. *Q’sapi: A history of Okanagan People as told by Okanagan families* (Louis, 2002) is an example of Okanagan narratives recounting the life and times of grandparents and

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25 I particularly draw on the theorizing of Archibald and Sterling because of the relative proximity of their Salishan traditions with those of the Okanagan who also share Salishan linguistic and cultural traditions. Jeannette Armstrong writes from within Okanagan traditions.

26 Marsden makes an invaluable distinction when she notes that in Western discourses, narratives and stories have the connotation of something imagined or made up for entertainment. But stories or narratives born of lived experience are a different category of story, expressive of personal events and meaning making. These latter stories of Okanagan collective and personal experience were a significant part of the “content” of the Beta Dialogue. It is narrative in this latter sense that we mean throughout this study when we use the term.
great-grandparents of the Okanagan. Sterling (1997) refers to these stories as of the *spilaxem* oral tradition:

Lived experiences as expressed in the oral tradition of *spilaxem* are transportable and adaptable. They can be written or presented orally by Elders and other first Nations resource people. What needs to happen in the educational system is that all students have access to First Nations lived experience, through personal sharing, individual experience, books, journals, visits, storytelling, and visual presentations. (p. 226)

She goes on to identify the importance of these stories for developing a critical consciousness of First Nations’ situations. She writes,

Paulo Freire’s (1993) pedagogical theory supports the need for *Indian Control of Indian Education*. Education has to date supported assimilation of First Nations Peoples into lower socio-economic status in the society. *Oral histories can inform and be self-informing and can complement and facilitate the dialogue necessary for critical consciousness and understanding of issues* [italics added]. Hopefully this will lead to plans of action that transform the negative situation for First Nations. In that way *mainstream society’s ignorance of First Nations cultures and histories will begin to be dispelled as knowledge grows and, hopefully with it, understanding and the will to change some of the factors which continue to oppress First Nations* [italics added]. (p. 227-228)

Smith (1999) also emphasizes the critical value of expressing such stories for decolonizing. Sterling observes that such oral histories can “complement and facilitate the dialogue necessary for critical consciousness.” To this I would add that such stories can also be the content of dialogue insofar as they enable understanding. Given, as Sterling reiterates, mainstream society’s ignorance of First Nations history, traditions and lived experience, creating the opportunities to enable such stories to be shared is vital. This is further the case for two significant reasons: first, because First Nations traditions and history are held within oral tradition rather than within a text-based tradition; and second, because First Nations traditions, culture and history are extremely localized with great variety between each

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27 Shirley Sterling is of the Nlaka’pamux First Nation, regional neighbours of the Okanagan. Although not Okanagan, the close kinship, linguistic (Interior Salishan), economic, and cultural ties between the Nicola Bands and the Okanagan give some confidence in her emphasis on the *spilaxem* and personal narrative as having resonance with Okanagan people. She writes, “Both my parents are/were Nlakapamux but my father had some Okanagan ancestry as well. This is true of many of the families, and it gives people access to both Nlakapamux and Okanagan grounds” (1997, p.11).
(Marlene Atleo, personal communication, March, 2002). Consequently some form of storytelling or dialogue or verbal sharing is essential to growing knowledge and gaining understanding. This study seeks to elicit such narratives from a broad range of participants. Archibald (1997) identified an interweaving of virtues and principles that shape an ethos foundational to the process of story-telling, story-listening, and story-meaning making. She says that Aboriginal “storywork” is based upon “the principles of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, wholism, inter-relatedness, and synergy” (p. 212). Respect honours the teller of the story, whose rights to the story are never extinguished. Responsibility lies with the teller to know when it is appropriate to share a story and to judge how best to tell it. Responsibility also lies with the listener to respect the story, its teller and the teller’s community, to ensure that the listener’s use of the story is not harmful or damaging. Reciprocity calls for giving back to the sharer of the story and to the story-teller’s community so that the gift of the story is honoured and also passed on. Reciprocity anticipates a cycling of positive gift returning that builds up participants and their community. Reverence honours the Ancestors from which stories come, honours the creation of which all are a part, and honours the wholeness of each person. Reverence, “through prayer, songs, and the ethical ways they approached the work” creates “a meeting place for the mind, body, and spirit to interact. Silence creates a respectful space for reverence” (p. 187). Wholism refers to the inter-relatedness between the intellectual, spiritual (metaphysical values and beliefs of the Creator), emotional, and physical (body and behaviour/action) realms to form a whole healthy person. The development of wholism extends to and is mutually influenced by one’s family, community, Band and Nation….the common goal has been to attain a mutual balance and harmony among animals, people, elements of nature, and the Spirit World. To attain this goal ways of acquiring knowledge and codes of behaviour, are of course essential and are embedded in cultural practices; one which plays a key role in the oral tradition is storytelling. (p. 13-14)
Wholism recognizes distinct difference (as in mind, emotion, body, spirit, animals, people, elements, spirit world) and the remarkable inter-relatedness of distinct differences. Wholism looks both inwards—recognizing difference and seeking balance—and outwards. Inter-relatedness expresses for Archibald the process by which a teller and a listener enter into the realm of the story, making the story meaningful in terms of “one’s own historical, cultural, and current context” (p. 42). Archibald quotes Elder Ellen White as saying there is a “going inside your own self….to get self-understandings…one must become humble” (p. 205).

“Inter-relatedness” is the synergistic process by which understanding happens. It is in the synergy of self, story, and teller that story-telling, story-hearing and making story meaning complete the circle.

These seven principles of storywork shape an ethos of respectful meeting with an Elder, or other Aboriginal person, and facilitate what Walter Lightning (1992) described as “mutual thinking.”

It is assumed that there will be effort to think mutually with the Elder. The assumption is that active attention, humility of the hearer, and respect for the Elder will put one in the frame of mind where the minds can meet. (p. 230)

During the Beta Dialogue, the Okanagan educator imbued the Beta group with enough sense of this ethos and with sufficient knowledge to be appropriately present with the Okanagan Elders and families when all did meet. He had shared some of the spilaxem/narratives of his people that would help us understand, and in doing so he modeled for us the ethos of storywork.

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28 Humility is a common theme in both oral tradition and dialogue literature. White goes on to say, “To be humble is when you get right to the core of what you’re trying to get across to them. That was part of the training of zeroing in. You have to be humble to get in there” (October 25, 1993 transcript). Archibald (1997) comments, “I have heard Elders from the Coast Salish Nations say that to be humble, one must practise respect and reverence” (p. 205).
The Talking Circle and the Okanagan Concept of “Communing”

The talking circle, sharing circle, or healing circle is a structured form of communication that is traditional for some First Nations Peoples in Canada (Hart, 1997; Katz and St. Denis, 1991; Marsden, 2005; Restoule, 2004). The virtues of the talking circle are tied directly to its process—each person speaking once requires listening attentively, much more listening than speaking, carefully considering what one says, seeking to understand, and synthesizing multiple perspectives (Hart, 1997, Marsden, 2005; Restoule, 2004). The openness of participants reflects their trust in each other to honour their responsibility for what is said. What is said in the circle stays in the circle. During the Beta Dialogue process the talking circle protocol was followed formally with the whole staff and less rigorously during other sessions.

I do not know the Okanagan or sqilxw language. If I did this literature review would be based upon the traditional cultural meanings inherent in the language because in the language would lie the ways of connecting tradition to the Okanagan. This, in part, is why I found Jeannette Armstrong’s (1996) explication of the word “communing” and its Okanagan (sqilxw) cognate as extremely helpful. She says,

I want to illuminate the significance of communing and point out that through its loss we have come dehumanized. To me, communing signifies sharing and bonding. Communicating signifies the transfer and exchange of information. The Okanagan word close in meaning to communing is “the way of creating compassion for.” We use it to mean the physical acts we perform to create the internal capacity to bond. (pp. 468-469)

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29 “The language which arose from our learning about the land is called the sqilxw language. All who speak it are called the sqilxw because the language carries the teachings of a very old civilization with thousands of years of knowledge of healthy living on this land” (Cohen, 1998, p. 97-98).

30 Her distinction between communing and communicating provides a significant means to value a communication event: does it humanize or dehumanize? Increase capacity for compassion and bonding? Nurture bonding and community growth?
Her distinction between communicating and communing has significant bearing for this study, as does her Okanagan understanding of “communing.” Certainly, part of the transformational nature of the Beta Dialogue for me was the emotional-relational dimension that opened up sharing, and generated compassion and bonding.

**Summary of Aboriginal Oral Traditions**

To reiterate then, using the Beta Dialogue as a beginning heuristic for suggesting what elements of Aboriginal oral tradition might have particular relevance for our project, several ideas emerged from Aboriginal scholarship. First, the Beta Dialogue provided opportunity for the sharing of several narratives in the tradition of *spilaxem* – stories that conveyed personal and collective meanings and lived experience. As Sterling (1997) established, “narratives of oppressed people is a good place to begin,” and creating space for such narratives is vital for decolonisation and dialogue. Second, the sharing of *spilaxem* was facilitated by an ethos of principles and values that nascently exemplified the seven-fold ethos articulated by Archibald (1997) as foundational to Indigenous storywork. The nurturing and growth of this ethos in research method and as basis for improving communication, understanding and relationship is proposed here as essential. Third, there was a moving toward the possibility of “mutual thinking” with Okanagan Elders and families. It is when such “mutual thinking” becomes possible (and happens!) that educators and the Okanagan People will begin to determine a powerful educational process for Okanagan students. In this light, “mutual thinking” is both a goal for, and a measure of, interactions between Okanagan people and the educators who serve them. It is also a goal for this dissertation to advance the possibility of such “mutual thinking.” Fourth, the protocol of the talking circle helped participants to enact the ethos of storywork, making possible the respectful hearing of the *spilaxem*. And finally, Armstrong’s (1996) notion of “communing” as developing
“compassion for” was a significant part of the experience that lingers with me to this day. Her notion also signifies for me the emotional, and relational engagement and transformation that are necessary for de-colonization to be successful.

I have selected these elements from the literature because they “rang” true for me, as an “outsider” reading descriptions and matching my limited experience to what I understood the authors to mean. My hope is that these elements would also ring true for Aboriginal people generally, and Okanagan people specifically, when reflecting on the sorts of processes that would enable bridging across cultural difference and decades of colonizing relations. Insofar as they are familiar to Aboriginal and Okanagan Peoples and are authentic forms of interaction and sharing meaning, they hold promise as ways of enabling “meeting” between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators. They also have significant ‘resonance’ with our earlier theorizing about dialogue.

When Horizons Meet: A Process for Improving Understanding, Relationships, and Communication

The Beta Dialogue manifested many of the attributes of dialogue we have presented: the importance of gaining knowledge about the reality of the lives of Okanagan students and families; a preparation process that enabled the growth of important knowledge and understanding in advance of the meeting with Elders, parents, and students; the self-awareness necessary to surface Canadian prejudices established in a racist past that diminish the potential for understanding and I-Thou relation; the development of a reciprocal relation marked by regard and trust between the Okanagan educator and Beta participants; communication processes that enabled two way interaction, ensuring that all could participate as “Subjects;” and an emancipatory purpose—the improvement of educational processes for Okanagan children. The Beta Dialogue also included Okanagan oral traditions, some of
which I have identified through the Aboriginal research literature as including *spilaxem*, elements of the storywork ethos, preparation for meeting Elders and for mutual thinking, the talking circle, and communing.

For the purposes of this study, the Beta Dialogue was a successful bridging experience between Okanagan people and non-Aboriginal school educators from which we have been able to induce, and through which we have been able to exemplify, the theoretical basis for this study. It has been a helpful exemplar for bringing attention to the significant intersection of shared and congruent elements of these traditions, and it has given grounds for thinking this congruence could be significant for further research.

**Aboriginal Oral Traditions and Dialogue: A Theoretical Framework Comes into View**

There are many shared and congruent elements between the Aboriginal oral traditions and Western theorizing regarding dialogue that we have brought together in our research. It seems to me that they validate each other in important ways. I have been particularly struck by the way in which these traditions open themselves up to the possibility of the differences and distinctions within each respective tradition. For example, Martin Buber's (1970) I-Thou relation opens up to the wholeness of person—mind, body, heart, and spirit—in a compelling way, though Buber did not, to my knowledge, use this understanding of wholeness. The I-Thou relation also opens up to the notions of reverence and spirit, which is to say, that the constellation of meanings I-Thou holds together connect easily with the set of meanings associated with reverence and spirit, as portrayed by Archibald (1997). I believe that the strong correlates and congruencies between the aspects of oral traditions and dialogue portrayed here provide validation of the cross-cultural potential for this framework of concepts.
The differences between the two also highlight concepts that merit particular attention. The talking circle explicitly expects that all voices will be heard. This is implicit in an I-Thou relation. It is readily induced from Freire (2000) and Bakhtin’s (1986b) notion of monologic communication and voicelessness. But the structure of the talking circle explicitly determines the norm: all are of value, and all must be included. Voice serves as a symbol of power (the voiceless are powerless) and inclusion. This value also extends the expectation of dialogic relation beyond the group of those engaged in dialogue, to those who are voiceless in it—an important balancing. The talking circle also makes explicit the importance of protocol, and therein the significance of structures. The structure of the talking circle (its rules of engagement and spatial organization) creates the possibility, even provokes, some of the values and norms of Aboriginal oral tradition and of dialogue that we have identified. The talking circle is just one of many protocols that structure communication events in Aboriginal oral traditions (Archibald, 1996; Atleo, 2001; Lightening, 1992; Sterling, 1997). Protocols are physical events that signal a desire to be engaged in respectful interaction with another. From this tradition of protocol I recognize that the ways and means by which Aboriginal persons (and non-Aboriginal persons too) engage are important. One might refer to this as paying attention to the behavioural rules and physical context of interactions—time, place, organization of space. In this study, I have used the word “communication” to capture the behavioural and physical characteristics of an interactive event where meaning was shared. I make the assumption here that when people think of communication, they think of structured

31 The protocol that precedes every formal gathering in Sty-We-Tan Hall, First Nations House of Learning at UBC is exemplary of this. The traditional territory of the Musqueam People is recognized, the stories and purposes, as immortalized in the carvings of the House posts of the Hall, of the Aboriginal Peoples who created the Hall, are retold. A welcoming song is sung. Chairs are arranged in a circle. Through these actions the values that will structure the communication event are signalled. Each participant is included in these values and joined in relation with all others present.
processes like meetings, newsletters, telephone calls, e-mails, and the like. The fact that Aboriginal protocols for engagement may differ from the norms of public schools and mainstream society is significant. What communication events within schools are sufficiently or appropriately structured for the ethos of storywork, or mutual thinking with an Elder, or dialogue for that matter, to occur? This is significant refinement of the concept of communication as structural framer of monologic or dialogic interaction.

The Aboriginal tradition of protocol also speaks to the issue of preparation that has been developed previously. Here I wish merely to underscore the importance of preparation by non-Aboriginal school leaders for engagement with Okanagan students, families and community that this implies.

Another difference of significance is the notion of “wholism.” On the Western side of the lexicon, when applied to a person, it might be regarded as carrying the same implications as “authenticity” or “genuineness.” I have interpreted these latter words in this way. However, as Archibald (1997) discussed above, “wholism” in an Aboriginal context implies a comprehensive world view that speaks to the interrelated parts of a person that constitute wholeness, namely the emotional domain, physical domain, spiritual domain, and intellectual domain—heart, body, spirit, head. Wholism also speaks to the whole of creation, as expressed in the tradition of the Medicine Wheel32 (Archibald, 1996; Brown, 2004; Marsden, 2005; Sterling, 1997).

There are four dimensions of “true learning.” These four aspects of every person’s nature are reflected in the four cardinal points of the medicine wheel. These four

32 The teaching of the Medicine Wheel identifies the interrelatedness of all of the universe and not just the parts of a person as I focus here. In my limited understanding of the Medicine Wheel I believe that a whole person is understood to be also interrelated and interdependent, as the four domains of a person are, with the human community and ecology that sustains him or her and then extending outwards to include all of the universe (Brown, 2004; Storm, 1972). “Wholeness. All things are interrelated. Everything in the universe is a part of a single whole. Everything is connected in some way to everything else. It is therefore possible to understand something only if we can understand how it is connected to everything else” (Bopp et al., 1984, p.26).
aspects of our being are developed through the use of our volition. It cannot be said that a person has totally learned in a whole and balanced manner unless all four dimensions of her being have been involved in the process. (Bopp et al., 1984, p. 29)

Wholism, as a world view, essentially values interrelatedness. This is a powerful ground for meeting—an imperative for relating to another, an imperative for finding a balanced, healthy relation with all others. Both the four domains of the self and the interrelatedness with all beings are significant departures from dominant Western views of the self such as the Cartesian mind-body dualism, or heroic individualism. Wholism provides further important background to the conceptual basis of this study.

The above Aboriginal oral traditions and explication of dialogue provide the conceptual ground for this study. I represent this ground using the headings: purpose, understanding, relationship, communication (PURC) as depicted in figure 2.

![PURC Conceptual Framework Diagram]

Figure 2. Graphic representation of the PURC conceptual framework.
The PURC diagram is based on the Medicine Wheel as a reminder of the presence of the Aboriginal traditions within the framework, and as symbolic of wholism, which provides such a profound ethical basis for authentic meeting. The diagram also symbolizes the meeting of two conceptual worlds sharing similarities, but also significant differences that inform each other. I have summarized the major concepts pulled together by this PURC framework in table 1.

**Purpose, Understanding, Relation, and Communication (PURC)**

What I seek with this bringing together of Aboriginal oral traditions and this theorizing of dialogue is a “gathering place” for Aboriginal Peoples and non-Aboriginal Peoples, for Okanagan students, families, community and the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators who serve them. Ideally, as around the *sacred tree*, participants in conversations informed by these traditions, would find a place of “peace, contemplation, and centering,” an engagement with each other that “gives birth to our values and potentialities as unique human beings” (Bopp, et al., 1984, p. 22). From this gathering place, Okanagan and non-Okanagan would move together, working with each other to bridge the distances of colonization and cultural difference, and together address the educational challenges facing Okanagan students.

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33 I have fussed for some time about using these headings which subsume Aboriginal oral traditions and make them appear less significant than the dialogue frames that the terms come from. I have decided on this structure for three reasons: I began the study based upon the triad of communication, understanding, and relationships itself derived from my Western theorizing regarding dialogue, thus this structure is reflective of the primary assumptions of the study; even though I feel that I have fairly represented the Aboriginal oral traditions presented here, I do not feel that I have dug deeply to their roots and the world views which sustain them to feel confident that I have understood them sufficiently well to use them as primary categories of organization and analysis; thirdly, this structuring reflects my non-Aboriginal identity. Thus, the Aboriginal oral traditions inform and validate this structure. They are essential for making sense of the findings of the study. I hope that my use of the Medicine Wheel is not perceived as inappropriate.
Table 1. Summary of Concepts Represented in the PURC Framework.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aboriginal, Nlaka’pamux, and Okanagan Oral Traditions</th>
<th>Aboriginal, Nlaka’pamux, and Okanagan Oral Traditions in the PURC Framework</th>
<th>Theorizing of Dialogue from within Western Tradition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spilaxem</strong></td>
<td><strong>PURPOSE</strong></td>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Narratives of experience</td>
<td>- Spirit (based in moral purposes of life.)</td>
<td>- Transformation of Colonizing world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Storywork</strong></td>
<td>- Wholism</td>
<td>- Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Ethos</td>
<td>- Community Building</td>
<td>- Awareness of own Horizon: Tradition, History, Prejudices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Respect</td>
<td>- Reverence/Sacred</td>
<td>- Situatedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Reverence</td>
<td>- Respect/ regard</td>
<td>- Acknowledgement of Other’s Horizon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Reciprocity</td>
<td>- Whole person</td>
<td>- Understood in own terms</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Responsibility</td>
<td>- Authentic presence</td>
<td>- Openness</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Wholism</td>
<td>- &quot;Subject&quot;</td>
<td>- Shared meaning: Fusion of Horizons</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Inter-relatedness (reflection, inwardness)</td>
<td>- Genuine Human Bond</td>
<td>- Hermeneutical circle: parts and wholes</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Synergy</td>
<td>- In a colonized context</td>
<td>- Shared language</td>
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<td><strong>Mutual thinking</strong></td>
<td>- Respect/Sacred</td>
<td>- Transformation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Meet</td>
<td>- Reverence</td>
<td>- Conditions that permit openness:</td>
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<td>- Humility</td>
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<td>- Agency</td>
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<td>- Openness</td>
<td>- Whole person</td>
<td>- Critical awareness of situation</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Preparation</td>
<td>- Authentic presence</td>
<td>- Recognition of strengths of silenced tradition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Talking circle</strong></td>
<td><strong>UNDERSTANDING</strong></td>
<td><strong>Communication Structures</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td>- Inter-relatedness</td>
<td>- Monologic vs. dialogic</td>
</tr>
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<td>- Egalitarian</td>
<td>- Preparation</td>
<td>- Carnival—space and time</td>
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<td>- Deep listening</td>
<td>- Deep listening</td>
<td>- Cultural/sub-cultural rituals</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Spilaxem (narratives)</td>
<td>- Synergy</td>
<td>- Living System</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Mutual thinking</td>
<td><strong>RELATION</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Meet</td>
<td>- Respect</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Humility</td>
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<td>- Preparation</td>
<td>- Reciprocity</td>
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<td>- Egalitarian</td>
<td>- Openness</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Synergy</td>
<td>- Communing</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Communing</strong></td>
<td><strong>COMMUNICATION STRUCTURES</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Compassion</td>
<td>- Protocol</td>
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<td>- Bonding</td>
<td>- Talking circle</td>
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<td>- Community building</td>
<td>- All voices heard</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Protocol</strong></td>
<td>- Consensus</td>
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CHAPTER 3
Hearing Others' Voices:
Dialogue And Oral Tradition As Research Method

This study sets out to investigate how communication, understanding and relationships may be improved, in part by modeling the sorts of communication, understanding, and relationships it theorizes will make a difference. The methodology of the study was designed to be congruent with the norms of dialogue and elements of Aboriginal oral tradition as developed in the previous chapter.

Beginnings—Location, Dialogue, Colonization, Reflexivity, and Doubt

When I began this study, I was heavily influenced by Western dialogical theory. I was convinced by my own experience, by Delpit (1993), Alcoff (1992) and others (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Roman, 1993; RCAP, 1996, 5.4.1.1; Shields, 2003) that dialogue could make a significant difference for Aboriginal education in British Columbia. With the guidance of my comprehensive examination committee I became familiar with a wide range of theorists and notions of dialogue. From these I formed an amalgam of characteristics that seemed to me of particular relevance to non-Aboriginal school leaders working with Aboriginal students, families, and communities. This dialogic approach was based upon Senge’s (1990) recognition of the importance of dialogue for leadership, particularly where working together is critical, Gadamer’s (2002) work on understanding, Buber’s (1973) I-Thou, Freire’s (2000) emancipatory dialogue, Burbules’ (1992) conception of dialogue as communicative relation, Bakhtin’s (Shields and Edwards, 2005; Sidorkin, 1999; Swingewood, 1998) concepts of monologic communication and heteroglossia (multi-voicedness), Rawls’(1999) notions of political deliberation and action between Peoples holding irreconcilable points of view,
Michael Hart's (1996) explication of Cree sharing circles, and Quaker traditions (Brinton, 1994) of dialogue and consensus decision making. These sources provided valuable background for the formulation of the PURC framework as presented in the previous chapter.

To this group of dialogic theorists, I brought the question of how one might do research in a cross-cultural, cross-colonization situation, when one has (and one’s family has) benefited from the colonizing of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) spoke clearly to a history of scholarship and research that at best had been of benefit only to the researchers, and at worst had advanced the colonization of Indigenous Peoples. Her critique made it evident that preferably Indigenous People would research themselves and produce knowledge for their own purposes. Marie Battiste (2000) made it equally evident that even the thought forms which I brought to this study, including those of dialogue, were imbued with “cognitive imperialism” (p. 198). If, as a non-Indigenous person, I was going to conduct research regarding Indigenous People, it had to be because the Indigenous community had identified that this research was needed, that the research would be in the control of those researched, that the research would be of genuine benefit to the Indigenous community, that the research in itself would be de-colonizing, and that I would have to be hyper-reflexive regarding my prejudices, my assumptions, my interpretations, my representations, and my claims to validity or small ‘t’ truth.

I realized in this reading that I had limited understanding of the ways and means of colonization, and following the lead of Smith (1999), and Celia Haig-Brown (1996), I read the works of Michele Foucault (1995, 2000; Haughey, 2002) and Franz Fanon (1963) as a way of finding a conceptual language for the power relations that corrupted the lives of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada in every circle of being and as a way to begin to understand
how I might be implicated in these processes. Foucault’s notions of discourse, disciplinarity, pastoral power, surveillance, examination, all in the service of creating subjects amenable to control were helpful, albeit extremely distressing. His analysis of how institutions, particularly schools, create subjects was especially illuminating when applied to Aboriginal experiences of residential schools and public schools. Foucault’s concepts made clear just how deeply implicated Canadian schooling was, and is, in the annihilation of Aboriginal cultures—in the name of education. Foucault also made it very clear, as did Fanon, that dialogue could very well just further instantiate extant colonial power relations.

To their critical voices I added elements of the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Swartz, 1997) and in particular his thinking on how schools reproduce class structure/culture and his theory of habitus as that conditioned, unconscious self that structures the world according to the class/cultural norms inculcated in childhood. The former helped highlight how every aspect of schools participates in the re-creation of social structures (and recreates colonizing hierarchies and power relations); the latter joined Gadamer’s (2002) notions of historically effected consciousness and “prejudices” to help me understand how my own habitus brings forward and participates in the re-enactment of colonizing discourses, even when I am reflexively conscious and seeking not to do so. As a White male, whose habitus was shaped within a liberal WASP, middle class Canadian heritage, I have relied upon critical theory (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Roman, 1993) and Aboriginal theorizing (such as that by Smith, 1999, and Battiste, 2000) and history.

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34 For example, “The colonialist bourgeoisie, in its narcissistic dialogue, expounded by the members of its universities, had in fact deeply implanted in the minds of the colonized intellectual that the essential qualities remain eternal in spite of all the blunders men may make: the essential qualities of the West, of course” (Fanon, 1963, p. 46).

35 One way out of the mansion of self-made mirrors created by the knower’s limited consciousness is through encounter with another, in dialogue.
(particularly residential school history) to reveal some of the assumptions, values, and hegemonies that such a *habitus* foists upon the world in which I live.

**Representation and Voice**

Alcoff (1992) expresses the possible consequences of *habitus*’ influence on research when she notes that even though a speaker may be attempting to improve the situation of a group, the effects of the speaker’s representations and discourse may be to reinforce racist, or imperialist relations. This concern also applies to the interpretive theories that structure a researcher’s engagement. Fine (1994) amplifies this concern with her critique about the representation of other’s voices. Academic representation of others’ voices can easily overwrite their intended meanings, crafting the representation of ‘voices’ to support or validate lines of argument chosen by the researcher. As a consequence, she argues that the voices of marginalized others must be represented with as much integrity to their original meaning as possible, implying such processes as framing quotations in a manner congruent with their original context, and quoting a person in sufficient length to let their meanings and connotations be clear.

It should be apparent that writing a dissertation that passes on and considers ideas that Okanagan people shared with me is very much an act of representation, and though they spoke to me, as the intermediary between you and them, the words I write end up “speaking for” them. This is deeply problematic territory. I have taken measures that I believe balance some of these challenges—these will become apparent in the following sections—but even still I question my location and the potential merely to reinforce racist, or colonizing relations. I ask you as a reader to be conscious of these tensions and possibilities.

As a consequence, frequently, since I began this project, I have questioned the legitimacy of my working with Okanagan People. Often, I have judged that it is not my place
to write about the life experience of Okanagan People. And on these days, I have decided that I will stop and go no further because I cannot be certain that what I think and feel and write is not just going to continue the colonization of the Okanagan People. This deep doubt has significantly influenced what this dissertation is. That you are reading this is a consequence of on-going faith in this project by my research committee, by Dr. Jean Barman, by the continued contacts over the years by a few of the Okanagan participants in the study, by the supportive comments from participants during our check back sessions, and by the answers that I told myself that could justify my own weaknesses for this work. These answers were the following:

1) A dialogic approach would give power to participants in the way that Freire (2000) envisions. This would be in keeping with Smith (1999), and would meet the standard of “respect” established by Kirkness and Barnhardt (1992). A dialogic approach also would ameliorate the dangers in representation or “speaking for others” according to Alcoff (1992):

   We should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others. If the dangers of speaking for others result from the possibility of misrepresentation, expanding one's own authority and privilege, and a generally imperialis speaking ritual, then speaking with and to can lessen these dangers.” (p. 9)

2) The research project is about improving communication, understanding, relationships and educational processes for Okanagan students, families, and communities. I believed there would be real benefits for the community, for families, and most importantly for children. I planned to make the research available to the Okanagan People and to the school district in a number of ways. This would meet a second criterion from Smith (1999) and also would meet the standards of “reciprocity” and “relevance” (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1992).

3) Participants were excited by the project and participated willingly, sharing with me the hopes that somehow things could be improved. There were many affirmations of our work
together during the conversations that I would stumble on well afterwards during transcriptions or in my re-reading—sometimes just at the right time.

4) My own location had some advantages to it. Over years working in the school district, I had built up solid working relationships with teacher and administration colleagues. It seemed that as a colleague, I could be a bridge to them, facilitating their understanding of Okanagan perspectives, convincing them of the need to reconsider communication, understanding, and relations. Moreover, it was apparent to me from the outset that I was the non-Aboriginal school leader ‘everyman.’ The ignorance and the talents and perspectives that I brought to the situation were likely typical of most school leaders. I came to see myself, in some degree, as a proxy for all non-Aboriginal school leaders; that what was being shared with me and asked of me, the Okanagan participants would want shared with all of the non-Aboriginal school leaders who would work with their children and families. Further, my location held valuable knowledge about how secondary schools work and about the values and assumptions of the school district, so that ideas and perspectives could be joined to my practical understanding that might give them traction in schools and district. Finally, I was known by many of the Okanagan participants before they participated in the study, and so I convinced myself that at least they had a measure of who I was (strengths and weaknesses) and thus could gauge what they shared with me accordingly. It has been deeply encouraging since the beginning just how much I was trusted by Okanagan participants. So, I told myself that although flawed, maybe I could a) learn something new and important, and b) be of service.

5) I wished to honour both the Okanagan People and the community of people who have dedicated their lives to educating the children of Alpha, Beta, and the school district. I am
connected to all in a rainbow of remarkable relations, and thus I am responsible to all. I would not intentionally harm their potential to continue to work respectfully together, or their potential to serve the current and future generations of children that they may share. I believe this is what Kirkness and Barnhardt (1992) meant by “responsible.”

6) Participants would have a final say in what is included.

7) And I told myself, even if you get some of it wrong, everything you do is offered in the spirit of dialogue, to be responded to, critiqued, and advanced upon by all. This is not the final word!  

It remains my hope that these answers were not merely self-justifications.

The “method” of this study has been to enact the norms and processes of dialogue, joining them with elements of Aboriginal oral tradition, testing them against the expectations of respectful research practices with Aboriginal Peoples as defined by Aboriginal researchers, always mindful of the potential for instantiating further colonization.

So What Happened?

Participants Join in

Preliminary discussions were held with the Okanagan Band Education office and with the assistant superintendent and district principal for Aboriginal education. My research proposal was revised in accordance with their guidance. A presentation was made to the Aboriginal Targeted Funding Committee—a school district sponsored working committee responsible for policy and allocation of Aboriginal targeted funding and composed of representatives from the Okanagan Nation, the Friendship Centre, and the school district. The Band Council asked for clarification on how knowledge generated by the study would be

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36 “The final word of the world and about the world has not yet been said, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future” (Bakhtin, 1973, p. 138).
used and controlled. An addendum to the original proposal was sent (Appendix 5). It was a remarkable moment when final approvals for the proposal were granted.

Shortly after approval was granted, a general invitation was sent home in flyer format with all Okanagan students at Alpha and Beta. Flyers were also made available through the Band Education office. Letters of invitation were forwarded to specific school board personnel. Parents and community members who expressed an interest were also provided letters of invitation. Consent forms, which clearly delineated study purposes, procedures, risks and rights, were completed by adult participants, by parents of students, by school leaders, and by students after they had volunteered to join the study (see Appendix 4).

Students—Nine Conversations with Nine Students

My intention was to interview four elementary students from Alpha and four secondary students from Beta. Both are public schools that provide services for a majority of the Okanagan students in the School District. The original plans changed somewhat as the project proceeded. After a general meeting with Okanagan students in both schools over pizza, during which students were given an overview of the project’s goals and processes, six elementary students volunteered and three secondary students volunteered. Of the six elementary students, four participated in 30 minute conversations and all six participated in a 40 minute focus group session. I met with each of the secondary students on two different occasions. My conversations with Laurie each lasted about 40 minutes. My conversations with Robert and Gordon stretched beyond an hour on each occasion. See table 2 for student pseudonyms, grades and conversation participation.

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37 Some Okanagan students attend a local Catholic school. A few Okanagan students attend other high schools in the community.
38 The First Nations advocates in both schools were enormously helpful in organizing these first meetings. This initial assistance helped by validating the project for students, and their on-going support with the collection of consent forms and the organization of meetings was invaluable.
Table 2

Student Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Pseudonym</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>1st Conversation</th>
<th>2nd Conversation</th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joannie</td>
<td>Alpha</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robyn</td>
<td>Alpha</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cody</td>
<td>Alpha</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stewart</td>
<td>Alpha</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Alpha</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>Alpha</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gordon</td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurie</td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Parents—15 Conversations with Eight Okanagan Parents

Ten parents participated in the first round of conversations specifically as parents (see Table 4). Of these ten, seven participated in a second conversation. Two parents did not continue with the study for personal reasons. The tenth parent joined the study late making only one conversation possible. Of the eight parents, three had elementary age children, but all had secondary students, or students who had recently graduated. Two of the eight were

39 There are several Okanagan educators who are also parents, but whose voices I have presented in the Aboriginal Educators’ Perspectives chapter.
40 One parent moved away from the Okanagan. Repeated communications were not successful. A second parent and I never seemed able to make contact for reasons that remain unknown to me. Neither of these parents asked that I revoke the permission they granted to use the conversations that we shared. However, because the research model expressed a commitment to dialogue and to an opportunity for participants to check back on my thinking, the failure to have this opportunity meant that our conversations together did not attain the standard of participant approval and validation essential to the study. The conversations of the two parents were not included in the thematic analyses, and their words and themes were not included in the parent chapter. However, at the time of our conversations, which occurred relatively early in the study, they powerfully represented their perspectives to me and these perspectives influenced my thinking and my participation in conversations in the months that followed. At the time, I didn’t know that our future paths would not cross again. Consequently, I wish to acknowledge they continue to have a presence in the braided weave of the parent chapter, even if only echoed in the conversations of others.
fathers. Parents had a variety of occupations: self-employed in trades, educators, retail, clerical, executive, farming:

Table 3

Parent participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent Pseudonym</th>
<th>Conversation #1</th>
<th>Conversation #2</th>
<th>Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Joe</td>
<td>Yes – not taped</td>
<td>Yes – not taped</td>
<td>son at Beta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Leslie</td>
<td>Yes – taped with some difficulties</td>
<td>Yes - taped</td>
<td>2 daughters in Beta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Margaret</td>
<td>Yes - taped</td>
<td>Yes - taped</td>
<td>1 daughter at Alpha, son graduated Beta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Gina – wife of Frank</td>
<td>Yes - taped</td>
<td>Yes - taped</td>
<td>Child in secondary, 1 recently graduated from Beta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Frank-husband of Gina</td>
<td>Yes - taped</td>
<td>Yes - taped</td>
<td>As above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Mary</td>
<td>Yes - taped</td>
<td>Yes - taped</td>
<td>children graduated from Beta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Carolyn</td>
<td>Yes - taped</td>
<td>No – Joined study late</td>
<td>1 child in elementary, 2 graduated from Beta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Linda</td>
<td>Yes – not taped</td>
<td>Yes – not taped</td>
<td>2 children in Elementary; one at Beta</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Aboriginal educators—20 conversations with 10 Okanagan and Aboriginal educators

I had two conversations with each of the ten Aboriginal educators who participated in this study. These conversations were rarely less than 90 minutes in length. The professional locations of these educators are very significant to their contributions to this study: three are band-based educators either involved in the managing the Band’s education portfolio or teaching traditional history, culture, and language, four have been advocates working in-between Band and schools, two have been teaching in public schools for more than 15 years, and one works as a Certified Education Assistant supporting Okanagan students in their
classrooms (see Table 4). Of the ten, seven were members of the Okanagan First Nation. Aboriginal educators were selected for the study based upon their involvement with Alpha and Beta—present and historic.

Table 4

Okanagan and Aboriginal Educators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educator’s Pseudonym</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>Band-based educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rita</td>
<td>Advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>Advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>Advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Band-based educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Certified Education Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>Band-based educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Non-Aboriginal school leaders—15 Conversations with Four Non-Aboriginal School Leaders and Four non-Aboriginal Educators

Initially I was interested in only interviewing the four administrators of Alpha and Beta, who volunteered to join the study. Principals Jim and John were veteran administrators and had a great deal of experience working with the Okanagan. Vice-principals Steven and Phillip were in their second postings, and both were reflecting on their first year working with Okanagan students, parents, and community. Given my previous work experience at

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41 Admittedly, these descriptions are vague. However, greater specificity would not maintain the confidentiality promised participants. Identifying the roles of these individuals would certainly help the reader accept the credibility of each person’s perspective, particularly on certain issues. Although I would like the reader to be able to make judgements of validity as much as possible in their own right, in this regard readers need to trust that I have selected persons to speak on an issue based upon the strength of their location and experience to make such a claim. I am also uncomfortable with the way in which this drive to confidentiality removes from participant’s their legitimate co-generation/authorship of the ideas presented here. Ideally, I would honour each participant’s thinking with public acknowledgement of their invaluable contributions.
Beta, I knew several key educators who had been involved with school leadership and had worked closely with Beta administrators for a long time: Zoe and Mick for 30 years; Charmaine for 18. I realized that these individuals could provide valuable perspective and history to relations between Okanagan students, families, community and the non-Aboriginal school leaders at Beta. Toward the end of the data collection process, it became apparent that it would be important to get further perspective on the Beta Dialogue. Maggie, as a previous participant in that process, also volunteered to join in, though too late for a second conversation.

Table 5

Non-Aboriginal School Leaders and Non-Aboriginal Educators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educator’s Pseudonym</th>
<th>Educator’s Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>Principal, (former) Alpha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Principal, (former) Beta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip</td>
<td>Vice-Principal, Alpha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charmaine</td>
<td>Counselor, Beta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mick</td>
<td>Counselor, Beta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>Vice-Principal, Beta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoe</td>
<td>Teacher, former administrator, Behavior support teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>Teacher, pro-d coordinator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

35 Participants

In all 35 people participated in the study to its end. Twenty-four were Okanagan.

Three were of other First Nations. Eight were non-Aboriginal. Of the 15 Okanagan adults who participated, 13 had children who had attended Alpha and/or Beta. Although not quite

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42 For clarity, I am referring to the principals and vice-principals as “school leaders” and to these others as “educators.” However, they all are unquestionably school leaders. I firmly believe that leadership in schools is not position or role dependent. I have purposely used “school leaders” as the primary frame here in order to speak broadly to all who take leadership in schools—teachers, staff, parents, school-based administration, district administration. But, the focus of the study is particularly on those vested with responsibility for leading the whole school—principals and vice-principals.
the representation I had planned (fewer Alpha parents and one fewer Beta student), this group provided a significant and vital diversity of perspectives. Together we looked at the challenge of improving communication, understanding, relationships and educational processes from many points of view.

61 Conversations

Sixty-one conversations each one holding a universe of meaning. The first round of conversations began in June, 2003. Second conversations with participants began as early as July, but most were done in January and February, 2004. The first conversations were generally guided by an interview script (see Appendices 1-3). “Generally” being the operative word, since I did not strictly follow the script, but rather posed questions from the scripts as the opportunity provided itself in our conversations. I wished conversations to be as “natural” as possible, and as a consequence, participants often went in directions that they considered important, and I followed after, ensuring I understood what they meant. These were mostly conversations, not interviews. After several of these conversations, I discovered that I tended to wait until a participant had broached a subject, or provided the language to engage a difficult topic. I believe that this approach enabled us to proceed respectfully and developed confidence in our ability to share meanings together. I became very conscious of being spoken to differently by each participant; and realized that attempting to support the coherence of these differences by staying within their specific terms and frames of reference was critical to the particularity of the meanings they wished to share with me. Each conversation was referential to the meanings and language that were generated within its bounds. The follow up conversations built further on this.

However, without specific locations in interviews to find certain sorts of data (i.e. after pre-set questions) this meant that much more searching was necessary for points of view on particular topics.
I was also aware of the evolution of relations through the process—depending of course on how well the participant and I knew each other—a remarkable spiraling cycle of suspicion, trust, withdrawal, revelation, care, and friendship.

The second conversations tended to be, but were not always, longer. Participants used the second conversation to review the first conversation. They generally expressed dismay at how the transcript revealed “uhms” and “ahs” and repetitions and tangents. They clarified some sections, expanded on some points that they wished to emphasize, and revised some sections. With these changes, all approved the use of their first conversations for the study. I explained to all that I would not be doing a similar follow up with the second conversation, but that they would have opportunity to review anything that I carried forward from the second conversation in their review of the material included in the dissertation.

I spoke a great deal more in the second conversations. According to the back and forth, listen, understand and check understanding, model of dialogue that I espoused, the second conversations were important for me to be sure that I was understanding what participants had meant in our first conversations. Sometimes this sounded like a direct response: “In the last conversation we talked about, and I understood from that....” At other times, my checking understanding took a more synergistic approach, building on what I understood to then make suggestions of what might address or engage this shared meaning. I took advantage of the second conversation to share what I had learned across the conversations and to get feedback on possible ameliorative actions that were implied by what I was learning.44 New directions were also explored. In several instances, the second conversations were very rich in detail and depth.

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44 In these second conversations the dialogic approach of this study becomes most explicit, and it creates a prima facie tension with my commitment not to speak for participants, yet, in checking understanding and
Locations and Numbers

I met students at their respective schools in offices or seminar rooms. I purposely met with elementary students in pairs and in a focus group in order to help them feel more comfortable when meeting with me—a White, tall, stranger. All other participants I met with individually. Okanagan parents and I met in a variety of locations: beside a soccer field, at work, at their homes, in coffee shops, and in restaurants. Some of these locations were conducive to taped interviews and some were not. Aboriginal educators and I met in their homes, at schools, in coffee shops, restaurants, and in work places. Non-Aboriginal participants and I also met at school and in their homes.

The #%^@^*! Tape Recorder (Operator)

Five of the 56 conversations that could have been taped were affected by operator-machine difficulties. The very first conversation, with Jim, the microphone was not turned on. On a day where I met with Laurie, Robert, Cody and Stewart for the first time in back to back sessions, I learned that the microphone switch could be turned to ‘on’ but not really be on. I discovered this only after the completion of the third conversation. This discovery resulted in a most intense feeling of despair, equaled only a few other times in my life. However, I immediately recorded what I had understood and remembered of the conversations. Interesting how such angst sharpens the memory! This resulted in my presenting to Robert and Laurie during our follow up conversation, what I understood they had been saying, rather than a verbatim transcript of what was said.\textsuperscript{45,46} This was fraught

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\textsuperscript{45} This process was repeated with a couple of the parent interviews when the parents did not wish to be recorded, and on two further occasions, when the operator failed to engage the tape recorder correctly.
with danger insofar as I was, and remain, concerned about putting my own words in their mouths. However, both of these students, as will become apparent in the chapter ahead, are very strong-minded individuals, and they were more than willing to get me thinking on the right track. And, this approach had some unexpected advantages for a dialogically based process. To put it simply, by providing the students a version of what I had understood, rather than an exact replication of what was said, they had opportunity to check that I understood their words as they wished them to be understood.

**Checking Understanding through Summary and Transcription**

This step of confirming understanding is part of the dialogical process that provides the basis for the approach of this study. And it is precisely the reason behind meeting a second time with each participant. By allowing participants to confirm my understandings of their meanings, we could move beyond some of the ways of thinking that pre-figure my own understanding, and thereby transcend some of the significant sociological differences and power relations that created distance between us – age, socio-economic status, gender, culture, colonizing history, religion, etcetera.

I benefited from the failure of the tape machine, as I reported to my supervisor later, through an experience that I can only describe as having to ‘write their words deeply in my heart.’ Knowing that the tape recorder didn’t have their precious gifts of thought and experience, I was forced to work the ideas out of my own being. I re-listened to their words in my mind, replaying body language and inflection, testing my own words against the feeling and thinking that they had evoked in me at the time. I am reminded of the wisdom of

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46 My understandings gained from the conversation with Stewart and Cody I carried forward to our focus group session.
Cree elder Jim Kanapotatao, as he chastised Wally Isbister (1998) for intending to use recording machinery for their conversation together.

Grandchild, you should have more confidence in the faculties and senses bestowed upon you by the Creator. The mind, eyes and ears, when used to capacity, facilitate the learning process. Machine learning, on the other hand, dulls our capacity to learn and takes away the essence of the moment. This very moment is crucial; therein lies the truth. Truth is yesterday’s problem and tomorrow’s lies. Learn, then, my grandchild by use of your faculties and senses and you will discover the beauty and essence of the moment. (Isbister, 1998, p. 78)

It was more important that the researcher understand with his mind, eyes, and ears, and let the experience in its present fullness teach him. Without the machine, I was suddenly much more accountable for, and much more attentive to, what I had heard.

However, what was profoundly influential to me at the time has posed some difficult challenges while writing this dissertation. I am concerned to represent the thinking of each student with as little mediation and bias as is possible. I do not wish at any time to speak for one of these students and thereby reinscribe a colonizing history that once again has a White person speaking for an Aboriginal person. This appears at first blush to be much easier from a verbatim transcript. It must be noted, though, that the multiple layers of meaning communicated and experienced in a face-to-face session, and inscribed in my understanding of the word events you read as a direct transcription, are also not easily accessible through a verbatim transcription. When speaking with someone using a different vocabulary than one uses oneself to express ideas, often the tone, inflection, body language, and on the spot interpretations of analogies and metaphors are deeply significant. This is one of the two reasons why I insisted on doing my own transcriptions of each conversation, and why I made notes as I was transcribing each conversation, logging ideas as they emerged in the

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47 The second reason was to uphold my promise of confidentiality. As an aside to future researchers, doing one’s own transcriptions adds a lot of time to a project. I averaged about 10 hours for every 45 minutes of taped interview (including initial logging of emergent themes).
interphase between my memory of the conversation, my listening again to the conversation, and my reading the words in newly formed text. Still, as a reader, I have greater confidence reading directly the words of a quoted person, than I do reading an author’s summary. And as a writer, crafting text directly from a transcription feels so much cleaner, so much more valid. So I trust that you will also gauge my summarized passages with a heightened awareness, not necessarily assuming that I have got it wrong, but conscious that my words may have connotations different than those words spoken initially by a student. And I will continue to struggle with whether experiencing someone’s conversation with one’s “mind, eyes, and ears” can carry the same legitimacy in text based academic writing as does a verbatim transcript.

Transcriptions

Of the 61 full transcriptions of conversations, I did 53 personally and had the final eight transcribed professionally. I transcribed all of the conversations that I shared with Aboriginal participants because of my concern for catching the nuances of meanings that can be lost in cross-cultural settings. I also wished to use each participant’s voice to bring back as much memory of our conversation as possible, and thus wrote process memos during the transcription of each conversation in order to better capture the particularity of each conversation. Finally, I was very concerned to maintain the confidentiality that I had promised to Aboriginal participants, and felt that doing the transcriptions myself was an important part of this. I would have continued with the same process with non-Aboriginal participants, however I just ran out of time. I felt that it was justifiable to give over the transcription process of their conversations because I was not concerned about cross-cultural meaning loss, because I shared with all of them the professional discourse of schools and school leadership, because I had worked with six of the eight non-Aboriginal educators for
several years previously, and because I was confident that they would be okay with this.

Finally, seven of the eight conversations transcribed professionally were second
conversations so that I already had followed my transcription-memo process once. The eighth
conversation was with someone that I had worked with for several years and given that our
conversation occurred at the end of the data collection process and given the uniqueness of
her location in the study, I had a good memory of our conversation. I checked several of
these transcriptions against the tape originals and found them excellent.

The transcripts of the first conversations, or summaries as in the few noted cases,
were forwarded to participants in advance of our second conversations. Reflections,
revisions, and approval were sought for these first transcriptions and summaries. Check back
for the second conversations occurred in each participant’s review of chapter sections based
on these conversations.

Analysis and Interpretation: Grouping

Sixty-one conversations generate a lot of text—1100 pages of transcripts—and a lot
of meaning! Holding onto the particularities of each conversation was a major challenge of
this study. It became apparent very quickly that one data chapter summarizing the different
perspectives of all participants would lose a great deal of detail and substance of the
conversations. I was concerned that in summarizing, I would be generalizing unique and
substantive details to the point where they lost their relevance and power to be a basis for
genuine engagement. Furthermore, such generalizing inherently simplifies, making
difference vulnerable to discursive overlay as I state things in my own terms. Consequently, I
organized the participants into four distinct groups: Okanagan students, Okanagan Parents,
Aboriginal Educators, and non-Aboriginal school leaders and educators. This organizational
approach enabled me to focus with greater intensity on fewer conversations. It also had the
effect of making the participants so grouped referential to each other in some degree. By that I mean that the words and ideas of participants in a group emphasized, revealed, and contradicted each other. They shared an interpretive space that influenced what was revealed and represented.

I assumed, and still believe, that the “locations” – student, parent, Aboriginal educator, non-Aboriginal school leaders and educators—represented by the groups provided a reasonable basis for making these groupings, that the participants were coming from a direction that had perspectives in common. I also assumed that in order to maximize the particularity of each participant’s perspective, it was necessary to limit the amount of cross-group referencing within each chapter. Thus, when I worked with a group’s conversations, I immersed myself in that group’s words and ideas. I sought to let the sub-themes and issues expressed by the group determine both how their chapter was organized and what was presented. I consciously did not, except in a few instances, make connections to themes or issues raised by other groups, though these perspectives were doubtless in the back of my mind. Some thematic repetition between data chapters has resulted. However, this process of analyzing, coding, interpreting, summarizing, and writing, immersed in, and referential to, only the participants’ perspectives of a particular group, was an important part of enabling participant’s voices to emerge in their own terms.

**Analysis and Interpretation: Each Conversation**

Each conversation was analyzed several times. After most conversations I made notes about themes that had stood out.48 When I transcribed the first conversations, I again made process notes—sometimes longer than the transcription itself—identifying major themes, sub-themes, new ideas, and questions they provoked, as well as reflecting on the

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48 Often onto tape as I was driving between conversations, or on the five hour drive returning to the city.
conversation process. These were important background for the second conversation. I included these process memos in the next round of analysis and interpretation during which I read through both conversations and all process memos. Following this read through, I then identified and recorded the major themes, sub-themes, and issues of the conversations and notes. At this point, I then coded the major themes, sub-themes, and issues according to the study’s major themes: communication, understanding, and relationships. This provided the loose framework for each chapter. For the students’ chapter and the parents’ chapter, I did this process by hand, writing down themes, quotations, and locations in conversations, eventually transferring these to digital form. For the Aboriginal educators and non-Aboriginal participants’ chapters, I used excel, typing themes, summaries, and locations directly to one of four spreadsheets dedicated to communication, understanding, relationship, or study process. Quotations for each I cut from the digital version of the conversation and pasted directly into excel. The use of excel further strengthened my ability to hold onto details, and increased the number of sub-themes identified. Excel also made re-entry into the data, after a time, easier. I used the excel sort function as a further aid to organizing themes and sub-themes.

As mentioned in the preceding chapters, communication, understanding and relationships were broad domains of meaning woven together to net experiences and insights of participants. I passed the net of communication through the stream of themes and sub-themes gathering those that fit within its broad definition of processes that enable the transfer of meaning. Similarly, the net of understanding gathered scores of spilaxem, and other specific knowledge that participants felt was necessary for improving communication, the process of understanding, the formation of relationships, and educational processes. The net
of relations gathered attitudes, ways of being together and power relations. These “nets” were made up of what participants had determined was significant to communication, understanding, and relationships, but were also woven of the theories of dialogue and oral tradition to which I have been particularly sensitized.

**Drafting, Analyzing, and Interpreting**

Rather than beginning with the literature review, theory, and methodology, I began drafting the dissertation with the students’ perspectives chapter. I then drafted the parents’ chapter, the Aboriginal educators’ chapter and the non-Aboriginal educator’s chapter. After these were done I drafted the literature review and then this methodology chapter. My intent was to make students’ voices and the voices of the Okanagan participants the foundation of the study. Of course I was immersed in theory before I began, but my hypothesis was that if I was to engage participant’s perspectives on their own terms as much as I could, I should be representing what they expressed as important (what I understood they expressed to be important), rather than bringing to my representation of their voices a predetermined argument. Put another way, giving as much priority to their ideas as I could was an essential part of the dialogical research theory that I wished to employ.

I need to note here that the process of writing/drafting is for me a journey of discovery and a further process of interpretation. In the crafting of sentences and paragraphs, the intratextuality of ideas and voices reveals and connotes meaning in unexpected ways. The translation of ideas into Mark’s language forms, limited vocabulary, and limited syntactical structures results in interpretation. The art of great writing is to communicate nuance and complexity deftly and simply; you will already have noted that lacking such skill I tend to use a lot of words in the hope of enabling a sense of the nuance of a perspective or idea. So I chose to write the perspectives chapters first, because I wished my further discoveries within
the writing of those chapters to become determinative of the rest of the dissertation. In the manner of “critical grounded theory” (Charmaz, 2000), I have sought at every opportunity to let the context and the particularity of voices of participants break through, recognizing that there are unavoidable overlays from discourse, *habitus*, and my capacity to write that limit this possibility.

As I began the students’ chapter a further purpose for this work emerged, namely, that Okanagan perspectives needed to be represented in a manner that would make them accessible to the Okanagan community for their own reflection and purposes. The perspectives shared with me across all of the conversations come from many sides of the political and generational divisions that inhere in the community. Enabling the community to hear these voices somewhat independent of my purposes for writing this dissertation, struck me as a further service to the community. This resulted in an inclination to provide as much detail, and as wide a presentation of perspectives and issues as I could manage. It also emphasized the importance of framing ideas and quotations in as authentic a manner as possible (again given the limitations that have been mentioned).

In retrospect, I would summarize the process of representation in the four perspectives chapters on a continuum. At one end was the students’ chapter, in which I attempted to make students’ voices as authentically present as I could, often using lengthy quotations with contextual detail. And at the other end was the non-Aboriginal school leaders and educators chapter, where I more frequently summarized perspectives and ideas.⁴⁹ In all cases I remained committed to understanding and representing perspectives in their own

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⁴⁹ My reasoning for this was that I shared professional experience, educational paths, and cultural traditions with each of these educators, and some I had worked with for a number of years. Consequently, I was more confident of catching their meanings and of my representation of their meanings. This assumption was supported in the check back sessions.
terms, but the combination of wishing to counter my own discursive influences and the desire for Okanagan people to be able to access the perspectives of Okanagan participants clearly, lead to a widely inclusive and detailed approach with Okanagan perspectives.

Maintaining confidentiality had an inordinately strong influence on how ideas could be presented, and even, to some extent, on what ideas could be presented. There were two levels of concern: external to the district and community, and internal to the district and community. It was relatively straightforward to create a fog of vagueness with which to make the community unrecognizable to the world beyond—district name withheld, city names withheld, Okanagan community name withheld. All participants were given a pseudonym (which they approved or changed). But it was much more difficult to maintain confidentiality, or anonymity as is implied, at the local level. Because the communities involved are so small, it was necessary to disguise or withhold idiosyncratic details that could reveal an identity. Whenever possible other ways were used to present perspectives that maintained confidentiality and let perspectives be present. For example, I might note that "one parent observed that" without revealing the pseudonym. The reasons for maintaining confidentiality generally had to do with concerns about the political dividedness of the community and relations with the school district.

After I had drafted the chapters and returned them to participants for their review, I expressed my concerns to participants that even with the measures I had taken, it would be very difficult to maintain anonymity at the local level. I wrote:

Given that the Okanagan community and the school district community are both quite small, I am concerned that local [names removed] readers of the dissertation will be able to figure out your identity from what you say. Therefore, I believe that the best rule of thumb is, if you are not comfortable with people knowing that you have stated a certain position, then please let me know, and I shall re-work the idea so that it is not spoken by you (your pseudonym), but nevertheless is not lost.
As I went on to express in the check back cover letter, maintaining confidentiality also meant
that I could not publicly honour the participants’ contributions to the study. This dissertation
has, from its beginning, been a collaborative effort, and to not acknowledge the many hours
of effort, the depth of wisdom, and the extent of knowledge shared by each participant is
deeply problematic to me. I am concerned that this, as much as any other things that I have
done, continues the colonizing process—Aboriginal voices are invisible while yet another
White man gets the credit. In response to this I say first that this dissertation is nothing
without the Okanagan, Aboriginal, and non-Aboriginal participants who shared of their lives,
hearts, minds, and spirits. To each I raise my hands in gratitude and reverence. Second, that it
is my intention, beyond the confines of these pages, to work with participants in other venues
wherein their wisdom and knowledge can be recognized and honoured properly. Those
venues will vary for each participant. Third, I am hopeful that the benefits of this work will
honour their contributions.

Confidentiality is a part of the “no harm” commitment that underlies this work. To be
responsible to all of the members of the Okanagan community and to the members of the
school district means to present perspectives in a manner that reveals shared worlds without
damaging working relationships in the present or those that might develop in the future. I
talked with participants about ensuring that what I included of their words and ideas would
not have negative effects for themselves personally or for the web of relations, which
constitute the Okanagan community and school district. Sometimes our reality is not
pleasant to look at, and those parts that are particularly difficult, such as racism, I have
sought to engage in a spirit of responsible and unflinching openness—aware of the pain
caused and the pain of recognizing responsibility.
Check Back

Following the completed drafting of the four perspectives chapters and the literature review chapter, I felt confident in giving the drafts back to participants for their final confirmation and approvals. This followed a two-stage process. First, for each participant I went through their respective chapter and excerpted all of the quotations and passages which I had cited from our conversations. I put these together in a document, and with a cover letter explaining the process, I returned them to participants for their review. In some cases this resulted in a 14 page document with as many as 35 citations. It was suggested that participants check those passages that were acceptable, place a question mark beside those passages that needed clarification or further explanation, and X those passages that needed to be edited or removed. Several helpful changes were made as a consequence. After I had a good sense of what participants were okay with, and thus what I could include, I then drafted the conclusion, and the introduction.

In the second stage, I forwarded full chapters, now containing approved citations from participants, to each participant (32 of 35) within the chapter. This was important to give participants a better sense of the whole, how their perspectives fit with those of others in the carefully woven tapestry of a full chapter. This stage went ahead much later in the process than I had hoped, this being after I had a good sense that my committee was satisfied with the chapters generally. As a consequence, further feedback was limited. Twenty-one of the 32 provided feedback.

Thus I sought to replicate the to and fro of dialogue in this research process, by which participants in dialogue mutually construct meaning and affirm each others’ understanding. Furthermore, I believe this cycling back and forth provided an important means of validation of perspectives, and of the representations.
Findings, Implications and Conclusions

There were two significant and somewhat interdependent processes followed for drawing implications and conclusions from the perspectives (Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7), theory (Chapter 2), and methodology chapters (Chapter 3). First, many implications and possibilities for improving communication, understanding, and relationships were checked with participants during the second interviews. These are noted in the perspectives chapters. The second process brought theory and perspectives together in a synergistic way in my own imagination when I at last could step back and consider all that we had created together. The former were collaborative, the latter emerge from my immersion in co-constructed meanings and theory. Both processes were generative of highly contextual new knowledge.

Giving Back (Reciprocity) and Control

It was always the intention of this work to be of use for Okanagan students, families, and communities, and for the non-Aboriginal school leaders and educators who serve them. To this end, presentations of the findings for both Band and school district are planned. Copies of the dissertation will be provided to both groups, as will an executive summary of the findings. All participants will be forwarded summaries of the findings as well. It is hoped that there will be opportunity to co-present findings with Okanagan participants in the study, and to support further research efforts by the Okanagan and the school district in this area.

Recognizing that the “data” of this study may be of interest to the Okanagan Nation and to the school district, all transcripts of conversations have been returned to respective participants. Participants were also asked if they would like the tapes of the conversations returned or destroyed.

Because this is a shared story—a collaborative construction of meanings—further presentations of findings in academic conferences or in publications by the author will be
done after consultation and approval of participants, and after consultation with Band and school district, depending, of course, on what aspects of the current work are relevant. Participant control will be honoured.

**Study Delimitations and Limitations**

In preliminary conversations, I was asked by school district representatives to consider including “urban” Aboriginal students, families, and community in this study. I chose not to for two reasons: study focus and resources. It was my hope that some of the findings might still be useful for other Aboriginal students, families and communities served by the school district. The focus on the Okanagan community also focused the Aboriginal education literature which I selected for theoretical background: that which had some affinity with the Okanagan culture, tradition, and history; with colonial history and with education in British Columbia and Canada; and with key issues raised by study participants such as colonization, oppression, and power relations. It had been my intention to include focus group conversations in the study as a further means of deepening understanding, triangulating perspectives, and as a way of modeling potential dialogic encounters. This stage of the study was cancelled because I ran out of resources and time.

This study is strongly influenced by who volunteered. I had hoped for another high school student. It was unfortunate that two parents whom I shared first conversations with could not continue. I cannot say how representative the volunteers are of the diversity of perspective in the Okanagan community.

This study, as a qualitative study, shares the same generalizability constraints. It does not claim to be predictive of conditions or solutions for other First Nations communities and

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50 For example, I foresee consulting with parent participants and Band if a publication considering the parents perspectives was planned, but not the school district, or other study participants.
non-Aboriginal schools. However, it does claim some merit in “its ability to speak specifically to the populations from which it was derived and to apply back to them” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).
CHAPTER 4

Students’ Perspectives

Conversations with Students

This chapter is based upon conversations that I shared with nine Okanagan students. In order to enable the elementary students to feel more comfortable, and in an attempt to level, somewhat, the power dynamics involved with 11 and 12 year olds speaking to a tall white male stranger, I met with the elementary students in pairs: Stewart and Cody, and then Robyn and Joannie.\textsuperscript{51} Our conversations occurred in a quiet office with nice wicker and cushion chairs around a small coffee table. After our conversations, I decided that the students would be more comfortable in a larger group setting rather than meeting a second time as a twosome. Consequently, the focus group conversation, which followed two weeks later, was in part a checking back with the four students about what I had understood from our first conversations.

The focus group conversation was a loud and boisterous event. If the first conversations had been typified by frequent pauses and longish silences, the focus group was beyond my ability, and the tape recorder’s ability, to capture all of the threads of the multiple conversations that were often going on at once. During the focus group, a student would respond to a question or offered observation and this would lead to other students jumping in with their own anecdotes, reactions, and frequent laughter. Anticipating that the tape recorder might be overwhelmed by the multitude of voices often speaking at once, I recorded my own thoughts about the conversation immediately afterwards. These notes turned out to be very helpful.

\textsuperscript{51} All of the students’ names are pseudonyms.
Three Okanagan high school students volunteered to participate in the research project: Robert, a male grade 12 student, Laurie, a female grade 12 student, and Gordon, a male grade 11 student. I met with each on two different occasions.

This chapter is organized in a number of ways. First, it is organized according to the general categories of understanding, relationships, and communication. All participants were informed from the start that these were the primary foci for the study. Thus, these themes provide a beginning organizational pattern. It is worth noting that at times participants were speaking directly to these themes as topics of discussion. However, I have also retrospectively identified parts of our conversations that spoke indirectly to these general themes. I identify these themes as an external structure, imposed from the outset, framing our purpose, setting our topics for discussion, and guiding my interpretation. Each of these general categories is in turn organized by sub-themes. These sub-themes emerged from the conversations as organizers that seemed to me to frame important ideas in a way true to their intentions. Within the sub-themes, I gather the students’ voices together as if we were again in conversation.

An image that guided my writing of this chapter is that of a talking circle in which a topic is placed before us, and each person who has something to say is respectfully given time and attention. But in the writing, I discovered that I was always also in a conversation with you as reader, a silent member of a larger talking circle, a circle that included the students’ conversations with me, but also included my conversations with myself, and my attempts to interpret the meanings of these conversations for the many others that nurture and educate these students. Your influence I discovered to be rather dramatic! In my efforts to include you in this larger circle, I add my voice in response to the student’s words,
sometimes to display my understanding, sometimes to help with clarification, sometimes to make valuable connections, sometimes to turn to you with my conviction that what the students are saying must call us to action.

Understanding

Understanding was identified by all students as essential for school leaders. In our conversations several meanings for the notion of understanding emerged. Understanding meant the processes whereby a person came to gain knowledge. Understanding meant knowledge about important areas of concern: knowledge of Okanagan culture and traditions; knowledge of students; knowledge of students' lived experiences; knowledge of students' families. Understanding implied the possibility for school leaders to act in a supportive way for Okanagan students.

Understanding as a Process of Gaining Knowledge

In our first conversation, Laurie was very clear about the importance of understanding the lives of students for improving their educational experience. Laurie had been a grade eight student in my final year as vice principal at the high school. I remembered her, but not as the self-possessed, confident grade 12 who sat me down and told me frankly what I needed to understand. She had listened carefully during my invitation meeting, had even begun my instruction then, with her peers surrounding her. At the time I had dearly wanted to carry on the discussion that she so willingly charged into, including all of the students present. But I was very conscious of the lack of consent that framed that invitation-meeting, and brought an end to the conversation in a way that I hoped didn’t make it seem

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52 This conversation was not taped. I made a summary of the conversation immediately following and presented the summary to Laurie, which she approved. Consequently, when I refer to what Laurie said, I am quoting from the summary of the conversation that she has approved. I use single quotation marks (‘‘) to reflect the paraphrased nature of her words.
that I didn’t want to hear her words. I was delighted when she volunteered. When we met for our first conversation, she had a good sense of what she wanted me to think about. She had journeyed through 13 years of public schooling, and as I was to learn, some of the years had held significant challenges.

School leaders need to understand students, Laurie maintained. But, in the same breath, she noted that student's lives must also be private. She said that ‘students needed people to understand, needed school leaders to understand, but also needed to have a private life that was their own and that they did not disclose.’ There is no question that teenage students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal want and need private lives, free from the controlling gaze of adults, and yet I was conscious that Laurie was also making a pragmatic statement to me as a non-Aboriginal authority figure, about being an Aboriginal student in a public school. Her words express the historical tension between colonized and colonizer, between First Nations person and European Canadian authority. In other words, it may appear to be in a student’s best interest if a school leader understands an Aboriginal student, but don’t expect that students are going to trust a non-Aboriginal school leader with the truths of their lives, and roll back boundaries that have been erected out of the experience of generations, without other motivations being present. This establishes an important frame to the process of understanding.

In our conversation, I responded that this presented a challenging tension for a non-Aboriginal school leader, seeking to understand and yet not invading a student’s privacy. Laurie did not attempt to dismiss the tension, or avoid the difficulties posed. Instead she noted ‘that as trust grew, boundaries might withdraw. As the interactions went on and there
were more communications, those boundaries and those needs for privacy might decrease somewhat, or would change.'

Laurie's words clearly define important elements of the process whereby school leaders may gain knowledge about Aboriginal students: grow trust through frequent interaction and communication. Her words also identify who is in the driver's seat; a school leader may create opportunities for frequent interaction, a school leader may communicate in many ways and many times, but it is the student who will determine when a degree of trust has been reached sufficient to roll back boundaries.53

Laurie also identified a memorable experience in which the school principal had demonstrated an important way to gain understanding. He 'had gone to the First Nations Studies 12 (FNS 12) class and had participated in it.' And he told her afterwards how it was 'important for him to learn those things. And to be there.' In our conversation Laurie expressed openly her respect and trust for this principal (John), how she felt she could approach him with problems, and how she had felt encouraged and supported by him across all of her years at the high school. His participation in the FNS 12 class stood out for her as remarkable though. It was a clear example, in her view, of gaining understanding and making connection with students in a positive way. When I consider her words, I am reminded of Paolo Freire's (2000) constant reminder to learn with those one would teach. This example also brings to light that it may not be on the usual turf of a principal or vice principal that such understanding is possible. Rather, it is off the beaten path, outside the expected role-

53 School leaders, through their authority, their access to confidential information about students, and their de facto power over students, are always in a position to manipulate students to reveal themselves more than students may be comfortable with. 'In loco parentis' provides a principal the legal authority to act in accord with what he or she believes is in the best interest of the child. However, Laurie’s thesis implies that school leaders would not use their power to attain understanding, but would instead earn their understanding through a process of gaining a student’s respect and trust.
boundaries, where understanding in the right sort of way becomes possible. By becoming a fellow student, by acknowledging his need to understand, by taking off, for a short time, the typical power relations that form the invisible armor of office, the principal gained understanding that opened the way for greater understanding of Laurie’s life, by building the trust and respect needed for her to roll back her boundaries.

She underscored the importance of this process for her, when, in our second conversation, she noted, “I don’t trust the new principal. I couldn’t take any problems to him.... He needs to talk with us more, wherever we are.”

Stewart gave an example of how a principal builds trust and connection in an elementary setting through empathic understanding. Stewart had a passion for hockey and for sports in general. His schooling experiences included time in another province, which provided him with alternative perspectives and some different experiences. He told the story of getting into trouble for sliding down the monkey bars on the playground. The playground supervisor had taken him directly to the principal’s office. Expecting a rebuke, Stewart was surprised and grateful when the principal acknowledged that sliding down the monkey bars was something he also had done as a child and he remembered the fun of it. Instead of a rebuke, Stewart’s identity as an adventuresome, fun-loving child was affirmed. Stewart liked this principal the best of all those he had.

Laurie provided a further defining aspect of the process of understanding that struck me forcibly in our first conversation, such that I quoted her words back to her in our second conversation. In reflecting back on her 12 years of experience in public schools, she noted

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54 See also school leader’s chapter, and in particular Jim’s anecdote about only being able to connect with a student outside of the office.
55 By empathic understanding I mean that process implied by the traditional metaphor of walking a mile in another person’s moccasins.
that at several times teachers had “talked down” to her, “treating her as being stupid or something.” I will bring up this experience again to explore its racist content, but here it serves to emphasize Laurie’s expectation of someone whom she would be willing to have understand her life. Namely, such a person would communicate with her as an equal, worthy of respect. She said of John, the former principal, that ‘he expected that she could do things, that she could succeed.’

Unlike Laurie, Gordon had only been in the high school for one month when I first met with him. He had transferred from another local school at his conclusion of grade 10 the previous year. By his second conversation in January, Gordon had a strong sense of the high school, and his transfer experience provided him with the clear vision of context that often accompanies those who move from one community to another. During our first conversation, Gordon was very respectful, though in the beginning somewhat wary of my questions and our talking. Nevertheless, I believe he preferred our conversation to his class work, and by the end of the conversation both of us were walking around and around this shared puzzle, trying to make sense of it. During our second meeting, Gordon and I really connected. Without noticing the time, we talked through breaks and into the lunch hour. Gordon also had a good notion of what he wished me to understand. His focus was on how important the personal lives of students were to their success in school.

There were several points in our conversations where Gordon defined how understanding as a process of gaining knowledge should proceed from his experience. He remembered one incident where a principal had punished him and a friend in elementary school. The incident stood out for him because his side of the story was never heard. The principal listened to one Aboriginal student’s side of the story and assumed Gordon guilty.
M. If you were to sit in that principal's position and you were facing yourself, what would you have wanted that person to do?

G. I would just want them to listen to what me and my friend had to say, and what we said had happened.... It was like we were guilty before we even went in there.

Understanding a student, especially in the emotionally charged context of conflict and discipline in a school, requires taking the time to listen to what students "had to say." By not listening at this critical juncture, Gordon’s principal closed down the possibility of building trust with Gordon.

M. Did you talk to your parents about the different story and perception?

G. Ya, well at first my mom was really mad at me and me and my friend got into a lot of trouble from our parents, then after awhile when she finally started listening to us, we uh, she kind of believed us after I told her what our story was.

M. So did she take that back to the principal or did she let it go?

G. Just let it go, kinda.

M. Were you okay with that?

G. Ya. It’s over and done with. It’s fine.

M. But it creates a bit of a gap between you and the school.

G. Ya.

Having been in the above situation as an administrator myself, I can understand that principals and vice-principals will make some mistakes during the investigation of incidents and the meting out of consequences during their careers. It is challenging to weigh the merit of conflicting stories and arrive at what truly happened in an incident, particularly when there are always other demands that seek immediate attention. However, there is little excuse for not following the simplest elements of procedural justice and hearing all sides of a story. In the context of non-Aboriginal school leaders and Aboriginal students, such miscarriages of justice attach themselves to historically pre-established frameworks of injustice that have the potential to increase the distancing effect of such actions. Gordon’s experience highlights the
importance of not denying Aboriginal students fair process. Moreover, when we consider understanding as a means of gaining knowledge, listening to what a student has to say presents itself here as a minimum condition for the process of understanding.

Another of Gordon's stories highlighted the importance of non-Aboriginal teachers genuinely responding to the authentic questions that emerge out of Aboriginal history and lives lived. How can a student begin to grow trust, in Laurie's words, if non-Aboriginal school leaders create, by policy, learning environments where teachers and school leaders evade questions about the serious issues in a student's life?

M. Okay. Hmmm. What about, what other things would you want them [non-Aboriginal school leaders] to learn?

G. ....I have a [relative] there [at his previous school], [the relative] is like part of the school council, and what [the relative] told us was that the teachers are not allowed to talk about what actually kind of happened, like whenever we used to ask about residential schools, they used to, the teachers wouldn't. I don't know if it is like that here, but the teachers didn't seem like they were allowed to talk about it. They'd change the subject right away. When you'd ask about stuff like that, they wouldn't tell you.

This experience I found extremely troubling for a number of reasons. The silencing of residential school history is shocking and I will address this in more detail later. The policy framework Gordon alludes to exemplifies how school leaders influence communication patterns amongst students and teachers, another significant piece that I will go into further detail later. At this point, I believe Gordon's experience underscores a fundamental attribute of understanding as a process of gaining knowledge with students. A process of understanding is not likely to go very far if there is not a symmetrical nature to communication. In other words, don't expect me to tell you what I think about things that are important to you, if you are not willing to share with me what you think about important things to me. There is a reciprocal or symmetrical nature to communication across power

56 I have removed details of the relative in order to maintain the anonymity of the student.
differentials, such that participants can expect each other to honour their openness with equal openness, their honesty with equal honesty. In the event that such trust is not offered, or reciprocated, developing understanding with another is made difficult.

Gordon observed in our first conversation that even if his community were to provide a list of its dreams and visions for its young people to the school, it could be for nothing.

M. Another thing I've heard is having the community define clearly what it wants for its students. Meeting as a group and saying, 'these are the things we want to make sure happen for our students in high school.' And on the top of the list after listening to you would be, 'we want you to have high expectations for our students. Our students are as capable or more capable than anybody else. So keep that in mind.' Uhm. 'That we have a lot of different dreams for our children: lawyers, Band councilors, teachers, ranchers, people that work in or own sawmills, all sorts of dreams.'

G. uh-mmm.

M. And there's a long list of them.' What do you think of that idea, of creating a list and presenting that to the school?

G. Ya. I'd agree with that, Ya.

M. Do you think that would have made a difference for you in school?

G. It might have but you know, it's hard to say. It's hard to get around what you've already thought of that person, and it's telling you what this is like and cause it depends on each person, if they are willing to accept that, or

M. Or if they are willing to be moved?

G. Ya.

We were towards the end of our first 90-minute conversation at this point. My own sense of connectedness with Gordon had grown to the point where I wished to ask his perspective on ideas that had arisen in other conversations to test their merit. Gordon reminds me of a person with both feet on the ground pulling my kite-flight of ideas back to ground. He does this by bringing to mind a significant block to understanding, namely, that once we have preconceived notions about something, or someone, these are very hard to change. And his observation highlights for me a further condition of understanding as a process of gaining

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knowledge. If we are to understand others, and to make their knowledge mean something, we must be open to what they have to say, and be willing to set aside our fore conceptions and prejudices. We must be willing to be moved (Gadamer, 2002).

My conversations with Robert echoed with themes of independence, strength, ambition, responsibility, self-determination, and critique. Robert had very clear and distinct ideas about succeeding in school, and he made sure, after I had worked my way through my various perspectives, that I understood exactly where he stood. When I go back through our conversations seeking out Robert’s thoughts on understanding as a process for gaining knowledge, he doesn’t speak directly to this question. However, one part of an oft repeated thesis speaks to the process of understanding sharply: if a person will understand something, then he or she must take responsibility for learning this, and not accept excuses for not attaining this knowledge. Robert was speaking with peers in mind, but his notion seems to me to be equally valid for school leaders, teachers, parents, and community leaders.

R. If you don’t understand math problems and you don’t say anything, then it’s your own fault for not getting help and trying to understand it. You have to make an honest effort to get help and hopefully somebody will be able to help you. And then you can understand the material and do it to the best of your ability.

Robert strongly argues that learning is something that we do for ourselves. We must assertively go after understanding, if we are to make it our own. Robert’s position was intentionally a challenge, a challenge we must take up if we wish to move beyond the many blocks to understanding.

As a grade 6 student, Joannie was the youngest participant in the study. Our first conversation together with Robyn was often punctuated with longish silences. Both girls were very shy in this situation and spoke quietly, not the playground voices I heard later, or the playful voices that flowed in and out of the focus group conversations. I noticed in
retrospect that words spoken through shyness have an unusual intensity and weight, for they have forced their way through discomfort, and careful consideration. Joannie’s reflections on how non-Aboriginal school leaders could learn ‘about us’ fit well with Robert’s expectation of initiative. She said,

J. There are books they could read. People on the Reserve make books and they sell them. Or they can come out to the museum out there, called Sen k’lip museum.

M. And learn there.

J. Ya. And they could come watch our plays at Sen k’lip.

To learn about Okanagan students and develop understanding, the community is making knowledge of itself, its people, and the students’ families available—if non-Aboriginal school leaders will make the effort.

These students have provided some key notions if understanding as a process of gaining knowledge about students will succeed. Out of Laurie’s conversations emerged the importance of considering the process of understanding as a way of gaining knowledge. I retrospectively returned to all of the student conversations to investigate how other students’ experiences and perceptions might support this theme. Laurie noted that understanding the lives of students is important but must be respectfully undertaken. Such understanding becomes possible when trust grows and boundaries withdraw. This may happen through frequent interactions and communications that are respectful. Such understanding depends upon the student’s willingness to be open, and upon the student’s choices regarding what he or she wishes to share and what shall remain private.

Understanding as a process of gaining knowledge may be helped when school leaders step out of their usual roles, and find spaces or opportunities that clearly indicate an alignment by the school leader with the students’ world. It is certainly helped when non-
Aboriginal school leaders connect with students’ experiences through empathic understanding. Gordon’s negative experiences in school highlighted several other considerations of understanding as a process of gaining knowledge. If understanding is our goal, then we must listen to what students say, as a minimum condition, particularly in emotionally charged situations. Similarly, the process of understanding must proceed in a symmetrical fashion, where all parties are willing to express what they think about things that are important to others. The turning aside of genuine questions about the lived experience of children or their families does not meet this reciprocity test. Finally, Gordon pointed out how hard it is for people to get past their first impressions and established prejudices towards others—towards Aboriginal students and about non-Aboriginal school leaders. If we are to hear with understanding what is proposed by another, recognizing that our prejudices may block our reception of good ideas is necessary if we are to accept them and be moved. Robert’s own passionate challenge that if we are to understand, we must be willing to do the hard work necessary, gives motivation to engaging the dimensions of understanding presented by Laurie, Gordon, and Joannie.

Understand What?

All of the students who spoke with me were convinced of the importance of understanding, and they stated this in various ways throughout our conversations. However, each student focused the process of understanding differently. Laurie stated repeatedly that non-Aboriginal school leaders needed to understand Okanagan traditions, Okanagan history, and they needed to understand and deal with racism. Gordon’s conversations emphasized the need for non-Aboriginal school leaders to understand the lived experiences of students, and how the unique challenges and opportunities of students play a significant role in their success at school. Robert’s conversations called for school leaders to understand the self-
determining capacity of Okanagan students, even as he inquired himself about the purposes that motivate students to make sacrifices and achieve in school. Joannie, Robyn and the other elementary students tended to be very concrete about what traditions and history needed to be understood. All of the students expected school leaders to understand that they wanted a good education.

Understand Okanagan culture, tradition, identity.

It was toward the end of lunch hour and in the final 10 minutes of our conversation together when something extraordinary happened in the elementary student focus group. Quite suddenly the energy level in the room increased ten-fold, and all of the students were engaged. I had thought to honour the students’ participation in the study by offering to them the book *Q’sapi: A history of Okanagan People as told by Okanagan families* (Louis, 2002), and I presented it to them with the suggestion that perhaps they could find a good use for it in the school. However, I was unprepared for their reaction to this book. They had not seen it before.

Kelly: Ooooooh! That’s my grandma!

Robyn: Where? Oh, there.

Kelly: She died when I was a baby.

Angela: My grandmother might be there. [Grandmother’s last name]. That was her last name until she was married.

Stewart: My grandma might be there. She should be there.

Kelly: My dad was spoiled. He never got a spanking or anything.

Stewart: I did once, when I was feeding my little brother dirt (giggles).

Angela: I think I’ve got that picture. Oh look at. I know her! That’s Gloria.

Kelly: Wow. She died though.

Joannie: Oh. She’s really old (another picture). (giggles)
Angela: Old William.

Kelly: I think he was poor. Look at his house.

Stewart: That might not be his house.

Angela: It looks like it.

(Silence)

Joannie: I want to look at all the pictures.

Kelly: Hold on. Hold on.

You can imagine the students gathered round the book, squeezing others out as they each sought to find their lives reflected in its pages. After awhile, I managed to get the attention of a few of them.

Mark. Who do we want to read that?

Stewart. Kids and adults and stuff.

Kelly. First Nations kids, and other kids too.


Mark. First Nations kids. All kids. Adults? Are there any teachers that would really benefit from reading that, that you would like to have read that so they know some of your stories?

Stewart. All of them! (said in a very large voice)

Kelly. Ya.

Robyn. Ya.

Mark. All of them.

Angela. So they won’t be mean to us!

Kelly. Ya.

Robyn. Ya.

Stewart followed his impassioned judgment that all teachers should read Q’sapi with an illuminating story.
Stewart. When I was in middle school [another province], there was this teacher, taught us history. And uhm, we were supposed to pick a native culture to do a project on. And she said, ‘Pick any one you want.’ So I picked Okanagan. And then she’s like, ‘No, you can’t do that one because I don’t know about it.’

Kelly. Oh my God!

Angela. But I do.

The intensity of pride in that small room was remarkable.

Stewart. We’ve got to tell her [the librarian]. It’s got to be somewhere where everyone can see it [italics added]. Okay? They don’t put any native books in the library.

Kelly. I know [annoyed tone]. They need to put some stuff.

As the bell sounded and an Aboriginal Certified Education Assistant came into the room, the students immediately recruited her.

Joannie. We should do one [a Q’sapi-type book] just for the kids in the school.

CEA. Ya. We could! Genealogy is exciting.

Joannie. Can we?

CEA. Let’s talk to [Aboriginal support worker] about it. We can do anything if we want to work hard enough at it.

Joannie. Is [she] going to be here Monday [the next school day]?

To see these students so deeply engaged, so keenly excited to learn from this book, was thrilling to me as a teacher. As a researcher, the students couldn’t have expressed any more clearly the significance of including their own culture and traditions in their educational process. Further, the students expressed directly and indirectly their belief that if others would just understand the richness of their history, then they would be respected as they deserved to be—“so they won’t be so mean to us!”

When I asked Laurie what she thought school leaders needed to learn, she talked about ‘Okanagan culture, about tradition, about difference....we are different—we need to be, and our heritage needs to be understood. They [non-Aboriginal school leaders] need to
know that we are different. But we need to be treated the same, not differently.’ At another
time in this first conversation, Laurie followed the same line of reasoning, but applied the
terms to herself: ‘my heritage, my tradition, my culture, my background, my identity need to
be understood....you must understand me.’

These paraphrases, recorded from memory by me and later confirmed by Laurie,
express several key concepts that are likely obvious to Aboriginal readers of this text, but
may not be so obvious to non-Aboriginal educators. Firstly, that Laurie, and all of the
students I met with, identify with their Okanagan heritage, culture, and identity. Secondly,
she names the need for non-Aboriginal leaders to spend the time to understand the traditions
and culture of the Okanagan nation. Joannie said the same:

M. Do you think that principals and vice principals know enough about the Okanagan
Band?

J. No. Not really.

M. What do you think they should know?

J. More stuff about us. That we are Natives and they should respect all of us. Just
cause we are a different culture, doesn’t mean treat us in a different way.

I do not intend to represent Okanagan traditions and culture except insofar as participants in the study felt it
was important for me to understand the significance of a certain aspect of Okanagan tradition for improving
communications, understanding, and relationships between non-Aboriginal school leaders and Okanagan
students, parents, and community. Hence, when Laurie states that school leaders need to understand Okanagan
traditions, I believe that I have achieved my goal by pointing a non-Aboriginal school leader, and the Okanagan
community in a valuable direction. To help students, school leaders need to understand traditions and culture.
Just what elements of tradition and culture are important is something that I believe must be determined in the
dialogical space created between the community and the school leader.

I remain extremely wary of establishing myself as any sort of authority on Okanagan tradition or
culture. I am not. It is for the Okanagan to represent their own traditions and culture and history as they see fit.
Publications such as We get our living like milk from the land (Armstrong, et al., 1994), Behind Closed Doors,
stories and images about what the horse has done for us: an illustrated history of Okanagan ranching and
rodeo (Cohen, 1998), Q’sapi (Louis, 2002), Story of our Ways (Andrews, Bono, Greenwood, and Long, 1997),
and Okanagan web sites (e.g., Okanagan Nation Alliance: http://www.syilx.org/governance-memberbands.php),
do this. My intention is to identify the opportunities and challenges that school leaders and Okanagan students,
parents, and community face if they wish to improve communication, understanding, and relationships.
Although sometimes this requires that I represent my understanding of Okanagan culture, I would ask that all
readers recognize that beyond my limited understanding, greater understanding may be learned through
dialogical relationship, and diligent research. I am grateful for the trust of all of the Okanagan people who have
shared their worlds with me, believing that I might walk the in-between world that exists between public school
and Okanagan Nation respectfully and productively.

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With this insight, Joannie, it seems to me, gets to the heart of the matter. She appeals to non-Aboriginal school leaders to recognize Okanagan identity, but not to pathologize her or others because of this difference, an assumption that she anticipates. Rather, she calls for respect on the basis of being Okanagan. And quite simply she makes a significant claim to justice—our difference does not justify treating us with less respect, or treating us in different ways that would be harmful to us. Said positively, “We are Okanagan. We are a unique People. Treat us with the dignity and respect afforded all others. To do so you must understand our unique differences.” She frames beautifully two competing principles of justice that must be kept in dynamic tension. Justice calls for recognition of differences and it requires that all be treated fairly. Joannie’s discerning plea eloquently argues the significance of identity, culture, and traditions for Okanagan students and for non-Aboriginal school leaders.

Understand racism.

The interpretation that brings home most clearly what I understood Laurie to intend when she reiterated Joannie’s ‘different yet treat us the same’ insight, revolves around what has become known as deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997). In our second conversation, Laurie identified a negative educational pattern that she had experienced and observed, a pattern she reacted to with intense indignation:

- treating us like we’re stupid, putting us in special programs cause we can’t read. Keep us in the classroom and teach us with everybody else. I want a dogwood that means something. I want to be able to do things with my life.

As Valencia (1997) and others have noted (Shields, Bishop, Mazawi, 2005), deficit thinking of this sort is a manifestation of racism, and is particularly pernicious in educational systems. It rests upon the sometimes spoken, but more often unspoken and even unconscious, assumption that a student is not really capable of a certain kind of work, or a certain level of
achievement, because of his or her racial or ethnic identity. Laurie told me the story of having to take make up courses in high school because she had been poorly prepared in Elementary school where, from her perspective, she had not been thought capable. Deficit thinking on the part of educators seems to underlie her experience of being “talked down to.”

Gordon echoes Laurie’s perception with his own observation about the negative effects of deficit thinking on Okanagan students’ dreams and aspirations.

M. What are your goals for yourself?

G. I want to go to OUC. First I want to go into law or something. Or take, spend a few years at OUC and then maybe find a friend or somebody to go up to UBC or UVIC and stay up there and get a law degree.

M. Right on.

G. Ya.

M. Is there a particular area in law that interests you?

G. Criminal.

M. Criminal?

G. Ya.

M. That would be interesting. That’s a great plan. And it sounds like you’ve thought it through. If you go to OUC you can stay at home.

G. Ya.

M. So you can stay connected with people and get yourself started well, and then by finding a friend that wants to go to UBC or UVIC you deal with the fact that you are moving to a new community, you stay with some connections.

G. Ya.

M. That’s good. Have you got anybody lined up that also has the same vision?

G. No. Not yet. A lot of them don’t, there’s a lot of people don’t really want to go to a College sort of thing, they just want to, when school is over they want to quit and stuff so

M. Do you think that is because they haven’t thought about their options very much?

G. No, it’s just that nobody has really believed in them really.
M. Is that right?

G. Ya.

M. Is that parents that haven’t believed in them or

G. It’s kind of a mixed, it’s kind of everything, like there’s a lot of, a lot of things, like some people, like their parents don’t really back them up, but a lot of times it’s the teachers cause it’s, sometimes they don’t believe, it feels like they don’t believe in you, or they don’t expect you to succeed [italics added] so it is easier to live up to their expectations than to try for higher goals.

M. Live down to their expectations?

G. Ya. Live down to their, Ya, live down to their expectations. Ya.

I have included a large excerpt of our conversation in order for you to understand the context in which this observation emerged. Its emergence was disturbing to me. What would it mean to know that the authority whom you regard with respect doesn’t “believe in you?” Gordon went on to identify two experiences that came to mind. The conversation continued thus:

M. That’s a shame.

G. Ya.

M. So this has happened to friends that you have?

G. Ya.

M. People that you know that are quite bright that just sort of well—‘they don’t care so I don’t care?’

G. Ya. Well one of my friends ever since he was, even in Kindergarten and stuff, he used to have a, like I don’t think it was, he doesn’t seem like he’s, seems like he’s pretty smart but he just seems like he’s lazy now because ever since he was like grade one or so they used to always put him in the, like always have a teacher’s aid around him all the time, and help him out so he kind of got, now he thinks he’s stupid and stuff and he doesn’t feel like he can do anything. So when he finishes he’s just

M. He’s just going to do whatever he can find.

G. Ya. And he just had nobody to believe in him.

M. What do you think a school leader, a principal or vice-principal, could do to avoid that for that student?

G. I don’t know if they could, cause sometimes it feels like it’s a racial thing, it’s like it’s learned but it’s like subtle remarks some of them say, and it’s just
M. And if people aren’t asking you to do the work, to work hard, I mean that could be a racial thing but you’d never know [as a student] because you just don’t know if the teacher’s being slack or if that’s her approach to things.

G. Cause I, when I was starting Kindergarten, I used to be pretty good, and then in grade one and grade two I was one of the best readers in the class. And then I finished the math work half way through the year so I was just doing grade three stuff. Then when I got into grade three there was a teacher, she didn’t seem to like me or anything, like she used to, she called my mom because I was quiet and I did my work and I finished all my work on time and because, and she just said she worried about me because I am quiet. So my mom gets in there, she was worried and everything and she asks her, well, does he do his work? And he sits down? She says, ‘Ya, he sits down and he does all his work, and he’s just, he’s not loud or anything. He doesn’t yell out answers and stuff. He does his work.’ That’s what she called my mom for. It kind of continued to my sister…. I don’t know, my mom didn’t understand it and she was kind of offended. Like she used to, that teacher used to do a lot of weird things, like as soon as I got into her class I started doing really not good at all. Like I couldn’t. My reading got worse and my math and everything got worse. And all I can think of it is that she didn’t believe, or didn’t think I could do anything

M. So you didn’t

G. Ya.

M. It would be hard for a principal to know about that.

When I followed up these ideas in our second conversation, I asked Gordon directly if he noticed a difference in expectations for other students and Okanagan students? He replied,

G. Some of my friends, a lot of them are put into modified programs.

M. Like math 9A or 10A?

G. Ya. And some of them don’t even need it.

M. They don’t need it based on your sense of their intelligence?

G. Ya. Like my [relative] also works here and she says, she has to help out students, she says a couple don’t even need to be there. They could take a normal math and they would be doing fine.

Although I had encountered the notion of deficit thinking in the literature regarding colonized educational settings before I spoke with Laurie and Gordon, the spontaneous expression of these stories in their reflections firmly established in my mind the necessity of identifying
deficit thinking as a critical part of improving communication, understanding, relationships, and the educational processes of Aboriginal students.

When reconsidering my own leadership in light of their stories and with the theoretical construct of deficit thinking, I am reminded of my once held assumption that ‘Aboriginal students were good with their hands.’ There were a couple of occasions when it was decided that Aboriginal students, particularly males, should be directed towards vocational courses, because “they are good with their hands.” As an administrator, I went along with these decisions, believing that this was the best option available to the student. I now believe this is another example of deficit thinking based upon racist assumptions. Even though such judgments were intended as means for finding a successful route through high school for a student, at base they continued a stereotyped and narrow perception of Aboriginal capacity, and they merely retrenched for another generation Canada’s well documented racist, colonizing program to keep Aboriginal Peoples undereducated and working at the bottom of the economic hierarchy (Barman & Gleason, 2003). The belief that the school had done its best by providing such an option that was ‘congruent with the talents of the race,’ had the effect of relieving the school system of the dissonance necessary to begin changing the practices that were leaving students with no other choices when they reached high school. Thus, benign good will coupled with the constellation of assumptions around Okanagan student capacity, resulted in a satisfaction with the status quo. I would suggest that this satisfaction assuaged any guilt or concern about tracking Aboriginal students that might have resulted in a force for systemic change.

Where did I get such an assumption? Gordon provided me with the means to critique my own uptake of this deficit thinking vocational assumption, when he told the story of his
grandfather attending high school in the same town. Gordon’s grandfather did not go to the residential school. He was first educated in the reserve school and then attended the high school in town.

G. Like he said, when he was going to [the high school] he wasn’t allowed to take sciences or anything. They only allowed them to take shop classes and stuff. And he was never able to get a really good education.

This story, so lightly narrated in our conversation, brought home to me how the past and the present remain intimately linked. I see my own complicity in this story, my own unconscious acceptance of a common discourse, even as I become aware that this story represents a long history in which Laurie and Gordon’s experiences of deficit thinking by non-Aboriginal educators are but recent manifestations.

Deficit thinking is a pernicious form of racism in education. Mostly invisible, veiled behind professional political correctness, difficult to prove, experienced as a feeling that is difficult to justify, and really only confirmed years after the fact when it is already too late for the learner (as in Gordon’s friend’s case). However, it is not the only form of racism that Laurie and Gordon believe school leaders must endeavour to understand.

Laurie stated from the outset that school leaders must understand racism.

M. If you were placed in front of all of the principals and vice principals in the School District, what would you tell them?

L. To take care of racism.

As a white, middle class, European Canadian whose ancestors immigrated to Turtle Island/British North America/Canada at various times between 1770 and 1880, I have never experienced racism as a colonized person. I acknowledge my sociological location of privilege, and with that location, I now recognize, comes significant ignorance and naïveté about the sorts of racism experienced by Aboriginal students. The realization of my
ignorance has deepened my appreciation of Laurie and Gordon’s call for school leaders like me to understand racism.

Laurie reported several incidents of racism. She told the story of a young classmate in elementary school who was being racist. The school principal met with the boy and his parents, which stopped the behaviour for a time. Somewhat later, the boy repeated the behaviour, and the principal expelled the student. Laurie appreciated the principal’s strong stance against racism. She also talked about the racist behaviour of a waitress in a restaurant. The waitress had treated her family inappropriately while serving them. Her family called the waitress on her behavior promptly with the restaurant manager. The manager apologized and dealt with the waitress in a way that acknowledged her family’s concern. Laurie talked about blatant racist name calling among high school students, rhyming off a series of rude names. But she also noted that often racism was subtle and inferred from what people said or didn’t say. In our second conversation, Laurie identified the experience of being talked down to as another sort of racism.

When I asked her how she dealt with racism now, she was very blunt:

When someone makes a racist comment to me, I just won’t have it. I don’t accept it and I tell them so. I am very forthright. I don’t have a problem with it.

Racism emerged at the top of Gordon’s list too:

M. Okay. ...What else should they [non-Aboriginal school leaders] learn?

G. That there’s a, seems like there is a lot of racism.

M. Racism in [major city in school district]? Racism in schools?

G. Everywhere.

M. So it would be helpful for them to experience that racism from the Okanagan’s perspective—point of view?

G. Ya. Well cause there is a lot of racism that goes on, everywhere I go I experience it a little bit.
Gordon recounted a story about one of his friends, Alfred [pseudonym], who was hassled by a group of non-Aboriginal boys when he was at a fast food place for lunch. The group started throwing pens and pieces of erasers at them, referred to Alfred and his friends as the ‘Rez crew’ and later said ‘Better watch your back’ as they left. The next day while walking to a convenience store down an alley Alfred and his friend were surrounded by this group and a fight ensued.

M. And that was racially motivated you figure?

G. I guess so. Cause its

M. Were they uh

G. Cause like there was, they have, they [his friend] had some white friends there but they [the group] didn’t go after them, they just went after the [Okanagan], there was [one white friend] and [another white friend] and those two Indians there and they went after those two first.

Gordon talked about visiting a friend’s house and having the fellow’s father get mad at the younger brothers in the house because of racist comments they were making, even though it was apparent to Gordon that the young boys thought the comments quite normal and were surprised their father was making a deal about it. It was at this point in our conversation that Gordon told the story about teachers ignoring student requests to discuss residential school history.

M. What do you think of that?

G. I don’t know. It’s just, you’re turning a blind eye to something that

M. You’re sort of sweeping that story under the carpet.

G. Ya. And making it look like something it wasn’t.

His linkage between the denial of the negative school history experienced by his family and racism highlights the broader nature of racism experienced by Aboriginal people in the context of colonization. It’s not just about overt acts like name calling and fights, but also
about the erasure of identity, as when school authority refuses to recognize a vitally
important part of one’s history.

Gordon also tells the story about one of his relatives who works in the provincial
court.

G. She said a lot of times the judges will, whenever an Indian comes up and he’s
talking to them, the judge’ll talk louder and he’ll seem to sound out everything. Like
treat him like he’s stupid or something and he doesn’t understand. She says sometimes
she wants to just jump up and say, ‘He knows what you are talking about!’

M. Stop treating him like a child!

G. Ya.

M. From a judge? (Pause). It sounds to me, you know it’s becoming one of the themes
of our conversation, that school leaders have to be very sensitive to racism. And
perhaps the best way to do that is to be able to hear stories of it, just the way you are
telling me stories of it, cause I never would have thought about it.

G. There are a lot worse stories too that I have.

Gordon told me of other events that left no doubt in my mind about the presence of racism in
schools and in the city. Joannie and Robyn noted that in their experience other kids were the
primary concern. Robyn observed that both of her brothers were regularly picked on.

There was one further theme, though, that emerged as I listened and re-listened to the
students’ stories, (and the stories of parents and school workers that supported their
experience) and their strong feelings about the importance of understanding and addressing
racism. This was the realization that they experienced the racism that was done to others of
their community as if it was done to them personally. There was a strong transference of
anger and of vulnerability. I believe that this discovery has profound implications for non-
Aboriginal school leaders who have not experienced racism as a colonized minority. What
this implies is that incidents of racism in a school that are particular to one person, or occur in
a unique situation, are not experienced as an individual’s problem, or as an isolated event.
Rather, an incident of racism toward an Okanagan person is experienced as an event of consequence for all Okanagan. I conjecture further that an incident of racism quickly becomes the latest chapter in the long narrative of colonizing relations between Aboriginal and Canadian society, and as such immediately has much more significance for Aboriginal students, parents, and their community, than is understandable just from the nature of the event itself. Non-Aboriginal school leaders must understand this.

To exemplify what I mean, when I look back on my own experiences of being bullied in school, it is easy for me to tightly associate this bullying to the character of the individual students involved—they didn't like me, and I didn't like them. Their acts of violence were isolated events, explainable within the framework of negative personal relations, and the school administrators and counselors dealt with them accordingly. However, an incident of name calling, that shares the same intent by a bully, namely putting a person down, but which is race-based, immediately becomes a part of the much bigger and deeper story of colonizing history. School leaders who attempt to resolve a racist event by simply using the negative personal relations framework will be surprised, as I was, that there is much more to the story, and a much more sophisticated response is required. Thus, the significance of understanding racism, as required by Laurie and Gordon, becomes apparent.

When I reconsider what Laurie and Gordon were asking of me, I am surprised by the scope of their request. Neither they, nor Robert, reported many racist incidents in their school. In fact, all three suggested that there was less racism at their school towards Okanagan people than at other schools. But they were convinced that school leaders should understand and address racism towards the Okanagan right across the community, beyond the walls of the school, into the cafeterias, mall stores, and other public spaces of the community.
as well as into the classrooms and curricula of all the students in the school district. Such initiatives would improve communication, understanding, relationships, and the educational processes of Okanagan students.

**Understand our lives.**

In the first minutes of my invitational meeting to the high school students, Laurie expressed the importance for non-Aboriginal school leaders to understand the lives of Okanagan students, even as she defined necessary limits to the process. Robert also included this as an important aspect of supporting Okanagan students in school. And Gordon dedicated much of our time together discussing the significance for students of their lives away from school. From our conversations, four guiding principles emerged for me: make the effort to learn as much as possible about what students and families are willing to share of their lives; expect that the lives of students and families differ in some significant ways from one's own life; be prepared to understand and work with these differences; and, understand that the lived experiences of students affect each student uniquely and therefore require non-Aboriginal school personnel to seek to understand how each student considers the challenges and strengths of their lives outside of school.

From our conversations, I judge that it is important for school leaders to seek to understand how socio-economic concerns influence a student’s life. Poverty was identified by two of the students as playing a significant role in their own lives and in the lives of their friends. One student noted this as the primary motivation for continuing with school and being ambitious for attaining an occupation that would provide a healthy income. This student recounted the challenges faced as a result of living below the poverty line all of his/her life. Another student noted that his/her relatives had succeeded in school even though they had had virtually nothing when they were growing up. These relatives were powerful
role models. Their experience gave this student confidence that he/she could succeed, and
that the sacrifices that school required (social and personal), as well as the hard work, were
worth it.

In listening to their narratives I became conscious of similarities and differences
between inner-city poverty and rural poverty. For instance, distance from the school, the
expense of travel, limited access to transportation, and isolation distinguish their rural
experience from inner-city schools that I have worked with.⁵⁸ These and other characteristics
of rural poverty imply different approaches than those that work for inner-city community-
centre schools. For those school leaders raised and educated in urban environments,
understanding how poverty influences the life of a student, and how that student and his or
her community deal with the challenges poverty imparts, is critical for determining how
students need to be supported in their efforts at school. There are strengths in these stories—
capacities that enable the transcendence of challenges—even as there are insights into
dilemmas that cannot be solved by the individual, the community, or the school, without the
effective collaboration of all three.

One area of similarity, currently typical of inner-city poverty situations and reported
by the students, was a concern about the negative effects of drug use on peers.

R. Well, people, they just have to find the right path I guess, and not hang out with the
wrong people, and go and do drugs, and get into that kind of lifestyle. Because, I guess
that is a pretty big problem today, because people, it has just become idealized.

The elementary students tied drug and alcohol use, which they identified as beginning in high
school, to the deaths of relatives.

⁵⁸I worked as a researcher on the Toward an Equitable Education project, which studied two inner-city schools
in British Columbia.
All of the students identified that it was important for school leaders to understand the family of a student. Family posed challenges and opportunities for students. One of the students noted that on several occasions he/she would get into trouble at school for not completing homework when he/she had had to spend the previous night caring for younger siblings. This was part of growing up in a single parent family. The student also talked about how the anger associated with his/her parents’ separation created difficulties at school occasionally. One of the students’ noted that parent separations were very frequent among the peer group.

M. Why does it [parent separation] happen?

Stu. I don’t know. It just happens. There’s only like three people I can think of that are, like my age group or my generation, that their parents are still together. That’s like through the whole reserve and everything. Like for some people it is even worse. Like for some people their dad leaves and their mom also leaves. They are left with their grandparents. One friend, his dad left and then his mom left him with his grandma. Then just a few months ago his grandma died. He just has his grandpa now.

This story reminded me of a similar situation when I was working as a vice-principal at Beta. At that time, a grade 8 student was dealing with a series of recent deaths in her family. As each one occurred, her need for support from the school changed. The nuanced interaction with the educators of the school that resulted from our shared understanding of her family situation, I believe made a significant difference in her on-going success in the school.

Again, the particular strengths and challenges that are unique to the student’s experience of his or her family situation requires that school leaders come to understand the individual nature of each student’s family. It became very apparent to me that there were few generalizations one could make about families based upon our conversations. One generalization I am willing to make, though, came through the students’ voices, and was corroborated strongly by the parents’ conversations: parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles
care deeply about their children and their children’s education. This is a vital realization
when non-Aboriginal, middle-class educators may be quick to judge a student’s family as
being ‘uncaring’ if the family situation or actions don’t conform to the educators’ norms.

Understand what will make for a good education.

At various times in our conversations, I found myself listening to students elaborate
what they believed should constitute a good education for Okanagan students. In their focus
group, the elementary students were unanimous in desiring “a good education” for
themselves, a desire, they said, that was as strongly held by their parents for them. The
students discussed Okanagan language education, they discussed approaches to cultural
education within the public school, and they ventured judgments about the quality of their
schooling at Beta.

All nine of the students expressed a willingness to study Okanagan language in
school. The elementary students said they would much rather study Okanagan than French.
One of the elementary students said “If I could study Okanagan language I would, I’d do it
right now.” Laurie noted that Okanagan language education should happen in elementary,
secondary, college and university. When asked if she was okay with non-Okanagan students
studying the language, she replied, “Yes, but it’s a hard language.” Gordon was concerned
that the language be preserved as the basis for Okanagan identity.

M. Are you interested in having Okanagan language available in school?

G. I guess I would ya. What my mom always used to say is that eventually the
government is trying to introduce this treaty thing and its uh, one of the things you
have to do is sign away your status. And she said, one day they’re just going to come
along and ask you if you can speak your language, and if you say no, then you don’t
get status. You’re not Indian then if you can’t speak your language. Cause I don’t
know my language. My mom doesn’t know the language.
In our first conversation, Robert maintained that if language education was going to succeed for students, then it needed to happen for students in school. He didn’t think students would take it if it were just an added thing on weeknights or weekends. But in our second conversation, his position became much more nuanced and defined.

R. Well, I don’t think it is up to the school, because it is a public school, to aim the Okanagan people in the direction that they are supposed to go. I see it as more up to the Chief and Council to organize events that are cultural so that people don’t lose their culture because I don’t know any young people, like my age, like 16 or 17 that know how to speak their language or anything like that. They don’t know much about traditions. Some people go to Pow-wows, and dance, but not many people do that. And we’re losing our culture, because you lose your language, you lose your culture. We’re losing traditions and everything like that. Personally, I think it is up to the Band, and like the Chief and Council, to hold events that support their own culture and to educate their own people about their culture.

M. Does that, if I believe that education is what creates culture, because how you educate your children, that’s what they become when they are adults, right? Does that mean that the Chief and Council should create a school system on the Reserve if they want to maintain their culture?

R. They probably could have. They don’t really have to make a school system, but, more like, a place like in Penticton; I forget what it’s called

M. The En’owkin Centre?

R. Ya. The En’owkin Centre. That Centre there is based on the language, and they make tapes and books about the language to help preserve the language, but I have some of those tapes and books. I was talking with my grandmother, and she knows how to speak the language. She said, well some of those words are different than what I use because, even though the languages are similar.... there’s different kinds of dialects for different locations. And just that there’s a huge difference between the Okanagan language and the Shuswap language....[Even though] it’s a 45 minute drive from one reserve to another....So I see it as up to the Band, the Indian Band to have, to at least to attempt to preserve the languages and culture.

M. What would you think about, or would you take a course that, say, happened two days a week in the afternoons, that you didn’t come into the public system, you stayed out on the reserve and took the language? Would that, is that the kind of model you have in mind?

R. Ya. Something like that.

M. Start in grade one and continue on two days a week you’d have language instruction, and you’d be able to tie that in with cultural tradition.
R. Ya. I think it is a good idea, because if you get kids going when they are young it then becomes habit and they’re going to say, ‘Oh, I have to go here today.’

M. This is what we do.

R. Ya. And it’ll preserve the language, because the kids will begin to know it. Well, that would take awhile because there’s not many people now that know the Okanagan language. They’re all Elders and they’re pretty old.

M. There needs to be a middle generation that learns it though doesn’t there?

R. Ya. Down in the States, near the border of Mexico, there’s Indian bands where all of the members of the Band all know how to speak their language, and English, and they also go to school so. That I suppose should have been happening here but it hasn’t.

I have included this long segment of our conversation in order to illustrate Robert’s careful thinking on this topic. He clearly defines the Band as being the locus of authority and action regarding Okanagan language and culture and gives good reasons for this. However, he does not shy away from the dilemmas of the current situation. There are few language speakers. There are not many young language speakers. The school system is the primary vehicle for the education of the young. Somehow the vision of a community that is fluent in both Okanagan and in English ought to be realized. But is it too late?

M. Do you think if I was to go out in, no, let’s say you were, because people will talk to you more than they will talk to me. You went out there and you asked every Okanagan person in this school, and said, ‘Is it important that we maintain our language?’ What do you think they’d say?

R. Well. I think most of them would say, ‘Ya I think it’s important.’ But, they might not mean it. They might not be willing to sacrifice their leisure time to go to some classes. But it is something that I think you are going to end up having to do or else, we’re going to have no language, no culture, no traditions and they’ll be nothing to define any differences between us and just anybody living in society today. It’ll just be about getting a good education, getting a good job, and just living the good life.

M. The good life according to television?

R. Ya.

M. Not the good life according to the Okanagan way?

R. Ya.
Both Gordon and Robert are concerned about the connection between language and Okanagan identity. Based upon my own, largely ineffective, efforts to support Okanagan language programs in the high school when I was in administration, and based upon the commitments of Laurie, Gordon, Robert, and all 6 of the elementary students, it is clear to me that non-Aboriginal school leaders must endeavour to understand the language issues of the communities they serve. Finding appropriate means to support language development is an educational problem of critical importance to Okanagan students.

All of the students noted cultural and historical knowledge that should be added to the curriculum. In their focus group, the elementary students talked about getting together on a regular basis to learn about Okanagan culture—something they had tried last year, though few students attended, and something that they wanted to try again. They were all very excited by the observation, made by Kelly, that there was an all First Nations school on another Okanagan reserve not far away. They considered this would be an ideal place to learn culture and traditions.

Laurie and Robert both observed that having First Nations Studies in the school was respectful of Okanagan culture and tradition, and they appreciated its focus on traditional activities.

M. Are there aspects of your Okanagan identity that you want to have present in this school, that you want to have recognized?

R. I think we have a lot of recognition already from the First Nations Studies program that they have. I’m not sure if they still have it, but that was a good program, and people got into the study of the Okanagan culture and some of the traditions, and actual hands on experiences, like making drums and whatnot.

Laurie believed that in addition to First Nations Studies current focus, there should be greater emphasis on land claim issues:
L. Land is very important. Land-claims are really important to us. You have taken more land than is fair, and we want at least some of it back. Even Silver Star is ours to claim but I doubt if we will ever get that back. Land claims could be taught more in school. In First Nations 12, in Social Studies 11 and Social Studies 10.

As was noted earlier, Gordon stated clearly that Okanagan history, such as residential schooling should be included and available to Okanagan students in school classrooms at all ages—Okanagan history from Okanagan points of view.

Although all were convinced of the importance of cultural knowledge, Robert was very concerned that schools provide the “basic skills” (his words). He noted that these skills were also important to the Okanagan community. His thoughts below are in response to my suggestion that perhaps the high school could better serve Okanagan students by offering Band specific curriculum that would help sustain the Band in the long term.

R. Let’s see. The school here, I see it as just getting students prepared with basic skills to go on to something like another job or to go get post-secondary education like college or something. So if they had a course here that taught about, the native students, what they can do better to make their Indian Band better. It might be all right. But people might not take it seriously because it’s just in this public school system. So, if there was post-secondary education, like some sort of college or something that was specific for, like you got diplomas or something to go on to be a Councilor on the Chief and Council, or stuff like that, so the Councilors are educated, not that they aren’t now. But if they had more specific education about how to make the community better, I think that would work. But as long as the kids get their skills here in like English, math, and stuff like that, they can go on to help their Chief and Council and being part of their Band.

Robert believed that he had been well prepared by his schooling experiences to go on to post-secondary. In fact, he was accepted into college immediately after graduation.

Toward the end of our second conversation we fell into what was for me a troubling discovery. It follows from our conversation, quoted earlier, on language education:

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59 I appreciated that Laurie said “you” in this context. It was as if a politically correct filter had been removed from her thoughts. Although non-Aboriginal people don’t necessarily associate themselves with the colonizing appropriation of Aboriginal land, it is important for non-Aboriginal people to recognize that Aboriginal students make this connection. Furthermore, Aboriginal students know they still suffer the consequences of that colonizing process, but non-Aboriginal people often remain unaware that they continue to benefit from the process at the expense of their Aboriginal neighbours.
R....we’re going to have no language, no culture, no traditions and they’ll be nothing to define any differences between us and just anybody living in society today. It’ll just be about getting a good education, getting a good job, and just living the good life.

M. The good life according to television?

R. Ya.

M. Not the good life according to the Okanagan way.

R. Ya.

M. Do you know, if I was to draw a line right in the middle [of that chalk board] and put “Good Life” on both sides, and one said “The Okanagan,” and the other said “Dominant Canadian Society,” could you differentiate between what the good life from the Okanagan perspective would be from the dominant Canadian society perspective?

R. Personally I probably wouldn’t. But that’s because I don’t know most of the traditions or most of anything about the Okanagan culture. I just know that everybody is, everybody isn’t very educated about their own culture, and they probably couldn’t do that either, unless they lived with their grandparents that knew the language and educated them in the Okanagan lifestyle. But,

M. Do you think that would be a useful thing for schools to do? To ask the question, well what’s the good life? And what does it mean for different communities? Then, students, such as yourself, could go home and ask ‘what is the good life from an Okanagan perspective? What is it that we really value?

R. Ya. I think it would be pretty valuable. Then kids would be able to see the differences between the Okanagan culture and the modern society today. But even my grandparents from [location], they don’t know much about the culture. That’s because when they were young they were put in residential schools and they didn’t really get a chance to learn their language or to preserve it. They were made to learn English.

Four things strike me here. First it appears that Robert’s education process has continued the legacy of the residential school, successfully displacing any sort of Okanagan education process that would have given him a sense of essential Okanagan values and purposes.

Second, as is made abundantly clear in the decolonizing literature (Smith, 1999 for example), Indigenous communities that are re-constituting themselves would benefit from opportunities to have these discussions with their children, just as their children would benefit from a clearer sense of purpose. Third I am concerned that Robert’s genuine expression of perplexity about the differences in the good life indicates that his educational experience fails
the primary test of Indian Control of Indian Education (1972) and successive Aboriginal policy papers on education (See RCAP, 1996), namely that education enable students to be equally competent in mainstream society and in their own community. Finally, what does it say about our educational process, if students are not able to identify for themselves, what constitutes a life worthy of regard? Surely, the fact that Robert has not wondered about this question before indicates a failing in curriculum.

After listening to each of the students speak clearly about their own ambitions for school and beyond, I am struck by Robert and Gordon’s accounts of a lack of purpose or ambition amongst their peers. I noted Gordon’s perception that his peers would not go on to post secondary earlier in relation to no one having believed in them. Robert noted a similar lack of motivation among students that he was tutoring—a cousin was among them.

M. In our last conversation you talked about your own ambitions and having your own purposes that kept you focused and kept you interested because you want to go somewhere, and yet other students don’t seem to have that clear notion of themselves and the future, and a clear sense of: “I need to work, this is important.”

R. Ya.

M. It would be nice if we could just give that to people. “Here is your purpose! Here’s your energy!”

R. That would be pretty simple. Then we wouldn’t have all these problems.

In the context of a community recovering from 150 years of colonization, understanding early the sorts of ambitions and life-purposes that students hold may be critical for their support and further success. Further, learning that students don’t have a clear purpose for themselves or their schooling, could well be the basis for a positive connection between school and student and family and community, as a child explores possible purposes for his or her life that will make sense within the good life as espoused by the community.
Understand students' self-sufficiency.

The high school students were strongly aware of their capacity and potential to succeed in school. In the context of 150 years of colonizing discourse that often has given Aboriginal students little credit, their words are particularly important. Robert stated that he knew he could do just as well as anyone else in the school, if he wished. Gordon was certain of his own graduation. Laurie was adamant about the significance of being independent, and about getting the education required to achieve her goals. Robert also insisted—he brought up the subject three times in the process of our conversations and when I asked if he had any further thoughts at the end of our final conversation, he brought up the subject again—that students were quite capable of being the drivers in their own education processes. I think he felt he needed to repeat himself, because he was not convinced that I was ‘getting it.’

M. Do you have any other thoughts?

R. Not really. I guess. But, about how the Natives, or anybody can get better in school is they have to work past their, work past what, they have to basically do all the work to the best of their ability. They can’t be slack and not try, and they have to ask questions when they don’t understand work or, go see the teacher, cause usually the teacher says, if you don’t understand this I will be here after school, or whenever, lunch or before school, and they can help you. But nobody goes. A few go. I haven’t seen that. So I think it is up to the individual to apply him or her self to get past all of the barriers that they have to overcome, and to just do well in school. And from there they can go on to post-secondary education and then, once they have education, they can get involved in their community, and just go on from there, helping their community.

M. So, uhm, when I write my paper and make my recommendations I will note that, I will note your position that as a student, what has worked for you, is to say, ‘I can do this, that whatever the obstacles, it’s my focus, and it’s my capacity that will get me through. I need to hold with my vision of getting to post-secondary and helping my community. And it’s not whether or not the teacher does this or that, or whether a friend of mine does this or that, it’s that I just choose to go and fight through this to get what I want.’

R. Ya. Because if the teacher sticks with the curriculum requirements, teaches you what you are supposed to know. Even if they just give out, give you textbooks and in the textbook it explains the rules. It doesn’t matter if they aren’t very good at their job teaching. You can, you have to read through the book and understand it, and if you can’t understand it, then, you go either to the teacher or to somebody else that has
already gone through that and hopefully understands it, then they can help you. So your sources of help just aren’t, aren’t just the teacher, they’re the students around you, other teachers, and your family, your friends.

M. It doesn’t sound like you have much patience for people that are always blaming somebody else for their not-working, for their lack of success.

R. When I was in my English class, my teacher had a quote on the board. I forget who it was from but, it said, “A man does not become a failure until he begins to blame somebody else.” I agree with that quote. You can’t blame your failures on somebody else, you have to take responsibility for your actions, and if you don’t understand something and you don’t say anything, then it’s your own fault for not getting help and trying to understand it. You have to make an honest effort to get help and hopefully somebody will be able to help you. And then you can understand the material and do it to the best of your ability.

Robert’s approach challenges non-Aboriginal deficit thinking inclined to assume that Okanagan students should not be expected to apply themselves in search of their own goals, rather the school should adapt to make things easier. As we have seen this fails to meet Laurie’s demand that her graduation certificate mean something! Such deficit thinking lowers expectations and harms the life chances of students, even as it purports to be caring for them. But, I also think Robert purposely wished to challenge the deficit thinking he finds in his peers about themselves.

Robert’s experience was that to succeed in school required choosing to do so, sacrificing in some areas, and working to the best of one’s ability. I am not conservatively inclined, and I find in Robert’s words, ideas that place an inordinate amount of responsibility for the success of students on the students themselves. Such ideas lend themselves to discourses that ‘blame the victim,’ ignore the influence of social structures, and can ultimately perpetuate an oppressive status quo. As a person of the colonizing, majority culture, I am concerned that including Robert’s ideas here is to be seen to be including them for just this purpose. On the contrary, to erase these words from this study, especially given their importance to Robert, would be another sort of colonizing. Once again, in paternalistic
fashion, a non-Aboriginal person determines what an Aboriginal person should say or not say, what ideas are congruent with being Aboriginal and what are not. Thus, I have pushed against my own inclinations to edit his words.

Instead, they have rattled against some of my deeply held presuppositions and as a consequence they have heightened my awareness of expressions of what I have framed simply as a tradition of independence and self-sufficiency. In Laurie’s conversation, in conversations with other Okanagan parents, and in my reading of Okanagan history (Cohen, 1998; Louis, 2002; Maracle et al., 1994; Mourning Dove, 1990), independence and self-sufficiency appear as cherished virtues. Robert’s words give life to these virtues. But, whether they are congruent with Okanagan culture, or outgrowths of conservative ideology, or pragmatic suggestions that enable an individual to succeed in school, what is overwhelmingly important is that such opinions and points of view must be heard. Okanagan students are not all the same. Understanding the diversity of Okanagan students’ points of view is an important aspect of developing understanding.

Understanding as a means of supporting students.

When Gordon espoused developing a “profile” for each student, he believed that understanding a student’s life in such depth would make a significant difference for that student’s experience of, and success in, school. He wanted teachers and school leaders to understand what was going on, because he believed teachers and administrators would then be able to teach and support students as they need to be taught and supported. Laurie’s push to have teachers and non-Aboriginal school leaders understand culture, tradition, heritage, and racism stands upon the same foundation: having such understanding about me and my Okanagan peers will support us in our learning and our becoming the persons we aspire to be. Robert insists on understanding students’ life goals, students’ capacity and responsibility for
their work, and he insists on understanding who is responsible for directing the inclusion of Okanagan culture in schools. Thus, we are reminded of the foundational purpose of why non-Aboriginal school leaders must seek to understand the lives, heritage, capacities, and aspirations of students, namely, to support students in their attainment of an education that will enable these.

**A Working Relation**

To be understanding of the range of issues, needs, and concerns identified by students implies a remarkable sort of relationship. This relationship must be considerate of students’ lived experiences, open to learning about cultural knowledge, and supportive of students’ learning. To enable just these examples entails that this relationship must be multidimensional—a relation perhaps unique to the role of a school leader. I have organized students’ perspectives on relationship into three major themes, which, when taken together, suggest the connective threads constitutive of a healthy working relation between student and non-Aboriginal school leader. The themes are: a relation of care, a relation of regard, and a relation of response ability.

**A Relation of Care**

Students seek a supporting relation from non-Aboriginal school leaders. I consider such a desire as an expectation of a relation of care. Students expected and wanted non-Aboriginal school leaders to care about their identities, their commitment to their heritage, their challenges outside of school, their future ambitions. Students hoped that school leaders would challenge the racism that hurts them and their peers. Students anticipated that school leaders would want each of them to succeed in school, and do whatever was reasonably possible to support this.
For Joannie and Robyn, care seemed to me to be captured in their notions of “like” and “nice.”

J. There are really nice people here. I like the teachers. They are really nice.

And later Joannie said,

J. The teachers are nicer here than at [her previous school] because if you miss a day they teach you what you missed, but at [her previous school] they’d just give you a sheet of paper that your parent would have to teach you. Here, most of the time all of the doors are open, like classrooms. At [her previous school], all the doors were shut.

I take it that the positive feelings generated by teachers and for teachers are indicative of a caring relation.

Laurie talked about regular encouragement from the former school principal. She noted how frequently he spent time ‘connecting with the students, encouraging the students.’ He had also encouraged her ‘to do better if she hadn’t done well.’ His encouragement was based upon his belief in her that she could do well and that she would achieve. I sensed in her words, the presence of a motivating optimism that gave her confidence in herself.

Gordon reminisced about his previous school. It was a smaller school and students were tightly held to account for their behavior. But this accounting was in part based upon a reciprocal care—teachers knowing students; students caring about their relation with teachers:

G. [students] weren’t allowed to slack off—to take the easier course. The teacher personally knew you and you didn’t want to let him down or something.

When Gordon talks about non-Aboriginal school leaders understanding the lives of students, I believe his notion of a caring ‘knowing’ underlies his belief (developed in the last section) that understanding a student’s life will be beneficial to the student. Gordon’s hope that school leaders would come to know the personal needs of students, holds within it an assumption that knowing the needs of a student calls for an appropriate response—a caring response.
And it is not just because the non-Aboriginal school leader may do things more effectively for the student, but rather because a caring relation is built between the two that enables them to work with each other. Gordon’s words help determine two levels of action for the school leader. On one level, the non-Aboriginal school leader should personally seek to form such a knowing, caring relation with students, on the second level, the non-Aboriginal school leader has the responsibility to enable the formation of such relations of care among students and teachers.

Where Laurie and Gordon talk about a personal, emotionally supportive relation of care, Robert recognized a relation of care that is about providing him with the best education possible. In our first conversation he talked about the importance of his preparation for the “real world,”—life beyond high school, beyond childhood. He stated at the time that he felt that he had been well prepared to work hard, to get things done, to learn how to learn, to succeed in that world beyond school. To meet Robert’s needs, a relation of care must consider not just a student’s present concerns, but also the challenges of a student’s future ambitions. Non-Aboriginal school leaders committed to providing the best possible educational opportunities to Okanagan students enact the relation of care necessitated by Robert’s expressed expectations.

A Relation of Regard

In general terms, students seek from non-Aboriginal school leaders a relation of regard. Such a relation encompasses sub themes of respect, trust, expectations of capacity, openness to difference, equality. Students expect that non-Aboriginal school leaders will not be racist, and that they will provide their schools and the community beyond school with the leadership to be anti-racist. Students want non-Aboriginal school leaders to be inclined to engage their culture, traditions, language, families, and community positively and
respectfully. Often I have heard people say that respect must be earned. My conversations with these students suggests the opposite. Rather, non-Aboriginal school leaders must, from the beginning, have a relation of regard towards Okanagan students, parents, and community. Such a relation is the basis of, if not the precursor to, communication, understanding, and good working relationships.

At the outset, Laurie made it clear that non-Aboriginal school leaders must respect student boundaries and the need for protecting student privacy. I take her observations around developing trust (previously cited) as instructive of a healthy relation of regard. As she observed, boundaries will roll back when trust grows between the non-Aboriginal school leader and students. Her frank remarks that she didn’t have sufficient trust in the new principal at her school to share her problems with him illustrates the importance of this relation. If non-Aboriginal school leaders wish to assist students through school, they must establish, and grow over time, a relation of respect and trust with students.

How does such a relation grow? Stewart and Cody co-constructed an example of a principal approaching a teacher who was teaching above a particular student’s level of understanding. Such an intervention, they said, would build trust and other things would follow. Laurie’s conversations suggest a two-fold process—with individuals one on one, but also as a consequence of the relations a non-Aboriginal school leader has with other Okanagan students, families, and community. As a couple of cases in point, Laurie observed that through her five years with the former Beta principal, he had always disciplined Okanagan students ‘in a respectful way.’ Similarly, when I asked Gordon what he thought of a particular non-Aboriginal school leader, he observed that he hadn’t had any direct experience but that a relative was quite distrustful given a recent difficulty she was having
with transferring her daughter. In our first conversation, when exploring the topic of cultural inclusion in school, Robert observed that First Nations Studies 12 and other cultural practices included in the school were ‘a statement of respect towards the culture.’ Finally, Laurie’s comments about the former principal participating in the First Nations Studies 12—openly learning about her culture and traditions—demonstrated to Laurie the principal’s regard for her Okanagan identity. Thus, a relation of regard with an Okanagan student is respectful of the individual but is also inclusive of his or her primary identity relationships—respectful of peers, of family, and of the Okanagan community.

As presented in the preceding section, the students recounted incidents that depict relations of disregard. These incidents eloquently express the need for fostering relations of regard. For example, Laurie’s experience of “being talked down to” indicates a diminished regard for Laurie as a person. As do Gordon’s experiences of not being listened to: first by the Principal who disciplined him for something he didn’t do; and secondly, when he and his classmates were not allowed to discuss residential school history. The students’ accounts of racism experienced in school and in the community provide further examples. Further, Gordon’s observation that people have a hard time getting beyond their “first impressions,” emphasizes the importance of being mindful and critical of prejudices. A relation of regard counters racism, discrimination, and prejudice.

Robert went to some length to assert that it must be the Chief and Council not the schools who make decisions regarding Okanagan language and culture. I take his desire to make sure that I understood this as a strong statement about the respect and openness a non-Aboriginal school leader must have for the self-determining responsibilities and powers of
the Band. A relation of regard will acknowledge the right of the Band to be included in the setting of educational priorities.

Finally, I return to Joannie’s just plea reiterated by Laurie: understand our differences, and treat us the same. A relation of regard will seek to understand and honour Okanagan differences, and will treat Okanagan people as of equal worth to any other person. These students expect a relation of regard from non-Aboriginal school leaders. This is the beginning place for positive relations with non-Aboriginal school leaders, and with their school communities.

**A Relation of Response Ability**

I stand on a different and questionable foundation with this notion of a relation of response ability—a foundation mostly of my making. This sub-theme is the result of inference and interpretation. There are no direct quotations or focused passages of conversation that specifically speak to this notion. Yet, I believe the sense of a relation of response ability, which I shall elaborate, was assumed by all students and by me throughout our conversations. Occasionally a researcher must surface what is unstated, whether it be an assumption or a pattern of thinking. However, the onus is on the researcher to establish that he or she is not simply imparting a foreign construct onto the stories of others because of some bias or other. I believe the notion of a relation of response ability stands this test, but I am concerned to make it clear that the following emerges from my thinking about what we talked about, rather than directly from what was discussed.

I can exemplify this theme simply by referring to students’ expectations of their involvement with me in this research project. The students spoke with me, in part, because they believed that some benefit would come from their efforts, not necessarily for themselves, but for other Okanagan and Aboriginal students and parents. This anticipation of
benefit, of positive work on their behalf, lies at the heart of the themes and ideas, which I have organized under the rubric of a 'relation of response ability.'

Students expected that their relations with non-Aboriginal school leaders would be productively responsive to their needs and perspectives. In other words, communicating respectfully and effectively is important, understanding is important, being in a caring relation is important, being in a relation of regard is important, but all anticipate that a non-Aboriginal school leader be capable of acting in accordance with the implications of these relations, these understandings, and these communications. In fact, part of the point of being understood by, and in relation with, a non-Aboriginal school leader is precisely because the non-Aboriginal school leader has the power to act—to respond. This notion of a relation of response ability assumes that school leaders have the power to change things, to achieve ends, to organize the world differently, to influence others—to do the work needed to improve learning environments for Aboriginal students. This ability to do is bound up with the non-Aboriginal school leader’s commitment to respond to what is understood and honoured through relatedness.

Let me provide a few examples that are illustrative of this sort of relation.

M. If you were placed in front of all of the principals and vice principals in the School District, what would you tell them?

L. To take care of racism.

Laurie’s reply is a call to action. She calls out the response ability of principals and vice principals directly. She seeks a relation that takes her challenge to heart and she assumes the capability of principals and vice principals to be able to do something about it.

L. In elementary school I had a problem with someone who was being racist. The principal met with him and his parents. Somewhat later he continued with the behavior and he was expelled. The principal dealt with the matter very well.
Laurie’s experience is that school leaders have the potential to respond to her communicated needs.

Joannie told a story with similar implications:

J. We have a volleyball team. But we always try to play outside and we are always on the field first. But then, there’s two fields where you can play soccer and the little kids, like, I don’t know, they always just like to bug us, so they always go on our fields, where we are playing and uhm then the supervisor comes out and says, ‘Well they were here first, you guys have to move right now.’ So we have to move, and the little kids are all laughing behind her. So we get in trouble.

M. So you were talking to [the principal] about that. And did he understand your point of view?

J. Yes and tomorrow he is going to come out with us.

M. Great. So he listened carefully to what you had to say?

J. Yes.

At another point in our conversation I asked Joannie

M. If you had difficulty with a teacher in the school, let’s say, I don’t know, something wasn’t right, and you knew the next person to speak to was the principal, [old principal or new principal], would you feel comfortable in going to talk with them?

J. Yes. I have done that before. Yes.

She went on to tell the unfortunate story of a teacher who had a nervous breakdown over a period of weeks in her class, and how she, with the help of her mom and the school principal, had dealt with this.

It’s not that this relation of response ability is about doing things for Okanagan students. Robert’s discussion of the importance of the Chief and Council in directing the education of culture and language in schools indicates his expectation that school leaders will work with the leadership of the Okanagan community to create a culturally appropriate education program. As I reflect back over our conversations, and in the process of writing this section, it seems to me that a relationship of response ability between non-Aboriginal
school leaders and Aboriginal students is one that is exemplified by the phrase: ‘informed
doing with.’ Well developed understanding about critical areas in students’ lives, relations of
care and regard, and open communication, enable school leaders to act in an informed
manner with students in pursuit of students’ concerns and educational aspirations.

I will end this section by acknowledging Gordon’s perception of one of the limits of
the relation of response ability, even as he emphasizes the importance of understanding for
working with students.

M. Let’s say you have become the superintendent of the school district and now they
[teachers and school leaders] are working for you. And you decide what it is they
need to know. And you look at their work and what they are doing with their school
and you say, you know, this is not serving the Okanagan People’s purposes. These
people need to know these other things to serve the Okanagan community better. What
would you have them learn?

G. I don’t know. Maybe spend some time, there’s a lot of, to look at what life is like
out there. It’s poverty basically; cause what’s the poverty level? Is it 24,000 dollars a
year or something?

M. Something like that.

G. So like everybody, almost everybody is below the poverty line a lot. Like my mom
is a single parent. She makes 18,000 a year after taxes and everything. It’s really hard
to live on something like that.

M. Ya.

G. And everybody is like that though, there’s, it’s all poverty.

M. So, one of the key things that the teachers and school leaders need to understand is
that there are issues associated with poverty that they can deal with. First of

G. I don’t know if they can deal with it, but they could just understand what everyone
has to go through.

Indeed, how can teachers and school leaders “deal” with the material reality of this poverty?

There are limits to the response ability of school leaders. Yet, even here, Gordon assumes
that the understanding of students’ lived situations will affect teachers and non-Aboriginal
school leader’s work with Okanagan students, improving the potential for fulfilling the purposes the Okanagan students hold for themselves. Informed doing with….

**Communication**

Students raised a few situations and examples that directly pertain to the importance of considering communication processes and structures. These included the principal stepping out of his usual role, a reticence among Okanagan students to voice their questions in their classes or to initiate conversation with school leaders, and a similar hesitation on the part of parents to come into schools.

Laurie mentioned how important it was to her when the former principal moved out of his usual role and became a co-learner. The fact that he moved out of his usual role, out of the usual spaces and hierarchical relational structures, enabled Laurie to connect with him more deeply. He gained acknowledgement for this, and trust. This experience suggests that communication structures of significance are not only time and space related, but also habit and social/power hierarchy related (Bakhtin, 1973; Shields, 2003; Shields and Edwards, 2005; Sidorkin, 1999).

The students noted a marked reticence among Okanagan students to pursue their own questions. Robert’s experience of tutoring other Okanagan students, including his relatives, led him to this important observation:

R. Here class sizes are bigger and sometimes if they [Okanagan students] don’t understand the material, they just don’t do it. They are too afraid to ask questions, or ask for help.

This reticence to ask questions indicates a communication pattern that is, for obvious reasons, quite dysfunctional in a classroom setting with many students. If students don’t pursue what they don’t understand, their learning potential in a large class setting will be seriously
compromised. Teachers have limited opportunities to assess in the moment when a lesson is making sense for a student and when it is not. Later on Robert said of his own learning,

R. When I was in math, sometimes I wouldn’t understand it and I’d have to ask for help, and once they explained it, then I just got into a rhythm and I found it fairly easy.

Based upon Robert’s own experience of what worked in school, and based upon his observation of a communication pattern that was limiting the success of fellow Okanagan students, a further study of assertive questioning by Okanagan students would seem helpful. How common is this trend? Why do students say they are unwilling to ask questions? Is it culturally typical? What approaches, pedagogical and communicative, might assist Okanagan students in asking questions more assertively? What learning and communication structures should be changed in order to accommodate a cultural predilection should this be the case?

The elementary students identified a specific situation in which an elementary student was unlikely to seek the assistance of a school leader.

J. Some kids are just too scared to go to the principal because they want the people who are picking on them to be friends, probably, but then if they go to the principal they might never have a chance to be their friends.

This observed reticence by Okanagan students gives a particular emphasis to Laurie’s stipulation that non-Aboriginal school leaders ‘talk to us. Talk to me.’ If it is the case that Okanagan students are not likely to initiate conversation with a non-Aboriginal school leader, then it is important that the non-Aboriginal school leader take the initiative to create communication opportunities, processes, and structures to enable such interactions with the students.

Gordon observed that parents don’t come into the school to advocate for their children because the parents don’t believe that they will be listened to. In his words,

G. Cause it feels like, maybe you [Okanagan parent] are not going to be heard and they’re [school personnel] not going to listen. So it’s just why bother.
Gordon's words establish a very valuable test for communication events between non-Aboriginal school leaders and students, parents, and community. Will Okanagan students, parents and community members say that they were heard during a communication event? Does being heard entail understanding, a congruent response, or both? Asking if a person thinks that they have been heard in the manner that they had expected and hoped would seem to be a useful addition to communication events between Okanagan students, parents, community members, and non-Aboriginal school leaders. We will consider this experience further in the parents' perspectives chapter following.

**Reflections on this Study's Dialogical Approach with Students**

I must say, from my perspective the dialogical approach of our conversations together was successful. We set formal meeting times. We met in offices or seminar rooms, which provided privacy and yet seemed comfortable. Although I entered each conversation with a set list of conversation questions, I set them aside and allowed the natural flow of the conversation to set our agenda, building upon what students said, and making connections with what they talked about. However, more often than not, opportunity to include the questions, or what knowledge they were seeking, arose within the conversation, as a natural extension of an observation, or an anecdote. This resulted in very different conversations, providing very different emphases, as is evident from the foregoing presentation on understanding and relation. It seemed to me that in some of our conversations, there were times when we developed a mutual interest in each other's perspectives on the topics that emerged. Certainly the conversations provided me with deeper insights into each student's perspectives on a variety of important issues, but more importantly, these relatively short communication events set the foundation for a lifetime of possible connections and conversations with each student, and with other students.
CHAPTER 5
Okanagan Parents’ Perspectives

What gives us the right to say to a child you’re not able to do these things? We need to unleash that potential for our children, that they have the abilities to do whatever they want....I think parents, I think teachers, we all need to say to our children ‘whatever you want to do, you can do that’.

Carolyn, an Okanagan parent

And you don’t want to lose those students because you don’t know which one is going to be a great leader here.

Mary, an Okanagan parent

They [non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators] really don’t know us. They don’t really know our heart.

Gina, an Okanagan parent

What are we really here for? We’re here to teach kids. The bottom line is you want to see them bloom, excel, get married, have kids, have a good job, and seven digits you know. (laughter)

Frank, an Okanagan parent

Conversations with Parents

The parents you will meet in this chapter had much to say, much they wished to be heard, and understood. Our conversations ranged widely and deeply over a number of topics. At one point in the analysis I identified approximately 134 different themes, each with one or more sub-themes. Parents genuinely engaged the purpose of the study, to improve communication, understanding and working relationships; but throughout, parents had a deeper purpose in mind—to improve education of Okanagan children. Given the importance of hearing Okanagan narratives and perspectives in order to enable Okanagan engagement with, control of, and success in, public education, I have attempted to include many of the
ideas put forward by Okanagan parents. Indeed, recognizing my own positionality as a non-Aboriginal educator, I struggled with how I could judge some ideas as more relevant or useful than others. Thus, rather than simplify ideas into a streamlined argument of my design, I have attempted to let parents’ voices dominate the content of this chapter. This is not to say that I am not present. I still have selected out of long conversations what I thought was important, and what I thought parents’ thought was important. I have sorted themes, and I have merged some themes with others. And still, I have left many good and important ideas out. The most significant challenge of this chapter remains how to represent the wisdom, experience, passion, knowledge and aspirations of Okanagan participants in a fashion that honours each parent’s insights and their trust in me to do so. This challenge would have been much easier in 200 pages rather than the 70 of this chapter.

A Journey of Time, of Destination, and of Many Ways

It has taken some time to find a way to organize the many ideas communicated by parents. I have analyzed and re-analyzed these conversations, first for themes, then for repetition of themes within each conversation, then for repetition of themes across all participants. I then analyzed themes for their intensity of representation—listening to the tapes, reviewing my field notes, reading transcripts for emotion and detail of thinking. In pass after pass through these conversations, I have sought to gauge those meanings which participants’ felt most strongly would help improve communications, understanding and relationships between Aboriginal students, parents, community and non-Aboriginal school leaders. Similarly, I have wrestled with finding a way of presenting these impassioned meanings that would make them accessible to you.

Eric Mitchell (2002, personal communication), Okanagan elder-in-training, once told me that metaphors were frequently used by the Okanagan to communicate meaning. At the
time, he referred me to the metaphor of Mother Earth presented in the title of the Okanagan publication, *We get our living like milk from the land* (Maracle et al., 1994), to demonstrate this traditional pattern of thinking and communication. Recalling Mr. Mitchell’s words helped me to give credence to an image that erupted confidently one early morning—the metaphor of a journey. My conversations with parents transported me on a journey, a personal journey that, in effect, required that I travel parts of their journeys from the time of cultural integrity in an honoured past, through times of darkness and despair, to a present in which the past travail of their families and their People is profoundly present, and then to look ahead toward new destinations and the many ways that could be traversed to reach them. So, this chapter is infused with the metaphor of journey: my journey (a journey beyond my established frameworks of history, knowledge, and social order, a journey guided by parents who would ask that other non-Aboriginal school leaders take the same journey); parents’ journeys, the stories of their lives in relation to schools and education; and a People’s journey, the story of the Okanagan from self-determining community through colonizing holocaust toward new destinations of healing, reconstitution, and self-determination.

Okanagan parents’ points of view were often inextricably placed within a time frame that goes back many generations, that included a passionate engagement in the present, and that extended generations into the future. Their perspectives required that I find some way to represent the importance of the past. I noted that parents talked in terms of a collective past and a personal past. The collective past was that experienced by Aboriginal Peoples, by the Okanagan Nation, by the particular communities of which the parents were a part, and that experienced by extended and immediate family. The profound overlap of family relations,
band, and Nation made personal identification with this collective experience very strong.

Parents also recounted narratives of their own lived experience. The journey metaphor helps to expand our understanding of parents’ perspectives beyond the narrow frame of the present. Here I have in mind how the Jewish people explain their situatedness by reference to Moses’ journey through the wilderness. The journey of a People is definitive of each member’s identity, even as each family and each individual have their own unique experience of the journey. Without knowing of the arduous journey that brought the Okanagan to this present, one cannot understand why the present poses the challenges it does, or why the next steps into a better future are as they suggest. Moving toward a more promising future of improved dialogue, understanding, relationships and student learning, requires understanding the epic and historic journey of the Okanagan through the last 150 years.

Okanagan parents’ perspectives also required that I find some way to represent the distance between their experience of schools now and what they seek for children and for themselves. The desire to go to new places with education and the wisdom to suggest new ways of reaching those places underlie every conversation that I shared—new destinations and new ways, again the image of a journey, though this time from our present to a better future.

Parents participated in this study aware that its stated purposes were to improve communication, understanding, and relationships. But parents made it clear by the nature of their concerns, and by the ways in which they directed conversations, that their interest in these three purposes was often justified by a larger purpose: improving the educational processes for Okanagan students. Frequently, parents spoke directly to this purpose. Their thinking about things that would improve learning for their children was urgent and it was
important. The inclusion of their thinking on this purpose in this chapter honours the
dialogical nature of our conversations, and of this study.

Finally, I must again express my on-going concern that my inadequate words not be
taken to speak for Okanagan parents. I have noted that time and again my words are
inadequate to the richness of the lives shared with me. I have kept myself from despair by
continually reminding myself, and here I also remind you, that I am not writing biography
but rather I am selecting parts of the biographies parents shared with me that, in my
judgment, are illustrative and representative of themes that are necessary to understand if we
are to improve understanding, communication and relationships between Okanagan students,
parents communities, and the public schools which serve them. I hope that my words are
understood as poor reflections of a reality that is best encountered directly, in open dialogic
relationship, where Okanagan parents may share their lives as they wish, much the way that
the logbook of a journey motivates and guides a would be traveler, but is not confused with
the destination itself.

This chapter is organized into two sections: what Okanagan parents say non-
Aboriginal educators and non-Aboriginal school leaders need to understand; and, what
parents say would improve communication, understanding, relationships and Okanagan
student learning. These two major sections roughly parallel a journey. Section one covers
where Okanagan parents have come from and where they are now. Section two considers
where they would like to go and how they see getting there.
Section 1

What Non-Aboriginal Educators And Non-Aboriginal School Leaders Need To Understand

Understand Our Historic Journey

The past, for the Okanagan parents of this study, is not past. It is present. This past and its presentness are vitally important for non-Aboriginal school leaders to understand. In our conversations, parents talked about the importance of understanding “our history.” They talked about the significance of traditions, culture, and language. They talked about the traditional family structuring of Okanagan communities, the recent history of families in relation to each other, and the socio-economic structuring of the Band. They talked about the impact of residential schools on their grandparents, parents, on themselves, and on their children. They talked about their own personal schooling experiences, some in Beta.

Tradition, Culture, and Language

Parents were unanimous in their sense of the importance of tradition, culture, and language for their children’s education. However, they differed widely on what traditions should be included in educational processes and where culture and language should be learned. After a day of meeting with parents and Aboriginal educators, I was struck by the image of a person holding a rope in each hand, being pulled in opposite directions, but refusing to let go of either rope, an image which found its way into my field notes this way: ‘They reach back and forward simultaneously. Grasping after a rapidly receding past available only in pieces, even as they seek to find the ways of a better present and future.

60 Parents, with a few notable exceptions, did not elaborate on what they meant by tradition, culture, or language. I infer from the concrete examples provided and by the context of their statements that tradition, culture, and language look back to the time of cultural integrity preceding European colonization, but also include some of the historic adaptations that have occurred since Europeans began settling in the Okanagan Valley in the 1850s.
Pulled in two directions at once. Pulled in two?’ The honouring of family traditions, culture, and language in these early years of the 21st Century seemed to me as difficult as it is important.

Leslie’s following observation represents the general sense of importance of tradition and culture for the education of Okanagan children shared among parents:

M. Is there anything else that you want me to understand, or make sure I think about?

L. The other thing that I’m just kind of thinking about is our culture. Because we talk about it, and we are trying to restore some of the things that have been lost in our language and in our teachings, and we have a ways to go with that.

Mary observed the power of including culture in schools for young children when she had occasion to bring some cultural teachings into a classroom:

Mary. So I brought in some Native things you know, and some beads, and some crafts and talked about the Okanagan people. And this one little boy [in a later conversation Mary noted that this boy was having a very difficult time in school], it always just almost brings tears to my eyes, but it just changed his attitude. I mean at that moment, he sat up straight. You could just, as if the breath was going in and coming out. Oh, it was awesome. You know, and when you, for me even to see that moment, that it had touched him that way. That’s important to each for their culture. You know, to have culture in their life, and not have it be put down or anything either.

M. There is a sense in which our identities are deeply imbedded in our cultures.

Mary. uh-uhmm. [affirmative]

Both of these passages reflect a living engagement with Okanagan culture, and reveal how Okanagan traditions that thrived pre-contact remain significant in the present. All parents that I conversed with seemed to me positively oriented towards Okanagan tradition, even as most expressed their own particular ‘take’ on how traditions should be included in one’s life. I was told several times that traditions are often unique to particular families. I also observed in listening to each parent that access to traditions and culture varied widely. It felt to me as if, for some, there was a valley between the ways of being of their ancestors and their own lives, a break in the transmission of tradition across the last few generations. Some of the parents
noted how their own parents and grandparents had purposely not taught them the Okanagan language, believing that this would limit their opportunities. In all cases, I was aware of how there was an interest to reconstitute culture, even as there were dynamic tensions around how traditions should be interpreted and lived. Leslie made these evident when she said:

I think that it’s important to incorporate, to bring back the cultural teachings. And I think sometimes, with some families, that’s lost and they are not teaching or telling their children about that. That’s missing. And I hear that, I hear people talking about that when we are out at functions. Most specifically we had a death in the community just this week and there are some people talking about all the young people who go and eat and are gone. That’s not our teachings. I was raised, when my children are there, they help. They help assist, feed the Elders and the family that lost somebody, then they eat. Then they assist with the cleaning up. That’s how I was raised, and that is how I’ve raised my children. And this is why, you know. Because they’ve had a loss and we are there to support them and to respect. There are quite a few families that those teachings have been lost. The culture, the cultural teachings need to come back.

In our second conversation Joe connected the importance of culture and language with Okanagan students’ identity. He observed that,

Children need to know where they are coming from. Who they are. They need to have a sense of identity. And that happens in Elementary school before they hit high school issues like girls [Joe has a son at Beta] and peers and drugs and things of that sort.

In keeping with her experience above, Mary was generally pleased that culture and tradition were increasingly present in the schools:

I’ve been to things at [Beta] you know in the last few years....the school district has been doing a fairly good job. They have their drumming, they have, you know, they talk about the territory. I’ve heard a lot of this. So they have been working on it. With the smudging too, I’m sure that they have probably done that. And even some circle work. I’m sure they’ve done these.

But for Gina and Frank, traditions, particularly those with spiritual connotations, did not belong in the school:

But I don’t agree with the religious side of it [First Nations Studies 12], or the culture side of it. You know, like the smudging and things like that. I don’t agree with that being taught in the class. The history is a whole different thing.
Gina and Frank highlighted for me a polarizing tension between Okanagan traditional spirituality centered on Sen K’lip (coyote), and a Christian spirituality that has been a part of the Okanagan community since the early 1800s:

G. If a public school is going to allow or entertain spirituality, then schools should also allow prayer and God principles.

F. The thing is with our cultural situation is that our God on our cultural side is ...coyote. Sen K’lip. And they claim him to be the right side, on the right hand of God. Instead, they are replacing Sen K’lip with Jesus. That’s our culture. And as we grew up in the era of Christianity, we define the two. Some of us do and some of us don’t.

The long-standing presence of the Catholic Church amongst the Okanagan accounts for the number of Okanagan children who attend the Catholic school in town.\(^{61}\) It also reveals a significant historical strand of difference between Okanagan families that contributes to the political and philosophical diversity of the community.

The notion of the sacred also played a powerful role in discussions regarding Okanagan Language. Most parents mentioned the importance of providing Okanagan children with Okanagan language education. However, study participants were split roughly in half between those who were supportive of it being provided in public schools and therefore open to all students as a subject of study, and those who were opposed to non-Okanagan students learning the language. Even Gina and Frank, husband and wife, had opposite positions on this issue. The primary reason of those in opposition to language instruction was the “sacred” status of the language. All parents expressed their own interest in learning the language, even as they expressed their own limitations with it. Carolyn noted an occasion when she and one of her children counted all of the Okanagan words she knew, and she surprised herself and her child with over 250 words. She captured much of the

\(^{61}\) Cf. Q’sapi (Louis, 2002) for a more extensive portrayal of the presence of Catholic tradition within the community.
urgency and challenge regarding language education that I heard from parents in the following excerpt from our conversation:

C. The Okanagan language is definitely big, and it is something that I have been advocating since I was a high school student myself.

M. You know, it seems to me that the biggest block [to offering Okanagan language in public schools] is on the reserve.

C. I've heard that too. I have heard that sometimes it's our leadership. And I have heard some of our leadership say things like, 'Well, the language is a sacred language.' And I would argue, because I have brought this up within my own family and my own home life over and over again, and yes, there are aspects of any language that are sacred. That doesn't necessarily mean that our children shouldn't be able to learn to do the conversational pieces, that our children shouldn't be able to learn how to communicate and to dialogue with their Elders, with each other, in the Okanagan language.

M. This would be respectful.

C. I think if a child learns their own language it ties back in to that part that I spoke to earlier about cultural identity. Then they feel good about who they are. It creates positive self-esteem. It creates a whole lot of things that a lot of times our children are denied. And it was an elder, and this was a piece that I read, that an elder wrote. It is our children's inherent right to be able to learn their Aboriginal language—their First Nations language. And I totally support that. I'm sad to say that a lot of times different organizations within Aboriginal communities want to be the cultural brokers. They want to have power and control over a certain part of the culture. And I don't necessarily always agree with that. I think that the language, the history, all of these things. Yes. When we look at the Delgamu'uk decision, we do need to protect our intellectual property, which to me is kind of a European thing anyways. But I think our language, our people had an oral tradition. Our language is definitely where we need to start working from. I think, like I said, I have brought this up over and over again with Elders, with people in my family. I've tried to talk to different community members. Part of it is, I hear Elders saying, you know, 'Well, it needs to be taught at home.' But they are forgetting the whole part of where a lot of our people went to residential school. They no longer have that capacity. So we do need to share that with those families where there has been a loss of the language.

As Carolyn notes, language, along with culture and tradition, are deeply connected to a child's developing identity and sense of self worth. The importance of affirming Okanagan students is one of the top concerns for Okanagan parents, and hence its significance as a rationale for offering language programs in schools. However, as is clear from Carolyn's observations regarding cultural brokers, who controls the language is a significant, program-
stopping concern. Giving public schools control over language instruction is extremely troubling. I would suggest this is not surprising given the history of colonization, appropriation, and cultural destruction experienced by the Okanagan in the last 150 years. I would also suggest that engaging this concern is a crucial way-point for the Okanagan and the School district on their educational journey toward a better future.

Residential School

Parents referred to the history of the local residential school as a primary factor in explaining the difficulties parents have with schools. As exemplified above by Carolyn, parents identified residential schooling as destroying their community’s language capacity, as breaking down children’s capacity to enact and respect Okanagan culture and traditions. Parents also identified residential schooling, and its intergenerational effects, as the root cause of violence, addictions, poverty, and many other challenges that influence the Okanagan engagement with education.

Carolyn went right to the heart of the residential school and its multidimensional and intergenerational effects on the relations of Okanagan People with schools. She said,

C. Our Grandmothers knew how to prepare us to live in the world that they understood. But when our families were split apart, and many people, our family members were sent to residential school, there has been a disconnection between the skills taught by the Elders and the imposition of the residential schools. Our families didn’t know how to prepare us to function within a school setting, within the education system. And there is a drastic difference between traditions, and the residential schools, education is quite different today. So I think that, that really affected how the family functioned. The loss of parenting skills is probably another factor, because it has created so many social concerns for our families. Like one elder shared with me when I was a young mother, she commented ‘When you think about the residential schools, you are a mother yourself now,’ she said, ‘think about your children when they are five or six years of age and your children are ripped from your home, and ripped from your life for ten months of the year. And if you are lucky, you will get them back after 10 months. But for 10 months out of the year, you won’t see your children.’ She said, ‘That’s what we went through with residential school.’

M. And your children come home and they don’t know you. And they don’t trust you. And they don’t
C. I think the residential schools are at the root to a lot of these issues. Another story I want to share at this time Mark too is when I worked as a counselor I asked several of the young people I was working with, teenagers and young people, I said what do you know about your own personal history? What do you know about your family history? Do you know if your parents or your grandparents went to residential school? There was a lot of anger expressed by these young people. There was a lot of resentment. There was a lot of negativity, and yet when I explored it more with a lot of these young people, I found out yes, their grandmother or their grandfather or their family members had gone to residential school. And yet they didn’t, those grandparents, or those family members didn’t talk about their experiences at residential school.

M. So these children had no way to organize or explain why it was that their families were the way they were or why they felt the way they did.

C. And I think with the residential schools our families became desensitized to a lot of things. The alcoholism was a major factor that replaced a lot of our traditional teachings within our families, and within our homes. I think the loss of the language is another major issue, because the children were sent away and perhaps they were fluent speakers before they left. But when the children returned because they were punished. They were no longer encouraged to even speak their own languages when they came home and back to their communities and were around their parents or their grandparents.

The abuses that they would have went through. If you think of a five year old child, who experienced physical abuse or other forms of abuse at residential school, it would create social issues—it would have been tremendous. Both my parents went to residential school.

M. Through [town nearby]?

C. Through [town nearby]. And my mother, even though she and her brother both went to residential school at the same time, there was this whole total separation from everyone. So even though she and her brother went to residential school, they weren’t allowed to talk to each other. They couldn’t even communicate with one another and heaven forbid if they were ever seen trying to communicate with one another. They were severely punished. So I think a lot of the whole education concerns as we know it today stems from, to me, the residential schools.

I have quoted this passage at length because of the integrity of its content and the important linkages of the many ideas that Carolyn places together as she elaborates her understanding of the local residential school and its on-going effects for the Okanagan People and the schools which serve them. I also provide it in its entirety because it catches themes and ideas expressed by other parents, though not in such a comprehensive fashion, and because it made several connections to my own learning about the local residential school.
Carolyn brings attention to the disintegrating effects on families, which manifested themselves in discontinuity between the wisdom of grandparents and the learning worlds of children, in the loss of parenting skills (repeated and amplified from one generation to the next over the 50 years of the residential school’s existence) in emotional distress experienced by children and parents, and by consequent alcoholism. During our check back conversation, Gina wished me to emphasize the impact of residential schooling on parenting. She wrote: “There is a lack of parenting skills in most homes. For example, parents don’t know how to set boundaries or consequences.” Carolyn also brings to the fore the fact that children and grandchildren have a poor understanding of the impact of residential school on their family members. She makes a compelling connection between the young people’s anger and their lack of understanding regarding the distressing emotional history of their parents and grandparents, emotional history that has been a part of each child’s growing up, even though unspoken—especially because it was unspoken. Carolyn also remembers for us the consequences of placing such young children in uncaring, abusive environments, where the fundamental attributes of one’s sense-making—one’s language and one’s culture—were physically beaten out of one’s being. Finally, Carolyn’s reflection on residential school moves from the general and abstract to the very particular connection she has with the residential school experience through her own parents. I don’t think I can state frequently enough for non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators how very present the effects of this residential school are, even though it closed 30 years ago.

Other parents talked about the discomfort parents feel in schools. Joe noted that ‘some parents feel awkward about coming in and participating and their feelings of awkwardness

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62 Elsewhere in our conversation Carolyn reflected that it wasn’t until around 1985 that opportunities began for residential school survivors to talk about their experiences.
inhibit their involvement in school programs.' Mary told the story of one person that she
knew who had been extremely scarred by his experience in residential school and who would
not go into his child’s elementary school. She said that it was only through carefully staged,
positive interactions that he gradually came to feel comfortable in the school. Carolyn spoke
of this discomfort, and named other effects:

I think a lot of times parents don’t perhaps recognize the commitment that it takes for
a child to do their homework, to do their studying, and probably don’t even get
involved in any of the process and to me I think that is an issue that comes back to the
residential school issues where because of the negative experience, and I have heard
this from other parents as well, because of the negative experience that a lot of the
Aboriginal families or parents or grand parents have experienced with schooling.
School is not valued. It is seen as threatening. It is seen as several different things, but
a lot of times some of the parents that I talk to, because I was involved with the First
Nations parent advisory committee for five years at least, maybe a bit longer, some of
the parents were uncomfortable with going into the school within the institution itself
because of negative experiences they perhaps had as a younger person.

After listening to parents and others through these conversations, it seems to me that
school—the word, the concept, the spaces, the relationships, the activities—everything about
school has possible connections for an Aboriginal person to residential school processes,
purposes, and outcomes. Hence, people’s experience of school as threatening makes sense, as
does a disinclination to value school, or to get involved. Given my own positive experiences
of school, viewing school through this residential school lens is akin to seeing an image as a
photographic negative—where I experienced white, I now see black. Thus, non-Aboriginal
school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators need to take a step back and consider what it
means to have the spaces, activities, processes, purposes, and outcomes of their work all
interpreted through the lens of residential school. It may also be of help for Okanagan parents
to assume that non-Aboriginal educators and non-Aboriginal school leaders may have little
or no understanding of why schools can deservedly be held with deep suspicion.
Carolyn recounted an anecdote that illustrated the powerful influence of residential school on parents’ and grandparents’ expectations of what school is like for their children, which at the same time exemplified that the actual experience of Okanagan children in school may differ widely from parent and grandparent expectations.

Maybe I can share with you a story that a relative of mine that works as an advocate shared with me just recently, where she said that she has a grandmother that is raising her grandchildren. The grandmother speaks her Aboriginal language. She came into the school to meet with my cousin. My cousin works in [name of nearby town]. The grandmother came in, and she happened to come at lunch time, so my relative offered to share her lunch with her and meet with her over the lunch hour. And the grandmother was really taken aback. And my relative asked her, well, what’s happening for you? And the grandmother says, ‘Well, I’m just really surprised.’ And my cousin said, ‘Well, why are you surprised?’ And the grandmother said, ‘because I went to residential school, and my education that I received then was very, punishing, very uncomfortable, and was totally different experience.’ She was not happy as a child in the residential school. She says, ‘I come to the school today, and my granddaughter is in school here,’ and she says, ‘And these kids are all happy.’ So it was such a contradiction and a lot of times I think the schools don’t recognize that there is a different continuum of experience for the Aboriginal families in what their education or their school experience is. And a lot of times the grandparents and the extended families need to be or are involved in the child’s education as well.

This anecdote illustrates a challenge that must be faced by both non-Aboriginal educators and Okanagan parents when it comes to schools: what is happening for Okanagan children in schools now may not be the same as was experienced by grandparents, or for that matter by parents. Carolyn finishes this passage with an observation about what will best respond to this conundrum: invite parents in and involve them.

**Public School**

Carolyn’s notion of a “different continuum of experience” helps me introduce a further discovery of significance, namely, that parents (sometimes the first generation to do so) who went to public schools also had different experiences of school, some positive and some negative. These experiences influence parents’ relations to their children’s schools.
Leslie talked about her husband’s negative experience at Beta and its implications for his current relationship to the school:

My husband talks about some of the teachers teaching my children right now, he questions them [their children]. Nothing’s come to his attention yet but I’m sure if there was, he would be right there, and in a very aggressive manner. And I’ve talked with him about that but those are things that he still carries with him from his experience in High School. He was kicked out in grade 10.

This observation triangulated with a couple of other parent conversations and with the conversations with several Aboriginal educators and helped me realize that there is not just a transference of negative experience from residential school to Beta, but Beta itself had given several Okanagan parents grounds for distrust. The institution’s own actions, some by teachers still working in the building, haunted these parents. When I worked in Beta as an administrator, I was not conscious of the school’s own historic shadow. The past is past, I might have argued then. But clearly, when the parents of the children one serves are parents who will not support the school, the past is not past at all but acutely present. This raises a question about how schools may own not just their positive history, which is celebrated, but also their negative history, which is neglected if not intentionally forgotten. Surely one way is to do what I have just done—hear the stories of those harmed by the school, understand the meanings of those historical events for families now, seek respectful ways to acknowledge these stories, and then act, together, upon their implications.⁶³

Another consequence of the discovery that the events of 30 years ago continue to influence the present was my realization that Alpha and Beta need to consider themselves as part of a much longer term project than the 13 year progression of a child through school. I realized that if teachers across a thirty-year period were part of this history of distrust,

⁶³ Another implication of Leslie’s husband’s experience has been further questioning around the negative experiences of Aboriginal men at Beta. Three other study participants commented on this. It is an area, I believe, for further investigation.
teachers across the next thirty-year period could also be a part of building trust. Unlike so many public schools where grads leave the community, never to return again, Alpha and Beta stand in a long term relation with the Okanagan People. This unique, long term relation provides both schools with an unusual mandate: set goals that may take generations to achieve.

Carolyn recalled how difficult it was for her to attend the public schools in town.

I think the whole transition from children being sent even to the public schools which I was probably one of the first ones in our community. My parents chose not to send us to the Catholic school, here in [town], and instead sent us to the public schools in [town]. It was really difficult because at, even at that young age we experienced a lot of racism. And it was really overt.

Carolyn’s recollection of racism reveals a raw nerve shared by all parents. Understanding the prevalent past and present experience of racism is extremely important to Okanagan parents. Carolyn’s designation of racism as “overt” was intentional on her part and she contrasted this with “covert” racism, which she observed is more common in the present. I have found her naming of overt and covert racism very helpful. It pushes me, and I believe other non-Aboriginal educators, to look beyond our assumptions of what racism looks like, and consider more fully the perspectives of those harmed by racism. We shall develop this further in our upcoming discussion of racism in the present.

Joe characterized his experience of school, particularly high school, as positive. He played on school athletic teams throughout his five years there. He connected with school. While reflecting on his son’s disconnection from Beta, Joe believed that his own participation in school athletics helped him associate school with fun, and made his connection natural. He recalls that he may have been the only Aboriginal student in the whole school. Joe did not attend Beta, but went to high school in a nearby town.
Margaret also told positive stories of school. She set these stories in the context of a troubled family situation, and identified the school as an environment which allowed her to feel good about herself. Her mother and father were alcoholic, and so she was raised by a disciplinarian uncle and caring aunt, which worked out until she was 14, when she returned to live with her mother. Dynamics with her mother were such that Margaret did whatever she wanted, and she recalls that soon she was partying heavily and began a slippery slope that lead to her own alcoholism. Margaret said she had great teachers in elementary school and at Junior high. As with Joe, she attended these schools in another nearby town, and did not attend Alpha or Beta. She made it through grade 11 but didn’t graduate. She told a story about a grade one teacher who really cared for her. Margaret had been sick with allergies and had been in the hospital and the grade one teacher brought her work at the hospital. She told this story as representative of her elementary and Junior high school days. She had “good teachers, very good teachers.” They expected her to do well and she did as well as she could.

I re-tell Margaret’s story in some detail in order to represent the complex and unpredictable ways that Aboriginal children and schools interact. The alcoholism in her family, identified by Carolyn as one of the consequences of residential school, affected Margaret somewhat paradoxically. As a young child, she found in school a positive space where she was accepted and did well, which differed from her home environment. So, one could say that the family troubles pushed her toward school where she found some very supportive teachers. However, as a teenager, her mother’s substance use and emotional difficulties eventually became a pattern that she emulated herself with the effect that Margaret did not graduate. Margaret shared difficult parts of her life openly with the understanding that the challenges of her life were not unique, and with the belief that students
who share her life experience need to be understood and that schools can play an important role in such students’ lives.

Carolyn also told a positive story about a principal who made a real difference for her.

Even though there was racism, we had an exceptional principal at that school, Mr. G, at that time. And I think he really tried to ensure that the Aboriginal children that were attending his school [another public elementary in town] at that time were made to feel comfortable, that he didn’t take on that authority role with our parents, and I’m thinking of my own mother in that case. And I think he tried to be fair and a leader that we need to see as an educator. I think he was an exceptional person because, I can recall times where he went above and beyond being a principal, where he knew that my parents didn’t have a phone, he knew that I missed the bus, he knew that I needed to get home. So he drove me.

As with Margaret’s experience above, Carolyn’s anecdote reflects a dynamic complexity of relationship and experience regarding school. Mr. G models good school leadership for Carolyn in the ways that he understood her personal situation; he was respectful of her family; he did not make her parents uncomfortable by taking on a position of superiority; and, he cared for her in ways that she deeply appreciated. Yet, racism in his school was part of her daily experience.

At another point in our conversation, Carolyn talked of two teachers she had that really believed in her and had inspired an ember of possibility that she was capable of attending university (Carolyn now teaches at the community college), but she told of these two against the background of all of the other teachers who didn’t believe in her, and one teacher who made her repeat a year. Carolyn’s anecdotes, taken with Margaret’s and Joe’s, illustrate a wide variety of experience of public schools, and at the same time, illustrate how uniquely each has interpreted the import of these experiences. I infer from these anecdotes, and others that were shared with me, that there is a need for non-Aboriginal educators and non-Aboriginal school leaders to be open to a wide range of orientations toward public school among Okanagan parents, and to listen deeply for those negative experiences that
incline parents toward suspicion, alienation, resistance, and anger. It is important for non-
Aboriginal educators and parents alike to be sensitive to the ways in which past experience
with schools influence parents’ present and future engagement.

**The Past Is Present**

Parents want non-Aboriginal school leaders to understand how the past is present for
the Okanagan. This means understanding the importance of tradition, culture and language.
Parents expressed an intense commitment to tradition, culture, and language, even as they
have passionate and diverse positions about how they may be included in public school for
the benefit of their children and other children. Parents want non-Aboriginal school leaders to
understand the overwhelming impact of the residential school on the community, on
extended family members, on immediate family members, and not just as something that
happened in the past, but rather as something that continues to have significant
intergenerational effects on parents and children now. To non-Aboriginal educators who
might be inclined to say that colonization is past, parents just point to the continued lack of
negotiated settlements regarding land claims, and the on-going presence of the Indian Act
(1876) to emphasize just how present this colonizing past is. Finally, parents want non-
Aboriginal school leaders to know that parents’ personal experiences in school may not have
been positive. All of this past is present in the cognitive frameworks, expectations, and
operating theories about school that parents have. Recognizing the presence of these
anticipatory cognitive structures that will structure the world they engage is vital to
improving communication and working relationships.⁶⁴

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⁶⁴ Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* suggests that these cognitive structures in turn structure the world that they
engage, they are ‘structuring structures.’ Gadamer’s notion of fore-structures of knowing that are shaped by
history imply the same meaning. In order to recognize how these structures selectively interpret the world,
gathering to them evidence that re-asserts their validity, I also refer to them as theories-in-use. These theories
Given the presence of a past that includes the intentional dismantling of families, culture, tradition, language, individual identities, and concomitant self-destruction and violence, it should be no surprise that many Okanagan parents consider school with suspicion. The presence of this past places an onus on schools to prove that they are different than this set of bleak expectations.

Non-Aboriginal educators must be conscious that Okanagan People hold a deep reservoir of pain and anger from this past. On more than one occasion, working in the school district, I was witness to the flood of emotion that accompanied events that released this deep reservoir. As example, I recall a meeting of the School District’s First Nations Education Committee. This committee was a representative committee composed of Band Councilors, School Trustees, District management, and a couple of appointed teachers, of which I was one. At this meeting, a distance learning school to be located on the reserve was being discussed. As a teacher-librarian at the time, I made the suggestion that if we waited four months, the next generation of computers would be out, and we could purchase computers at a much cheaper rate. The response from the Band Councilor across the table astonished me. He jumped to his feet and shouted: ‘We have waited long enough! We will not be delayed any longer!’ He said there was always some reason why Aboriginal people shouldn’t have their own school. They had waited generations and they weren’t going to wait longer. At the time, I thought his outburst highly irrational. I now recognize the potency of my ignorance. Without understanding the presentness of 150 years of violent colonizing history, I had no way of judging just how sensible his response actually was.
Non-Aboriginal Educators and School Leaders Need to Understand Where We Are Now

In this section, I present parents’ experiences of, and their thoughts about, their children’s schools.

The Colonizing Continues: Racism

Having benefited from the colonization of Aboriginal people rather than lived the suffering this colonization has inflicted, I do not have the raw weals of racism’s lash to provide me with an acute sensitivity to its presence. Even with a well-tuned empathy and practiced ear to perceiving the meanings of others, I miss the acts of racism that Aboriginal people and other minorities have experienced, even in my presence, even by my own words and actions. I find this blindness upsetting, and deeply convincing of the need to engage fully in dialogue with others regarding their experiences of racism. As an example, a South Asian friend and I were traveling together in New Zealand. He was speaking with the Anglo owner/manager of the motel where we were staying when I joined them. The owner/manager shifted his attention to me and carried on the conversation. It was only afterwards, when my friend tried to explain to me how the owner’s slide of his eyes to me, and his shift of attention to me, and the way that he spoke through me to points that my friend was making, that I realized how my friend had been dismissed by the owner, and how deeply upsetting this was to my friend. It didn’t help things that I just didn’t get it right away. My own blindness to my privilege, made me equally blind to this act of racist exclusion.

Similarly, when serving as vice principal at Beta, I would have said that racism wasn’t present. But, in retrospect, having listened to parents and the other participants in this study carefully, I have come to understand that racism takes many forms, and disguises itself, even in well intentioned actions and apparently reasonable policies. Consequently, non-
Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators need to create open, dialogic spaces for Aboriginal students and parents to express freely how it ‘feels’ to be understood as Aboriginal in school.

Linda told the story of a principal in her younger son’s school [not Alpha] who she has come to believe is prejudiced. She observed that this principal “talks down” to First Nations families. She recounted how a friend, who is Aboriginal, and her husband, who is not, met with the principal. During the entire meeting the principal talked to the husband, and spoke to the woman through the husband, as if she wasn’t even present.

When I asked Carolyn to give me an example of “covert” racism, so that I might understand this better, she thought but a moment and then provided four examples.

C. I think the racism is a lot of times more covert. It’s very, very subtle.

M. Do you have examples of that?

C. Ha. Do I have examples of that? I will just try to think of some.

M. One of the challenges of dealing with things that are invisible is that they remain invisible until you can name them, until you can call people at it....

C. Some of the subtle examples I can think of from my own children when they’ve gone to school, an example would be when one of the teachers was talking about how on CBC you have different, multicultural broadcasting. I think CBC offers Chinese or Mandarin, a radio program that is all in Mandarin. There is an East Indian broadcast. We have it in French. We have it in English. And there was a program on CBC where the teacher was talking about how there, they were thinking about expanding this and offering CBC in the Aboriginal communities and having Aboriginal interests, Aboriginal broadcasts. And the teacher made the comment with my daughter and another Aboriginal student in the class, ‘Oh well they can offer all the Aboriginal broadcasting they want, but I would never listen to it. And I would never advise anyone else to either.’ And I was quite taken aback and when the teacher, made this comment my daughter said she felt uncomfortable. When the teacher made this comment, he looked at her and the other Aboriginal student in the class.

Another example would be the whole issue about the Bering Strait theory. As Aboriginal people, we have a different version that we didn’t cross over the Bering strait. We didn’t originate in Asia and migrate from Asia and Russia over the land bridge. When one of our daughters first heard this theory she came home and she said, ‘You know what? This is what I learned in Social Studies today. This is what the teacher said.’ And we shared with our daughter that we don’t believe in that
theory, that if you were to theoretically to look at it. If you look at all the tribes in North and South America and all the different linguistic groups, all the different cultures and everything, it would almost be impossible for as many cultural tribes and groups that we have in North and South America to evolve within a 10,000 year period. Or whatever it was the anthropologists were speaking of. That you’d have to almost be running across the continent forming different languages and unique cultures in that short of a time, in that short of a time frame. And when we shared that with our daughter, and she went and shared this with the teacher, he just like totally dismissed any of the beliefs or theories that, ‘Oh well this is what science has proven.’

M. This is the official university curricula. I learned it there, so therefore it is true.

C. Exactly. I think another example would be when our daughter was asked to do an assignment around doing a Christmas or a Christmas from another culture. And she was sharing with the teacher. We had a belief in, my grandmother says that Jesus came and he lived amongst the Aboriginal People here in North America and we have our legends that reflect his being born and everything. And the teacher just totally dismissed it. And she wanted to actually do her presentation on First Nations’ Christmas perspective and it was totally dismissed and she was then required to do something more European, from a German belief of what Christmas was and how Germans celebrate Christmas. So the total dismissal of our traditional teaching and the teachings that we offer the children in our home and how it gets totally pushed aside. I think that’s when it reflects the racism that our children experience and the parents experience within the school system.

Another example would be when our children were in grade school and I think the teacher’s assignment or expectation was, ‘Okay, these are things that reflect who I am as a person.’ And, it was my husband actually that made the comment, when you looked at the [classroom] wall. Our children were always and have participated in their culture, their spirituality, we teach them what we can of the language and they have been involved in community events and social events where traditional events happen for them. And my daughter said that when she was doing her assignment she tried to say, ‘ You know, well I participate in Pow Wows or I participate in ceremonies, and sweat lodge, and this and that. And the teacher said, ‘Oh.’ And I guess because she couldn’t identify with it, or couldn’t relate to it she said, ‘Oh well. Do you watch tv? Do you do this thing?’ Totally ignoring the things that my daughter said she wanted to share. And this was like in the second or third grades. So if you have a child that isn’t comfortable with themselves, and they are being questioned on, ‘Oh well, this is my cultural identity of who I am.’ And you are totally ignoring it, a child and their parents are going to say, ‘Oh well I can’t trust sharing.

M. I can’t even be present here

C. What my experience is. So those are just a couple of examples that I can think of where it is subtle racism but then they are experiences that either myself or my children have gone through.

Note the similarity of this last example to Taylor’s attempt to do a project on his Okanagan traditions recounted in the previous chapter. Carolyn’s words are powerfully instructive. Her
examples are echoes of racist residential school dynamics and experiences, re-introducing colonizing domination and marginalization. Without understanding this historical backdrop the full significance of these events would be missed. The school authority figure dismisses Aboriginal expressions of culture (CBC), dismisses the legitimacy of Okanagan knowledge construction (Bering Strait), dismisses Aboriginal traditions of Christmas requiring a European perspective be presented instead, and dismisses a child’s desire to explore and express her Okanagan cultural identity (ongoing rejection of powwows). As Carolyn rightly concludes, Aboriginal children and parents, “can’t trust sharing” their lived experiences. The effect of such covert racism on children, as they construct their identities, their values, their authorities, and their world views, far exceeds what such experiences would impart in an adult context where adults are confident of who they are and able to assert an alternative point of view. Thus, this subtle or covert racism in a school context may have far from subtle effects on children. If school erodes a child’s sense of self, she/he is not going to be very committed, nor is she/he going to feel very confident about taking the risks necessary to successful learning. Will not such racism ultimately affect a student’s achievement?

M. Those are brilliant examples of, you called it, covert racism, about just how a child gets shut down and shut off and why performance, which is so based on joy, on wanting to express yourself, and feeling good about putting in the energy to do something, wouldn’t be present. You just wouldn’t go to that extra effort because, why? You don’t know how it would be received. You don’t know if the teacher will honour you.

C. No. Exactly. And I can honestly say that throughout my years of education, if I look at my elementary and high school education, I can honestly say through that 12 years of education, actually 13 because I was held back a year, that I can only count two teachers that I had that said to me, [Carolyn] you can succeed. [Carolyn] you can do whatever you want. You can further your education.

Carolyn’s own experience of teachers who assumed that she couldn’t succeed, identifies a further form of racism of profound significance for children and of significant concern for parents.
The Colonizing Continues: Deficit Thinking

The literature refers to the belief that certain sorts of children can’t learn as “deficit thinking” (Shields et al., 2005; Valencia, 1997; Vibert et al., 2002). To assume that an Aboriginal child is not as capable as other students because she is Aboriginal has the potential of inscribing a narrative of incapacity in the child that becomes more deeply etched in the being of the child every time a teacher makes a judgment about the child’s learning program. Deficit thinking in education is a brutally effective self-fulfilling prophecy: a child is judged less than capable and a special arrangement is made. The special arrangement expects less of the child. The child consequently learns less. The child then is discovered to be less than capable…and the cycle repeats itself, spiraling a child’s capacity ever downward. The poor performance of the student is then justified by the premise that started the cycle downward in the first place—well she’s Aboriginal and she shouldn’t be expected to do as well. Recall that this pattern was identified in the previous chapter by Gordon reflecting on the educational paths of his peers. Parents also identified this pattern of deficit thinking:

M. What would you insist [non-Aboriginal school leaders] know?

G. Not taking them [our children] out of the classrooms and into learning assistance programs. I don’t think that our kids should be, pretty near just about 90% of students are, they get stuck in the modified programs. Everything is modified right from grade 3. By the time they get to grade 8, they become less and less challenged because they never were challenged, even in grade 3. They can do the work! I don’t doubt that there isn’t any Native student that can’t do the work the same as the White kid that is sitting beside him. And I think that they should be, I don’t know what the word is, expected that they can do the same.

M. I have heard the phrase, ‘they should be held capable.’

G. That’s right. They are just as capable as the student sitting beside them. I see it more as not a Native problem, but the White, the teachers’ problems. That they already have set in their minds that they [our children] are different…. ‘Let’s just take them and throw them in a learning assistance room.’
Whatever the justification used by a school to question an Aboriginal child’s capacity to participate in a regular classroom, by the parents’ accounts, there needs to be serious and well-founded deliberations in support of such a decision. Even conscious, well-intentioned motivations to pitch the ball where a child can hit it, and therefore, decreasing the challenge of a program, need to be reconsidered in the light of the race-based deficit thinking that has been overtly and covertly part of the system’s education of Aboriginal children since the 1890s (Barman and Gleason, 2003).

Parents frequently and passionately spoke about the importance of building Okanagan students’ self-confidence. The residential school had as policy the denigration of Aboriginal ways of being and doing. No surprise then, that one of the challenges facing Okanagan students is a deeply set pattern of deficit thinking regarding their own capacity, an internalized prejudice in themselves, in their parents and in their community, that “White is right:”

C. And I went to one of our Band council meetings, and I said, ‘Why don’t we have our own school in our own community?’ And I was really disheartened to hear one of our leaders state at the time comment if we had a school on our Reserve, who is going to send their kids to it? He quickly said, ‘I sure won’t send my kids to it.’ And I said, ‘We need to be sending our kids to their own school’...’I was just so disheartened when he said, ‘Well, I wouldn’t send my kids to a school.’ You know it is that whole oppressive thinking from our own people.

M. That is the residential school coming out again.

C. It is.

M. Whatever we do is not valuable.

C. And it goes to the saying that we have within the Aboriginal communities you know, the ‘White is Right’ syndrome. And you know, people, we need to have faith in our own selves, and our own people.

The presence of this historical, and internalized deficit thinking, makes other experiences of deficit thinking in schools more powerful than they might be otherwise—even a slight wind
will knock over a tree with weakened roots. Carolyn speaks to both the internalized and
external (from educators) experience of deficit thinking below, after she notes the enormous
influence of a teacher who believed she was capable:

My grade 5 teacher, Mr. J, he's now deceased, but he was the one who first
encouraged me and said, '[Carolyn] you can go on to university. You can go and do
whatever you want.' You know....It's nothing more than quashing a child's dream if
you state, 'You're not smart enough. You can't do that.' And believe you me, I have
heard parents, I have heard educators say that to children. 'You can't do it. You're not
able to do it.' And I think, what gives us the right to say to a child you're not able to
do these things? You know we need to unleash that potential for our children, that they
have the abilities to do whatever they want.

I believe that this recurrent theme to bring confidence to Aboriginal students is the positive
re-framing and response to the negative experience of deficit thinking. 'You keep thinking
we can't. Think we can!' We shall enlarge what this aspiration for their children looks like
when we discuss parents’ perceptions of what they seek and how they see getting there. Here
it is important to understand just how deeply deficit thinking negatively connects with past
educational experiences, and how significantly it can affect a student’s education.

Parents had many positive things to say about the leadership and work of John, the
former principal at Beta. So, it was an anomaly when Gina and Frank recounted a set of
experiences that had really upset them, and which they wished me to understand fully from
their point of view. At the heart of this issue was the desire to have Okanagan children
experience themselves as capable in school, and to protect Okanagan children from the
experience of being judged incapable. I had the good fortune to hear of this incident from
several points of view, and I present it here as instructive on many levels and as speaking to
our key themes: communication, understanding, and working relationships.
Gina and Frank launched into a discussion about this incident, one moment after I had sat down at their kitchen table. It was hard to ask them to pause, to review the consent form and to ask if I might use a tape recorder to recall their perspectives in detail.

In the previous year a young relative had tried out for a Beta basketball team. The student was not selected to play, this though the student had been a star in previous years at a different school. There were other Aboriginal students that Gina and Frank felt should also have made the team. Another young relative did make the team but was not played fairly. This upset relatives, and parents. There was a concern that the coach was dismissing the children because they were Aboriginal. Gina goes on to say:

G. I was asked to write some letters regarding that situation, that circumstance, because the parents were not confident in doing this themselves. So, I spoke to the parents, got their feelings from them and then wrote a letter to the school. The letter was directed to the principal, the coach, the First Nations Advocate, and also the [district principal for Aboriginal Education] and the [Band’s education manager] because the parents wanted the people in, for instance [the Band’s education manager] and [the district principal], the parents wanted them to know what was going on and how they were being treated in the public school system, and how their students were being treated, and not only did they feel that their kids just weren’t being played, they were seeing a difference in their kids, because of this treatment. Their kids were losing confidence in themselves, saying, ‘Oh maybe I never really was a good player.’ There was just a real, a real strong expression

F. of resentment.

G. Of resentment and bitterness. So this letter was written. And what came out of it was absolutely nothing. There was a meeting set up. The meeting was set up by myself, and the principal. The principal didn’t really want [the band education manager] to be there. He didn’t want myself to be there. He really didn’t think there was a need for the [First Nations Advocate] to be there. I believe he felt vulnerable and concerned that he might lose control. The other [the district principal for Aboriginal education] his stand on this whole situation was just backed off....The only person who showed up was [the band education manager]. So, therefore, again, the parents never were heard. Their kids were never played.

Although our conversation was almost a year after this incident, Gina and Frank were still extremely upset by this situation. It seemed to confirm for them deeply held suspicions about Beta and its ability to meet the needs of their children. And this is the point: suspicions born
out of generations of harmful educational experiences from public and residential schools are quickly turned to conviction and anger when Okanagan children are subjected to experiences that are analogous and which continue this harmful legacy.

**The Colonizing Continues: Parents Are Not Heard**

With not a little bitterness, Gina brought attention to her feeling that the "parents were never heard." This gathers up a thread of experience which the students set down in the last chapter. Gordon observed that parents don’t go into schools because they don’t think they will be heard. This is another historical pattern that I discovered was extremely loaded for Aboriginal parents, and it emerged in several different places in our conversations. We will consider three areas here: parent hesitation to express concerns to the school; parent inclusion in decision making regarding their children—particularly disciplinary events; and parent beliefs that Aboriginal parents should assert their point of view more readily.

Margaret recounted a troubling story about her daughter’s teacher from a previous year. Her daughter had uncharacteristically struggled in this teacher’s class. Her daughter reported that the teacher favoured those students who were doing well, and ignored the rest of the class.

You know, I wondered about this. But didn’t go with it very far. Then I went to a parent meeting, and he spent a lot of time, and really was very inclusive with the parents of students who were doing really well in his class, but I might as well have not been there.

I asked Margaret if she thought the teacher was being racist, specifically discriminating against Aboriginal parents, to which she replied, no, a few of the parents selected for attention were Aboriginal. I then asked Margaret if she could have done something about it. And she replied that if there had been a major event she would have, but there wasn’t one, so she didn’t make an issue of it. She said that she was concerned about how her daughter
would be treated if she did make an issue of it, and she didn’t really believe that anything would really be done about it. The bitterness that comes from feeling helpless to act against something that one knows is not right was evident in her voice when she emphatically said, “This was not the way I was treated as a child. I was always supported. I was always included. I was never left out. This was just wrong.”

Out of the history of residential school and the past experience of parents with public school, the anticipations of not being heard, and of nothing being done, provide a powerful theoretical framework that gathers to it events—no matter how remote—which serve to confirm this operating theory’s validity. And in this confirmation, helplessness, frustration, and anger erupt. This has significant implications for working relations and communication with Okanagan families. Somehow trust must be restored that counters these anticipations. It would seem that the historical truth of these powerful anticipations means that a very strong case built upon a lot of positive evidence must be made to shift the anticipations from expecting the negative to having the confidence that expressing one’s point of view will make a difference.

Non-Aboriginal school leaders need also understand how a phenomenon of collective identification and generalization contributes to these historically validated, negative anticipations. A theme that emerged through several conversations with parents and students and Aboriginal educators was how an event that happened to any Aboriginal child was experienced as if it could happen again to one’s own child, or one’s self. Thus, events that may be totally unrelated to Alpha or Beta, having occurred in very different contexts, with individuals that aren’t a part of either school environment, and are not even closely
associated with the local Band, nevertheless confirm these dominant operating theories and their negative anticipations.

**The Colonizing Continues: Parents Are Not Included**

A similarly upsetting experience to not being heard is the experience of not being included in the school life of one’s child. This again shares dimensions of the residential school history in which parents were excluded from involvement in their children’s lives while at school. The clearest example of this process was the schools’ habit of disciplining Okanagan students first and then informing parents of the outcome after the fact. Having done just this a number of times as vice-principal at Beta, I could think of many examples of just what they were saying. One of the parents [I have chosen not to identify which parent in order to maintain confidentiality], referred to a recent discipline incident with her child that exemplifies the point precisely. Her child and another child were involved in a cycle of threats and counter threats over a couple of weeks based upon the other child’s theft of some valued items. The situation never came to blows, but the threats escalated. She said,

> You know what? Through all of this we never received one phone call from that principal, or the vice-principal, or the Native Advocate, at all. So our [child] comes home and she is telling us what went on. Then the principal phones and he says, ‘Your [child] is suspended three, no five days for bullying.’

The parents were left out of the loop until after the sentence had been set; too late for them to make a difference in their child’s approach to the problem, or work with the school to shape a disciplinary process appropriate to the child.

Parents deeply resented not being involved in these processes. School administrators are empowered by the BC School Act to act *in loco parentis* for children. This is the legal basis for disciplinary action without parental involvement. However, given the backdrop of residential schooling, and the extremes that resulted from *in loco parentis*-type reasoning in
that context, non-Aboriginal school leaders must recognize that an historical onus has been
placed upon them to justify why Aboriginal parents should not be involved in every aspect of
a child’s life in school—good and bad.

Parents expressed a desire to be included much earlier in the discipline process than at
the end when things had become extreme, or had proceeded so far down the tracks that there
was no opportunity to make things better. Leslie noted this in reference to moving her
daughter away from Alpha to a new school.

L. With [the new school], when anything happened, they called....Any concern, I want
to know about it. I don’t want to hear about it when it’s at the extreme. I want to know
before. Give me the heads up so let’s see if we can do something about it before.

M. Let’s work together. Don’t make any decisions about my child without me
included.

That’s right.

Mary said,

A parent wants to know if their child is skipping school, right away, not when the
report card comes. And if they are not doing their homework they’d like to know also
before the report card comes....I want to know!

Frank was equally adamant:

You know anything that is concerning your children should go back to the parents.
Cause I want to know what my kids are doing.

Given a context in which communication is not easy, it may be explainable how not-so-
serious incidents are just dealt with ‘internally.’ However, this is not acceptable to parents.
The implications of this for communications are obvious—communicate frequently and
immediately whenever a concern arises, or stated as a rule of thumb—‘when in doubt,
communicate.’ This must be true for both school personnel and for parents.
Gina noted that there is a habit of thinking among some parents that a child’s education is up to the school, and if the child doesn’t learn, it’s the school’s problem, not the parents. She had shared this attitude herself:

I think part of our problem is in the Native community, we have always, and you know what, I used to feel like this myself when my kids were first born, and I know a lot of the community thinks that way, is ‘Well, if they are not learning this in school well that’s the teacher’s problem. That’s that school’s responsibility to teach my child. Not mine.’ I don’t believe that anymore.

Gina, Frank, Carolyn, Leslie, and Mary all spoke about the need for parents to assert themselves more progressively and to get deeply involved in schools. These parents have come to the conclusion that taking the initiative, asserting their perspectives, and being involved with the school is needed if one will be heard and included by non-Aboriginal educators. Mary stated emphatically, “you know what? Parents have a right to be there [in schools]!” This is a call to responsibility for both schools and parents. In the context of explaining what had helped Carolyn’s children do well at school (both graduated and went on to post-secondary studies), she replied: “I think one of the main cornerstones of Aboriginal children succeeding with their education is parental involvement. Definitely has to be there.”

There are many ways that parents may be involved in schools, and we shall explore what parents believe they should do more of in a following section. However, it is essential to remember that parent involvement is not an easy thing to do for Aboriginal parents. Frank’s words frame the challenges:

Well, anyways, the biggest thing is we were just, well, it’s a tough task you know, to go through this. It’s a lot of learning. Standing up for yourself. That’s one of the things we don’t really do out here. And people would rather just blow it away and let it go. And in a sense they are not really benefiting their children when they do that, because it is out of fear that they don’t. Rejection. Because they are this third generation of rejection. You know I’ve talked to a few people, and that is how they feel about it.

And Gina’s experience with school governance reflects both the benefits and the deep personal challenges and costs to being involved:
[Being involved] was good for me, myself, because I was able to get on the inside. Being on the inside, I saw some issues and some things that absolutely astounded me with disappointment. It rose up a fire and a fight inside of me. And so, those people who were sitting with me on that board saw me as very political and voiced that to me. That’s why you sit on those things because I don’t want to be a sheep. I just don’t want to be led around because a certain majority group says this is how it should be. Maybe you think that is how it has always been, but there needs to be changes, you know. And I’m always a fighter for those changes. To be not part of the problem, but part of the solution for these problems. And this is how I could see these things changing. But the system doesn’t like that. They don’t want somebody in there who is vocal and who speaks their heart. And even if you do, [Gina slammed her hand down onto the table] it gets shoved under the carpet anyway because it is just not their idea.

Being involved didn’t mean difficulties went away, but it did enable Gina to advocate strongly for what she believed was right. Further, her understanding of the system identified for her more clearly what sorts of involvement and actions were needed.

**The First Nations Advocate**

The First Nations Advocate roles in Alpha and Beta were considered important positions by parents. Not one parent I met with suggested that the position was unnecessary. On the contrary, when parents were critical of the position it had to do with the limited power that the position seemed to have, with a desire to have the position more clearly defined so that parents could know what was reasonable to expect the Advocate to do, and with the perceived failure of Advocates to meet the needs of their children.

**General appreciation for the Advocate role.**

Mary was generally pleased with the work of the First Nations Advocates, seeing the role as part of an overall direction by the school district to meet the needs of Okanagan students.

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65 The First Nations Advocates are Okanagan, know the community well and are known by the families who send their children to Alpha and Beta. The Advocates also know well the school communities in which they work. The role includes cultural programming for students, student counselling, tracking all Aboriginal student progress, and liaison between school and home. The Advocate participates in school processes, has working relationships with teachers and administrators, and is able to move issues along appropriate pathways. In effect, the Advocate lives in both worlds, and between both worlds.
You know, they [school district] are on the right track. And I think if they put value in their First Nations Advocates...that they will have a lot of the right answers, maybe already. And you know, the Advocates are doing a pretty good job because they say that the graduation rate has risen.

Mary observed that the Advocates, if they are given opportunity, have many of the answers or perspectives that could and will continue to help schools improve their educational processes for Okanagan students. Leslie noted how her children had benefited from the work of the Advocates, “I think it is wonderful that they have the First Nations Advocates. Both my [children] have accessed support from the Advocates.” Linda appreciated the Advocate at her son’s school letting her know early on about an issue her son was facing.

**Criticalisms of the Advocate role.**

Frank and Gina hoped for more from the Advocate role and expressed several concerns. They expected that the Advocate would have greater capacity to speak their needs to the school and greater power to bend the school’s processes to their expressed concerns. They theorized that the Advocates could not bring forward Okanagan parent concerns clearly because Advocates are employees of the school district and are therefore constrained by their need to be acceptable employees.

We’re not saying that we’re blaming the Advocates. We’re saying that they’re just not able to represent us as an Aboriginal community or represent the Aboriginal students as well as they could, or even as well as they want to. Because they are controlled. They are controlled under the district. They are controlled specifically because they are being paid by the district. That’s why. So. If our Advocates were being paid by the Band, by our dollars which is already in the district, then we would be more respected. Then this district would hear what Advocates are saying to a certain extent. Because then that would give the Advocates that freedom to be able to voice what they need to voice. But otherwise we see them as walking on egg-shells.

They also expressed concern that the Advocates are not respected within schools, and that they are placed within the school establishment at the bottom of an institutional hierarchy.

They are not respected where they are because you have teachers who have gone to school for several years to get the degrees that they have, and then here you have a Native Advocate come in, making the same pay as they are. But they are receiving
pretty well the same pay as the secretaries, or most of the teachers. So then it causes a problem of jealousy. You know, who do you think you are? And the Advocate’s role is perceived to be unimportant.

Frank and Gina had deeply appreciated the work of one Advocate who had connected very well with their children gaining their confidence and trust, and who had had a good sense of when they wished to be contacted about their children’s experiences and work at school. Other parents also stressed the importance of connecting with their children as a top priority for the Advocate. Frank and Gina were distressed when another Advocate did not connect with their children in such a positive way, did not communicate with them [Frank and Gina] as promptly, and appeared to have other priorities. As a consequence they sought some means to change the approach of this latter Advocate, and were dismayed when they could not. This brought them to question to whom the Advocate was ultimately accountable—to the Band or to the School District. They wondered if they might use the job description of the Advocate role as a means to bring about change.

The feelings which Frank and Gina felt about this latter Advocate not meeting their needs or their children’s needs were very strong and were not just those of parents whose children had not been well served [bad enough] but included feelings of betrayal.

F. It’s more like betrayal than anything else because the first thing you’re looking at is a relative you know that is in a position that you think you can rely on. And to us everybody is an aunt and uncle, no matter what side of the fence you are on, or what side of the families you are on here. Everybody, all the young folks here are taught and brought up to believe that these are adults they’re their aunt, they call them aunts and uncles.

M. They are relatives.

F. They are relatives. And that’s how they pursue it. But when they get shut down by their relative in a position that they are in, it doesn’t take too long and the kids won’t even go around [the Advocate].

Frank brings attention to a further concern when he says “no matter what side of the families you are on.” As mentioned above, there are strong divisions among the families of the
Okanagan. These divisions sometimes get reified in Band politics, and Advocates, several of whom have been associated with the Band Council in different ways, become associated with particular political agendas of some families. It is quite possible for the Advocate to be on the wrong side of such a division in relation to some parents, and, judging from Frank and Gina’s concern, this makes for suspicion and difficult communication as well as a questioning of the Advocate’s motives.

F. One of the things I thought too is that a person in that [Advocate] position should have no relation to Band business, because it comes down to the fact of the ‘haves and have-nots’ issue, which results back into the kids. So if a person has business out here and [the Advocate] partakes into a council position, then all of a sudden, [the Advocate] is having a hate for certain folks out here, then takes it out on the kids. That’s not fair.

Clearly, this is challenging terrain for the community, and for the Okanagan person placed in the Advocate’s role.

What would make the Advocate’s role more effective?

During this discussion of the First Nations Advocate position, one of Frank and Gina’s children joined us briefly. A recent grad now attending a post-secondary education program, their student observed that it would have been very beneficial to have had more academic guidance from the Advocate that had made a difference to Okanagan students regarding their course choices. This student was having to make up courses which would not have been necessary with more effective guidance. The student said the following:

[The Advocate] could lead them [students] through. But [the Advocate] never did. None of them really did. Because as far as I was concerned a lot of us didn’t even know. Like I graduated and I didn’t really look to the future...I realized that I had to upgrade a lot of things. And I think that if we had somebody who was personal, who gave us the background information on what we needed, a lot of us could graduate and go straight on to university. But a lot of us just get pushed on. ‘Oh, you’ve graduated.’ But it doesn’t really help us because a lot of us give up anyway.

From this student’s perspective, the role of the Advocate (particularly the High School Advocate) would be effective if this academic information could have been given to her in a
persuasive manner, that is, from someone with a “personal” relation with her.\textsuperscript{66} Just listening to this student’s point of view underscored for me the value of listening carefully to what Okanagan students say would be helpful to them—part of a positive working relation between Advocate and students sought above.

Some parents noted that it might help if there was a clearer connection to the Band Council. It was suggested that if the Council took a more active role with the school district regarding the Advocate position, there could be helpful feedback and guidance. They also suggested that there seemed to be little way to reflect on parent experiences with the role, or suggest changes to the Advocate role, and that a clear job description might help parents with this.\textsuperscript{67}

The Advocate role is clearly an important one to parents. A significant tension that I perceived in the expectations held for the role was that between a need to facilitate parent engagement with schools—a process that ultimately increases parents’ power to achieve their objectives within a school—and a desire to have the Advocate act on parents’ behalf. This need for the Advocate to act as an agent for parents’ directives is well grounded in historic alienation from schooling. Some sort of transparent balancing of this tension is necessary, otherwise the Advocate position seems to become the focus of parent anger toward the system. The irony is that this undercuts the capacity of the Okanagan Advocate and of parents’ to engage the system that is the structure creating the challenges in the first place.

Thus, even the position structured to be the basis of communication, understanding, and

\textsuperscript{66} I note that the high school counsellor is traditionally the source of this sort of information in a BC high school. The fact that many Okanagan students were not connecting sufficiently with the counsellors to receive this knowledge and have it make a difference in their lives is noted by the counsellors who participated in this study. Given the direction of this study, it would seem that improving the working relations with counsellors and Okanagan students would make a difference here, and would help address the large set of responsibilities expected of the Advocate, and perhaps enhance the Advocate’s ability to meet students’ and families’ needs.

\textsuperscript{67} Parents were very cognizant of times when, in their opinion, an Advocate had erred, and gave specific examples.
relationships itself calls for clear, open communication, thoughtful understanding, and
relations grounded on regard.

Section 2

Destinations and Ways to Get to Them

Section One of this chapter has identified the difficult journey that Okanagan people
have traveled to arrive at this present place in relation to public schools. The history of
colonization and racism toward Okanagan people by the non-Okanagan who settled in their
territory sets an inescapable context for communication, understanding, relationships and
improving education for Okanagan students. Even the present, though there is increasing
consciousness regarding this traumatic and unjust history, continues to re-instantiate and
repeat elements of this oppressive history. The goals and processes that parents propose for
non-Aboriginal school leaders and for education of their children grow out of this context,
speak to it, and seek ways beyond.

Section Two presents parents’ destinations and ways to get there, if communication,
understanding, relationships and educational processes of Okanagan students are to improve.
The first part of this section identifies the goals and processes that follow from the
understandings presented in Section One. The second part defines further goals explicitly
stated by parents. In part three, parents’ suggestions regarding the learning processes of
students and how to improve these are presented. In part four parents suggest processes to
improve the connection between parents and non-Aboriginal educators in schools. In part
five, parents address themselves to other Okanagan parents and suggest what is important for
Okanagan parents to understand. And part six concludes the chapter with parent responses to
possible recommendations which had evolved during the conversations.
Respond to the Present Past

The following processes and educational destinations arise from the history and experiences presented in Section One. These ideas are presented without further reference to conversations, insofar as they restate points of view already established.

Parents desire to be heard. Parents wish to be able to communicate directly their unique experience of Okanagan history and the effects of colonization that influence their individual engagement with schools. Okanagan parents believe that non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators must understand the role of this history in the lives of each Okanagan family and that non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators must be prepared to understand each Okanagan person's potential vulnerabilities and suspicions regarding schools. Parents believe it important to be included in meaningful ways in the education of their children. The residential school history of exclusion places an onus on the remedial nature of such involvement. The historical lack of success of many Okanagan parents in schools also calls for a concerted effort to get beyond the negative inertia that propels tendencies to avoid involvement. This means supporting parent assertiveness and child advocacy—processes that are difficult for Okanagan parents and as a consequence may be avoided by parents or are overcharged with emotion. Parents of students who have successfully navigated the system note that their own involvement in schools was essential to their students' success.

Parents identified how absolutely fundamental it is for Okanagan students to be provided opportunity to develop self-confidence. The exclusion of a student from a sports team was experienced as harm. "Speaking a future over these kids" is essential in the process to displace historic racist and deficit identities with strong, positive identities of capacity and possibility. "Hold them capable!" Have high expectations of Okanagan student capacity.
Parents identified that racism and deficit thinking must be effectively addressed by school communities if communication, understanding, and relationships are to improve and Okanagan students are to have an opportunity to succeed.

Parents stressed the uniqueness of Okanagan history, of Okanagan traditions, and of Okanagan culture. Parents noted the rich and strongly held diversity within the Okanagan community itself and brought attention to the uniqueness of each family’s experience and engagement with Okanagan history, traditions, culture, and language. Parents thus established the importance of communicating directly, of non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators communicating and connecting with each family.

Parents established the absolute significance of engaging Okanagan culture, tradition and language. Schools must seek to include these in the educational goals and processes of Okanagan students. Parents identified the struggle they have to assert the legitimacy of Okanagan knowledge and Okanagan thinking about the world, and noted that a respectful engagement of Okanagan thinking is needed. Parents also expressed the desire that non-Aboriginal educators and non-Aboriginal school leaders be open to understand and address cultural antagonisms within the current situation in which curriculum and processes undercut or displace Okanagan values. Respectful recognition of Okanagan traditions, culture, and language within school curriculum and processes is needed.

In addition to these educational goals, processual goals, and areas of concern calling for non-Aboriginal educators and non-Aboriginal school leaders’ engagement, parents expressed other educational goals and processes or destinations and ways of getting there that they believe will improve communication, understanding, relationships and the educational processes and success of Okanagan students.
Further Destinations

Parents believed that communication, understanding, relationships and Okanagan students’ experience of schooling will improve if non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators understand and work to achieve the following purposes and goals: the best possible education for Okanagan children; mainstream competence; Okanagan cultural competence; and an increased control of educational purposes and processes. In these goals, parents articulated the primary educational ambitions outlined in Indian Control of Indian Education and reaffirmed in the 1996 Royal Commission (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972; RCAP, 1996), though parents did not reference these documents in our discussions. Parents also proposed that educators and community should consider locating a school on the Reserve.

All of the parents who participated in this study desired the best possible education for their students. I am concerned that non-Aboriginal educators may fall into thinking that because Okanagan parents don’t do certain things that non-Aboriginal educators use as indicators of caring about education—such as being more ‘involved’ (a situation we have problematized above), Okanagan parents must not care. I will admit to having jumped to these conclusions myself when working at Beta. Such conclusions are mistaken. Margaret talked about thinking long and hard on a decision to move her child to a school reported to her by friends as being better, to get the best education opportunities available. In Gina’s words, “we want results and we haven’t got the results.” Several parents recounted efforts with tutors (some at large personal expense) to keep students caught up. Mary said simply, parents “want a good education for their children.”

A good education will enable Okanagan students to attain post-secondary education opportunities and it will enable Okanagan students to successfully engage in mainstream
Canadian society. In our first conversation, Joe maintained that Okanagan students should focus in schools on developing excellence and competence in the mainstream culture and economy. Frank and Gina maintained that schools should focus on what is going to get students post-secondary education: “It’s your math, socials, science, and English that’s going to get you a Master’s degree.” Frank also noted the absolute importance of Okanagan people being able to work with non-Okanagan people.

M. You are talking about the importance of being able to work together.

F. You have to. In the real world you have to do that. Regardless. If you want to work in [local RV company], there is no colour barrier. Everybody has got to work under the same roof and come out with a product. And that’s what we are looking at here.

Linda discussed the educator savings plans she and her husband have devised in order to facilitate each child going to university.

But, more than just post-secondary and mainstream career opportunities, a good education will also build a child’s Okanagan identity and develop the child’s capacity to be a competent Okanagan Nation member. We have noted above the importance for schools to engage Okanagan culture, traditions and language. Leslie discussed the importance for Okanagan children to have the possibility of a future on the reserve in which community vision and needs aligned with a student’s ambitions and competencies. As quoted above, Leslie linked education with the restoration of Okanagan culture. The next generation’s capacity to participate in this restoration process is intimately connected with the education it receives.

From a variety of different points of view, parents expressed a desire to have greater control over educational purposes and processes. In our conversations, Frank and Gina repeatedly expressed their desire to understand better how Aboriginal targeted funding, and funding that was provided by the Federal government to the Band and then to the school
district, was being used. They desired greater transparency regarding resources and they desired greater say in how these resources were allocated. Mary was very concerned that these resources be used for all children, not just those who were receiving awards—"every child needs support." They wanted the ability to follow up on funding promises to see how funds were actually used.\(^6\)

G. There is not enough research done from our own community that says,

F. Where their funds are going.

G. Where our funds are going. How are they being used? Let's follow up and see if those funds are being used for our students.

They expressed a need for, and access to, research regarding student programs, placement, and performance in order to get a better sense of how the schools were working with Okanagan students.

G. I do think we need one person that is their specific job [research regarding Okanagan students in the public system]—to be a liaison between schools and our Band Office. Not just our parents, but our Band Office. Our financial Band Office. You know. Someone going into those schools and saying, 'Okay, how many kids do we have in your learning assistance program? Why are they there? Why do you think they are in there? Are there alternatives to taking them out of the classroom? ... That's my recommendation, that there be a person that does that, goes into the schools and says, 'Okay, are our kids being represented here? You know, what are you Advocates doing to help these kids? Are you being able to speak up for them? And if you are not, if you feel that you are being stifled, okay, well we need to take a look at this.

For Gina and Frank the Band needs greater authority to get a better handle on the education of Okanagan students. Carolyn echoed this sentiment.

Politically we have the targeted fund dollars that come in from the Department of Indian Affairs that goes into the school district. The Band has a say in what happens with those funds. And then we have local education agreements, and I think politically our leaders should be saying to the school districts, they should be asserting: 'this is what we want to see and how we would like to see the education of our children happening.' At one point, I wanted to pull my kids from the public school systems and

\(^6\) During our check back conversation, they emphasized the importance of Band Council involvement in decision making and the importance of follow through on decisions. They cited a recent example, where to their knowledge funds had been promised for one program but the program never occurred and there seemed to be no follow up to understand where the funding went and why.
I wanted to do home schooling for them. I would rather have done home schooling for my children.

To my knowledge, Carolyn did not pull her children from the system. However, there is no clearer statement regarding the importance of gaining more control of education purposes and processes than this intention to get her children out of the system entirely and direct their education herself. Six Okanagan parents participating in this study did pull their children from the public system, at various times, one for home schooling, and five placed their children in independent schools. Carolyn concluded our conversation with a vision of hope for her community and for schools. She said, “We are going to evolve and at some point, and I am hoping sooner than later, our people will be taking over more control. We will be doing things in a more healthy way.”

The notion of a school located on the reserve touched most of my conversations with parents, though for many different reasons. Parents suggested a reserve-based school would alleviate the transportation problem that has five year olds and older riding a school bus for upwards of an hour in each direction. Parents thought a reserve-based school would facilitate parent involvement in school because it would be much less of a costly trip (in time and money) into town to attend the school. Parents believed a reserve-based school would enable more culture and language programs taught by Okanagan people. Parents considered that a reserve-based school would enable more Okanagan control of education purposes and processes. In one case a parent’s perspective on having a reserve-based school evolved between our first and second conversations. Joe was concerned in the first conversations that students have opportunity to become competent and competitive in mainstream society and he doubted the merits of a culturally oriented program. At the time of our second conversation, Joe expressed greater concern regarding the importance of cultural identity for
a child's sense of capacity and well-being, and from this vantage point, he believed a reserve-based school that could give students a better sense of their heritage and their identity would be an important initiative. Quoting from my notes of our conversation,

Joe took our discussion of curriculum in a different direction when he said, ‘children needed to know where they were coming from. Who they were. They needed to have a sense of identity. And that happened in elementary school before they hit high school issues like girls and peers and drugs and things of that sort.’ And because of this, he was increasingly excited about creating a school on the [reserve].

I include the notion of a school located on the reserve here as a goal that seems to be not a matter of if, but rather, of when, how, and controlled by whom. I wonder about how non-Aboriginal educators in the school district could position themselves vis a vis a reserve school in order to be of most benefit to Okanagan students. To me the possibility presents itself as one of opportunity for improving understanding, relationships, communication, and educational processes for Okanagan children.

Pathways to Get There

In addition to the above destinations, parents expressed ways of addressing the challenges of the present and moving beyond them. I have organized these ways into four general categories: learning processes of Okanagan children; connecting parents and educators; what parents thought other parents need to know; and what educators need to know. This section exemplifies further how parents had a deeper emancipatory purpose in mind which, in some ways, was prior for them to the study’s stated purposes of improving communication, understanding, and relationships; namely, how to improve the educational opportunities for Okanagan children.
Learning Processes of Okanagan Children

Parents had many recommendations for the learning processes of their children. These encompass relationships, curriculum, learning styles, assertive pursuit of learning needs, modeling, and accommodating a wide range of socio-economic situations. Parents believed that positive, caring relationships that developed a strong rapport with each individual child or youth were essential. Parents noted that even the most simple of interactions, a good morning welcome that holds personal recognition and warmth, made a difference for their students. Mary talked about one Advocate who had successfully taken on the challenge of educating a particularly gruff non-Aboriginal educator, by modeling for him over an extended period of time a respectful approach to Okanagan students. The Advocate made sure to say ‘Good morning!’ to each child, to ask how they were doing, and to wish them well. The educator’s eventual enactment of this approach improved students relations with him and with the school. Similarly, recall Carolyn’s example of the principal who knew her well enough and cared enough to give her a ride home, or Margaret’s example of the teacher who visited her in the hospital. Parents know that their children are more open within positive, respectful, caring relations with teachers, and are likely to do better in school.

From above we have already established parents’ belief that curriculum that is culturally supportive of Okanagan and Aboriginal culture and history is important for successful student learning. Carolyn noted that a culturally appropriate curriculum would be built upon Aboriginal philosophy and emphasize a holistic balance of self, educating not just the intellect, or mind, but also a student’s body, heart (emotions), and spirit. She referred to this four-fold pattern of the Medicine Wheel as defining a good education.

C. We look at using the Medicine Wheel and a holistic approach. Looking at the cognitive is definitely the sphere the education system looks at...and like I said, it is culturally biased.
M. And they don’t do much with the spiritual or the emotional.

C. They don’t do anything with the spiritual. There is no emotional growth for our children in the schools and it’s even limited on their physical development. They have cut back on the PE time with our kids drastically and they are lucky to have PE maybe twice a week. So I would look at how do we teach our children incorporating those four components of the individual. And having that in balance because as Aboriginal people we believe that you need to be balanced in all aspects of these four components.

Carolyn’s analysis exemplifies that student learning is profoundly connected to the essential purposes which determine the scope and sequence of public school curriculum. Exploring what would constitute an effective curricular balance for an Okanagan student would be an excellent long term project that would provide much opportunity for communication, understanding and relationships between Okanagan parents and non-Aboriginal educators and non-Aboriginal school leaders.

Gina argued strongly that the learning choices of students when they get to senior grades and are looking beyond school to post-secondary education and careers are significantly influenced by what happens in elementary school. She observed that the modified programs provided to Okanagan students in elementary school took away their educational options later:

It began at the elementary level when Aboriginal students are removed out of classes. Their opportunities are taken from them at this level. So already the system that we have allowed (modified programs) has set the tone for their future. Aboriginal parents and students have not been aware of this. Some are now, but it is too late, the damage has already been done. The only way the Native Nation can escape this abuse is by parent awareness to stop the cycle.

Leslie and Gina spoke about the importance of understanding Okanagan student learning styles. Although this fits in with the general desire for non-Aboriginal educators and non-Aboriginal school leaders to have a strong educational understanding of and relation with each individual Okanagan student, they also posited learning style inclinations among the Okanagan students they know. Leslie works in a teaching venue with Aboriginal adults.
With the line of work that I do here, First Nations, (I keep making this assumption but) are very visual and very interactive learners. We don’t learn very well just sitting there with somebody up there talking….You’ve got to get them involved. You’ve got to get them being creative. That works the best. And talking with each other rather than just getting into trouble. There needs to be more interaction. Like I said, I may be making an assumption about just First Nations, but it’s about thinking and doing rather than somebody just up there all the time talking.

Gina also emphasized the importance of engaging learning style questions. She talked about the importance of kinesthetic learning for Okanagan students.

M. I understood what you were saying [before the taped conversation began] about information being presented in a way that used the right brain of students, that wasn’t just left brain-linear, but was more, well you talked about colour coding information, or colour organizing information so that it was more readily accessible. You talked about the need for students, for teachers to work on different learning styles, and teaching to different learning styles, and emphasized the kinesthetic part of it.

G. Yes.

M. What would you insist that [non-Aboriginal school leaders] know? What would you insist they develop?

G. Kinesthetic learning.

Carolyn added to the noted styles of “interactive,” “visual,” “kinesthetic,” a notion of “experiential” learning.

I think another issue that comes up for me that is really different for our Aboriginal children, is the whole area of how the children learn. I think the school system totally ignores that our children are experiential learners. And it is kind of like, you are expected to read, you are expected to write, and do all these, which is fine, but I think we need to balance our children’s learning so that it incorporates, not just in PE, not just in music, but in other aspects of their learning, where it is more experiential for them….We need to acknowledge that a lot of times the Aboriginal children have a different learning experience or different learning style, than what the predominant society has and what is taught in the schools, in the education system.

Carolyn also questioned the sorts of testing used to measure the cognitive capacity of students in school, arguing that they do not accurately reflect or predict Aboriginal student intelligence. Parents believe that the pedagogies used in schools don’t necessarily play to Okanagan students’ strengths; they are convinced that adapting instruction according to a
deeper understanding of students’ learning styles will improve student engagement and student learning.

Somewhat akin to this perception about learning styles was a repeated observation about how Aboriginal students benefit from coaching to pursue questions and things they don’t understand. Carolyn emphasized the need to develop in her children a capacity to pursue their questions and she outlined a cycle of failure that arises from an inherent hesitation to state one’s ignorance and assert one’s need to know.

C. Where I have taken a different approach with my children, I said, ‘you know what? The teacher is there to teach you. And it is your right and your responsibility to question them. To say, ‘Okay well I don’t understand that. Can you say that a different way?’ And I think my husband and I have both encouraged our children to say, okay, if you don’t understand something, don’t be ashamed to go ahead and ask for clarification. But I think a lot of times other parents probably don’t do that with their children…. And a lot of times before you know it, if a child is falling behind, it gets to the point where the child is feeling it’s futile and they’ll say, ‘well I can’t do it anyway. There is no way I’m ever going to pass. I’m not going to get through this.’ So they just kind of give up.

Leslie told the story of coaching one of her children through such a situation, and developing in her child [grade 10] the courage to follow through on her own learning needs.

L. [Leslie’s student] was very frustrated with the math teacher. He was talking and just writing on the board and you take notes and that’s it. No questions. And she was just frustrated by this. I said, ‘Let him know. If you are having a difficult time, I’ll bet you anything there are one or two other kids in the classroom who are also having a difficult time. If not more. Let him know, that this just isn’t working for you.’ He responded to her by closing her down. Others spoke up too. But he responded with ‘You should have got this by now. What’s wrong with you?’

M. I understand it, how come you don’t?

L. That’s right. And I related to [student], that she needed to take that further. ‘You’ve spoken your truth, now what are you going to do? You have options here. Either you can take it the principal or you can get someone else to teach this to you. I could help with the math.’ I have been teaching them and trying to let them know that you have choices to make and sometimes you have to take things a step further, sometimes you have to go talk to somebody…. 

In the end Leslie’s child had a meeting with the teacher, withdrew from his math class, studied math on her own in the library, and completed the course with a B standing.
L. She worked hard. That was Math 10. I’m glad she did that. I am glad that I supported her in that.

Following questions and asserting one’s need to know are important skills parents believe Okanagan students need assistance learning. As noted above by Frank, parents also find it very challenging to assert their perspectives at school.

One of the primary expectations of the Advocate position is that of role model: here is an Okanagan person who has figured out how to be Okanagan in a school setting. Carolyn was particularly clear about the importance of such role modeling.

C. I think we need to develop more roles for the Aboriginal people in the school systems themselves. We don’t. If you look at [the school district], and you look at all the schools and all of the staff, most of the Aboriginal staff are just Advocates or they are CEAs.

M. We need more teachers.

C. We need more teachers. We need more people in all capacities of the ....

M. Administrators.

C. education system. Administration. Clerical. Everything. Librarians. Whatever. Wherever Aboriginal people are willing to do in whatever capacity they are able to do it in. Like I say, that goes back to that whole role modeling part too. And I think, actually I was surprised the school didn’t take my [student who had graduated from Beta] up on [this] commitment. [Her student] had written a paper on Aboriginal youth and the justice system...and was willing to go back to [Beta] to do a presentation on [this] paper to a group of youth. [Her student] put the offer out, but it was never followed up on. The presentation could have been used by any number of...other schools.

M. That could have gone all over the place.

C. Yes. Ya. I think a lot of times we see our Advocates and different people but kind of have money [in mind]. Yes it is nice to bring in a well known artist like Roy Vickers, or different people like that. The kids came home and said that there was an Aboriginal person, and he was a really good basketball player. But I think we need to look more within our own communities. And I think we need to look at, ‘Okay, these individual people have done something.’ I can’t tell you how many people, Mark, that I know that have gone on, completed their education and they’d be more than happy to go back into the schools and share their experience of ‘okay, this is what it took for me to get through, through my education. These are some of the skills and abilities that I needed to develop within myself in order to succeed. These are some of the study habits.’ You know I have been a real strong advocate of study skills and teaching, not only the students, but the parents.
Carolyn notes how practical it would be to have Okanagan people who have successfully navigated the educational system to share their approach with other Okanagan learners—students and parents. Carolyn believed that students would pay attention to her student coming back from post-secondary to model academic achievement and thoughtful engagement of an important Aboriginal issue; her student would exemplify for other students a different sort of Okanagan identity. Modeling is a powerful, and multi-dimensional form of education. But Carolyn’s suggestion also arises from her belief in the need for Okanagan people to have more control of, and share more equally in, the educational purposes and processes of Okanagan children. From Carolyn’s point of view, including more Okanagan people in the school system would advance communication, understanding, and relationships significantly, and improve the educational processes of Okanagan and Aboriginal students.

Parents were also concerned that non-Aboriginal educators and non-Aboriginal school leaders consider the socio-economic situation of students. Carolyn provided a helpful anecdote to illustrate this concern.

I think a lot of times the whole socio-economic status within the communities is another factor that has an impact on families. It was like my [child] who is in grade 4 came home the other day, and said, ‘You know what mom?’ Out of, I forget, thirty some students in the class, there was probably, and Alpha is predominately Aboriginal, I think that out of roughly 300 students, 150 or 200 are Aboriginal students. So the school is quite high with the Native population. But [my child] came home and said, ‘Out of thirty some students in my class, there is probably more than half of them that don’t have computers.’ And [the] teacher was expecting the students of the fourth grade to do a power point presentation.

As also noted by the students, consideration of the socio-economic realities of students and families will improve student’s capacities to meet learning objectives. Setting assignments that cannot be done by students due to lack of resources has the potential to shame students and marginalize their participation in classes, and more to the point, it is unnecessary. Gina suggested that Band and schools ensure access to, and funding for, tutors when students need
learning support. She maintained timely tutoring would make a significant difference for some students and families. Parents also noted that understanding and acting with consideration of their particular socio-economic circumstances would develop realistic expectations about involvement and support that would enhance problem solving around connecting parents with educators.

**Connecting Parents and Educators**

Parents had several further recommendations for improving connections between parents and educators as schools and community seek to move forward toward new and shared destinations. These included building trust, working with parents on educational projects, modeling successful parent-teacher interviews, and connecting with parents at significant transition times.

Given the basis for suspicion and distrust that deepens the geographical and cultural distances between community and schools, several parents identified the importance of trust and the building of trust as essential to improving communication, understanding, and relationships.

M. You talked about the significance of residential school and its influence through generations. And so I’d like to put back to you with the question: ‘How best, then, to improve the relationships with parents and with children with grandparents that have that experience, with a non-Aboriginal school leader?’

C. Definitely, the trust building needs to be established. I think a lot of times as parents, what we see are people [non-Aboriginal school leaders] that really do make a sincere effort or, kind of, a lot of times. Then it is probably the system itself [that breaks down trust because] where that person does well within the community, [and] develops that rapport, it’s kind of like they get shuffled around rather than them being able to stay within that community and continue to work within the community.

Carolyn not only identifies the importance of developing trust in the community’s post-residential school context, but she notes a vital characteristic of trust building with parents and the Okanagan community—time. Building a genuine rapport takes time and the system’s
inclination to move people around, for whatever reasons, limits this possibility. Leslie gave a remarkably clear elucidation of how trust can be built, and I quickly gathered in what she said.

M. In this situation where the school has clearly demonstrated a lack of judgment and clearly shaken your trust in that capacity, how should the school go about rebuilding your trust and faith in them.

L. Acknowledgement. Acknowledgement of what my fears and my concerns are. And also follow through on remedies. Whatever that may be whatever they may propose or by asking for suggestion for remedies to rectify this, then I can clearly see, ‘Yes. I am heard. I was acknowledged. These were my suggestions or recommendations, that have been followed through on, the follow through. The actions. That would assist in rebuilding my trust.

M. It’s being heard. Acknowledged. Making sure there is follow through. Making sure that you know what the follow through is. [Transparency. Inclusion.] And that the follow through actually meets your concerns.

L. Hmm-mmm [affirmative]

M. you know it seems simple. Yet it is so powerful....in the context of the negative history between Aboriginal Peoples and non-Aboriginal people in BC, the ability to build trust is crucial. Colonizing relations. Oppressive relations. Deeply hurtful relations. Trust has to be developed in a similar way. Acknowledgement. Respectful recognition. Action. Communicating the follow through so that people understand what has been done.

L. Hm-mmm.

M. And allowing that to be the basis of a new relation.

I believe that the process outlined above is crucial to improving communication, understanding, and relationships, and improving the educational experiences of Okanagan students, parents, and community.

Another way of building a new relation between Okanagan parents and non-Aboriginal educators and non-Aboriginal school leaders proposed by parents was working together on shared projects. In the process of working together toward a shared purpose, parents believed that trust, communication, understanding, and relationships will grow.

Parents gave examples of projects that would strengthen communication, understanding, and
relationships and meet other educational purposes. Mary suggested that parents and non-Aboriginal educators and non-Aboriginal school leaders should create a workshop to model positive parent-teacher interviews. She noted her own strategies developed over years, for engaging in positive interviews with teachers, even when there were difficulties, and she was aware that sharing these strategies and others with both teachers and parents would be helpful.

Mary. When I go in to talk to a teacher too, and you know, I have one that struggled in school, really struggled, and really had to work harder than all the rest. And when I go in and I ask, I ask when I sit down at the parent interview, I ask, ‘Well how are you and so and so getting along?’ You know I don’t say, ‘How Come?’ or anything like that. I just say, ‘How are you and my child getting along. Are you working well together?’ I know some of them were surprised before when I sat down and started talking, including the two of them together, because it is almost like a business relationship, I guess you could say. It takes two of them—[you might think of it as] a marriage, or whatever you want to call it. A business relationship is what I think of it, because the two of them have to work together on it.

M. That’s helpful, because you’re not antagonizing the person.

Mary. You’re not antagonizing the person.

I hope to show from this example that parents are not talking about fund-raising, but rather about projects that will significantly improve communication, understanding, relationships and learning opportunities for their children.

Gina proposed that Beta consider piloting a program to highlight the challenges of young parenthood in an effort to get valuable information to the young adults in the community. Gina reports having had a lot of initial support for the idea, but that the project was never picked up. This was upsetting to her. In our check back session, Gina wrote: “It was because it was not their idea. This was clear to me, especially since this Baby Think About It program was absolutely free.” It was an opportunity to address a significant area of learning together with the school. It seemed to me as I listened to Gina tell her side of this story, that not taking up the project and not giving Gina a clear rationale why it was not taken
up, just perpetuated the historic exclusion of Aboriginal people from schools for her. Thus, projects pose a charged space for interaction that can be positive or very negative. Not to take up an offered project is not a neutral stance, but rather runs the danger of more deeply etching the alienation and suspicion of some parents.

Parents supported the value of connecting with them at key times in their children’s school lives. Mary noted that when children are transferring to Beta in grade 8 from elementary school, or when they transfer from another school, this is a time when relations with parents can be positively framed and the potential for further involvement established.

Mary. And some parents have not had good experiences in the school and they need to be [welcomed]. Say ‘Hello’ to them or give them a phone call and ask them if they are coming in for a parent interview or, you know, if there is a personal touch to it, maybe you’ll speak to them only once. Just phone and say, ‘Hello, I’m your son or daughter’s teacher.’ That might be the only time you’ll ever speak to that person in the year.

M. Do you think it would be advisable for a school like [Beta] to connect with parents and students at grade 8? As soon as they come in?

Mary. Yes. Yes.

M. Or even with parents of students transferring over from another school, say in grade 9 or grade 10. So that they have a special connection that is personal; it’s intended to give parents contact so that they know who the principal is; they know they can reach out if they are concerned.

Mary. Yes.

This idea evolved in further conversations to identify that parents are likely to be open to connecting with schools when children are in the K – 4 grades. This makes good sense; seek to connect with parents when they are most likely to wish to connect with schools in support of their children. Some of these times correspond to when their children are most vulnerable and when they are facing significant change.

But, the absolute minimum, if this is not putting too fine a point on this, is to make a connection with parents. Period. Mary is very clear about this as well.
And also for the parents, if they come into the school and have just a short meeting here, it's better than waiting 'til there is something wrong and then coming in. Because then, if they have never been in the school and they are in grade 11 or 12 and you're calling them in—maybe they've had their child suspended here and they are coming to the end of the rope where they are going to be kicked out—you know, it's too late. They [the parents] are only going to listen to the one side. And I don't know which side, you know, I couldn't say right now which side would be right or wrong but, they're going to. It's too late. And you don't want to lose those students because you don't know which one is going to be a great leader here.

By connecting on positive terms, non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators and parents are proactively making it possible for more complete and successful communication when faced with difficult situations. Having built sufficient resilience in a relationship before hand with such a connection could mean the difference between a young adult finding a way through a difficult time and remaining in school, or walking away from school. Mary gives a good sense of the loss this represents to the Okanagan community.

What Parents Thought Other Parents Need to Know

The parents who participated in this study had much that they wished to communicate to other parents about how to improve communication, understanding, relationships, and Okanagan student learning. From their point of view, parents need to listen to children and to teachers, to understand that involvement makes a positive difference, to learn school processes as much as possible, to learn and support key learning habits essential for student success, know that home support makes a huge difference, that extra-curricular involvement improves Okanagan students' chances of graduating, and to anticipate problems and be proactive. Creating opportunities for parents to pass on this and other information to each other would be of great benefit.

Mary and Leslie noted the importance of parents listening—listening to their children and listening to the other sides of a situation. In this way parents can let their children know
they are valued, and they can gain a full understanding of a situation enabling them to judge
and act appropriately.

M. Another thing too is to listen to your children. They come home and they have
something to say. Maybe something happened. You know you have to listen to what
they are saying. They may have only one side of it, or you know, when they are
telling a story or whatever, but you need to listen to what they are saying and then they
know that you value them too....But you know what? You have to sit down and talk to
them too. Not just at school, but even out of there. And the teachers are not always
right either....I'm not saying they are always wrong either, just that you have to listen
to both sides.

Such listening, deeply, to both sides advances the possibility of reciprocal understanding that
is essential to communication, understanding, and relationships. Frank and Gina also note
how important it is to know what is going on with a student’s learning.

F. That’s what we came across over the years because when our kids can’t grasp
something they come home and tell us. And we encourage our children to tell us
when that occurs. Then we step on it and get in and we bring a tutor in then. Deal
with it right now.

G. Oh, we’re right in the school, we are right in the teacher’s face the next day. We
don’t let it wait. Where a lot, most Native parents don’t do that. And myself and
Frank we are now talking more to our Native community and we are saying, you
know, you need to do this. You need to be talking to kids, going into that school and
talking to that teacher. ‘What area do I need to be helping my child at home?’ And
taking those steps and following through.

And Carolyn strongly concurred,

C. I can’t stress enough the importance of the support they [students] get at home. I
think a lot of times parents don’t perhaps recognize the commitment that it takes for a
child to do their homework and to do their studying.

Gina and Frank make the point simply: parents need to develop an on-going conversation
with their children about their learning. In this way, parents can jump in and support a child’s
learning with tutoring, or speak with the child’s teacher and find ways to support the child’s
learning at home, whenever extra support is needed. In this way, the cycle of failure (as
expressed earlier by Carolyn), where children get behind, lose confidence, and believe their
efforts will be futile, never gets a chance to get started.
As demonstrated above, there are many strong historic reasons for parent involvement in schools. Parents in this study wanted to be sure that other Okanagan parents understand the value of their involvement for their students. Parent involvement, no matter how awkward it may feel, makes a difference!

G. Being more visible in the schools is important for Native parents. To get in there and be active, go to the PAC\(^69\) meetings, go to every meeting that you can. Be involved and stay involved. Because there is no real relationship formed between uhm I might as well say White teachers and Native parents. They really don’t know us, they don’t really know our heart. You know. Because there is no relationship between the two of us.

M. How would you create that relationship? You are saying the best way to do it is to just get there and be there and be present and be visible so that they can get to know you.

G. PAC meetings. Volunteering. Driving. Things like that. Anything that you can help with. Be a part of the plan.

Thus all kinds of parent participation in school builds relationship. Parent involvement also helps parents get inside knowledge of how schools work. Parents expressed the importance of attaining such knowledge. Gaining comfort with the processes that go on within school makes it much easier for parents to engage the school when needed to support their children.\(^70\) Parents wanted other parents to be sure to understand how student learning choices and successes in elementary and early high school influence students’ graduation choices. There are academic pathways, made up of particular academic skill development (fractions, paragraph writing, algebra, etc.), learning habits, and course choices that may be invisible to parents who have not walked successfully through the system themselves.

Carolyn was particularly concerned that parents learn about key learning habits that make it possible for students to succeed in academic programs in school.

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\(^69\) PAC is an acronym for Parent Advisory Council. In British Columbia all parents and guardians of a child registered in a school are automatically voting members of that school’s PAC.

\(^70\) A published course description booklet that outlines course and career tracks from grade 8 onwards was noted to be very helpful in this regard.
Probably, if you were to ask any of the parents, or any of the students, ‘What are some study habits or skills that you need to do to be able to do well in your class?’ And I bet you ten to one that they’ll just say, ‘Oh well, you just go to class. You just show up.’ But it’s not that often that somebody will be able to tell you, ‘I know I need to study. I know I need to review. I need to take good notes. I need to attend classes.’ All these kind of things, and that’s been one area I have been pushing as a parent even: let’s teach the parents some of the things our students need to know in order to do well with school [italics added]. Study habits are a cornerstone to that. It is the foundation for how well our children do. A lot of times I think parents get to the point, ‘well, you need to do your chores.’ Well you know what? The chores are always going to be there. For your child to succeed they need to put in extra work in sciences and in their math.

Carolyn’s observation is vital. It reveals some of the tacit, or assumed knowledge that is taught through the ‘hidden curriculum.’\textsuperscript{71} This knowledge is gained by parents who have successfully navigated the school system and who have worked through a post-secondary education. Such parents ‘backmap’ for their children, applying this intimate knowledge of the micro-elements in learning that made a difference for them, to the learning paths of their children. And thus such parents make it a priority for children to “study,” “review,” “take good notes,” and “attend classes.” We could also categorize the previously identified need for Aboriginal students to learn to assert and pursue questions when they don’t understand something as this sort of knowledge. This knowledge need not remain tacit or hidden. As Carolyn argues, it can and should be learned by parents.

Gina noted the importance of parents developing an early foundation for reading.

“The first three years are special ones; they are the most important in terms of forming life-long patterns of learning.”

If it sounds like parents thought that there was a lot that parents can do to support their children, absolutely. All parents who participated in this study asserted that they are not

\textsuperscript{71} Here Carolyn lets us in on what parents don’t know. There are other pieces of knowledge that Aboriginal students, parents, and communities don’t know, and because they don’t know, they don’t know to ask, or to value this unknown knowledge. Here is another important purpose of dialogue—in dialogue what a partner doesn’t know can be learned, and a context of relationship and commitment to understanding makes this possible.
powerless to make a difference for their children. Linda spoke of the importance of anticipating potential difficulties with one’s children relative to school and proactively preparing for these difficulties with a child’s teacher and with the child. In her opinion it was not adequate to expect the Advocate to engage a potential concern. Better to ‘check-in to see how things are going, if you have concerns.’ Several of the parents talked openly about the hard work it was for them to support their children’s successful school experience.

M. Your own kids did well.

Mary. I worked hard though. It wasn’t just them. I worked hard. And lots of times I went without too, for myself, so they could have those basketball shoes or whatever, too.

M. So you were committed to the importance of education, and the importance of making it work for them, however they chose to make it happen.

Mary. Yes.

Mary alludes to her commitment to support her children in school extra-curricular activities with her reference to basketball shoes. Several parents, including Joe above, made reference to the importance of their children’s involvement in extra-curricular activities as significant aspects of their children’s success in school. Parents really wished to share with other parents their belief that the success of their students was in no small way a consequence of valuing education, of time, of their own learning, and of their hard work.

Possible Ameliorative Actions as Responses

The dialogic nature of this study meant that as I gained understanding of participant’s experiences and thinking regarding communication, understanding, and relationships, and as I was able to communicate my understanding of schools to participants, new ideas emerged. Possible responses to the situations of Okanagan students, parents, and community grew out of our dialogues together. This was new knowledge! And so, as I met with one participant after another, I found myself carrying ideas across conversations, checking both my
understanding and possible responses to what I understood. Indeed, these possible ameliorative actions, because they assume an accurate understanding of what had been communicated with me, served as a further check on my understanding of the meanings parents had communicated. This process was most evident in our second conversations together as I checked for congruence of what I understood with what they meant, and as I checked for congruence between our shared understanding and possible ways of improving communication, understanding, relationships and student educational experience. Parents had various and valuable perspectives on such responses as: holding an annual Okanagan-School District educational conference, seeking shared projects and “thick” communication situations, connecting high school counselors with grade four parents, an Okanagan mentor for non-Aboriginal school leaders, and a pro-d retreat model for non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators.

**Annual conference.**

For my own part, I came to the idea of a conference after listening to some very powerful analyses and consequent judgments of the system by Okanagan parents that were based on partial information regarding how the system works, and what certain things mean to educators within the system. Parents’ excellent thinking was thus based on faulty premises. From my observations, this tended to widen the distance between Okanagan and school, and to marginalize parents’ ability to effectively engage their school communities. Solid information is needed. This insight moved from wondering aloud to increasingly detailed consideration of the merits of this idea. Across our conversations the conference was perceived as a means: to increase Okanagan knowledge of the education system, to facilitate Okanagan engagement with the goals and the processes of their children’s education, to make transparent funding issues and resource decision making, to enable the Okanagan to review
their students’ performance within the system, to enable the Okanagan to be a part of researching, and analyzing significant educational issues for their students on an on-going basis, to enable the Okanagan to be a part of the short, middle, and long range planning for the education of their children and within their territory. The following quotation from my second conversation with Leslie, which was one of my last conversations with parents, reveals a matured framing of the conference notion. As I recall this conversation, the idea came into even sharper relief than previously.

M. If there was a conference that allowed the professionals and the members of the band some serious discussion about educational issues that are important to them, it would give people access to information. I have been struck by the incredible good thinking by parents that is based upon poor information. So people are thinking very clearly about things, but they have poor information to start their thinking from. And because that is the case they end up with conclusions that are not necessarily helpful to their students. And I think they have created problems for themselves because they haven’t got good information. To me there needs to be an opportunity to get information, and to allow all sorts of people to know where they can get it, and to know that they can put forward their thinking and that they would have a venue for asking tough questions about what education should be about. The second thing of value: the community itself would benefit from the opportunity to have a discussion about what vision we have for our education. Even if it’s to say, ‘traditional things are important.’ Or ‘getting three doctors in 10 years is important. We want to meet both of those goals.’ They don’t have to compete against each other. Currently these things are sitting in the background and they are competing against each other. [It] would seem to me that if people could say, ‘well we want this, and we want this, and we want this, for different reasons, so let’s do that.’ And then the next year in conference [there would be opportunity for] saying, ‘well we achieved this, we achieved this, we didn’t get this. We don’t like this, and we need to change this.’ The third reason is that people keep changing. School administrators keep changing.

L. Yes.

M. And a lot of information is given to them. Gets invested in them. Relationships get invested in them and then they move and all of that investment is lost. But I think an annual conference process creates a structure where knowledge doesn’t get lost, even though people change, the knowledge stays. And I think that is vital to continuing to move things forward rather than having to start back at square one again.

L. I think that is a wonderful idea. That gets a really good opportunity for good discussions but also to educate, to educate the parents. What’s out there. What’s available to their children. What are the rules and the responsibilities of some of the people that are working with our children. From teachers, to principals, to First Nations advocate. And I know that there are some parents out there questioning, in their various roles and responsibilities, the First Nations Advocate. What is their role
and responsibility? How are they working with my children? And then, the First Nations class that my daughters attended. They enjoyed that. It's an opportunity for them to learn more about their culture. It's done some wonderful things. And from my understanding that hasn't always been in place. Because I hear some of the older ones now telling my daughter, 'You guys are lucky. You're fortunate.' 'Yes we are. We've got different people, different Elders coming in.

Leslie's response exemplifies precisely why having a regular conference would benefit the Okanagan community and the school district: many questions immediately erupt when the possibility of such a space is given, or even just imagined as in this case—questions seeking a venue. Also I note how changes in experience and discourse, which may be barely audible spoken as they are on the margin ("You guys are lucky"), would have opportunity to become a part of the larger conversation and enable a more accurate reflection and successful engagement of what is happening in schools for children. When I mentioned this idea to Carolyn, she recalled a conference held on Silver Star in 1996. To her that conference had been very powerful and important.

**Shared projects and “thick” communication situations.**

From the start participants in this study talked about the importance for non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators to do things with Okanagan students, parents, and community. The range of these "things" was startling—from modeling parent-teacher interviews to an extended canoe trip up the lake and back with Elders, students, and families. As I listened to the desire for such shared projects, I tried to understand the basis for these suggestions, and believe that the motivation for such projects comes from a recognition of what will enable the Okanagan to develop the trust and relationships necessary for communication, understanding, and relationships with non-Aboriginal school leaders to improve. What I particularly noted is that these proposed projects generally took non-Aboriginal school leaders out of their surroundings, indeed out of
their roles and their professional personas. I also noted that these projects enabled multi-dimensional and non-linear communication.

The following text is from my field notes as I first grappled with this discovery.

Communication that enables a multitude of touch points, interdependencies, and dimensions of self (physical, emotional, mental, spiritual) is “thick” communication. Participants talked about experiential learning/doing situations as ways to connect. It’s not just about being social, it’s about being multi-dimensional together. “Thin” communication might be monological, or prescribed, or socially constrained (as in a meeting setting where certain things can be talked about in certain ways, or where few get opportunity to speak). “Thin” communication also results when understanding is superficial. “Thick” enables connectedness; “thin” doesn’t. “Thick” enables solid understanding; “thin” doesn’t. “Thick” enables collaborative action; “thin” doesn’t. “Thick” enables well-informed decision-making and action; “thin” doesn’t. “Thick” enables dissent; “thin” doesn’t.\footnote{In considering this insight relative to the conceptual framework of this study, I would like to say that thin is monological and thick is dialogical, but this doesn’t quite capture the whole of it. Thick seems to have a lot to do with wholism proposed by Archibald (1997)—connection that happens through mind, heart, body, and spirit.}

As is apparent, I was struck by the multiple points of contact, the opportunity for body language and gesture to be included with words, the opportunity for frequent back-and-forth communication checking meaning and developing new meaning. In effect, these ‘projects’ seemed to me to become spaces in which people could be more genuinely present to each other than in the typical communication events shared by Okanagan students, parents, community members and non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators.

I had opportunity to check this idea, in its maturing form, with Leslie and Carolyn.

M. The point is that projects create an opportunity to communicate and to learn what needs to be learned. The current approach based upon meetings, such as parent-teacher night, or grade 8 transition, are very limited—one way communication. Thin.

L. They are very limited. And the more communication we have creates a relationship. And that is really important, is to have a relationship. So often it is just about whatever wrong thing has just happened. And that is something that needs to be talked about. That is not the only time that a parent should be communicating with the school. The parent gets a call because little Johnny did something. That needs to have opportunities for communication, interaction that creates a relationship.

M. Project commitment allows administrators to set aside time and resources. Otherwise [things remain] reactive, working with the latest problem. So projects
become pro-active. ‘These are the steps that we are going to have to take. We will have to get together here, here and here to talk about this issue. This is a good reason to get together.’

L. And that way, the resources that parents have can become known, that [they] may be able to go in and assist.

Perhaps it is obvious, but if genuine relationship is what we seek, then communication situations that enable connection with more than the surface of our selves are required. With Carolyn, as the last parent I met with, the notion of doing things together as a powerful way to make connection, had its clearest elaboration.

‘These are the projects we are going to do this year, so let’s say we are going to improve reading in grade one and grade two. So we want this resource. We are going to have parents involved. We are going to have the school district involved. And we are going to see if we can make a difference.’ So there is a shared project. There is a point where [everyone is] going to step back and say, ‘Okay, we did it. We’ve done it.’ And I believe in the mutual working together of projects like that, that you empower [participants], that you give people legitimacy and validity in their perspectives. And you give the opportunity for parents to say, ‘what I do makes a difference. I’ve just learned a great deal about these other people that I have to work with. It’s a lot easier for me now to go and talk to them about other issues because we worked together on this issue. And I also know that if I have a problem, I can go and talk to this person.’

I went on to say that when working together on a project, participants create new points of contact and communication becomes multi-dimensional.

M. It’s all over the place. It is not static. It’s not fixed. And I think it is that kind of communication that’s needed to break, to get across the distance between the two, because ideally parents and teachers would interact immediately without hesitation, with trust already established....

C. Right. That’s good. Definitely.

So at least two things follow from this notion: projects that include Okanagan parents are perceived as valuable means for improving communication, understanding, and relationships; and consider whether communication situations are enabling multi-dimensional, non-linear, or “thick” communication. As Leslie observed, the relationship that grows from both is the key.
A retreat.

An idea that gained coherence late in the study was the notion of a professional development experience for non-Aboriginal school leaders based on a retreat model. This idea joined together threads of the desire, expressed above, to have non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators interact with Okanagan community members outside of the confines of schools and roles, and in a dynamic environment structured by the Okanagan. The opportunities for “thick” communication are apparent. Unfortunately the idea crystallized late and only Leslie had opportunity to engage the idea fully.

M. Considering possible educational formats for non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators, given what everyone has said, it would seem a) retreat process seems best. Several people have talked about the need to not just change people’s thinking, but change their minds and their hearts. This comes out for me in your interview when you talk about role playing and the importance of role playing. I think that administrators need to have the experience of role playing a racist issue, dealing with racism.

L. Yes.

M. I envision something like a group of Okanagan facilitators and educators to set the stage there. My child has just experienced a racist incident. Let the administrators deal with it. And then get feedback from the Okanagan educator. Other people have talked about the importance of spending time together, not just in a meeting format, but sharing meals, or doing things that are just being together things. Canoeing. Hiking. Walking. Sharing stories. Just to allow a more personal connection. The purpose of that then would go to four or five day retreat, then to sessions, maybe four or five which would follow in the year, organized through the Aboriginal principal, to a specific information session. So I throw that out. What do you think of that idea?

L. I think that is a good idea. I can’t think of any other way, other than to bring everybody together and have a mixture of allowing the Okanagan People to express themselves, and also for them to relate and show others how they communicate, as well as sharing some of their cultural and spiritual beliefs and ways. I think it is an excellent opportunity, so that there is an understanding. Because they are there. They will be present and they will be experiencing. It makes a big difference rather than just hearing about it or reading about it.

M. The physicalness of learning. The importance of feeling it in your bones, this is what I think people need. This is what I think non-Aboriginal school leaders need. They need to feel it in their bones. And the only way that I know to do that is to talk about role plays, being together and allowing face to face interaction. Allowing the direct connection of people.
L. That’s important. That’s very important. In both environments I believe. I believe it needs to take place in both environments [Okanagan community and school]. And I think that needs to alternate because if you allow that then there becomes an understanding and a comfortableness. This is okay. This is okay for us to come into the school setting and have these discussions and do some of the role playing. And to work some to improve some of the concerns, and be proactive, and then doing it in this setting. We have talked about the history, and I think that will enable some of the Okanagan members to work through some of that.

M. Exactly. That was something else that was very strong in our discussion. Allowing that history to be acknowledged, to enable a therapeutic process. If that was possible for people to bring their experiences, and run into the current reality of people wanting to do things differently and allow those personal histories [to be re-considered], ‘okay if that happened to me it doesn’t have to happen for my children or grand children. Here’s an opportunity to change it, and perhaps I can work with these people.’ So a preparation program is also fascinating because it would ask the Okanagan people to identify some educators to put together a process for these non-Aboriginal school leaders. I’m not sure that has been done.

L. I think it can happen. There are enough people who care about the future of our children and they will be involved.

M. Would you be involved?

L. I would be involved. Yes.

As we have seen, all of the conversations I had with parents touched the content that would form the curriculum of a learning process for non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators. But the retreat idea holds a significant congruence between form and this content. There is a need to enable Okanagan people to be able to guide an educational process on their own terms, one which, as Leslie says, enables them to express themselves, show how they communicate, and share deeply held values that remain hidden otherwise. Leslie’s strong belief in the value of role playing to communicate most effectively what non-Aboriginal school leaders need to understand, requires a context in which people are able to take unusual risks. Both of us believed that a well-run retreat does this. And, as I sought to put into words our underlying assumptions about retreats and role-playing with the metaphor getting this knowledge into one’s bones, this is about deep, transformational learning—learning that engages body, mind, heart, and spirit. As happens in dialogic encounters,
though I was focused in one direction, Leslie immediately also recognized that such a
genuine learning process would be deeply affecting and valuable to Okanagan parents too.
Her commitment to be involved in such a retreat process speaks for itself.

**High school counselors in elementary school.**

We mentioned above the need for parents to gain understanding of the academic
pathways that lead through a forest of course options and learning decisions to graduation
and a dogwood that “means something.” As also mentioned, parents who have successfully
navigated these pathways are able to ‘backmap’ them for their children, supporting their
children with tutors or other means at critical crossroads of learning that they recognize.\(^73\)
High school counselors are intimately acquainted with these pathways, and they are
designated by the high school to make this knowledge available to parents and students.
However, as I listened to parents I came to understand that this knowledge is not being
received when it has the potential to make the most difference for students, and that is in
early elementary school when parents are most connected to their children’s school
experience and when parents are most likely to be able to shape new learning habits for their
children.\(^74\) The following excerpt of my conversation with Leslie exemplifies the problem
well.

L. Yes. Taking the right courses that you need to take to go beyond.

M. And knowing that the difference between a c+ and a b+ in grade 8 and 9 math
makes entrance into grade 11 and 12 math possible. And that means the difference
between being a physiotherapist or not.

\(^73\) See Lucas (1999) for further development of this idea.
\(^74\) As I listened I also noted a pattern that needs further research before I would be willing to say how critical a
role it plays in family learning capacity, however, it is important to note here. I noted that many students,
parents, and Aboriginal school workers commented on family breakdowns and children moving from two
parent to one parent situations or even in with a grandparent or other relative. Based on this observation, I was
led to wonder about how the coherence of families affected capacity with regard to school involvement and
learning support. I postulate that early on, when children are still in their early elementary years, families are
frequently still together, and that as a consequence there may be more capacity for engaging knowledge
regarding academic pathways, and involvement in children’s education in general.
L. Now that is some of the things I have heard from other parents, is that they did not know. Now that their daughter or son is having to do the upgrades, and they could have taken all of that in high school, to meet the pre-requisites to get into whatever they had chosen, their chosen field. Nobody told us. I don’t know if they just weren’t listening at the time. That information is there. And that is something that, because actively talking about it with my [children]. ‘What are the pre-requisites...what are the pre-requisites for getting into early childhood education? What do you need to have?’

M. And [your child] knows?

L. S/He knows. S/He has known for a couple of years. And s/he knows what the gpa needs to be, and s/he knows after that what s/he needs for a teaching degree. S/He knows. They really promote that in grade 10.

M. Right in the CAPP program. Career and Personal Planning.

L. They really promote that in grade 10. How come that information isn’t filtering down to the parents? I don’t know.

By the time children reach high school, the opportunities for parents to change the learning structures and patterns of home and child diminish. Thus, for example, when children discover in grade 10 that they need math 12 to go into forestry science, or any science for that matter, it is too late to go back to the critical learning moments in grades 4 – 7 when the foundations for math 12 were set (integers, BEDMAS, fractions, algebra, geometry). The system, it seems to me, has a tendency to assume that students will make their own decisions regarding their learning and their career paths; however, without the early preparation provided by parents or schools who make overt the critical learning moments of academic pathways that are tacit, the choice is made many years before students develop the cognitive maturity to make such decisions for themselves. High school counselors could be the providers of this tacit knowledge, but clearly there are many ways, and there may need to be many ways, by which this knowledge is disseminated. Parents who have completed post-secondary, or senior students could equally play an important role in the dissemination of this knowledge and its uptake by parents.
An Okanagan mentor.

Early on in the first conversations with parents, I suggested that an Okanagan mentor of a non-Aboriginal school leader would be a powerful means to improve the non-Aboriginal school leader's capacity to communicate, improve his or her understanding, and further working relationships. This was based on my own experience with Eric Mitchell, among others, who took the time to guide my learning with the Okanagan. This was of great assistance to me. My thinking was simple. If it was expected by school and community that every time a new administrator was placed into a school, someone from the Okanagan community stepped forward to act as a mentor, then much trial and error learning (with errors always threatening to deepen distance between school and community) could be avoided, and an administrator could, from the outset, build trust with the community in ways important and recognizable. Although, I thought the idea had great merit, parents were mixed on it. One parent thought it was a great idea but then wondered who would act as mentor and how would that person be selected—having in mind the deep seated differences in the community. Another parent noted that the Advocates could perform this role, and thus such a mentor was not needed. As we shall see, the idea had a little more support from Aboriginal educators and non-Aboriginal school leaders.

The Heart of the Journey

As we arrive at the end of this chapter, you have traveled the journey, some of the pathways, that parents walked with me. And perhaps, now you and I can begin to discern what we need to do to start a journey along new pathways, toward new destinations with Okanagan parents, mindful of the complex reality that constitutes your/my/their/our location of beginning. I close with the following dream, told by Gina, as a way of expressing the
sense of alienation and the profound hope that must motivate our moving forward into a better future on this shared journey.

G. After we last talked I had this, I had a dream. And I dreamt there was a bouquet of flowers. The flower vase was huge. Each bundle of flowers was a different type of a flower with a distinct colour and they were all beautiful flowers...but they were in bundles, so they weren’t every different flower integrated with a whole bunch of them. They were in their own little bundles. So there was a bundle, say, of yellow flowers, and there was a bundle of another different flower but they were all gorgeous. All the vibrant colours complemented one another. But there was another bundle of flowers that was off to the side and they were not allowed to be in that vase with the rest of the flowers even though they complemented the entire vase because they would complete it. They were still not allowed to be in that group. And the flowers that were off to the side were roses. And at first I thought that, I thought maybe that the flowers represented different nationalities. That is what I first thought. But after thinking about that for a couple of days, I realized what does a rose represent? It represents love, commitment, trust, all kinds of things a rose represents. It’s the type of flower that everybody gives when they love one another. So I realized then that there were all these bouquets and bundles of flowers in this vase, but the thing that was not allowed in was love. So I came to the conclusion that in [Beta] there is no love.
CHAPTER 6

Aboriginal Educators’ Perspectives

Our people just need opportunities to speak our truths.

Eric, Okanagan Educator

Because you know when you look at traditional beliefs and thoughts as an educator and you don’t place any value on those that just cuts to the heart of education. Because, if you have a huge group of students who grew up with these beliefs and these traditions, and you don’t value that, and you come in as a White, middle class person, and you haven’t got a clue about their way of life, and you try to impose another system upon them. It seems to me that that is a certain recipe for failure.

Nathan, Aboriginal Educator

Conversations with Okanagan and Aboriginal Educators

In this chapter I will present the major themes of conversations with ten Aboriginal educators working with and for Okanagan students. The perspectives of these educators are rich with experience facilitating communication, understanding, and relationships. Indeed, many of these people have carried the responsibility for communication, understanding, and relationships between Band and District, Okanagan families and schools, parents and principals, students and teachers, some for more than 20 years. They have a profound sense of the challenges faced by Okanagan students in the public school system. They also have many clear ideas about what needs to happen if things for students are to improve.

This chapter is organized into three major sections, the first presenting those themes having to do with understanding, the second having to do with relationships, and the third having to do with communication. As with the previous chapters, there was much more presented in our conversations than I can include in this chapter. The struggle to honour the trust given me by participants as I make decisions about what to include, and what to leave
for later works together, has been daunting. My approach has been to immerse myself in our conversations, in their minutiae, trusting that in this process participants’ emphases, themes, and intentions would suggest patterns of organization and those crucial ideas that must be included. However, as Marlene Atleo (in conversation, 2006) and David Coulter (in conversation, 2005) have stated to me, in the end I make the judgments about what is relevant, and included. Wishing neither to continue the colonizing ‘capture’ of Indigenous knowledge so forcibly argued by Linda Smith (1999), nor to overwrite the voices of Indigenous people with yet another White interpretation, I have only been able to ethically accept my authorship by framing it in the dialogic methodology which underlies this study: what I write here is my attempt to carry on the dialogue I have shared with participants, and thus as my response to their words and meanings, it begs for their further response—this chapter is not the last word in the dialogue! Indeed, I believe that it is my responsibility to honour our conversations by using this opportunity to contribute to deepening and extending the dialogue about improving communication, understanding, and relationships and improving educational processes for Okanagan students. As ever its weaknesses are my own.

Section 1

Understanding

In our conversations it seems to me now that Aboriginal educators revealed to me what I, as a non-Aboriginal school leader, needed to understand if I was going to meaningfully engage the challenges of improving communication, understanding, relationships and improvement of educational processes of Okanagan students. At one level we were talking about what non-Aboriginal school leaders needed to learn. At another level they were telling me stories that I needed to know in order to make sense of why they felt non-Aboriginal school leaders needed to understand what they were saying. And at yet
another level, they expressed perspectives they believed were necessary for Okanagan members and non-Okanagan members to understand. As I write this chapter, I am aware that there are still other levels of understanding needed if we are effectively to engage the learning challenges and aspirations of the Okanagan Nation. What I am about to present reveals what needs to be understood if we are to be able to take the next steps to attain those further levels of understanding. What follows is a map intended to take Non-Aboriginal educators and Okanagan members to those areas where challenges and possibilities exist, where further mutual communication, understanding, and relationships are necessary, where further dialogue is essential, if improvement is to occur.

The Understanding section comprises the majority of this chapter and is organized into seven major subsections: The Importance, Challenges, and Possibilities of Okanagan Nation Identity; Elders; Parents; Students; The Role of the Advocate; Non-Aboriginal Educators and School Leaders; and Education Processes. These sub-section headings emerged as a means of gathering many sub-themes together.

The Importance, Challenges, and Possibilities of Okanagan Nation Identity

I am amazed at how different we are actually.

Sarah, Okanagan Advocate

The theme of uniqueness and difference arose frequently in our conversations. It became a given that to improve educational processes for Okanagan students, one must engage the Okanagan themselves to discern what the real challenges and possibilities might be for such improvement. On the one hand, such claims to particularity and difference emphasized the importance of a dialogic process (some sort of communication/understanding/relationship/purpose approach is necessary to attain the local knowledge needed to work together—theory developed elsewhere will be of limited utility).
On the other hand, just what constitutes this uniqueness must be carefully ascertained.

Aboriginal educators went to some lengths to help me understand this uniqueness. In our conversations, Aboriginal educators talked about positive forces that influence Okanagan identity: Okanagan history, territory, economics, culture, language, families, and spirituality. Aboriginal educators also talked about the negative forces that have influenced and continue to influence Okanagan identity: colonization, systematic oppression, the residential school, poverty, reserve life, politics, internal diversity marked by dissension and lateral violence, and racism. And Aboriginal educators talked about reclaiming pride in Okanagan identity and asserting self-determination and personal agency.

**Okanagan History, Territory, Families, Language, Spirituality, Culture**

That the Okanagan were a self-reliant, self-determining People before Europeans arrived was a foundation stone for Aboriginal educators’ discussions of Okanagan history. The territory inhabited by the Okanagan was co-terminus with their identity and their economic sustenance. The territory shaped culture and language. The connection between territory and identity and self-determination is vital to understand, for this connection influences virtually every discussion about education, even when not voiced. For example, Rose, in our first conversation, said

But you know, this is Okanagan territory. Our kids have to be proud of who they are and this is where they are from. You know there is nothing wrong with having other Nations’ information about their Nations in the curriculum as well, but Okanagan to me should be number 1.

Having listened to this theme emerge with many others after this early conversation, I attempted to put into words with Rose this theme as I understood it during our second conversation:

M. I have been struggling with a bunch of different ways to talk about how the school district needs to honour the Okanagan claims to resources, to orienting curriculum,
towards involvement in the structures. There is a ‘primacy of relation’ because of the fact that this is the Okanagan’s traditional territory...and because of the history of colonization that has happened....Thus there is a primacy of relation that is required; a priority of approach.

R. You know I believe that, first of all this is Okanagan territory. So people that come in have to be respectful to that. When I went to Merritt, I was respectful. That is their territory....Like jobs in their Band. If a Band member was qualified, you know you have to respect that they would get the jobs first, instead of others. That is the way it is, or should be...you respect other people’s territories when you go in.

M. When I went to France, I was respectful of French customs.

R. That is right.

Rose makes clear the implications of this deeply set norm for curriculum—“their information”—and for hiring, but, as I begin to comprehend in my reflection back to her, the implications of this ‘primacy of relation’ can be applied to all aspects of the school system.

The primary political and economic unit of the Okanagan was not the nation-state, or the city-state, or the feudal-state—to name a few of the standard European structures—but rather was the extended family. Except for war, rare was it for the Okanagan to gather in a larger group for some collective conclave. Rather, each family functioned as an autonomous unit. Sarah’s following history lesson is instructive as she responds to my query about talking circles and group gathering for collective decision making:

Our family would go to the same place every year and hunt. We would go to the same place to fish; gather roots or pick berries. We’d have our own area. And that family had the area right next to us. A different family had a different area and everyone knew that and they used it for generation after generation. Because of that, there was no need to sit down and negotiate, or discuss when to go hunt or gather foods. And if somebody was wanting to go hunting elk, there were people who specialized in that, and they would say, ‘I’m going to go hunt elk, and if you want to come, come.’ So at that point, that person would be a leader of that hunt. When they returned home, you knew that leadership role was over. So, we have this idea of all these chiefs getting together, and doing all that, and I’m not sure when that happened. I believe it happened at contact because then the land, all of the land was threatened. So at that time, people got together and then it would have been not just the Okanagan people, but all of our neighbours too. They met and then they developed some of those strategies of dialogue and respectful sharing. They became male dominated because they were meeting with other males. Yeah. So anyway. I could go on. (laughs)
In my conversations I began to understand just how important the historical norm of family is for how the Okanagan function politically, and why it is that it has been a challenge for the Okanagan and the school district to negotiate a set of long term arrangements for educational reform. The Band governance structure is an overlay imposed by the Indian Act and the colonizing governments of Canada on top of the traditional family political structure headed by Elders. It would seem that the traditional and the new political structures operate concurrently in an uneasy power balancing, marked by frequent and difficult changes in Band leadership. This challenging political situation of the Okanagan we will visit again further on. But here it is enough to note that to begin to understand the historical significance of the family unit is to begin to understand the importance of including extended families in the education of Okanagan children in meaningful ways.

Aboriginal Educators noted the dilemma in which the Okanagan find themselves in regard to language. On the one hand, language is perceived as vitally important for identity and for self-determination. On the other hand, the Okanagan are uncomfortable taking the responsibility for language development from families, and giving it to the public schools. Rita said,

I'm one of those that believes that, with some of our Elders and some of our language speakers, that it belongs in our own community, and that if anybody is to learn it, you know, we should learn it.

Matt generally concurred with Rita but embodied the dilemma:

And I think, once we have our school on the Reserve, that the language should be there, then if the students from the district wanted to come to the Band school and learn the language, they should be able to do that. I'm not sure, I guess I'm not sure. Maybe I guess my feeling is that we have shared a lot, we've shared, sometimes I think we've shared too much with the non-community Peoples. The only things we have, and our language could become extinct, but is unique to us, and I think one of the very few things we have, we still have spirituality and we have land, we still have land, and some of the language. I think we've shared enough. But I guess right now my thoughts are it should be controlled by the Band, within the school system there. Even though there is a possibility it could become extinct.

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Eric argued that “there should be limited language presentation of Okanagan language in schools, enough to promote positive self-identity for our students, and to present our uniqueness to the other students.” And Nathan, from the school district side, advised a cautious approach and acknowledged that language development “really needs to come from the [Okanagan] community.” Understanding the desire for Okanagan language development and the fears for its development must be the basis for supporting this most important educational process—whether it happens on Reserve, or privately, or in schools, there is no doubt among Aboriginal educators that learning the language is important for Okanagan students and their identity. Rita went on to say, “I think it would be okay if it was, if there was an understanding and an agreement about how the program or courses would come about and why.” The challenge for leaders and educators on all sides of the issue is to resolve the dilemma.

Above Matt mentioned Okanagan spirituality. On several occasions, Aboriginal educators talked about the significance of spirituality for the Okanagan. Seeking understanding in this area is vital for approaches to improving educational processes for students if they are to be more than superficial accommodations of mainstream, assimilationist driven agendas. By spirituality I group both the religious affiliations (predominately Catholic Christian) and traditional spiritualities that give rise to Okanagan notions of goodness, ethical behaviour, justice, and right relations with self, family, others, the earth, ancestors, and the Source of life—however defined. Both Eric and Sarah took time to explain the openness with which the Okanagan met the Catholic tradition—given significant parallels between traditional beliefs and those presented by missionaries. They also highlighted the strong Catholic history on the Reserve, exemplified by the high
proportion of children who attend the Catholic school in town, and the historic support for
the Catholic school by Okanagan leadership. However, there are those for whom
Catholicism is problematic—associated with the residential school, and with the colonizing
of the community. And there are those for whom traditional spirituality, based in Okanagan
culture pre-contact, is important. I infer from our conversations that there is an uneasy
acceptance of these different spiritualities; but that they make it difficult to establish a
coherent set of Okanagan values. I also infer that this Catholic history provides a strong
vector for participation in mainstream society beyond the Reserve. Seeking understanding of Okanagan spirituality is necessary if educators are to be able to build an educational program that properly reflects the deep values and aspirations of the Okanagan People and that resonates with the deep purposes for life imbedded in Okanagan children by their ancestors.

Rita argued strongly that these deep values and purposes are what we should mean when we talk about Okanagan culture, rather than just talking about artifacts—like food, dance, and historic technology.

It [An article Rita wanted to share but couldn’t find] talks about culture, and they use this iceberg, as a diagram to show what culture [is] and all that it’s about. Most people are comfortable at the top, at the tip of the iceberg—fry bread, say, and sing and dance, you know that kind of thing. But, underneath that are the laws, the philosophies, the languages, more of the culture, educational systems, you know all that kind of thing. Values. All underneath there. If people would wish to look there, you know and go further, you know, it’s all there.... If people are happy at the artificial, superficial level, the tip of the iceberg, they’ve got it. And if they can get away with it in this district, which they have been, they will continue to get away with it.

75 Seeking understanding in a way that provides space for Okanagan families and the Okanagan People to assert those values that are essential to their notions of the sacred, and yet does not “share too much” to use Matt’s words, or make the sacred profane. Understanding in this context must lead to a fine discernment of appropriateness, and be imbedded in a strong set of dialogic relationships in which this discernment can be tested openly. As Dr. Archibald (personal communication, September, 2006) has said, this is “very complex and tricky—a fine balance is required.”

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Rita went on to talk about the commodification of Indigenous culture, and Okanagan culture, a process that reduces a very complex and sophisticated way of living in the world, to a marketable, or teachable-in-one-easy-lesson, simplification. The importance of understanding Okanagan culture, and as more than just the tip of the iceberg, was strongly voiced by all Aboriginal educators. Aboriginal educators believed that all students living in the Okanagan territory should have more than passing knowledge of Okanagan culture. Aboriginal educators expressed that Okanagan students should attain knowledge and skills to be competent in their culture. Aboriginal educators were unanimous in recognizing the significance of culture for healthy identity development in Okanagan students. Lisa told a story about two Okanagan male students who struggled at school.

L. This one particular kid had difficulty with two other teachers. And he was in [the principal’s] office quite a bit, because he was so rude and disrespectful to them. And he wasn’t to me. And this kid in particular his grandfather had died. I think it was October. His grandfather who he lived with. So I went there and I brought some food. And I went to the funeral. I go to all the funerals. It’s another thing that I do. I go to all the funerals that I know.... And I think I went back one more time. Just to see how they were doing. I called on them and talked to him and his sister and his aunt....And he needed some extra credits. He needed two credits to graduate. So I said, okay, I’ll take you as a peer tutor. So he had to do a certain amount of things. I asked him, I want you to teach one thing to the students....So we all got in a bus and we went [to a place on the Reserve]. And he had made bannock for them all, and he taught them, he showed them what he did. He had carved a canoe and he also brought all of his Grandfather’s stuff that was stored away in a suitcase. And he took it out and he taught the kids some of the things that the Grandfather had taught him. And that was really amazing. And what was even more amazing was that his cousin, [student’s name], who I don’t know if you remember.

M. I remember [him] quite well.

L. [He] told all the kids to gather around—and [he] is a really shy kid—gather around and he told a story to the kids. And he played a flute. He has been learning to make the traditional flutes from somebody.... So he has been learning to make the flute and

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76 Throughout our conversations, Aboriginal educators made a linkage between healthy identity development, and student success in school.
77 This story also exemplifies the norms of a relation that Lisa thought essential for her teaching Okanagan students, namely that to be a successful teacher for Aboriginal youth was a 24/7 occupation, and that finding ways for students to be teachers themselves was vital for their learning. We shall return to this later, and we shall also return to her practice of attending funerals.
he played the flute for the kids. Isn’t that amazing because [he] would never have done that. [He] was so shy. He couldn’t do anything in class. But he taught that culture to the kids that were out there.

The exemplified connection between culture, self-respect, and identity created an illustrative teachable moment for students that reflects Aboriginal educators’ perspectives regarding the benefit of Okanagan culture for students. When engaged with Okanagan culture, or learning about Okanagan culture, students become energized, they come out of themselves.

Aboriginal educators presented many aspects of culture they felt were of significance for non-Aboriginal school leaders, non-Aboriginal educators and for me to know. Unfortunately, I cannot provide the space they deserve in this study. However, I can firmly state the importance of seeking understanding of culture that goes beyond the tip of the iceberg into the values, practices, and relations that lie below the surface.

**Colonization, Oppression, Poverty, the Residential School, Internal Dissension, Politics, Reserve Life, and Racism**

In our multicultural society, it is no longer such a leap for Canadian educators to accept that they must make an effort to understand culture, values, history, family structures and the like. What is harder for White Canadian educators is to seek understanding of the processes of colonization that on the one hand, greatly benefited White colonists and have become the basis of Canada’s remarkable prosperity, but on the other hand greatly harmed Aboriginal, and in particular Okanagan, people. It is harder to seek vigorous understanding when one directly benefits from these historic and ongoing injustices. It is much easier to avoid knowledge of culpability. It is much easier to ignore responsibility, which becomes clearer the more one learns. Aboriginal educators are very familiar with this terrain, and how their non-Aboriginal colleagues negotiate through it. In our conversations, I was often conscious of being assessed as I listened, of participants gauging just how guarded they
needed to be with their language, or just how much of the anger, hurt, humiliation, and
despair they could trust me with, before I would run for cover, or use some ideological tactic
to blame the victim and re-inscribe the colonized internal frames of shame. Aboriginal
educators revealed as much as I could handle, as much as our relationships could bear; for
this much I am deeply honoured, and from this much it is easy for me to assert how important
it is for non-Aboriginal educators to engage the darkest side of Canada’s history.

Graham Smith (2004) observed that colonization is done to the colonized on every
level of living and being. Colonization invades the social: culture, economy, governance,
family structures, values, and language. And colonization invades the personal: identity, self-
worth, behaviour, relationships, education, and career opportunities. Every aspect of a
person’s life is shaped by the colonizing process. Eric opened the Okanagan experience for
me in our first conversation with these words:

But the other reality is, is that our people have been so, what’s the word, oppressed,
that it’s hard for our people today to think that way. To think that we are kings in our
own land. When we are so darned poor in certain ways, that it is hard for people to get
out of that rut. It’s hard for our people to think beyond the fences of the Reserve. It’s
hard for people to think beyond themselves, even.

He took the time to introduce me to the letter written on behalf of the Okanagan, Shuswap
and Couteau Chiefs by James Teit (1910, 1993) and addressed to then Prime Minister Wilfrid
Laurier on his visit to Kamloops, BC, in August, 1910. This letter, dated nearly one hundred
years ago, expressed the shock, dismay, and outrage of Okanagan, Shuswap, and Couteau as
a consequence of the government policies that had forced them off of their traditional lands
and onto tiny reservations to make way for the colonizing settlers. Through this letter I could
see beyond the present to a time when the Okanagan had indeed been “kings” in their own
land. Through this letter I could also see the present differently, noting how little issues had
changed though a century had passed—the Okanagan are still asking that their rightful claims
to territory and self-determination be acknowledged. And where it would be convenient to say the violent upheaval of confining the Okanagan people to reserves is well in the past, Aboriginal educators made it clear to me, as Eric does above, that the web of laws, customs, and attitudes toward Aboriginal Peoples constitute a force that daily reinforces those historical acts. This, in part, is what Eric, and other Aboriginal educators meant when they talked about the on-going oppression Okanagan people continue to experience.

This oppression is most tangible for non-Aboriginal educators familiar with the poverty of Reserves. Time and again, Aboriginal educators emphasized the importance of understanding the home lives of Okanagan students. The history of colonization and on-going oppression has meant that some families have access to few of the resources, and are dealing with difficult life situations, that teachers—generally of middle class backgrounds—would consider to be the norm. Aboriginal educators were not claiming that all Okanagan families are impoverished. Indeed, some talked about hierarchies of power and economic well-being that exist on the Reserve. It is necessary to get to know students, and the families that stand behind them.

The residential school stands as the clearest symbol of a century of colonization and intentional oppression. The historical record reveals the government’s collusion with religious groups to provide an educational process that would destroy Aboriginal culture and language, assimilate Aboriginal peoples, and provide second-class education. Aboriginal educators often referred to the residential school experience as a means for explaining why parents and grandparents do not wish to associate themselves with schools. I mentioned this to Rita in our second conversation:

M. This comes up in the stories and the interviews with people as one of the reasons why communication is difficult, and why connections are difficult. People have strong negative school experiences in their backgrounds that they have lived through. And
[they] then go to the schools full of other meanings than just going into a school to talk to somebody.

R. Ya. The level of disempowerment and all that kind of thing, is just amazing. I have got [a friend], she has got to be 75, pretty active. She said to me last week, she got out of the Kamloops residential school, even now she won’t even go near the Kamloops town area. She said, her whole life she had totally avoided that whole part of the valley. Ya.

Mike reflected on his own experience growing up and noted how his father, a residential school survivor, had on only one occasion gone into his school:

My father visualized a non-native person as a priest—any other non-native person, maybe a principal, maybe a teacher, maybe anything—so he never, I think my whole time going to school, he stepped into my school once, and that is because the principal of that school, his son played hockey with me. They always met at the arena.

A couple of Aboriginal educators noted that some people had positive experiences in the residential school. Others noted the lasting, intergenerational effects of the residential school included the internalization of oppression and a racist impression of what it meant to be Okanagan: Okanagan language was not as good as English; Okanagan culture was not as good as European culture; Okanagan were not as capable as non-Okanagan. Eric captured what this means on a personal level for Okanagan people today:

But a lot of our people can’t accept who they are. Half of them, there are status people on the reserve here that they don’t want people to know they are Okanagan. So then, if you deny that big part of yourself, well how are you going to move ahead? Anyway, I was doing these life-skills workshops and this one young woman there, Oh she was like a lot of our people there. Angry. They are angry. They have every right to be.

Aboriginal educators talked about those Okanagan people who have been overwhelmed by their anger and hurt, resulting in addiction, and suicide, and how this internalized violence, even generations old, becomes “lateral” violence, targeted at each other as emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. In this way, the violence propagated against Okanagan people for 150 years is recycled and inflicted on even this new generation, which has grown up in a multi-cultural Canada that 10 years ago asserted Aboriginal title and self-determination had
never been extinguished. One participant described a situation working with a parent in
which the parent’s anger and hostility far outstripped the issue at hand, and to make sense of
it this participant turned to the notion of lateral violence to explain a phenomenon frequently
observed and personally experienced:

And I think the whole concept of lateral violence [applies here], when unhealthy
relationships occur in communities. The ability for them to pull out all stops, to come
at you with a sharp stick and keep poking and poking until you are just too tired to
defend yourself. And the work itself becomes unbearable because the personal is
political.

As I listened to several stories from Aboriginal educators about displaced anger,
expressed to the detriment of people’s own goals, I came to think of the historical legacy of
colonization and on-going oppression as generating an aquifer of anger that, like molten
magma near the surface of the earth, only needs a slight crack in the veneer of orderliness for
an eruption to occur. The challenge for non-Aboriginal educators is to understand and engage
the historic conditions that create this aquifer of anger, and undertake those actions in schools
that will contribute to their amelioration. This is not a new challenge to Eric. He said of a
former student who was overwhelmed by her anger:

And so that is the first thing I told her. ‘Good. If you are angry own it. Our People
have every right to be angry about this and about that, about this, about that. You
know you can name things for four days. But are you going to let that drive your life?
Are you going to allow that anger to boss you around kind of thing.’ It’s all right to be
angry, but what are you going to do about it? What are you going to do about it. What
do you want to do about it? Do you think you even can do anything about it?’

I will explore these ideas further when we discuss the healing journey as an essential element
of an Okanagan specific educational program.

This anger finds its way into the relationships between families on the Reserve, and
sharpens divisions, politics, and historic enmities. Rita spoke of the ways in which
internalized oppression seemed to exacerbate distinctions between families:
It seems that that is a part of our problem in our own community amongst our family and our nation, is what some would call our own internalized oppression. Where maybe one family or one community thinks it's stronger, better, more capable or more deserving of whatever. So that, that has to be talked about and addressed. We do it to each other. We do it to ourselves.

One Aboriginal educator observed that sometimes even children on the playground end up embodying these conflicts:

I find it very surprising at times that families can be so thoughtless about other family's personal information. I have heard children say, "I can't play with you because your mom and dad blah, blah, blah. So that shows me that this child has heard adult information about someone else's parents and they come to school and make statements that are not appropriate. In my opinion this situation harms both students.

At one point in our second conversation, Eric was explaining to me the ways that government had created definitions for who could qualify as a "status Okanagan Indian" and who did not—up until bill C-31\(^78\) Okanagan women who married White men and their children did not qualify. When bill C-31 was enacted it pitted families against relatives who wished to rejoin the Reserve. He lamented,

E. It all comes down to what we were talking about earlier, everybody is split on everything, whether it is religion or traditional versus modern, whatever. It is very hard for people that are of two minds like that to come together to decide who is going to be members of our community. If it was just based on blood lines, and just based on notions of what we think an Okanagan is or isn't, then that wouldn't be a problem. But economic things come into play. Here it would only be land, cause we don't have money. Being an Okanagan Indian, if you decide to enfranchise, it means that you will get $75 as your cut. So that's not the issue. The issue is a small group of our members own 60% of the reserve.

M. Haves and have nots.

E. Ya. And so they don't want this seemingly big number of people coming back and demanding some of those things.

Other Aboriginal educators commented upon this hierarchical structuring of the Reserve—the haves and the have-nots. Rita noted that some hierarchy was traditional— Chiefs were

\(^{78}\) Bill C-31 was enacted by parliament June 28, 1985. A person who is identified as a “status Indian” is a person on the Indian Register and for whom the Indian Act applies. Such “status” confers Band membership rights. (Indian and Northern Affairs, 2004).
generally from specific families. Mike observed that in his experience with several Bands there were powerful families and less powerful families, and this pattern had been set for generations:

Mike. I've attended meetings in almost every Reserve in the Okanagan Nation. You can see the ones that are the [top of the] hierarchy families that attend the meetings and the respect that is shown to them. Not just from people, but from their Chief and councils and stuff like that.

Mark. How does one, how does a family move up in the hierarchy? Is it fixed for generations or?

Mike. Ya. It's fixed for generations.

One Aboriginal educator noted that some children took a superior air in relation to other children when they learned what families they were from:

I've seen a superior air in relation to new students. 'My family is...'and they will use the family name. And from another students there will be the subtle body language—the flick of the hair, and the 'Oh, you're a so and so.' And there will be a superior glance. 'You are of no consequence because you are of a particular family.' I have seen that in students. And they had to learn it somewhere.

It is important for all educators to understand how this dividedness, accentuated by colonization, oppression, and limited access to economic opportunity, influences students, relations with schools, and education policy development. One consequence is that one cannot speak to one family, or group of families, and then make claims to having gained an understanding of the Okanagan position on an educational issue. Lisa recalled her own efforts to introduce a new educational program, and how, even after following all the leads she was given, she still ended up being criticized for not connecting broadly enough.

M. So you can't really expect to speak to one person who would be representative of a collective position?

L. No. I guess the political process is going through Chief and Council, cause they represent the people’s voices. They were elected to be in that position. However, sometimes that group of people is only from a certain faction of the Okanagan Nation and only represents a certain amount of people. An example was when I first started the [new ] course. I wanted to have input from the Elders. That was the main, that was how I was going to develop the course, is what do the Elders want the children on
Lisa went on to say in our second conversation, that to anticipate a single perspective from an Aboriginal community is really an outcome of colonial thinking—an expectation of a simple group when in reality within the Nation there is remarkable and significant complexity.

Another consequence is the bringing into question of how one hires Okanagan personnel when each person is likely affiliated with one faction or another, and that some families will feel ill-served, or worse, by such appointments. With this in mind, Lisa noted that the distance between some families made it difficult for some children to feel it appropriate to approach and trust an Advocate or other Okanagan educator, if that educator was on the other side of a political divide. Another consequence is that engagement in Okanagan politics—being seen to side with one point of view or other—is problematic. Of such an incident Rose recalled the following,

I was upset because the teacher here brought one faction [in and] was kind of supporting one side. This school is supposed to not be involved in politics, because it is so controversial on Reserve. There are two sides, and we want to keep all of our students. And I said, 'I really think that it is a mistake to do [this]—they brought in a speaker. They were saying that there are all these high paying jobs and you need an education and the Band is going to do this and do that and whatever, and I just said, 'I think that if it is not a Council, if it’s not a Council motion to support this, and if this is a candidate’s personal perspective,’ then I said, ‘the school shouldn’t be getting involved.’... And I was just told that he didn’t know, he didn’t know it was political....

It blew right up in our faces and I think we lost students. So I think school staff should know too that politics is [politics], school is school. You don’t get involved in Band politics. Even though you might support someone. But if you are going to do that, do it on your own time....All of a sudden we lost a bunch of students. Politics on Reserve, elections are just horrible. You know, you don’t know if you can walk into a room, or into the Band office and have people talk to you or snub you. You have no idea during the election. It just gets really, really dirty on the Reserve and I don’t like it. So I was upset. Cause I think that school staff need to know when to stay out of things. I find some people do. They say, ‘Well you know what, that’s Band politics
and we don’t want to get involved.’ And you know that is good. You know you don’t want to be taking sides, because you have to work with whatever Chief and Council is in there. You can’t pick and choose.

In short, power relations within the Band are intense and play a significant part in how Okanagan Band members relate to each other, and to schools. All educators, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, must understand these power dynamics well if they are to work effectively with the Okanagan community to support the education of its children.

Many Aboriginal educators brought up the theme of living on the Reserve in our conversations. They did so in order to make clear to me that living on the Reserve was very different from living anywhere else:

There is a big difference between on-Reserve and off-Reserve people. You know, there is almost a boundary between them. You’re in two separate worlds. [Rose]

They wished to make clear that understanding these differences is important for supporting Okanagan students:

It’s trying to reach them to a point where they feel comfortable. That’s the hardest. Knowing their background. Knowing somewhat of the culture and somewhat of the Reserve, because every Reserve again is different. [Mike]

From across our conversations, I weave the following tapestry of meanings regarding reserve life. It is home. It is a secure place the boundaries of which are not crossed without trepidation by some Band members.79 It is a place where everyone knows everyone else. It is a place where families have lived together for generations beyond remembering, and where families intend to live together for generations beyond imagining. It is a place where one’s relatives live. It is a place where children may move from parents’ to grandparents’ to aunts’ and uncles’ homes quite naturally. It is a place where some families are economically well to do and others are very poor. It is a place where governance resides in the traditional way with

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79 In Mike’s words, “And again and in my mind I always look at the Reserve line and the non-Aboriginal society. And every Reserve has that border, you know just, it gets difficult. A lot of parents find it hard just hard to step over that line.”
Elders and in a post-colonial way with elected Band Councils. It is a place where power has been passed down across generations in certain families. It is a confined geographic location created by racism and maintained by oppression. It is a place of anger, internalized oppression, and lateral violence. It is a place of Christian and Traditional spiritualities. It is a place of strong divisions, and long standing grievances. It is a place that is rural, but not remote, away but not isolated, and yet is different enough to be “a different world.” It is both a symbol of violent colonization and a symbol of the collective identity of a Nation perhaps saved from oblivion by its creation. It is a place with which Okanagan people identify passionately. Thus, multiple intersections of these and many other factors, make it absolutely imperative that non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators shake off preconceptions of what it means to be from the Reserve, and seek to understand the lives lived by students and their families on a person by person basis. Similarly, developing educational policy with the Okanagan Band calls for processes that are widely inclusive, otherwise the history of exclusion and factionalism will develop resistance processes that negate the potential of such policy for long term success.

**Racism is a pressing concern.**

It was striking how much Aboriginal educators had to say about racism—its presence, the varied nature of it, its impacts, the necessity of engaging it. I had the impression that if non-Aboriginal school leaders did nothing else but effectively engage the racism that continues to devalue Okanagan identity, this would be sufficient to make an important contribution to improving education programs for Okanagan students. In order to capture the essence of the varied and frequent observations about racism (69 sub themes), I have organized this section into four sub-sections: Racism is a pressing concern; Racism feels like; Racism looks like; and Countering racism.
Aboriginal educators talked about their own experiences of racism, about racism they had seen directed at Okanagan families and children, and about its continuing presence. On several occasions, participants struggled with this topic because it seemed that in our conversation, the experiences of racism were re-lived, let out of their safe boxes, so to speak. Emma’s words after recounting her own experience capture this moment precisely: “I just, it just, it brings you right back to the moment (pause).” I take her courage, and the courage of others to push through those events with me, to make it clear just how real and hurtful racism is for Okanagan people, as testament to its significance and to their commitment to do something about this. Rita’s words speak for many,

R. Well. At that level, there would have to be hiring of staff representative of the population that they are serving. At least that. That would be the very least that could be done. Working on the curriculum of the students to take course work that would educate them [pre-service teachers] about other people other than themselves. Other, this is hard for me…. For me, the bottom line is racism. It’s been there. It’s the colonization process. It’s what this country Canada was founded on. And, you know, the bull shit continues and it will continue. You know, so, that’s the bottom line. And people, even our own people because of their colonization process and the level of colonization, they don’t want to see it, they can’t see it, even though they experience it every day, whether they are coming to town, or where ever they go, you know, they experience it. But they don’t want to acknowledge that because it is so great. And what can one, what can one person do? What can one family do? I don’t know what would make a system like this bend.

Rita expresses something here that took a long time for me to understand—that racism is experienced by the Okanagan as an inseparable piece of 150 years of colonization and oppression. Where non-Aboriginal school leaders may perceive an incident of name calling as a one-off event of bad temper, for an Okanagan person it is a re-instantiation of an identity shaped to serve White superiority and settlement. My own childhood experiences of put-downs, ostracism and the like were easily located in the personal relations that I had with

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80 I believe that the disclosure of such experiences needs to be risked within the bounds of a relationship respectful and supportive of the person, and that they should be well informed in advance that such a topic might come up and that they feel confident to end a conversation, or line of conversation, at any time. I also maintain that the presentation of such events in text form such as in this dissertation must be approved by the participant.
childhood foes. These events did not immediately attach themselves to a larger, pervasive, societal narrative in which my identity was cast as inferior. Something else that has shaken my own faith in my ability to imagine the implications of events for others (something I guess I thought I was good at), has been learning just how deeply hurt Aboriginal educators were by childhood experiences of racism, events that even 40 years later, were still unhealed wounds. I have concluded that the racism experienced by the Okanagan is beyond my lived experience as a White person in Canada; perhaps other non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators may have better understanding, but, as Nathan clearly stated, this is an area where much listening and deep learning is needed.

M. So preparing a non-Aboriginal school leader would include history. What else?

N. I think you need to, I think you need to know a little bit about racism and how that might work. Something that a lot of people don’t particularly want to talk about but it’s there. Sometimes it’s very subtle and I think you need to understand that as a leader. What you may not perceive as a problem to a young man or a woman, could be a very difficult problem for them. So, you know, you need to, and I guess, you need to, you need to be a good listener.

Eric provided historical bookends to this overarching racist narrative that begins with the settlers, gets added to with each racist event, and continues into the present generation. He recounted the story of one of the first settlers to enter the Okanagan territory. This settler began as a good neighbour, married into an important Okanagan family, had children, and was trusted with a place to live, but from the beginning he staked out increasing amounts of territory for his cattle operation, and soon the government had given him title to this land. As his prosperity and control grew, he turfed out his Okanagan wife and his children, and brought out an English wife. One hundred and thirty years later, the story was being re-inscribed again:

Anyway, he’d [Eric’s Grandfather] always shake his head. He’d hear some of our people say, “I’ve tried and tried to understand them White people.”
I’ve lived around them all of my life. And yet when Oka happened, they’re right back to those other Whites [the English] that came and just want you out of their way. So all of this time they weren’t really true. They weren’t really true friends of our people.

The presence of this racism, this narrative, this entrenched set of beliefs and values that begins long ago but is experienced as intensely now, makes just identifying as an Aboriginal person seem to come at a price not worth the risk if it can be avoided. One Aboriginal educator recounted the following experience as a way of talking about the racism experienced by Okanagan students and families.

I think it was the first parent-teacher interview when you introduce yourself and you want to make a good first impression. The teacher made a statement, “Oh, that explains it.” Until that moment the teacher had been telling me that my child was not being successful in his class. I know that this teacher was willing to

M. Make a stereotypical judgment

because I gave him information that he never would have had to use against my child, if I hadn’t been proud of who we were. So, now I have a new way of introducing myself with my other child. Our heritage does not get discussed. I am finding that my child is having a far more successful education. I only share personal information with teachers that have proven that they value my child and that I believe I can trust.

M. So the Okanagan students, judging just from your experience, have a strike against them as soon as they walk in the door.

Oh. Definitely!

This experience echoes Eric’s observation above that Okanagan people don’t even want to identify themselves as Okanagan. Her experience was also echoed by Matt who reported that he knew several people in the school district of Aboriginal descent who would not identify themselves as such for fear it would influence how they were considered by peers and by the system. Nathan stated matter of factly,

Not to say that there might not be some racists among us....And I mean, when you are a visible minority, you have to deal with that all your life. Just find out who they are I guess and stay away from them. Or have them charged.

There are some racists among us. Matt was unequivocal:

There is racism in the schools. There’s racist teachers. There’s racist principals.
Nathan identifies that there are some people who are overtly racist, who openly and intentionally break Canadian laws regarding racial discrimination. Their acts are overt. We can identify them through language, hate propaganda, bullying. Indeed, the list is not different to the acts Nathan identified non-Aboriginal school leaders should watch for in school hallways:

I think that an astute administrator needs to be in tune to that. In the hallways, and that, what do you hear in the hallways? Do you hear comments? Do you hear you know slurs coming out about race and so on and so forth and jokes? You know that type of thing.

These sorts of verbal and physical exchanges we have become adept at recognizing as racism. But Aboriginal educators identified other situations in schools that were experienced as outcomes of historical Canadian colonizing racism. These included the apparent exclusion of the Okanagan athlete from the Beta basketball team (mentioned in the parents’ perspectives chapter), the absence of Okanagan students from Beta award ceremonies, and the failure to hire Aboriginal and Okanagan teachers. Although, as Nathan pointed out when we discussed the few number of Okanagan students who are accepted into English 12 at Beta, there are many factors that play into these “absences,” these absences are experienced by Aboriginal educators as symptoms of, and continuations of, Canadian colonizing racism. Some Aboriginal educators identified that these absences were symptoms of “systemic” racism, which, as I take it, referred to decisions, processes and practices imbedded in the educational system that, when taken together, result in the exclusion of Aboriginal people.

The following perspective regarding district failure to hire Aboriginal teachers is illustrative of both Aboriginal educators’ experience of systemic racism, and of the system’s apparently ‘reasonable’ and innocuous decision making that results in exclusion. That I heard
Years ago we were told by the school district, there are no Indian teachers out there. Otherwise we would hire them. You know, some of us started pushing, pushing people to go into education and to become certified Indian teachers because, you know, they would eventually get hired. And now we are told, now let’s see was that last year? Or two years ago? One of the administrators told us, [names], even when Indians are certified as teachers they are still not the best candidates. So, we’re kind of going, okay, ya, people got to compete and all that. But, so we got two students coming out of one of these programs, both certified teachers. One is a Canadian, one is an Indian. The Indian doesn’t get a chance. That’s what you’re telling me, that’s what you’re telling us, who pushed people to go into education. You’re telling us the Indian won’t even get a chance. That’s what you’re saying. Years ago it was there aren’t any. Now, there are some, they’re not qualified. It’s amazing. It means somebody, some White kid, coming out of these programs, won’t get a job…. Here we are in the 21st century and still back in the dark ages. We’ve met Indians all over the place who’ve said they’ve applied for jobs here and they’ve not even got an acknowledgement, never mind an interview. There are even Indians saying this school district has a rep, when they apply for jobs here, they don’t even put on their application that they are Indian, because they know they’ll be taken out, right off the top. They say that…. But it’s very very rigid, very cold, very closed, reinforces the Canadian, I want to say all-American, you know, like all-Canadian system. So where does the change start?

In a cross-cultural context, it is possible for different assumptions about what constitutes a “good” teacher to make one candidate appear ‘better’ or ‘more qualified,’ than another candidate. In a colonized context, this process would seem to be amplified, and more problematic. Not only is there cultural difference, there is an historic relation of subordination, assimilation, and oppression that is imbedded in the way that Canadian non-Aboriginals and Aboriginal people think. Aboriginal educators argue that such judgments must be carefully deconstructed and analyzed.

**Deficit Thinking/Unconscious Prejudice/Canadian Colonizing Racist Narrative**

An important discovery for me has been that even when one no longer hears slurs, or deals with intentional acts of violence predicated on race, the historical racist narrative mentioned above is still present and active. Often Aboriginal educators referred to racism as
subtle, as difficult to pin down, even as invisible. To help make sense of their words, I now think of racism using the iceberg metaphor mentioned by Rita above: it’s what’s under the water that rips the hull and founders the ship. You can, as Nathan suggested, deal with the highly visible stuff, but much of what Aboriginal educators meant by racism is under the surface, at the levels of beliefs and values. These beliefs and values surface rarely, but become apparent in such events as described by Mike when he decided to apply himself in school:

So I went home and took my own [assignment] and taught myself it, to practice my spelling and eventually then, when I did start getting As, 10 out of 10, the teacher was trying to find out how I was cheating. If you are succeeding, you must be cheating.

The underlying belief: Okanagan students can’t do well in school. If they are doing well they must be cheating. Matt stated that he believed some teachers considered Aboriginal and Okanagan students less intelligent than others:

I think there is a belief within the district that not just Okanagans but all First Nations, that the intelligence is lower.

It is perhaps only through years of observation, as Sarah states here, that the presence of such values and beliefs can be recognized:

S. I think one of the things that happens is that, because of, maybe, there’s a lot of stereotyping and labeling and racism

M. By teachers?

S. Oh sure. If they had an experience the year before with some Aboriginal parents who weren’t very responsive, set meetings-didn’t show up, you know, their expectation of the kids, of the new kids, is coloured by that. They think well, you know, the parents aren’t going to come in anyway. So there is a bit of writing off of kids early on in the year.

M. Do you sense that? And work, I guess you would work on that once you’ve

S. If I, if I realize it, or if I notice it.

M. Sometimes that’s pretty hard to see, isn’t it?
S. Ya, it is. Because it’s really subtle and unless the teacher makes some statement, one can’t really tell. But I do know that over the years, that has happened and so that little bit of extra effort that might have made the difference isn’t made. And those opportunities to dialogue or build relationship aren’t taken because of that. So that, that’s a big thing. Treating each child as an individual. Not grouping them together is really hard. Especially when they might have the same last name, or, even be from the same family.

It’s in those moments where that little bit of extra energy needed to bridge the gap between the learner and new knowledge isn’t undertaken, where the best one has to offer as a teacher is uncharacteristically not made available, where things are let go a little bit longer because the parents might be difficult, all invisible except, perhaps, to the children themselves. I don’t believe that any teacher, with the exception of the volitional racists mentioned above, consciously sets out to exclude or marginalize or belittle an Okanagan student. However, given my discoveries about my own blindnesses in this area, I believe Matt and Eric when they identify that non-Aboriginal teachers just don’t know that they are unconsciously replicating the racist narrative that is imbedded in Canadian history.

Matt. I think sometimes teachers don’t know....Because with societal racism it’s the norm.... Living here in [town], my dad’s generation called [this town] a Scotch town because of the racism. That’s the term they used out there. That’s always been. So living here, racism is normal. You become tolerant to it, if that makes sense.

The injustice experienced by Aboriginal people, and by the Okanagan People in particular, has been all around me most of my life. Rita said about my ignorance of the residential school experiences, “that was the way it was meant to be.” How have I been able to maintain my ignorance so effectively? This question leads me back to the iceberg metaphor, but this time to understand my own thinking, my own values and beliefs, established in childhood, and invisible to me until a dialogue with an Aboriginal person revealed what I didn’t know was present. This iceberg is more fully conceptualized by Bourdieu’s (Swartz, 1997) notion of habitus, and by Gadamer’s (2002) notions of prejudice, and the fore-structures and fore-knowing that structure understanding.
non-Aboriginal educators must do their inner work, they must surface their prejudices before they teach Okanagan students:

That goes beyond Beta and the student, it goes deep into the educational system... what are they teaching their teachers to become, to come [here]? What tools do they provide a teacher to deal with other people, never mind our own students? Because the reality is whatever prejudice and bias a teacher has comes out in their classroom in many forms. And if they don’t know that, how are they ever going to understand the effect that they have on their students? They’ll never know....

So back then there was teachers there that just, and you can’t really blame the teacher either in some ways, it was the whole mentality of that era, you know. It came out in that person. And so that, it happened to be that that person, what came through them was the ignorance, and the non-awareness, and sometimes the hatred.... Or, they have the general consensus of a lot of Canadian people that we are a burden, and we’re just a bunch of drunks and we’re taking their money out of their taxes and what not like that. Just ignorant things. So, until they go through a process like what [we] are talking about, how are they going to change and how are they going to know what effect they are having on their Native students if they don’t even know that they have a prejudice?

This cry for non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators to surface their own biases came from a number of the Aboriginal educators. One educator called it “self-work.” A systematic, comprehensive, and transformative program that enables educators to do this “self-work” ranked highly among Aboriginal educators as a means for addressing racism.

Aboriginal educators made other suggestions about ways to address racism. Nathan noted that the absolute worst thing non-Aboriginal school leaders can do is ignore it. Although this is difficult, and potentially embarrassing even to admit that racism is present in a school, it is best to face racism directly. My own bias at the outset of this study is illustrative. When I first met with Sarah, I was very concerned to find some process that would allow non-Aboriginal school leaders to deal with an alleged racist event at school in a manner that would create the least upset, that would, in fact, help the Okanagan community to calm down quickly. When we had our second conversation, six months and fifty conversations later, I had begun to understand that ‘damage control’ was another way to
silence Okanagan voices about an issue that really needs more attention not less. In that second conversation, we identified several principles that need to be a part of a redemptive approach to an event of racism. These were transparency, a recognition of the error, authentic apology, and a commitment not to act in such a way again.\(^\text{82}\)

Nathan and Mike suggested an attitudinal shift with regard to engaging racism. They identified that the real differences, colonizing history, and ignorance that prevails among non-Aboriginal Canadians regarding Okanagan people necessitate a working model which hypothesizes that everyone is in the process of improving their understanding. In this context, everyone is moving from stereotypes, assumptions, beliefs, prejudices, and generalized knowledge—all of those places that result in harmful and oppressive simplifications of identity—to ways of thinking that are mutually constructed, and reciprocally respectful. Everyone, in effect, is in the learning process. As an example, Nathan observed that the mass migrations of Peoples from all over the world has created multicultural contexts in which neighbours may have no knowledge beyond generalizations of the culture of each other, and thus, our beginning place must be respect, and a commitment to being in a genuine learning process together. Nathan argued that an act of racism calls for education, transformation, and redemption, not retribution, punishment, and ostracism. As I concluded in my conversation with Sarah, the outcomes of a redemptive process are about "understanding the effect of racism and understanding the effect it has on a student and on that community. And it’s about empathy and action, not just about what a person says." To

\(^{82}\) In the case of a teacher, there is an important balance to be struck between the student’s, parents’, and community’s need to be included, and a teacher’s need to be able to learn and move on from her/his error and not be inhibited by a public humiliation that has the same effect as the racist thinking we are seeking to ameliorate—a stereotyping label. Amelioration processes that are in-house and protective of a teacher’s confidentiality are perceived by the community as being just another case of ‘nothing being done’ and Whites looking after themselves. A process that meets the needs of all parties should be mutually worked out.
this I would add, it is also about beginning a process of “self-work.” I wrote in my field notes after meeting with Sarah that rather than seeking to “minimize damage” as I had been inclined, non-Aboriginal school leaders should seek to “maximize learning” when engaging a racist event.

Aboriginal educators expressed other means for non-Aboriginal school leaders to engage racism. Commit resources to anti-racism education for all students and teachers. Anti-racism education programs to be effective must be “transformative”—experienced and meaningful on many levels: mind, heart, spirit, and body. Aboriginal educators talked about learning situations that would have people connect with, and understand, the humiliation and hurt of a racist experience. Effective anti-racism programs would provide the skills for students and teachers to begin their own, on-going program of “self-work” in relation to the Okanagan and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. Effective anti-racism programs would create the conditions for decreasing ignorance, and connecting respectfully across the chasm created by racist, colonizing, oppressive history.

Aboriginal educators suggested that non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators always “individualize” with an Okanagan student. Such an approach is likely to help non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators get past generalizations and prejudices, and enable them to see more clearly who this child is and what his or her capabilities are. Aboriginal educators suggested countering deficit stereotypes with narratives of capacity. Narratives of capacity would span the full range of achievement, from Okanagan and Aboriginal people on the international and national stage, to Okanagan people historically and currently making meaningful lives in their traditional territory, to each Okanagan student and his or her own personal stories of capacity. Aboriginal educators
identified the importance of educating Okanagan students and families in a manner that enables them to assert themselves effectively when they experience racism. Aboriginal educators also argued strongly that it should not be up to the victims of racism to ameliorate the situation; there has been sufficient harm without having to risk being beaten down further in a battle for justice that should be waged on their behalf.

Aboriginal educators recognized that some students inappropriately allege racism to gain power over a situation, or to defend themselves, and that such situations should be used as important learning events for students and families. Mike observed that the negative consequences for an Okanagan student who has made such an allegation can sometimes result in ostracism by Okanagan peers. A couple of Aboriginal educators noted that the history of colonizing racism has fostered a mirror image, counter racism toward Whites in the Okanagan community, and that this will benefit from anti-racism education, and an increase in understanding and connection.

I conclude this section on racism with Aboriginal educators' identification of respect as the fundamental principle for countering racism. Nathan said,

N. It is a matter of respect. A matter of respect. Is that racist or not racist? If you don't respect what I am, where I came from, what I do. You may not call me down. You may not write nasty letters, but maybe you don't respect what I do. And that is where a lot of it comes from. So. See that's tied to the other thing [Okanagan suspicion, anger and caustic communications] now. If we can go and talk to the people and show them that we respect their opinions and respect where they are coming from and respect their traditions, etc. etc. Then they won't say those other things to us.... Because that's what it is. I respect you. Don't matter what colour you are. Don't matter where you came from. I know you. I respect you.

As Nathan says, it is lack of respect that is perhaps the clearest marker of deficit thinking in one's self and others, and it is the commitment to respect the other first and foremost—regardless of historic discourses, stereotypes, ideologies, and the like—that displaces racist
inclinations. We shall visit further what Aboriginal educators understood respect to mean in the relationship section.

Okanagan Nation Identity: Self-Determination, Pride, and Personal Agency

We began this sub-section of what Aboriginal educators said needs to be understood, with the recognition that the Okanagan People are unique, and we have presented aspects of Okanagan identity Aboriginal educators identified as contributing to this uniqueness: Okanagan history, territory, economics, culture, language, families, and spirituality; as well as colonization, systematic oppression, the residential school, poverty, reserve life, politics, internal diversity marked by dissension and lateral violence, and racism. In the process of discussing racism we took time to explore what racism means to the Okanagan, and somewhat tangentially, how it might be tackled. Aboriginal educators have portrayed dynamic forces at play in each Okanagan student’s life. The negative history of colonization, oppression, racism and the like highlight the need for, and the significance of, re-membering and re-building Okanagan identity. To this end, Aboriginal educators called for processes that enable self-determination, pride, and personal agency. We conclude this sub-section on Okanagan Nation identity by considering these empowerment processes.

To move beyond the history of colonization that continues to influence Okanagan identity at so many levels, Aboriginal educators identified the Nation’s need to be self-determining, and particularly in the area of education. “I think we need to control our own destiny as a community, as a Nation” (Nathan). As Rita says,

Our own people have to, more and more have to, get with it. For too long, we’ve either blamed ourselves or been the victims of the residential school kinds of things. It is up to us to take our power back.
Aboriginal educators generally concurred that processes which enable self-determination are an important part of improving communication, understanding, and relationships and educational processes for Okanagan students in the long term.

Contrary to the need to hide Aboriginal identity, Okanagan students “need to know who they are, where they came from, and be proud of who they are.” The wholeness of person that results will be, as Rita notes, the basis for successful engagement with the mainstream community:

To me the trick is, it’s even better when we can keep our identities intact while we go out and do whatever. For some of us, or many of us, that might be the why we might go and succeed, is because we know who we are.

Aboriginal educators made a strong connection between knowing “who they are” and the growth of a vital pride in students’ identity.

Just as the community needs to be self-determining in order to ameliorate the conditions of oppression, so too do individuals. Mike frequently returned to the importance of an educational program that builds personal agency in Okanagan students. Okanagan students and parents need to grab onto the “power” Rita identified. They need to realize the strength to achieve their dreams is in them:

Okay, we are here to support you, but you are in charge of your own life. You are in charge of what you do today, and what you do tomorrow....You are in charge if you are going to get a good education.... My biggest thinking is that you are in charge of your own destiny. You have to pick up the ball and run with it, or are you just going to kick it around until someone else takes it from you?

I do not think I overstate Aboriginal educators’ perspectives when I conclude that personal agency, built on a healthy and whole Okanagan identity, built out of intentional, self-determined educational programs toward this end, and built upon the openness of others to recognize such agency rather than oppress it, will significantly improve communication, understanding, relationships, and educational programs for students.
Understand the Importance of Elders

Aboriginal educators stated that the inclusion of Elders was essential for authentic, long term, and deep improvement of communication, understanding, and relationships and educational programs. As mentioned above, Elders play a significant role in the leadership of families and of the Band as a whole. Nathan argued that by bringing Elders into the schools, their exposure would at a minimum, improve their understanding of the “good” and the “bad” going on there. This alone would help the community respond more cogently to school issues. Lisa identified the value for students of having Elders in school. She remembered with particular strength the influence Elders had on students at school during the Beta Dialogue and the students’ response.

M. Any ideas you want to develop or that jumped out at you?
L. Page 16—when you were able to work with Eric and bring in the Elders of the Okanagan Nation. How important it was. I still think that’s very powerful. And I don’t think that is getting any easier to bring that about in our school.

M. Why is that?
L. I don’t think there is the focus on the importance on Aboriginal education in our school. I think it is not a high priority, as it used to be. I think it is sort of there. But I don’t know if there is anybody in the school who is willing to take on the leadership role in the administration. But that is the one that did jump out at me because it was very important to the kids. To see the students working with their community members and their grandparents in the school, that is unfamiliar and probably uncomfortable to a lot of the old people, and to see how the students worked with them and made them feel comfortable and stood beside them and walked down the stairs and held their hands. I think that was what jumped out at me the most when I was re-reading it [the transcript of our first conversation].

Lisa also noted that to have Elders in the school required creating an appropriate climate of respect in the classroom and in the school, particularly for those Elders for whom the school was an “uncomfortable” place to be. The Beta Dialogue of 1999 modeled this with its four pre-meetings with a core of teachers and Eric Mitchell, Okanagan educator, in advance of the
formal meeting with Elders, family members, and students. The Beta teachers and principal also reported being strongly influenced by the Elders at this meeting.

**Understand Okanagan Parents**

They [parents] need to know that what they have to say is important and they need to believe it. We need to listen to them time and again, and then do something about it.

Sarah

Aboriginal educators wanted it clearly understood that Okanagan parents care deeply about their children. They also care very strongly about their children’s education and school experience. They felt it necessary to make this clear to counter assumptions and judgments they experienced from some non-Aboriginal educators who claim parents ‘don’t care,’ otherwise the parents would be at meetings, or doing more with homework, or be more involved in school activities. As parents and students have articulated above there are a number of reasons why parents may not be involved in schools in the ways that non-Aboriginal educators expect. Over years working with parents Aboriginal educators identified many such obstacles: parents’ own negative experiences with school, including with Alpha and Beta; an expectation that their perspective is unimportant given how often significant decisions are made without consultation; that they will not be listened to when they are consulted; that they have little to contribute; a loss of power or agency when they do attempt to participate; guilt and shame about abandoning their children to the school system; anger that gets in the way of their intended support of their child; an expectation of stereotyping by school personnel; and stereotyping of school personnel by parents; discomfort and unfamiliarity with school practices such as parent-teacher meetings; personal challenges such as poverty and addiction; relationship breakdown. Many of these challenges will be immediately recognizable as manifestations of the history of colonization, oppression,
and racism elaborated above. As has also been emphasized above, every parent is different. The situation of every parent is different. It is necessary to individualize. What can be generalized is that parents care, and that the obstacles that may prevent them from the most effective means of support for their children in school can be removed or ameliorated with listening, understanding, and mutually agreed action.

Aboriginal educators articulated many ways that these obstacles may be removed or ameliorated. Sarah set the general frame for these when she said, "I think the biggest challenge is having it really safe for parents." Mike used the word "comfortable":

I still feel that there has to be a mechanism within the school district, with the administrator or with the advocate or with somebody in the SD [school district], to make this a very, very comfortable place for First Nations students and parents to come [italics added].

What does a "safe," "comfortable" place look like? Emma talked about the importance of just reaching out and making a positive connection which affirms their presence whenever parents come to the school:

It can be a full grown man of six foot three and he is coming up the stairs and if he didn’t have to be delivering a lunch to his child he wouldn’t be in the school. All it takes is ‘Great to see you’ or ‘Did you see the game last night?’ Or just a smile and you can watch relief wash over his face.

We will expand more fully on the importance of establishing positive, respectful, authentic relationships in the upcoming relationships section. Aboriginal educators suggested the idea of a room in the school dedicated to Aboriginal families and Elders—an Okanagan embassy on the school grounds—as an important means for creating a "safe" space. Many Aboriginal educators expressed the need for parents to gain a strong working knowledge of the system and how it works. This included the roles and responsibilities, rules and regulations, which structure schools. It included gaining knowledge of curriculum, learning outcomes, and school objectives. And it included whom to talk with to gain needed information, or to move
forward an important concern. Aboriginal educators noted that misconceptions and partial knowledge sometimes resulted in the wrong conclusions leading to unnecessary conflicts. It was observed that with better information about schools and what is going on in them, more effective communication, more productive interventions, and more involvement by parents would result. Aboriginal educators also identified, as Sarah does at the opening of this section, that parents need to know they have a right to be there for their child, and they need to know that what they have to contribute is of value for their child and for the school.

Aboriginal educators noted that parents sometimes come into schools angry and seeking retribution. Aboriginal educators observed that it would be useful for parents to channel this anger into action that will make a difference for their child. Anger at school or with non-Aboriginal educators sometimes has negative effects for all concerned. One Aboriginal educator suggested that parents remember to remove their “political hat” and put on their “problem solving hat” so that they might more effectively work “with” school personnel to find solutions. Another Aboriginal educator and parent suggested that spending some time with parents helping them develop strategies for coming into schools when they are most concerned, and likely most vulnerable, would be very helpful:

In my opinion it would be helpful if someone could explain to parents that they should not come in to school angry. That is when they are the most vulnerable. I know from personal experience that when I went to school angry I didn’t stay focused. So now I slow down and think. When am I at my best? Do I need to write notes to help me remember my points I want to bring up? Should my husband come with me or am I the one that should stay home? Is there someone at the school that can advocate for my child? When I am talking about my child I only have a certain amount of time to get my opinions out before my emotions take over. If I just want to vent I should call a friend before I go into the school. In the future if I have issues with the school I will try to use more communications skills and remember my goal is to make sure my child gets the best education possible.

Developing the confidence, knowledge, and skills to establish one’s goals for the school in advance and then problem solving with the school personnel how to achieve them is
suggested here as very important for parents. Aboriginal educators revealed a rich understanding of the dynamics of parent / non-Aboriginal educator interactions that would suggest their facilitation and instruction in this area would be highly beneficial for all involved in schools. It was noted by Aboriginal educators working at Alpha that parents were making more direct contacts with teachers in the parking lot and in the school than had ever previously been the case. This was taken as a very positive sign. Mike argued that, from his perspective, it was best if parents could make direct contact with teachers, and that building up parents for this sort of interaction was very important.

All Aboriginal educators supported the importance of parent involvement in schools. They believed that if parents were more involved, then children, teachers, the Okanagan community, non-Aboriginal school leaders, all would benefit. Emma’s story captures some of the benefits for children:

We had a dance demonstration at the school in the gym. One of our parents came in and did a wonderful presentation and included a lot of introductory teaching that really helped the students and staff learn about Pow Wow dancing. Her children were also part of the demonstration. One child in particular was so confident and just regal when she danced. I heard students say, “Oh, look at Josephine! Where is she going?” And suddenly there was a buzz in the hallway. Other student comments were, “oh, I want to go to the gym and dance too.” It was very powerful for the dancers to have that positive experience. The demonstration ended with a Friendship dance and the whole school joined in the dance.

Nathan observed that when parents join together they constitute a powerful political force. Lisa stated that parent involvement should happen in classroom settings, but also in policy level settings as well. This is in keeping with the self-determination theme expressed above.

Aboriginal educators were unanimous in urging strong understanding of Okanagan parents by non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators. And the best way to ensure this understanding was unquestionably to form a strong, open, respectful, and trusting

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83 Pseudonym.
relationship with each parent. As Sarah says at the opening of this section: listen, understand, and act.

**Understand Okanagan Students**

They [students] have to be proud of who they are. They have to know that they can go anywhere in this world and get a job. They can’t be scared to leave here. They have to be able to go somewhere else and know that they can succeed and have that confidence that they can get a job somewhere else and know that if they want something it is a skill that they can learn.

Rose

Aboriginal educators talked a lot about students, about what educational “success” for students might mean, as Rose does above, and about how educational “success” for students might come about. There was much they thought important for non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators to understand in order to improve communication, understanding, and relationships and educational processes for students. Nathan observed that what was needed was a removing of the obstacles that inhibit students in their engagement of learning. Nathan’s observation, when joined with the many other conversations with Aboriginal educators, suggested to me that Aboriginal educators fundamentally seek a liberating, fostering, and growing of the learning ‘energy’ available to each student. There are things in each Okanagan student’s life that uniquely build this energy, and there are things that deplete a student’s energy to do the work of learning. The actions of non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators can foster this energy, or inhibit it. Awareness and communication, understanding, and relationships are required to know the difference.

Nathan said cogently what all Aboriginal educators expressed in many ways: there is no one single factor that is the magic panacea for Okanagan student “success.” There are multiple factors that influence students. Aboriginal educators talked a great deal about the
need to understand and engage the “life situations” (Mike) of students. Community and family dynamics significantly influence a student’s orientation to school and the available energy they have for learning. For some students, Aboriginal educators noted the importance of basic life essentials—consistent food, sleep, clothing, care. They identified that if these basic needs aren’t met, a student’s energy to learn is seriously diminished. The effects of poverty, internalized oppression, lateral violence, and substance abuse are a pressing reality for some children. Aboriginal educators noted that Okanagan children grow up fast and are expected to make adult decisions about their lives and their education from an early age. Nathan expressed a concern that children did not necessarily have the perspective or the knowledge of the bigger picture to make these decisions about their educational program.

Aboriginal educators spent some time talking about the plight of Okanagan boys in schools. Fewer males graduate. Aboriginal educators noted that the history of Beta in particular indicated that boys experienced a tough time at school—the memories in the community among former male students carried this history forward. Mike emphasized the importance of unravelling the knot of “anger, frustration and confusion” that he encounters among many Okanagan male students. He noted the value of having a male role model that boys could relate to and turn to for guidance, particularly in high school.

Lisa told the story of having finally to ask a non-Aboriginal student to leave her classroom as a consequence of unremitting and unrepentant denials of Aboriginal history and experience, and disrespect to Okanagan educators who had presented in her class. She talked of the struggle that this caused within herself and later with administration, but it was made evident by the students that this one student was poisoning the learning environment for all of the Aboriginal students in the classroom. When the student repeatedly refused to engage

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84 Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs models their arguments well.
more respectfully in the classroom, Lisa asked her to leave. The Aboriginal students in the course were deeply relieved. Lisa observed,

But, I went and I talked to some of the students, and I went and I asked them how they felt about the comments and things that were going on, and they said that they felt very, very uncomfortable in the class, and they had for a long time because of the things that were said. ‘Oh that is racist, that native people get this, and we don’t get anything.’ And I felt that the Aboriginal kids in my class—and I have a high number, about 22 out of 25 of the kids are Aboriginal—all throughout their schooling, they have had to deal with people like this in the classroom. And it has been annoying. And I felt that, that doesn’t need to be a part of that class. First time that I have done that.

Lisa’s narrative makes a challenging point, how often are learning spaces in school poisoned for Aboriginal students in the same way, and yet this is tolerated at Aboriginal students’ expense. As mentioned above, it is very important for non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators to build anti-racism capacity/sensitivity in schools, students, teachers, and in themselves.

Aboriginal educators discussed learning styles and learning needs of Okanagan students. There was a firm belief that improved understanding in this area would benefit Okanagan students. Several brought attention to an inclination to be passive rather than assertive, introverted rather than extroverted, disinclined to seek recognition rather than inclined to competitively display their knowledge. Aboriginal educators believed that this led teachers to make certain inferences about Okanagan students’ learning that did not acknowledge capacity, or build further capacity.

Again, for Aboriginal educators the principle of ‘individualizing’ for each student was critical. Mike called for all educators to “listen to the stories behind the behaviour.” Aboriginal educators spoke of the need to motivate students with ambitions and goals that are their own. They spoke of the need to challenge students at their level.
Aboriginal educators emphasized the necessity of having high expectations of students, of “holding them capable” (Carol). This meant engaging students, showing through actions that they are deserving of attention, not letting things slide, not extending boundaries that lower standards, not ignoring their misbehaviour. Such neglect is another form of deficit thinking. Many Aboriginal educators talked about the importance of giving Okanagan students responsibility. My conversation with Rose is illustrative of this theme:

R. I think they [students] need to say...we want this money spent this way, or we want to go here, or we want to go there, or we want to raise money to go here or there. We don’t have that here. So they need to feel that they are a part of the school. They need to be the ones to say, like I’ve heard it a few times, ‘don’t swear, this is school.’ But it is not as often as it should be. And they need to take more ownership of cleaning up because I have been doing it.

M. There is something about, and this comes out of several of the interviews I have had, there is something about giving people power, so that they can control their learning, but also to take control of their lives. Simple things like being asked to make a decision such as about how to spend money,

R. Yes.

M. ‘Because you are capable and you all need to contribute.’ That helps with that self-concept.

R. Ya. That’s right.

Others referred to the importance of giving Okanagan students the responsibility to teach others, or tutor and mentor others. Lisa mentioned how successful this approach had been in her own classroom:

Ya, because they [students] are the teachers as well. And ultimately they do, they drive it. Because if they feel that they are being listened to, and heard and their ideas [are] being brought to the classroom, then they are going to learn. And they have a part to it.

Just to further underscore this point mentioned above, Aboriginal educators asserted the importance of understanding students as inseparably a part of their family systems. In order to improve a student’s capacity to learn, the student’s family’s capacity to support student learning must necessarily also be addressed. In Mike’s words,
I still believe it is still a long ways off, to be able to have the communication where the school district understands that the tradition on the First Nation is a big family aspect. In order to get to one child, you have to go through many doors.

**The Role of the Advocate**

I think the main purpose for any of us as Advocates is to provide support to teachers, students, admin and families, and to serve as a spokesperson for families, sometimes for teachers, but mostly for children, and to serve as a link between the home and the school, and sometimes the school and the community. And the last thing that I think we do is serve as a resource person in classrooms, and elsewhere. Just like the [on-site history and cultural immersion experience for grade 4 children] program I was mentioning. That’s another key role that we all play: we’re expected to know everything about Aboriginal people, because any time questions come up they always ask us. And they’re often surprised that we don’t have a clue about it. But ya, that’s the main part of our job.

Sarah

The Advocate role has been the structural means for communication, understanding, and relationships between Okanagan students, families, community and the school teachers, and leaders, for over 20 years.\(^{85}\) As Sarah describes, the Advocate dwells in both worlds, serves the members of both worlds, serves as an important link for both worlds, advocates for members of both worlds, is knowledgeable about both worlds, and has an important teaching function about each world to the other. Advocates and Aboriginal educators talked a great deal about the role, its core purposes, and its challenges.

Some of the Advocates were less broad in their definition of their role. Matt said it wasn’t his responsibility to educate non-Aboriginal educators and non-Aboriginal school leaders, that supporting students had to be his focus and there was never enough time to do that adequately. Mike emphasized the importance of the Advocate doing whatever students needed, that the role description had to flex according to the particular set of demands defined by the Aboriginal students in a school at any one time. He also emphasized that

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\(^{85}\) The name of the position has changed across 25 or so years, but it was observed that the functions have remained “pretty much the same.”
Advocates had to connect with the “life situations” of students and help them transcend negative situations. Mike noted that his own Okanagan identity made a real difference for ‘calling students out,’ recognizing when more could be asked of them, and getting them back on track—particularly with boys. Several Advocates talked about parent expectations that they be parents’ “eyes and ears” keeping careful watch on their children. These parents expected Advocates to be the primary conduit, or bridge, for communication about their children. When other Aboriginal educators talked about the role, they identified that it was crucial that Advocates be successful connecting with Okanagan students. Eric stated this most eloquently,

When you have somebody in there who has a problem with being Indian, then they can’t help our kids. Simple as that. That’s what I’m talking about. You don’t need a highly educated PhD person in there to help our kids. An old granny that has love for all our children is what we need in there. You know. And anybody, a person in there that’s okay about being a Native person from whatever background, that can talk to our kids in a gentle loving way, and advocate for them. To me, when you, if my son or any of our kids could go to this person and express some concern, then that person, without demands, without fear, without using fear tactics, without using guilt trips, and be able to go into that system and talk to whoever needs to be to sort this issue out that this child has....

And so in either case those two people are rare. It’s rare to have an educated person that has the common sense to be able to talk to children of any kind but our children in particular. It’s rare to have a member of our community that all of the parents can feel safe with that our children can relate to, and like that. And therein lies the double edged sword. So I think the Advocate philosophy is a good one but we have to re-look at how we are accommodating that.

Eric wasn’t alone in noting the importance of parents feeling “safe” or trusting the advocate. We will note momentarily how the Advocates experience an intense vulnerability because of parent distrust. Lisa noted how important it was for the Advocates to facilitate engagement of the school by residential school survivors. Eric also confirms something that stood out quite clearly throughout all of the conversations. Not one person suggested the Advocate position
wasn’t needed, or wasn’t important. Rather, as Eric said above, Aboriginal educators explicitly and implicitly assumed the position was “good” or necessary.

**Challenges of the Advocate role.**

There are very high expectations and needs for the role of Advocate. Indeed, as I listened to Advocates talk about the challenges of their work, and listened to other Aboriginal educators reflect on the position, I was very conscious of how the needs for the position exceed the potential for one person to fulfill them. Simply, in a high school environment, though Advocates knew that parents wanted them to communicate what was going on for each child (who may have as many as eight classes), there is just too much going on for this information to pass through one person. When I drew a diagram of 100 students passing 7 or 8 lines of information through the bottleneck of one Advocate and then those arrows finding their way to 200 parents, the visual representation made the point very clear. It is not possible. Communication must happen through other means too.

Advocates reported that expectations of their ability to intervene on behalf of students were also very high, and seemed to be out of step with the reality of the Advocate position and authority within a school setting. Advocates rely on teachers’ and school leaders’ willingness to be persuaded by the Advocate’s arguments on behalf of children. If teachers or school leaders are not persuadable, then the Advocate’s power and authority is seriously diminished. In order to build up their ability to persuade, Advocates must demonstrate a strong understanding of the issues and perspectives that teachers have (i.e. must be credible), and must work within the acceptable norms of a school staff in order to be perceived as trustworthy. To gain and maintain this respect requires a high degree of ‘fitting in.’

The Advocates talked about the suspicion with which they are held by Okanagan members. They talked about being charged by parents with conspiracy because of their
obvious (prima facie) affiliation with the school. Parents and students expected the Advocate to take their approach to issues when in conflict situations. Advocates, having a strong sense of how schools operate, talked about how such approaches sometimes would potentially have the opposite effect parents sought, particularly in the long term. Parent distrust was compounded in situations where there was a history of enmity between the Advocate’s and the parents’ respective families. It was noted how the lateral violence and anger that circulates within the community sometimes gets focused on the Advocates, as they are perceived as agents of the system. As I listened, it seemed to me that the Advocates, through an understandable process of transference, became identified as the root cause of frustration and anger that has its roots in 150 years of negative colonizing history, suspicion of the school system, oppressive power relations, and so on. Poor communication, weak understanding, negative relationships, even student difficulties, were construed as the Advocate’s fault. There may be issues with how Advocates do their work; but the problems that face the Okanagan community and the schools are much greater than one person’s strengths and weaknesses. That both sides seem to manifest the underlying assumption that the Advocate position is supposed to fix these problems is a significant challenge for those who perform the Advocate position.

The Advocates also talked about their somewhat tenuous position within school staffs, being perceived as unnecessary extras, and not-quite teachers. At one point in re-reading Advocates’ experiences of conflict, an image came to mind of the Advocates as trapped in “no-man’s land,” between enemy lines, appearing to both sides to be wearing the
enemy’s uniform, and being shot at by both sides. In conflict situations, the Advocates told stories of intense vulnerability. To be seen to side with the school was to be ostracized in the Reserve community—with potentially life-long implications; to be seen to side with angry parents was to lose credibility with school staff, and thus to become less capable of advocating for students within that complex system. To create and work within the middle ground was sometimes appreciated by neither. This vulnerability, the anticipation of lateral violence, and the lack of understanding of each other by both sides, made the Advocate position highly stressful. I remember how this stress drove one of the Advocates, who held the position at Beta when I was vice principal, from the position.

The Advocates have developed an extraordinary knowledge of how both worlds connect, and conflict. Their understanding of the complexity of both worlds deserves recognition, and opportunity for its communication to others. I have come to understand, as is reflected in the many pages of this chapter, that the Advocates have much to say that will advance communication, understanding, and relationships, because they have embodied the aspirations and necessities of communication, understanding, and relationships, and they bear the scars of success and failure.

Non-Aboriginal Educators and School Leaders

This whole chapter speaks to what Aboriginal educators thought non-Aboriginal educators and non-Aboriginal school leaders should know about improving communication, understanding, and relationships. However, there were times in our conversations, when Aboriginal educators spoke specifically about the roles of non-Aboriginal educators and non-Aboriginal school leaders. It is these themes that I present here.

86 “No-man’s land” is a term that emerged during World War I to describe the territory between opposing enemy trenches. The area was filled with barbed wire, bomb holes, mud, and was under constant surveillance and cross-fire by both sides. At night it was hard to tell if those in “no-man’s land” were friend or foe.
Non-Aboriginal educators and non-Aboriginal school leaders need to prepare themselves for working with Okanagan students, parents, and community. To do this, they need to do their own "work." As identified above, this includes identifying their own biases, and being open to question these. Non-Aboriginal educators and non-Aboriginal school leaders need to be ready to understand how they are implicated in the system of oppression and colonization that has effectively marginalized Okanagan People, and that has provided education processes that have been problematic at best, harmful at worst. To this end, a process of professional development that increases knowledge of Okanagan and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada is needed. Aboriginal educators made the case that such a preparation program will involve a transformation of the heart, as well as provide information for the intellect.

Aboriginal educators described the elements of a preparation program for non-Aboriginal school leaders. They suggested such a program would be developed largely by the Okanagan. They proposed that the most effective way to begin the learning processes needed would be to hold an intensive retreat, that included opportunity for deep listening, role plays, and daily Elder reflection on learning. Some of the content of such a retreat would include history, residential school history, land claims, current justice issues, Okanagan tradition, titles of respect, philosophical differences between Western and Okanagan world views. Such a retreat would, as Mike observed, enable a necessary depth of engagement with questions and issues,

But to go into depth like we are saying in regards to a workshop process, and a training process would be great. You know, just to get a lot of questions asked. You know, because there is a lot of negativity out there on Indian land claims. A lot of negativity on the treaty process. A lot of negativity on everything. And it just impacts on everybody.
The outcomes of such an event would be a solid foundation of reference points upon which to develop further knowledge and more constructive relationships. To this retreat Aboriginal educators identified a systematic and on-going education process—“Indian 101” in Eric’s words. Many Aboriginal educators supported different mentors for non-Aboriginal school leaders as another way of building knowledge, understanding, and relationship: an Elder, a student and Elder, the Advocate.

Aboriginal educators were very clear on the significant role non-Aboriginal school leaders can play to improve communication, understanding, and relationships and educational opportunities for Okanagan children. Nathan spoke for many when he observed that

Administrators are key, especially in this district where they have traditionally operated in their own little worlds.

Lisa and Rose noted just how important overt and on-going support of Aboriginal issues is in schools. Without a concerted effort, initiatives lose ground and get mired, and the status quo overwhelms needed change. It must be a top priority for non-Aboriginal school leaders.

Aboriginal educators also noted that the frequent moving of administrators poses many challenges for improving things with the Okanagan. Just as expertise reaches a functional level, and respectful relationships are developed, administrators are moved—“musical administrators” as Nathan said.

Aboriginal educators gave some thought to the characteristics of an effective non-Aboriginal school leader. Mike talked about a respected principal who managed to meet students, parents, teachers, everyone at their own level, and yet everyone knew he was “the boss.” This principal connected well, and he respected students and parents. Rose considered
the previous principal at Beta as having embodied many of the characteristics of a successful school leader for the Okanagan. In her words,

M. What was it about his work that worked? About what he did?

R. Actually...I went to visit him over the summer. Course we’re always talking about the kids and we were talking about, I think we both agree that you have to be, I think [he] is a very gentle person. I think, but gentle doesn’t mean you are a push over. I think you can be gentle and you can be strong at the same time. And I agree with him, that you have to have boundaries. You can’t just walk over them [students] and demand that they do this and do that or whatever, you can do things in a positive way, but you need boundaries. If kids understand that, then they live within them. But I think being treated with respect is really important, for any kid.

Rose went on to say that children have to be the first priority for non-Aboriginal school leaders—not computers or paperwork or policies. Several Aboriginal educators repeated a now well established theme: non-Aboriginal school leaders need to “individualize” with every student.

Okanagan Responsive Education Processes

It is still a new concept to go to school, to go to a school like that [Beta]. To learn the things that we learn in that school. It’s not to say that we as a people never had our own learning system. There always was a learning system of how our people retained language, history, knowledge of all kinds of things, but it was a different system of passing knowledge from one generation to another. To go into a totally foreign school system to learn a totally foreign philosophy, to learn a totally foreign economic system and all of that.

Eric

Aboriginal educators directly, and by implication, spoke of the necessity of an education system of learning processes suited for the Okanagan community. As Eric observes above, there “always was a learning system” of how Okanagan people passed on

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87 Nathan’s words, previously quoted at the opening of this chapter are particularly pertinent here and I quote them again for convenience: “Because you know when you look at traditional beliefs and thoughts as an educator and you don’t place any value on those, that just cuts to the heart of education. Because, if you have a huge group of students who grew up with these beliefs and these traditions, and you don’t value that, and you come in as a White, middle class person, and you haven’t got a clue about their way of life, and you try to impose another system upon them. It seems to me that that is a certain recipe for failure."
important learning skills and knowledge from one generation to the next. What might such a learning system look like now?

The purposes and priorities of an Okanagan education need to be explored and established. Aboriginal educators supported a deliberative process in which the whole community would participate in determining purposes and priorities. Lisa tied this process directly to the need to define what “success” means for Okanagan students. Eric eloquently stated that there is a traditional education needed for Okanagan students, one that cannot be provided by the school system as it is currently organized:

The only place that he can find out who he is, is to go where he is from. Back to his people. Back to our own customs. Back to our own rituals and ceremonies and truths and understandings. Uhm. I think there is a place, looking back to what I just said earlier. The minute you admit, the school system admits that they cannot fulfill that part of ... of an Aboriginal student, the moment that statement is made the door is opened also. The door is opened at the same time. But the next step has to be, okay, now I’ve admitted this, then the door is open to: ‘Okay, what do we do? What can we do to accommodate for that Aboriginal child to get that. To get that part that he needs. And I think that if the educational system did that, and left it alone to the ones that can offer that to that student, and not get in the way of that. And that is where I see, the ones that are getting in the way, is sometimes our own people.

Eric also identifies here the necessity of a process that enables the Okanagan to openly engage each other on these issues. If the education system is to achieve ‘bi-cultural’ competency, a goal identified frequently by Aboriginal educators, then an educational process composed of Okanagan purposes, priorities, pedagogy, curriculum, and personnel is called for.

Every Aboriginal educator discussed the merits of having a band-operated school on the Reserve. This school would build on the success of the band operated pre-school. This school would enable a more culturally responsive and appropriate curriculum for Okanagan students, inclusive of Okanagan language, culture, history, and tradition. This school would

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*I place “success” in quotation marks in order to indicate that the meaning of the term must be held in suspension until defined by Okanagan families and students.*
increase the parents’ and the community’s involvement in education. This school would
decrease the amount of time children wasted riding a bus to and from school. This school
would enable the hiring of Aboriginal educators and educational leaders. Students of this
school would do much better in all areas of their learning. In Eric’s words,

There are now some samples of where there are Native schools that can still produce
the right amount of knowledge to have those kids write them provincial tests and pass,
and pass well. Not just a passing grade but excel in those things: Math and English and
whatnot. But it is because they’ve come to know who they are and value that about
themselves.

In short, control and self-determination would at last be possible to the degree aspired to by
some Okanagan members. What is dreamed possible for students in such a school is not
different than what Aboriginal educators proposed for Okanagan students even without a
Reserve school.

Sarah made a case for an Okanagan curriculum with or without a Reserve school. She
said:

I think that students need to start with the reality that our ancestors have been here for
tens of thousands of years, that we are not going away, and that they need to know our
own history. They don’t. Most people don’t because it’s not written, and what little is
written, may or may not be correct. So we need to know that. And they need to learn
how to question everything. Not just accept. Don’t even accept what I am saying.
Question it. Check it out. And they need to develop that ability to critically analyze
whatever is going on. That isn’t encouraged until they reach college, and most of our
kids aren’t reaching college. I think they need to have the skill to be able to say no to
whatever, and they need to have clear goals set really early on, again which most of
them don’t. I think that if all of our young women had a strong sense of who they are,
they wouldn’t be pregnant at 18, or younger. They would be doing all the things they
want to do when they are a little older, they’re wanting to travel and do this and do
that, meanwhile some of them have one child or two. I think those skills, the basic life
skills are missing because their parents didn’t have them, so how can a parent teach a
child, when they don’t have those same skills. I don’t think we can separate those
students from their parents. We have to work with the parents and invest in the
parents, and we haven’t always agreed on that within our district.

Sarah is particularly pointed in this curriculum: history, critical thinking, agency—an ability
to assert oneself, life-goals/purposes, and basic life skills. And as mentioned above, Sarah
insists that an effective education process for Okanagan students will include parents.
Six Themes of an Okanagan-Responsive Education Process

Sarah's list in effect summarizes some of the key themes and ideas that Aboriginal educators were at pains to have me understand. Other Aboriginal educators gave slightly different lists. When I consider these, Eric's recollection of traditional educational processes, the interests which drive the desire for an Okanagan operated school, and then include the many relevant issues Aboriginal educators expressed in our conversations, six major themes emerge that I think help organize the critical components of an Okanagan-responsive education process. These themes are: Okanagan Traditions, Healing Journey, Anti-Oppression, Educating out of Poverty, Bicultural Navigation, and Success in the Western Education and Western Society.

The first theme, Okanagan Traditions, is suggested by Sarah's reference to "history". It spans a wide area of knowledge, skills, attitudes and would include Okanagan history, culture, language, and traditions.

The second area, the Healing Journey, is suggested by Sarah's reference to agency, life-goals, and basic life skills. The "Healing Journey" includes those processes that enable individuals to develop agency, self-worth, and personal wholeness when growing up in situations marked by poverty, or violence, or substance addiction—the inter-generational consequences of residential school, systemic racism, and oppression. The "Healing Journey" also includes the teachings and world view of the Medicine Wheel, calling for a holistic balance of mind, body, heart, and spirit.

The third theme, "Anti-Oppression" education, is introduced by Sarah's suggestion of questioning and critical thinking. It brings together the educational processes that enable the Okanagan to effectively push back against historic, systemic racism and oppression. It includes the processes that create the capacity for non-Okanagan people, particularly those
living in Okanagan territory, to welcome the assertion of Okanagan identity and Okanagan self-determination.

The fourth theme, “Educating out of Poverty,” addresses the influence of economic hardship on student capacity to learn. Aboriginal educators talked about the heavy impact that poverty had on their own lives, as well as on the lives of some of the students and families that they work with. There is a great deal of educational research that addresses education for children in situations of poverty and economic hardship that could be drawn on here.

The fifth theme, “Bicultural Navigation,” speaks to the challenge of living and learning in two different “worlds.” All Aboriginal educators talked about the importance of Okanagan students to be able to succeed outside the Reserve, and to be strong in their Okanagan identity. However, they also made apparent that this is very challenging and can be very confusing for students. Eric noted that in the past, to become “successful” in the school system required becoming an “apple”—red on the outside and white on the inside. An Okanagan specific education program would include knowledge and skills on navigating this difficult dual culture capacity/identity terrain.

The sixth theme, “Success in Western Education and Western Society,” acknowledges the importance for Okanagan students to make their way in mainstream Canadian society and in the global economy. This theme articulates the clearly stated desire that Okanagan students be able to access post-secondary education more successfully, and thus, that elementary and secondary school educational processes, honed for such preparation, work more effectively. Most Aboriginal educators who spoke of a Band operated school, did not want an Okanagan-only, segregated school. “Mingling” was a new
term to me that was used to represent students interacting with mainstream, multicultural, Canadian society.

These six themes are interdependent. They interact with each other. For example, Aboriginal educators were clear that increasing a student’s knowledge of Okanagan culture, would increase the student’s sense of self-worth, and make it easier to withstand racism from others, and result in greater learning potential in the public school.

The outcomes of an Okanagan-responsive education process would include:

- pride in being Okanagan, improved motivation for learning, stronger academic capability,
- greater opportunity for post-secondary education, increased economic opportunity (on and off-Reserve), increased social mobility (on and off-Reserve), improved Okanagan identity, stronger and healthier community, an improved balance between Okanagan values and mainstream Canadian values, and a greater degree of personal wholeness as symbolized by the Medicine Wheel’s balance of Mind, Body, Heart, and Spirit. Aboriginal educators also identified that an outcome of a successful education system in Okanagan territory will create respectful ‘space’ for Okanagan people/Okanagan identity in the non-Aboriginal Canadian community that dwells in Okanagan territory.

**Classroom Discoveries**

There were several classroom ‘discoveries’ that Aboriginal educators felt it important for non-Aboriginal school leaders to understand. Learning Assistance (LA) is viewed with significant suspicion. Aboriginal educators question the judgments that placed students in LA, and they were very concerned by the long term effects of LA on Okanagan students’ participation in core curriculum. It was noted by elementary Aboriginal educators that in-class support seemed to be an improvement over the pull out approach previously used. Several Aboriginal educators noted that expulsions from school have extremely negative long
term effects on the individual and on the community. These students will be connected with
the Reserve community their whole lives—a major blow to a small community. Finding
other approaches of restitution were recommended.\(^{89}\) It was noted by secondary Aboriginal
educators that multi-dimensional final exams that include community members and Elders
were highly motivating for Okanagan students and resulted in stronger engagement and
achievement. It was also noted by secondary Aboriginal educators that classroom
presentations by Okanagan members and Elders were very important to students. Much of
the knowledge regarding Okanagan history, culture and tradition resides in people, not in
texts, so that the inclusion of Okanagan Band members in classroom instruction was essential
if this knowledge was to be meaningfully included.

**Beyond the Classroom**

Three education ‘system’ issues emerged out of the 20 conversations I had with
Aboriginal educators. First, that the Okanagan community needed to increase its capacity to
support learning, to become a learning community. Second, that Aboriginal educators must
be hired. And third, that effective, long term planning is essential for improving the
educational processes for the Okanagan, but it is difficult.

Aboriginal educators were never satisfied with analyses that just focused on the
individual student. Aboriginal educators constantly expanded our conversation to include the
student’s family, and the student’s community. I gathered from this the simple truth that
improvement of student learning requires the improvement of family and community
learning. There is deep commitment to learning in the Okanagan community and in parents. I

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\(^{89}\) "I think that one thing that bothers a lot of parents, and again it’s not just Aboriginal parents, is this idea,
kicking people out. When you work in the Native community, generally speaking, you have to work on an
inclusion model, not an exclusion model and that’s the difference" (Nathan).
listened to the many ways that learning and teaching are enacted in the community outside of formal education institutions. When taken together, the numerous references to Elder mentorship and teaching, to parents’ supporting learning, to developing Okanagan specific curriculum, to student’s increased learning energy, to building and operating a set of schools, to the connectedness of students to their families, to the profound, yet troubled, Okanagan identity issues, to the aspirations for students and for education, to the intense frustrations with learning processes experienced by Okanagan people, to the many other historical and cultural issues already stated in this chapter, all indicate the significance of the Okanagan community understanding itself as a learning community. Thus, student “success” needs to be understood as, in part, an outcome directly connected to the community’s own success as a learning organization. School district initiatives that support the Okanagan community in its efforts to increase its learning capacity, will, from this perspective, improve student “success.”

The perception that there is a negative inclination in the district to hire Aboriginal teachers was established above. The significance of this is heightened insofar as Aboriginal educators unanimously expressed the importance of hiring Aboriginal teachers. Rose observed,

That is why you need First Nations people in the system as teachers. Because Advocates really don’t have a voice, you know. They aren’t heard in the school system. So you need a degree and you need to be a teacher to make a difference in that system.

Rita argued that hiring Aboriginal teachers would constitute the single most powerful intervention for positive change in the school district. Aboriginal educators talked about

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90 The term learning community has become a technical term indicating a set of formalized principles, structures, and processes that enable a community or organization to learn, and to further develop its capacity to learn.
proportional representation. If 7.6% of students in the school district are Aboriginal, even just seeking a proportional mirroring of 5% of the teacher population, would result in having in the district 27 teachers, given the 535 FTE of the district.\textsuperscript{91} Others expressed the need for Aboriginal people working in all aspects of the school system. In Matt's words,

I think there needs to be more Aboriginals hired within the district. I think there need to be Aboriginal secretaries, there need to be Aboriginal custodians, there need to be Aboriginal teachers and administrators. I think we need the role models. I think when you have that, that's how you can effect some of the changes. But that is going to be very difficult for this district.

The rationale Aboriginal educators offered to justify the hiring of Aboriginal educators often came down to the two reasons mentioned by Rose and Matt: the ability to make a real difference, and the power of role modeling\textsuperscript{92} for Aboriginal students.

When Aboriginal educators discussed the importance of long term planning, they noted several impediments: inconsistency of school leadership—the movement of principals; and inconsistency of Band governance—the change of Council every two years. They commented on the sometimes polarizing nature of Band Council changes that seem to stymie long term goal setting and attainment. Eric also expressed a concern about how parents and Council members might inform each other of educational concerns and initiatives, or build a longer term planning process. Aboriginal educators noted that one of the positive outcomes of building a school on Reserve would be the necessity of developing longer term planning capacity around educational issues.

\textsuperscript{91} 2001 figures (BC Ministry of Education, 2006).
\textsuperscript{92} "And that is always why we want to push for Aboriginal teachers, so the ones coming up can say, 'Oh I can be a teacher too. And not only that, I could be a respected teacher'—as a position that is respected in the community and respected by other professionals" (Nathan).
Change Process

Aboriginal educators noted a few simple, but powerful principles that had guided successful educational innovations in schools. First, discuss, plan, and do changes inclusively, with Okanagan People. Second, have an Okanagan mentor who can act as a wise guide. Third, never give up though the criticism is intense and the route more circuitous than expected. Fourth, active support and leadership from those in positions of authority is necessary.

Section 2
Relationships

Aboriginal educators talked a lot about relationships between Okanagan students, parents, community and non-Aboriginal school leaders. They told the histories of negative relations that were introduced in the previous section, and they told the stories of positive relations that made a significant difference for all concerned. They were helpfully analytic about the sorts of relationships that are needed, about the principles that should guide the creation of such relationships, and about processes that, in their experience, nurtured positive relationships.

It is a given that non-Aboriginal school leaders and Okanagan students, families, and community are in relation. Unfortunately, the default relationship, before non-Aboriginal school leaders and Okanagan people have even met, is not a neutral one. The history of colonization, oppression, racism, residential school, and public school experiences incline many Okanagan people toward suspicion and resistance as defensive postures. Non-Aboriginal school leaders, for their part, come to the table with power relations, cultural assumptions, and attachments to Canada’s colonial history, that block the development of egalitarian, reciprocal relations. Thus, non-Aboriginal school leaders and Okanagan people
must actively define and work for a different set of relations. In Eric’s account of the letter to Wilfred Laurier by the Okanagan, Shuswap, and Thompson Chiefs, Eric noted that the Chiefs proposed a partnership with the new settlers—a partnership of equals that would allow them to live together “as one people.” This section is about how Aboriginal educators thought such an overarching relation as ‘a partnership of equals’ might be achieved.

**Challenges**

The previous Understanding section expressed the context vividly and why the formation of positive relations might be difficult. Aboriginal educators talked about the tendency of Okanagan people to perceive that the school personnel were likely to be in collusion with one another, should there be an issue. Suspicion, distrust, and lack of faith that the schools will do what is in an Okanagan student’s best interest, or the best interest of family and community, are strong blocks to the formation of positive relations. These feelings have been compounded by experiences, shared amongst each other by community members, where schools did not listen to, or did not act on, student and family concerns. Aboriginal educators also talked about the feelings of powerlessness and discomfort associated with being in schools, akin to going into a police station or courthouse, expecting to be found guilty of something one didn’t do. Add to this student and parent anticipations of disrespect and misunderstanding, and one has a clear set of challenges: build up trust, credibility, and comfort with the Okanagan people. Another set of challenges emerges when one considers the structure of non-Aboriginal school leaders’ work lives. Schools are busy places, and even working fifty and sixty hour weeks still leaves little time for non-Aboriginal school leaders to build relationships beyond the school. However, time is absolutely crucial to developing positive relations that counteract the ‘default’ relation. And then, to compound this problem, when non-Aboriginal school leaders have put in the time, usually across several
years, they are moved to another school. Aboriginal educators identified leader (dis)continuity as a significant challenge. A third set of challenges was identified in our discussion of the Advocate position in the previous section. Those Okanagan people who work in the school system, sometimes have family connections that are problematic for some students. In these cases animosities that have nothing to do with the school specifically, but have to do with strong divisions within the community, negatively influence the sorts of relations that can be formed with schools, given that these Okanagan personnel are often expected to be the primary ‘medium’ of relation between school and community.

Relationships Aboriginal Educators Seek

Time and again Aboriginal educators identified two sorts of relationships that were critical for non-Aboriginal school leaders and Okanagan students, parents, and community. These were relationships of respect and trust.

Nathan went at the theme of respect again and again throughout both our conversations. At one level respect is about acknowledging different beliefs, different ways of thinking, different assumptions, and different aspirations; this is typical in cross-cultural settings. He says,

I think that [respect] is certainly the crux of the whole thing [italics added]. If we have qualified people we need to respect where they are coming from. They may have different insights on things than we do. That’s always so important in dealing with other cultures I think [italics added]. We can’t just put it down as being—and I think that everybody is kind of guilty of this—as just a boogey man, or a mythical thing or a philosophical thing….We really don’t know enough about the universe and all its mysteries and so on and so forth that we can just push that aside and not respect what you know. That that person believes it, why not respect it. Because everyone is an individual. Your beliefs and my beliefs may never jive.

Respect, as exemplified here, is an openness to the other’s knowledge, thinking processes, and beliefs, and a recognition of their right to hold such different points of view. Lisa noted that at another level respect values the other person, honours the other’s inherent dignity and
integrity, and regards the other with deference. Lisa talked about the importance of a relation of respect for students:

I have a lot of respect for the students in the class, and I think that is a part of the whole process of being [successful], I think I am being successful in the school, it is because I have respect for the students, and I think it is returned as well.

M. What does respect look like?

I don't know if you can actually see what respect looks like. I think it is sometimes unseen. Respect. But it is just between people. Respect is treating an individual with dignity, with integrity. If someone tells you something, then you believe them. If they ask you to do something for them, then you follow through with it. Being respectful in front of the class, introducing cultural teachers, showing the respect that you have for them. What does that look like? That is a really hard question.

She elaborated on several examples of respect with students and with Elders. We summed up her thinking with these words:

L. I don’t think I have answered your question.

M. Ya you have. Because it is contextual. Being respectful is very contextual at times. Being silent at certain points. Paying attention. Paying close attention to a person. Listening deeply. Honouring the person with your openness. Communicating that openness.

L. Recognizing the person for their knowledge and who they are.

From Lisa’s words, respect in the context of working with Aboriginal students is a way of being with, a function of the Heart and the Spirit, just as it is also a function of the intellect as Nathan notes. Simply put, respect is honouring an Okanagan person for who he or she is, open to her or his knowledge, experiences, and beliefs. The dramatic importance of this relation against the stark backdrop of colonizing history, racism, anger, and suspicion is obvious—respect is an oasis in a desert.

Lisa included in her notion of respect, the idea of “believing someone when they tell you something.” Trust was equally critical to Aboriginal educators. When Aboriginal educators talked about trust, they meant it in the way that Lisa exemplifies above—trusting someone’s words. And they expanded it to mean confidence in someone to do what was
right. A non-Aboriginal school leader who was trusted was someone who could be counted on to consider and act for an Okanagan person’s best interests. Trust included a degree of knowing and being known by the other. As Nathan said,

So much depends upon your style as an administrator, and like I say, like you said, if people know you, trust you, then they feel a lot more comfortable in dealing with those problems [behaviors] and with those issues [suspensions] … if they know you are sincere.

Trust was inseparable from actions and was tied to notions of credibility. Sarah put this in context:

Parents need to know that what they have to say is important and they need to believe it, so we need to listen to them time and again. And then do something about it [italics added]. Because certainly our experience with government or decision makers is that they come and they ask for feedback, they ask questions, but then what’s done with it? It doesn’t look like anything’s done with it. And so we have a long history of that, and we’re looking back two hundred years. That’s been our experience so it’s hard for parents to believe the schools, the administrators when they say “we want to hear from you.” It’s really hard for them to believe it. So that’s a challenge: we have a lot of trust to develop and a lot of work to do in that area [italics added] within the school system.

Non-Aboriginal school leaders can build trust with Okanagan students, parents, and community by listening carefully, and then doing something about what is understood. Aboriginal educators also noted that strong, positive relationships with students become pathways to parents’ trust. Aboriginal educators frequently talked about building trust and respect at the same time, noting that both are essential relations in the context of attempting to improve communication, understanding, and relationships.

Aboriginal educators spoke of other qualities in relationships that they thought were essential to improving communication, understanding, and relationships. These included care, inclusion, and reciprocity. They spoke of relationships that increased agency of Okanagan people, such that power was shared sufficiently to enable non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators to become allies. One Aboriginal educator spoke of the
importance of authenticity in relationships. She told the story of working with non-Aboriginal educators who treated her as the exemplary Aboriginal, treating her as a category of experience rather than as a person in her own right. She noted these people were more interested in being politically correct than being open and authentic with her. Mike and Lisa both went on at length about the importance of availability for working relationships with Aboriginal students—relationships with Okanagan students required an availability beyond the confines of classroom walls and classroom hours. Resilience and tenacity were also identified as significant attributes of relationships between non-Aboriginal school leaders/non-Aboriginal educators and Okanagan people, if relationships were going to be strong enough to be capable of achieving shared goals. Sarah first emphasized the importance of humour to successful relationships. She and others noted that when Okanagan students and adults felt comfortable with a person, there would be much teasing, joke-making and laughter. Mike, as mentioned above, established the importance of relations that facilitated a sense of being “comfortable” for Okanagan people. When Okanagan are comfortable, when there is much laughter, when relationships are characterized by reciprocity, agency, authenticity, care, openness, trust, and respect, then will there be conditions for non-Aboriginal school leaders/non-Aboriginal educators and Okanagan to work well together.

Relationships of Note

Aboriginal educators told stories about relationships that made a significant difference. These ranged from the ‘parking lot’ relationships between Okanagan parents and primary teachers who intentionally went out to the parking lot to meet with parents daily, to remarkable encounters that enabled student engagement. Rose told the following story of a student who had had extreme difficulty in school all of his young life:
He was in here. He was on probation. He was in trouble all of the time, and he came here. Wasn't until maybe April or May that he started to work really hard...He came every day. He never missed a day. And I was telling [his relative], I said I bet this is the best attendance [he] has ever had in his life. And she said, 'yes it is.' And she said, 'Do you know what it is?' And I said, 'I don't know.' She says, 'You know what? When he comes in that door and you say 'Hello' and smile at him everyday. He says that's what he comes here for, cause he gets it everyday.'

Such a simple relation! A smile, an authentic greeting, Rose’s obvious care. Lisa’s story of the young man who became a classroom tutor, told above, is illustrative of another transformative relationship, built on respect, trust, and care. Matt talked about being included in a principal’s confidence on a difficult issue, and just how deeply affirming this trust and respect was of his own work, and, significantly, how this engendered Matt’s respect and trust for this principal. These stories, and many others, indicate the significance of positive relations with Okanagan students and parents.

**Nurturing Positive Relations**

From many anecdotes and examples, I have attempted to abstract guiding principles that might assist in nurturing positive relationships. First, that relations be accompanied by transformative understanding, such that those who grow in understanding of others, are changed at many levels by this understanding. Thus, not just intellectual, but empathic, physical, ethical, and organizational responses become possible. This is the “transformation of head and heart” called for if a preparation program of non-Aboriginal school leaders is to be worthwhile. The second principle is that relations be developed proactively, on positive terms, rather than being created in crisis situations. The third principle is a focus on “with” rather than “to” or “for.” Doing projects “with” Okanagan people, working “with” students to improve school processes, solving problems “with” Okanagan parents, students, and community—inclusion, mutuality, respect, trust, power sharing, and power generation all result. The fourth principle is that leaders model the relations they seek with Okanagan
people, and that they believe other non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators ought to develop with Okanagan people, and visa versa for Okanagan leaders. The fifth principle is that non-Aboriginal school leaders take seriously their capacity and unique opportunity to foster the conditions that will enable positive relations to flourish. An example of such a condition is expressed in the sixth and final principle, namely, that continuity be recognized as a fundamental condition of positive relation building—people need time to build social capital with each other.

**Processes for Positive Relations**

Aboriginal educators were very practical. They provided many examples of processes that facilitated positive relations between individuals. Several noted the value of Okanagan mentors, who had guided non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators through educational processes that had developed relations with the mentors even as they had developed the capacity in the non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators to have respectful and positive working relations with Okanagan people. A process of introduction to Okanagan community leaders and educators, sometimes via a mentor, but sometimes through school personnel, made it possible for non-Aboriginal school leaders and Okanagan People to begin building relationships. An intentional, positive connection with each Okanagan student, and through the student to the students’ family, was identified as an important approach for building relationships. Many Aboriginal educators talked about the absolute value of phoning parents, particularly about positive things.\(^93\) Some noted teachers who had a systematic approach to make sure that each Okanagan parent was phoned at least

\(^{93}\) Nathan's words exemplify the significance of this simple but taken for granted act: "The most important thing has got to be old ma bell over here. Pick up the phone. Talk to them, you know. And don't just talk to them when there is a problem. We always say that. (laughter). How many people actually do that?"
twice in a year. Finally, Aboriginal educators noted the value of dialogic encounters, in which Okanagan and non-Okanagan could be open to each other’s life situations in an authentic way.

The Aboriginal educators who were involved in the Beta Dialogue had strong recollections of its effective relation building process. Of that process Eric said,

We may have touched a few peoples’ lives in the sessions we did. But that’s only once at one school. Every principal and every change of staff need that. Every school needs that [italics added]. Every district needs that, that same kind of approach.

We have noted some of Lisa’s comments regarding the Elder session above, and it’s effects on the students who were involved.

Lisa, Emma, and Mike all talked about the importance of attending Okanagan funerals. Being a part of these events reflected their respect for the families involved, and helped to communicate their genuine concern and commitment. All Aboriginal educators, at one point or another, talked about the importance of doing projects together. “Projects” took various shapes: Sarah talked of a Mural project at Alpha, Lisa mentioned fundraising activities, and co-instructional classes (taught with an Okanagan person). One Aboriginal educator talked about field-trips. What all had in common was a shared goal with many different components that were divided up among participants and accomplished together. Finally, Mike expressed for many the simple fact that there need to be opportunities for relationships to form outside of the day-to-day roles and responsibilities of school. To this end he called for “fun” days:

Invite the school principals out for a fun-day. And meet the, you know all the teachers, invite them all out here [Reserve]. And let’s just have a Band, school district fun-day. Meet your principal, meet your child’s principal, meet your child’s administrator, and the advocates.

94 It was also valued for the depth and breadth of understanding developed among participants.

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Mike's notion of a "fun" day, a day of loose role-identities made flexible in an open situation, helpfully summarizes this sub-section on ways that Aboriginal educators suggested would form relationships. What is essential to all is the recognition that old patterns of relationships are difficult for Okanagan students and families, and that new approaches are necessary to enable authentic connections with individuals, families, and community.

Section 3

Communication

Aboriginal educators spoke about communication processes and structures frequently. They noted that Okanagan families did not seem to engage the communication methods used by the school very effectively, particularly newsletters and meetings. Mike said of newsletters:

"Cause a lot of it, again, goes back to the newsletter. We can fill every house in the Okanagan [Reserve] here with a newsletter and some of them probably will not get the information that is on there. "CAPP class." Well what does CAPP mean?"

Not only is the 'code' or acronym short hand (e.g., CAPP for Career and Personal Planning) used by school educators difficult to make sense of, the newsletter doesn't seem to inform and include parents in the way that is intended by schools.

Aboriginal educators had many perspectives on meetings. Few parents attend full PAC meetings and the like because meetings are dominated by a few (often non-Aboriginal), and other voices cannot be heard. Okanagan-specific meetings were seen as a positive step, but weren't without their problems. Some Aboriginal educators suggested that these meetings needed to be more structured. Aboriginal educators appreciated meetings being held on Reserve, to connect with people where they are comfortable and in a location that is convenient. Rose observed that, no matter how few people show up, these meetings symbolize a commitment to connection that is appreciated beyond those who attend. But
others said that meetings needed to be held in schools in order to familiarize parents with their children’s school. A couple of Aboriginal educators noted that some people are ‘triggered’ at meetings, and such confrontational events are difficult for everyone in attendance causing increased discomfort and lack of desire to return to a meeting. Sarah stated the situation bluntly:

M. You’ve been a part of many meetings with parents and with administrators and with leaders, when have you seen, what does it look like when it is respectful?

S. I’m just trying to think of one.

M. Oh dear.

S. I’m serious. There’s always been some edge, you know something.

M. Really?

S. And, there have been meetings at Okanagan Band when staff have gone out to meet with parents. When it’s really respectful, you will have people laughing, joking. With our community, if they are comfortable, they will start joking and teasing people, I guess. See. You haven’t seen that have you?

M. No.

S. (laughs) And they will, they’ll just say things, you know, silly things. And if we ever get to that point, that’s when they are going to really share. And I, I haven’t seen it. I’m sorry. I’ve probably been in a hundred meetings… [Once] I have seen it, when we were at [nearby mountain resort], when the kids were talking, and people were really listening to them.

The rarity of “respectful” meetings where Okanagan people are actually comfortable highlights a challenge to schools, which rely on meetings as an effective communication structure, and frequently as providing validation of successful working relations. Sarah’s emphasis on “really listening” helpfully emphasizes that meetings are experienced as ‘thin’ communication events where little of depth can be risked. Some Aboriginal educators noted that at times meetings just become dumping grounds, especially on First Nations staff, where blame and fault-finding get cycled around and around. Nathan observed that without clearly
articulated agendas, meetings may devolve into negative venting sessions. What is clear from all is that meetings must be carefully considered, with their limitations clearly understood.

Aboriginal educators talked about the formal positions in the Band and in the district which act as communication structures. They particularly brought attention to the Aboriginal Targeted Funding Committee (ATF), the Aboriginal Programs District Principal, and the Advocates. Generally speaking, Aboriginal educators appreciated the potential of each of these formal positions. The ATF was recognized as carrying forward Band initiatives, enabling some degree of self-determination vis-à-vis targeted funding. One educator was not pleased with the way members were appointed by the Band Council to the ATF, and noted that representatives had little formal connectivity with Okanagan parents. I got the sense from listening to Aboriginal educators that they were generally pleased with the position of district principal insofar as this position seemed to be able to communicate Aboriginal issues directly to the school district executive. Aboriginal educators disagreed with some perspectives that the Aboriginal principal had expressed, for example, with the proposed idea of introducing the Cree language into schools, when Okanagan language wasn’t yet available. The Advocate position we have discussed at length already, noting how it acts sometimes as the primary communication structure between home and school.

Ways to Improve Communication

Aboriginal educators had many recommendations for improving communication processes and structures. These recommendations included paying attention to: the quality of communication events, the timeliness of communication, the location of communication, important ways of extending communication, and a constant need to always be seeking new processes.
Quality of communication processes essentially included all of those issues that have emerged through our explication of their perspectives on improving understanding and relationships: opportunity, availability, frequency, welcoming, openness, respectful, attention to biases, and “two-way” or dialogical. After listening to Lisa and Mike emphasize repeatedly the necessity of non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators and all who work with Aboriginal youth to be available for communication with Okanagan students and families on an almost 24 hours a day, seven days a week basis, I developed the term “hyperavailability” as a way of representing this extra-effort. What they, and others, impressed on me is that, in this context where voices have been marginalized and silenced, the need to be “hyperavailable” is necessary if shy, but urgent attempts at communication are to be heard and responded to.\textsuperscript{95} Calls for attention to opportunity, increased frequency, and openness\textsuperscript{96} (listening deeply and understanding fully before judging or acting) all share this basic context and rationale. We have addressed the importance of respect and of attending to biases above. They are essential aspects of being “open” to hear, and understand, and connect. For example, Lisa observed how the assumption that Okanagan parents don’t care about their children’s education, makes it seem reasonable for non-Aboriginal educators and non-Aboriginal school leaders not to contact parents—a simple assumption that blocks the possibility of communication.

The two-way nature of communication came up through Aboriginal educators’ frequent use of the word dialogue, and their descriptions of situations in which Okanagan and non-Okanagan were able to work together, gain mutual understanding, and communicate

\textsuperscript{95} I understand this as a principle to guide an individual, but also as a principle for a school—is it structured to be “hyperavailable” for communications with Okanagan students, parents, and community?
\textsuperscript{96} “It’s a matter of being a good listener and recognizing that you are there to learn, and don’t be peddling your own agenda” (Nathan).
respectfully. It was exemplified in descriptions of egalitarian power relations, where Okanagan people were on a level with non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators, and could speak their truths as well as hear the truths of non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators. Oddly, I have come to appreciate the Aboriginal educators' emphasis on the phone, as a significant example of two-way communication.

Inclined as I am to prefer face to face conversation for dialogue, there is a certain degree of safety permitted by the phone at the same time that it permits an important back and forth as meanings are communicated and confirmed. This, however, is to be distinguished from phone calls that are merely monologic communications: “I have suspended your child for one week. Be sure he doesn’t get on the bus.”

Aboriginal educators noted that timing was a critical part of communication. As previously established, not being included early on in a problem situation is distressing. Receiving a call informing one of one’s child’s suspension without preliminary inclusion in the problem solving process is disrespectful and harmful of relations. Aboriginal educators talked about the importance of proactive communication, about communication regarding positives, and about inclusive communications in urgent situations. Aboriginal educators also discussed the importance of enabling communication with parents, families and non-Aboriginal educators when children are youngest (Kindergarten and primary)⁹⁷, as well as enabling communication with parents, families and non-Aboriginal educators during important transition times for children (primary into intermediate; elementary into secondary school).

⁹⁷ “Because those primary teachers are almost training the parents, and the parents are training the teachers (somewhat) and that is easier for them [than] when their kids are older.” (Sarah).
Aboriginal educators at many points talked about the significance of location for communication. These discussions were often framed by recognizing the ‘discomfort’ and loss of agency that some Okanagan people experienced in school spaces. Aboriginal educators recommended not meeting parents in the principal’s office. They suggested defining an Aboriginal or Okanagan specific space/room in a school that could act as an ‘embassy’ for Elders and families when they come to schools. Aboriginal educators emphasized the importance of non-Aboriginal school leaders meeting parents and Okanagan people directly on the Reserve, or even just away from the school. In Sarah’s words, “in order for really good conversations to happen, you need to get out of the school.” Sarah proposed that arranging for “tea” with four or five parents around a kitchen table would be an optimal communication venue. Clearly, attention to time and place matters a great deal.

Aboriginal educators talked about specific processes for communication. All agreed that direct and frequent parent-teacher interaction was extremely important and preferred to mediated communication. From Rose’s point of view, meetings don’t need to be a problem, they just need to be structured carefully. She suggested they be short, tightly structured, and frequent, with agenda and minutes posted. Many Aboriginal educators supported the idea, started early in one of our conversations, of collaborative projects that enable ‘thick’ rather than ‘thin’ communication environments, that is, situations where meaning is shared on a variety of levels—task-specific, social, personal—and there is opportunity for topics to emerge spontaneously. Projects discussed covered a broad range from collaboratively investigating and piloting a restorative justice approach at Alpha, to experiential learning situations like a shared canoe journey with Elders down Okanagan lake, to collaboratively

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98 Aboriginal educators associated with Alpha noted that there were increasing numbers of parents who seemed to be okay with coming into Alpha to meet.

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planning grade eight parent-teacher meetings on the Reserve, to collaboratively setting and achieving literacy goals for grade three students, and there were many others. Aboriginal educators also were highly supportive of an annual conference. They perceived this as providing opportunity for communication about knowledge and meanings that currently cannot be expressed or engaged. They also were very supportive of the continuity of knowledge construction and reflection such a conference would provide. Several suggested, at different times, the importance of structured learning events (like Okanagan history for non-Aboriginal educators) as providing a formal, open venue for significant communication. The Beta Dialogue exemplified this.

What is apparent, after considering Aboriginal educators analyses and suggested ways of improving communication, is that new communication processes are needed, that old forms should be carefully reconsidered, and that with openness and respect the collaboration necessary to undertake these processes is possible. We are also in a position to identify some helpful guiding principles for these processes. Improved communication will enable increasingly sophisticated understanding of Okanagan educational aspirations and realities and of school operations and realities. Improved communication will enable increasingly respectful and trusting relations, with Okanagan people experiencing these relations as decolonizing and empowering, and school personnel experiencing these relations as productive and helpful. We should be cautious of communication processes that simplify understanding or have a deleterious effect on relationships. We should expect that there will need to be many sorts of communication processes, because some will work for some people, but not for others. Finally, we should ensure that Okanagan voices and school voices can be respectfully heard, respectfully understood, and respectfully responded to.
CHAPTER 7

Non-Aboriginal School Leaders’ Perspectives

Conversations with Non-Aboriginal School Leaders and Educators

In this chapter I present major themes collected from 15 conversations conducted with four non-Aboriginal school leaders and four non-Aboriginal educators who worked at Alpha and Beta. The chapter focuses primarily on the perspectives of the four administrators interviewed, using the other non-Aboriginal educators’ points of view for triangulation of ideas and for background. Hearing the perspectives of these educators and representing their voices in a manner congruent with their meanings and their concerns also posed significant challenges for me. When one has walked the same hallways, shared the same concerns, worked through shared problems together, I think it is easy to assume one knows what the other means. Consequently, I found that I had to remind myself more often than with other participants to suspend my quick judgments of meaning, and to seek out nuances and differences that distinguished their voices from my own expectations of what they were saying. Again, the process of going through the transcripts frequently and checking back with participants to be sure I had understood their meanings helped immensely.

Jim had been principal at Alpha for three years. He began his teaching career in the school district at Alpha 30 years previously, before going on to other schools. He retired the week following our first interview. John had been principal at Beta for five years at the time of our first conversation. He also moved on at year’s end to begin a principalship at another school, where he was working at the time of our second conversation. Philip had been a vice-principal for three years prior to his appointment at Alpha, where he was completing his first year as vice-principal at the time of our first conversation. Steven had also been a vice-principal for three years prior to his appointment at Beta. He was just beginning his second
year at Beta at the time of our first conversation. Both principals were veteran administrators and had a great deal of experience working with the Okanagan. The vice-principals were freshly into their administrative careers, and both were reflecting on their first year working with Okanagan students, parents, and community.

Zoe and Mick had been at Beta for 30 years respectively. Zoe held a variety of teaching, administrative, and learning and behavior support positions in that time. Mick was counselor. Their historical perspective provides important depth and background. Charmaine worked as a counselor at Beta for 18 years prior to our conversation. Maggie had been a teacher at Beta over seven years at the time of our conversation, and was professional development coordinator. All four provide an important “insider’s view” of Beta’s work with Okanagan students, parents, and community.99

All of the non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators that I met with were very concerned about Okanagan students and finding ways to improve their educational “success” at Alpha and Beta. They were aware of the disproportionately low graduation rates, of the high incidence of drop outs, of low academic achievement, of the high number of discipline incidents including suspensions, and of student-school ‘disconnect.’ They were very concerned about incidents of “racism” at school. They struggled with ways and means to involve parents more fully in school processes. Many expressed “frustration” with these challenges as they seemed unable to make substantive and lasting headway with them. Those with experience going back decades at Alpha and Beta expressed dismay with the little progress for Okanagan students across thirty years. All were supportive of this study’s

99 Although all participants have been given pseudonyms, it is virtually impossible to mask their identities from those who know these schools. Consequently, wherever confidentiality is absolutely necessary, I will simply state that a given perspective arose in my conversations without identifying with whom. Please note that what is included in this dissertation also met with each participant’s approval.
assumption that improving communication, understanding, and relationships would make a significant difference.

The four administrators were surprisingly insistent about the importance of relationships with Okanagan students, parents, and community. For this reason, this chapter presents their perspectives on relationships ahead of understanding followed by the final section on communication.

**Relationships**

Philip expressed for all the importance of relationships when he said forming relationships with Okanagan parents would be “huge!” Both Steven and John expressed openly that they are relationship oriented, and that attending to relationships was their primary concern.\(^{100}\) Jim directly correlated “connection” with “success”:

> I think that we have to continue looking at ways and finding ways to be able to make those connections because I know that anytime I can connect with an adult or a kid, that that kid will have success, and that family will have success. But, and I can come into this school and I can tell which ones that they are. I can come into this school here [Beta].\(^{101}\) In the last three years I can tell you which kids will be successful, which kids might drop out because I didn’t make a connection. Somebody didn’t make a connection with them or their families. And that’s why I talk about the anger in those young boys, and that’s why those young boys are the ones that are troubling me the most in terms of those connections.

Jim observed a process in which grade six and seven Okanagan boys disconnected from Alpha and became increasingly “angry.” With Jim, all non-Aboriginal school leaders recognized the primary importance of connecting with Okanagan students, that through positive relationships with students one had the potential to have positive relations with parents.

\(^{100}\) John was somewhat critical of his relationship orientation in our second conversation, noting that his focus on creating positive relationships must eventually lead to and include high expectations of students.

\(^{101}\) Although Jim was principal at Alpha, we met at Beta for our second conversation.
Sorts of Relationships

Jim’s use of the words “connection” and “connect” indicates a unique relation between student and CEA, or student and teacher, or student and non-Aboriginal school leaders, or student and school that is more potential than it is one sort of relation or another. I have come to understand the connection he is referring to as the ‘stem cell’ of other relations. This connection could be observed as being respectful, caring, teasing, honouring, challenging, identifying, or any one of a hundred sorts of positive relations—it is nascently all of these. The counselors spoke of Okanagan students as only rarely making such a connection with them—relative to their experience with non-Okanagan students. Non-Aboriginal school leaders were acutely aware, as Jim above, when students did not “connect.” Steven agonized about his relationship with one student, just when he thought a connection with the school was building:

There’s this one boy who’s just kind of at the crux of all this for me and I can’t, and I’m not trying to figure it out I guess, but I can’t reach him in any way shape or form.... I felt like we got him to a place last Friday where, okay now he’s going to come, he’s going to get some work done. And now if I’ve totally turned him off by whatever I said he’s going to just come and sit and do nothing like he has been for quite some time. When I can’t find something that works for a student, I find it very frustrating.

John told the story of one Okanagan young man with whom he had a most difficult relation throughout his years at Beta who stopped him on the street to catch John up on how he was doing—a connection that took years to forge but which surprised John by its strength and authenticity. Generally, this “connection” seemed to be typified by an ease of interaction, trust, a sense of care, identification with the other in some degree, respect, authenticity, and an openness.

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102 Laurie noted just such a connection, as John had been her principal throughout her high school years.
Non-Aboriginal school leaders spoke directly about the importance of relations of trust, respect, and partnership. All of the administrators spoke at length about trust, the high degree of mistrust, the difficulties they experienced building or earning trust with the Okanagan, how quickly trust was lost if something went wrong. Steven observed:

S. I think trust is a huge thing here. I think there is a lot of mistrust.

M. So what is your approach to that?

S. Be genuine. Be caring. Be interested. And like I say building that relationship so that you can have some trust. But it just seems like even the smallest thing severs back the trust a lot.

One approach to build trust was to be as transparent as possible with school processes. As John says while describing Beta-Okanagan Parent meetings held on the reserve,

We shared any information about our school that we could. Anything they asked we answered. It was all there because I think that my belief was let’s demystify all this stuff. Let’s just make sure that if someone has a question, they feel they can get an answer. That may create a relationship of trust with the school system, which ultimately is our goal, or one of our goals.

Lack of trust was perceived by non-Aboriginal school leaders as a significant barrier to working together to support Okanagan students. When non-Aboriginal school leaders talked about how to build trust, as does Steven above, they talked in terms of personal relational qualities and they also talked about following through on commitments. A few expressed a desire for greater reliability regarding commitments for action made by Okanagan parents—that building trustworthiness was a mutual endeavour. The sort of relation that non-Aboriginal school leaders seemed to mean by their use of the term “trust” was a relation of positive expectation rather than of suspicion, a relation that expects a truthful revealing when asked, a relation of being able to count on the other to do what they say they will do. I noted that when non-Aboriginal school leaders talked about the trust issue they did not overtly identify that they would be perceived as trustworthy, as would the school system, if
Okanagan students, parents, and community were convinced that their best interests would be defended by non-Aboriginal school leaders and by school.

Non-Aboriginal school leaders also talked about the importance of respect though with less frequency than they spoke about trust. Steven noted that gaining the respect of students was central to his relationship-building approach but that it had been a much greater challenge to gain the “respect” of Okanagan students and a rapport with them than he had anticipated. It was apparent in our conversations that the “respect” Steven sought was a mutual regard essential to a friendly “rapport” rather than the hierarchical “respect” accorded to a drill sergeant, for example. Jim spent some time talking about the requisite to “give” Okanagan students “respect” rather than have a student “earn” a teacher’s respect first, and with some frustration he noted the challenge of changing the beliefs of teachers who were not inclined this way:

I mean I can talk until I’m blue in the face saying to a teacher, “You need to give respect. No one has to earn your respect, you need to give it.” I could say that a hundred times and if that teacher doesn’t believe that, if they have in their psyche that, “You have to earn my respect,” well then a kid will have to earn that person’s respect. I can’t change that. All I can say is, “I just give them my respect”. Why shouldn’t I? I mean, I don’t know where they’re coming from. Why do they have to earn my respect?....I can say all that, but it really comes down to modeling it. Hopefully they see that. “How can [Jim] have that talk with that rowdy, rotten, no-good kid? How can he have a civil conversation? How can he be told to f-off and he still keeps coming back? And why does he do that?” And I can say that, and I can model it, but unless they take it on, it won’t work.

Jim and Steven’s reflections on respect highlight a significant power relation orientation. Jim believes that respect is foundational for a teaching relation with Okanagan students and is dismayed by those who use respect as a reward, or manipulative device to have students conform to their standards of appropriate conduct. For Jim, finding teachers who deeply believe in giving “respect” is critical for schools, such as Alpha, that work with Aboriginal students in general, and Okanagan student in particular. Steven takes this orientation a step
further, recognizing the suspicion and mistrust some Okanagan students hold for Beta, he espouses the necessity of earning the respect of students. Taken together their positions reflect an orientation that I gathered from my conversations with all of the non-Aboriginal school leaders, namely that a reciprocal relation of respect was an ideal they sought and that attaining this ideal required recognizing students’ prevailing context and limited power.

I asked non-Aboriginal school leaders to identify what they considered to be most important for Okanagan families and community to know. They listed specific aspects of their respective schools (see below), but from a relational perspective, both of the principals had remarkably similar answers: the Okanagan need to understand that the education of Okanagan children must occur within a partnership relation. John said,

Then we can talk realistically about: How can we meet the expectations they’ve outlined and what, in turn, do we expect of parents to help us, so that we truly are partners in getting their kids through this system. It’s not us and them. It’s us.

John expresses here the reciprocal back and forth nature of a partnership, where both sides are poised to respond to the expectations and needs of the other to achieve their mutual goal. Jim used different words to represent the notion that together all—“it’s us”—sustain Okanagan students.

I want people to feel that we are all doing this together. It takes a village to raise a child. I believe this. I am not going to do this alone. We need to bring everyone together to raise a child. People should feel that they can approach me as an equal in this effort.

Jim expressed explicitly what John’s passage implies, that the Okanagan are equals in this effort. Partners are equals. They may have different roles or functions, but partners are equals. It was quite striking that both principals should make this claim as pointedly as they did. This was a relation that the non-Aboriginal school leaders clearly aspired to, but which,
in their opinion, was not yet, and which, they felt the Okanagan did not know was what non-Aboriginal school leaders sought.

Other relations strongly implied in my conversations with non-Aboriginal school leaders were a strong orientation to care and recognition of the need for a learning relation. When the non-Aboriginal school leaders told anecdotes about different students, such as Steven’s worry about the student who wasn’t connecting, or John’s connection on the street, or Jim’s driving a student to medical appointments, or Philip’s finding a balance of tutoring, transportation, homework assignments, and test scheduling that enabled an Okanagan boy to attain life-changing success in math, relations of care were evident. The importance of this sort of relation with students was further evinced by their frequent references to the times that they had such relations, and by how troubled they were when relations of care were in conflict with other demands of their roles, or were thwarted.

At various times, and in various ways all of the non-Aboriginal school leaders, non-administrators included, identified that they didn’t know enough about Okanagan aspirations for education, or Okanagan traditions, or just what would be the best way to communicate with, and involve, Okanagan families. And on each occasion that a non-Aboriginal school leader came to the brink of his ignorance, he expressed a need to learn (see also limits to understanding below). Jim said simply that if he had to do it over again, he would spend more time with Elders, and more time on the Reserve connecting with students, families, and community. This inclination to understand more suggests the possibility of, and the desire for, a learning relation—a willingness to connect with the other as a learner—open, interested, respectful. I believe that the non-Aboriginal school leaders’ expression of a desire for a ‘learning relation’ helps remind us that understanding is not simply an intellectual
process. It also suggests non-Aboriginal school leaders’ willingness to recognize the authority of the Okanagan, an important shift in power relations that is essential if the Okanagan are to believe non-Aboriginal school leaders’ call for a relation of ‘partnership.’

Building Relations

Non-Aboriginal school leaders identified several ways of building relations. They talked about the value of social events and informal contact for making positive personal connections. They identified shared projects as being a means for developing working relationships (see also communication below). Philip spoke of the importance of achieving success in a shared venture and then publicly acknowledging this success. In his view, each success, no matter the size, effectively sets the stage for the next project, further success and deeper trust, respect, and ability to achieve mutual ends. Steven spoke of the merits of having high school students take leadership in developing positive relations between Okanagan parents, community and the school. John and Jim identified the importance of having new non-Aboriginal school leaders introduced to the parent community and Okanagan education leaders, so that they begin their term already knowing, and known by, the Okanagan people they will serve and work with—a ‘networking’ introduction process. Jim, Charmaine, and Philip all proposed that it was critical to build positive relations with Okanagan families when their children first enter school. As I explored this idea with the other non-Aboriginal school leaders, it became evident that there are times when families are more inclined to connect with the school—primary, primary-intermediate transition, elementary-secondary transition, graduation preparation. All agreed that maximizing the relation building opportunities at these times could advance working relations.

Non-Aboriginal school leaders presented several attitudes, or ways of being, as vital to building relationships. A non-Aboriginal school leader should strive to be caring, actively
interested, trustworthy, respectful, humble, genuine. Other attitudes underlying their connection stories included being ‘opportunistic’ and a willingness to go beyond the usual duties of their role. I noted that sometimes non-Aboriginal school leaders took advantage of opportunities in a similar fashion to the way that teachers take advantage of teachable moments: when one appeared they would go as far as they could with it. Non-Aboriginal school leaders also talked about their efforts to make opportunities for relationship building—some successful, some not. From these conversations, I gather that it is very helpful for non-Aboriginal school leaders to be opportunistic, both in the sense of grabbing whatever opportunities present themselves, and in the sense of being very intentional about creating opportunities for connection.

On several occasions when memorable connections were made, it seemed to me that they came about because non-Aboriginal school leaders had gone beyond the bounds expected of their roles. The willingness to be ready to kick into what I have come to refer to as a “hyper” state of action, marked the events that facilitated these connections. For reasons that have been developed throughout this dissertation, the status quo has historically poorly served the majority of Okanagan students and families, and thus it makes sense that this extra energy, this ability to hyper-engage, has been fruitful and necessary.

Challenges

Non-Aboriginal school leaders mentioned several challenges to building relationships with Okanagan students, parents, and communities. Three major themes stand out: power relations, transience, and relation-building inclination and skill among staff.

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103 I also noted during my comparison of parent perspectives to non-Aboriginal school leaders perspectives, that there were opportunities presented that non-Aboriginal school leaders missed.

104 Hyper, with it’s etymological meanings of “over, beyond, above, or exceeding” (Sykes, 1986) represents the extra energy and resources given to meet needs as they arise. Examples include driving students home, meeting with parents on the reserve, organizing an Okanagan-directed professional development process, and so on.
Non-Aboriginal school leaders discussed several situations where power, its perception and its exercise, influenced relationship building potential. John discovered that if he pushed some Okanagan students directly he encountered direct “push back” or resistance. John observed that if he used his position of authority to coerce some sort of compliance with school rules or expectations, that students predictably resisted, with a longer term negative effect on working relations. In his words Okanagan students held a “show me, don’t tell me” attitude that responded well when he modeled what was expected. He discussed situations when Okanagan students were grouped together, where he had to learn ways to give students the control of the situation while still representing for them the need to be adhering to school rules. I remember well the challenge of ‘motivating’ Okanagan students grouped together across the street for a recess or lunch break, to make their way to class at break’s end.

Steven, after one year in the vice principal’s role, found it difficult to balance his desire to build relationships with his vice principal role requirements to “discipline.”

So coming in here and having to do the discipline thing which is, unfortunately, such a big part of the job, and at the same time build relationships, was much harder than I thought.

He found himself between some school staff who expected sharper boundaries and heavier consequences and students for whom he felt such an approach would exacerbate, rather than improve, behaviour. He observed that discipline events with Okanagan students often substantially eroded any sort of positive relation building he had managed. It was not that Steven was without a variety of strategies in this regard—he talked openly about restorative justice approaches, and his own experience with community talking/healing circles.105

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105 This dilemma merits significant attention for newly appointed non-Aboriginal school leaders: how to work with students’ misbehaviour in a manner that builds long term relationships with the student and with the family?
John noted that it was very challenging for him to connect with Okanagan parents and community members when people became "positional." There was an inherent inflexibility to these situations that chilled the possibility of developing the sorts of relations John aspired to develop (see communication section below). John also talked about the challenge to build relationships when an interaction had, for whatever reason, been politicized. Once political, John found the opportunities for authentic connection quite limited. He also observed that when the formal political apparatus of the band council became involved in school situations, he was aware of a political set of priorities being imposed on the situation, some of which he felt were at odds with the school’s priorities.

From Steven and John’s experiences and observations, and from those of the other non-Aboriginal school leaders in this study, it is apparent that when power (the assertion of power by non-Aboriginal school leaders or by Okanagan students, parents, or community leaders) comes to dominate a relational context, the potential for maintaining, much less building, other positive sorts of relations (respect, regard, trust, partnership) is challenged. In comparing John’s experience over time to Steven’s one year of experience with the same students, it is also apparent that the relational ‘capital’ and mutual understanding that John had built up was an important part of navigating the authority-student situations that their roles frequently put them in. Becoming aware of the power relations at play in a situation, and becoming aware of how implicit and explicit assertions of power are experienced, and becoming adept at working with others when in these situations, would seem essential to building positive relations, or at least, to avoiding the “severing” back of connection articulated by Steven.
Philip stated that the transient nature of the student body at Alpha and the job of administration made relationship building difficult. Alpha’s high transiency rate (60-70%)\textsuperscript{106} makes connecting with students and families difficult. He told the story of an Okanagan student and parent who were deeply involved in the school, and with whom he invested a lot of time, only to have them move away half way through the year. Philip also observed that the transient nature of administration posed a serious challenge. In the six years he had been in the district, Alpha had three principals and Philip was the second vice principal.

Finally, both Jim and John noted that teachers sometimes pose a challenge for connecting with students, parents, and community. As we quoted Jim above, some teachers’ demand for respect alienates children and families rather than connecting with them. John stated that in difficult situations some teachers had the skill set to enhance relationship building potential, while others did not. Developing these skill sets, and the values that underlie them, pose their own significant challenges for relationship building.

In summary, non-Aboriginal school leaders spoke about several significant challenges to relationship building with Okanagan students, parents, and community. These included power relation situations, the transiency of students and non-Aboriginal school leaders, and teachers who did not share the values or skill sets to build positive relationships with Okanagan students, parents, and community.

**Relationships—Summary**

The non-Aboriginal school leaders of this study placed a high priority on relationships with Okanagan students, parents, and community. The sorts of relations that they spoke about included the importance of “connection” for students and families with the

\textsuperscript{106} Jim identified that in 2003, the transiency rate at Alpha was between 60 and 70%. Philip noted that of the 30 students who wrote the grade 4 FSA (2000), only 10 were left to write the grade 7 FSA (2003).
school, and for non-Aboriginal school leaders with students, families, and community. Non-Aboriginal school leaders were very conscious of Okanagan distrust, and of the need for developing relations founded on trust. Non-Aboriginal school leaders spoke about the necessity of relations of respect, and of the importance and challenge of developing this in a staff. Non-Aboriginal school leaders returned again and again when they encountered their own ignorance to the need for a learning relation with Okanagan students, families, and community. Non-Aboriginal school leaders identified that they shared a partnership with Okanagan families and community in the educating of Okanagan children and youth. Non-Aboriginal school leaders identified many approaches for developing positive relations, including social events, informal contacts, shared projects, connecting during times of high parental interest in school (early years, transitions), and through student leadership. Non-Aboriginal school leaders also suggested that being caring, interested, trustworthy, respectful, humble, genuine—indeed being open to being in a positive relationship—were significant. Non-Aboriginal school leaders were opportunistic and intentional about creating opportunities for relationship building. Non-Aboriginal school leaders were also prepared to go above and beyond the typical roles of the job if something new were really to have an opportunity. Non-Aboriginal school leaders also expressed some significant challenges to relationship building: authority and resistance, discipline and relation building, “positionality” and politics, awareness of power relations, transiency of students and non-Aboriginal school leaders, and relation building skill sets and values in teaching staff.

**Understanding**

Saying hey, we think your child is wonderful! We want to help make them successful....What can we do? I have a boy in grade seven, an Okanagan boy, his math has come along so huge this year. He's part of the First Nations tutoring.... It's been excellent because what I've been able to do, is I know which days she's [the tutor] here and that's when I'll give him homework, because I know he'll have success
finishing it. He feels good the next day bringing it in. With a test, I’ll go up to him and say ‘Hey, do you want help after school with [the tutor] on this? And you can take it there but you have to bring it to me tomorrow.’ And him bringing back an Ace test. He feels good about that. Now if we could do that, and we’ve seen, and other teachers have seen real gains in this child and I credit it to him becoming involved in tutoring and also the communication between myself and the tutor and arranging when the work is done and coordinating that. Rather than setting him up, cause I know if he takes work home, it’s not going to get done because of what’s happening in his own family. It’s not going to get done so let’s set him up for success here.

Philip

In this section, I present major ideas or themes that non-Aboriginal school leaders expressed were important to understand in order to improve communication, understanding, working relationships, or to improve educational processes for Okanagan students. As exemplified by the anecdote above, throughout our conversations non-Aboriginal school leaders assumed that improved understanding would enable them to better serve Okanagan students and their families. Non-Aboriginal school leaders also assumed that if Okanagan students, parents, and community gained greater understanding of non-Aboriginal school leaders’ roles and of the schools they work in, Okanagan capacity to attain their respective educational goals would increase. The section is organized into two parts: challenges and recommendations.

Challenges

Zoe and Mick framed most poignantly the primary challenge expressed by non-Aboriginal school leaders when they noted that across their 30 years of working at Beta, the outcomes for Okanagan students had changed remarkably little. Okanagan students were still dropping out of school with greater frequency than other students, had higher participation rates in alternate programs than other student groups, were taking proportionately fewer academic courses, and were graduating at rates well below other students. 30 years! The span of a teacher’s full career. All non-Aboriginal school leaders understood their fundamental
challenge and number one goal as improving Okanagan student “success.” As they analyzed this challenge, many other challenges came to the fore as significant and having a bearing on the possibility of Okanagan student “success.”

“Success?”

Steven, Jim, and Philip all expressed a desire to know what “success” for the Okanagan might mean. They were conscious of cultural difference, and were aware in some degree that an education program that was successful from an Okanagan point of view, might be different than what they had in mind, or what schools were currently providing. Philip spoke about the importance of developing a clear “Vision” for Okanagan education, and the need for strong leadership on the part of the Okanagan to this end. Jim expressed the need to better understand what parents and community wished for their students. He waxed eloquently on what sort of school might result if parent and community wishes for children were clearly articulated. John professed an understanding of Okanagan aspirations and Okanagan ideas of “success.” He referenced directly the Beta Dialogue, and the aspirations for schools expressed by Elders and families at this time. Among other things, the dialogue confirmed that the Okanagan families participating wanted the best possible education for their children, an education that would enable them to attend post-secondary institutions—colleges and universities. It also identified for John the importance of Okanagan culture. This process of mutually clarifying an Okanagan meaning of educational “success” gave John greater confidence in his decision-making and leadership.

Parent involvement.

The out-of-the-ordinary nature of the Beta Dialogue process revealed another challenge non-Aboriginal school leaders identified. The usual informal and formal school processes for gaining understanding and getting feedback on school operations (processes
that might have given opportunity for confirming aspirations and notions of “success”) from parents did not work well with Okanagan families. Consequently, extra-ordinary approaches, like the Beta Dialogue, were necessary. Non-Aboriginal school leaders spoke about difficulties getting parents involved. For example, at Alpha an offered Parents as Literacy Support program (PALS) failed due to lack of participation, whereas the same program offered by a school one mile up the road, serving roughly the same socio-economic community was very successful. In their explanations of why parents did not get involved, they mentioned cultural differences, historical difficulties with schools, economic reasons, and the limiting effects of geographic distance—it’s a long way from the Reserve for parents to come in for meetings, or to help out in classroom settings during the day. All non-Aboriginal school leaders expressed the importance for students of getting families involved at Alpha and Beta, and getting them involved “early.” Philip articulated the significance of parent involvement for parent understanding, when he observed that his going out to the Reserve and “telling” parents and community what they need to understand about Alpha would not be the best use of time. Rather they need to “come and see” what is happening in schools to understand.

What can we do to get people into the school? Actively, meaningfully involved and to feel good about what they are doing and what they are seeing and to gradually spread a good message. That would be my main purpose and goal would be to get people into the school so they can see what’s happening and see the good things that are happening with all children in the school. And how it’s being done and that it is a safe, courteous, respectful environment and teachers do care sincerely about what’s happening. But to get them into the school.

Parent involvement develops understanding on both sides. From the point of view of non-Aboriginal school leaders, getting “people into the school” will make a significant difference for understanding.
Racism.

The most prominent theme raised by non-Aboriginal school leaders was the problem of racism. Non-Aboriginal school leaders discussed racism from many points of view. They talked about its presence in the community outside schools and within schools. They talked about incidents that became ‘racist’ incidents, and how they dealt with these. They talked about allegations of racism against school, teaching staff, and themselves, and how they dealt with these. They also considered the elements of what they thought might constitute a better response to racism. By all accounts, racism called for understanding.

Charmaine said at one point in our discussion of racism and discrimination against First Nations people that the school is merely a microcosm of its larger community, and that the community certainly manifested racial discrimination towards Aboriginal Peoples. John observed that discriminatory attitudes and prejudices in the community, in students, and in staff, were invisible until a crisis event would illuminate them.

I think there’s some prevalent attitudes within the community that are not always expressed, but every now and then there’s a flash point, and those things come out, [italics added] and I think they reveal the true spirit. And I think those are dinner table conversations that happen about native rights, land claims, all of those kinds of issues. Like ‘they’re [Aboriginal people] taking back from us without the recognition of what they’ve lost in the beginning.’ So, it’s like a reverse discrimination. ‘We can’t do that. That’s special treatment.’ Our students see it that way.

A troubling piece of John’s observation is his perception that these unspoken values are the “true spirit” of people’s orientation to First Nations. In a crisis, people reveal their core beliefs.107

John’s observation of reverse discrimination or “special treatment” was also expressed by Jim when we talked about dedicating space in Alpha as an Okanagan Elder/Family meeting room. He observed that he would experience resistance from staff if precious

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107 Recall Eric’s perception of the Oka crisis and what it revealed to him about the White people who had been his neighbours, and whom he had lived with all of his life.
resources, like a classroom, were used to provide a special arrangement for Okanagan families. Both John and Jim recognized that this defense of the status quo simply retains the marginalization of Okanagan learning rights. As John went on to say, this discriminatory assertion of the status quo is built into the foundational assumptions of the K-12 school system.

You said that we are all prejudiced, and one of the things that you had to do was to search for and to articulate your own prejudices. That’s an exercise that we don’t often undertake. I think that they’re deeply held within the system, within our teachers, so one of the things that struck me here was, one of things that we needed to recognize as a school system was that we had to look at how kids learn – all kids. So, if we found that there was a group of First Nations kids that learned in a significantly different manner, why wouldn’t we teach differently to those kids? But, because that group is First Nations, well hold on, they’re going to have to stand up to a standard expected by university. In other words, the unwritten white standard, so they’re going to have to do this. I think somehow the system is flawed that way.

As we proceeded in this conversation, John noted how distressing it was to think about the scope of change needed to surface and transform the deeply held prejudices against First Nations learners. Thus, the existence of racism in the community and in the very system that teachers and school leaders embody, poses two significant challenges for non-Aboriginal school leaders. The existence of discriminatory prejudices that would maintain the status quo inhibit the potential for authentic engagement of Okanagan educational issues. The second challenge is that these prejudices are often hidden, exist at the level of values and beliefs, and are difficult to engage. This challenge requires surfacing prejudices, understanding what they mean for Okanagan people, and engaging them in an open way. This second challenge is made doubly difficult by the loaded nature of a charge of racism. What educator would dare to acknowledge that they might hold racist views?

Allegations of racism.

Non-Aboriginal school leaders described occasions when they had been accused of being racist, or that a staff person was accused of being racist by an Okanagan student or
adult. All described their initial reaction as being “shocked,” “defensive,” “hurt,” “offended,” “surprised.” Jim candidly observed,

And I know that, having been called a racist by Aboriginal people, the defenses do go up. Because you don’t think of yourself as a racist. You don’t believe you are a racist. You have not, you’ve had your kids raised in a multicultural society. You’ve had many different kinds of children in your house and your home. And you’ve been to their family’s homes. And so you think, “I know my parents were racists. I know they would say racist things and they would make racist comments.” And my generation I don’t believe – we’ve changed that. Through our children, I believe, we have learned about other cultures and other places. So then when you get called on it, you think, “Jeese, you know, I’m the opposite. I am on your side. I’m supporting your culture. I’m supporting you as a person. I’m wanting the best for you, and you’re calling me racist.” And so the defenses come up big time. Right now.

Steven believed that the consequences of being labeled a racist for a teacher or administrator would be very damaging for career and for one’s ability to work with Okanagan students, indeed with all students for that matter. My perception of the non-Aboriginal school leaders themselves was that their visceral responses were not about defending their reputations so much as they were about not wanting to be a racist. Such a thing did not fit with whom they aspired to be or professed to be. That something that they believe or say or do might be experienced as racist by another person was therefore deeply troubling, and would result in a defensive posturing that spontaneously asserted, “I am not!” The defenses went up because it would be a major blow to their self-concept to be confirmed a racist. Furthermore, as exemplified by Jim above, it seemed to non-Aboriginal school leaders that they were doing everything they knew how not to be racist. According to this view, a charge of racism just didn’t take into account everything else they were doing that they believed proved otherwise. As I listened to them work through these situations, I believe this analysis was confirmed by how they moved beyond their defensive reactions—they expressed the need to face the situation directly, understand what was experienced by the other person as racist, and problem solve what must be done to ameliorate one’s behaviour. In Steven’s words:
I think you have to sit down and talk face to face with people that are feeling [that one has been racist]. For me, I would just hate to think that anybody is unhappy. I'm just the kind of person that I'd want to hear it. I'd want to dialogue about it. I'd want to flush it out. I'd want to make sure everyone felt good about the discussion.

Jim called for better ways to deal with racism situations that don’t just create “confrontation” but rather create the opportunity for learning and change:

So that we can have that conversation and so that we can have those discussions of, “Where did it come from and how were you feeling?” And saying, “This is where I’m coming from. This is what I mean.” Without all of the apologies, but being able to say, “I can do this. I can change that,” because I think as soon as we get into those apologies, then again we’re admitting, “Well, I’m racist” and we’re trying to say is, “we’re not racist, we made a mistake here.”

What Jim misses with this response process is that even unintended actions that are experienced as racism still hurt—hence the need for authentic apology—something I think he would acknowledge if I raised this with him. But more significantly, following from John’s observation about values and structures, not all actions or words that are experienced as racist are just a “mistake,” and can be quickly accommodated. There are times when actions and words reflect beliefs and values. In these cases, an authentic engagement with values and their implications for others is necessary, and this sort of change process takes more time. The challenge is to know the difference, because to take a manifestation of a deeply held value as just a “mistake” that will be corrected by appropriately choosing the politically correct words, is to ignore the real problem, to resolve superficially a very significant issue, and in effect to perpetuate, and to be seen to perpetuate, racism. That the Okanagan People have had their lives deeply affected by such values explains why actions are interpreted as manifestations of values first rather than “mistakes.” As Jim acknowledged, he had never experienced being on the receiving end of racism, and that this required of him greater awareness:

I think that if you’re, if you haven’t walked the walk, you don’t know what that walk’s like and I don’t know if you’ve ever had the chance of being in a racist situation. And
I keep thinking that I can’t think of one time when I felt that I was in a racist situation towards me.

The non-Aboriginal school leaders recounted incidents of racism among students, and how they dealt with them. John discussed three events over his five years at Alpha that qualified for him as significant racist events. The following description of one of them outlines the challenges such events hold for schools. It also outlines John’s fundamental approach to such events: get to the root of the problem, support the individuals involved in a resolution of the problem, and then find whatever means possible to get the message out that the issue has been dealt with appropriately while maintaining the rights to privacy and confidentiality of all the students involved.

The first one was in my second year and we had a fight on the front steps. We don’t have many East Indian students in the school and it was between an East Indian student and one of our First Nations boys. And that caused, that ran deep. That went really deep and it wasn’t racially motivated. It was two angry boys who were disrespectful to each other, but it became a racial incident. And man that one just wore us out. That one we worked really hard on with our entire community. With our First Nation community and with our non-First Nation community because there were a lot of stories that went home and unfortunately what I got back from some of those were that attitudes in our dominant population here, attitudes at home, there was some pretty narrow views. So that incident reinforced a view within those homes and came back with those kids. Those kids were in grade 11 and so we rode that out for another year, where every now and then it would squirt out. Like you were holding this in and it would squirt out in a different spot and you’d then kind of push it back in and do some damage control and work with kids. I think the growth area there that over time we were able to bring the kids, the First Nations students and wherever the conflict point was, whoever else that was with, and work with them individually or together to bring this back down to the root cause. Why are we here? What is it all about? And it always came away as being a non-race issue. But the thing I always struggled with is how do we get that message [out that] those two kids were able to communicate really clearly with each other? Maybe [they’d] walk out and communicate with the kids they are most closely associated with but I’m not sure about the effectiveness [of that for the wider community]. You don’t publicize discipline events. You don’t go on the announcements and say this is how they resolved it. But the skills that they used, really used, were good. They were effective. We’ve replicated that dozens of times [in situations] that were flash points that could have gone way off, that we were able to bring back in and then sit down with the community. And we’ve made it a point to be—without names—to be completely open and honest about all of this. Whether there was a suspension, how we dealt with parents, how we dealt with the attitudes. Because we, not only did we have to be transparent in that process, it had to be seen that we were addressing this in an appropriate and effective way.
The striking fact of John's portrayal is that the incident between the two boys is only a match that lights up the powder keg that surrounds the two boys. The issue is the powder keg, not the flash. The communities surrounding the school and inside the school are quick to be ignited if there should be a spark. In his description it becomes clear that there is always the potential for an incident to inflame racist attitudes ("narrow views") and strong defensive responses. Even incidents that are not essentially about race can be interpreted as such.

John's description makes clear how quickly such incidents explode, expanding well beyond the school. The challenge for the school, as it was for these boys, is that once the interpretation exists in a large enough community of people, it just continues to be held, even well after a resolution has been reached. And the interpretation keeps making itself real. In this context the evolution of John's containment strategy makes some sense: deal with flashpoints before they flash, get the word out quickly that whatever the issue may have been about, it has been resolved, and be as transparent as possible. The long term negative effects for those involved, for non-Aboriginal school leaders, and for the school community as a whole, are significant when an incident blows up.\textsuperscript{108}

When an allegation of racism is made against a staff person, non-Aboriginal school leaders talked about processes for assessing the veracity of the allegation, and processes for seeking resolution.\textsuperscript{109} In our conversations, John's approach was most explicit: deal with the issue immediately and directly; include only those people that are involved or directly

\textsuperscript{108} In such an environment, it would seem that there is very little manoeuvring room in the time of a crisis to use the event as a means to surface prejudices and undertake an educational, transformational process. Yet, effective containment does not deal with the underlying conditions that create the danger of an explosion in the first place. This process needs to be undertaken prior to such events—the powder keg that responds to the flash must be transformed. An on-going anti-racism program that addresses underlying conditions in advance of "flashpoint" events, and also provides for processes to resolve the outcomes of such events is called for.

\textsuperscript{109} In a check back conversation, Steven noted that as relationships with students had grown over the intervening years since the initial conversations, he had greater confidence in addressing these situations.
affected; listen carefully to what the concern is; identify the root issues; seek a process and resolution that honours complainant and alleged perpetrator. John sought to deal with the allegation of a racist coach in this way.

This issue was brought forward by formal correspondence and a meeting was called. John was initially uncomfortable with the number of people who were invited to be involved—these included Band representatives, the district Aboriginal principal, and parents. He wasn’t sure who was going to show up. The problem as identified was that Beta was intentionally not selecting Okanagan students to their teams. John recalled the meeting as follows:

So we ended up with about six people here and it was a very good meeting. It took an hour, but ultimately you know right off the bat, “Are you racist? Do you have racist policies in your school?” And we had to talk through things. “It’s a well-known fact that you don’t pick natives on your teams.” Stopped me in my tracks. So we started to talk about the kids’ experiences and I was able to draw on, have you talked with [Okanagan student] and [another Okanagan student], have you talked with [a third Okanagan student]. Have you talked with kids that have had successful experiences in our school? “No.” That would be a neat idea. Would you be open to doing that? “Absolutely.” And did you know that [Okanagan student] was the captain of our football team this year? “Was that a token position?” She must have seen the look on my face and she said, “Well I had to ask.” And I said, yep thank you for asking but I am offended. Deeply offended. However, at least we are talking about it. And in the end she said “Good. I had to ask all of these questions. Now I know.” And away she went.

John was still thinking about it when I spoke with him six months after our first conversation.

I mean, by the end of the conversation, I felt quite comfortable that I had listened to all of the concerns. That they had heard that it hadn’t been our intention to hold those kinds of policies or to react in a particular way. So, it was ok. But, I was deeply offended that those perceptions were held out there. It blindsided me a little bit, because those weren’t the kinds of relationships that we had with [students].

The charged nature of an allegation of racism is apparent in this anecdote. Parents are angry and bring in support to help level the power relations and underscore the seriousness of their concerns; the non-Aboriginal school leader is shocked and offended that such a perception is even “out there.” The event itself created distinct and on-going discomfort for the non-
Aboriginal school leaders. Indeed, John mentioned that he didn’t discuss the event with Steven until well after the fact, because he knew it would be deeply upsetting to him. He reported that Steven didn’t sleep well for several nights after he informed him. Steven observed that he became very “self-conscious,” and “gunshy” about his interactions with Okanagan parents thereafter, sugar coating issues rather than communicating in a genuine, direct way. This personal identification of non-Aboriginal school leaders with the actions taken by staff is remarkable. Clearly, the non-Aboriginal school leaders took the allegation seriously, even if there was good evidence, in their minds, that it was not true. John went on to say,

"I think the part that hurt about this the most was because I believed that we were sensitive to all kids, and to me, what was being presented to us could have been presented by any parent in our school whose kid did not make a team. ‘Why did my daughter not make this team? What was it? I sat and watched, and I think, in my judgment, she’s stronger than athlete A, B and C.’ But, then there was a race issue attached to it, and that made it quite a bit more, the possibility for it to be quite a bit more emotional. I believe these questions always need, or have a right to be asked, ‘Why did my, why was my daughter or my son not selected to the team?’... And if we really believe that keeping kids involved is good for their development academically, socially, keeps them off the street, gives them a good focus, then, if we have too many kids maybe we need to solicit coaches so that we have two teams.

Charmaine reported that this was far from the first time that parents had expressed a concern about their child not making a team at Beta. What distinguished this event in her mind was that the parents experienced the event as an act of racism, rather than coach “favouritism” or school policy inadequacy for not including all children. As we see in John’s final words above, this was where John’s approach—seek the root cause—took him. He identifies the school culpability in this situation as having created norms where children are regularly excluded from activities that would be beneficial for them. However, I surmise from our conversations that the allegation of racism remained troubling.
Incidents and allegations of racism from the non-Aboriginal school leaders’ perspective were highly charged events. They required an intense application of energy to get to their root cause quickly, to problem solve with participants ways to resolve the root issues and reconstitute respectful relationships, and to communicate with others that the issue had been resolved. It became apparent that proactive effort to minimize the ‘powder-keg’ nature of the non-Aboriginal and Okanagan communities’ response to a potentially racist event could help ameliorate these crisis situations. But even the efforts of a veteran principal like John with many years working with the communities and with much stored social capital may be too little for the crisis nature of these events, which are not, as Jim wished, “hard on the issue and soft on the people.”

Politics.

Non-Aboriginal school leaders expressed that they had some experience of what they called the “politics” of the Band, but little understanding. How to work with the “politics” and dividedness of the Okanagan community was a concern to non-Aboriginal school leaders. Two non-Aboriginal school leaders noted that some families were comfortable approaching their school advocate while others were not, which they attributed to politics. Jim noted that at times Okanagan children picked on each other based upon apparent inter-family enmities. He believed that some families did not send their children to Alpha because other families did. John thought it might improve the school’s capacity to be proactive if there was a better connection with the Band Council, but hesitated to engage the politics represented by such a connection. He said,

I have never been a politician, and I have no desire to be a politician. I believe that my best work is with kids and teachers in the school. But I also understand, that the, it’s a good question Mark, the positive side of being pro-active in approaching that group and talking about elements or answering questions, could be very powerful, could be really powerful.
Whether as family divisions, or as formal politics, non-Aboriginal school leaders expressed a strong caution about Okanagan power relations with each other, and were inclined to stay out of these “politics” as best they could.

Non-Aboriginal school leaders also identified the power relations in their schools as a challenge requiring understanding. Resources, like space and time, were jealously watched. Jim talked about resistance that appeared with regard to allocation of resources when a First Nations initiative threatened to change the status quo. John observed that textbooks themselves and entrenched curricula exerted a remarkable degree of suasion over school norms, expectations, and flexibility to accommodate Aboriginal knowledge, perspectives, and learning styles.

J. I think that’s one of the biggest faults with our system, and I think that we ascribe a great deal of power and authority and wisdom to publishers....When really all they are is a resource, but we’ve allowed textbooks to really drive us. I think very much so, it drives me nuts.

M. So, when it comes to the Aboriginal community, and defining curriculum that’s going to be meaningful and powerful for them, we get stuck.

J. We are, you know, and when there is some curriculum that does gain input from the Aboriginal community and becomes part of our mandated graduation requirements, or an option for graduation requirements, there’s, you know, our district, there’s 30, 50 kids that take it. So it’s there, but it hasn’t been given a great deal of value system-wide, unfortunately.

From our conversations I gathered from non-Aboriginal school leaders that the power relations existent in their schools could make for intense politics around such things as resources, knowledge, and curricula in the context of change.

Limits to understanding.

Non-Aboriginal school leaders identified their own limits of understanding as being a significant challenge. Steven’s words exemplify this realization well:

In my mind, I probably will never understand fully. How could I if I wasn’t in their shoes? Which is what they question. Do we need Aboriginal leaders in schools, you
know? Because I can try. I can listen. I can be empathetic. I can go, “Wow, that’s amazing, or that’s horrible,” but it seems that way, it’s a certain culture that it certainly seems that way, that I’ll probably never be able — well, I don’t know, I don’t want to say never. I’d love to be able to relate in the same way as an Aboriginal person could relate to another Aboriginal person, but I think that that would be really difficult.

They recognized their need to be informed by others, particularly the Okanagan, if they were to attain levels of understanding they believed necessary for their work.

Non-Aboriginal school leaders also identified that lack of parent understanding about their schools. How the schools operated and what actually was going on in them was another significant challenge. They noted that partial understanding of situations resulted in parents making misjudgments about what was going on.

Ways Forward

Preparing new non-Aboriginal school leaders.

I asked Jim and John to reflect on what would be helpful preparation for new non-Aboriginal school leaders coming to work with Okanagan students, parents, and community. Jim, as we have already noted, felt strongly about getting out onto the Reserve as soon as possible, meeting and developing relationships with Elders, parents, families, and students there. John’s reflections share this same ‘develop relationships’ orientation. He also suggested new non-Aboriginal school leaders needed to be introduced to the community and to be out on the Reserve for social and formal events. He suggested new non-Aboriginal school leaders needed to develop respectful, interested relationships with Okanagan students. He advised gaining knowledge about families and the community. He recommended an Okanagan history course, or systematic learning program with someone from the Okanagan community. He pointed out that new non-Aboriginal school leaders need to understand the importance of gaining knowledge from many sources, that many perspectives are needed to appropriately engage Okanagan students, families, and community. But above all John noted
that in his experience, the most significant thing that had helped with his transition to Beta and working with the Okanagan community had been joining another administrator with knowledge of, respectful relationships with, and a deep commitment to work with, the Okanagan.  

What Okanagan parents should know.

In our conversations, I eventually would get opportunity to frame a scenario in which the school leader had been asked to provide a two-week seminar for Okanagan families and community members which would address the question: ‘What most needs to be understood by Okanagan parents and community in order to improve communication, understanding, and working relationships with you, as a non-Aboriginal school leader?’ Philip responded with saying that ‘telling’ them wouldn’t help nearly as much as their coming into the school, seeing what was going on and becoming productively engaged. Jim said the most important thing to communicate would be that “we must work together.” He said,

That I’m there for their child. They must understand that I want every child to succeed and to be happy. But they’ll need to see this and experience this. You can’t just tell people this.

Jim wanted parents to understand the nature of his work:

They need to understand that my primary responsibility and concern is safety. It would be nice if we could focus on improved achievement, the way the government would like us to. Ninety percent of my time is focused on safety. Making sure that students are respected and respectful to each other. Safe. Responsible. Students must feel that they are safe when they are here, that they won’t be humiliated. Put down. Abused. Hurt. We’ve got to take care of safety concerns if students are to be able to focus on academic work.

He added to this that everyone needs to understand how time is such a significant limiter and challenge for school leaders. Cutbacks and increased responsibilities have made for busy

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110 Given the transitory nature of administration placements, attempting to create ‘overlapping’ transitions, where connections and knowledge can be carried forward to each successive incarnation of an administrative team through one remaining person, makes some sense.
schedules that limit the possibility of substantive engagements and connection. This observation was shared by all non-Aboriginal school leaders.

John elaborated a program that would communicate and answer questions about the functions and processes of the high school. These included the curricular program: grad requirements, courses and pre-requisites, curriculum, learning support, student differences. He included his role as an educational leader, encouraging specific sorts of engagement, interactions, and dialogue. He included recognition of how all participants in the school have issues, and the necessity of being prepared to engage these issues. He suggested a need for parents to express their expectations for communication with the school. He also suggested a need to express the school’s expectations for parents. He suggested that part of the program would have to include a process of seeking grounds for partnership and the understanding that we are all in this together. He proposed that discussing school data with parents would be important, to show how students are doing. He wanted some time to engage parents about the school’s role in “character” development. He included the need to present and explore how parents and school can partner for academic support. And he concluded by wanting to make clear the avenues for voice and problem resolution:

Then, I think, lastly, we’d go to issues, and avenues for making sure that they find a voice. That would be multi-faceted: so there’s the issue and there would be a number of places to be able to go to talk about that. But we’d also talk about the danger of letting that exist in a closed circle, because it creates a vortex, that unfortunately, once it gets wound up can be hard to stop when, really, if you can find one avenue to begin to address an issue that arises, we’re more likely to be successful and to your being successful in getting to an end.

By the end of the seminar, John had it in mind that parents’ improved understanding of these functions of the high school, and of some of the roles in the school, would enable more effective engagement and more successful attainment of parents’ goals. Jim and Philip shared the same expectation. Non-Aboriginal school leaders did not identify how they knew
this knowledge was what parents needed to gain, but it was clear that they believed gaining this understanding of their respective schools would make a difference for Okanagan parents and students.

**Parent anger.**

Non-Aboriginal school leaders observed at different times in our conversations how difficult it was for them when parents arrived angry seeking to blame “the teacher; me; the school; someone. It’s hard to get to a place where we can begin to work with each other” (Jim). This concern had a double impact from their point of view: such anger and blaming was experienced as a personal attack by non-Aboriginal school leaders—no matter how long they had been administrators, and secondly, that it didn’t help resolve the issues or attain the goals that the Okanagan parents were coming in to achieve. John speculated that the colonizing process that had created prejudices in non-Aboriginal school leaders had also entrenched prejudices in First Nations people, and that he had experienced the projection of these prejudices on many occasions.

I don’t ever feel like the people that walked through the door reflected on their negative experiences. It came out periodically, and it was probably one of those things that, like me, I had my own prejudices....The same things existed within the First Nations population as they came through the door. The way I was treated, I was pushed out the doors.

In our conversation, we had been exploring the merits of non-Aboriginal school leaders being reflective about their own prejudices. John further suggested that a similarly reflexive process for Okanagan parents about their negative histories might help them connect more congruently with non-Aboriginal school leaders. He speculated that the projection or anticipation of past negative experiences overcharged the situation at hand with interpretations that were alienating and harmful for all parties involved. In my conversations with Steven, we explored the fact that several Okanagan parents I had spoken with had
negative histories with Beta and schooling. He observed that it would be helpful for non-Aboriginal school leaders to understand where parents were coming from. He was interested in how a non-Aboriginal school leaders might support the expression of parent narratives about Beta. In summary, non-Aboriginal school leaders were clearly concerned about finding ways to make their interactions with Okanagan parents less about blame and the transmission of anger and more about problem solving and working together to resolve issues of concern.

**Increasing Okanagan student agency.**

Charmaine first noted that Okanagan high school students rarely used the means available to them to shape their educational programs to suit themselves. Mick corroborated this observation when I asked him. Charmaine said that non-Aboriginal students more frequently changed classes when they had personality or learning issues with a teacher, and more often readjusted their time table to suit a change in interests or to refine their learning focus. Mick and Charmaine concluded from this that Okanagan students seem much more passive about their educational programs—much more accepting of their learning situations. From their observation I concluded that it is important Okanagan students and parents know all of the ‘levers’ available to them within the school system to adjust a student’s educational program. I also wondered about how a greater sense of agency in this regard might be developed.

**Understanding—Summary**

Non-Aboriginal school leaders who had been involved with Alpha and Beta for thirty years were dismayed to reflect on how little things seemed to have changed for Okanagan students in school. Non-Aboriginal school leaders identified many challenges to improving communication, understanding, working relationships, and educational programs for Okanagan students. These included gaining a good sense of what would constitute “success”
for Okanagan students. Some non-Aboriginal school leaders were looking for a strong vision for Okanagan education, championed by Okanagan leadership. Other challenges included: a perceived lack of parent involvement; racism in the community and its negative effects on students and school; allegations of racism and how such allegations were taken very seriously and were deeply felt; the divisive politics of the Okanagan community and non-Aboriginal school leaders' inclinations to stay out of these power relations if at all possible. Non-Aboriginal school leaders also noted the politics that prevail inside their schools and influence decision-making and action. Limits to understanding posed a further challenge.

Non-Aboriginal school leaders made several recommendations to improve understanding and the capacity for gaining understanding. They suggested preparing new non-Aboriginal school leaders in a systematic way that would connect them with Okanagan people expeditiously. They also suggested there were several areas where parent understanding would be beneficial. These included being involved in schools, getting a good sense of the role and commitments of the non-Aboriginal school leaders, having a strong working knowledge of the systems operative in a high school, the importance of partnership, ways to support student learning, and avenues for problem resolution. It was proposed that anger and blame is sometimes counter-productive to achieving goals for students, and that some reflexivity by parents could be helpful. Finally, apparent Okanagan student passivity with regard to managing their educational programs led to a suggestion that families understand these processes more fully, and that students be encouraged to develop greater agency with regard to their educational programs.

Communication

Non-Aboriginal school leaders had much to say about the ways and means by which they shared meaning, gained understanding, and developed relationships with Okanagan
students, parents, and community. They believed firmly that improving communication processes was critical if there was to be an improvement of education programs for Okanagan students. In our conversations non-Aboriginal school leaders analyzed difficult communication situations, reflected on established communication processes, identified elements of their experiences that held potential for improving communication, and gave consideration to processes that might improve communication, understanding, and working relationships. This section is organized accordingly.

**Difficult Communication**

Both Steven and Philip identified that communication doesn’t go very far if there is no trust. We have established throughout this dissertation the basis for lack of trust, and for Okanagan reservoirs of anger. Still, as we noted above, non-Aboriginal school leaders struggled with situations where parents arrived angry, and we noted that some non-Aboriginal school leaders thought the parents could do some of their own reflection in this regard. However, the same non-Aboriginal school leaders expressed that it was absolutely essential for angry parents to communicate their concerns with non-Aboriginal school leaders. John said,

> Ultimately if people are hurt, then we can understand where they are coming from, we can correct things if they need to be corrected within our school, or we can also help to re-align perspectives based on knowledge. So lets open the door and bring them in.

His approach was to listen until parents were certain that he had understood what they were concerned about. Then he would present his perspective. He anticipated a “softening,” or a moment when both perspectives would influence each other and an appropriate response would develop. He noted, however, that this was less likely and the communication event
more difficult if a person came inflexibly attached to a particular position. It was also difficult to attain this responsive space if there were many people present.\footnote{I wonder now about the fact that John didn’t reflect on the power relations extent in these one-on-one situations. I did not ask for his perceptions. One can see that the two sorts of things that would level the power relations with the principal—strong assertion of one’s point of view, and a supporting cast to help one hold to one’s perspective—both make communication events more difficult for the non-Aboriginal school leaders. On the one hand, the non-Aboriginal school leaders’ power of suasion is reduced, and although the event sounds dialogical, it may be so only from the non-Aboriginal school leaders’ point of view. There would have to be confirmation by Okanagan parents that they had achieved an understanding and respectful response. On the other hand, the non-Aboriginal school leaders has only a limited capacity to meet the demands of a parent—the school and its personnel, relations, structures, commitments, purposes, processes and culture are what they are, and are only changeable in certain ways. Yelling at a principal because she will not move a mountain with a teaspoon, and refusing to recognize that this is what is being asked, is not very helpful for anyone. Understanding what is fixed in a school culture is very important for parents, and important for non-Aboriginal school leaders to communicate.}

One of the functions of the non-Aboriginal school leaders in anger and blame communication events was to act as a sort of buffering filter or energy transformer between anger and school personnel. Non-Aboriginal school leaders received the highly charged communication, found a way to step down the voltage, and then moved the communication into the school in a way they saw fit. I noted that their judgment on what moved forward into the wider public and what was kept in the office was a remarkable weighing of many complex factors, including, among other things, the current emotional well-being of the staff person involved, how the information could improve the situation at hand, and the potential effects for the student. What constituted the ‘wider public’ was also carefully considered, and a circle of those who needed to know and who would respectfully honour the integrity of the information and the people involved was sometimes deliberately defined. This process of carefully balancing private and public communication, and the movement between the two, was a constant consideration for non-Aboriginal school leaders.

As we also noted in the previous section, non-Aboriginal school leaders were not left unchanged by these difficult communication events. Steven observed that he became gun-shy and began to “sugar-coat” his communications. But he noted later how important it was to be
able to give direct, solid information to parents, rather than the less authentic, more easily
delivered ‘lite’ version. He was very conscious of being the bearer of bad news:

You know, it really sucks when you have to call a parent, this parent she’s just
fabulous, who has four children in our school and I have something,
unfortunately...something negative I need to report about every single one of those
kids. And it’s just kind of culminated at that point where it’s all kind of happening at
the same time or similar times. And so I’m having to phone and say, “Okay, now let’s
move on to, you know, this guy. Okay now let’s move onto her.” And I’m like, ‘oh
my.’ I don’t want to. That’s just horrible. What parents want to have [such] phone
calls? Like I get people that just say, “Oh, I really don’t like hearing your voice. I hope
you don’t take that personally.” And I say, “Okay! No, no, no. Totally understand,
wouldn’t want to hear my voice either, if I had the messages that I’m always giving.”

This was clearly very wearing on Steven. In our conversation I noted that without making
those difficult phone calls parents would be denied opportunity to participate in their
children’s program. We discussed how solid information, even if it is bad news, gives its
recipient the capacity to deal with a situation as it is, and therefore more effectively. Steven
believed this, but it still seemed a thankless task that he felt subverted his potential to build
trust, respect, and connection.

Established Communication Processes

Non-Aboriginal school leaders discussed several communication processes that they
relied upon with Okanagan families. These included newsletters, phone, meetings, and
advocates.

Philip discovered that if he wanted to have Okanagan parents participate in an event,
sending out an invitation in the school newsletter was not sufficient. Initially this surprised
him because this method had worked very well in his previous school. However, he
discovered that if he phoned as a follow up to the invitation, then Okanagan parents were
much more likely to attend.

Steven depended upon the phone for his interactions with Okanagan parents about
student discipline issues. He noted that he found this challenging because it was impossible
to read body language to gauge how the person on the other end of the line was receiving his information. But he also recounted situations where Okanagan parents would call him with an issue, and a long conversation would result. Some very pointed criticism of the school had come to him over the phone.

All the non-Aboriginal school leaders discussed meetings at different times. These included public meetings such as Parent Advisory Council (PAC) meetings and First Nations Parent meetings (at Beta), and more private meetings with students and parents. Jim and Philip noted that Alpha PAC meetings were generally weakly attended (five or six people) and rarely attended by Okanagan parents. They were dissatisfied with this. Philip talked about having convinced the Alpha PAC to take a bus out to the Reserve for one of the upcoming PAC meetings in order to make participation more enticing for Okanagan parents.112

Beta hosted regular PAC meetings, to which Okanagan parents were welcome, and First Nations Parent meetings, which were held on the Reserve. John’s description of these meetings efficiently lays out their structure, their agenda, and their purpose:

So since that point [following the Beta Dialogue] conversations with parents occur in an informally formal, or a formalized informal setting when we do our parent meetings. And we used to do them monthly and this was with a specific First Nations parent group. The agenda was set through a parent representative who was chosen not elected so supported by the group to be the parent representative and we had continuity through a number of years with [name of parent] when she was in that position and now it’s [a second parent]. [The second parent] also serves on our school planning council as one of the parent reps to represent the First Nations community. And so at those meetings there would be, you may recall, that agenda that flowed. There was no definite time limit on a meeting. There was no stifling of discussion. There was a pretty free view that anything was open for discussion and I think we tried to create that. We shared any information about our school that we could. Anything they asked we answered. It was all there because we, I think that my belief was let’s demystify all this stuff. Let’s just make sure that if someone has a question, they feel they can get an answer. That may create a relationship of trust with the

112 During our check back conversation, Philip noted that this event did not occur. Low parent involvement in the PAC limited its ability to meet this goal.
school system, which ultimately is our goal, or one of our goals. But it also went to professional discussions about teachers, which allowed us to springboard from, ‘you have some concerns and we’d like to listen,’ [to] ‘so let’s set a different time for us to address those concerns.’ So there has been some very formal meetings as a result of particular insights or perspectives that parents have brought about, concerns about our school, or concerns about the progress of their sons or daughters, and so we’ve had those in the presence of the Advocate and many times just myself and parents. We’ve also had the Band’s education coordinator involved in some of those discussions.

There are several aspects of this meeting process of note: their location on the Reserve; their formal informality; their fluid, mutually constructed agenda that enabled an openness to all questions; their intention to demystify and build trust; the parent representative; the move from public to formal private conversations. With the exception of the parent representative, all of these elements are organic outcomes of a mutually grown meeting process. From the initial Beta Dialogue, John sought to maintain an interactive process that would enable further understanding and relationship building. John identified that he gained valuable understanding of issues of importance to Okanagan parents through these meetings. He also learned to set boundaries on what could be discussed and became adept at moving confidential issues out of the public venue of the meeting to private meetings with the individual(s) who had raised the concern—these included discussions of teacher conduct—and thereby maintained a respectful process. John noted in our second conversation that these meetings often really got started as they moved past the ‘formal’ part to the conversations over coffee, then he would hear the real issues. John noted that over the years the attendance at meetings had dropped off so that they decreased the number of meetings to four per year, which seemed to work well.

John noted how much he valued the parent representative. This person joined the Advocate as a vital “bridge” for the two-way transfer of important knowledge, information,

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113 I infer this given the Advocate’s increasing discomfort with the open agenda under the new administration as noted in the previous chapter.
and concerns between Okanagan families and Beta. He welcomed the issues brought forward by this person no matter how contentious or difficult. It was his position that the school needed more people to act in this bridging role.

John and Jim both cited the importance of their respective school Advocates for communication, identifying numerous ways in which knowledge and information was moved back and forth through the Advocate. Philip recounted a situation where a student had “messed up big time.” He was aware that the mom was not very comfortable in the school. “I gave the First Nations Advocate my support that what solution they come up with for this problem I’ll support it. I would like to be involved in it but if not we’ll go with that. But I said under no circumstances are we having five or six people sitting around a table staring at the mom.” Philip arranged that the mom should meet with the Advocate away from the office, and that they should come to an understanding of the situation and an appropriate resolution. After a very short period of time, Philip was invited to join them, and a constructive resolution was determined. He noted that the positive outcome of this process grew into a positive working relationship between the mom and him. Non-Aboriginal school leaders did note that the Advocate, as a member of the Okanagan community, had a specific location within that community that enhanced their ability to connect with certain families and limited their ability to connect with others.

John was particularly explicit about the necessity of utilizing and developing multiple ways for meaning to flow between community and school, though this inclination was implicit in conversations with all of the non-Aboriginal school leaders.
Suggestions to Improve Communication

Pro-active and positive.

At various times and in different ways all of the non-Aboriginal school leaders expressed the importance of pro-active communication and of positive communication. Steven particularly noted how reactive his communications often were as he responded to crises and emergent difficulties. As a consequence he was often communicating with people he did not know well, or with whom he had not had opportunity to develop a positive relationship. Pro-active communication, from his view, would develop sufficient mutual understanding and positive relations to enable Okanagan students and families to work effectively with him, and visa-versa. Communicating “positives” about students was viewed as an important part of pro-active communication. All non-Aboriginal school leaders recognized they didn’t do this enough, but that it was a vital way to let students and their families know how interested and connected they were.

Location, roles, and projects.

In my conversations with non-Aboriginal school leaders, the notions of location, roles, and projects emerged as significant considerations for improving communication. One anecdote that Jim told will serve to exemplify these ideas.

Jim recalled working with a grade six Okanagan male student who was struggling in many areas of his life, including school. As happened, the student would be sent to the office and Jim would meet with him. During these times the boy would say nothing.

He will sit here, head down, avoiding eye contact. I give him time to walk around the school to collect himself. He will go, but in the end, he still won’t talk with me.

It happened that Jim made regular trips to the recycling depot to deliver the school’s recyclable waste. He invited the grade six student to join him. During these times the student
would open up, and they would talk about things of interest to him—fishing, hunting, what was going on in the community. When they returned to the office, again the student would say nothing. Jim tried to find ways to enable the student to feel comfortable and to connect with him more openly in the office, but was unsuccessful.

When Jim and I discussed this story, I wondered about what made the difference. He identified the change of location, the purposefulness of their activity together, and the student feeling comfortable.

I might have needed to rely on him for a particular thing, whatever that was we were doing. For a simple example, we had to go and buy some tubs for our “fun day”. So, “Let’s jump in the truck and go get the tubs. We’ve got to go. And I need help carrying them out to my pick-up, so can you come with me?” “Sure.” ....So it can’t be an artificial thing and I don’t know how you would set something like that up in terms of alternate spaces. And I guess, yeah, I don’t know where those spaces would be because they have to be private. They have to be spaces where it’s comfortable for that person and that it has meaning, it’s not contrived. It can’t be contrived; if it were I don’t think it would ever be successful.

This anecdote highlighted a set of experiences and suggestions that I heard repeatedly from students, parents, Aboriginal educators, and non-Aboriginal school leaders—that the location for meeting is very important. Seek locations where Okanagan people are comfortable.\(^{114}\)

Some may be comfortable in the office, but the office may also inhibit communication. Jim connected this observation with the value of developing an “Elder’s space” within the school. Similarly, we noted above that it had been important that the Beta First Nations parent meetings were located on the reserve.

Jim’s story also illustrated the value for non-Aboriginal school leaders to step outside of their recognizable roles, as purveyors of discipline for instance, and to meet outside of the School Leader role-identity. Frequently non-Aboriginal school leaders and others talked

\(^{114}\) The story also highlights just how idiosyncratic such a location may be; not every student is going to feel more comfortable going to drop off recycling! The leading question is “where would you like to meet?” and it’s corollary, “where does this person seem most comfortable?” I would also gather from other conversations that comfort level itself changes over time, and that locations may change accordingly.
about the necessity of meeting “informally.” It seems very important for Okanagan people to be able to meet with non-Aboriginal school leaders as individuals, without the robes of office, so to speak, or when the identity of authority is less prevalent.

Finally, Jim’s observation that such a situation could not be artificial or contrived, but that there had to be another purpose meaningful in its own right, illuminated a whole other set of ideas suggested by many of this study’s participants. My conversations with Jim occurred very early in the data collection process, and I was immediately intrigued by his notion of meeting-while-engaged-in-a-shared-purpose. I re-framed the idea in the concept of shared “projects,”¹¹⁵ which I presented to study participants in the second round of conversations. Non-Aboriginal school leaders were very supportive of this concept when I re-presented it to them.

**Focus groups, mentors, and a conference**

Philip reacted very positively when I invited him to be a part of a follow-up focus group to this study. He was quick to say how valuable it would be for him to hear parents, students, and Elders engage different topics. In essence his desire was exactly what happened for non-Aboriginal school leaders and non-Aboriginal educators during the Beta Dialogue. In the second phase of that process, Beta teachers and school leaders met with Okanagan Elders, parents, graduates, and students, and heard clearly their perspectives on educational priorities and issues of educational concern. Maggie, one of the eleven participants of the dialogue

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¹¹⁵ In Chapter 5 I theorized that these projects are contexts for “thick” communication—multi-dimensional situations that require multiple aspects of a self to engage with others. For example, the joint hosting of a conference calls for, among other things, exploring purposes, practical problem solving, social interaction, creating a team to share tasks, updating others, setting up venues, sharing the risks, celebrating the successes. In the process of making this project happen, participants engage in formal and informal, personal and professional, public and private communication. And this, I take it from Jim’s story and from others, is where important communication and connection may flourish.
process, had been very impressed and as professional development chair at Beta, she hoped that a similar process could be repeated again.

M. I was also struck by how open people were to what the Elders and parents and students had to say, when we finally did have that session with them.

Maggie. That I think was one of the most positive sessions. But it needed the lead in. You couldn’t just go to that session and expect that it would work without the education ahead of time to, you know, make people aware of what it was that made the Okanagan a special place, or a special People. I think those were important steps and I think it could easily be repeated.

Her recognition of the necessity of the educational preparation process that preceded the meeting with Elders, family, and students emphasizes the importance of understanding for making the most of engagements with Okanagan People. I have also found her self-evaluation of what difference the dialogue meant for her teaching very instructive:

One of the things that came to me afterwards was the question, “Okay, how much did that [the Beta Dialogue] affect what I do in my classroom?” And that’s where I’m not sure. I really don’t know if, if with that it changed the way I dealt with anyone, you know. And that’s where I think doing more helps. To actually incorporate the ideas more directly into action, how you deal with students, I think takes more and maybe years of work.

For John, as we noted above, this dialogue process was very helpful as it provided a basis for judgment and decision-making. It also became the basis for more frequent meetings with parents on the Reserve. But as Maggie observed, for the understanding that she gained to make more difference in the classroom, it would have been necessary for her to continue on in working relationships with the Elders, parents, students, and other teachers so that a new way of teaching could have been explored and practiced. It would seem that “focus groups” that enable dialogue and the development of new understanding may reach a summit of sorts, but that the new level of understanding needs a concomitant evolution of the “focus group” to address new questions and challenges.
Early on in my conversations with non-Aboriginal school leaders I introduced the idea of having an Okanagan mentor. This idea was received with some appreciation. A mentor could make introductions to people, could direct the non-Aboriginal school leaders to learning necessary information, and could provide guidance on non-Aboriginal school leaders actions and judgments. However, in my final conversation with John, in an example of the sort of synthesis that occurs in dialogic encounters, the idea evolved into a mentorship relation not just with an Elder, but with a student too. What we came to was that non-Aboriginal school leaders need guidance from students inside the school as well as from an Elder. If you include the parent representative mentioned earlier, one can envisage a mentoring team or council working with the non-Aboriginal school leaders.\textsuperscript{116} It seemed to me that this configuration might be beneficial for the student, the parent, and the Elder too.

During the second round of conversations, I also asked non-Aboriginal school leaders what they thought of an annual conference dedicated to Okanagan educational issues. Again, this idea was received positively. It would provide an opportunity for teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community to engage and understand educational issues from all perspectives. It would also provide some continuity in knowledge development and goal setting if agenda items were carried over from one year to the next.

The conference, mentoring council, and focus group ideas are all structured opportunities for non-Aboriginal school leaders and the Okanagan to interact openly about the educational issues that are of concern to either or both. The excitement of non-Aboriginal school leaders for these ideas arose, I contend, from their potential for authentic dialogue with Okanagan students, parents, and community.

\textsuperscript{116} I don't have in mind here that all four would meet together all of the time, but that the student, parent, and Elder, charged with mentoring the non-Aboriginal school leaders might together and separately do so.
Communication—Summary

Non-Aboriginal school leaders were quite conscious of the structures and processes that constituted communication. In their reflections, they analyzed processes they relied upon, processes such as newsletters, phone calls, meetings, and ‘bridging’ people (the First Nations Advocate, and the parent representative at Beta). These analyses revealed some of the strengths and limitations of these approaches. One non-Aboriginal school leader talked about the importance of distinguishing, and helping others understand, when topics were suitable for public communication and when they required more confidential, or private processes. The movement between public and private required a careful balancing of rights to confidentiality, and public transparency. Non-Aboriginal school leaders discussed communication situations that were difficult for them, posing challenges that seem inherent to their responsibilities. Although inherent, these challenges have effects that influence non-Aboriginal school leaders’ communication, sometimes negatively. Non-Aboriginal school leaders identified elements within communication processes they believed could play a role in improving communication. These included increasing their pro-active and positive communications, paying attention to location, seeking ways to meet Okanagan persons in informal situations where a non-Aboriginal school leader’s personal identity steps out from behind the formality of their role-identity and its authoritative power relations. Non-Aboriginal school leaders responded positively to the communication potential of shared projects, an annual conference, a mentoring council, and focus groups. Non-Aboriginal school leaders were inclined to foster, and make use of, multiple ways of communicating, and were particularly attracted to dialogic opportunities.
Non-Aboriginal School Leaders: Frustration and Hope

I think that we have to continue looking at ways and finding ways to be able to make those connections because I know that anytime I can connect with an adult or a kid, that that kid will have success, and that family will have success.

Jim

Non-Aboriginal school leaders were very conscious of the lack of “success” some Okanagan students experienced in their schools. They expressed frustration with their own inability to connect with some students and families. They were aware of, and were challenged by, Okanagan suspicion and lack of trust. They expressed their concern for racism whether between students or in the community and they recounted the challenges they faced when facing allegations of racism. The way through such experiences included direct engagement with the people associated with the allegation, and as much transparency as possible with all stakeholders about the process. These school leaders were convinced of the primacy of improving relationships for ameliorating the educational experiences of Okanagan students. They believed that improving parent and community knowledge of what is going on in schools would assist their work for and with students. There was a strong awareness of the importance of clarity regarding what “success” in school means for Okanagan people. Their own analyses of communication situations has resulted in a sensitivity to communication processes and an inclination to multi-modal approaches.
CHAPTER 8
Discoveries and New Destinations

Study Summary

This study began with my own experiences as a non-Aboriginal school leader at Beta secondary school working with Okanagan students. It was perplexing to me that such a good staff should have done so poorly with Okanagan students. One highlight of those years was a professional development experience for school personnel with an Okanagan educator\textsuperscript{117}, which led to a gathering of Okanagan Elders, families, and students. Something clicked during that event, which revealed to me that things for Okanagan students could be very different, and that the distance between school and Okanagan community could be effectively bridged.

When I began to reflect on what had constituted that particular bridging experience, I was taken by descriptions of dialogue used in similar circumstances for similar purposes.

From my reading of the dialogue literature, I postulated that there were three major elements active in a dialogue: a structuring of the interaction—what I called \textit{communication} processes or structures; \textit{understanding} that included reflexive awareness, openness to an other’s perspective, and attainment of shared meaning; and \textit{relationships} based upon mutual regard and responsibility. From my reading of the educational leadership literature, particularly in cross-cultural situations, I further postulated that improving interactions between a school of a dominant culture and a community historically oppressed by the dominant majority would make a significant difference for students from this minority culture. Thus, I wove these three elements into one question that became the basis of this study: what would improve communications, understanding, and relationships between

\textsuperscript{117} Mr. Eric Mitchell.

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Okanagan students, parents, and community, and non-Aboriginal school leaders? Into this braided question was further woven the challenge of enacting and testing the postulated dialogue/Aboriginal oral traditions (PURC) theory as research process. What we were talking about and how we were talking about it were very much intertwined.

Okanagan students, parents, community members, and educators from the schools who served them—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal—thought the questions of sufficient merit to commit to what turned into three conversations (for most) and hours reading what we had talked about. The participants of this study took great care with what was shared, many re-drafting sections of what was included in the data chapters during the final check back sessions to make sure that what they wished to say was as clear as possible. I engaged our interactions together in a manner as congruent with the postulated dialogue/Aboriginal oral traditions theory as I could—hence the repeated returns for clarification of meaning, the deep listening that occurred during sessions, the long hours of transcription that preceded second conversations and preceded chapter drafting, the ownership and control over what was included, and the co-construction of the data chapters.

In the writing of this study, I attempted to include you, as reader, in our dialogues, giving as much sense of flow and context as possible, particularly with the students’ and parents’ chapters. I hoped that you might hear their voices clearly, even hearing beyond what meaning I was able to understand. I also hoped that as participant in our dialogue, I might inspire you to honour the vulnerabilities of those who shared their voices, emulating the regard, trust and shared purpose that nurtured our conversations into existence. Certainly, one point I wished to convey to you was that the way forward for Okanagan students, families,
community, and non-Aboriginal educators lies in meeting and understanding and developing relationships directly, not mediated through me or this research study.

**A Telling of Narratives: A Fusion of Horizons**

This study resulted in a remarkable profusion of narratives and perspectives. Each participant brought a different horizon to each topic that we engaged. Each conversation opened multiple horizons of meanings that I sought to understand. This dissertation, in no small way, is my best effort to map out the horizon of my understanding of each person's horizons. Some of the meanings I now understand are not necessarily ones that I agree with, or know how to stand comfortably with. But perhaps this is the most significant of findings, that by being open, and by respecting the other person and his/her right to assert his/her own truth claims, we may share meanings and horizons that are incommensurable to each other, meanings that emerge from very different traditions and imply different ontologies. What follows in the drama of making sense of these differences together in the conversations that build on these understood meanings is where hope becomes emancipatory transformation.

The fusion of horizons that is this dissertation exemplifies the necessity of humility when understanding others. With each conversation and with each re-drafting, I learned that what I understood previously was partial. Every participant in this study knows that they had more to say, more that was important to understand, but I couldn’t hear it, or the context was not safe enough, or there just weren’t words. From this it is clear that on-going relationship is vital. Our conversations and our understandings are always limited and of necessity must rely upon our relationships with one another to enable us to meet again and continue our conversation.
Enacting the PURC Theory as Research Process—My Experience

I have found that the research approach taken in this study has had many benefits, a few challenges, and some weaknesses. Primary among its merits were unquestionably the relationships and friendships that formed and deepened in the process. During the checkback sessions with study participants, even though in some cases more than two years had passed since we had last spoken, it was amazing to pick up relationships where we had left off and engage the challenges of the day together with urgency, commitment, and care. If relationships are a critical barometer of the merits of a cross-cultural, decolonizing, qualitative research project, to re-engage with participants in our shared work so well was a strong affirmation. The formation of positive relations was certainly anticipated within the proposed theoretical framework (Archibald, 1997; Armstrong, 1996; Buber, 1970; Freire, 2000; Gadamer, 2002), although friendship was not a descriptor proposed. That our conversations in many cases just carried right on, engaging the present moment and its new challenges and possibilities, was a further affirmation of the merits of the process: true dialogue is never finished (Bakhtin, 1986; Gadamer, 2002; Shields and Edwards, 2005). I had previously understood this ‘never finished’ as a claim that there will always be more to be said and understood about a particular topic. However, I experienced the continuance of dialogue, in the first instance, as a continuation of our relation—of our mutual trust, our shared interest in each other’s perspectives, and our care for one another. Understanding the topic more deeply came after.

Including so many participants in the study from four critical constituent groups, that in themselves were representative of a broad range of experience, affiliation, and points of view, provided an extraordinary depth of detail and analysis regarding what would improve communication, understanding, relationships and the educational processes of Okanagan
students. This wide participation, when combined with the series of conversations and checkback processes with each participant also provided the basis for significant triangulation of perspectives, and I think, established a fair level of validity for the themes and issues presented. The quality and breadth of these perspectives placed a large onus on me to record them and present them in a manner that did not lose their vitality, validity, or particularity.

I was torn by a commitment to preserve and protect these important narratives (Sterling, 1997) and a need to meet the challenge of writing a coherent piece of research. The length of the thesis, and its multitude of sometimes disparate details indicates my choice in favour of participants’ voices. From very early on, it was apparent to me that this was a project participants and I were doing together. This is indisputably a collective work, and the good ideas that emerge from it are a testament to the synergies of our dialogical relationships (Gadamer, 2002). Often, in revising stages when I was looking for ways to thin down the study I experienced a feeling that this is not my story to remove!

This, of course, was also the study’s greatest challenge for me: how to engage the extraordinary quantity and quality of the perspectives provided? The personal costs have been very high. Perhaps others may engage such research without becoming fully absorbed by the lives of participants and the challenge of finding hope and possibility in their situations.

The theoreticians whose concepts I gathered into the PURC framework prescribed a challenging set of tasks. In order for me to gain understanding of what participants, particularly those of differing traditions (Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal) and histories (colonized/colonizer) were saying, it was necessary for me to become open. This entailed
close scrutiny of my *horizon* (consciousness): suspending assumptions; provoking and
surfacing my *prejudices* whenever possible; awareness of my traditions, history, and
situatedness. To this was added the requirement of becoming aware of the horizon of each
participant. This called for a process of research preparation, but also of deep listening and
exhaustive reviews of transcripts as I took the details of what was said and tried to fit them to
my conjectures of what was meant. I found that my ability to transpose myself into the
constitutive horizons of participants improved as I learned more from each conversation. All
of this was in service of hearing each participant’s meanings as they were intended, not as I
construed them—in the participant’s terms, not in my terms. I became hyper self-conscious
about letting the meanings of participants be understood in their own terms, with as little of
my horizon imposing itself as possible. (Which is not to say that my horizon was ever not
influencing what I presented. I share Gadamer’s (2002) position that you can never remove
yourself, but you always have the obligation to do so as much as you can.) As I have
mentioned previously, I was deeply concerned not to re-inscribe the colonizing history and
traditions which, in part, have shaped my own consciousness.

One of the ways I followed in order to enable the other’s meanings to assert
themselves as they were intended was to do all of the cross-cultural transcriptions myself.
This took hundreds of hours, but the benefits of this process for clarity, for developing
understandings, for provoking my prejudices, for giving me time to reflect, and, interestingly,
for maintaining a strong emotional connection to each participant, made this time
commitment well worth it. Listening, hearing each voice, focusing intently on intonation and
signification, until I could hear each person’s voice speaking their perspective long after the
tape recorder was turned off, had profound ethical consequences for me. Assuredly this is
personal, but having participants’ voices present to me every day that I traveled this journey, has been transformative at every level of my being. As Gadamer (2002) foretells, in the communion of understanding one is changed.

Finally, I need to bring attention to the importance of becoming trustworthy. This study’s process required that I be worthy of participants’ confidence. I’m fallible; this was a significant personal journey. Participants entrusted me with narratives and perspectives that were very personal. Sometimes I would be sitting with a person who had been named by another just hours before as an antagonist of sorts. Indeed, I heard ‘both’ sides of a story many times. How does one remain authentic to others, when the horizons of these others begin conflicting with each other inside one’s own head?

The importance of respect and trust have had a strong presence in every aspect of this research and their significance cannot be overstated. They were established as fundamental at the outset in theory (Archibald, 1997; Buber, 1970; Freire, 2000; Gadamer, 2002; Lightning, 1992), and virtually every participant in the study stated just how critical they were! Still, it was the direct experience of participants’ concern about their vulnerability and the importance of confidentiality that forced me to learn how to contain each person’s horizon. By containing a horizon, I mean that I was allowing each person’s story to remain his or her story, honouring the legitimacy of his or her truth claims within his or her terms, while not revealing it to others until given permission to do so. It was one thing to carry this confidence during our conversations; it was another to carry this confidence in writing this dissertation which required that I disclose those horizons in some degree. I have sought to maintain the trust of participants with what is written here, holding to my essential commitments of respect, responsibility, and to do no harm.
Testing the PURC Theory as Research Process—Discoveries

While doing this research study, several discoveries about the process were made and are worth noting. First, the multiple interactions with each participant and the control these enabled over what was included in the study, were frequently identified by participants has having been very important. I believe that this approach was essential to the on-going willingness of Okanagan participants to continue with the study. I also believe that this allowed participants to engage more fully with the topic and with me from the beginning, knowing that what they said could later be reconsidered.

Second, I was overwhelmed by how much knowledge Okanagan participants insisted must be understood by non-Aboriginal school leaders. The understanding sections of the students’, parents’, and Aboriginal educators’ chapters were long because they believed gaining this knowledge and understanding were essential to improving communication, understanding, relationships, and educational processes of Okanagan students. This discovery strongly supports the salience of “preparation” from Lightning (1992) and Archibald (1997) and “acknowledging the horizon of the other” as posited by Gadamer (2002) for Okanagan/non-Okanagan dialogue.

Third, and closely connected to this knowledge discovery, is the overwhelming validation of the significance of the spilaxem, or narratives, for coming to shared meaning (Sterling, 1997). This study did just what Shirley Sterling (1997) said was necessary, it opened a space for Aboriginal narratives. I have found these narratives to be valuable in their own right, far beyond what meanings I have been able to make of them. They are landmarks for locating the current experiences and thinking of a community, and thus the basis for

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118 At another level, it was important for me to gain knowledge and understanding in such depth if I was going to represent accurately what participants wished to say about communication, understanding, relationships, and improving the educational processes of Okanagan children.
further conversation and further journeying. Without question, there is more knowledge that needs to be understood and there are more narratives to be told.\footnote{119} A significant implication of this research study is the importance of seeking the ways and means for these narratives to be shared and this knowledge to be learned.

A fourth processual discovery of significance was the importance of a holistic world view, and view of persons (Archibald, 1997; Bopp et al., 1984). It wasn’t until I had drafted all of the perspectives chapters that I realized just how often a holistic view of a person was behind criticisms of, and aspirations for, education. One of the markers of my own evolution in coming to this realization was my attempt to identify the desire for multi-dimensional communication as “thick” communication. In effect, what I was interpreting as a desire for “thick” communication was a desire, in part, for communication or events that would enable engaging the mind, heart, body, and spirit of a person. The dialogue process that we shared enabled us to range widely across a variety of topic areas that in some conversations included discussions of spirituality, suffering, tragedy, loss, aspirations, and hope; as well as to include many different locations, food, hikes, and the like. However, I believe that with a better understanding of the importance of engaging the whole person at the outset of this study, I would have engaged participants, and the topics I placed before them, more holistically. For example, I would introduce the four domains of self early in our conversations, and enable participants to use this as a reference, if desired.

As it was, asking participants how they would improve communication, understanding, and working relationships between Okanagan students, parents, community

\footnote{119} Although participants came from a broad range of locations within the Okanagan community, I am aware that as volunteers, they also came with a degree of confidence, interest, and trust in me that may not be shared by all. The narratives of those who are not represented in these pages are equally important. Another researcher, perhaps an Okanagan person, might be able to bring forward perspectives of those not represented.
and non-Aboriginal school leaders, proved to be a very productive set of questions! I believe that we engaged significant educational issues, in sufficient depth to suggest substantive, new and viable responses and possibilities. When I began the study, I believed that communication, understanding, and relationships made up an interactive system, which, if used as a basis of analysis and engagement with others, could helpfully guide the improvement of learning situations for Aboriginal students. A significant finding has been that the PURC basket of concepts, from Aboriginal, Okanagan, and Western sources, really worked. Across cultural and colonized distances, meaning flowed.

**PURC-A: An Improved Conceptual Framework**

In the process of conducting this research, it was evident that even though I was intent on understanding, relationships, and communication, participants never took their eyes far from the larger purpose which justified their participation. That purpose was of course the improvement of educational processes of Okanagan students. As a consequence, suggestions about how to improve the educational processes of Okanagan students (beyond the set areas of communication, understanding, and relationships) edged into most conversations and consequently have become a valuable addition to the study (see Appendix 6). It was a significant discovery that our dialogues were very strongly informed by an overarching purpose, and, in keeping with this discovery, I returned to the dialogue theorists to discover, in Freire (2000) in particular, the importance of a shared emancipatory purpose for dialogue in colonized/colonizing situations.

The concept of agency also emerged as a necessary element in the process of doing the study. Though this idea was arguably a part of my conceptual framework—Freire’s (2000) notion of “Subject” implies, according to my reading, the agency of a person—I just hadn’t known how valuable a signifier it would be. Agency marks power relations. In the
context of colonized/colonizer interactions, the degree of agency of participants in any given situation is absolutely vital for genuine conversation. Agency is also a measure of successful engagement. If the agency of all participants has increased, the capacity of participants to attain their ends and to work together has improved. Participant agency was enhanced in this study through the control participants had over what they said, how I understood it, and how their thinking was represented. As previously noted, this was very important for participants. I came to realize the importance of personal agency as a key indicator in this research process, when I discovered myself questioning whether students who spoke with me were empowered as a consequence of our conversations, or not. Finally, agency signifies the self-determination and control of education so strongly articulated by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) and by the National Indian Brotherhood (1972) before it.

The operative model of the Medicine Wheel described by Bopp, et al. (1984) and referenced widely in Aboriginal scholarship (Archibald, 1996; Brown, 2005; Marsden, 2005; Restoule, 2004; Storm, 1972), further suggested the PURC-A framework. The Medicine Wheel charts the four domains of a person as Spirit, Mind, Heart, and Body. Bopp et al. include with the four domains the attribute of volition, as the power to move between domains, and to choose how one will behave. The PURC–A framework correlates to these domains of a person as indicated in figure 3. As with the Medicine Wheel, the five elements of the PURC-A framework are interdependent and mutually enhancing: greater understanding facilitates stronger relationships and visa versa; carefully constructed communication processes enable understanding and nurture relationships; shared purpose creates commitment and scope; authentic participation requires agency and generates further agency.
The PURC-A conceptual framework brings together what have proven to be powerful concepts from dialogue and Aboriginal oral tradition. These concepts open to each other in important ways, affirming means of connection resident in both Western and Aboriginal traditions. Most significantly they open Okanagan and non-Okanagan to each other. Consequently, the PURC-A framework holds significant promise for future mutual connection and mutual research between Okanagan students, families, communities, and the non-Aboriginal educators who serve them.
From Silenced to Voiced: Private to Public: Oral to Text: Safe to Captured?

During the final checkback process, after reviewing the whole of chapter six and seeing all of the perspectives together for the first time, one of the Aboriginal educators wrote the following:

At times, I felt the level of sharing meant for private conversations; as you noted the level of sharing came from a place of trust. Somehow, I know that trust will be challenged by seeing all of the voices in totality. It seems so revealing as the group is small, and I feel a sense of unease....I know that these conversations have not been had with the Dominant group and with the Aboriginal group, not in such candor.

This observation highlights a significant caution learned with this research process. From the beginning many participants were concerned to maintain anonymity because they were afraid of how their words would be used against them. Their sense of vulnerability was very real. In their context of colonized power relations and lateral violence, one moves from silence to voice with care. I believe that the research process enabled participants to voice silenced perspectives. However, as noted by the Aboriginal educator above, this was not without anxiety and “unease.” One on one conversations are private, and what is said in them is held within a web of person to person relatedness. Words that are spoken between individuals are fluid and malleable; the same words transmuted to text are fixed and irretrievable. Moving such private conversations into the public space of this dissertation was and is dangerous. Even when participants were aware that this was going to happen, even when participants have had veto control over everything that was moved forward, and even when we all shared the belief that making our voices public was necessary for transforming education for Okanagan children, there remains a sense of exposure and vulnerability. What will happen to us now that our voices have been captured?

It is for this reason that I call for you, as reader, to honour the courage and truth claims of participants, to take seriously your place as participant in our dialogues, and
consequently to uphold the shared purpose and mutual respect that nurtured them into existence. With you inheres the possibility of our fears and our hopes for transformation.

**Improving Understanding, Relationships, and Communication: Discoveries**

What discoveries have been made on this journey that might improve understanding, relationships and communication between Okanagan students, parents, community and non-Aboriginal school leaders? I answer these questions by weaving together the major themes that emerged from participants’ perspectives with elements of the PURC-A framework.

**Improving Understanding**

Our people just need opportunities to speak our truths.

Eric, Okanagan Educator

Non-Aboriginal school leaders can improve their understanding of the Okanagan people they work with through preparation and a commitment to engagement. Preparation includes becoming aware of one’s own horizons and doing one’s self-work: reflexively considering how one’s tradition, history, and situatedness have shaped prejudices and assumptions that result in deficit thinking or reinstantiation of Canada’s historic colonizing discourse or that forestructure the learning of Okanagan perspectives. The result of one’s self work will be humility in the limitations of one’s consciousness, suspension of *prejudices* made conscious, and openness to learning new perspectives.

Preparation also includes gaining knowledge about the horizons of the Okanagan People. This includes learning about the history of European and Canadian colonization of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada and British Columbia—disease, intentionally inadequate Reservations\(^{120}\), formal policies of cultural destruction and assimilation, and residential schools. This preparation includes gaining knowledge about how this colonization was

\(^{120}\) Cf. Harris (2002).
enacted and experienced by the Okanagan. It includes learning about the role of schooling in this process. This preparation includes gaining knowledge about Okanagan culture, traditions, traditional education processes, world views, values, epistemologies, social structures, territory, spirituality, language, and history. And this preparation includes thinking critically about how this Okanagan life world is present in curriculum, pedagogy, school values and purposes. All of this preparation is possible before one meets with an Okanagan student or parent for the first time; all of this preparation is foundational, whether done before the first meeting, or the five hundredth, to understanding the lives of students, and families and to understanding their aspirations for education.

It will also be helpful for non-Aboriginal school leaders to know the situatedness of each Okanagan person that he or she may serve. The Okanagan community is very diverse, and understanding the nature of this diversity is very significant. Okanagan participants identified amongst themselves a spectrum of orientation from strongly traditional to strongly mainstream. Okanagan participants identified that some families are economically very secure and for others poverty is a pressing concern. Okanagan participants identified that politics and historic antipathies between families can make for difficult relations. Consequently, it is necessary for non-Aboriginal school leaders to push for many points of view on issues, to be broadly inclusive, to anticipate a multifaceted rather than singular position on any educational issue from the community, and always to seek the personal narrative of each student.

In meeting with Okanagan students, parents, or community, non-Aboriginal school leaders would do well to seek to understand first, and then to confirm their understanding with an Okanagan person. Make space and time for back and forth refinement of one’s
understanding. Make the gaining of understanding public and shared. Similarly, in the process of moving to judgment regarding an Okanagan student, make the process inclusive and transparent, so that mutual thinking and mutual action are possible.

Above all engage frequently with Okanagan people: Elders, students, parents, community members, politicians. Understanding is not an academic enterprise, but a 'learning-with' process, especially in a context where the particularity of individuals—their values and their circumstances—is so pronounced. Creating space for, and being open to Okanagan narratives is perhaps the most important thing for understanding that a non-Aboriginal school leader can do.

Okanagan students, parents, and community will also benefit from becoming aware of their own horizons and doing their self-work to improve their understanding of education, schools, and school leaders. Becoming aware of one's own experiences with schools, and how these experiences influence one's own thinking, particularly if the experiences were negative, will help identify assumptions and prejudices which may misinterpret what is happening for one's child in school, or may limit one's ability to interact with a school leader to improve an educational process for one's student. Given the identified intergenerational effects of residential school, this reflective process seems also to be worthwhile regarding one's parents' experiences of schools. A process of self and community reflection that clarifies assumptions about goals and purposes for education and for schooling would further improve the potential for understanding.

Gaining knowledge about the horizons of school educators would be valuable for improving understanding. Gaining knowledge about the school system, about curriculum, about roles of the personnel who work in schools, and about possible ways to be involved, to
take leadership, or advocate for change, were all identified as important preparatory knowledge for deepening understanding of education, schools, and school leaders. Being open to learning the values that individual educators hold and their goals for one’s child’s learning through direct engagement would improve understanding. Also, learning enough of the educators’ professional ‘language’ to be comfortable discussing issues in their terms, would improve the potential for understanding. As with non-Aboriginal school leaders, the best way to gain this knowledge is through frequent engagement with non-Aboriginal teachers and school leaders and through participation in schools.

Situations where Okanagan people and non-Aboriginal educators can develop mutual understanding, and develop a shared language that enables access to meanings both share, this is the heart of improving understanding.

**Improving Relationships**

Improving understanding improves the potential for relationship. Students knew that if non-Aboriginal people just understood Okanagan traditions and history, then they would be respected. All Okanagan and Aboriginal participants in this study expressed again and again the significance of respect for improving relations: respect for me as a person, which inherently requires respect for the Aboriginal, Okanagan heritage that constitutes my identity. If non-Aboriginal school leaders did nothing further than to ensure that their engagements with students, families, and community were experienced as respectful, this alone would bring significant improvement. Respect is backlit by 150 years of colonization, assimilation, and racism—150 years without respect. To act without respect is to repeat this history and all that it has meant.

Trust was a desired experience among Okanagan students, parents, community and non-Aboriginal school leaders. Okanagan participants expressed a desire to trust, non-
Aboriginal school leaders expressed a desire to be found trustworthy. But suspicion and distrust were notably the default position of relations, and participants observed how difficult it was to build trust and hold on to it. As stated in the parents perspectives chapter, acknowledging an Okanagan perspective, recognizing its merits, responding to this perspective, including the agent in formulating this response, and then following through would build trust. Being transparent would build trust. Developing mutual understanding would build trust. Engaging in mutual action would build trust. Without trust, other relations are troubled and easily eroded. Even moving from suspicion to neither trusting nor distrusting but waiting to see, would be a helpful improvement for relations.

For their part non-Aboriginal school leaders noted that when Okanagan parents don’t follow through with commitments, as sometimes happens, this also erodes confidence and a willingness to risk ventures that depend upon follow through.

Care was yearned for and experienced as transforming. Students spoke about the personal significance of school leaders who cared about how things were going for them, who took an interest in their studies, their thoughts, and their lives, who went out of their way to support them when urgency required. Parents and Aboriginal educators talked about the power of just warmly welcoming each child, which had the effect of letting the child know he or she was important. They noted that this also applied to parents, particularly those with negative school experiences. Care implied getting below the surface of behavior and public personas of a student. Care was experienced through acts of inclusion. Care was experienced through processes that clearly sought the best for a student. An experience of the absence of care was deeply distressing.
Okanagan and non-Aboriginal participants identified the need to frame relations as mutual, reciprocal, a partnership and the like. When relations are mutual, both sides bring perspectives to a situation as well as purposes, expectations, and resources. When relations are reciprocal, both sides share costs and benefits. Framing relations as mutual, reciprocal, or as partnership reflects a significant and overt desire to level power relations. It reflects a desire to be able to work with one another, rather than to be engaged in power struggles of resistance. Becoming aware of, and addressing, situations that foster powerlessness, or power over the other, will further improve relations between Okanagan students, parents, community and non-Aboriginal school leaders.

The Okanagan and Aboriginal value of wholism, mentioned by several Okanagan participants, provides a final way to improve relations. Recognition of the four domains of a person and connection, which honours the heart, mind, body, and spirit of each person, will deepen and strengthen authentic relations between individuals. The foundational assumption of wholism—that all are connected in a living web of relations, and that these relations must be balanced for all to be healthy and whole—provides significant ethical ground for further improving relations. It would do well for non-Aboriginal school leaders to find in their own traditions the beliefs and norms that resonate with the principles of wholism—this meeting promises a powerful ground for relationship.

**Improving Communication**

How the meeting is structured when Okanagan students, parents, community and non-Aboriginal school leaders engage influences the potential for developing understanding and relationships. Communication processes can be structured to intentionally limit or promote the possibility of understanding. Communication processes can be structured to maintain hierarchical or colonizing relations or promote egalitarian and reciprocal power relations.
The following set of questions, based on the PURC-A framework pose principles for improving communication processes:

Does this communication process develop understanding, positive relationships, agency, and advance mutual purpose (PURC-A)?

Purpose: Does this communication process advance a shared greater purpose? Is it congruent in form, content, and intended outcome with this shared purpose (for example, with decolonizing learning environments for Okanagan students.)

Understanding: Does this communication reflect understanding of the other? What assumptions and prejudices am I bringing to this communication? Does this communication advance understanding, or the potential of understanding? Does this communication enable mutual understanding?

Relation: Is this communication structured by, and does it promote, respect? Will this communication advance trust? Will this communication reflect care? To what degree is a communication process structured by, and does it develop, mutuality, reciprocity, and partnership? Will this communication enhance the formation of positive relations in the future?

Communication: Is this communication process inclusive of Okanagan oral traditions, or processes that have been agreed as valid and effective by the Okanagan? In what ways and to what extent does this communication process engage the four domains of a person? Is the process dialogic or monologic? To what extent has the communication process considered location, formality, and time?

Agency: Are power relations addressed within the communication process? Does the communication process instantiate power over the other, in the way that monologic
pronouncements from authority dictate observance and silence the other? Is the agency of participants advanced? Are all voices heard? Is the process colonizing/decolonizing? These principles apply whether one is making a phone call, sending a newsletter, arranging a parent advisory council meeting, or preparing for a restorative discipline event for a student.

In addition to these principles, five proposed communication processes emerged from the study as having significant potential for advancing purposes, understanding, relationships, communication and agency. These were: Okanagan mentors for non-Aboriginal school leaders, shared projects, “focus” or dialogue groups, a retreat for non-Aboriginal school leaders, and an annual conference. There was wide spread support for these suggestions among study participants.

Finally, the Advocate position as a structured communication process has had a critical role in carrying responsibilities for communication, understanding and relationships between the Okanagan and the public schools which serve them. Advocates have provided a visible bridge across the distance of culture and colonization. The role is a difficult one that puts the individuals in the position between worlds, with the potential for “split headedness” (Cajete, 1999), and perceived divided loyalties. Advocates have a significant knowledge base, which holds incredible potential for improving communication, understanding, and relationships.

Reconsidering the Literature: Reflections on the Application of Theory

Archibald’s (1997) seven principles for an ethos of storywork were an important foundation for this research process. Their similarity with some of the essential elements of dialogue provided powerful validation for key concepts (respect, reverence/I-Thou, interrelatedness/horizon awareness, synergy/fusion of horizons) as significant for a research process with Aboriginal people. Her ethos also served as a valuable bridge to the concerns
and issues raised by other Aboriginal research theorists regarding research with Aboriginal people. For example, Smith’s (1999) criterion that research with Indigenous people must be of benefit to the community was effectively represented in Archibald’s notion of reciprocity. Similarly, principles for Aboriginal research outlined by Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991)—respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility—were included and helpfully expanded in areas of significance for this project. Archibald’s ethos also helped me to hear more readily and to validate participants’ words spoken from a tradition of wholism and reverence. Although not all principles were applied in the same degree, or emerged with similar intensity, this study certainly substantiates the relevance of Archibald’s storywork ethos as a foundation for research with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

Sterling’s (1997) work was equally important to this research study, particularly her understanding of *spilaxem* and the value of narrative for speaking important truths. The power of participants’ narratives, their richness in detail and depth of meaning, was unexpected; their importance to those beyond the study was helpfully understood through Sterling’s work. Sterling brought attention to the decolonizing and reconstitutive significance of making narratives available to the Okanagan community. As with Archibald’s (1997) work, Sterling’s theorizing also validated key concepts—in particular, the significance of tradition, history, situatedness, and being understood in one’s own terms. This study substantiates the relevance of *spilaxem* for generating understanding and relationship between Okanagan people and non-Aboriginal people.

Lightning’s (1991) notion of “mutual thinking” with an Elder based upon preparation, humility, openness, and authentic meeting again validated key concepts across theoretical traditions (particularly preparation-awareness of one’s horizon, humility, openness, and
mutual thinking/understanding/fusion of horizons). With Archibald (1997), Lightning’s work also modeled the interdependence of relational virtues with processes of understanding, a significant assumption of this work and a strongly supported finding. Finally, Lightning’s emphasis on the process of preparing for meeting with an Elder also supported the argument that dialogue may benefit from attention to ritual, protocol, and structures of communication that signal an upcoming meeting is different and deeply important, whatever dialogical meeting this may be.

Armstrong’s (1996) notion of “communing” extended the relevance of relatedness to processes of understanding. Her translation of the Okanagan term she represented as meaning “communing” highlighted the importance of compassion, social bonds between people, and building community as traditional to a genuine process of meeting between Okanagan people, and by inference, with others. Thus, from a meeting between Okanagan and non-Okanagan people, Okanagan participants would hope for a stronger social bond and a positive consequence for building up community. I reiterate this because it so clearly articulates the relational telos of dialogue; and so clearly defines what is historically absent in meetings between Okanagan and non-Okanagan school leaders. This study has clearly shown a strong desire for this sort of “communing” by all participants.

Although the talking circle was not used as a research process, its principles of inclusion and awareness of protocol that enables respectful engagement shaped conversations and interpretation.

Gadamer’s (2002) notions of tradition, historically effected consciousness, and situatedness, their production of prejudices, and the restructurings of one’s horizons were vital to identifying how well-intentioned educators could still be engaged in colonizing
Okanagan children, or reinstating generations of deficit thinking. Gadamer’s theorizing here helped make sense of the observations of Aboriginal scholars, such as Battiste (2000), that the world view of European Canadians continued to dominate Aboriginal Canadians, through, in Battiste’s words, “cognitive imperialism.” Gadamer’s notions were essential for me, as researcher, to become as clear as possible about the forestructuring of my own consciousness in order to be open to participants’ perspectives. Gadamer’s work was of further assistance in defining how, in the process of gaining understanding with another, our prejudices are provoked, the structuring of our own consciousness becomes apparent, and what might otherwise remain hidden becomes available to our awareness. Knowing this pushed me to pay careful attention to the ways of thinking in our conversations—both participants’ and mine as revealed by the perspectives of participants. Gadamer’s theorizing also made clear to me, what I discovered over and over again listening to conversations that suddenly revealed new meaning though I had reviewed them three or four times before, that no matter how empathetic I may be, my own consciousness still limited what I could understand.

There was remarkable congruence between Gadamer’s (2002) central notions of tradition, history, and situatedness and participants’ frequent references to tradition, culture, and history. Gadamer’s theoretical validation of tradition as significant for understanding an other resonates with Okanagan participants’ emphasis on the need for non-Aboriginal school leaders to gain knowledge about and understand Okanagan tradition, culture, and history. I also found it remarkable how participants’ insistence that this background knowledge was essential to making sense of what they were saying matched Gadamer’s requirement to transpose one’s self into the horizon of the other. This knowledge was as necessary for me to
make sense of what was being said, as it will be for non-Aboriginal school leaders. Participants seemed to share Gadamer's hermeneutical insight, that the parts don't make sense without the whole story, and any 'whole story' one may have regarding Okanagan people must be constructed with reference to tradition, culture, and history. From Okanagan participants' view, non-Aboriginal school leaders won't understand why something is important to an Okanagan person until they have understood culture, tradition, history, colonization processes, and the lived experience of a person first.

From Gadamer (2002) I also took up the very practical observation that understanding is developed in genuine conversation, in a dialogic, to and fro process, where refinement of understanding increases with each back and forth movement. Thus, at end I had three conversations with most participants, some many more. The meet-converse-listen-transcribe-send transcription for review-meet to converse about transcription and new perceptions-listen-transcribe-write-send chapter sections for review-meet-listen-make changes cycle really did increase the depth and complexity of understanding. I was very aware that during the last few interviews Okanagan participants related to me differently, as if I might just be getting it—some of it anyway. Certainly, we had come to share meanings across some very important topics.

Gadamer's (2002) position that language is the medium of tradition played in the background of my consciousness throughout the revision process. It poses significant questions for this research study, and for those going forward attempting to improve understanding, relationships, and communication. As a means of introducing these questions, let me recall the student who paused when I inquired what it might mean to live the good life according to Okanagan tradition. Okanagan tradition was not easily available to his
consciousness. In part, I believe this is because the *sqilxw* (Okanagan) language was not present for him to think in terms of Okanagan tradition. The language of our conversations was English. English provides a wide vocabulary, but as Gadamer points out, a vocabulary anchored to Western meanings and interpretations. What is the effect on Okanagan tradition to have it translated into English and its corresponding world of meaning? I am suspicious that because this study was conducted in English, ultimately being referenced to meanings held within its traditions, that the “cognitive imperialism” of concern to Battiste (2000) still has had its way with us. As Gadamer observes, language is virtually invisible to us, so close is it to the act of thinking. A second question is: Was there sufficient opportunity for me to identify that English words that I understood one way, were referring to quite a different set of meanings? Gadamer’s position is that through the miracle of language eventually we can come to understand what each person means. However, he also states that this process of coming to an understanding may never be finished. As a consequence of these questions, and based upon the perspectives of some participants, I believe that this research will be advanced further when Okanagan language is included.

Archibald (1997), Buber (1970), and Lightning (1991) all make note of the significance of reverence in relation to the other. The commitment to encounter another person as Thou, no matter what his or her differences or values, is foundational to the research approach of this study. The absolute presence that Buber calls forth, the imperative to respect—or have “absolute regard” as Starratt (1991) says—even as an ideal to which I, as researcher, aspired, this frame of an ethical-spiritual-emotional-mindful way of being with another, it pushed me to value the other’s perspective and views, pushed me to get beyond judgments and differences and honour the life of each person I met. It also pushed me to be
as authentic as I could be with participants. The point of this is a profound one for dialogue as a research approach. There may be no method for dialogue, or all methods may work for dialogue, because ultimately when dialogue happens it is because of the openness of participants to each other. Dialogue calls forth an ethos that one commits to, a way of being that pushes one to be genuine, authentic, and open to the other in his or her uniqueness, in his or her own terms.\textsuperscript{121} As a researcher taking the teleological imperative of the I-Thou relation to heart, the purpose of the research was always about and remains about the relation—our relations.

This research study observed, employed and substantiates Sidorkin’s (1999) notion of “rips in the fabric of the I-It world” based on Bakhtin’s idea of carnival (p. 136). Many times participants called for a need to meet each other in a different way, in a different place—on Reserve, out of the principal’s office, in the principal’s truck, in retreat, paddling Okanagan lake, eating together, at a community games day. I met participants in kitchens, out of classes, in coffee shops, at work, on verandahs, in an upscale restaurant that I certainly couldn’t afford. Our conversations often occurred in situations where our routine worlds were set aside, and well, there we were. There is something very important about meeting each other outside of habituated space and time, in the rips of the I-It world. It is as if we can be genuine there.

The research process of this study was strongly influenced by concerns of domination, colonization, oppression, and the power relations that enable these. Theorists such as Fanon (1977), Foucault (1995, 2000), Bourdieu (1977, 1984), Fine (1994), Battiste

\textsuperscript{121} I have intentionally used “ethos” to describe Buber’s I-Thou relation, and the way of being that actualizes it, as a way of reflecting Archibald’s (1997) storywork “ethos.” Essentially both move beyond behavioural procedures, and move towards the necessity of living one’s life in relation to others in a manner that reflects authentically held values.
(2000), Henderson (2000), Nicholas (2001), Smith (1999), among many others make clear the significance of such relations, particularly for Aboriginal people. The work of Freire (2000) provided a theoretical basis for dialogue that was structured as a response to these power relations. Freire makes it clear that the traditions of dialogue espoused by Gadamer and Buber are necessary but insufficient in situations of oppression. It is critical to have an emancipatory purpose that clearly is of benefit to those who have been oppressed. It is critical to enable their lived experience—their narratives—to be formative of understanding and action. It is critical to be conscious of the power relations extent in a situation. It is critical that the agency of participants is recognized, enabled, and advanced. And it is imperative that educators (or researchers) care deeply—Freire uses the word “love”—about the people one is working with. From my view, Freire is right in all of these. I was conscious of these concerns in structuring the research process. Yet, it wasn’t until I was well through drafting the perspectives chapters that I realized how important purpose and agency really were for participants, and that I should have given more opportunity in the conversations to engage the topic of agency.

The research literature upon which the theoretical framework of this study was based enabled a research process that was generative of narratives, understanding, and relationships. As has been presented, elements of the theoretical framework helpfully illuminated the perspectives of participants. Similarly, participants’ perspectives confirmed the significance of elements of the framework. The theoretical framework holds potential for improving understanding, relationships, and communication processes between Okanagan students, families, community, and non-Aboriginal educators.
Conclusion

This conclusion marks a significant way point in this dialogic journey, but hardly its end. I have had the privilege of sharing conversations about improving connections and educational processes for Okanagan students with 35 caring, thoughtful, concerned individuals. I have pulled together strands of their thinking and my thinking and our mutual thinking to say here are some important ideas that we had and here are some conclusions that are congruent with my understanding of our conversations. I know that participants to this study would emphasize some different ideas and would draw other conclusions. I also know that they will be able to improve on the conclusions I have made. And this is the point which I hope is made abundantly clear. The wisdom and knowledge to move things forward for Okanagan students is resident within the Okanagan community and the educators who serve those students. The findings and conclusions of this study point the way to possible approaches, but all of them require engaging Okanagan and non-Okanagan alike in mutual thinking, communing, and mutual action. Anytime Okanagan and non-Okanagan seek ways to work with each other to improve education, things will improve for Okanagan students. 36 of us pondered how to go about improving connections and education, but there are several thousand who were not part of these conversations that have much more to contribute!

My non-Aboriginal identity, my personal values and traditions, my strengths and limitations have dramatically shaped this study. I am certain that an Okanagan person would have had different conversations, would bring different emphases, and would come to different conclusions. Everyone who reads this study, its findings and its conclusions, needs to understand this. Does this mean that these findings and conclusions are useless? Not at all. My own location as educator, former administrator, neighbour, colleague, ally, and friend brings strengths to this study that another won’t bring. What this realization of limitedness
means though is that the challenge is for you and others to respond, to identify the strengths and the limits of this work, and in dialogue, to deepen the understanding that was foundational to it, and to then go beyond its findings. This study is relevant to a particular moment in the evolution of relations between a growing Okanagan community revitalized through decolonizing and reconstitutive processes, and a school district that is still growing into its relation with this elder cousin. Hopefully, the recommendations of this study will lead to improvements that in turn will require new understanding, new dialogue, and new recommendations.

Ironically, one of the strengths of my identity-location for this study is my non-Aboriginal Canadian-European ancestry. This is because some of the most limiting forces that constrain Okanagan students are in us, are in non-Aboriginal educators and school leaders, are in me, are in the habitus that I have, are in the habitus we share as upstanding educators and leaders in Canadian society. It’s not just about decolonizing the educational processes that Okanagan children experience, this study has demonstrated that the necessary work at hand includes the decolonizing of me, of us. This study has demonstrated a process where those who have benefited from colonization, those whose frameworks are structured by the narratives of Canadian and European superiority, may, through dialogic relations and Aboriginal oral traditions, deconstruct these imprisoning frameworks, and become open to Okanagan perspectives, and significant change.

When I began working at Beta secondary, I felt the need for a bridge between the school and the Okanagan community. There needed to be some structure to cross the distance between school and Reserve, between teacher and Okanagan student, between administrator and family. So I conceptualized dialogue as a bridge, as a way of allowing people to be
different, but through dialogue they could visit each other in their difference. In many ways this study has been about constructing a bridge across the distances created between school and Okanagan community by 150 years of colonization and by cultural differences. But, I now think that bridges also come between people and instantiate distances that may be left behind otherwise. And so, at this waypoint in this journey, I appreciate deeply the wisdom of the Sacred Tree as presented by Bopp et al. (1984), and I would shift the metaphor from a bridge to conversation, dialogue and oral tradition as providing a gathering place, symbolically like the Sacred Tree, where we may gather in a place of “peace, contemplation, and centering,” where we, in each other’s gracious company, may give “birth to our values and potentialities as unique human beings” (p. 22). It has been an honour for me to gather with those who have participated in this study, and with them offer to you and to our children, our analyses and aspirations for making our shared world a better place.

All my relations.
Reference List


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APPENDIX 1

General outline for first conversation with Okanagan and Aboriginal participants

A. Brief introduction of the researcher and of the research project and its purposes.
   1. Have you any immediate questions, thoughts or concerns regarding the project or your participation in it?
   2. How long have you attended this school? How long have you known the school leaders?
   3. In general terms, how would you characterize your overall relationship with the school?

B. Communicative events with school leaders.
   1. Could you tell some stories typical of your experiences of communication with the school leaders?
   2. It would appear from what you say that this process (summarize process recounted) was particularly effective/ineffective for you. Can you explain why? [Follow this sequence for each of the experiences recounted]
   3. Have you other experiences where communication with the school leaders was effective? What was it that the school leader did that facilitated this? What was it that you did that facilitated this?
   4. Have you other experiences where communication with the school leaders was notably ineffective? What was it that the school leader did that contributed to this? Is there anything that you are aware of that you did that contributed to this ineffectiveness? What would have changed the outcome and made the communication process more effective?

C. Preferable communication processes.
   1. Imagine, if you will, that the world is perfect and that you can communicate with school leaders as you most deeply would like to. In this perfect world, when you communicate as you would most like to, you are understood, you are respected, and you feel that you could work with the school leaders to improve your educational experience. And equally, in this perfect world, you understand what the school leader wishes to communicate, you can respect what she/he says, and you know she or he feels she/he can work with you to improve your educational experience. What would communication in this perfect world look like?

   [Summarize vision to allow time for reflection and further response and further detail.]

   2. Would you say that your vision of how communication should be would be shared by other Okanagan students? / parents? / educators?

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122 This outline was a foundation for conversations, though each conversation quickly developed its own priorities based on what was shared.
3. How would communication processes with parents change as a result of this vision?

4. How would communication processes between school leaders and community Elders and leaders change?

D. Preparation of non-Aboriginal school leaders.

1. What should your school leaders know more about in order to communicate more effectively with you? [What is it that they could understand better before hand so that in communication with you, they would understand your perspective more fully?]

2. What sorts of knowledge do you wish your school leaders had in order to better work with students? Parents? Okanagan community Elders? Leaders?

3. If you were responsible for preparing non-Aboriginal school leaders for the position of principal at your school, what would you require of them?

E. Preparation of Okanagan students, parents, community leaders.

1. Looking back over your experiences with school leaders, what do you wish you had known in advance?

2. If you were responsible for preparing Okanagan students / parents / Elders / educators for communicating with the school leader at your school, what would you want to be sure they knew?

3. How would you wish to teach this knowledge?

F. Closing.

1. Have you any further thoughts about what sorts of communication could improve understanding and working relationships between Okanagan students, parents, community and your school leaders?

2. [Summarize transcription process and arrange for return of transcription for review.]

Thank you.
APPENDIX 2

General outline for first conversation with non-Aboriginal school leaders and educators

A. Brief introduction of the researcher and of the research project and its purposes.
4. Have you any immediate questions, thoughts or concerns regarding the project or your participation in it?
5. How long have you worked at this school in your current capacity? Previously? How long have you been in education?
6. In general terms, how would you characterize your overall relationship with Okanagan students, parents and community?

B. Communicative events with Okanagan students, parents, and community.
5. Could you tell some stories typical of your experiences of communication with Okanagan students, parents, and community?
6. It would appear from what you say that this process (summarize process recounted) was particularly effective/ineffective for you. Can you explain why? [Follow this sequence for each of the experiences recounted]
7. Have you other experiences where communication with Okanagan students, parents, or community was effective? What was it that the Okanagan students, parents, or community did that facilitated this? What was it that you did that facilitated this?
8. Have you other experiences where communication with Okanagan students, parents or community was notably ineffective? What was it that the school leader did that contributed to this? Is there anything that you are aware of that you did that contributed to this ineffectiveness? What would have changed the outcome and made the communication process more effective?

C. Preferable communication processes.
5. Imagine, if you will, that the world is perfect and that you can communicate with Okanagan students, parents and community as you most deeply would like to. In this perfect world, when you communicate as you would most like to, you are understood, you are respected, and you feel that you could work with the Okanagan students, parents and community to improve the educational experience for all Okanagan students. And equally, in this perfect world, you understand what an Okanagan student, parent or community leader wishes to communicate, you can respect what she/he says, and you know she or he feels she/he can work with you to improve educational experiences for Okanagan students. What would communication in this perfect world look like?

[Summarize vision to allow time for reflection and further response and further detail.]

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123 This outline was a foundation for conversations, though each conversation quickly developed its own priorities based on what was shared.
6. Would you say that your vision of how communication should be shared by other school leaders? By teachers in your school? By district staff?

7. How would communication processes with Okanagan students change as a result of this vision?

8. How would communication process with Okanagan parents change as a result of this vision?

9. How would with community Elders and leaders change?

D. Preparation of non-Aboriginal school leaders.

4. What do you know now about the processes of understanding and working with Okanagan students, parents, and community leaders that you wish you had known when you started?

5. If you were responsible for preparing school leaders for communicating with the Okanagan students at your school what would you want to be sure they knew?

6. With Okanagan parents?

7. With the Okanagan community?

8. Would this same hold true for teachers in your school?

9. How would you wish to teach this knowledge?

E. Preparation of Okanagan students, parents, community leaders.

4. What should Okanagan students know more about in order to communicate more effectively with you? [What is it that they could understand better before hand so that in communication with you, they would understand your perspective more fully?]

5. Parents?

6. Community leaders?

10. If you were responsible for preparing Okanagan students, parents, and community for effective communication with you and the school, what would you require of them?

F. Closing.

3. Have you any further thoughts about what sorts of communication could improve understanding and working relationships between Okanagan students, parents, community leaders and your school leaders?

4. [Summarize transcription process and arrange for return of transcription for review.]

5. Thank you.
APPENDIX 3

General Outline For Second Conversations\(^{124}\)

A. Review of and reflection on transcript from conversation 1.
   7. Participant’s thoughts, clarifications, expansions, concerns, or questions arising from transcript of conversation 1?
   8. Mark’s thoughts, clarifications, expansions, concerns, or questions arising from transcript of conversation 1?

B. New thoughts or perspectives since conversation 1.
   10. Mark (including preliminary findings).

C. New questions arising from preliminary findings.

D. Concluding remarks and brief discussion regarding focus group participation and next steps.

\(^{124}\) This outline was a foundation for conversations, though each conversation quickly developed its own priorities based on what was shared.
APPENDIX 4

Adult Consent Form for the Study:
Communication, Understanding, and Working Relationships
Between Okanagan Students, Parents, Community
and non-Aboriginal School Leaders

Student Investigator: Mark Edwards, PhD student, Educational Studies, University of British Columbia. 604-822-5374.
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Carolyn Shields, Department Head, Educational Studies, UBC. 604-822-5359

This study is being undertaken by Mark Edwards, PhD student at the University of British Columbia, in conjunction with the Okanagan Indian Band and with School District #22. This study will provide the basis for Mark’s graduate thesis. Its findings will be presented to all participants, the Okanagan Band and to School District 22.

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to discover what sorts of communicative processes could improve understanding and working relationships between Okanagan students, parents, community and non-Aboriginal school leaders. Participants in this study have an experience of communicative processes between Okanagan students, parents, community and non-Aboriginal school leaders of school district #22 and have an interest in expressing their perceptions of these communicative processes.

Procedures:

This study is based upon conversations between participants and the primary investigator, Mark Edwards. You will be asked to participate in two interviews with Mark, and invited to participate in one focus group session. Each interview will last 45 minutes. The focus group will last 60 minutes. Interviews will be conducted at locations of convenience for you, to be arranged when an interview is scheduled. The interviews will be based upon a series of questions aimed at discovering what sorts of communicative processes have been effective for you and what factors are important for allowing such processes. Interviews will be audio-taped for transcription unless you have strong feelings to the contrary. Transcriptions of interviews will be returned to you for feedback.

A next to final draft that includes your interview data will also be returned to you for feedback. All interviews will be compared with each other by Mark. Major themes, common events and factors will be identified. Findings and suggestions will be based upon these.

Confidentiality:

Your identity will be kept strictly confidential. You will be given a code number that will identify your interview audio-tapes, transcripts and other documents. Audio-tapes, transcripts, and other documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. You will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. Digital information will only be stored on a computer kept in a locked office, and will be removed from the computer at the conclusion of the study. Mark Edwards will have access to and make use of the study raw data. His advisor, Dr. Carolyn Shields, may access raw data to validate study methods and findings. No one else will have access.

Study Participation Risks:

You will be asked questions about how well you have been understood by people in school leadership, or by parents, students, and community members of the Okanagan Band. If you believe your responses to this
Ownership and Control Concerns in the Research Proposal: Communication, Understanding, and Working Relationships between Okanagan Students, Parents, Community and non-Aboriginal School Leaders

Introduction:

There are four main parties and up to 40 individuals involved in this study. This paper is an overview of how this study intends to address the ownership and control concerns of the four main parties and the individual participants.

The four main parties are: The Okanagan [community], School District #, The University of British Columbia, and Mark Edwards (the researcher).

Individual participants may include:
- 8 Okanagan parents of students;
- 8 Okanagan students (4 elementary, 4 secondary);
- 3 Okanagan community leaders;
- 3 First Nations Advocates;
- 2 First Nations Certified Education Assistants;
- 2 First Nations teachers;
- 4 School counselors;
- 4 Administrators (school leaders);
- 2 District Office Personnel;
- 3 Aboriginal Targeted Funding Committee members.

The numbers provided may increase or decrease depending upon whether people are willing to participate.

Consent Forms:
Every individual who participates is given a consent form which outlines the study’s purpose, what is expected of a participant, how confidentiality will be maintained, and what risks are involved in participating in the study. Consent forms for adults, parents of students, students, and school administrators are attached. Participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Participants are informed that the study is supervised by the Ethics Review Board of the University of British Columbia and that any ethical concerns can and should be reported to them.

Confidentiality

Of Individual Participants:
- Individual participants will not be named or identified in any way;
• All “raw” data (interview tapes, notes) that could identify participants will only be accessed by the researcher—Mark Edwards—and by his advisor at the University, Dr. Carolyn Shields for advising purposes only.
• Raw data will be kept in secured office filing cabinets and will be destroyed after 5 years.
• Each participant will have opportunity to review the transcripts of his or her interview with Mark and the section(s) of the proposed final draft of the study that quotes the participant’s words or expresses the participant’s experience. If the participant is concerned that their identity may be revealed by what is said, the draft of the study will be changed.

Confidentiality

Of Main Parties:

• Neither the specific Okanagan community nor School District # will be named or identified in the thesis.

Control of Information

By Individual Participants:

• Individual participants will have opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews. At this time participants may wish to rephrase or edit what was said, or they may wish to add clarifications.
• Individual participants will also have opportunity to review the sections of the thesis that quote their interviews to ensure that what is represented is acceptable.

By Main Parties:

This proposal suggests that the study take a few forms. Each form presents slightly different control and ownership issues. These forms are:

1. A thesis or dissertation;
2. An executive summary for Okanagan community and school district;
3. A public presentation of findings with summary for Okanangan parents and students;
4. A professional development workshop for employees of School District #.
5. Submission of findings of the study to an academic journal, such as the Canadian Journal of First Nations Education;
6. Presentation of findings of the study at an academic conference.

1. The thesis:

• The Okanagan community will be given opportunity to hear and respond to a draft of the thesis before it is submitted in its final form.
• The School District will be given opportunity to hear and respond to a draft of the study before it is submitted in its final form.
• The thesis or dissertation is written to meet academic specifications of the university. These specifications include being read by six academic examiners and then submitting the thesis to the university library where it is catalogued and shelved.
• A final draft of the thesis will be formally presented to the Okanagan community and School District #. It is hoped that these copies will be made available to individual participants who may wish to read the full thesis.

2. The executive summaries presented to the Okanagan community and to School District # will be for the Council and the District to make use of as they see fit.

3. The public presentation to Okanagan parents and students would be developed and presented collaboratively with the community and the School District.

4. The professional development workshop for School District # would be developed and presented collaboratively with the community and the School District.

5. Submissions of the study findings to academic journals would be submitted to the Okanagan community and to School District # for review and approval.*

6. Submissions of the study findings to an academic conference would be submitted to the Okanagan community and to School District # for review and approval.*

*I would like the opportunity to present the findings to the larger educational community in Canada and the United States because I believe the findings may be of great value to Aboriginal students in both countries.

Conclusion:

There may be areas of concern not addressed by this summary, or areas that arise during the study which require further clarification and negotiation. I am at all times open to engaging these and other concerns that may arise. Given the legitimate interests of all parties, negotiation and resolution of such concerns is vital to the intent and success of this proposal.

Respectfully yours,

Mark Edwards, Ph.D. Candidate,
Educational Studies, University of British Columbia
APPENDIX 6

Improving the Educational Processes of Okanagan Students

The study strongly supported the need for change in Aboriginal education evinced by graduation statistics (BC Ministry of Education, 2006), life chances statistics (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2001), Aboriginal groups (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972), public inquiries (RCAP, 1996; Sullivan, 1988) and scholars (Archibald, 1995; Barman, 2003; Battiste and Henderson, 2000; Bishop and Glynn, 1999; Brown, 2005; Cajete, 2000; Chandler, 1998; Cohen, 1998; Hampton, 1995; Hare, 2003; Harris, 2002; Henderson, 2000; Ing, 2000; Isbister, 1998; Miller, 1996; Nicholas, 2001; Schissel, 2003; Smith, 1999; Sterling, 1997; Sterling-Collins, 2001). Participants in this study provided analyses and suggestions on how to improve the educational processes of Okanagan students.¹²⁵ In this Appendix, I gather together their diverse thinking on this issue and suggest that there are 12 major themes of approach for improving educational processes based upon our collective thinking about this challenge. Each theme represents a line of inquiry and action. I have chosen to portray these themes or lines as threads of a blanket in order to illustrate that they are interdependent. When each thread is engaged and woven with the others they promise something strong, comprehensive, and useful. See figure 4.

Thread 1. Okanagan Culture, Traditions, History, Language, Territory

Students, parents and Aboriginal educators all strongly urged greater attention to Okanagan culture, traditions, history, and language in the education process of Okanagan

¹²⁵ I have used the term educational process rather than the term schooling in order to express and imply that educational processes encompass learning that happens in school and beyond school. Thus the educational processes of each theme are not necessarily going to be undertaken by, or achieved in, schools. By educational processes we are seeking the ideal education of Okanagan students—education that is inclusive of family, school, and community processes of learning.
students. There were many reasons given for the significance of this theme in students’
education—identity, cultural competence, pride, self-determination, culture sustainability.
The implications of this finding are straightforward. Okanagan culture, tradition, history,
language, values, world views, ways of thinking, and territory should be more extensively
included in Okanagan students’ K – 12 school experiences and education outside of school.
This finding is widely supported in the Aboriginal research literature (Archibald, 1995;
Battiste, 2000; Brown, 2005; Bishop & Glynn; 1999; Cajete, 2000; Hampton, 1995; Ing,
2000; Minister’s National Working Group on Education, 2002; Smith, 1999; RCAP, 1996;
Stiffarm, 1998) and confirms the findings of Sterling-Collins (2001) review report on First
Nations Education in the school district. Perhaps the research of Chandler and Lalonde
(1998) makes this point most bluntly: communities with strong cultural programs and
identity have suicide rates markedly lower than those without such programs.

There was support for Hampton’s (1995) notion of “Indian education sui generis”—
as ‘a thing of its own kind’ (p.10). Parents and Aboriginal educators identified the need for
Okanagan responsive curriculum and pedagogy—Aboriginal education initiatives which are
exemplified in the work of Archibald (1995), Brendtro and Brokenleg, (1990, 1993), Ermine
and sequence of Okanagan culture, traditions, values, history, language, and knowledge of
the territory to be undertaken by each Okanagan student through their learning years is
needed (See Appendix 7 for one model of Okanagan education in parallel with the public
school system.). Sterling-Collins’ (2001) recommendation to hire a full time curriculum
writer is in keeping with this need. There was also concern that the non-Aboriginal
population also become more conversant with Okanagan history and world views, though as
previously noted, participants were divided on whether the language should be available to non-Okanagan people.

Figure 4. A weave of proposed themes to improve the educational processes of Okanagan students.

Thread 2. Students

This theme expresses the widely held finding that the particularity of each student is at the heart of improving educational processes for students. Students, parents, and educators
identified the need for appropriate and effective learning support (arguing that previous pull-out learning assistance effectively trapped students in a back eddy of low expectations). Parents and non-Aboriginal school leaders talked about timely tutoring. All participant groups identified the importance of getting to know the personal life of each student—the sharing of personal narratives. Parents and Aboriginal educators talked about learning styles and responsive pedagogy that would meet these. There was a significant congruence of perspectives about the need for Okanagan students to develop assertiveness and agency regarding their own learning. Similarly, students and parents independently talked about the importance of developing a sense of future possibility and ambition for students: “You can do anything!”

My own experience of spending hours with Okanagan students learning of their experiences in school provided for me a perception of just how valuable student narratives would be for school, family, and community engagement of educational processes. This finding echoes the merit of Russell Bishop’s (2002, 2003) efforts to gather the narratives of Maori students and use these as the basis for educational and instructional reform. It also echoes the findings of Foster and Goddard (2003):

We contend that further examination of student perspectives of schooling would be informative as educators develop curricula that are relevant in a northern environment. More precisely, the arguments here are that (i) “our education system must provide opportunities for students to actively participate in their educational process” (James, 1999, p. 216), and (ii) “educators have a responsibility to acknowledge, not only the student’s cultural perspective, but that of their own, which will influence the teaching-learning process.” (p. 216)

Further gathering of student narratives is called for. Other implications of this theme include local action research on learning styles and responsive pedagogy and monitoring the efficacy of operative learning support models. Approaches for developing assertiveness in students could be undertaken as a joint project between families of primary and intermediate children.
and their classroom teachers. A similar joint approach could be undertaken for developing student ambition—high expectations and assumptions of capacity by all would be a start.

Thread 3. Family

Include families. Schools need to engage families in as many ways as possible. Families need to take it on themselves to be involved as much as they can. The exclusion of families by historic educational programs (residential school) needs to be countered by marked inclusion. All groups identified that parents needed to participate in schools and that they needed to be respected and heard when they do. The sense of personal agency experienced by parents in relation to schools varies widely. Extra measures to counter negative histories, assumptions, and past experiences are called for. It was noted that parents need greater knowledge of how the system works. It was proposed that schools pay careful attention to connecting with parents when they are most inclined to be engaged with schools, such as in primary, transition to intermediate, transition to secondary, preparation for graduation.

Perhaps the most pressing implication of these findings is for schools and for families to actively seek ways to increase parent capacity to be involved in schools and to support their students learning. One area that emerged as a possible direction for further enhancement in the study was the way parents took time to express what they thought other parents should know. Having parents support other parents, and creating opportunities for the sharing of personal narratives regarding successful navigation of the school system, shows promise.

Thread 4. Community

All participant groups expressed in different ways a desire to see greater involvement of the Okanagan community in education. One set of reasons revolved around the perceived need for greater control of educational processes if Okanagan aspirations and purposes for education were going to be met. Parents were particularly concerned about accountability and the ability of the community to be able to hold the school system to account for outcomes with students. Parents also perceived the community and council as having the political strength to lever change in the school system when they as parents could not. A second set of reasons revolved around the necessity of involving the whole community if Okanagan culture, traditions, values, history, language, and knowledge of territory is ever going to be genuinely passed on to the next generation. All participant groups acknowledged that some of this knowledge was appropriately provided by the Okanagan community, not the schools. A third set of reasons was based on the belief that each Okanagan student is enmeshed in a powerfully influential set of relations with the community, and for the learning of Okanagan students to advance, the capacity for learning and supporting learning by the community must also advance.

Implications of these findings include clear delineation of educational goals by the community so that mechanisms for control necessary to the achievement of these goals can be pursued. Community participation in the scope and sequence of learning Okanagan culture, traditions, history, language, and knowledge of the territory, and identification and

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127 See Foster and Goddard (2003) for similar research findings. Their findings support those of May (1999) whom they quote: “Without community consultation and involvement in planning, schools will always yield to outside pressures to conform to the dominant culture, so that important cultural values weaken and die. However, when schools become organic to their local Indigenous communities, such communities are able to insist on the insertion of their own values into the school’s organization, management, pedagogy, curriculum, and modes of evaluation (p. 3)” (Foster and Goddard, p. 10).

128 See Kavanagh (2003a) for school leadership specific suggestions for working with First Nations community.
development of persons able to teach these, would seem called for. Also a long term commitment, by school district and by Council, to enhancing the community’s learning capacity and capacity to support learning is suggested.

**Thread 5. Healing Journey**

This theme is built upon the widespread testimony of participants regarding the ongoing, negative, intergenerational effects of the residential schools, and the ongoing, negative effects of 150 years of colonization, racism, and oppression by dominant Canadian society. The healing journey theme speaks to the disintegrating forces of violence, abuse, relational breakdown, addiction, and self-destruction that have resulted from these oppressive histories. This theme speaks to a journey for individuals and for community. The necessity of enacting healing processes within the educational processes of Okanagan students is strongly implied by these findings.

This theme also responds to the frequent references by parents and Aboriginal educators to the need for educational processes to be about developing the bodies, hearts, and spirits of Okanagan students as well as their intellects. The healing journey theme calls on participants’ references to the Medicine Wheel and the view that education and healing are about becoming and being whole.129 This finding corroborates the work of Brown (2005) and Ing (2000).

My own view is that there is a strong moral imperative for schools, as the historic sites for much of Okanagan dis-integration, to create the spaces within curricula, and to make available the resources and expertise (Okanagan personnel and others) for structuring

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129 Cf. RCAP, 1996, Volume 3, Chapter 5, Section 2: “The education provided must be holistic. Education processes and institutions must address the intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical development of participants.”
educational processes that would enable a journey to wholeness. A significant implication of this theme would be a re-consideration of the BC K-12 curriculum from the perspective of educating for the healthy development of students’ bodies, hearts, spirits, and minds.

High school students identified the use of marijuana and alcohol by some Okanagan students as a significant problem for these students. Augmenting current strategies for addressing drug use by community and by school district is called for.

**Thread 6. Bicultural Navigation**

This theme addresses the findings that being Okanagan in a mainstream public school can be difficult and result in student disengagement. As one Aboriginal educator put it, to be successful in school can be perceived pejoratively as being an apple—“red on the outside and white on the inside.” What is implied is a need to consciously address this challenge so that students are not torn by identity allegiance when they move into schools. Parents and Aboriginal educators were very strong on the importance of having Aboriginal teachers precisely to model that it is possible to hold onto one’s Aboriginal identity and learn what is offered in schools.

This theme also addresses “success.” What constitutes school “success” is a question that Okanagan people and schools need to answer together. Non-Aboriginal school leaders showed a promising self-consciousness about the possibility, raised by parents and Aboriginal educators (and made evident by much of the foregoing), that “success” from the public school’s perspective, might not be the same as that of the Okanagan People. Thus,

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130 Operationalizing the work of Dr. Rosalyn Ing (2000) and Dr. Lee Brown (2005) would be a start. A research relationship between K-12 educators and units that have been pioneering a healing journey for Aboriginal people, such as the Round Lake Treatment Centre, could provide useful knowledge.

131 This theme is brilliantly portrayed by Gregory Cajete’s explication of the pin geh heh – a split headed doll. “I asked her why she was making one of her pottery figures with a split head. She told me this is they way she feels as a Native woman in a society that does not honour who she is or where she comes from....The split head, of course, leads to things we’ve talked about before: suicide; self-hate; the disintegration of our cultures; the lack of knowing where we are, where we are going, and where we are coming from”(p.187)

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there is a need to provide for opportunities wherein Okanagan people can define for
themselves what constitutes educational “success” and further opportunities for Okanagan
students, parents, and community to dialogue with school personnel about what should
constitute “success.”

Thread 7. Western Education

Students led the way establishing in no uncertain terms that they wanted their
education to get them access to post-secondary institutions and to careers in the larger global
economy. In Laurie’s words, they wanted their diploma “to mean something!” Their
ambition was shared by all other constituent groups. Academic and vocational skills and
knowledge development, core purposes of the K – 12 school system, should be of the highest
standard. Parents expressed a desire for the best possible education.

Given that public schools have carried this general mandate for many years, and that they have not been able to accomplish this with many Aboriginal students, change (such as
that proposed by this 12-theme blanket framework) is required.

Thread 8. Hire Okanagan and Aboriginal Teachers

Parents and Aboriginal educators were convinced of the absolute importance of hiring
Aboriginal and Okanagan teachers. As Rita observed, hiring Aboriginal teachers would
constitute the single most effective intervention possible. The reasons for this were founded
upon the importance of modeling for Okanagan students, but include recognition of the tacit
knowledge and Aboriginal ethos such teachers bring to the learning situation. A second set of
reasons were grounded in the economic reality of building educational capacity in the

132 This finding confirms the same argument espoused in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP, 1996).
133 Although it may seem to be asking too much to include Okanagan culture, traditions, language, etc., and also
expect excellent academic and vocational education, it needs merely be remembered that immersion programs
in Canada quite successfully enable bicultural development while simultaneously developing academic excellence.

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community. Besides providing valuable economic resources to the community, hiring Okanagan professionals provides an economic foundation upon which to build an education ‘class’ or infrastructure within the community. For the district to constantly hire people from away to serve the educational needs of the Okanagan community, denies the community the opportunity to build its own economically viable educational infrastructure. Positions held by Okanagan people in the school district, carry this extra layer of signification.

There are several implications for this finding, but I will bring attention to three. Hire Okanagan educators.\textsuperscript{134} Secondly, it would seem necessary to develop a long term process that ‘recruits’ and supports, through cohorts and other programs from an early age, possible students who could become teachers. Thirdly, keep track of Okanagan educators who are working in other jurisdictions, and frequently bring them back for modeling, and for leadership.

**Thread 9. Preparation of Non-Aboriginal School Leaders and Educators**

This theme represents the finding that there is much non-Aboriginal school leaders and educators can learn to improve their capacities to work with Okanagan students. This theme gathers perceptions of a need for non-Aboriginal educators to do their “self-work” regarding Aboriginal people, particularly in regard to deficit thinking.\textsuperscript{135} It is based on participants’ frequent calls for non-Aboriginal educators to undertake learning Okanagan and Aboriginal knowledge, history, values, and ways of knowing. It is also based upon participants’ perceptions that curriculum and pedagogy could be adapted to more effectively meet the learning needs of Okanagan students. This theme is also based upon the findings regarding understanding, relationships, and communication presented above, and anticipates

\textsuperscript{134} Sterling-Collins (2001) makes the same recommendation, but is more diplomatic—develop a recruiting policy to hire Aboriginal educators (p. 48).

\textsuperscript{135} See Foster and Goddard (2003), op cit. page 338.
an education process of non-Aboriginal school leaders and educators responsive to those findings.

One implication of this finding is a request that non-Aboriginal teachers and school leaders be open to reflecting on their practice, be open to research, and engaging in research, and be open to changing their practice accordingly.

Finally, this theme includes the observation of parents and Aboriginal educators that the frequent movement of school leaders acts as a disincentive to deep or long term investment in them by the community. A corollary of this is that teachers, who tend to stay at one school for longer periods of time, should be considered as more likely to be able to build long term relationships, and perhaps provide a longer term return on the community’s investment in their preparation and education.

**Thread 10. Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression Education**

Laurie said that what she would ask non-Aboriginal school leaders to do, before anything else, is address racism. Racism was a constant and pressing issue for all participants. This theme is based upon the findings that racism is present in the community surrounding schools and that engaging this racism, and the history of Canadian oppressive and racist relations that this non-Aboriginal community racism represents, is a pressing issue for improving the educational processes of Okanagan students. This theme is also based upon the recognition that for Okanagan students to be able to enact their identity with freedom and pride beyond the Reserve requires that “space” be made among the non-Aboriginal population for their Okanagan identity. Put in other words, schools can develop anti-racism knowledge and skills within their student bodies that will enable the enactment of minority racial identities, particularly Okanagan. An obvious implication is that this work needs to be
done district wide, including those schools that have few Okanagan students, or students of other racial identities.\textsuperscript{136}

This theme stands on a second group of findings based on another level of analysis: Aboriginal people and Okanagan people in Canada have experienced, and continue to experience, laws, social structures, and dominant narratives intended to further permit the colonization of their life-worlds. Anti-oppression education is education aimed at countering colonization processes, discourses, and history. To give an example, First Nations land claims are difficult to justify within a frame of anti-racism; they make a great deal more sense when understood within the history of colonization and applied racism that spans 150 years and continues. Implications of this finding include questioning whether the educational processes planned for Okanagan students (planned by district, school, or classroom teacher) further colonize the Okanagan, or effectively decolonize. Another implication is the development and inclusion of curricula that tells the Okanagan side of history.

**Thread 11. Responsive Curriculum, Pedagogies and Learning Opportunities**

All participant groups expressed a need for curriculum more responsive and relevant to Okanagan students. In order for Okanagan culture, traditions, history, language, values, world views, and territory to be made available to Okanagan students, new curriculum needs to be developed. An implication of this finding is the necessity of a working group committed to the development of such curricula. Such a group may include Okanagan Elders, First Nation personnel, and district teachers and personnel, as exemplified by the *Story of our ways* (Andrews et al., 1997) grade 4 curriculum developed by jointly by the Okanagan Indian Band and School District 22, or by the *Sto:lo Sitel* elementary school curriculum discussed

\textsuperscript{136} Sterling-Collins (2001) identifies the same issue and similarly recommends all students in the school district would benefit. See the anti-racism toolkit produced by the First Nations Education Steering Committee for an example of an effective resource (Wong, 2002).
by Archibald (1995). The En’owkin centre and the University of British Columbia – Okanagan are other potential partners with the community and school district in developing such curricula. Another implication of Okanagan responsive curricula is the researching and development of responsive pedagogies that are congruent with new curricula and its concomitant sub-structure of values and world views.

A further implication of engaging the particularity of student learning needs is the researching and development of pedagogies that work well with Okanagan learners. As previously noted, pull out learning assistance was not considered very successful by study participants. On the other hand, parents, students, and educators talked about the value of tutoring support and targeted one on one instruction outside of school. Parents talked about different learning styles: kinesthetic, experiential, not inclined to lectures, non-assertiveness. Some participants noted the work of Larry Brendtro and Martin Brokenleg (1990, 1993) as having had pedagogical merit with Okanagan students. A commitment to mutual inquiry and action research regarding what pedagogies are most successful for Okanagan students, and are congruent with Okanagan responsive curricula, is called for.

Several parents and Aboriginal educators expressed the importance of extra-curricular involvement for Okanagan students. They made a strong correlation between completion of school and involvement in such programs. There was much discussion about finding ways to enable Okanagan students to participate on school athletic teams, so that they are not excluded from playing due to lack of previous experience, skill development, or unfair selection processes.
An implication of this would be creation of a strong athletic skill development program for children in grades 4 – 7 at Alpha and in cooperation with the Okanagan community.

Thread 12. Out-of-Poverty Education

All participant groups brought attention to the low socio-economic conditions endured by some Okanagan students and the effects these have on students’ learning. The effects of poverty, whether Okanagan or of other ethnic descent, are well known, and strategies used by schools to ameliorate these effects are widely researched. Alpha and Beta already show some consciousness of these. Recognizing that this theme is very important for some Okanagan students, and not relevant for others underscores the need to learn the personal narratives of students.

Implications include developing and structuring school resources—curricular, pedagogical, counseling, and material—to support low socio-economic status learners appropriately, anticipating and engaging barriers to parent participation, and continuing to engage the educational research in this area.

Participants shared the belief that improvement of communication, understanding, and relationships would improve the educational processes for Okanagan students. Establishing an empirical basis for this belief would be a valuable follow-up study to this research.

A Weaving of Many Threads of Inquiry and Action

There is no one panacea for improving the educational processes of Okanagan students. However, a weaving together of the above lines of inquiry and action will make a significant change in the educational experience of Okanagan students. Through their life experience, thoughtful analysis, and understanding of learning, participants of this study have
together woven a reform program of significant promise. Choose your metaphor: a tapestry whose interdependent colourful weave images a wholistic education process; a strong rope whose tight weave of threads can withstand forces hundreds of times more than any single thread, or even all the threads placed side by side; a braid of sweetgrass symbolizing tradition, the joining of mind, body, and spirit, the teachings of the Medicine Wheel, and healing; a blanket of beauty, and resilience, and utility, and comfort. I envisage a blanket—a throwing blanket. Picture an Innu youth being tossed in the air by a strong blanket held by the hands of family, community, educators. The weave of the blanket holds the youth, then throws him or her skyward, and the same strong weave catches him or her as he or she plummets back to earth all smiles. Together Okanagan people and school educators can weave a blanket that will give flight to the aspirations and dreams of Okanagan students. You can’t get a student airborne with a one thread blanket, nor can you do it with one pair of hands.
Bicultural Competency: Okanagan Studies Program and Portfolio Proposal

Background:

In order to increase Okanagan culture, tradition, and history education for Okanagan students, the community develop, possibly with support from the school district but not necessarily, a scope and sequence of learning outcomes and competencies of Okanagan skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values that should be learned by Okanagan students from 0 – 18 years. Presumably this program would begin as a skeleton with details to be filled in over time. This document would serve as a guide for students, parents, for community members, and for school based educators. This document would also clarify educational processes that are better undertaken by the community, and those that are better undertaken by a public school.

Based upon a scope and sequence of Okanagan cultural learning, an Okanagan Studies program be developed. As students progress from year to year Okanagan competencies and learning outcomes would be attained. Completion of the diploma program would parallel completion of high school, with graduation in the BC curriculum with a Dogwood Diploma and in Okanagan Studies with the Okanagan Studies Diploma. The Okanagan Studies program would be controlled by the Okanagan community. The students enrolled in both, would be able to attain competencies in both through project work that covered requirements in both programs. For example, an Okanagan Studies program requirement to understand the impact of residential school on one’s family could be used as an assignment within the BC public school curriculum to meet academic writing and research learning outcomes. The current requirement for a student portfolio by the public system would be a powerful vehicle for allowing a student to move back and forth between programs easily.

The Okanagan Studies program would enable the learning of sacred language, sacred stories, and other traditions that cannot be gained through the public education system. The Okanagan Studies program would also mobilize the community to support student learning, simultaneously engaging in reconstitution processes.

A. Rationale

1. Facilitate education processes that would advance Okanagan culture, tradition, history, world views, and language competence of Okanagan students;
2. Give greater control of cultural education to community;
3. Increase education and learning infrastructure of Okanagan community;
4. Gain proven benefits from strengthened cultural identity regarding Indigenous student engagement and educational success;
5. Improve knowledge exchange between community and schools.
B. Process

1. Develop a scope and sequence of Okanagan knowledge, skills, and values for ages 0 – 18 years. Such a scope and sequence would match expected learning outcomes or competencies to student ages, or stages when attaining a competency would be appropriate.

2. Identify how these learning outcomes may be learned. (For example, some might be learned one on one with an aunt or uncle. Others might be learned through a summer intensive program. Still others, such as language, might be learned through regularly scheduled sessions.)

3. At the start of each year, students could set out a plan with parents as to how they could attain the competencies appropriate to their age and learning stage. For those attending public school, some could be met while also fulfilling assignments in the public school: a research assignment in history, for instance, could be written about a competence area identified in the Okanagan Studies scope and sequence.

4. Proof of competency completion would be kept in the student’s Okanagan studies portfolio, which would be presented annually to a panel of Okanagan community members (Elders and educators) for review. The completed portfolio could be presented to the whole community at a special graduation ceremony for this purpose.

5. A culturally appropriate ceremony recognizing attainment of this knowledge could mark the completion of the Okanagan Studies program. (As in university, students could graduate with a “double major.”)

6. The portfolio could also be used in the public system for graduation credits.
APPENDIX 8

Annual Conference Proposal

Okanagan Community and School District

1st Annual Conference on Education

A. Rationale

1. Access to information;
2. Community afforded opportunity to discuss vision of education;
3. Provides a structure to counter the loss of knowledge and momentum entailed by people moving/changing responsibilities;
4. Perspectives, knowledge, and research from elsewhere shared;
5. Facilitate long term goal setting, planning, problem framing:
6. Develop a learning capacity and educational infrastructure of Okanagan community
7. Develop school district and Okanagan community research capacity regarding educational processes of Okanagan students
8. Celebrate education!

B. Possible Agenda Items

1. Student performance
2. Learning support programs
3. Review of initiatives undertaken in last year
   a. Action research findings presentations
4. What to do next year?
5. How to keep ourselves going forward?
6. What is our long term plan (now)?
7. Research/knowledge/transparency/input re: funding. Where does the money go?
8. Okanagan language
9. First year a summary of the status quo and a commissioning of a group to investigate strengths and weaknesses of the status quo—report back next year.

C. Responsibilities

Jointly hosted. Could alternate locations between school district and reserve. Emphasize collaborative process. Imagine what education would look like after 30 years of conferences!
APPENDIX 9

Sterling-Collins (2001) Revisited


"Why do people feel powerless and feel that they have to fight to have a voice?" (Sterling-Collins, 2001, p. 30)

Sterling-Collins (2001) and associates completed their report for the school district two years before this study began. Their study included focus groups and surveys of stakeholders in the district First Nations education program. Their recommendations were made with all Aboriginal students in mind, including Okanagan students. I make special note of it here because this study corroborates several key findings of her study.

Recommendation 1:

A three-fold strategic planning process needs to be implemented. ... The third part will involve all of the stakeholders in a working conference to review the vision/mission statement, to develop guiding principles and provide input into short-term and long-term strategies for the First Nations Education Program. (Sterling-Collins, 2001, p. 25)

The need for all stakeholders to be involved in such a process is strongly supported by this study, particularly the development of long term purposes. However, this study would suggest that there should be several preparatory sessions leading up to such a strategic planning session so that participants are working with a shared understanding of the issues and possibilities, so that participants have developed a fair degree of comfort with, and the rudimentary understanding of, each other’s “language-in-use”—to use MacIntyre’s phrase (Vokey, 2001)—or the beginnings of a shared language (Gadamer, 2002), and so that relations of respect, trust, care, mutuality, and reciprocity are evident and confirmed for participants. Such an agenda would benefit from an extended period of time for careful consideration of guiding principles and long-term strategies. Broadening the conversation in
order to be as inclusive as possible is critical if such an event is to achieve long-term outcomes.

The roles and responsibilities of the Advocates also need to be reviewed and clarified. Not only will it assist the Advocates in having clarity about expectations, but it will assist District Staff, students and parents in being clearly informed about what the Advocates do and what they can expect or not expect of them. (Sterling-Collins, 2001, p. 40)

Some parents in this study certainly concurred with clarifying what they can expect of the Advocate role. In the review of roles and responsibilities, which will happen again in the not distant future, even if it happened right after Sterling-Collins’ report, I would add to the mix an appreciation of the extraordinary knowledge that the Advocates have regarding working between Reserve and school, and I would recommend that this knowledge needs to be shared amongst community members and school educators. In effect, based upon this study, I would suggest that having experienced Advocates focus, in part, on developing the capacity of parents, students and non-Aboriginal educators to engage each other and work together, would be of lasting benefit.

There is a need for a “late” bus for students participating in extra-curricular activities (i.e. 5:00 p.m. bus), particularly for those students from the Reserve. (Sterling-Collins, 2001, p. 45)

This study strongly supports the need for Okanagan students to be included in extra-curricular activities. Removing barriers to participation, as in this example, is important.

Recommendation 12:

There is a valued need for more Cultural Awareness Workshops and Training Events for Teachers, District Staff and First Nations Staff. It is recommended that the First Nations Education Program coordinate semi-annual workshops and training events and that the District provide the funding for the costs of the workshops and training. Further, that all staff be encouraged to participate, emphasizing the importance of cultural awareness for the success of Aboriginal students and to promote the elimination of racism and stereotyping in the school system toward Aboriginal students. (Sterling-Collins, 2001, p. 53)
The findings of this study strongly support this recommendation. First, the importance of eliminating racism and stereotyping in the school system toward Aboriginal students cannot be overstated. Secondly, the need to continue to develop in the teaching community culturally responsive pedagogies and teaching styles, as well as a solid knowledge base of Okanagan culture and traditions, is also supported by this study. This study strongly concurs with her statement: “Everyone [including non-teaching staff] has a responsibility to improve the success of Aboriginal students” (p.63).

All of the participants interviewed agreed that the Aboriginal worldview, values, culture, languages, traditions and history, particularly of the Okanagan Nation are not adequately reflected in the programs and curriculum at this time. (Sterling-Collins, 2001, p. 80)

This study strongly supports this finding, and further supports Sterling-Collins’ recommendation that resources be allocated for curriculum development (a good example of a joint project with district and community!).

Recommendation 17:

f) A First Nations Language Program needs to be developed by the District in concert with the Okanagan [community] with a start-up target date set (i.e. to start in two years). Language should be offered at both the elementary and secondary levels to any students wishing to learn Okanagan language. (Sterling-Collins, 2001, p. 83)

This study supports the urgency of this recommendation, though not necessarily its assumption that any student wishing to learn Okanagan should do so, at least at the beginning. Given the divided perspectives uncovered in this study, it would seem fruitful to begin a language program with Okanagan students as soon as possible because there was unanimous support for this, and to anticipate the inclusion of other students in time. It would seem practical and politic to run a “pilot” project.

Recommendation 18:

Family and community supports are an important component to the educational success of Aboriginal students. Consideration...needs to be given to implementing the
ideas and recommendations put forth by parents and community members for support not only for the students but for the parents and families. These may include programs such as:

f) provide services to parents to learn skills on how to help their kids study\textsuperscript{137} and do career planning;

i) Holding annual forums for all stakeholders to attend;

j) Organizing community gatherings and dinners to share information among district staff, First Nations staff, parents, and community members. (Sterling-Collins, 2001, p. 87)

This study strongly supports the spirit of this recommendation. The web of relations that supports Okanagan students will benefit from investment. Long term, sustainable change requires that the capacity of this web for education and learning be strengthened (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006).

\textsuperscript{137} The findings of Leithwood and McElheron-Hopkins (2004) particularly support this focus.
APPENDIX 10

Afterthoughts for Community and District

The following suggestions are offered as further considerations for community and district. They are based on the process and findings of this study and are my reflections on possible ways to address needs or issues that arose.

Suggestion One: Increasing the Community’s Research Capacity

The Okanagan community of this study consider increasing its capacity for conducting its own educational research, perhaps with the creation of a research institute made up of a board of research directors affiliated with the community. This institute would identify topics for research, and would be a developer and organizer of relations with external research institutions such as the Indigenous Education Institute of Canada, First Nations University of Canada, UBC-O, UBC-V, Simon Fraser, and so on.

Suggestion Two: The Formation of a Joint Community – School District Research Committee

The Okanagan community and the school district increase their capacity for joint research projects with the creation of a research committee. This committee, among other things, would host the proposed annual conference (see Appendix 8), using this conference as an engine for action research and a vehicle for knowledge dissemination. This committee would support the development of an action-research program with district and community-based teachers working with Okanagan students dedicated to investigating practices and pedagogies of particular value to Okanagan students. A further suggestion would be for this action-research program to network with the teachers of Okanagan students in other school districts and with other Okanagan communities. The Network of Performance Based Schools
provides an example of such a network. The network could join with other Aboriginal education research communities or networks.

**Suggestion Three: An Okanagan Immersion Program**

The Okanagan community consider an immersion program, similar in outcome if not in structure to the Kohanga Reo and kura kaupapa Maori programs undertaken by the Maori in Aotearoa/New Zealand since 1980 (Bishop and Glynn, 1999). The arguments for such a program are many, but based upon this study’s findings, such a program would enhance not only the cultural education of those involved in the program, such a program would also advance the Okanagan cultural education of those students not directly enrolled—Okanagan and non-Okanagan. Such a program would also build up the educational infrastructure of the community. The school district could act as a minority partner or ally in this project.

**Suggestion Four: Okanagan Literacy in Okanagan Traditional Territory**

The Okanagan community and school district consider defining what should be constitutive of an Okanagan literacy. That is, what knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes should *all* people who live in the Okanagan traditional territory have in order to be “literate” citizens of this land. From this study I conclude that if things are to improve for Okanagan students, families and community, those people who surround them, live with them, work with them and study with them, must have a minimum of knowledge in order to be able to interact with Okanagan identity and ways of being with respect, rather than with ignorance or worse. I foresee here, what is patently evident in Quebec when one travels there, or Aotearoa/New Zealand when one travels there: everyone is familiar with enough language to

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138 http://www.npbs.ca/
139 Several of the outcomes of the Kohanga Reo program are already evident in the community pre-school.
enable respectful gathering, the history of Quebecois or Maori people can be told by anyone one bothers to ask—the highlights, and there is an ability among all to express central values of the Quebecois or Maori that helps others acknowledge a different way of being that is legitimate in its own right.

Suggestion Five: Long Term Planning

The school district consider committing to a long term change process of 30 years—the length of the career of a new teacher starting in schools now. Such a frame enables taking the time to develop quality changes that are sustainable and meaningful in the bigger picture of education with the Okanagan community.\(^\text{140}\) In order to significantly improve the educational processes and prospects of Okanagan students, change must be broadly inclusive and multi-generational.

\(^{140}\) Hargreaves and Fink (2006) are very helpful in setting out operational criteria in this regard. Eric Mitchell (2003 personal communication) brought home to me the fact that the Okanagan community has existed in this territory since time immemorial, and will continue to exist in the territory forever—this is a valuable perspective for the school district to bear in mind.
APPENDIX 11

Behavioral Research Ethics Board Approval

See following page for Certificate of Approval.