A RED TILE IN THE CANADIAN EDUCATIONAL MOSAIC

by
Kern Von Hagen

M.Ed., University of Alberta, 1986
B.Ed., Mount Allison University, 1981
B.A., Mount Allison University, 1980

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

in the
Faculty of Education

© Kern Von Hagen, 2008
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Fall 2008

All rights reserved.
This work may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy or other means, without permission of the author.
APPROVAL

Name: Kern Von Hagen

Degree: Doctor of Education

Title of Research Project: A RED TILE IN THE CANADIAN EDUCATIONAL MOSAIC

Examining Committee:
Chair: Lee Southern, Advisor to Ministry of Education

Michèle Schmidt, Assistant Professor
Senior Supervisor

Byron Robbie, Superintendent, School District 58

Fred I. Renihan, Adjunct Professor

Robin Brayne, Adjunct Professor, Education
Internal/External Examiner

Sheila Carr-Stewart, Head, Department of Educational Administration, University of Saskatchewan
External Examiner

Date: October 23, 2008
Declaration of
Partial Copyright Licence

The author, whose copyright is declared on the title page of this work, has granted to Simon Fraser University the right to lend this thesis, project or extended essay to users of the Simon Fraser University Library, and to make partial or single copies only for such users or in response to a request from the library of any other university, or other educational institution, on its own behalf or for one of its users.

The author has further granted permission to Simon Fraser University to keep or make a digital copy for use in its circulating collection (currently available to the public at the “Institutional Repository” link of the SFU Library website \(<http://ir.lib.sfu.ca>\)) and, without changing the content, to translate the thesis/project or extended essays, if technically possible, to any medium or format for the purpose of preservation of the digital work.

The author has further agreed that permission for multiple copying of this work for scholarly purposes may be granted by either the author or the Dean of Graduate Studies.

It is understood that copying or publication of this work for financial gain shall not be allowed without the author’s written permission.

Permission for public performance, or limited permission for private scholarly use, of any multimedia materials forming part of this work, may have been granted by the author. This information may be found on the separately catalogued multimedia material and in the signed Partial Copyright Licence.

While licensing SFU to permit the above uses, the author retains copyright in the thesis, project or extended essays, including the right to change the work for subsequent purposes, including editing and publishing the work in whole or in part, and licensing other parties, as the author may desire.

The original Partial Copyright Licence attesting to these terms, and signed by this author, may be found in the original bound copy of this work, retained in the Simon Fraser University Archive.

Simon Fraser University Library
Burnaby, BC, Canada
STATEMENT OF ETHICS APPROVAL

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this work, has obtained, for the research described in this work, either:

(a) Human research ethics approval from the Simon Fraser University Office of Research Ethics,

or

(b) Advance approval of the animal care protocol from the University Animal Care Committee of Simon Fraser University;

or has conducted the research

(c) as a co-investigator, in a research project approved in advance,

or

(d) as a member of a course approved in advance for minimal risk human research, by the Office of Research Ethics.

A copy of the approval letter has been filed at the Theses Office of the University Library at the time of submission of this thesis or project.

The original application for approval and letter of approval are filed with the relevant offices. Inquiries may be directed to those authorities.

Bennett Library
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, BC, Canada
Abstract

This phenomenological study sought to understand the lived experiences of six Aboriginal graduated high school students in a northern remote setting within the Northwest Territories, who all attended the same high school. Its primary focus was to answer the question, “What are the lived educational experiences of graduated Aboriginal secondary students?” Using this qualitative methodological approach, framed by Anthony Giddens’ Theory of Structuration, a series of semi-structured interviews explored each participant’s experiences within the institution of school. An examination of both the structural characteristics of school and society combined with an investigation of the individual student’s personal agency formed the bedrock of the study and its suggested implications. Structural properties such as culture, teachers, curriculum, and language were reviewed as well as the social contextuality of the individual student, inclusive of community, family, friends, role models and parental support. Additionally, each student’s perception of his/her cultural identity, school experiences and its structural properties were explored. Specifically, this study sought to answer from their individual perceptions: what personal factors contributed to their success; what school factors contributed to their success; what challenges did they encounter; and how did they overcome these challenges?

Analysis of these related lived experiences or narratives enabled the identification of themes that speak to what the participants believed helped them graduate from high school, what challenges they experienced and how they overcame such challenges. Ten themes or findings were elicited from the data as follows: Giddens’ structuration and contextuality; socio-economic status; relationships; ambivalence about Aboriginal identity; consciousness; spirituality or spiritual interconnection; resilience, persistence and motivation; teachers; language and culture; and, extra-curricular involvement. Based on this analysis and interpretation, the study concludes with suggestions for future research and implications for practice.

Keywords: Lived experiences; Aboriginal; graduated; high school; structure; agency

Subject Terms: First Nations; education; secondary schooling; identity
Acknowledgements

Sincere gratitude and recognition is extended to those who assisted me in realizing my dream of completing my doctorate and especially this dissertation: the participants, my thesis committee, my family and my school district.

The participants have impressed and taught me throughout, and their words and experiences will continue to influence my actions in all future endeavours. I extend my thanks to each young person for their willingness to share and for teaching me.

I am indebted to my thesis committee beyond the mere expression of these words. To my senior supervisor, Dr. Michele Schmidt, I thank you for your high expectations and your equally superior support of my work throughout the process. You always expected more of me and challenged me to be my best. To my co-supervisor, Dr. Byron Robbie, I am most grateful for your ongoing and constant support throughout the writing. You were my lifeline and my sounding board. To my third committee member, Dr. Fred Renihan, you are a gentleman, a scholar and a class act. In your gentle and supportive manner, you stepped in to offer encouragement, guidance and a belief in me when I needed it most. I could not have done it without you.

The love and support of my family is a thread that runs throughout this doctoral journey, and I could never have done it without Leah, Aaron and Sarah. You have been my refuge and my "home base." No matter what challenges I faced in the work, you were my peace and my strength. I am truly blessed.

Lastly, I wish to acknowledge my school district, Yellowknife Catholic Schools, for supporting me in this work in so many ways. It could not have happened without the progressive, visionary leadership and support that the Board provided over the past three years.
To my mother and father, Joy and Dale, who always supported me in my every endeavour and who provided the early foundation upon which to build a life filled with learning. To them I owe much.
# Table of Contents

Approval ........................................................................................................... ii  
Abstract .......................................................................................................... iii  
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................... iv  
Dedication ........................................................................................................ v  
Table of Contents ............................................................................................ vi  
List of Tables .................................................................................................. xii  
List of Figures .................................................................................................. xii  

## Chapter 1. Introduction .................................................................................. 1  
Rationale ......................................................................................................... 2  
The Problem ..................................................................................................... 4  
The Purpose of the Study .............................................................................. 7  
Research Questions ........................................................................................ 9  
Significance of the Study .............................................................................. 12  
Organization of the Study ............................................................................ 13  

## Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework ............................................................... 14  
A Theoretical Approach to Understanding the  
  Lived Experiences of Aboriginal Students .................................................. 14  
Theory of Structuration .................................................................................. 15  
  Agency and Structure ................................................................................ 15  
  Knowledgeability ...................................................................................... 19  
  Critical Theory ......................................................................................... 20  
  Power and Control .................................................................................. 21  
  Contextuality: Time-Space Interactions and Intersection ....................... 23  
  Social Structures: More on Structural Properties of Rules and Resources 24  
Giddens: Implications for Aboriginal Worldview? ...................................... 25  
  Commodification of Time ....................................................................... 26  
  Urbanism and the “Created Space” ......................................................... 27  
  Routinization of Everyday Life ............................................................... 28  
  Types of Society ....................................................................................... 29  
Critique of Structuration Theory ................................................................. 32  
Giddens and the Context of School .............................................................. 35  
  Giddens Structuration Theory and Schooling ....................................... 37  

## Chapter 3. Literature Review: Social Systems and Structural Properties ......... 46  
Underlying Assumptions Behind the Research Questions ......................... 46  
  Historicity: Eclipse of “the Other” .......................................................... 47  
  Historicity: The Canadian Context ......................................................... 50  
Aboriginal Education ..................................................................................... 54  
  Historicity of Education in the NWT ..................................................... 62  
Aboriginal Worldview ................................................................................... 64  
  Social Dominance Theory .................................................................... 72  
Institutional Influence .................................................................................. 74
Chapter 6. Discussion of Findings ................................................................. 264

Introduction ............................................................................... 264

Social Contextuality/Positioning .................................................... 266
  Theme: Giddens’ Structuration and Contextuality ......................... 266
  Theme: Socio-economic Status ........................................................ 270
    Socio-economic Conditions and Opportunity ................................. 272
    Macro-structural Variables .............................................................. 272
    Healthy Family .............................................................................. 274
  Theme: Relationships ..................................................................... 275
    Parents ....................................................................................... 275
    Role Models ............................................................................... 276
    Friends ..................................................................................... 277
    School ....................................................................................... 279

Identity ....................................................................................... 280
  Theme: Ambivalence about Aboriginal Identity ............................... 280
    Cultural Identity ........................................................................ 281
    Dilemma .................................................................................... 282
    Assimilation ............................................................................. 283
  Theme: Consciousness .................................................................. 284
    Aboriginal Studies ..................................................................... 285
  Theme: Spirituality or Spiritual Interconnection ............................. 287
  Theme: Resilience, Persistence and Motivation .............................. 290
    Engagement ............................................................................... 292

Perception of Structural Properties .............................................. 294
  Theme: Teachers .......................................................................... 294
    Efficacy ..................................................................................... 295
    Personal Attributes ..................................................................... 295
    Learning Style ........................................................................... 296
  Theme: Language and Culture ........................................................ 296
    Loss .......................................................................................... 297
  Theme: Extra-curricular Involvement ............................................. 298
    Team Sports ............................................................................... 299

Reconsideration of the Conceptual Framework ................................. 300

Suggestions for Future Research .................................................. 302
List of Tables

Table 1. Giddens Classification of Society Types .......................................................... 30
Table 2. Factors that Encourage Success and Failure for Aboriginal Students ...... 115
Table 3. Differences Between Quantitative and Qualitative Research ................. 125

List of Figures

Figure 1: Structuration: Social Practice ............................................................... 41
Figure 2: Structuration: Social Practice—Revised .................................................. 301
Chapter 1.

Introduction

The Board Chair recalled the evening session to order after a short break. The Board formation session had been going well, courtesy of the outside “expert” consultant brought in from the Alberta School Board Association. Given the remote northern, NWT location of their school district, a session such as this was a privilege and an opportunity for growth that was to be valued. A strong emphasis had been placed on the roles and responsibilities of trustees within the corporate board structure and on a review of progress made over the past school year. Trustees felt confident that the Superintendent was realizing the vision of an authentic learning community that immerses all constituents in a culture of learning. Board members were satisfied that progress had been made in establishing a learning community characterized by a shared mission, vision and values; collective inquiry; collaborative teams; an orientation toward action and a willingness to experiment; commitment to continuous improvement; and a focus on results. Further, the school district had identified a district and school-wide instructional focus; identified, learned and used effective research-based practices; created targeted professional development plans; re-aligned resources to support their instructional focus; involved parents and the community in academic standards, assessments and in supporting students’ academic success; and, finally, created an internal accountability system based on SMARTIES (specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, time-bound, institutionalized, every student, and supports required) principles to ensure system integrity, learning and results. A review of the Alberta Achievement Test grades, the Diploma Exam marks, the Gates McGinitie Reading Comprehension scores, other quarterly report indicators and graduation rates had been completed. The consultant had been particularly impressed with the “success” rate the district’s one high school had had with its First Nations’ students. The district had seen 29 Aboriginal students of the 58 who had begun the 2005-2006 school year graduate! That represented a 50% Aboriginal graduation rate, one similar to past years, an outstanding accomplishment compared to the “south” according to the consultant. In fact, he felt the Board should share its secrets for success with other jurisdictions.
This scenario would not be unfamiliar to many boards across Canada: well-intentioned trustees dedicated in their pursuit of an ever-improving school district with a results orientation based upon the latest research-based literature or data. Certainly, one should not undervalue the types of initiatives and strategies being employed in this school district and there should be an appropriate level of satisfaction as boards across the nation achieve targets and objectives set out in their respective strategic plans. However what is hinted at, but not explicitly stated, is that school jurisdictions across the country are failing a significant segment of our populations. What follows is an attempt to come to terms with what the lived reality is for Aboriginal students within one high school in the Northwest Territories, to hear their voices and through them, understand better how as educators we might better serve them.

Rationale

Marie Battiste (2005) claims that First Nations students have few incentives to remain in school, receive little career-related skills training, have weak English skills and have high drop-out rates from high school. She further details that the reasons for poor Aboriginal school performance covers a range of complexities and factors: historical exclusion; eroded families, bonds and skills; colonization and assimilation; poverty and unemployment; lack of transference and parenting skills; erosion of Aboriginal languages, geographic isolation; as well as a southern Canadian, Euro-centric curricula coupled with the non-supportive attitudes of the non-Aboriginal population. Richard Barnabé (2006), the Assistant Chief Statistician of Canada, reinforces this notion in recognizing that between the ages of 18-20, the Aboriginal youth drop-out rate is over 30%, but only 15% for non-Aboriginal youth. He further noted that the high fertility rates of Aboriginal people and the correspondingly young age profile, means that Aboriginal youth will be a growing component of the school age population, becoming an even more significant percentage. This is supported by demographic information posted by the Northwest Territories Bureau of Statistics (2006) who summarize that although like national birth rates, NWT birthrates are in decline, that the fertility rates for NWT teens continues to be 3.0 times the national rate. Further, the NWT fertility rate for 20- to 24-year-old females is approximately 2.0 times the national rate. In other words, an
increasing school age population of Aboriginal students means that the issue of meeting their educational needs will not disappear any time soon.

The history of Aboriginal education in Canada is well chronicled and generally accepted as fact today (Barman, Hébert, & McCaskill, 1986, 1987; Dickason, 2002; Fournier & Crey, 1997; Frideres, 2000; Friesen, 2002; McMillan & Yellowhorn, 2004; Miller, 1991; Milloy, 1999; Morrison & Wilson, 2004; Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996). One of our founding fathers, Prime Minister John A. MacDonald, in 1887 asserted: “the great aim of our civilization has been to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the inhabitants of the Dominion, as speedily as they are fit for the change” (Milloy, 1999, p. 6), setting the policy direction of our country on a century-long quest to absorb our Aboriginal peoples, or as some describe it, to “aggressively civilize” them (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).

Various policy attempts from pre-Confederation to present day have had a focus on “white-washing” the “little red schoolhouse” (Cardinal, 1969, p. 43). It is fair to say that the impact and implications have reverberated throughout our country over time and we are still faced with and attempting to come to terms with the deeply imbedded consequences of historical Aboriginal educational efforts. Cecilia Haig-Brown who cites residential schools as being a prime fertile environment for developing “cultural self-hatred” poignantly sets this in relief (1995, p. 281). It is realized in Aboriginal people who have “learned self-helplessness, a socialized belief that no matter what you do, as a member of a particular cultural group you cannot make a difference...many First Nations people grow up hearing and believing negative stereotypes about their personal and cultural backgrounds” (p. 279). Hampton (1995) succinctly captures how the Euro-centric invasion of Canada disrupted the holistic and integrated Aboriginal life-world.

Physical, mental, and spiritual—it is all one thing to the Indian. Physical effects of the conquest on Indian education include otitis media, fetal alcohol syndrome, material poverty, poor housing, and poor nutrition. Treaty provisions were not met, schools were not built, teachers were not sent. The mental effects include the erosion of our self-concept, denial of worth, the outlawing of languages. The spiritual effects include the outlawing of our worship, the imposition of Christian denominationalism, the destruction of Indian families. (p. 32)
And perhaps Marie Battiste (1995) best summarizes the history of Aboriginal educational efforts when she states that it is critical to acknowledge that:

For a century or more, DIAND [Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development] attempted to destroy the diversity of Aboriginal worldviews, cultures and languages. ... Through ill-conceived government policies and plans, Aboriginal youths were subjected to a combination of powerful but profoundly distracting forces of cognitive imperialism and colonization. Various boarding schools, industrial schools, day schools, and Eurocentric educational practices ignored or rejected the worldviews, languages and values of Aboriginal parents in the education of their children. (p. viii)

Inevitably, according to the authors above, the intergenerational effects of the displacement, assimilative efforts, Canadian Indian policy, residential schooling and their cumulative impact have compounded the problems faced by present day Aboriginal peoples. Whether this is accepted wholly or in part, there can be no doubt that the Aboriginal educational experience has not produced the kind of results that one would desire from an educational system.

The Problem

Based on a 1991 Statistics Canada-wide survey of Aboriginal peoples, the RCAP found "a large percentage of Aboriginal youth was not completing high school" and that "of Aboriginal youth aged 15 to 24 years who left school, 68.5% did not have a diploma" (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Vol3, Chp5). The Education and Labour Force profiles posted by the Northwest Territories Bureau of Statistics (all statistics are from this source unless otherwise indicated) poignantly illustrates that despite the unique nature of the North, the Aboriginal reality is similar to that of Canada. In the 2003 academic year, of the 278 official graduates, only 114 or 41% were of Aboriginal descent. Of those, only 63 were of Dene heritage, representing 19% of the graduating NWT cohort (The balance of Aboriginal graduates were of Métis or Inuit origin). In the 2006 academic year there was a marked improvement as the numbers increased to 366 graduates with 188 or 51% of Aboriginal descent. Of these, 124 were Dene, comprising almost 34% of the NWT cohort.
This recent success, juxtaposed against an examination of the highest level of schooling by ethnic group and gender, brings clarity to the history of education in the Northwest Territories. A reference to 1999 data and a total Territorial population of 29,506 who were 15 years or older, reveals a demographic breakdown that confirms the phenomenon of early school leaving. Of the 13,507 Aboriginal people, about 46% of the overall total, 3,453 (25%) had less than Grade 9, 3,919 (29%) had no high school diploma and only 1,587 or 12% had a high school diploma. Another 3,918 people had some other form of diploma or certificate that is not described, but only 237 (1.7%) Aboriginal people had a university degree. In 2004, the corresponding numbers were reflected in the following: total Territorial population was 31,341; Aboriginal population was 14,440 or 46% of the total; 3,290 (23%) had less than Grade 9 education; 4364 (30%) had no high school diploma; 2230 (15%) had a high school diploma; 3,618 (25%) had some other certificate or diploma; and, 659 (4.5%) had a university degree. What can be seen are a modest improvement and a positive trend over a 5-year period that should be the source of some NWT pride.

When compared with their non-Aboriginal NWT counterparts, however, much like in southern Canada, there is a marked difference. In 1999, those non-Aboriginals, with less than Grade 9 educations counted as only 338 or roughly 2% of the total Territorial population. Those with no high school diploma were 1,719, almost 11% of the population. While almost 55% of the Aboriginal population either were below Grade 9 or had no high school diploma, non-Aboriginals were almost 13% in the combined categories. In 2004, using the same categories, the numbers are reflected as follows: 332 (almost 2%) non-Aboriginals had less than Grade 9 and 1,834 (approximately 11%) had no high school diploma. In combination, the 2004 Aboriginal population that either had less than Grade 9 or had no high school diploma was 53% compared with the combined totals for non-Aboriginals of 13%. These percentage figures are almost identical to the 1999 figures and represent no substantive improvement over the five years.

When viewed through the optics of the labour force and the employment rate, not surprisingly, there is a general correlation between highest level of schooling and employment rates. Those Aboriginal people with less than Grade 9 had only a 28%
employment rate in 2004. Those with no high school diploma had only a 40% employment rate in the same year and those with a high school diploma enjoyed a 58% employment rate. Others who had alternative certificates or diplomas had a 72% employment rate while a degree guaranteed a 95% employment rate. This is a similar trend to non-Aboriginal people, but with significant differences in the actual percentages that ranged from 53% employment rate for those with less than Grade 9, to 53% for those with no high school diploma, to almost 80% for those with a high school diploma, to 88% for those with other certification and to 93% for those with a university degree. In total, then, there are much better numbers than their Aboriginal counterparts, suggesting, perhaps, possible systemic concerns. Generally, educational background, as in other parts of our country, plays a role in labour force participation. Like other indicators of success, however, there continues to be a discrepancy between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people. The Northwest Territories Bureau of Statistics (1999) offers the following summary.

The greatest barrier to employment in the Northwest Territories continues to be education levels. Examining employment rates by education levels for 2005 shows the continuing pattern of increasing odds of employment as education levels increase...

(Northwest Territories Bureau of Statistics, 1999, Table B8)

In summary, what is highlighted here is the significant variance in education levels between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples outlined above.

In fairness, while there is no doubt that the Aboriginal experience within the Northwest Territories and Yellowknife has some parallel with our southern provincial counterparts, there is reason to look forward optimistically. Today in the Northwest Territories, the recent Towards Excellence: A Report on Education in the NWT (GNWT, 2005) reveals that Aboriginal graduates are on the rise across the NWT, up from 41% in 2001 to 49% in 2005, an increase of 8% (2005, pp. 68-69). Overall, 52% of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students graduated in 2005 (pp. 68-69). This compares poorly to the national average of 78% (p. 68). However, in the NWT, there continues to be a large variance in the graduation rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students with a graduation rate of 65% for the latter and 40% for the former (Northwest Territories
Bureau of Statistics, 1999). It should be stated here that participation in the labour force should not necessarily be seen as the only measure of success in life, especially when considered in light of a traditional lifestyle for Aboriginal people. However, when viewed through the lens of graduation and the ultimate participation in the work force, it must be said that comparatively, Aboriginal people do not fare as well as their non-Aboriginal counterparts in the NWT. The problem stated, then, is that completion and graduation rates for Aboriginal students are low within the NWT. Determining how to change this, as in other parts of the country, is a concern for educational authorities of all levels.

**The Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this dissertation is to better understand the stories and the profile of graduated Aboriginal students to determine what has contributed to their success and the institutional and personal agency factors that facilitated or hindered them in realizing school success and ultimately, graduation. A close examination of their lived experiences will offer insight into the challenges they faced and how they negotiated the school environment to achieve the ultimate goal of a formal education.

Using a phenomenological methodology, the lived experiences of a representative sampling of graduated Yellowknives Dene students was explored. Through a progressive data collection and analysis process, focused on successfully graduated high school Aboriginal students, themes emerged that provide insight into the lived experiences of these Aboriginal students. Ultimately, the outcome of this study will hopefully be of value to other Aboriginal students, their communities, schools and school boards. This research study explores, through a sharing of lived experiences from graduate Aboriginal students, their perceptions of secondary education set within a Canadian Northern context. The selection of graduation as a benchmark of success reflects the present Canadian model of education where it is largely expected that students will graduate from high school (Mackay & Myles, 1995, p. 157). The study therefore, is based primarily on student learners' own perceptions of the factors that were of central importance to them in remaining committed to attaining their/our educational goals and aspirations. It is through their stories we may better understand the Aboriginal student experience within high school and give voice to Aboriginal youth.
School systems in Canada are generally concerned about school performance and completion rates in their schools, and perhaps, particularly for their Aboriginal students (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). The phenomenon of the "early school leaver" or the "drop-out" generally takes place while an Aboriginal student is in high school, as this seems to be the "tipping point" in "an inventory of forty-two factors believed to be closely associated with or to contribute to dropping out" (Mackay & Myles, 1995, p. 161). The issues for early school leavers, generally, cut across a wide spectrum of potential causes, including but not limited to the following: leaving home prematurely, conflict with parents, involvement with the justice system, pressure from friends, family or marriage responsibilities, pregnancy, boredom with an irrelevant system, conflict with teachers and administration, attendance and punctuality problems, appropriate fit of school programs and many other social issues (pp. 176-177). Making matters even more complex, for these students, leaving school is a process, not a singular event. There is an ebb and flow as they weave in and out of school, both suggesting alienation and attraction. These, then, are some of the many barriers to school success and they can be formidable.

Additionally, if you are an Aboriginal student in Canada, the likelihood of failure or poorer achievement is statistically more significant than the average school leaver above. The seeds of disengagement, disillusionment, disenfranchisement and discouragement take root much earlier in an Aboriginal student's life with the combined pressures of assimilation, marginalization and suppressed Aboriginal identity. This led the RCAP to ask the significant question "...why schooling has continued to be such an alienating experience for Aboriginal children and youth?" (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996, Vol3, Chp5, s1.4). Mackay and Miles (1995) frame the problem as follows.

Earlier research on dropouts, based mainly on statistical correlations, located the main 'cause' in socioeconomic factors such as family background (parents' occupation, income, educational background, ethnicity, family size, etc.), which lay largely beyond the control of the school system. More recent research has begun to focus on school culture or climate, posing the very pertinent question 'How much do schools contribute to the problem?' (p. 161)
Framed another way, there are matters of both personal agency and institutional factors, either individually or in combination that comes together in the alchemy of Aboriginal student failure or dropping out.

The potential benefit in hearing Aboriginal youth voices is in better understanding what the school experience has been for them from a more personal perspective where more intimate aspects of their lives can be explored, including self-concept, cultural impact on the individual, motivation, parental and family support, community well-being, friends, mentors, and whether their school experience reflected them as an Aboriginal person. These are matters of personal agency where the individual Aboriginal student may express what their lived educational experiences have been and to what degree their own volition played a part in their success. Volition, described by Bopp, Bopp, Brown and Lane (1984), through the four aspects of our nature—physical, mental, spiritual and emotional—"is the force that helps us make decisions and then act to carry out those decisions" (p. 14). It is at the heart of developing all of our human potentialities and as such seems to have a place in considering the individual within the learning context of institutional school.

Research Questions

© **What are the lived educational experiences of graduated Aboriginal secondary students?**

Sub-Questions: From their individual perceptions.

© What personal factors contributed to their success?
© What school factors contributed to their success?
© What challenges did they encounter?
© How did they overcome these challenges?

The intent of this study is to gain in-depth knowledge about Weledeh Yellowknives Dene students' experiences in a secondary school environment with the ultimate aim of informing school and district practices. There are a limited number of studies focusing on Aboriginal secondary students experiences and perceptions.
(Bazylak, 2002; Makokis, 2000; Peacock, 2002; Runnels, 2007; St. Denis, 2002; Williams, 2000; Zamluk, 2006). These studies have a variety of foci, methodologies and purposes, yet what is common to all is the intent to elicit from Aboriginal secondary students their perceptions about their schooling experiences. A handful of studies, however, suggest a gap in the research literature as the volume of studies does not yet offer conclusive findings. This study will hopefully add to the cadre with a unique Canadian Northern context.

A central research question will be used as the foundation for my study, as it will allow for an open-ended exploration of Weledeh Yellowknives Dene students’ perceptions, namely: “What are the lived educational experiences of graduated Aboriginal secondary students?” The critical words within this question are “what,” and “lived” and “experiences.” Use of the word “what” brings clarity and a notion that there will be several particular aspects among the many experiences that have helped them to graduate. “Lived,” as expressed by Max van Manen (1990), is both the starting and ending point of phenomenological research, transforming the lived experience into a textual expression of its essence (p. 36). The effect of this transformation was having the students utilize the text as both a reflective re-living of the experience and as an opportunity to attach meaning to the experience. Thus, “the interpretive examination of lived experience has this methodical feature of relating the particular to the universal, part to whole, episode to totality” (p. 36). “Experiences” refers to an event or activity that leaves a lasting impression relative to the school context.

With regard to the four additional and supplementary research questions that were used to guide my study and data collection, they were intended to drill down further on the lived experiences of the students. The word “perception” supports the idea and intent of “lived” in that the participant were asked to remember and become newly aware of past school experiences and to bring an understanding or interpretation to these experiences. In other words, by sharing their experiences the participants brought an intuitive understanding or “insight” that allowed them to frame reflectively what these experiences meant for them. Again, as van Manen (1990) postulates:

Lived experiences gather hermeneutic significance as we (reflectively) gather them by giving memory to them. Through meditations,
conversations, daydreams, inspirations and other interpretive acts we assign meaning to the phenomena of lived life. (p. 37)

Lived experience is the breathing of meaning as an individual alternates between inner and outer consciousness, between the experience and the reflective and retrospective appreciation of its meaning (van Manen, p. 37). Through this approach the participant comes to a perception of that lived experience. This fits nicely with the theory proposed in Chapter 2 as this iterative phenomenon parallels the "structuration" process as defined by Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984) and a concept known as reflexive monitoring where there is interplay between the subjective and objective as the individual attempts to understand their lived reality in a continuous flow (Giddens, 1984, p. 5).

The intent of the central research question and the sub-questions is to provide a focus on the research as it:

1. Seeks to reveal more fully the essence and meaning of the student's experience;
2. Seeks to uncover the qualitative-subjective rather than the quantitative-objective factors in behaviour experience;
3. Engages the total self of the research participant, and sustains personal and passionate involvement;
4. Seeks not to predict or to determine causal relationships;
5. Illuminates through careful comprehensive descriptions vivid and accurate renderings of the experience, rather than measurements, ratings, or scores.

(Moustakas, 1994, p. 105)

The research questions were used to develop an interview guide (for more on this, see interview process in Chapter 5) to encourage participants to discuss their personal history and context, their school or institutional experiences, and their thoughts and perceptions of that school experience. The intent, in every interview, was to pursue deeper levels of meaning through the participants' own experiences and perceptions. Participants were asked to consider their social contextuality or positioning, including community, family, friends or role models and parental support. They were asked to reflect on their identity with a particular focus on self-concept, the influence of culture and tradition and the level of personal motivation. They were given opportunities to
remember and to consider the contextuality of their school experiences, how secure they felt, their sense of belonging and also to reflect on how much their school experiences reflected a First Nation perspective. Lastly, the participants had an opportunity to entertain the structural properties of their high school and what the implications of these were. The questions were determined through a blended contemplation of the theorist, Giddens, chosen to frame the study, and the many authors encountered during the literature review (Battiste, 2000; Cajete, 1994; Friesen & Friesen, 2002, 2005; Giddens, 1979, 1984; Hampton, 1995; Kanu, 2002, 2005, 2006; Kirkness, 1998, 1999; Peacock, 2001; Peacock, 2002; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Smith, 1999; Williams, 2000).

Overall, students focused on what contributed to their successful graduation from high school. Ultimately, a review of both personal and institutional factors became part of the contemplation of Aboriginal lived experiences within secondary school.

**Significance of the Study**

Given the nature of the problem and the potential application of the findings, this study provides an added dimension to the existing literature about the Aboriginal high school student experience. A phenomenological approach offers a unique perspective given the northern demographics and the nature of the local Aboriginal communities, and furthers an examination of a problem experienced nationally. Furthermore, it provides a basis for the reader to reconsider how best to meet the needs of First Nation students and what practices, aptitudes and approaches might best be applied in supporting their educational experience.

In a very particular way, this study should assist high schools to better understand the lived experiences of Aboriginal students, by challenging and affirming present practices. It should offer some potential solutions to the problems experienced with too many of our Aboriginal youth and assist schools in realizing more effective practice, supports and targeted effort.

More broadly, it may be that some of the discoveries or practices uncovered in the study can be helpful to policy makers, school board trustees and school district leadership. This effort is one made to continue a conversation with other practitioners in
the hope of realizing more effective practice that better meets the needs of First Nation learners. Here, for instance, the findings may see school district leadership change some of their programming or maintain effective practices. They may implement new strategies or initiatives designed to better engage Aboriginal students or be affirmed in what they are doing. The research may assist the school system in refocusing its resources to more effectively accommodate First Nations students or bring added emphasis to something they are already doing. In understanding how successful First Nations students have realized their potential, perhaps we will better know how to support other Aboriginal students in reaching theirs.

The findings from scholarly research and the qualitative data collected and analyzed might inform the policy direction of a school system. In a general sense, any school or school system willing to go through a journey of self-examination is one that will continually evolve and adjust its policies and practices. Simply accepting that there is a problem and making a conscientious effort to attend to it would be a significant policy initiative for any school board. Much is contingent on particular emerging findings and their potential implications for policy setting and direction.

**Organization of the Study**

The balance of this dissertation is structured in five additional chapters: Chapter 2 explores a theoretical approach to understanding the lived experiences of Aboriginal students in the work of Anthony Giddens and his Theory of Structuration (TS); Chapter 3, contains the literature review structured around the elements suggested in Giddens' theoretical construct; a description of the research methodology employed in this study is included in Chapter 4, based on qualitative, naturalistic inquiry methods. Chapter 5 presents the resultant data for each of the six participants of the study. Chapter 6, the concluding chapter, offers an interpretation and a thematic exploration of the data from the previous chapter. It answers the research questions posed and defines the responses within the theoretical framework suggested by Giddens' work. It also addresses the implications and recommendations of the study respectively. A definition of terms is located in Appendix A to assist the reader if required.
Chapter 2.

Theoretical Framework

A Theoretical Approach to Understanding the Lived Experiences of Aboriginal Students

A theory is primarily a tool used to develop a systematic understanding or explanation of a given problem or set of phenomena. Over the years, educators, policymakers, academic researchers and even community members, in an effort to provide context and to better understand, have drawn on analytical frameworks and theories to make sense of the experience of Indigenous or Aboriginal peoples throughout the world. On a more macro level, sociologists like Georg Simmel (1858-1918), Norbert Elias (1897-1990), Talcott Parsons (1902-1979), Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), Peter Berger (1929- ), Thomas Luckman (1927- ), and Anthony Giddens (1938- ) have contemplated the influence of structure and agency on human thought and behaviour. Essentially, they have examined aspects of agency (the capacity of human beings to act independently and freely) and of structure (social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, customs and culture, etc.), and what, if any, influence or limits these structural principles impose on agents. Most fundamentally, it is essentially a question of cause and effect. What is a cause and what is an effect? Do social structures influence and shape an individual's actions or does the individual human act freely, influencing the social structures around him?

Despite the numerous scholars vested in structuration and agency, this study relies on the work of Anthony Giddens, a British sociologist, because in his lifetime of work he attempted to build upon and amalgamate the thinking of sociologists before him and to add to the on-going dialogue that is so foundational to the primary debate of sociology. Giddens, at this juncture in sociological history, seemed to offer the most complete, compelling and consolidated perspective on the central question regarding the
primacy of agency or structure. Therefore, a rich description and critique of Anthony Giddens' Theory of Structuration (TS) will constitute the bedrock upon which to rest a discussion about its use for examining the Indigenous high school student experience. In short, Giddens’ theory explores the question of whether it is individuals or social forces and structures, or both, that shape our social reality. Given that school is a social microcosm of our society and one of the primary socializing institutions of that society and that it is central to the institutional principles and structures that we adopt, it is appropriate to examine the setting more closely to understand the lived experiences of Aboriginal students and their agency.

Theory of Structuration

Agency and Structure

Giddens has developed his TS over a lifetime and it continues to evolve to the present. His first notable formulation of it occurred in *Central Problems of Social Theory* (1979), substantial refinement manifested itself in *The Constitution of Society* (1984) and, it could be argued, he has subsequently polished it and used it foundationally in various publications up to the present time. Within the scope of this dissertation, only those aspects of Giddens theory that relate to the topic at hand will be discussed. To begin, Giddens work is not without controversy, with a central debate revolving around the primacy of the dichotomies of agency or structure, subjective or objective perspectives, and micro-level or macro-level activity; a concept that Giddens has termed the "duality of structure." Giddens emphasizes that: “The constitution of agents and structures are not two independent given sets of phenomena, a dualism, but represents a duality” (1984, p. 25). He goes on to characterize this duality as one in which agency and structure or actor and social rules and processes are two sides of the same coin (p. 25). One cannot exist without the other and no precedence is given to either agency (individual/independence/free choice) or structure (societal structures such as social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, customs, etc.). These two elements may be crudely allied with the “individual,” where the human agent is the primary actor and interpreter of social life, and “society,” the author of structural forces that shape the way that people do
things (Giddens, 1984, p. 162). Traditionally, social theorists had given primacy to one or
the other of these emphases. Giddens established a “third way” in proposing his theory
of structuration, a recursive notion of actions constrained and enabled by structures that
are iteratively produced and reproduced by that action (1984, pp. 25-26). He breaks with
tradition within the sociological arena by taking the position that this nature of duality is
characterized by “a reciprocal relationship where neither structure nor action can exist
independently” (1984, p. 25), and that “each presupposes the other” (Giddens, 1979, p.
53).

Giddens also challenges that social activity can be understood in static terms, but
rather maintains that it “is always constituted in three intersecting moments of difference:
temporally, paradigmatically (invoking structure which is present only in its instantiation)
and spatially” (1979, p. 54). He believes that time, space and what he has called “virtual
time-space” constitute what is our reality and that agency is a “continuous flow of
conduct” (p. 55). This further suggests an image of society as also a continuous flow, not
just a series of acts, which changes or maintains a potentially malleable social world
(Archer, 1982, p. 457). In other words, structuration is a process and never a product.
Within this intersection evolves the notion of social practice as reflected in our structures
and institutions. Each of the last two terms are somewhat abstract as Giddens uses
them, the latter referring to established patterns of behaviour, which are produced and
reproduced across time and space and the former as “rules and resources, recursively
implicated in the reproduction of social systems” (Giddens, 1984, p. 377). Institutions,
then, are the structuring “forces” or modes for society and serve to coordinate stable
activities and production of goods across time and space (Hardcastle, 2005, p. 224).

An important bridge needs to be made here between Giddens’ ontological
framework and what he considers “institutions” and the implication for society.
Institutions as he understands them do not necessarily mean the physical interpretation
as socially constituted, for example, in governmental and educational settings, but rather
those practices or behavioural patterns referred to above. This does not mean that the
aforementioned physical structures and edifices housing our institutions should not be
considered when contemplating our societal structures, but that we must see them for
what Giddens describes as the habitualized social practice over time symbolized in the
physical architecture we choose to place them in. I take this to mean both the soft and
hard forms of institutions. "Physical settings and their connected rules and regulations
provide social structures that can enable and constrain encounters over time" (Hardcastle, p. 227). From this, we know that Giddens also acknowledges that there is a
collective consensus necessary to produce and preserve social constructs and practices
(Hardcastle, p. 224). This stems from the need for people to realize what Giddens refers
to as "ontological security", a concept denoting the trust people have in social structures
and those everyday actions that have some degree of predictability thus ensuring social
stability. In simple terms, people can count on structures and institutions to give form to
their lives.

Giddens (1979) also introduces another perspective under the umbrella of the
agency/structure dichotomy in the form of a stratification model that addresses the
unacknowledged conditions of action, the reflexive monitoring of action (as well as
rationalization and motivation of action), and the unintended consequences of action;
essentially acknowledging that the context or setting within which action takes place may
influence outcomes of action, that individual agents continuously and reflexively monitor
their actions through a comparison to other agents and to the object-world, and finally,
recognizing that unintended consequences of action may take place (p. 56). In short,
"social and structural circumstances can shape and reshape social action with or without
conscious or unconscious collusion of the agent" (Hardcastle, 2005, p. 224).

Giddens (1984) later extends this notion of action to elaborate upon this
foundation in outlining and discerning the distinctions between discursive
consciousness, practical consciousness and unconscious motives/cognition (p. 7). By
discursive consciousness he means "what actors are able to say, or give verbal
expression to, about social conditions, including especially the conditions of their own
action" (p. 374), or more simply having a discursive awareness that can be expressed.

Confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, including the basic
existential parameters of self and social identity (Giddens, 1984, p. 375). In other words, in the day-to-
day nature of being or existence, dependent on the context and vagaries of individual personality, there
is an ontological security given expression through autonomy of bodily control within predictable
routines (p. 50).
This can be differentiated from practical consciousness, a notion that Giddens most closely equates to "pre-consciousness," the idea that "what actors know (believe) about social conditions, including especially the conditions of their own action, but cannot express discursively" (p. 375). Thus practical consciousness seems to be something that is tacit, where actors draw upon "stocks of knowledge" that they use implicitly to orient themselves to situations and to interpret the acts of others (Shilling, 1992, p.82). The third level of consciousness or in this case, "unconsciousness," is distinguished from the first two in its focus on "the motivational level that represents emotions and desires, although such desires may not be enacted, and may only provide outlines for potential action" (Layder, 1994, p. 134). This suggests a form of "social imprinting" that is unknown in the consciousness, but that skeletally frames how a person may act.

Taken in totality, these concepts constitute what has typically been named "reflex monitoring," the central underpinning of the human agent's construction and contribution to social structure and practice. TS distinguishes between discursive and practical knowledge, then, in recognizing agents or people as knowledgeable and situationally engaged in reflexive monitoring (Giddens, 1984), a process akin to revisiting, reviewing, revising and reshaping as new information becomes known to the actor(s). Here the idea of the dialogic comes into play as people reconsider and ruminate upon "social life" (Giddens, 1984, p. xvii). In other words, this interaction can cause the structures and the very ontology of social activities to be reshaped and re-produced over time and space. People adapt and change over time within the context of their situationality and history and correspondingly so do social conventions and structures. I call this convention mediated by invention. Through reflexive monitoring we may look at actions to judge their effectiveness in achieving their objectives: if agents can reproduce structure through action, they can also transform it. This is how change happens. This means that there are social structure-traditions, institutions, moral codes, and established ways of doing things; but it also means that these can be changed when people start to ignore them, replace them, or reproduce them differently.
**Knowledgeability**

These combined concepts of discursive and practical consciousness highlight two dimensions of the knowledgeability of individual agents who have the capacity to effect change or difference. Giddens fleshes this idea out in offering that “awareness of social rules, expressed first and foremost in practical consciousness, is the very core of that ‘knowledgeability’ which characterizes human agents” (Giddens, 1984, p. 21).

Agents have this knowledge and use it in their interactions across time and space, which in essence is contextuality, and they avail themselves of the rules and resources known to them. This either enables them or constrains them; that is, “everything which actors know (believe) about the circumstances of their action and that of others…” (p. 375) will inform their social action. Remembering that there is a graduated, sedimentary structure to knowledge, it must also be stated that the experiences, education, context, class, socio-economic reality and culture of the agent quite likely shape the individual’s knowledgeability. What Giddens is speaking to is the individual’s capability or capacity to act otherwise and make a difference in human affairs. This does not require agents to be fully aware or even intend to act in a particular way. What he is naming is the transformative capacity of humans—their power to intervene in social life.

...to be an agent is to be able to deploy (chronically, in the flow of daily life) a range of causal powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others. Action depends on the capability of the individual to 'make a difference', that is, to exercise some sort of power...power is logically prior to subjectivity. (Giddens, 1984, p. 14)

Even those in oppressed positions have the power to influence their circumstances because of what Giddens calls the “dialectic of control,” a concept meant to delineate the two-way character of the distributive aspect of power (p. 374), and to suggest that it depends on both the dominator and the dominated (Giddens, 1979, p. 149).

Of course, if individuals or collective agents find it difficult to act in other ways, or to change the nature of these invisible social forces or structures, the nature of this resistance also needs to be explored. The reversion to habituated patterns or behaviours is well established in literature on the change process within organizations or institutions (Coghlan, 2006, Fullan, 2001, 2007, Hargreaves, 1998, 2000a, 2000b, Hurst, 2002,
Pasmore, 2003) and it becomes even more complex in considering sociological structures; stressors to our ontological security are not viewed kindly. People react strongly against others who disregard society's rules and conventions and, in particular, when the “rules” of social order, socialized from birth, are contravened. Breaches of collective understanding are not accepted easily and often those who go against the status quo are victimized for their audacity in questioning socially acceptable conventions. In this way, historically embedded sociological constructs and understandings are “institutionalized” and their roots run deep. Much of what is good in our society can be seen in these structures and represent what is the best of human nature or agency, but much of what is wrong in our society can equally be linked to what is the dark and ignorant nature of human agency and requires the reflexive monitoring and dialogical discourse cited by Giddens to initiate the transformation required once its merit is recognized, which is not often a rapid exercise—more of an evolution generally than a revolution.

**Critical Theory**

Picking up the thread of discourse on knowldegeability above, Giddens’ TS has a Critical Theory (CT) orientation and feel partially because of a process called the double hermeneutic loop, where two frames of meaning intersect: “the meaningful social world as constituted by lay actors and the metalanguages invented by social scientists” (Giddens, 1984, p. 374). An emancipatory principle underpins such theory or research and it is committed to engaging oppressed groups in collective theorizing and distilling of what is common in their lived experiences. Thus, the social scientist enters the field in getting to know the actors and what they know, their daily lived experiences, and these findings are “second-order” concepts “in so far as they presume certain conceptual capabilities on the part of the actors to whose conduct they refer” (p. 284), but they become “first-order” through dialogue with agents who are engaged in the very social life being studied. It is hermeneutic in that it has a double layer or process of interpretation and translation. Every action has two interpretations. The one is from the actor himself,

---

2 Critical theory in its narrowest sense was born in the 1920’s with several generations of neo-Marxist, German philosophers, known as the Frankfurt School (Bohman, 1999, p.195).
the other of the investigator who tries to give meaning to the action he is observing. The actor who performs the action, however, can get to know the interpretation of the investigator, and therefore change his own interpretation, or his further line of action. Giddens (1984) cogently captures the essence of hermeneutics by describing it as the “mutual interpretive interplay between social science and those whose activities compose its subject matter” (p. xxxii). “All social actors, it can properly be said, are social theorists, who alter their theories in the light of experience” (Giddens, 1984, p. 335)—part of which experience is social theory. Notably, all social theorists are actors as well. So, as sociological knowledge enters into the dialogue through the social scientist, the experience becomes part of the social knowledge and also the process of the interchange with the actors, helping to transform the very world that it seeks to explain and analyze. Social actors have the power to reflect upon the theories of the social sciences, to incorporate them in their stock of mutual knowledge and belief, and to act differently as a consequence—a sort of intermingling of data construction and theory construction. Of course, what immediately strikes home is the nature of dialogue between researcher and social actor and the potentially “uneven” character of the discourse as the participant would speak from deliberative reflective thought at a discursive level and the researcher more from a reflexive, theoretically framed perspective with the intent of uncovering, interpreting and translating the findings; a difference otherwise reflected in the correspondence of lay and professional understanding. However, Giddens believes it is the very nature of this iterative process that is transformative, both for the actors and for the social context of which they are a part.

Power and Control

Giddens returns to his theme of duality of structure in his explanation of power and this has already been referenced earlier in discussion of the dialectic of control. Giddens stresses the importance of power, which is a means to an end, and hence is directly involved in the actions of every person or actor. Power is the transformative capacity of people to change the social and material world and it is shaped by our knowledge and the space-time context. He sees both the actors and the structures as integral to power and mutually dependent. Power’s two faces are those of the subjective
actor and the objective structure. But it is also present in the relations between the actors, between the subordinate and their superiors. A review of the essence of this concept is encapsulated in Giddens' (1984) own words:

Power within social systems which enjoy some continuity over time and space presumes regularized relations of autonomy and dependence between actors or collectivities in contexts of social interaction. But all forms of dependence offer some resources whereby those who are subordinate can influence the activities of their superiors. This is what I call the dialectic of control in social systems. (p. 16)

Power is not a resource in itself, but rather resources are the media through which power is exercised over time and space. Power can be seen as the action that agents take in realizing the goals or outcomes that people may have in mind. Again, there is a dynamic to this as one considers the agent-structure dichotomy and the interplay of power in the relationship. Of course, there are many types and sources of power that come to mind as one considers varied and diverse concepts like social class, financial influence, possession of knowledge, moral suasion, ascribed power and so forth. Complicating matters, the operation of power does not just occur on an individual level, but also operates on a collective group basis, summoning the micro/social and macro/system constructs of Giddens where the self and identity may take primacy or where the ideological terrain, institutions or nation state issues may command attention. The net effect can be one where agency is facilitated for some and where it is constrained for others. This, of course, can give rise to “power struggles” as the dialectic of control and the autonomy-dependency tension shifts to one orientation or another—the dominated or the dominator. Quintessentially, the subordinate attempts to acquire control while the superior or powerful seeks to maintain position and control through the social structures and resources available to them. On the autonomy-dependence continuum, this suggests a continual fluctuation across time and space between who has control and who is dependent and may vary within the context of social interaction and be dependent upon the knowledge of the actors. This, then, is the realization of a tension between the poles of enablement and constraint, between empowerment of the subordinate and constriction of the superior.
Contextuality: Time-Space Interactions and Intersection

Giddens mediates the intersection of agency, structure, social integration (reciprocity of actors) and system integration (reciprocity between groups or collectivities) (Giddens, 1979, p. 77) in the binding of time and space within contextuality. Contextuality is “the situated character of interaction in time-space, involving the setting of interaction,” where actors are co-present and there is communication between them (Giddens, 1984, p. 373). Such “time-space paths” (p. 113), whether situated in the home, work or social environments, form the very essence of social action: the “stations” (p. 113) or places provide the meaning generators, which again, as discussed in terms of the dialectic of control, enable or constrain action. Stations both allow for and result from action. So the actor is co-present with other actors where they interact in recursive patterns of social activity producing locales. Not only do actors inform or transform each other, but also geographic location plays a role in that transformation. Physical settings and their related rules and resources provide the social structures that shape social activity.

Giddens extends this conception in distinguishing “that social systems, as reproduced social practices, do not have ‘structures,’ but rather exhibit ‘structural properties’ and that structure exists...only in its instantiations in such practices and memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents” (Giddens, 1984, p. 17). Structural properties then become structural principles as they are reproduced and routinized over time and space. Routinization implies that social practices acceptable to agents and collectivities undergo this recursive examination and only become principles when rationally scrutinized and examined through a normative lens. Only then will those practices that have the greatest time-space extension gain credence in our institutions, or in our standardized practices, enduring and becoming widespread in society (Archer, 1982, p. 462). So this practical, everyday, tacit knowledge becomes part of the ontological security that agents seem to require in establishing the kind of social order and stability cited earlier.
**Social Structures: More on Structural Properties of Rules and Resources**

We have already seen that structural properties, or "structured features of social systems" (Giddens, 1984, p. 377) are built upon the "rules and resources recursively instantiated action" (Dillard & Yuthas, 2002, p. 54). In turn, structural principles are formed that constitute our institutions. Social structures are figuratively brought to life by knowledgeable actors and therefore virtually "exist only as memory traces" (Giddens, 1984, p. 377), which emerge from practice itself, providing a social ontology about being in the world (Giddens, 1984, p. xxiii). Structures facilitate system integration (systemness on the level of relations between social systems or collectivities) that takes place across time and space. Social systems facilitate social integration (systemness on the level of face-to-face interaction) that takes place at a particular time and place between agents (Giddens, 1979, p. 77).

Giddens identifies three types of structures in social systems, those of signification, legitimation, and domination. He makes the point that these are analytical distinctions and should not be construed as separate as there is an "interlacing of meaning, normative elements and power" and "divergent and overlapping characterizations of activity" (Giddens, 1984, p. 28). Structures are seen as rules and resources. Rules are either normative or interpretive. The essence of the three dimensions of social systems he speaks to are as follows. Structures of signification provide the symbolic means for actors to perceive and interpret events in the recursive manner repeatedly emphasized to this point. In short, the signification structures influence the manner in which people understand themselves, others, and attach meaning to their surroundings (Yuthas, Dillard, & Rogers, 2004, p. 231). Structures of legitimation are seen as the rules relating to social conduct or the identification of legitimate or moral conduct within a social system or a society (Yuthas et al., 2004, p. 231). Sanctions and rewards are equally realized in two forms—formal and informal, stated and un-stated. Regardless of what form these sanctions take, agents are active participants in the process and rules are "inseparable from the exercise of social power" (Tucker, 1998, p. 80) and meaningful social action (Layder, 1994). Lastly, Structures of Domination are essentially concerned with who has access to resources. Authorization refers to non-material resources such as human beings and speaks to the domination of
some agents over others. This is usually accomplished through the allocative resources at the disposal of the agent to realize specific social goals or objectives (Yuthas et al., 2004, p. 231). Allocation refers to the more material or economic resources such as goods, natural resources or wealth. Inherent in these structures we come full circle to the issue of power and who controls the respective resources.

For Giddens, these structural forces are at play in our social systems and rules and resources cannot be divorced from daily activity. It stands to reason, as in much of the rest of Giddens' constructs, that there is also an iterative quality to social practice that sees people combining the rules and resources in different ways for different purposes, which ultimately enables some and constrains others. In theory, these rules and resources are dynamic because of the reflexive monitoring of human agents and their ability to transform because they can do otherwise. However, since structures facilitate interaction, either promoting or hindering engagement, once the process is underway, through time and use practices become self-legitimating and therefore part of the legitimating, signification and domination structures of the agent or the institution, solidifying the assumptions, norms, and embedded processes (Dillard & Yuthas, 2002, p. 58).

**Giddens: Implications for Aboriginal Worldview?**

The role that worldview plays in our schools and in our society is an aspect of our sociology that should be considered when entertaining the participation of Aboriginal people within our institutions. "One of the problems with colonialism is that it tries to maintain a singular social order by means of force and law, suppressing the diversity of human worldviews. The underlying differences between Aboriginal and Eurocentric worldviews make this a tenuous proposition at best" (Little Bear, 1995, p. 77), an encounter really begun in 1492, "each on its own uncharted course of exploration and discovery for purposeful knowledge" (Ermine, 1995, p. 101). Has this created a colliding of "jagged worldviews" that has proved irreconcilable within the context of school, the primary instrument of socialization and social practice within our society (Little Bear, 2000, p. 84)? Given this contemplation and how constitutive it might be to the Aboriginal search for standing within society, it is timely to summarize several of Giddens other
substantial observations on the structure of modern life and its potential implication for Aboriginal people (Giddens, 1984; Bertilsson, 1984).

**Commodification of Time**

Giddens believes that with the advent of capitalism came a corresponding significant change in the social structuring of time. In previous societies time was intimately tied to the more organic, the natural conditions of existence, to the cyclical rhythm of seasonal change, and to the immediate caring for the human body. With the creation of superordinate centres of power such as the state, time was “imposed” on actors from above. Their activities no longer belonged to themselves and their bodies, but rather were structurated through an increasing awareness of and dependence on a socially constructed order (the clock time). The introduction of the clock has been said to concur with the formation of the absolutist state where time is objectified and universalized in the regular movements of clocks. Only one temporal existence is sanctioned—linear progressive time. This universal recognition of clock-time can be compared to the introduction of money as the universal mechanism of transfer. Within the context of social practice, life was increasingly subjected to new and effective modes of control. It is Giddens’ view that capitalism was made possible not only through the commodification of labour in the value price of goods, but also and primarily through the commodification of time, which created the specific and essential work-place discipline of capitalist production.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) further elaborates on this Western conception of time in observing the following about history and its implications for Indigenous peoples. Smith sees the Enlightenment as a crucial point in time within the Western view of history as it demarcates between light and darkness. Prior to this period of development was an era likened to a period of “darkness” (the “Age of Darkness”), followed by a reformation of the Church of Rome. "What has come to count as history in contemporary society is a contentious issue for many Indigenous communities because it is not only the story of domination; it is also a story which assumes that there was a ‘point of time’ which was ‘prehistoric’. The point at which society moves from prehistoric to historic is also the point at which tradition breaks with modernism" (p. 55). Smith believes this was
also the point at which traditional knowledge ceased to exist from a Western "modern" perspective—the beginning of the end for "primitive" societies. Further, that deeply embedded within these constructs of time and history is a system of classification and representation that instructs binary oppositions, dualisms, and hierarchical orderings of the world (p. 55).

**Urbanism and the "Created Space"

Capitalism also determines a break with previous "time-space edges". In order to expand on its activities, it must also create "space" out of the natural environment. Modern man no longer stands in direct relationship with organic nature, but rather lives a mediated existence in a manufactured space, culminating in the creation of the modern city. "The city is far more than a mere physical milieu. It is a 'storage container' of administrative resources around which agrarian states are built" (Giddens, 1984, p. 183). This new city is qualitatively different from the older city that was premised on religious and ceremonial cult. Giddens believes that to understand modern society an analysis of what the city is will inform our understanding of the changed relationship of dependency between urban and rural contexts. "For it is only with the advent of cities—and, in modern times, with the urbanism of the 'created environment'—that a significant development of system integration becomes possible" (Giddens, 1984, p. xxvi).

Again, we may turn to Linda Tuhiwai Smith to offer an insight into the Western view of space and its ramifications for Indigenous peoples. Beginning with the notion that mathematics has defined with precision the parameters, dimensions, qualities and possibilities of space, Smith (1999) suggests that this influences the way in which the West thinks about the world beyond the earth (cosmology), the ways in which society is viewed (public/private space, city/country space), the ways in which gender roles were defined (public/domestic, home/work) and the ways in which the social world of people could be determined (the market place, the theatre) (p. 51). Space was compartmentalized, measured and defined and this is reflected in how the West organized and arranged its space.
Thomas Andrews (1990) reinforces the importance of space/geography as he comments upon the significance of place names in the Dene culture and the inextricable union between culture and the land.

Place names provide a “hook” on which to structure the body of narratives, and in doing so become an integral part of the narrative itself. This is particularly evident in myths and legends recounting the travels and exploits of mythical heroes, which list in great numbers places relevant to the story line. Place names are therefore mnemonic devices, providing a mental framework in which to remember relevant aspects of cultural knowledge... Physical geography is transformed into “social geography” where culture and landscape are fused into a semiotic whole. In essence, one cannot exist without the other. (p. 3)

Giddens (1984) describes contextuality as a central feature of his TS where it is the “situated character of interaction in time-space, involving the setting of interaction, actors co-present and communications between them (p. 373). He elaborates upon this idea in breaking contextuality down into locales that refer to the use of space to provide the settings of interaction, denoting their physical nature. But he clarifies that a locale has much broader connotations when considering a range of other properties specified by the modes of its utilization in human activity. Locales become internally regionalized within people and become critically important in constituting contexts of interaction (p. 118). Regionalization is not just the localization in space, but rather a “zone” of time-space in relation to routinized social practices. So, context or contextuality “thus connects the most intimate and detailed components of interaction to much broader properties of the institutionalization of social life” (p. 119). We see this in the Indigenous fusion of culture and space/geography.

**Routinization of Everyday Life**

Giddens maintains that the severance with organic nature required new meaning generators in modern life. He offers that routinization and habituation supply that meaning in the orderly existence of everyday life. The very notion of everyday life, a private sphere separated from public space, is an outcome of modernity itself. The surveillance of the modern state and capital (in creating and controlling space and time for actors) needs a corresponding legitimation on the level of social integration. In
everyday life we are allowed to create our own time and space within the boundaries set by the system of state and capital. With increased system surveillance, everyday life gains in importance for actors. This gain is translated into routinization. The "ontological security" needed for the stabilization of the actor within the social context is supplied within the structure of regularized practices of everyday life (Giddens, 1984, p. xxiii).

**Types of Society**

One of Giddens' primary tenets of TS is in proposing a threefold classification of society types. Drawing upon a range of comparative and historical studies, he offers tribal society, class-divided society and class society as his typology headings. The first features small oral cultures where the dominant structural principle operates along an axis relating tradition and kinship and where the social and system integration are the same, grounded in the sociological setting and/or geographic locales. Giddens (1984) takes some time to note, “tribal societies—in which humankind has lived out all but a small fraction of its history—are substantially divergent from 'civilizations', of whatever type” (p. 182). The dominant structural principle of the second type of society, class-divided, operates along an axis that relates urban areas to their rural counterparts. In this society type, traditional practices and kinship relations remain prominent, but new attributes surface with the loosening of four institutional spheres from one another: politics (authoritative resources), economics (allocative resources), law and symbolic orders (ideology and modes of discourse) (p. 33 and p. 183). The last type of society, class society, is dominated by capitalism and the rise of the city-state, a symbiotic fusion of urban and rural realities, with an attendant routinization of codified administration in the context of an industrialized society.

Giddens then formulates a categorization of intersocietal systems in light of the above classification of society types (see Table 1). He makes the point that the tribal societies occupied the largest span of history, despite their fragmentary nature, but lacked the global influence of "civilizations" that developed centres of power that fired the "heat" of rapid social change. Imperial world systems did not have the staying power of other forms of society and often acquiesced to pressures from them. Early capitalist world economy marked a period with more types of society than ever before or since.
We will allow Giddens (1984) to speak to the balance of society types and to offer his critique of what has transpired since the onset of capitalism.

Table 1.

Giddens Classification of Society Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tribal Societies</th>
<th>'Pre-historical' and fragmentary systems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class-divided societies</td>
<td>Imperial world systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribal societies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capitalist societies</td>
<td>Early capitalist world economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class-divided societies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribal societies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Super power blocs'</td>
<td>Contemporary capitalist world economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capitalist societies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State socialist societies</td>
<td>(world nation-state system)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Developing countries'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class-divided societies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribal societies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For since that time the increasing ascendancy of Western capitalist societies, challenged only by the state socialist societies in terms of their industrial and military power, has implacably destroyed or corroded tribal and class-divided societies...Is it necessary to stress again that the development of the world nation-state system is not coeval with the expansion of cohesion or consensus? For the same developments which have created at once that distinctively modern form of society, the nation-state and its involvement in a global system of a new type, have at the same time brought into being schisms which, in the nuclear age, threaten the survival of humanity as a whole. (p. 185)

Of course, this observation was steeped in a context and history that was experiencing the height of icy relations between the then superpowers of the world and the threat of nuclear annihilation has somewhat subsided. However, other more sophisticated elements seem to be in effect as identity politics and the politics of recognition play a more prominent role in the dynamics of nation-states around the world. In Giddens’ model, he suggests the recursion to class-divided and tribal societies once more, although in a likely different form than thus far experienced. It would seem
that there is a somewhat dual, but contradictory nature in this reversion in that tribal societies are seen as regionalized and fragmentary in nature and not the modern view of civilization that Western nation-states would promote; yet, Giddens (1984) suspects that:

it is 'modern' societies that should be defined in negative terms. Our relations with one another are now only occasionally and fragmentarily based upon 'generic experience', the 'concrete "apprehension" of one person by another.' The mythic 'world-view' and the modes of representation that it employs serve to establish homologies between natural and social conditions or, more accurately, make it possible to equate significant contrasts found on different planes: the 'geographical, meteorological, zoological, botanical, technical, economic, social, ritual, religious and philosophical.' (p. 194)

Again, the atomistic deconstruction of societies along the planes described above focus on our differences and the politics of recognition and in this sense we revert to "tribal" conclaves. Yet, in the tribal or Aboriginal experience there may be hope as their holistic view of life and their intercultural orientation may compel society to add a chorus of voices to the few isolated ones that are "beginning to articulate an awareness that Aboriginal approaches might have value for a broader constituency" (Castellano, Davis et al., 2000, p. xii).

If we accept these premises of Giddens, it assists us in comprehending how significantly disoriented and displaced Aboriginal peoples felt as they straddled and continue to straddle two inherently different worlds—one culture with its own agency, structures and social practices colliding with the horizon of another and its significations and structures. This has prompted Gregory Cajete (1994) to summarize that in today's society, "Indigenous people everywhere suffer, in varying degrees, from 'cultural schizophrenia'" (p. 145). He promotes an ecology of Indigenous education that would forge a new educational consciousness rather than adopting and working within the Western paradigm and structures of education and society. He seems to be echoing what others have said about the nature of Aboriginal experience in our schools today.

For the most part, Native children continue to attend schools that are structured in ways that differ only marginally from the organizational patterns that were imposed by Europeans. The same hierarchies, divisions of space and time, and systems of accountability continue to pervade modern formal education and to convey a similar level of mistrust
and disrespect—and with it a subordinate status—towards Native peoples not only at the classroom level, but also at a community and societal level. (Ryan, 1996, p. 116)

**Critique of Structuration Theory**

In book after book, successively, Giddens has attempted to build and clarify just what it is that constitutes society and sociologically just how the constitutive elements dynamically shape the social life we have. Giddens' view of structuration offers a conceptual mechanism for explaining the reproduction of social structure. The breadth, depth, and complexity of his writings make an assessment of his work very difficult. However, in considering some of the more central themes explored above, it is possible to examine more critically, the implications of his work, the strength of his theory and where potentially it is left lacking.

One of the common refrains heard among social theorists has centred on the very foundation of his theory, that of the conflation of agency and structure. Functionalists at heart, argue that conflating the two weakens the theory's analytical power and erodes the distinction between David Lockwood's original conceptions of "social" and "system" integration (Archer, 1996, p. 679). The argument is that there is a fundamental need to maintain clarity between the "parts of society" and its "people" to better ground analysis in sociological reality. Structure and agency are "phased over different tracts of time" (human actions over the short term, structures over the longer term) which allows for their analytical separation (Archer, 1996, p. 680). In fact, there are those who suggest that because Giddens gives precedence to rules and resources being instantiated in memory traces and action of the agent, that he is giving emphasis to the knowledgeable human actor and therefore subjectivism rather than the symmetrical balance in the duality of agency and structure that he claims (Rose, 1998). There are others who supplement this view, claiming that Giddens' work is merely a categorizing system, that outlines a theory of structuration, comprehensive in scope but short on detail (Turner, 1990), essentially obviating the relevance of his theory for understanding reality. Globally, they do not believe he answers the substantial question of relevance: Why do some forms of social reproduction succeed and become institutionalized, and others do not (Rose, 1998)? This may well stem from Giddens'
renouncement of positivism and his reluctance to accept theory that seeks to develop timeless laws of human organization (Turner, 1996, p. 969). Certainly his predisposition to a more qualitative interpretation of sociology is strongly at play in his work. Given his critique of sociological theory for "its unwarranted faith in positivism, for its functionalism and evolutionism, for its failure to implicate motives and structure in the process of interaction, and for its tendency to see structure as an ex cathedra entity disembodied from the actors who produce and reproduce it" (p. 970), it is not surprising that those from different theoretical camps or orientations would, perhaps, take issue with his perspectives. But one cannot sell short what Giddens has taken on in the very significant task of overcoming sociology’s dualism of objectivism and subjectivism. This is ambitious, innovative and has garnered the attention of the social sciences within the debate. There is no doubt that his theory represents the most seminal attempt to provide a coherent and comprehensive theory of the social systems in the world today, their functions and dysfunctions, their history and legacy and their possibilities for future security.

Related to these perceived deficiencies is another alluded to at the beginning of this chapter, the criticism that Giddens' work is no more than "a collection of other theories; an eclectic account that leaves TS open to much debate" (Hardcastle, 2005, p. 230). Margareta Bertilsson (1984) has been denunciatory of Giddens noting that because he has chosen to work out a World Theory through this form of consolidation, that it may well lose coherence and, in fact, be contradictory. She notes an ambiguous quality with discrepant theoretical sources, concerned with exploitation and human enablement on the one hand, and on the other, with systems and social analysis, leaving the reader to wonder about just how critical, detailed or practical Giddens wishes to be (p. 347).

Coupled with this is the complaint that Giddens fails to illustrate or make practical his strategic concepts. One glaring omission as Peillon (1985) describes it is the failure to submit the concept of practice to a sustained analysis (p. 261). This reinforces the assertion that the abstract nature of TS fails to provide empirical utility, offering neither methodological directions of how to conduct research or give actual examples of how his theory might be applied to social science (Hardcastle, 2005, p. 230). The intent of this
study will be to determine practical actions or steps that might be taken, as framed by the participants, to ensure that abstractions are concretized; that praxis is transformed by the reflexive input of the agents.

Another such instance revolves around his treatment of routine where it is described as a central element in the explanation of social integration, but where no real analysis or explanation of the process of routinization is offered. The same might be said in his contemplation of reflexive monitoring where he focuses on how individuals go about satisfying their wants, but is silent on why people want what they want. He does recognize the reality of structural constraints, the fact that human actors are socially constructed and that "ontological security" is likely one of the drivers. But, "the inability, or more precisely the unwillingness to account for the orientation of action of individual agents constitutes a rather serious deficiency" (Peillon, 1985, p. 261). Further, there is a moral implication in the "could-have-acted-otherwise" postulate that Giddens advances, suggesting that actors will follow their conscience and act in an appropriate manner set within contextuality. This does not account for situations where the unconscious collusion of the agent is at play or where the ontological security-seeking individual may make choices for other reasons, especially in "critical situations" where the actor is stressed (Bertilsson, 1984, p. 348). Vaughan (2001) succinctly captures this thought in observing, "structuration theory is wanting because it lacks a theory of motivation. Apart from the notion of preservation of 'ontological security', it is difficult to see why agents reproduce a social system or try to transform it" (p. 198). Given his Critical Theory orientation and the role that lay agents are to play in TS, Giddens, then, is susceptible to questions around practice and utility: Can lay actors learn from theory? Will they, as a result of having read Giddens' TS, become wiser to the circumstances of their actions? What is the correspondence between lay and professional understanding (p. 350)? These questions in turn call into question his double hermeneutic loop, if only in its apparent lack of practical application. Just how knowledgeable is the human agent? Just how enabled are human agents? There appears to be an assumption on Giddens' part that all human agents have the capacity to act freely and to be knowledgeable about our social institutions. This seems idealized and generalized and requires further detailing. It will be a point of consideration as this study unfolds to ascertain just how knowledgeable the participants are and whether their respective agency has made a difference upon
their school. As Vaughan (2001) again summarizes, "Giddens makes structuration dependent upon agency because agents need to invoke structures through resources" (p. 198), and somehow people in merely choosing to act differently will be able to affect change in long standing institutions and by extension our society. To some this notion seems overly simplistic.

Another area of potential vulnerability lies in his idea that actors or agents employ the social rules appropriate to their culture, ones that have been shaped through socialization and experience. These "rules" and the resources at their disposal are used in social interactions. Giddens sees these rules and resources as non-deterministic, but applied reflexively by knowledgeable actors, albeit actors who are constrained by the specifics of their time, space and activity. It introduces the suspicion that TS is trapped within a more monolithic worldview, shaped by the dominant culture, without consideration for the Other.

While it appears that there are deficits in Giddens' TS, he has taken on an ambitious lifetime project that incrementally improves each time he attempts to bring clarity to his thinking. In the broad sense, through his thinking and writing and the engagement of other social theorists, there is a form of reflexive monitoring occurring. Only through this type of interchange and dialogue can we expect there to be a transformation in sociological thinking, in our institutions and in our society. It is hoped that in some small way, through the contemplation and application of his theory in this study, that a meaningful and practical orientation can prove its usefulness.

**Giddens and the Context of School**

Social Science research is based upon ideas, beliefs and theories about the social world. The macro-sociology of our society is to some degree reflected in the micro-sociology of our schools, as the latter is intended to reflect the norms, values and structural principles we "institutionalize" within our society. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to explore how Giddens' concepts and constructs might be generally applied to the world of school. As Giddens (1984) portrays it, when considering school life and its dynamics, we need be mindful that
a school...is a 'station' along the converging paths traced by clusters of individuals in the course of the day....As a type of social organization, concentrated upon a locale having definite physical characteristics, the characteristics of a school can be understood in terms of three features: the distribution of encounters across time and space occurring within it, the internal regionalization that it displays, and the contextuality of the regions thus identified. (pp. 134-135)

There is, if you will, a sociology of education (Shilling, 1992) that can be considered when examining the nature of our institutions such as schools. Giddens views schools as disciplinary organizations with bureaucratic features that both influence and are influenced by the regions they contain. Schools operate within closed boundaries, creating a "container" where it is possible to strictly coordinate the serial encounters of its inmates (p. 135). Interestingly, his use of the term inmates suggests that students within schools are spatially and temporally sealed off from potentially intrusive encounters from the outside. While this seems extreme in nature, what he is driving at is the duality inherent in schools as they are both part of society, but in the way we have structured them, also apart from society. They are apart from society because of the internal partitioning of classes with homogeneous groups and the rather artificial means of controlling activity within the environment. The tightly managed distribution of social encounters is in marked contrast to the looser nature of our social life. The routinization of life within schools is far from the reality outside of schools, seen in the spatial divisions and allocation of tasks. As Giddens (1984) summarizes, outside influences may make their power felt in influencing policies that help to shape the life of school, "but...what goes on in the 'power container' of the school has a significant degree of autonomy from the very outside agencies whose ethos it expresses" (p. 139).

Moreover, within schools the timetable and the clock coordinate time-space paths. Clock time strongly plays a role within the school environment, reified through the use of bells. Additionally, discipline is closely correlated to this precision of clock time in the regimental expectations of behaviour. There is a sense that just as you may regulate time, so too can you regulate behaviour; "...time enters into the calculative application of administrative authority" (Giddens, 1984, p. 135). Within the created space of schools and classrooms, "bodily positioning, movement and gesture is usually tightly organized. The spatial positioning of teacher and pupils in the context of a class is quite different
from that of most other situations in which face engagements are carried on" (p. 136).
Intrinsic to this dynamic is the power and control relationships, or autonomy-dependency
tension Giddens speaks to in his dialectic of control. Classrooms are “power containers”
(p. 136) where co-present actors interact within contextuality, where there is clearly a
subordinate and a superior. The degree of reflexive monitoring and interacting within the
setting is contingent upon the agents, especially the teacher. The life-span time
chronology for the agents (their ages) is a prime consideration in assessing the
knowledgeability of the actors and contributes to the dialectic of control, as the actors
attempt to exercise dominion over both the authoritative and allocative resources at their
disposal.

**Giddens Structuration Theory and Schooling**

It can be said that the sociology of education and the educational research
community has experienced debate between the macro-level, structural/objective
orientation and the micro-level, individual school/social interaction positioning. The first
bases educational analysis on large-scale phenomena such as social systems and
national policies while the second tend to smaller-scale phenomena such as case
studies of individual schools or on the social interaction contained therein (Shilling, 1992,
p. 69). Like many traditionalist or functionalist research practitioners, many cannot
accept Giddens’ conceptualizations and remain loyal to a separation of agency-
structure; others believe in the duality Giddens advocates, giving equal attention and
concern to the importance of individual action and the social structures. The latter see
the potential in combining the levels of analysis as a means to have them inform one
another; the blending of macro- and micro-level investigation having the potential to
interact to produce better research. For example, the macro-level theory of structuration
can be used as earlier described to inform the micro-level study being proposed. And the
findings from this micro-level study may equally inform the macro-level of educational
philosophy, policy and vision.

Shilling (1992) goes further in identifying the largest obstacle to the integration of
macro- and micro-level perspectives being the dominant conceptions of structure and
agency.
Not only are the respective conceptions of structure and agency found in macro- and micro-level work deficient in their own right, they also contribute to an unresolved dualism which has characterized the sociology of education. Educational research is typically constructed as addressing either large-scale structural processes and policies, or small-scale individual interaction patterns; the assumption being that social life itself exists on different levels. As well as being a false assumption, since individuals simply do not occupy different 'levels' of existence, splitting social life into hierarchical levels makes it difficult to conceptualize change as a dynamic process involving both structures and human agents. (p. 70)

He advocates, like Giddens, for a bridging of the structure-agency dualism into the duality the latter expressed in *The Constitution of Society*. Rather than the static conception of society implicit in the research practices of the past, he sees the more dynamic interaction of TS as having foundational merit as a starting point in any social research, including that focused on school.

Of particular note, Shilling (1992) advances that, as an example, taking seriously the need of actors for ontological security has important implications for how educator's or policy maker's actions are conceptualized and interpreted in the sociology of education.

There is a tendency in much writing to view the teacher or policy maker as an intentional agent who is deeply committed to certain norms of behaviour (i.e., to classroom practices which are sexist or racist in character). However, instead of arguing that such individuals are necessarily intent on upholding existing societal norms, it may be more profitable to consider the possibility that such beliefs and actions are prompted more from a familiarity with routine and a sense of what is 'natural'. (p. 83)

In this we can see the possibility to view things differently, to challenge stereotypes and to contest structural principles that have come to constitute our institutions. Again, the possibility of transformation is embedded in TS as agents, both researcher and participants are engaged in reflexively monitoring the social reproduction of agency and structure. TS provides "a new way of looking at the relationship between social interaction in schools and the reproduction of the major structural principles which characterize society" (Shilling, 1992, p. 84).
Giddens offers us in his TS, despite the criticisms and perceived shortcomings, a framework and language that can be used in examining an institution like school. Whether in part or in whole, TS provides a potential system for organizing and considering findings on both structure and agency within the cultural context of school. It suggests a framework for approaching this study, addressing both structural/institutional and individual/agency elements—system integration and social integration. It also allows for and supports the reflexive monitoring and meaning making required in a phenomenological methodology by those agents being studied. In fact, Giddens (1984) recommends that researchers have to methodologically insert themselves into whatever material is the object of study through one of four levels, either independently or in complementary combination (p. 327). The hermeneutic elucidation of frames of meaning is a linking of theory and practice in the interpretive process (p. 328). This may allow students to better understand their school environment, its structures, policies and sanctions and also assist them in understanding the power relationships between students and teachers. Studying the context and form of practical consciousness allows an agent to express discursively through social sciences what s/he already knows unconsciously (p. 328). This could be, for example, the difference between what students do (practical consciousness) and what they say they do (discursive consciousness). Identifying the bounds of knowledge requires the relevant agents to engage in an exchange with others that helps to define their knowledgeability (p. 329). Here, recognizing the unintended or unacknowledged conditions of the school environment and teaching/learning practices might be an example of students trying to assess what practices take place and their outcomes. And lastly, specification of institutional orders involves identifying the main elements of a social system and then analyzing them to better understand the integration of social and system elements (p. 329). This might, for instance, involve analyzing the conditions of social (micro-classroom/grade level) and system (macro-organization/school/district level) integration, looking for alignment or incongruities between the two. Using reflexive monitoring, agents like Aboriginal students can assess discursively what their experience of school and its associated practices have been.

Giddens’ TS is an example of one frame of reference that is useful in providing us with the language necessary to examine and explore aspects of the Canadian
Indigenous experience and its implications for social practices within our social institutions. Although it has been criticized for not addressing a methodology on how to implement its tenets, there is merit in examining the tensions inherent in the dichotomies of agency/structure and the micro- and macro-levels of social interaction to determine how they inform one another. In the contextuality of our society and specifically, our schools, an examination of how the institution of schooling has affected the lives, aspirations, and prospects of Aboriginal students is useful. Their views through this study will provide a voice for the participants and inform the social institution of school about what their experience has been within the context of a setting dominated by one worldview. The conceptual framework in Figure 1, an amalgam of Giddens’ constructs, elements identified through the literature, and my own experience, outlines an approach to the discussion for completing the study.

The framework in Figure 1 provides an illustration of just how aspects of Giddens’ work can be adapted in examining the lived experiences of graduated Aboriginal students within the social institution of school. On the left are Giddens’ macro-level structural or institutional aspects of society and the micro-level of school. At the first level, exploration of the “historicity” of schooling for Indigenous peoples, provides a contextuality of Aboriginal educational experience within Canada over time and space. An examination of the colonization of the structures and institutions of our society will explore how socially dominant the Euro-centric view has been and examines the white structural oppression many Aboriginal people believe exists. Within a societal context, a better understanding of worldview difference between European descendants and Aboriginal peoples, of social dominance, and of institutional influence will round out our understanding of the sociology of our Canadian mosaic.

At the micro-level of school, an investigation through a literature review of the primary structural properties and principles of this institution will consider whether through the instruments of culture, teachers, curriculum and language (see Figure 1), the

3 Giddens (1984) uses this term to describe, “…living in a world constantly exposed to change,” the blending of history and social science with an emphasis on social change (p. xxviii).
euphemistic language of conquest and assimilation is still at play within our social structures (Jacobs, 2006b). Essentially, the left-hand side of the figure is intended to explore the institutional nature of our society, the principles that drive it, and through both a discursive and practical consciousness, attempt to better understand the social reality of Canadian Aboriginal people. Notably, this will take place on two levels—the first

**Figure 1:**

*Structuration: Social Practice*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural/Institutional (School-System Integration) Objective</th>
<th>Structural/Institutional (School-System Integration) Objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Systems of Interaction (Macro-level)</td>
<td>Social Contextuality/Positioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Historicity: Ellipse of the Other</td>
<td>• Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Historicity: The Canadian Context</td>
<td>• Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Aboriginal Education</td>
<td>• Friends/Role Models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Historicity of Education in the NWT</td>
<td>• Parental Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Worldview Differences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social Dominance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Institutions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**School: Structural Properties of the Institution (Micro-level)**

- Culture
- Teachers
- Curriculum
- Language

**Student Voice**

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual/Agent (Student-Social Integration) Subjective</th>
<th>Individual/Agent (Student-Social Integration) Subjective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Contextuality/Positioning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Community</td>
<td>• Culture/Tradition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Family</td>
<td>• Personal Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Friends/Role Models</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parental Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Identity**

- Self-concept
- Culture/Tradition
- Personal Motivation

**School Experience**

- Contextuality
- "Ontological Security"
- Belonging
- First Nation Perspective

**School: Perceptions of Structural Properties**

- Teaching
- Culture
- Curriculum
through the medium of literature, a source that poses its own dilemmas with respect to perspective, and, more importantly, the second through the medium of this study where the agency of Aboriginal students will be the focus, represented on the right-hand side of the figure.

Much like Giddens who is accused of covertly giving primacy to agency (Rose, 1998), there is recognition that some may equally see this as giving priority to the agent and subjectivity, but the emphasis will be on the lived experience of Aboriginal students within the institution of school and their perceptions of the structural principles within it. Through the double hermeneutic loop (represented on the extreme right of the figure) and a phenomenological methodology, to be more fully detailed in the methodological chapter, it is hoped that both researcher and participants will jointly arrive at meaningful findings about the sociology of school. Here, the interest will be on the individual student, the Aboriginal agent, and primarily through phenomenological interview exploring the micro-level of agency (identity: self-concept, culture and tradition, personal motivation), and the more macro-level of agency (social contextuality/positioning: community, family, friends/role models, parental support). With respect to participant school experience, we will examine contextuality, their ontological security within the setting, their sense of belonging, and their perceptions of school as First Nation actors. Lastly, an exploration of some of the structural properties of school will be conducted. Specifically, their perceptions of their teachers, the extent to which their culture and the curriculum reflected the Aboriginal perspective, worldview and identity. The interview design and process will be paramount in eliciting the information desired and to ensure that a discursive consciousness is brought to bear upon the participants’ experiences.

In true hermeneutic tradition, the approach to this study is one that will stress the analysis of texts, influenced by prior understandings, that have helped shape the interpretive process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 27). Later, in Chapter 4, an elaboration upon the methodology used in this study will be outlined, but for now it will be stated that the hermeneutic phenomenological approach is a human science that focuses on people, where we pursue the individual "against the background of an understanding of the evasive character of the logos of other, the whole, the communal, or the social" (van Manen, 1990, p. 7). It is necessarily a retrospective on lived experience and focuses on
the “meanings as we live them in our everyday existence, our lifeworld” (van Manen, 1990, p. 11). As such, we come to a fuller grasp, taking into account the socio-cultural and the historical traditions that have given meaning to our ways of being in the world, of our understanding and interpretation of the world. That is what the individual agents of this study will be called upon to do. Using Giddens’ work to frame the right hand side of the conceptual framework and fleshing it out with elements germane to their life-world, this approach reflects the notion that practice (or life) always comes first and theory comes later as a result of reflection (van Manen, 1990, p. 15). Here we are interested in the Aboriginal student experience as we find it, in all its variegated aspects. We have a “fore-conception” of the aspects of their lives that as researcher we wish to explore with the intent to re-achieve a direct and primitive contact with the world (van Manen, 1990, p. 38), ultimately with the goal of creating a descriptive text that will be deconstructed and exploded for meaning (van Manen, 1990, p. 39). The goal in developing the right hand side of the framework was to structure it in such a manner that it would consider Giddens’ Theory of Structuration, that is the dynamic between agent and institutional structures, while at the same time, explore the many facets of the agents’ lives that taken collectively would serve to illuminate what their experience of attending school was for them. These facets of their lives were influenced by the literature and the studies encountered during the process of this project, notably, Cajete (1994), Kanu (2002, 2005, 2006), Makokis (2000), Peacock (2002), Runnels (2007), Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003), St. Denis (2002), Williams (2000) and Zamluck (2006). In a sense, the headings represent the obvious or familiar aspects of their lives, knowing full-well that “in the study of commonly known texts, we come to find that sometimes the familiar may be seen as the most strange” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 311). It is the “strange” heard through these former student voices that is of interest to this researcher; it is their perspective, elicited through the phenomenological interview process that will inform both the research and by extension, praxis. It is in this way that the emergent properties of agency in the lived lives of these Aboriginal students could find an interpretive expression in the discussions and recommendations seen in the concluding two chapters of this study.

Reflexive monitoring and knowledgeability are central to both Figure 1’s conceptualization and the intended process. As the study unfolds, both the researcher
and the participants will reflexively monitor and engage with the dichotomy of agency and structure, the interaction between the subjective and objective, in an effort to better understand Aboriginal student agency and the extent to which institutional structures have shaped their experiences. Furthermore, the knowledgeability of both researcher and participants will be drawn upon in understanding what the lived experiences of the Aboriginal students has been. This will be an evolving process as the study unfolds and as the knowledgeability of the actors develop—a form of the double hermeneutic at play. Ultimately this will determine to what extent agency will inform and potentially transform the school that they have experienced. It is anticipated that it will also demand a review of the conceptual framework, and possible changes to it, as this iterative interplay will inform the work of the study.

While it is critical to explore individual agency to establish knowledgeability, levels of reflexive monitoring, extent of discursive engagement in Aboriginal students' education and ultimately how engaged in the double hermeneutic they have been, it is equally important to determine how enabled or constrained they have been in availing themselves of the allocative and authoritative resources of the institution, in how enfranchised they have been within the norms and social conduct of a place called school. In other words, what has been their dialectic of control, the autonomy/dependency tension, between themselves as individual actors and the social structures of school? What rules, skills and knowledge have had to be drawn upon to assist them in realizing success in school? Have these habituated routines been comfortable or have hidden assumptions, discourses, ideologies and constructions inhibited their successful participation? Has the contextuality of school with its associated rules and regulations, a location where they as individual agents have been positioned, enabled them or constrained them? What voice have agents had in the formation of the rules and in how they are exercised? Have these norms been overwhelmingly hegemonic in nature or has there been “ontological security” within the setting? What meanings do agents attach to other agents’ actions, the structural properties of daily life within the institution and the power inherent in those structures? Structuration Theory pays homage to the recursive nature of social life and can be used within the social setting of school to investigate and explore routines, customs, traditions, power and practices within the institution. As with TS, the structures and headings on the
right hand side of the framework are fixed with an eye to using them as the frame for the discussion, but with an understanding that it can accommodate and change based upon the dynamic interaction with the individual Aboriginal agents, the student participants. Seen through their eyes, it should offer some insight into the social reproduction of the school and what it has meant for them. These broad questions have suggested the outline of the right hand side of the conceptual framework and have been the base upon which the actual interview questions were constructed.

At a more macro level, in considering a broader contextual analysis of social, economic, and policy frameworks within which schooling, employment/social prospects, family/community life, and cultural interactions are constituted, what perspective may students offer as they reveal their personal narratives? Educational practices cannot be understood in isolation of the social systems in which they operate. The interplay between the social structures of their community and the institutional structures of school are of importance in understanding the lived experience of Aboriginal students. The exploration of the structural duality that Giddens offers in TS will assist in better understanding the social practices that have been produced and reproduced over time and space to establish the recursive patterns and routines that have become one of our traditional institutions: school. What should be revealed in the process of this study, through the iterative nature of reflexivity, through a discursive examination, is what level of agency Aboriginal students have experienced within school. What should also be revealed is what social practices, school and district policies and practices might need to be changed in order to better meet the needs of Aboriginal students.

Chapter three addresses a review of the literature based upon the social systems and the structural properties suggested in the left hand side of the Structuration: Social Practice Chart earlier outlined. More specifically, Chapter 3 offers an exploration of the historicity of Aboriginal peoples and their worldview, followed by a brief examination of how social dominance takes a foothold and influences our institutions. It will also examine the school structural properties of culture, teachers, curriculum, and language.
Chapter 3.

Literature Review:
Social Systems and Structural Properties

The literature review generally serves four broad functions as defined by Marshall and Rossman (2006). Firstly, it demonstrates the underlying assumptions behind the general research questions. In this instance, the context of Aboriginal peoples, their history and their interaction within the institutions of our country, as Giddens (1984) would define them, underlie much of the focus contained within this chapter and the next. An exploration of contextuality, both on a macro and micro level, will serve to set the backdrop for the research questions posed in Chapter 1. Secondly, it demonstrates that the researcher is knowledgeable about related research and the scholarly traditions that surround and support the study. Thirdly, it should support the researcher in identifying a gap in the literature that the proposed study will fill. And fourthly, it can assist the researcher in refining the research question by placing it within potentially larger traditions of inquiry. In this case, the review yielded the theoretical framework contained in the last chapter as well as assisting in developing the conceptual framework near its end that provides the overarching frame of reference for this study.

Underlying Assumptions Behind the Research Questions

This chapter, as earlier described, will focus on both the social systems of our society and the structural properties of our schools within primarily the Canadian context and how the unfolding of a socially dominant society has contributed to the lived experiences of Aboriginal students within our country and schools. It begins with the more macro level of the world stage and the reality that social dominance has a long history and must be seen within this light to more fully appreciate the Canadian context. Only then can the Canadian experience, especially that of Aboriginal peoples, be seen
within appropriate terms of reference. This then allows for a closer investigation and appreciation of the worldview differences between Euro-descendants and Aboriginal peoples, setting the stage for a better understanding of just how social dominance infiltrates a society and its institutions. This is followed by an examination of the structural properties that traditionally and presently form our schools (culture, teaching, curriculum, and language) as seen through the critical lens of Aboriginal performance and belonging. This is central to the purpose of this thesis and allows the reader to better understand the micro-level of school for Aboriginal people.

**Historicity: Eclipse of “the Other”**

Perhaps there is no better macro-perspective on the hegemonic nature of North America and on actors being constrained within the time-space-historical context than the work of Enrique Dussel, who offers in *The Invention of the Americas*, a radically different take on the traditional view that Europe possessed exceptional internal characteristics which permitted it to surpass all other cultures in rationality (1995, p. 10). To the contrary, he maintains, “that Latin America, since 1492, is a constitutive moment of modernity, and Spain and Portugal are part of its originary moment. They make up the other face, the alterity, essential to modernity” (p. 26). Of course, this flies in the face of Euro-centric conventions, but affirms that humanity was in fact developing and evolving outside of Europe and its colonization efforts. It also confirms Giddens’ contention that spatial/geographical concepts must be introduced to explain how interactions are regionalized (Turner, 1986, p. 974), institutionalized and ultimately socialized into different national identities. It also touches on the nature of power and control, a concept that will be elaborated upon further on in this discourse. Thus, “Europe hegemonizes the human experience of forty-five hundred years of political, economic, technological, cultural relations within the Asian-African-Mediterranean interregional system” (p. 11). Dussel outlines effectively the nature of discovery taking place between 1500-1520 and how this began a self-feeding and self-fulfilling process of “European perspective interpreting itself for the first time as the centre of human history and thus elevating its particular horizon into the supposedly universal one of occidental culture” (p. 35). He goes on to assert that “for the modern ego the inhabitants of the discovered lands never appeared as Other, but as the possessions of the Same to be conquered, colonized,
modernized, civilized, as if they were the modern ego's material. Thus the Europeans (and the English in particular) portrayed themselves as 'the missionaries of civilization to all the world,' especially to the 'barbarian peoples'" (p. 35). This was an indiscriminate process contingent only on the discovery of newfound land and the necessary inconvenience of dealing with whatever Indigenous people might occupy the same. Latin America was the first colony of Europe and it was the experimental grounds for perfecting its subjugation practices, moving from primitive, brutal takeovers to a more sophisticated domestication and sublimation of the conquered (p. 45). Notably, the colonization process has been one with an ongoing and deepening history that had its origins not in cultural differences, per se, but rather in how one group or set of interests could secure and maintain its advantage over another. This provides an interesting take on agency and structuration. It suggests, as earlier noted, that the recursive process between the two is susceptible to ideological hegemony. However, it also illustrates that the iterative nature of the discourse between agency and structures is not restricted to historical moments or episodes, but rather is a conversation that takes place over the time-space continuum, more a motion picture with individual frames than a snap shot in time.

Another key facet of this phenomenon, Dussel characterizes as the spiritual conquest of these new lands. In the name of God, a justification for all actions, the contradictory nature of European invasion becomes clear as they preached love for religion while they imposed themselves, often violently on the other. A further reinforcement of this contradiction lay in the fact that "while the conquest depicted itself as upholding the universal rights of modernity against barbarism, the Indigenous peoples suffered the denial of their rights, civilization, culture and gods" (p. 50). In short, original inhabitants of these lands had to submit to the replacement of their religion and the complete elimination of their Indigenous beliefs (p. 51). Their whole perspective of ritualized experience underwent dramatic change and struck at the very heart of their identity. This invokes Giddens' "critical situations," a concept he applies in his discussion of routinization and motivation, where he means "circumstances of radical disjuncture of an unpredictable kind which affects substantial numbers of individuals, situations that threaten or destroy the certitudes of institutionalized routines" (1984, p. 61). Habituated life as Indigenous peoples experienced it was radically interrupted and their institutions
corrupted. Giddens comments on the psychological consequences of this kind of phenomenon, captured in the following:

The disruption and the deliberately sustained attack upon the ordinary routines of life produce a high degree of anxiety, a 'stripping away' of the socialized responses associated with the security of the management of the body and the unpredictable framework of social life. Such an upsurge of anxiety is expressed in regressive modes of behaviour, attacking the foundation of the basic security system grounded in trust manifested towards others. Those who are ill equipped to face these pressures succumb and go under...a process of 'resocialization' takes place in which an attitude of trust (limited and highly ambivalent), involving identification with authority figures, is re-established. (p. 63)

The legitimacy of colonialism has been a longstanding concern for political and moral philosophers of the Western tradition and as evidenced in the work of Dussel, now more eminently, for the non-Western thinker. Typically, the struggle is in reconciling the ideas of justice and natural law with the practice of European sovereignty over non-Western peoples. One way of reconciling those apparently opposed principles was the rationalization of civilizing, suggesting that a temporary period of political dependence or mentorship was necessary in order for "uncivilized" societies to advance to the point where they were capable of sustaining liberal institutions and self-government.

David Gabbard makes the case, through two key points echoing the above, that in fact, the colonial experience begins much earlier in history than the post-Columbian conquest or since the predatory Europeans came to North America. The seeds for the model of colonization were planted much earlier.

...in limiting our identification of predator as 'colonialism'—an easily discernible pattern of conquest and genocide committed by Europeans against non-Europeans—we ignore the history of the same pattern of conquest and genocide as it occurred in Europe ‘before predator came’ to the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Australia. (2006, p. 227)

He presents that the history of colonialism began with Rome during the 6th Century BC as they originally established colonia as a line of defence and later as a means of extending their imperial reach. Over time, these outpost colonies were used as a means of "Romanizing" the occupied territories, subjecting the Indigenous peoples (barbarians)
living there to physical and cultural genocide (p. 228). He extends this reasoning to suggest that this was the precipitator of Rome's later stage of Christianization when it outlawed all other religions and laid down yet another significant cultural limitation (p. 228). All of this to suggest that the roots of colonial growth are steeped in world history and there is often a sense of self-aggrandizement and self-perpetuation in the psyche of the conqueror. There is also a long history of ethnocide and genocide. In the consideration of agency and structure, or social change, it also recommends that knowledgeable actors must consider history and the past when grappling with the present, to learn from what has transpired previously.

What Dussel is addressing is the self-serving function that Euro-centric interpretation of history and colonization has mythologized. He argues that, in particular, "Latin American people, the social block of the oppressed, have struggled to create their own culture" (p. 131). To refute this is tantamount to ignoring modernity's own other face. Increasingly, modernity and the Western world have to come face to face with this reality. Increasingly, on many fronts, the Western world faces its other and can no longer hide behind its self-created veil of superiority.

_Historicity: The Canadian Context_

With an understanding of the challenges of colonization, its roots and its history, and its influence on what has been institutionalized in our structures and interactions, it allows us to view the Aboriginal experience within Canada in perhaps a different way. First Nations peoples have increasingly made the point over time that in the 500 years since contact with the Europeans, they have been subjected to overtly racist and assimilationist policies. Bennett, Blackstock, and De La Ronde (2005) have concluded that First Nations peoples' history within Canada has been one of social, economic, political and cultural oppression (p. 7), and that unlike the experiences of other minority immigrants who experienced similar racial discrimination based on "the dominant society's need for cheap labour and security" (p. 9), First Nations peoples suffered the pervasive and colonial oppression of a government bent on eliminating the "Indian question" (p. 9).
Interestingly, this had not always been the experience of First Nations people in their interactions with Europeans. Miller (2000) outlines the history of Aboriginal-Newcomer relations occurring in four discrete time-periods. The first was soon after contact, around the end of the 15th Century, where relations were centred upon the development of the fur trade and fisheries and generally relations were cordial and mutually respectful. The second period, steeped in the 18th Century, saw Aboriginal peoples used tactically and strategically by both the French and English as they waged a war bent on imperial dominance over North America. In both these periods, there is a need for and a reliance upon Indigenous peoples as the first Europeans could not have physically survived without their support during the first period and in the second period, Aboriginal alliances were key to victory in securing dominion over the North American lands.

The third period marked a fundamental shift in relations as colonization began in earnest with the arrival of European immigrants who were pursuing the promise of virgin lands. To this point it had been generally accepted that Aboriginal nations were entitled to the territories in their possession, unless they relinquished it as dictated by the Royal Proclamation of 1763 (Dickason, 2002, p. 163). Unfortunately, the cork was out of the bottle and despite the effort to control the pace of colonization and to keep the peace on the frontier (p. 163), “a saga of expropriation, exclusion, discrimination, coercion, subjugation, oppression, deceit, theft, appropriation and extreme regulation through education and legislation” (Bennett et al., 2005, p. 11) marked this third period. Notably, it is during this time that the doctrine of Aboriginal inferiority, a belief system that judged the original inhabitants to be inferior, took a foothold.

Aboriginal peoples were seen as lagging behind and therefore needed guiding in catching up in the process of accelerated evolution. Consequently, this justified unilateral decision-making and the creation of a centralized system to help Aboriginal people assimilate into Western society. The characterization of Aboriginal peoples as “savage” and “biologically inferior” enabled Europeans to remain blind to the complexity of Aboriginal cultures, customs, beliefs and traditions. At the same time, it facilitated the imposition of European values and control over Aboriginal people by outsiders (Bennett et al., p. 13).
Combined with "the notion of a Christian’s duty to evangelize and civilize Indians" (Bennett et al., p. 13), the seeds of complete colonization were well rooted in the fertile lands of our Aboriginal peoples. Access and possession of land was one of two key means of controlling the Aboriginal population of the day. The second was the control of children through the government’s educational efforts (Bennett et al., p. 12). We will examine each of these a little further below. This, then, the continuation of a long historicity of self-serving colonial "institutionalization" as described by Dussel, Gabbard and Giddens, and reflected in one key legislative tool used by the early Canadian government to bring about the "civilization and education" of Aboriginal peoples: the Indian Act, 1876.

The Indian Act typifies the approach the Canadian government took during this third period described by Miller (2000) and as such deserves some review prior to addressing the fourth period. It is important in that it represents, for the most part, the policy of the newly formed government of an equally new nation and that its long shadow still falls across First Nation lives.

The Indian Act of 1876 consolidated and revamped pre-Confederation legislation of the Canadas into a nationwide framework that is still fundamentally in place today, despite amendments that began almost as soon as it was passed—there were 28 by the time of the major revision in 1951. (Dickason, 2002, p. 263)

Wilson and Urion (2002) characterize the Act as duplicitous, alienating, heavy-handed, paternalistic, controlling, limiting and ultimately denigrating to Canadian Indigenous peoples (p. 36). Reflectively, it invaded every facet of Aboriginal life and essentially attempted to define them in Eurocentric terms. Henry (2000) asserts that the Indian Act rested on the tenet “that the aborigines are to be kept in a condition of tutelage and treated as wards or children of the State” (p. 130). Dickason (2002) points out that between the Indian Act and the treaties forged with various Aboriginal nations, that a “total institution” was created that touched upon and controlled every aspect of life for status Indians (p. 265). Morrison and Wilson (2004) go further in assessing that the combination of the Indian Act, federal administration of reserves and oppressive policies created, in fact, a period of oppression over time (p. 36); and given that the Indian Act is in place today, it could be argued that the attitudes and the societal conditioning existing
then continue to underpin present day beliefs. Friesen (2005) advances that because the
decade old Canadian government was so freshly formed, where education of First
Nations people was concerned, it could offload the responsibility to church
denominations, partly because they were already involved in delivering schooling in their
mission to civilize, and more distressingly because “the long-range forecast for
Indigenous survival was perceived as inevitable genocide, so no one felt obligated to
provide Aboriginal children with a first-class education” (p. 77). Echoing this, it seems the
government’s attitude was evidenced in the paternalistic role of protecting First Nations
with the Indian Act until they could be assimilated into white society and in the belief that
it knew what was in their best interest (Bennett et al., 2005, p. 13).

So in the Indian Act we see the cornerstone legislative tool that marked and
defined the official Canadian government’s position on Aboriginal peoples, and that,
more importantly, reflected on the psyche and attitude of the early immigrant settler and
by extension has been institutionalized into Canadian society. More significantly, it also
marks the beginning of a long history of unwillingness by society to receive Aboriginal
people into the fold of the dominant social order in Canada (Bennett et al., 2005, p. 14).
Given its history and intent, and despite the many revisions and the continuing and
evolving nature of the Indian Act, it seems somewhat surprising that First Nations today
would insist on its continuance. The Act has put Indians into a separate legal category,
and it is the lever for “paving the way for Indians to become fully participating members
of a society based on the liberal democratic traditions of individual initiative supported by
equal rights for all” (Dickason, 2002, p. 265). Despite its oppressive overtones,
Aboriginal leaders have seen it as instrumental in maintaining legal standing within the
Western conceptualization of justice and in achieving their rightful place in Canadian
society. However, for some this would be seen as “living in a world according to
Eurocentric scripts” (Youngblood Henderson, 2000a, p. 164) where

Indigenous peoples are forced by the compelling needs of physical
survival to cooperate individually and collectively with the state authorities
to ensure their physical survival. Consequently, there are many
‘Aboriginals’ (in Canada)...who identify themselves solely by their
political-legal relationship to the state rather than by any cultural or social
ties to their Indigenous community or culture or homeland. This
continuing colonial process pulls Indigenous peoples away from cultural
practices and community aspects of 'being Indigenous' towards a political-legal construction as 'Aboriginal'...what we refer to as being 'incidentally Indigenous'. (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005, p. 599)

This continuous and evolving situation and dialogue is indicative of what Miller has characterized as the fourth period of history in Aboriginal-Newcomer relations where Aboriginal peoples have begun to reassert their place in Canada.

Miller (2000) maintains that the fourth period, beginning shortly after World War II, is still in progress; a sentiment contemplated in the RCAP (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996) as well. This period is distinguished by activities that have focused on negotiations, renewal, recovery and a restructuring of relationships epitomized in the realization of self-governments for First Nations and attendant self-reliance.

...non-Aboriginal society is haltingly beginning the search for change in the relationship. A period of dialogue, consultation and negotiation ensues, in which a range of options, centring on the concept of full Aboriginal self-government and restoration of the original partnership of the contact and cooperation period, is considered...Aboriginal people also appear to realize that, at the same time, they must take steps to re-establish their own societies and to heal wounds caused by the many years of dominance by non-Aboriginal people. (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996, Vol1, Chp3, s2.4)

Aboriginal Education

The history of educational initiatives for Aboriginal peoples in Canada has a general congruence with the four periods of history that Miller (2000) has proposed. Prior to the European arrival and certainly during the first period described above, the community was responsible for the teaching of its children. It was an education where the community was the classroom, its members were the teachers, and adults were responsible to ensure that each child learned how to live the good life (Kirkness, 1998a, p. 10).

Survival depended on ensuring that children were taught the values, the culture, and the roles (including the male and female roles) within the community. The Elder's role was critical, as they taught the children the necessary lessons about life. Many of the teachings took place in the moment, when adults were observing the children. Children were always
in close proximity to the adults, learning through observation. (Makokis, 2000, p.16)

Living and learning were integrated. This form of teaching is likely what for Aboriginal peoples most equates to Traditional Knowledge and education—a strong link to the survival of the family and the community (Kirkness, 1998a, p. 10).

Donald Wilson (1986) claims that between 1608 and 1760, three basic views of Indian-White relations were all contemplated and attempted: (a) biracial harmony where Europeans and “civilized” Indians would live in cooperation, (b) segregation of the Indian from the White population by means of reserves, and (c) integration or assimilation (pp. 64-65). Again, significantly, all three approaches have marked Aboriginal education efforts up to present day, reinforcing the notion of structures of domination that Giddens theorizes about where some agents are dominant over others and their structures become institutionalized over time. At first, day schools or mission schools were the dominant mode of education, established by the various churches as a means of civilizing and evangelizing the Aboriginal people. These gave way to boarding schools in the 1800’s as the preferred option as it allowed more complete control of Aboriginal children in the mission to assimilate them (Kirkness, 1999, p. 2). Industrial schools, based upon a British model for poor and orphaned children (Bennett et al., 2005, p. 15), ran concurrently focusing on basic subjects and a half-day of ‘practical’ training that included agriculture, crafts and some trades. Some believe that this system of education saw Aboriginal students spending far more time working on school farms than in the actual classroom, another form of self-serving action and indenturedness (Dickason, 2002, p. 316). Dickason (2002) reports that, by 1900, of a total of approximately 20,000 Aboriginal children between the ages of 6 and 15, 3,285 children were enrolled in 22 industrial and 39 boarding schools and another 6,349 were in 226-day schools (p. 316). Attendance at this time was not mandated and, in fact, did not become the norm until 1920 when along with compulsory enfranchisement it was deemed appropriate to stiffen attendance requirements (Dickason, p. 317).

Ultimately, boarding schools transformed into what has now commonly come to be understood as residential schools, reaching their numerical height in 1933 at 80 schools (Kirkness, 1999, p. 2). The goal of residential schools as we have seen, was to
“drive a wedge between the students and their culture, to turn Indians into budding young Christians trained in the work ethic” (Makokis, 2000, p. 18). The previous methods had not achieved the desired results or effect as their efforts to assimilate continued to fail. It was thought that only through removal of children from their families would the influence of culture, family ties and their community be severed (Bennett et al., 2005, p. 15). While not all residential schools were detrimental, the following quote puts the human face on some of the reported actions taken to enforce governmental policy.

The round up of children was considered a horrendous, tragic affair. In many cases, the RCMP also assisted by arriving in force. They encircled reserves to stop runaways then moved from door to door taking school age children over the protests of parents and children themselves. Children were locked up in nearby police stations or cattle pens until the round up was complete, then taken to school by train. In these schools, children were often segregated by gender, received inadequate instruction, forced to work, and suffered beatings for speaking their Native language, humiliated and ridiculed and sexually abused. Children were taught to hate their Native culture and as a result became "cultural refugees" (p. 16).

Many scholars have described these types of actions as cultural genocide or Indigenous holocaust, as Aboriginal children were taken from their families, not allowed to learn the ways of their people, were indoctrinated to be ashamed of Aboriginal customs and practices and, most momentously, had to adopt the white man’s ways (Youngblood Henderson, 2000b, p. 28).

According to scholars like Fournier and Crey (1997) the residential school system had an impact on the cultural identity of Aboriginal children. Compounding this has been that these children as parents themselves could not draw upon the rich knowledge and traditions of their Elders and family. Factors such as these have been reported as contributing to the First Nations family breakdown (Fournier & Crey, 1997, pp. 62-63). Bennett et al. (2005) and other scholars claim that the residential schools system failed in their efforts to assimilate First Nations’ children into white society, and quite conversely served to alienate and marginalize First Nations people (p. 18). By the 1950’s, the Canadian government integrated Aboriginal children into the public school system, “with the enduring expectation that for First Nations people to become productive citizens they had to be schooled in the ways of industrial white society” (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 56).
At this juncture, it is noteworthy to insert that while all of the above was the reality for some Aboriginal people it is quite likely that “the conventional view of residential schools fails to note that the system never reached more than a minority of young Indians and Inuit” (Miller, 2004, p. 118). As already stated, residential schools achieved their peak at 80 schools and given the expanse of the country, they could not physically meet the needs of all Aboriginal children, even if there were not other mitigators that kept them from attending these schools. With the recent residential school settlement, the total number of impacted Aboriginal peoples is 80,000 across Canada, and this includes some who may have only attended for a year or two (O’Neill, January 7, 2008, A7). This figure only includes the living survivors. It is estimated that there were about 150,000 residential school students over time.

Many Aboriginal children escaped the residential school experience. Even with mandatory attendance imposed in the early 1900’s, not unlike today, the schools found it quite difficult to enforce the attendance policies (Miller, 2004, p. 118). Further, there is evidence to suggest that language suppression, part of the assimilationist agenda, was not the universal experience so often expounded, as many denominational missions had varying views on the use of Aboriginal languages and, in fact, often used them to reach their “congregations” in the most expedient manner (p. 120). Aboriginal communities or bands were also complicit at times in achieving these outcomes as in the first instance they would sometimes lobby for residential schools (p. 118), or in the second instance, would insist upon the instruction of newcomer English within the schools, arguing that they would be responsible for their own Aboriginal language instruction as they had always been (p. 120). Additionally, according to Miller (2004), the long held view that residential schools separated Aboriginal children from their parents, their homes, and their culture, should be qualified as this often depended on the distance the schools were from Aboriginal communities or reserves (p. 121). In fact, he asserts that while this was certainly the desire of the government, the lived reality was that “most children in residential schools were not kept away from home influences for long periods. Many of them visited home at least every weekend…” (p. 121).

In concluding his seminal essay, Owen Glendower, Hotspur, and Canadian Indian Policy, Miller (2004) argues that while Aboriginal peoples, diminished to minority
status within Canadian society, were reduced to economic and military irrelevance and generally were the victims of an assimilationist set of policies, it should never be mistaken that Aboriginal people were not active agents in their history within this country. They may not always have made the best choices or in many instances they likely had no choices, but

...Indian people of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were actors who pursued their interests and struggled to preserve their identity. They resisted, evaded, and defied efforts to control their decision-making, limit their traditional rites, and deprive them of their children. If we distinguish between the intentions of churches and government, on the one hand, and the effects of the policies, on the other, we might find that Canada’s Native peoples persist throughout time as active, if lamentably ignored, actors in the country’s history. (p. 126)

All of this is to say that, while there are mythologies that find staying power within our history, regardless of who is telling the story, we should never accept that Aboriginal peoples have not been resilient if not resistant actors over time in their advocacy to be heard within Canada and in their longstanding desire to find their appropriate place within their homeland.

In 1967 the anthropologist Harry B. Hawthorn, at the behest of the federal government, led an inquiry into the economic, political and educational needs of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples and their underprivileged place in the country (p. 56). A further mandate was to assess the failure of education for Aboriginal education and to provide a roadmap forward that would see the upward mobility for First Nation’s citizens. This undertaking was treated seriously and sincerely, but there are those who have derided the report as paternalistic and ethnocentric, because it is so strongly steeped, perhaps unconsciously, in the Euro-centric frame, that its net effect was to “blame the victim” for Aboriginal failure, especially in school (St. Denis, 2002; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).

Verna St. Denis (2002), a notable Canadian Aboriginal scholar, cites the Hawthorn Report as a turning point in the treatment of Aboriginal peoples within our country, expressing that it valorizes culture, cultural discontinuity and cultural difference, that on its face seems honourable, but in effect minimalized “class, racial and historical
practices of domination and inequality," and denied and trivialized "the effects of class and racial positioning" (p. 80). Essentially, by now reversing the assimilationist policy of the government over the past 100 years, in recognizing First Nations' cultures, this in effect deflected and continues to deflect from white society accepting responsibility for the effects of racism and discrimination as realized through the colonization of Canadian society.

This report discounts the prevalence of racism by describing it as rare and extreme. White people are portrayed as unintentional in their discrimination. Discriminatory practices are explained as resulting from misunderstanding, lack of knowledge and miscommunication. (St. Denis, 2002, p. 81)

The subtle shift that has taken place here is that Aboriginal peoples, in light of this cultural revitalization emphasis, are blamed for "losing their culture," assuming responsibility for the effects of colonization and racial domination; they are positioned as deliberate and careless and irresponsible caretakers of their culture (p. 164).

It is for good reason that the racially dominant encourages a discourse of 'cultural difference'. A cultural difference approach to inequality deflects attention from practices and processes of racial domination. If we explain the problems that Aboriginal people experience in Canada as an effect of racial domination and white supremacy, the focus and responsibility for change shifts from those who are its victims to those who benefit from that very white supremacy and racial domination. (p. 329)

Now it may well be that present day white society has been ignorant of its past and perhaps in that sense, victims of colonization or systemization as well. This position seems to be supported by Mary Louise Pratt (2004), a New York University professor, who, echoing Dussel, puts forward that:

the subject of imperial modernization, partially but not entirely a product of modern European civilization, possesses historical and cultural knowledge that the normative metropolitan subject lacks or denies—including that the European monopoly on the universal is a manufactured object. (p. 445)
Ojibwe educator, Peacock in *Collected Wisdom: American Indian Education* (1998), reinforces this idea when he states that;

> We are not abstractly removed from history; we are products of it. The process of colonization, the Christianization and the ‘civilization’ of the indigenous people in this country continue today to affect both the colonizer and the colonized in more ways than we at first discern. (p. 60)

However, there is no excuse for ignorance if it manifests itself in the harsh racism that Aboriginal peoples claim is their reality. As St. Denis (2002) defines the problem, drawing upon Razack, this inequality must be addressed through “exploring histories, social relations and conditions that structure groups unequally in relation to one another and *that shape what can be known, thought and said.*” [Italics in original] In other words, there is no excuse for “blind racism” (p. 275), for a “vacuum of consciousness” (p. 295), or for Euro-Canadians being unfamiliar with their history (p. 297).

In fairness to the Hawthorn Report, St. Denis (2002) also claims that Aboriginal peoples were complicit in the assessment that cultural revitalization and cultural identity recovery were to become the fixed focus and solution for all Aboriginal problems. She particularly cites the National Indian Brotherhood policy, entitled *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1972), sometimes called the “red paper” (Friesen, 2002, p. 90), as beginning the institutionalization of educational programming for cultural affirmation and revitalization.

> We want education to provide the setting in which our children can develop the fundamental attitudes and values which have an honored place in Indian tradition and culture. The values which we want to pass on to our children, values which make our people a great race, are not written in any book. They are found in our history, in our legends and in the culture. We believe that if an Indian child is fully aware of the important Indian values he will have reason to be proud of our race and of himself as an Indian. (p. 2)

This corresponded, however, with the 1969 “white paper” put out by the Trudeau government in which it floated the idea of a “just society” where “Aboriginal peoples of Canada were to join the rest of Canadians by having their special status eliminated via proposed legislation” (Friesen, 2002, p. 91). Major recommendations reflected the
continuance of an assimilationist agenda and policy, inclusive of the abolition of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND), repeal of the Indian Act, the transfer of Indian programs to provincial administration, and the elimination of treaties (p. 91). In short, First Nations people of Canada were to be absorbed into the cultural mosaic and would no longer hold a special place in Canadian governmental policy. Given this reality, it is little wonder they chose to fight within the Euro-Canadian script that Youngblood Henderson earlier characterized. Aboriginal peoples were going to fight to retain their cultural identity.

This, then, was some of the dynamic and backdrop that permeated the period of Aboriginal integration into the public school system and given several successive reports on the continued failure of Aboriginal educational initiatives, including the Assembly of First Nations’ Tradition and Education, Towards a Vision of our Future (1988), the Royal Commission on Education (Assembly of First Nations, 1988), and the RCAP (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996) Gathering Strength, Volume 3, one is left to contemplate what must be done to realize better outcomes? It must be said at this juncture that changes have occurred, especially over the past half century, as Aboriginal peoples have fought for the attention of the Canadian conscience. Recognition of constitutional status and standing has increasingly taken a foothold in the Canadian psyche because of Aboriginal agency; successful treaty negotiations and the realization of self-governments and land claims have slowly come to fruition; economic development and health and welfare improvements have accompanied these landmark successes; and, most importantly, residential school litigation has gone some distance in recognizing the travesty of past educational and social practices. Related to the latter, efforts have been made to improve Aboriginal educational practice by making schools, whether on reserve or off, more relevant and meaningful to Aboriginal students. This has meant some improvements in the numbers of Aboriginal graduates from high school and in the number of Aboriginal youth enrolled in post-secondary institutions. But, as we have seen, there is still concern about how successful Aboriginal students are within Canadian schools.
Historicity of Education in the NWT

The history of education within the Northwest Territories is similar to that of the rest of Canada, as the first mission schools opened in the 1860’s and education was largely controlled from the outside as both church-run residential schools dominated and then the federal government either collaborated with them to provide educational governance or established their own federal schools (Jewison, 1995, p. 1). The same challenges were posed by Aboriginal leaders as reflected in the following statement by Steve Kakfwi (1977), at the time, a director of the pipeline inquiry for the Indian Brotherhood of the NWT, who eventually became the Minister of Education within the NWT and ultimately the premier of the Territories.

...a conditioning of people to respect an authority other than oneself; a conditioning of people to conform and not to question, to minimize one’s own ability to make decisions based on one’s own understanding of the world, and to become dependent instead on some external authority...The lesson to be learned from this experience is that no imposed educational system, no matter how well intentioned, will work for the Dene. Instead, only one that is initiated and developed by the Dene tradition, culture, and values will be successful. (p. 146)

Bob Overvold (1977), executive director of the Métis, echoed this sentiment and even went further as he saw the educational system of the day as a foreign one, imposed on the Dene causing conditions and characteristics that were uncomfortable in the traditional lifestyles of Aboriginal people. He described it this way:

How can we tolerate an educational system which is set up to fit into a capitalist world? Where the whole purpose in life is to become rich? Where the competitive spirit, the individualistic spirit, is far more important than the spirit of cooperation and the spirit of community? Where there is no room for mercy for the many who cannot make it? Where you either fit into the system or you are an outcast, a dropout, a hippie? There are many labels for failures. (p. 143)

Only in 1967 did the administration of education move from Ottawa to the newly formed capital of the NWT, Yellowknife (Overvold, p. 1). It wasn’t until 1980, five years after the Dene Declaration—both a plea for and a statement of rights and recognition by the Dene people on the heels of the Berger inquiry into a pipeline up the Mackenzie
Valley (McCullum & McCullum, 1975)—that the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories determined that a Special Committee on Education needed to review all aspects of the educational system and make recommendations for improvement. The result of two years of consultation yielded the seminal report, *Learning: Tradition and Change in the Northwest Territories* (GNWT, Legislative Assembly and Special Committee on Education, 1982), a visionary document that essentially established the foundation for the principles of locally controlled and culturally based education in the NWT. Key among its recommendations were that the government establish divisional educational boards with local education authorities providing input from the communities; that the government establish Centres for Learning and Teaching that would focus on producing northern curricula with an emphasis on Aboriginal language and culture; and that there should be Aboriginal teachers in language classrooms and generally non-Aboriginal teachers should be enrolled in a teacher-orientation programs that would assist them in a cross-cultural setting (pp. 17-23).

The Department of Education’s further commitment to locally-controlled, culture-based education were articulated in a series of other reports, notably, *Education in the NWT* (GWNT, Education, 1988) and *Our Students, Our Future: An Educational Framework* (GWNT, Education, 1991). These were then implemented in an ambitious agenda through the Department’s Strategic Plan, *People: Our Focus for the Future, A Strategy to 2010* (GWNT, Education, 1994). The introduction to *Our Students, Our Future* referred to above suggests an integration of traditional education and a forward-looking perspective.

Education is a dynamic process, involving individuals, groups and the society in which they live. It is a process which is shaped by the past, and, at the same time, one which must be refined continuously to support a vision for the future.

The education process in the Northwest Territories should reflect the unique nature of its peoples’ past—their traditions, history and values; and, in the evolution of the NWT towards self-determination, the process should be molded to provide an appropriate response in preparing its children and young people for the future. (p. 3)

Among the highlights achieved in the priorities set out in these documents were: a NWT curriculum reflective of its people, especially within the K-9 range; at the high
school level a Northern Studies course that focused on the history of the NWT, culture and traditions, northern languages, and trends that will shape the future of northern society (Jewison, 1995, p. 2); Dene Kede, a Dene culture and language program designed to be infused throughout the core curriculum, written by and for Aboriginal people to reflect their unique worldviews as well as their traditions and knowledge (p. 2); community-based high schools built within almost all remote communities, completely replacing all residential schools; incorporation of Aboriginal language instruction within schools reflective of the local dialect; Aboriginal educators, trained and supported through Teacher Education Programs that have variously been located within communities, more centrally in the local college (Aurora College), as a 2-year program and most recently in partnership with the University of Saskatchewan as Aurora College has begun offering a complete B.Ed. program in the north. All of this is done with an eye to immerse students in their own language and culture and to allow students to see themselves reflected within their schools. So we can see that within the NWT there is recent history and effort to globally and systemically change the educational structures, content and approach to honour the concerns expressed earlier.

**Aboriginal Worldview**

We are all of us born into a social world of culture: one that precedes us and is fully intact before our arrival. By virtue of our birth we are immediately assimilated into a view of the world and a common body of knowledge. Customs, norms, beliefs, ceremonies, structures and institutions are preset and through socialization become our boundaries or our frame of reference. There is no question that it is an ethnocentric view of the world and that the cultural signposts ultimately help to shape our inner world, our worldview. Moreover, the knowledge, meaning and expressions we internalize become for us our "objective" social fact (Clarkson et al., 1992, p. 10). This representation of our world becomes both an internal and external set of boundaries within which we live, act and learn. In this way, we are all the same. But in this way, we are also very different and this socially intrinsic difference between Indigenous and Euro-centric worldviews is crucial to understanding the dichotomy between the two.
Graveline (1998) defines worldview, as "a set of images and assumptions about the world. Since a worldview is knowledge about the world, what we are talking about here is epistemology, the theory of knowledge." Worldview is defined by a Tewa historian, Ortiz, as "a distinctive vision of reality which not only interprets and orders the places and events in the experience of people, but lends form, direction, and continuity to life as well" (p. 19). Wilshire (2006) cautions that the idea of worldview is another European idea, specifically German, deriving from the word *Weltanschauung* which means "world looked-at" or ideology (p. 260). His concern is that we, again, work within the European script and more particularly give emphasis to "a European bias that gives priority to seeing and vision" (p. 260). Perhaps understanding this notion, others have labelled the "worldview" conception for Aboriginal people as Indigenous Knowledge (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000a; Smith, 2000b; Friesen, 2002; Wilson, 2004; Simpson, 2004; Ball, 2004) or Traditional Indigenous Knowledge (TIK) (Simpson, 2004). Battiste (2002) adds further clarity in characterizing Indigenous Knowledge as an extensive and valuable knowledge system that is transcultural in nature, embracing about 20 percent of the world’s population. It is most synonymous with "folk knowledge," "local knowledge or wisdom," "non-formal knowledge," "culture," "indigenous technical knowledge," "traditional ecological knowledge," and "traditional knowledge" (p. 7).

In this contemplation of worldview, the origins and history of both European and Aboriginal peoples within Canada is worthy of some time and attention as a starting point in addressing the question of differences between them. It is imperative to note, firstly, that Aboriginal peoples have as much diversity and difference as nations within the United Nations. Aboriginal peoples are homogeneous and heterogeneous, distinct and diverse. This paradoxical equation may confuse the reader, but alludes to the fact that Indigenous peoples of the Americas share elementary ideas and cultural values whose symbolic meanings and archetypes are similarly interpreted from tribe to tribe (Cajete, 1994, p. 137).

American Indians enjoyed a rich diversity of worldviews, values, philosophies, spiritual concepts, mythologies and ceremonies, both as individuals and as Nations. However, there are certain characteristic ideas that American Indian cultures had and have in common. Indeed, recognition of an 'Indigenous Worldview' as a philosophical system is gaining momentum in academic circles.... (Jacobs, 2006a, p. 278)
Just as nation states from around the world are culturally different, so too are the "First Nations" of the Americas. Much of the differences are animated in the adaptation to a geographical environment, the evolution of their worldview and in the unique history of the tribal groups (Cajete, 1994, p. 138). The term Aboriginal tends to obscure the distinctiveness of First Nations peoples and perhaps as a colonial convenience, there has been a tendency to lump them all together as one identifiable group. We may speak of Inuit, Métis, and First Nations as one form of categorization, but even this denies the unique and varied nature of Indigenous nations. With over 50 Aboriginal linguistic groupings (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996, Vol. 1, Chap. 1) and a variety of dialectical differences even within these groupings, it is evident that there is much more sophistication and complexity to the issue of Aboriginal reality and experience than suggested by a monolithic characterization. This is elaborated upon within the RCAP as it considered the "separate worlds" of Aboriginal peoples and European societies.

Centuries of separate development in the Americas and Europe led to Aboriginal belief systems, cultures and forms of social organization that differed substantially from European patterns. Although this is generally accepted now, there is often less recognition of the fact that there was considerable diversity among Aboriginal nations as well. They were as different from each other as the European countries were from each other. Moreover, they still are. (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996, Vol1, Chp1, s1)

As a whole, however, Aboriginal people share a worldview composed of ideas, symbols, metaphors and stories that cannot be denied. At its heart, the horizons of two life-worlds have been repeatedly colliding over the time-space continuum and while many would like to reduce this to something as elemental as culture, it seems deeper than that.

As stated earlier, the worldview differences between the Europeans and AmerIndians are appreciated more if considered from the perspective of their respective roots or their origins. It has been said by Aboriginal peoples that they have inhabited this land since time immemorial and, in fact, that there is evidence that first human inhabitation could have taken place up to 40,000 years ago (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996, Vol1, s2). Olive Dickason (2002) offers, "today it is widely accepted by anthropologists and archaeologists" (p. 4) that Indians crossed the Bering Strait on foot
from Asia during the Ice Age and then proceeded southward throughout the Americas. In his introduction to *Dancing with a Ghost*, Ross opines:

> They are not just different versions of us. They began their journey to today not where we did, with the Mediterraneaen worldview classically enunciated by Plato and Aristotle. They began it in Asia, then brought that Asian worldview to the reality of the harsh, nomadic existence on this land mass many thousands of years before Plato was born...The paths they followed were completely different from ours as we passed through the rise and fall of Greece and Rome, the Christian Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the development of a wage and money economy, secularization, and the growth of major cities. For most Indians of the North, even the Industrial Revolution took place without their knowledge or direct involvement. (1992, pp. xxii-xxiii)

Noteworthy here is Ross's (1992) understanding that the Western worldview has its own path that is fundamentally different than that of our Indigenous peoples and how that has influenced our respective evolutions. In each case, it is like there is a genetic imprint that defines who we are and that it is intrinsic to our natures. Not only are you what you live, but inherently, you are what your ancestors have lived. It is bred in the bone.

Friesen advances that there are those who take issue with the Bering Strait theory and how our first peoples populated the North American landmass (2005, pp. 41-42). Recent archaeological discoveries have weakened the case and draw into question just how long our original peoples have been here (Mann, 2005). This does not negate the fact that Aboriginal peoples, regardless of their origins, represent an entirely different set of cultural beliefs and practices and that they have views steeped within their history, land, contextuality, experiences and values. Not surprisingly, given their history and their symbiotic relationship with the land it would not be unexpected that land plays an integral role in anchoring the Aboriginal worldview. Leroy Little Bear partially addresses this interrelatedness, this sacred covenant with the land, when he says,

> Tribal territory is important because the Earth is our Mother (and this is not a metaphor: it is real). The Earth cannot be separated from the actual being of Indians. The Earth is where the continuous and/or repetitive process of creation occurs. It is on the Earth and from the Earth that cycles, phases, patterns, in other words, the constant flux and motion can be observed and experienced. (Youngblood Henderson, 2000c, p. 248)
There is a strong sense of being with the universe and the interconnectedness that this implies.

Youngblood Henderson (2000c) reinforces the importance of the natural context in declaring that, “Ecological forces have always been the source of the most important lessons of Aboriginal thought and life. Aboriginal worldviews, languages, knowledge, order, and solidarity are derived from ecological sensibilities, so an understanding of these forces is essential to an understanding of Aboriginal contexts and thought” (p.256). Pobihushchy (1986) bolsters this perspective in describing the North American Aboriginal worldview as “eco-centric,” where man is not at the centre of being, as an individual separate from his environment, but rather is an integral part of it (p. 119). He further elaborates that the self is not only the individual person but also includes the parts of being or existence, the Great Spirit, the spirits, animals, plants and the rest of creation (p. 119). The strong sense of harmony in the community of being permeates Aboriginal thought and knowledge and implicates many aspects of Aboriginal life. Aboriginal epistemology is one of wholism and interconnectedness. Aboriginal people do not believe in the “fragmentary self-worldview” that permeates the Western world (Ermine, 1995, p. 110). They believe in “oneness,” a wholeness that sees all aspects of the universe connected and imbued with a spirit, whether animate or inanimate. Ermine, again, captures the concept when he writes, “Aboriginal epistemology is grounded in the self, the spirit, the unknown” (1995, p. 108). The inward landscape or metaphysical journey to discovery marks the Aboriginal way.

Additionally, spiritually, there is a reverence for all aspects of life and being; sacredness exists in the many relationships within creation. Wilshire invokes (2006) William James, who observes,

Religion, whatever it is, is a man’s total reaction upon life, so why not say that “any total reaction upon life is a religion?” and to get at these reactions, “…go behind the foreground of existence and reach down to that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as an everlasting presence…This sense of the world’s presence…involuntary and inarticulate and often half unconscious as it is, is the completest of all our answers to the question, ‘What is the character of the universe in which we dwell?’” (p. 262)
The innate spiritual, sacred and holistic nature of the Aboriginal reverence for the land and life can only be seen as a religion within James’ frame of reference. The natural world was the Aboriginal church (Cajete, 1994, p. 90). The web of interdependence is intricate, delicate and fragile, holding all the natural beauty of life together through the spirit-world, and thereby creating a complete unity of being (Pobihushchy, 1986). This is also likely why Aboriginal peoples, generally, do not adopt the instrumental, dualistic thinking inherent in science because they tend not to look at the world as a detached observer (Jacobs, 2006a, p. 279). Their view is one of cooperation over competition, harmony with instead of control over and ultimately, reciprocity within relationships and decision-making (p. 279). This notion extends to kinship as well where family is considered the immediate, extended and community members where family and group take precedence over the individual. “The individual does not form an identity in opposition to the group but recognizes the group as relatives (included in his or her own identity)” (Maclvor, 1995, p. 76).

In contrast, the Western worldview or Euro-centric perspective rests on an atomic or instrumental perspective bent on acquiring and synthesizing human knowledge and understanding through the constitutive elements of our world. Influenced strongly by the aforementioned classicist thinking, it takes a part to whole approach in understanding life’s mysteries. It also stems from the original thinking proposed by John Locke who argued that the right to life, liberty and property underscored individual happiness and led in civil society to the common good (Youngblood Henderson, 2000b, p.19). This individualistic orientation has become the cornerstone of modernity and in essence provided the little impetus that early settlers needed to stake a claim to Aboriginal lands, and to use his thinking as a means to rationalize their imposition upon the Aboriginal peoples. Again, Pobihushchy (1986) in discussing the arrival of the immigrant European society to North America, asserts that western civilization was and is characterized by a separation of man from his environment and that man places himself at the centre of the world of “being” (p. 118). For the European descendants, he labels them as “homo-centric” or man-centred where man is superior to his environment and exerts his will over nature. This homo-centric worldview
...promoted, in effect, the domination which man as the superior form of existence could expect to exert. The natural world, at a lower ‘level’ of being, was not of great consequence, and could be exploited to serve the higher purposes of man...According to this logic, as nature was ordered according to a hierarchy of value, therefore there must be a hierarchy of value in mankind itself. (p. 118)

Predictably, this meant that some groups were held to be inferior to others and a resultant, self-serving, pecking order evolved where the interests of the “superior” could be satiated.

Immediately, one can discern that this is the polar opposite from the Aboriginal worldview described above. Everything from atoms to behaviour can be reduced to basic units that will allow for better understanding (Peabody, 2002, p. 9). The world is objectified, measured and reported. Rupert Ross (2006) draws upon Milton Freeman, a professor of anthropology at the University of Alberta to put this in perspective.

The methods of [Western] science are essentially reductionist, that is to say, they seek to understand organisms or nature by studying the smallest or simplest manageable part or subsystem in essential isolation.

The non-Western forager lives in a world not of linear causal events but of constantly reforming, multidimensional, interacting cycles, where nothing is simply a cause or an effect, but all factors are influences impacting other elements of the system-as-a-whole... (p. 63)

As Ross (2006) concludes, the Western way of science is not so much to look at the relationships between things, but rather to identify the characteristics of things. As a result, Western science seems to have achieved excellence in its understanding of things and their properties, while Aboriginal science has attained excellence in how things work together in a system (p. 64). Again, the Aboriginal way is to begin with the whole and accept the universe as the one truth and then to establish one’s relationship with it. This is an interior journey with a much more subjective orientation. In reality, the two views, Aboriginal and European, seem to represent the opposite ends of a continuum, likely devolved from primal differences in their origins and their evolution.

There are many Indigenous scholars who, recognizing worldview differences, have called for a new approach to educating Aboriginal peoples, who are recognizing
value in harmonizing Indigenous knowledge with Eurocentric knowledge and who are ready to “imagine and unfold post-colonial orders and society” (Battiste, 2000, p. xvi).

Modern education and traditional education can no longer afford to remain historically and contextually separate entities. Every community must integrate the learning occurring through modern education with the cultural bases of knowledge and value orientations essential to perpetuate its way of life. A balanced integration must be created. (Cajete, 1994, p. 18)

However, before this is possible, a paradigm shift is identified as necessary to challenge and transform the modernist vision of the state of nature with an “extraordinary context-breaking vision that relies on Indigenous teachings about our place in nature” (Youngblood Henderson, 2000b, p. 14), a vision that has an ecological or natural basis. These scholars advocate a “decolonization” of the educational context to assist in reclaiming control over Aboriginal lives, identities and cultures and in establishing autonomy from and within Euro-centric thought and institutions.

To acquire freedom in the decolonized and dealienated order, the colonized must break their silence and struggle to retake possession of their humanity and identity. To speak initially, they have to share Eurocentric thought and discourse with their oppressors; however, to exist with dignity and integrity, they must renounce Eurocentric models and live with the ambiguity of thinking against themselves. (Youngblood Henderson, 2000c, p. 249)

Effective decolonization demands not only that there be Aboriginal content and people in schools and other societal institutions, but that new structures and forms of social interaction are created around Indigenous knowledge and worldviews (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000, pp. 92-94). They are seeking Aboriginal viewpoints in the curriculum and in the organizational fabric of schools; they want educational policies and practices that will contribute to a proportionate representation of Aboriginal people as teachers, administrators and school board members. Others, still, see decolonization as a necessary step in the recovery of Traditional Indigenous Knowledge as:

The recovery of Indigenous Knowledge is deeply intertwined with the process of decolonization because for many of us it is only through a consciously critical assessment of how the historical process of
colonization has systematically devalued our Indigenous ways that we can begin to reverse the damage wrought from those assaults. (Wilson, 2004, p. 362)

In Giddens’ terms, knowledgeability of the actors is critical in understanding both the individual agency and institutional structural principles that form our society.

**Social Dominance Theory**

Linked and aligned with Giddens’ TS and with Dussel’s contentions and their related understanding of power is the Social Dominance Theory (SDT) that claims that most stable human societies are typified by a stratified, group-based hierarchy where one hegemonic group dominates over at least one subordinate group (Pratto, Liu, et al., 2000, p. 370). The claim is that the hegemonic group holds a disproportionate amount of social status and power, and socially valued things that status and power bring, while the subjugated group is disproportionately plagued by undesirable life conditions such as poverty and oppression in its varied forms (p. 370). The four underlying assumptions of SDT (Sidanius & Pratto, 1993) suggests that human social systems are predisposed to form group-based social hierarchies, that hegemonic groups tend to be disproportionately male, that most forms of social oppression, such as racism, sexism, and classism, can be viewed as manifestations of group-based social hierarchy; and finally, that social hierarchy is a survival strategy that has been selected by many species of primates, including *Homo sapiens*.

As clarification, “hegemonic groups” are those that tend to be disproportionately represented at the higher positions of authority within social institutions, whereas “negative reference groups” are those that are least likely to be represented there. Pratto et al. (2000) have also shown that SDT transcends cultural boundaries—that it is a ubiquitous, cross-cultural phenomenon, spread rapidly about the globe because of the recent history of imperialism and the propensity of a group dominated culture to accept the interaction patterns, allocation rules and the cultural ideologies that justify specific forms of group dominance, as well as the general psychological orientation that these authors have called Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) (p. 402). In Giddens’ vocabulary, collective agents have accepted into habituated social practice the
structures and institutions of a dominating group that has exercised its power through its allocative and authoritative resources. It serves to remind us as well of the earlier conversation about critical situations and the psychological implications.

Sidanius and Pratto (1993) maintain that this type of behaviour has survival value and originates very early on in the evolutionary development of primates. Its usefulness can be summarized in three points: (a) social hierarchy could serve as a principle of scarce resource allocation, with a distribution principle based on social rank; (b) Everything else being equal, social hierarchy might serve to reduce internal social conflict as lower social status individuals defer to higher ranked individuals; and, (c) Social groups that are hierarchically organized will have a competitive advantage over those that are not as they follow a “military chain of command” principle, with little room for challenge (p. 175). In the words of Pratto et al. (2000):

...people who most support group dominance are most likely to obtain social roles and political positions that enable them to enhance or maintain social hierarchy. This postulate links the individual psychological level to the level of socio-political structure, wherein group dominance is maintained by systematic institutional discrimination and other normative social practices (ie. law, economic distribution systems, gender roles) that advantage elites and disadvantage the oppressed. (p. 371)

In other words, the iterative nature of the dialogue between and among the agents and their structures reifies the status quo and it can be very difficult to change.

This extends as well to another force that maintains group dominance—that of ideology: shared cultural beliefs like origin myths, social role prescriptions, and group stereotypes (p. 372). Again, Pratto and company (2000) are able to cite discourse analysis and ethnographic research studies that show:

ideologies are embedded not only in individuals’ minds but in the way their conversations, interaction patterns, and social practices reconstruct group histories and group relations. So, social ideologies are powerful because they organize people into relationships that constitute their societies; because they are so consensually known and cued by ordinary social context that they are chronically accessible; and because they justify and explain why certain people should be punished, rewarded or given power. (p. 372)
Social hierarchies are maintained through a combination of individual (agency-preferences) and institutional (structural-courts, schools, banks, legislative bodies) discrimination, which also must be limited to prevent social destabilization and to avoid excessive conflict with the expressed values and beliefs of the social system. Discrimination in this sense means the extent to which socially valued sets of things (money, promotions, positions, titles, etc.) are differentially allocated to different social groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1993, p. 175). Taken to its extreme, this implies that those in the negative reference groups accept the hierarchical structure, thus internalizing their oppression by rationalizing to themselves their place in the scheme of things. It also means that both the dominant and subordinate groups accept the “legitimizing myths” (i.e., European racial superiority, divine right of kings, theory of papal infallibility, manifest destiny, meritocracy, Protestant work ethic, social Darwinism) that define groups and their relationships (p. 374). Thus, within hierarchical systems, most social institutions are supported by those myths that serve to explain and rationalize the differential distribution of power and rewards in favour of the dominant group (Sidanius & Pratto, 1993, p. 177). Given this seeming predisposition, the question of how to overcome this discriminatory structural set of social practices presents itself (Turner, 1986, p. 972).

Institutional Influence

SDT focuses on the general tendency for human agents to form and maintain group-based hierarchy, and as such, examines more holistically the oppression that large numbers of people experience in their everyday lives. Most proximally, SDT notes that chronic group-based oppression is driven by systematic institutional and individual discrimination. “Because institutions allocate resources on much larger scales, more systematically, and more stably than individuals generally can, social dominance theory regards institutional discrimination as one of the major forces creating, maintaining, and recreating systems of group-based hierarchy” (Sidanius et al., 2004, p. 847). Research has shown that institutional discrimination is pervasive across a wide and diverse range of structures in our lives, including housing, labour, health care, retail, education, and law (p. 851). However, Sidanius and Pratto (2004) alert us to the fact that, while institutional discrimination can be a driver within society reinforcing a dominant group
perspective, there are also a class of institutions that attenuate rather than enhance
group-based hierarchy (p. 851). These institutions disproportionately allocate resources
in recognition of the group-based dominance orientation to counter balance this effect
and create more equilibrium. This was earlier alluded to as a mechanism to avoid the
destabilization of society and its practices. Such institutions would include civil and
human rights organizations, unions, public and private welfare agencies and legal aid.

Other institutional findings reflect, generally, patterns of behaviour and
habituation that are significant when considered from an educational perspective.
Primarily, there are four socially based practices that Sidanius and Pratto (2004) found
to be in play. Institutional selection suggests that institutions select personnel with values
compatible with its hierarchy function. That is, they will select individuals based on
whether they are hierarchy enhancing or hierarchy attenuating dependent on the fit with
the institution. Institutional socialization is another form of matching an individual's
discriminatory predispositions and their roles within an institution (p. 854). The case is
made that because of differential socialization effects, schools reflect a microcosm of
society and could then be classified as hierarchy-enhancing. Differential reward reflects
an institution's interest in ensuring that its personnel display role-appropriate behaviour
by rewarding behaviour compatible with their social roles and punishing behaviour that is
deemed incompatible with those roles. Hierarchy-enhancing roles will enjoy institutional
privilege and rewards, while subordinate individuals and groups or hierarchy attenuators
will not. Interestingly, those in compliance with the hierarchy-enhancing expectations are
seen as "congruent" and those who are not are named "incongruent." And lastly,
differential attrition refers to the expectation that there will be a difference in attrition from
social roles among congruents and incongruents. People with incompatible attitudes
toward group dominance (incongruents) should leave their hierarchy roles at higher
rates than people with compatible attitudes (congruents).

In summary, then, we see the difference among agents in the form of hierarchy-
enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating, we see the reification of social dominance in the
mechanisms and contexts of institutional settings and structures and in the group-based
social hierarchy there is the uncomfortable hint of attendant manifestations in prejudice
and discrimination. In combination, when we consider both the work of Dussel and of
Sidanius, Pratto et al., we are left to wonder about the experiences of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. How does one make sense of their resilience in the face of such powerful domination? Is it a case of Giddens’ reflexive monitoring and his double hermeneutic loop playing themselves out over time? Is it that the knowledgeability of Aboriginal actors has deepened over time and they are now better able to position themselves within the context that they now find themselves? Have they, in fact become a hierarchy-attenuating group counter balancing the dominant, hegemonic, hierarchy-enhancing group and its institutions? Is it now a case that Aboriginal thinkers, leaders and people have in mind a post-colonial vision as suggested by the eminent Aboriginal scholar Marie Battiste (2004)?

...it is about rethinking the conceptual, institutional, cultural, legal, and other boundaries that are taken for granted and assumed universal, but act as structural barriers to many, including Aboriginal people, women, visible minorities and others...The instruments of this hegemony and domination are cultivated in language, discourses, disciplinary knowledge, and institutional practice.

Postcolonial is not only about the criticism and deconstruction of colonization and domination, but also about the reconstruction and transformation, operating as a form of liberation from colonial imposition. (pp. 1-2)

In conclusion, this section has explored the general sociology of Canadian Aboriginal experience within the context of the macro-experience of the world and the micro-experience of Canada. The historicity of Canadian Aboriginal peoples, the historicity of Aboriginal education, the differences in worldview and the cumulative impact this has had on the hegemonic order of Canadian society, and the implications of Social Dominance Theory and Institutional Influence, serve as the backdrop to understanding the present day structural properties that constitute one of the key institutional propagators of our societal norms, values, beliefs and customs: school. We now turn our attention to some of the key structural properties of that institution.
Structural Properties within the Institution of School

We have already seen in tracing the history of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, that there has been an institutionalizing and colonizing of a Euro-centric worldview. It is pervasive in our society and Aboriginal people have seen its face on many levels. Of particular note, is the caution that Verna St. Denis has registered that the cultural revitalization emphasis prevalent during the fourth historical period of dealing with the “Indian problem,” may be too narrow. She does allow that the RCAP report borders on this finding as well when it asserts that Aboriginal people want education to:

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. (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996, Vol3, Chp5, Intro to Education)

The report quickly adds, however, that:

rather than nurturing the individual, the schooling experience typically erodes identity and self-worth. Those who continue in Canada’s formal education systems told us of regular encounters with racism, racism expressed not only in interpersonal exchanges but also through the denial of Aboriginal values, perspectives and cultures in the curriculum and the life of the institution. (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996, Vol3, Chp5, Intro to Education)

The RCAP, of course, made many recommendations about education in its third volume, Gathering Strength (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996), and in particular in the fifth chapter where it deals with education specifically. Many dealt with what were perceived to be institutional barriers, reflected generally in the comment that “the school culture may be simply too difficult to penetrate” (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996, Vol3, Chp5, s3.5.6). Chief among the concerns expressed was the absence of a culturally attuned sensibility in the areas of teaching, curriculum, language and culture within the school. Mindful of earlier discussion focusing on social dominance, institutional influence and the larger project of Giddens’ Structuration Theory, a closer examination of
each will better explore these structural properties and the implications for Canadian Aboriginal students and their families within Canadian schools. It should be noted that a separate examination of each of the structural properties is somewhat artificial because in the lived reality of school they are intertwined and iterative in nature, generally informing one another in the dynamic interplay of daily activity.

**Culture**

“Culture refers to a dynamic system of social values, cognitive codes, behavioural standards, worldviews, and beliefs used to give order and meaning to our lives as well as the lives of others” (Delgado-Gaitin & Trueba, in Gay, 2000, p. 8). This would loosely align with Giddens’ sense of social institutions and the dynamic between agency and structure. Societies are social systems with influences coming from both inside and outside sources, where structural properties [signification (language), legitimation (moral conduct), and domination (resource access)] inform the institutions over time. Giroux (1988b) speaks to a cultural hegemony where he invokes Gramsci who saw the use of a cultural apparatus as the means to reproduce and distribute dominant systems of beliefs and attitudes (Giroux, p. 76). Others have expressed that cultural capital is reproduced and distributed by dominant society in a bid to socially legitimate systems of meanings, taste, dispositions, attitudes and norms (Giroux, 1998b, p. 77). There can be no escaping that much of life and school is a socio-cultural experience and as such a critical examination of the role of culture seems indispensable in understanding both. Much of the discussion to this point, whether in consideration of Giddens’ work or that of Sidanius and Pratto, does not broach the issue of culture other than to theorize antiseptically that culture only matters to the degree that there is a “cultural script in reifying inequality” (Pratto et al., 2000, p. 371). For Giddens, this would be part of a socializing script realized in the dialogue of the actors in habituating structural or institutional practices. For many anthropologists, neither of these explanations would go far enough in examining the function of culture and the impact on groups within society or its institutional and social practices. Through the years, many school situated, culture-based theories have been proposed ranging across cultural deprivation or deficit theory to cultural differences theory to cultural discontinuity theory
and lastly, to culturally responsive theories of pedagogy, emphasizing the role of teachers and schools.

In the first, cultural deprivation theory came into vogue in the 1960’s and described, based on cultural lines, the limited experiences of poor or impoverished children as a cause for poor academic achievement (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997, p. 123). Children from these circumstances were considered to come from a deficit culture and essentially were not congruent with the hegemonic, hierarchy-enhancing dominant culture. One can readily see how this would lead to a model of schooling and society that would be assimilative in nature and function and where structuration could be shaped by the dominant culture.

Besides the obvious flaws in assessments that pose minority cultures as inferior to, or more primitive than, the dominant one, cultural deficit approaches are misleading or dangerous in three other major ways—they tend to focus on cultures as phenomena that develop in isolation from one another and remain relatively static over time; they assume that the dominant culture and its standards are neutral or superior and that success depends on people’s ability to assimilate into it; and they fail to acknowledge the richness and diversity of other cultures. (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 21)

Cultural differences theory emphasized a narrower focus on teacher-learner interaction and the potential miscommunications resulting from cultural and linguistic differences (St. Germaine, 1995, p. 2). Here the solution in overcoming these obstacles lay with teachers becoming more knowledgeable about the culture and language of students and adapting curriculum, methodology and lessons to meet the needs of those students. Elements of this theory are still in favour to this day and have significant implications for schools and teachers.

Theories of cultural discontinuity explore the realities faced by ethnic minority groups within a dominant, majority culture, especially the experiences of students who are thrust out of the warmth of their own cultural womb into the cold, discordant, cacophonous school world that is literally and figuratively foreign to them. This gives meaning to the familiar “cultural clash” so often heard in refrain as individuals navigate the turbulent waters of culture, attempting to reconcile their own with another, with the
potential of drowning themselves in the process. St. Germaine frames the paradox as one where a child may have to choose one culture at the expense of another and in so doing, see success in school become failure in their cultural community and failure in school become a success of a different sort for the community (1995, p. 3).

Ogbu (1982) questioned whether the construct of cultural discontinuity was too narrow and worked to refine the cultural discontinuity hypothesis, distinguishing between three types of cultural discontinuities associated with schooling. There are universal discontinuities experienced by all children, where some features of schooling are inherently discontinuous with the home and community experiences of all children. The net effect is a discontinuity in the socialization received in the home and school. There are primary discontinuities experienced as a transitional phenomenon by immigrants and non-Western peoples being introduced to Western-type schooling. Often, people in this scenario go to school or send their children to school expecting and willing to learn the new culture of the school because of expected material and non-material rewards in an emerging Western-type status system. And finally, there are secondary cultural discontinuities and schooling. These develop after members of two populations have been in contact or after members of a given population have begun to participate in an institution, such as the school system, controlled by another group. Secondary cultural differences usually develop as a response to a contact situation; especially a contact situation involving stratified domination.

Each type of discontinuity has implication for how to meet the needs of students and demands that those responsible for learning environments both understand and engage with these discontinuities in order to discover appropriate continuities to accommodate the individual agents and the collective communities. Ogbu (1982) notes, however, that it is the secondary cultural discontinuities that present the most troublesome response “as structural discontinuities, opposition, and domination are more difficult to eliminate in school because the underlying cultural differences are less specific and often affectively charged in nature” (p. 304). He sees hope in the recognition of a structural nature in the discontinuities and in finding structural remedies or solutions by improving opportunity structure for minorities. “Under this circumstance, programs emphasizing cultural, cognitive, linguistic or communicative, and interactional remedies
are likely to prove more successful" (p. 305). Some question why cultural discontinuity has a greater impact on some students than on others (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997, p. 182). One of the conclusions reached is that those Aboriginal students who come from traditional homes with a rich cultural base, seem to have less trouble in school and that a culturally non-responsive curriculum is a greater threat to those whose own identity is insecure (p. 182).

Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Paulo Freire’s work, as a Brazilian educator, researcher and philosopher is instructive with respect to constructing a research paradigm that contributes to the struggle for a better world. It also reinforces Giddens’ perspective that the exploitation of the Other must be central to any critical examination of society and its agents' recursive relationship with its structures. Throughout his career, Freire had a Critical Theory (CT) orientation, where he insisted on the involvement and inclusion of the people he studied as subjects and partners in the research process. This, he terms as dialogical, cultural action (2006, p.167), a cooperative venture where “the dialogical theory of action does not involve a Subject, who dominates by virtue of conquest, and a dominated object. Instead there are Subjects who meet to name the world in order to transform it” (p. 167). Here we see the iterative nature of Giddens’ agent/structure interaction and his double hermeneutic model. Freire takes this further in his critique of the dominant banking model of education, a metaphor he uses to describe traditional education where teachers are depositors and students merely the passive receptacles of information shaped by the hegemonic order of the day (p. 72). He sees having resolution in his proposal of problem-posing education where “people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (2006, p. 83). Liberation is in praxis. Knowledgeable praxis effects that transformation and influences the societal structures and institutions that constrain them.

For Freire, problem-posing education and the path to true liberation, meant responding to the essence of consciousness—intentionality—essentially being conscious of consciousness (p. 79). Freire defends his methodology of having co-
investigators or as some have named, co-researchers. Those who question this methodology focus on the intrusive influence of the “co-investigators”, the contamination of the data and the resulting sacrifice of objectivity (p. 106). Freire maintains that in the search for meaningful themes that we cannot think that themes exist, in their original objective purity, outside people—as if themes were things" (p. 106). He advances that it is not possible to understand themes separate from the people. "Thematic investigation thus becomes a common striving towards awareness of reality and towards self-awareness, which makes this investigation a starting point for the educational process or for cultural action of a liberating character" (p. 107). For Giddens, this would be knowledgeability and mutual knowledge; attempting to understand one’s self in relation to time, space and contextuality and recognizing that there are multiple actors or “others” that have knowledge as well that must be engaged. Here both the researcher and the social actors come together to inform and transform the social order or system.

This in turn leads to a process of conscientization, or what Freire labelled in his mother tongue, conscientização (p. 109). People reflect upon their situation and their very existence, together in “cultural circles” (pp. 102-103), eventually teasing out a perception of an objective-problematic situation that allows them to understand and then be prepared to intervene as an emerging historical awareness of their situation becomes clear to them. This deepening awareness through dialogical process prepares participants to struggle against the obstacles to their humanization (p. 119). This is difficult work and involves breaking out of the habituated practices that people have been socialized into accepting as their frame of reference. This is compounded by the fact that it is not necessarily in the best interests of a hegemonic ruling group. Giddens describes this as the first level of system where homeostatic causal loops are in effect, where there are “circular” causal relations in which a change in one item initiates a sequence of events affecting others, that eventually return to affect the item that began the sequence, thus tending to restore it to its original state” (1979, p. 78).

In this respect, one of the key obstacles to humanization for Freire is what he calls cultural invasion, a central feature of conquest. He views this as an “act of violence against the persons of the invaded culture, who lose their originality or face the threat of losing it" (p. 152). Invasion is a form of economic and cultural domination that ultimately
leads to the cultural inauthenticity of those who are invaded. Inherent in this process and for cultural invasion to succeed, the invaded become convinced of their intrinsic inferiority, the absolute superiority of the invaders and consequently must adopt the values of the latter as they are alienated from the spirit of their own culture (p. 153). Importantly, Freire identifies that cultural invasion, which serves the ends of conquest and the preservation of oppression, always involves a parochial view of reality, a static perception of the world, and the imposition of one worldview upon another. It implies the "superiority" of the invader and the "inferiority" of those who are invaded, as well as the imposition of values by the former, who possess the latter and are afraid of losing them. (p. 160)

Henry Giroux (1988a) maintains that for Freire to be appropriately and contextually understood, we as "cultural workers" must become border-crossers; that is that teachers, students and other intellectuals have to take leave of the cultural, theoretical, ideological, and institutional borders that enclose them within the safety and comfort of the known.

Border pedagogy offers the opportunity for students to engage the multiple references that constitute different cultural codes, experiences, and languages...Within this discourse, a student must engage knowledge as border-crosser, as a person moving in and out of borders constructed around coordinates of difference and power...In this case, students cross over into borders of meaning, maps of knowledge, social relations, and values that are increasingly being negotiated and rewritten as the codes and regulations which organize them become destabilized and reshaped. Border pedagogy decenters as it remaps. The terrain of learning becomes inextricably linked to the shifting parameters of place, identity, history, and power. (p. 166)

It stands to reason that this is not a very comfortable experience and that the decentralizing effect is in substance the unexplored frontier of learning, a journey into the unknown. But only this dialogical receptivity will contribute to an understanding and a changing sense of the world, as we "interrogate it, to open up broader theoretical considerations...to engage a vision of community in which student voices define themselves in terms of their distinct social formulations and their broader collective hopes" (Giroux, 2006b, p. 63). Again, individual actors must engage within a collection of
other actors to reflexively monitor and to ultimately transform the structures of society, as we know them. Critically, there is a role for educational institutions to play.

**Teachers**

In contemplating the structural properties of teaching employed within our Canadian school system as it relates to our Aboriginal students, there are many facets to be contemplated. As we have seen, there are differences in worldviews and epistemological perspectives; there is a cultural underpinning; there are also the varied experiences of education for Aboriginal peoples, many of whom claim to have experienced oppression and the resulting alienation, the related socio-economic consequences and the racializing experiences within a colonized society. More recently, there has been the reification of a cultural revival of Aboriginal life, giving emphasis to the cultural discontinuity orientation that is now so prevalent in this period of integrating Aboriginal education within public education. That is, that the differences between the socio-cultural environments of Aboriginal student homes and those of the school are fundamentally different as expressed through the cultural orientation of each (Hawthorn, 1967; Haig-Brown, Hodgson-Smith, Regnier, & Archibald, 1997; Battiste, 1998; Caillou, 1998; Cajete, 2000; Peacock, 2002; Kanu, 2005). How teachers, both Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal are to negotiate this landscape, is at the heart of understanding how they might be more effective in meeting the needs of our Aboriginal students.

Martha Nussbaum (1997) identifies several important points to remember about the idea of teaching and including culture within our classrooms and schools. Real cultures are plural in nature, contain argument, resistance and contestation of norms, even internally, have a divergence of thinking and expression and reflect both the past and the present (pp. 127-128). As teachers consider how to integrate the study and understanding of culture into their classes, they must consider the nature of culture, the content of their lessons, and their intended audience. Furthermore, they must consider what the relationship between agency and structure is and how we critically examine our social practices? Barth poses the question, "How can we make conscious, deliberate use of differences in social class, gender, age, ability, race, and interests as resources
for learning" (1990, p. 168)? Differences hold great opportunity for learning and as such should be consciously explored within our social institutions, particularly, our schools.

Geneva Gay (2000, 2002) proposes that part of the answer is a culturally responsive pedagogy (p. 213). Again, the cultural hegemony referenced earlier is questioned and is central to the position that she takes. That is, that educators and society in general fail to realize that within the North American context, assumptions, expectations, protocols, and practices considered normative in schools are not immutable. They are based on the standards, norms, values and beliefs of the cultural system of one dominant, Euro-centric worldview. She comes from a multicultural theoretical construct that takes as its main tenet that, "when teaching and learning are filtered through the cultural frameworks of students of colour, their achievement improves dramatically" (p. 208). More specifically, culturally responsive teaching is seen as a partial antidote to the homogeneous, hegemonic reality in most schools of this continent, demanding that teachers use “the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (Gay, 2002, p. 106). In short, the achievement levels and inclusion of ethnically diverse students will improve when they are taught through their own cultural and experiential filters. Presumably, the extension of this thinking is that society, as a whole, will ultimately benefit as it becomes more culturally knowledgeable and hierarchy-attenuated.

At its heart, culturally responsive pedagogy, for Gay (2000, 2002) and others is comprised of addressing five key aspects of the learning environment. Developing a Cultural Diversity Knowledge Base argues that explicit knowledge about cultural diversity, including an understanding of cultural characteristics and contributions of different ethnic groups is critical. Designing Culturally Relevant Curricula addresses the need for teachers to pay heed to three levels of curricula: formal, symbolic and societal. The first has to do with the official, state-sanctioned policy, curriculum, textbooks and other standards issued through the varying levels of educational structure. The second concerns the images, symbols, icons, mottoes, award, celebrations, and other artefacts that are used to teach students knowledge, skills, morals, and values. The third is the knowledge, ideas, and impressions about ethnic groups that are portrayed through the
mass media. *Demonstrating Cultural Caring and Building a Learning Community* suggests that teachers need to know how to use cultural scaffolding in teaching ethnically diverse students—that is, using their own culture and experiences to expand their intellectual horizons and academic achievement. Teachers show their caring by accepting nothing less than high-level success from culturally diverse students and by working diligently and relentlessly to accomplish it. *Cross-cultural Communications* maintains that in order to effectively communicate with ethnically diverse students, teachers must understand the cultural encoding of student thought and to be able to decipher them. The culturally responsive teacher will understand the communication styles of different ethnic groups and how they reflect cultural values and, in turn, how they shape learning behaviours. And ultimately, *Cultural Congruity in the Classroom* speaks to a congruence or continuity between ethnic cultures and the school culture, especially teaching methodology and learning styles.

This school of making learning culturally relevant is not new. Perhaps it moves beyond theory into praxis and in this it is different. Like Freire and other critical pedagogists, the active nature of the pedagogy holds the promise for a better future. But there are those who would likely want to take a step back before moving forward. Many believe that in order to appropriately participate in such discourse, there needs to be a more egalitarian approach and that what first must be addressed is an understanding of one's own cultural roots and the implication of race. Friesen (2005) cites Yazzie, in acknowledging that if Aboriginal peoples:

> are to throw off the yoke of epistemological colonialism, they must commence the process within themselves. This requires a revitalization of all Indigenous cultural aspects including language. Political self-determination begins with internal sovereignty which means taking control of one's personal, family, clan, and community life. (p. 150)

Their argument is that just as we cannot teach what we don’t know, we cannot advocate for ourselves if we do not know ourselves. We must be conscious agents, knowledgeable about ourselves, so as to make informed choices on the road to transformation.
Stairs (1995) has called upon teachers to be “cultural brokers” or negotiators, realizing “the integration of the two models,” European and Indigenous, “into a new cultural pattern of learning and teaching...” (p. 145). She sees within the culture-based approach, recognition that teachers can act as the direct agents of contact where conflict and reconciliation may be addressed and negotiated between diverse cultural learning models (p. 146). This presumes an integrated environment and she is particularly addressing the role of the Aboriginal teacher within the mainstream educational environment. She concludes, “two-way brokerage between Native culture and formal schooling validates Native ways of learning, responds to urgent mainstream needs, and is our collective path to success in Native education” (p. 151). St. Denis, as we have seen, would take issue with this perspective in that she does not believe it goes far enough in consciously addressing the racialization of the system. But more particularly, on the role of the teacher as a cultural bridge, she cites many examples of the challenges that Aboriginal teachers face in providing “culturally relevant” education. For instance, what exactly is culture? How broad is it and when asked to integrate culture into the classroom, just what is it that is being asked for (St. Denis, 2002, p. 247)? There is a presumption, as well, that if you are of Aboriginal descent that you will automatically know your culture (p. 250 and p. 253), a very uncertain proposition at best, given the historicity we have explored. And even if you have some comfort with your Aboriginal culture, out of respect for Traditional Knowledge, you would not necessarily address significant aspects of your culture, but rather call upon the Elders to do so. In other words, there are boundaries and limitations that many Aboriginal teachers feel when it comes to matters of ceremony, spirituality and sacred knowledge. It may well be disrespectful to talk about things that are generally reserved for the Elders to speak about (p. 250). Aboriginal teachers express that they feel the burden of being the “resident Aboriginal expert” (p. 254) and that they often describe their experience as “being a bridge that gets walked on by both sides,” by the advocates of culturally-relevant Aboriginal education and the public educational setting within which they work (p. 258). This has been compared to “being a referee in a game with the odds stacked against one side,” being cultural translators and cultural brokers in very politicized and difficult circumstances with little likelihood of success (p. 258). Add this to the view that Aboriginal teachers are often seen as “sell-outs” because they have fit into the
established colonial structure of school and one can appreciate the pressures that might very well be associated with being a cultural broker (p. 260). Moreover, sell-outs are often seen as having a foot in both worlds, something seen as desirable by the school system because they are “Indian, but not too Indian” (p. 261). A strong sense of tokenism is suggested here.

Stairs has honourable intent in promoting cultural brokers and certainly her statement about “two-way brokering” would likely resonate well with St. Denis. This theme is picked up on by the National Indian Brotherhood in its policy paper, *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1972) in addressing the nature of integration.

Integration viewed as a one-way process is not integration and will fail. In the past, it has been the Indian student who was asked to integrate: to give up his identity, to adopt new values and a new way of life. This restricted interpretation of integration must be radically altered if future education programs are to benefit Indian children. (p. 25)

The key is two-way integration and this will never be accomplished by putting the responsibility solely on the shoulders of Aboriginal educators or individuals. Systemic and institutional changes are called for and there must be an overarching commitment to achieve these by all those involved or it will continue to result in failure.

Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003) still maintain “the presence of teachers who share a common heritage with the students they teach fosters a sense of acceptance and may facilitate stronger communication among education system personnel, students, and parents” (p. 116). Cleary and Peacock (1998) come to a similar conclusion, drawing upon interviews and classroom observations with 60 teachers of American Indian students, in recognizing methods and teacher behaviours that work with Indigenous students:

...the need to build trust; to connect with the community; to establish cultural relevance in the curriculum; to tap intrinsic motivation for learning; to use humour; to establish family support; to provide situations that yield small successes; to make personal connections with students; to use highly engaging, activity-based learning and, in some cases, cooperative learning; to provide role models; to be flexible, fair, and consistent; and to provide real audience and purpose for student work. (p. 13)
Their findings, however, corroborate other findings that suggest:

the most critical factors in teaching success tend to be associated less with what any teacher's racial or social background is than with the degree to which teachers are sensitive to student backgrounds and cultural orientations, including possible differences in learning styles. (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 117)

This seems to be borne out in a later study by Bergstrom, Cleary and Peacock (2003) who, based on the stories of 120 Native youth in the northern Midwest of the U.S., determined that good teachers and teaching roughly split into two primary characteristics: teaching and personal. Positive teaching attributes included having cultural knowledge, using encouragement, using explanation, using examples and analogies, having high expectations, being fair and demanding respect for all learners, being flexible, being helpful, being interested in students, listening and trying to understand and using multiple approaches. Personal attributes included being caring, being friendly, being fun, being mellow, being open-minded, having patience, respecting students and staying (as opposed to leaving the school or community) (pp. 160-170). Save, perhaps, for the first item in the first list, cultural knowledge, the lists define what any parent or student would want from their teachers. It could even be argued that cultural knowledge is about knowing your students and would therefore be listed by all as well. This supports Kleinfield’s (1995) findings suggesting what differentiated effective teachers of Aboriginal and Inuit students was their instructional style, not their ethnic membership.

This motif is supported by Gloria Ladson-Billings, professor of education at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, who in studying excellent teachers of African American students, has argued for a "culturally relevant" pedagogy (1992, 1994, 1995a) that goes beyond just good teaching, to go beyond the surface features of teaching 'strategies,' to explore the philosophical and ideological underpinnings of their practice. It demands that students must experience academic success, must develop and/or maintain cultural competence and, must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 160). In the case of the first, culturally relevant teachers attend to student academic needs in a very real and intentioned way, insistent that students choose academic
excellence, and that they are not merely making them “feel good” or that they belong (p. 160). In the matter of cultural competence, culturally relevant teachers utilize students’ culture as a vehicle for learning. Students are able to maintain cultural integrity and to be themselves, rather than “acting white” (pp. 160-161). Lastly, the culturally relevant teacher creates a climate and environment where students “develop a broader socio-political consciousness that allows them to critique the social norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (p. 162). This puts us in mind of Freire’s conscientization, where students and teachers engage the world and others critically (p. 162).

Gregory Cajete (1994) describes traditional tribal education as revolving around experiential learning (learning by doing or seeing), storytelling (learning by listening and imagining), ritual/ceremony (learning through initiation), dreaming (learning through unconscious imagery), tutoring (learning through apprenticeship), and artistic creation (learning through creative synthesis) (p. 34). What is unique to these forms of learning is the marriage between inner and outer realities of both the teachers and the learners where both are engaged in a complementary educational process. Cajete also offers the foundational characteristics of Indigenous education that in many ways mirrors an earlier review of worldview differences, where a sacred view of Nature permeates its foundational process of teaching and learning; where integration and interconnectedness are universal traits of its contexts and processes; where its processes adhere to the principle of mutual reciprocity between humans and all other things; where it recognizes language as a sacred expression of breath and incorporates this orientation in all its foundations; where it recognizes that each person and each culture contains the seeds that are essential to their well-being and positive development; where story, expressed through experience, myth, parables, and various forms of metaphor is an essential vehicle of Indigenous learning; where it recognizes that we learn by watching and doing; where it recognizes that learning is about seeing the whole through the parts; and where we learn through our bodies and spirits as much as through our minds (pp. 29-32).

Friesen and Friesen (2005) identify what they describe as reliable pedagogical principles to ensure a healthy learning atmosphere for Aboriginal children. As with all
such principles, caution should be exercised on two fronts; the first is that not all principles apply to all Aboriginal children, and the second is that there is always a danger in lists that they will be adopted in a stereotypical fashion. With this in mind and knowing that applying any principles requires road testing them in the practical and lived reality of school, here are seven of their findings.

1. Teachers need to encourage students to accept themselves in terms of their total identity—spiritually, physically, culturally and emotionally, particularly with regard to what their non-Native peers or superiors might perceive as atypical traits.

2. Teachers should be prepared to present and accept alternative cultural explanations for normative behaviour. Be inclusive.

3. Students should be encouraged to learn about and appreciate the unique contributions of their own culture.

4. Teachers need to assist First Nations students in realizing that they are worthy of making unique contributions to society.

5. Students need to be made to feel part of a group while at the same time maintaining their own cultural identity.

6. Teachers need to be themselves in terms of acting out their own values and cultural identity.

7. Teachers must learn to accept each student as an individual.

Yatta Kanu (2005), from the University of Manitoba, in examining teacher perceptions of the integration of Aboriginal culture into a high school curriculum, found without exception that participants felt it was crucial for there to be an integration of Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives into the school curriculum and their classrooms (p. 54). Among her discernments were four themes on integration that she views to be elemental to any success: teachers’ beliefs about integration and reasons for these beliefs; teachers’ understandings of, and approaches to, integration; perceptions of challenges to integration; and, facilitators of integration. A further exploration of each may illuminate what the nature of the conversation within schools must be in order to have successful integration.

In the matter of the first, concerning the need for integration, teachers believed that it would improve how Aboriginal students felt about themselves and their
backgrounds (p. 54). They saw integration potentially realizing school success and retention among Aboriginal students while providing a platform where complex analysis of issues affecting Aboriginal lives could take place. Teachers also saw integration as an opportunity for their own personal transformation, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal and as a means to produce a readiness to have the dominant culture teachers engage in the critical reflection, critical pedagogy, and socio-historical introspection called for earlier (p. 55).

The second theme advanced by Kanu (2005), focuses on teacher understanding and approaches to integration. Here she references the work of multiculturalist James Banks (1989) whose typology of teachers’ engagement of the inclusion of multicultural perspectives in the classroom frames the discussion. Four approaches have been identified in his work: a) the contributions approach, where the focus is on teaching students about the contributions made by each cultural group; b) the additive approach, where content, concepts, and perspectives from other cultures are occasionally added to a curriculum that remains largely Euro-centric; c) the transformational approach where curriculum topics are taught from multiple perspectives; and d) the social action approach, where based on the transformational approach, students are encouraged to take action for social change (p. 55). Viewed as a continuum, the fourth stage is seen as the desirable outcome, but the reality is that the majority of teachers spent their time in one of the first two categories. Interestingly, in classrooms where genuine integrative efforts were being made, non-Aboriginal students “revealed that these activities had little or no effect…in terms of how they perceived Aboriginal students or of moving them toward interrogation of power structures in society” (p. 56). Their frame of reference remained entrenched, perhaps caused by their relative immaturity, but more likely because of the overt enculturation of the society they have grown up within.

Predictably, under the third theme of challenges to integration, the significant issues were defined as teachers’ own lack of knowledge about Aboriginal cultures, the lack of Aboriginal classroom resources, the racist attitudes of non-Aboriginal staff and students, school administrators’ lukewarm support for integration, and incompatibility between school structures and some Aboriginal cultural values (p. 57). We have already had some discussion of the first of these and it seems obvious that you can’t teach what
you don't know. However, the question begs how much effort do teachers make to know? Or framed another way, is the lack of knowledge merely a passive lack of information or is it "in part an active resistance to the difficult knowledge of cultural differences arising routinely in educational encounters between white, middle-class, Euro-Canadian teachers and their ethnic minority-culture students such as Aboriginal students" (p. 58)? Kanu also highlights the suppression of Aboriginal voice and agency, both students and parents, as one of the results of "epistemological racism," where those of the West marginalize minorities and people of colour. One of Kanu's participants is particularly distressed by the attitudes of teachers and administrators who really do not seem to grasp what the real issues are for Aboriginal students. They cannot "see" the Aboriginal students for who they are or the realities they often face. Again, one is reminded of the need for two-way brokering to occur. One last point under theme three reflects an earlier contemplation of Giddens where the potential incompatibility of school structures and Aboriginal cultural values and practices is identified. Within this study what surfaced were three examples: (a) incompatibility between schools' rigid approach to dealing with time and Aboriginal people's more flexible view of time; (b) incompatibility between schools' large class sizes and Aboriginal teaching methods such as the talking circle; and lastly, (c) incompatibility between the regimentation of the classroom experience and Aboriginal people's cultural value of non-interference in childrearing practices in some Aboriginal communities (non-interference means refraining from directly criticizing an individual or attempting to control the behaviour of others by direct intervention) (p. 62).

Under the fourth theme of facilitators of integration, Kanu identifies professional efficacy where teachers take responsibility for their own professional development in the area of Aboriginal culture and seek out opportunities to learn. Of course, there is an onus upon school systems to provide for these kinds of opportunities as well. Additionally, sustainable funding was seen as crucial in enabling schools to draw upon the Aboriginal community to support culturally relevant teaching in the classroom. Perhaps most critically, the need for support and leadership from school administrators is seen as instrumental in creating the catalyst for integration and ultimately for change. The focus must be on the policies and the practices of schools as well as on other
structural properties like curriculum. You can change curriculum and not impact upon the school’s culture at all (p. 64).

In a spin off study Kanu (2006) conducted, with a special emphasis on critical elements of instruction influencing Aboriginal student performance, she examined the results of integrating Aboriginal perspectives into a high school social studies curriculum throughout the 2003-2004 academic year. Kanu's theoretical framework embraced the cultural discontinuity thesis, but did not discount alternative theories that have been posited to better understand cultural conflict and minority student failure, such as those posited by Ogbu (1982, 1987) or by those, like St. Denis, with an antiracism framework (i.e., Dei et al., 1997; Ledlow, 1992), who investigate how the institutional structures of the schooling processes affect students' identities (race, class, gender, and sexuality) (p. 121). The study again took place within a mixed urban setting in a relatively large high school of 1,100 students. In general, the approach was to use an "integrated" implementation of Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum and classroom. In one classroom, integration was at the heart of everything the teacher did and reflected more the “transformational” or “social action” model cited in her previous study, while the second teacher and classroom practiced integration through the portal of “contribution” and “additive” strategies. In essence, the second classroom was a control group, while the first was the experimental classroom. In that classroom, the researchers assisted the teacher in integrating Aboriginal perspectives into: (a) the student learning outcomes for each unit, (b) the instructional methods and strategies, (c) the learning resources and materials, (d) the assessment of student learning, and (e) as a philosophical underpinning of curriculum (p. 124).

Findings from this study seemed to support the cultural discontinuity theory as those in the “integrated” classroom significantly outperformed those in the “additive” classroom across a range of indicators, including pass rates, class average, understanding of social studies content, higher-level thinking, self-confidence, verbal participation and Aboriginal perspective (p. 129). However, there was no apparent connection between the integrative approach and school retention and regular class attendance as the profile of each class was similar in these categories, “suggesting factors other than cultural discontinuity may account for attrition among Native students”
Some of these factors included having to take care of younger siblings at home; having no money and needing to work; having problems with parents, foster parents, or guardians; having legal issues; and, other social or family related issues (p. 130). Kanu reiterates that an examination of other macro-structural variables must be considered to fully account for poor school performance. On the matter of elements of instruction that seemed effective in improving Aboriginal student performance, Kanu concluded:

Teacher capacity, motivated by strong teacher efficacy beliefs, appears to be the most important factor affecting academic achievement, class attendance, and participation among the Native students in this study. Native resources, community involvement, and respectful and nurturing environments also appeared to enhance classroom learning for Native students. (p. 140)

In the realm of other macro-structural variables within a school that likely contribute to poor attendance, disengagement from the school, and eventual dropout by minority students, Kanu cites "low teacher expectations, racial discrimination and differential treatment of non-White students, curriculum delivery and pedagogical practices, and disconnection between school curricula and students' lives" as contributors (p. 140). This seems to reinforce the arguments posed by others that there is:

not enough evidence to conclude that cultural discontinuity plays a significant role, but there is overwhelming evidence that economic and social issues which are not culturally specific to being Indian (although they may be specific to being a minority) are very significant in causing students to drop out of school. (Ledlow, 1992, p. 29)

It may well be Linda Goulet (2001), Associate Professor in the Department of Indian Education, Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, who most aptly summarizes what is needed to address the needs of Aboriginal students in today's society.

As teachers we need to connect with our students, recognizing that each student is a part of a family and a community—a community with a history. We need to connect with families and communities in order to affirm, value, and include the language, cultural practices, and knowledge of the people in a meaningful way, in partnership, in order to overcome the past colonial practices in schooling. At the same time, we need to pay attention to the present realities of communities where we teach and live. We have a responsibility to participate in the struggle against the
continuing effects of oppression, because effective teaching practice takes place in relationship with the teacher, student, family, school, community, as well as the broader society, keeping in mind that all of us are situated in, and affected by, the complex historical contexts of culture, race, and class. (p. 80)

Curriculum

Hampton (1995) proposes that the failure of Aboriginal students within North American schools has to do with the malevolence of Western educational structures like curriculum, institutional context and personnel. Much of what has been written to this point explores the cultural discontinuity or disconnect for Aboriginal students within Eurocentric schools. The theory is that Aboriginal students do not see themselves in the schools that they attend. Further, on a more macro level, the:

rethinking of education from the perspective of Indigenous knowledge and learning styles is of crucial value to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators who seek to understand the failures, dilemmas, and contradiction inherent in past and current educational policy and practice for First Nations students. (Battiste, 2002, p. 7)

As with previous discussion, the argument goes that teachers of First Nations students need to decolonize education through raising the collective voice of Indigenous peoples, exposing the injustices in our colonial history, by deconstructing the past by critically examining the social, political, economic and emotional reasons for the silencing of Aboriginal voices in Canadian history, and thereby legitimizing the voices and experiences of Aboriginal people in the curriculum (Battiste, 2002, p. 20). In short, an ontological change is required to drive the Aboriginal perspective forward and to allow its inclusion in our structural properties and institutions.

Others advocate for a balanced approach to curriculum for Aboriginal students that has three foci: (a) traditional First Nations history and culture, (b) contemporary transitional First Nations culture and lifestyle, and (c) mainstream Euro-Canadian knowledge (Friesen & Friesen, 2005, p. 170). This approach acknowledges the need for integration, reconciliation of perspectives and a wider base of knowledge than what might presently exist within our schools. Again, we are reminded of the advice meted out
by St. Denis, Nussbaum, Ogbu, Freire, Giroux and others who believe the contestation through rigorous debate and discussion of cultural beliefs and perspectives will ultimately assist us all in better understanding one another and in validating the oppressed Other in the process.

A much vaunted set of standards or guidelines geared to accomplishing this infusion of Indigenous knowledge into the structural properties of the schools comes from Alaska where the Alaskan Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools (1998) has been mandated for all of the state schools. Its goal is through inclusive and comprehensive guidelines to articulate ways in which Indigenous knowledge can be infused within the local context of school. It is not a “one size fits all” mandate, but rather its process demands the involvement of the community in adapting the standards to suit local conditions and contextuality. The standards cover five principal areas, including students, educators, curriculum, schools, and communities. The approach is holistic and the standards are intended to act as “touchstones against which schools and communities can examine what they are doing to attend to the cultural well-being of the young people” (p. 3) within their schools. The emphasis has shifted away from an additive approach where teaching/learning about cultural heritage is completed in a separate subject to one where teaching/learning is realized through the local culture as a foundation for all education. It is the lens through which all teaching and learning is to be viewed and experienced.

These standards, then, serve to frame the core purpose of achieving a balanced, integrated and culturally responsive school environment where Aboriginal peoples may “see” themselves. In general, the standards may be used by communities and schools: to review school or district-level goals, policies and practices with regard to curriculum and pedagogy; to examine home environments and parenting support systems for the upbringing of the community’s children; to devise locally appropriate ways to review student and teacher performances and how they relate to nurturing and practicing culturally healthy behaviour, including serving as potential graduation requirements for students; to strengthen the community’s commitment to revitalizing the local language and heritage and fostering the involvement of Elders as an educational resource; to help teachers identify teaching practices that are adaptable to the cultural context in which
they are teaching; to guide the preparation and orientation of teachers in ways that help them attend to the cultural well-being of the students; to guide the formation of state-level policies and regulations and the allocation of resources in support of equal educational opportunities; and to evaluate educational programs intended to address the cultural needs of the students (p. 4). The model is one that holds all constituents accountable in the process of cultural revitalization and in advocating for Indigenous knowledge. It is beyond the narrow perspective that merely changing the curriculum will address the cultural deficits prevalent within schools.

In a similar vein, the Northwest Territories has developed the Dene Kede Curriculum (1993), a community-based effort that produced a cultural curriculum for children in kindergarten through to Grade 9. Addressing a theme of fours, the Dene value and hold sacred the land, self, the people and the spiritual world. Ideally, there is to be a balance in the four dimensions, representing a holistic and complete human experience. Understanding the self means understanding one's relationship with the physical environment, the spiritual world and other people. In understanding the Aboriginal view of spirituality it is perhaps best captured in the notion that we are not human beings on a spiritual journey, but rather we are spiritual beings on a human journey. Self-esteem derives from individual accomplishments in achieving collective goals. Within the Aboriginal context, wellness is defined as a balance between the four elements described above. The curriculum is integrated across and through the other subject area disciplines, taking an experiential learning approach while emphasizing the local Aboriginal cultural activities. It draws upon community participation, the student's personal experience and the teaching of Elders.

More recently, the province of Manitoba produced a resource designed to assist curriculum developers, teachers and administrators to integrate Aboriginal perspectives into the curricula. Integrating Aboriginal Perspectives into Curricula (Government of Manitoba, 2003) sets as its objective that curricula inclusive of Aboriginal worldview will include:

1. All students will be treated with dignity and respect, and recognition will be given that all students have gifts that can be shared with others.
2. Student motivation should be provided through intrinsic rather than extrinsic means.

3. Curriculum material will be made relevant to the students who are learning it.

4. Experiential learning opportunities will be used when possible and appropriate.

5. Members of the family and community will be involved in the education of students.

6. Elders will be invited to share their knowledge and wisdom with the students.

7. Traditional knowledge, histories, values, and cultures of Aboriginal peoples will be included in the classroom.

(Government of Manitoba, 2003, p. 18)

The document then outlines the learning outcomes intended to act as a guide for curriculum development teams who are integrating Aboriginal perspectives into the learning activities across subject disciplines.

Like Manitoba, Saskatchewan Learning has taken a similar approach to their curriculum development, adopting Guidelines for Integrating Aboriginal Content and Perspectives into all curricula (Government of Saskatchewan, Education, 2000). The Aboriginal Education Provincial Advisory Committee (AEPAC) recommendations anticipate what Saskatchewan Learning defines as actualization, that is, “effective implementation and ongoing renewal”. In the case of Aboriginal content and perspectives, actualization requires that: the intentions of including Aboriginal content and perspectives in curricula be understood and attempted by all teachers and administrators; Aboriginal content and perspectives be recognized as having a legitimate and rightful place in curricula for all students; quality in the delivery of Aboriginal content and perspectives be achieved; and, efforts to implement Aboriginal content and perspectives are continually renewed, and new ways are found for making authentic connections in school programs.

Additionally, the following principles, based on the recommendations in the Aboriginal Education Provincial Advisory Committee Action Plan 2000-2005 (2000), guide the actions of educators in achieving the goals of Saskatchewan Learning.
Principles

- Aboriginal worldview is a valid way of knowing and understanding the world.
- Accountability is essential to progress.
- Communication throughout the system is key to the achievement of common goals.
- Quality and authenticity are essential considerations in all Aboriginal education policy and program initiatives.
- All people must have equitable opportunities for success, coupled with respect for individual experiences and knowledge.

The *Indian and Métis Education Policy from Kindergarten to Grade 12* (Government of Saskatchewan, Education, 1995) specifically states that Aboriginal peoples will be represented fairly and accurately in all curricula and materials approved and developed by Saskatchewan Learning.

- Curricula and resource materials will concentrate on positive images of Aboriginal peoples.
- Curricula and resource materials will reinforce and complement the beliefs and values of Aboriginal peoples.
- Curricula and resource materials will include historical and contemporary issues.
- A strong curricular emphasis will be given to Native Studies, Aboriginal languages and English language development.
- Curricula and resource materials will reflect the legal, cultural, historical, political, social, economic and regional diversity of Aboriginal peoples.

Saskatchewan Learning does not identify what processes they employ to ensure compliance and support for teachers as they attempt to achieve the outcomes outlined above.

In British Columbia, Jo-ann Archibald (1995) provides us with a similar approach when she explores the philosophical and historical rationale behind a locally developed native studies curriculum based on the Sto:lo culture. She outlines the five main components involved in the curriculum development process as: a) situational analysis,
b) objectives, c) active research, d) learning experiences, and e) evaluation. Her overview of the five gives the flavour of what has been a long-term and sustained curriculum initiative that has realized successful implementation.

In situational analysis a variety of methods were used to gather information to aid curriculum development. Peoples’ viewpoints and research surveys were primary sources of information...The term 'active' was used to describe the type of research conducted because researchers were actively involved in interviewing Sto:lo elders and collecting data from various institutions. Learning experiences combined contemporary teaching methodologies and learning resources with traditional Sto:lo principles of education. Evaluation measured student learning of content and compared attitudes before and after each unit was covered. (p. 299)

Central to the learning experiences was a conscious effort to use the integrative inquiry process as the preferred teaching model. This was seen as appropriate for two primary reasons; the first that teachers would be familiar with the approach because it is often used within social studies and the second because it resembled the holistic approach to teaching and learning within the Sto:lo educational tradition (p. 303).

What emerged from this initiative and its review were six significant findings to contemplate when considering an Aboriginal model for curriculum development. Teachers desired more complete and practical lesson plans and units and therefore more development time is required. It takes a great deal of time to ensure authorization and approval of curriculum and sourcing the materials and resources. As with any new curriculum implementation, teachers require support and especially in cultural awareness. The development of an authentic curriculum requires the involvement of school personnel, Aboriginal people, especially elders, and if possible should reflect meaningful Aboriginal contribution. Curriculum initiatives are a living process and as such require that the process is responsive to the needs of the community and in supporting the cultural workers. And lastly, the model for curriculum development may be adopted by others and correspondingly, it may require supporting and sharing with other curriculum developers who are interested in the work (pp. 308-309).

Common to the approach used above, is another curriculum development model that employs the integrative inquiry-based strategy that is central to the success of the
Sto:lo curriculum development initiative. Veronica Ignas (2004) explores the necessity of linking local knowledge, local understanding of knowledge construction and the specific discipline of study, in this case, science (p. 49). For Ignas (2004), Indigenous students must experience curriculum that is relevant and meaningful to their local context and conditions and this necessitates that locally researched content, Indigenous knowledge content and careful attention to context and process permeate every aspect of the teaching and learning paradigm. “Relevant content harnessed to expert research techniques increases the likelihood that Indigenous students will more fully identify and articulate their own culturally unique set of behaviours vis-à-vis knowledge construction” (p. 51). Central to this learning process is the inquiry-based strategy that respects the different knowledge base of culturally different students and begins to pay homage to the need for increased pluralism in programs for Indigenous students. Specifically, the strength of the inquiry approach is:

That it demands that the teacher adopt an indirect and facilitative role in the learning process of students. When using the inquiry approach teachers support the students in their learning endeavours as opposed to orchestrating the learning process. Hence, it is the students who assume the primary responsibility for planning, conducting and evaluating their investigations. (pp. 51-52)

Ignas (2004) believes that this approach will help students apply what they already know to new learning opportunities. She emphasizes that educators must be aware of Indigenous knowledge, understand the students they are teaching and explore through the content of curriculum the motives of the majority culture and why the majority worldview is as it is. There should be a balancing of meeting the individual needs of students through a culturally sensitive approach while enabling the students to participate in mainstream culture. Here, one can see the educator’s role as one where Giddens’ knowledgeability of actors is increased and improved, where Freire’s subjects meet to name the world in order to transform it. Lastly, Ignas (2004) promotes involving the community members, parents and Elders in the curriculum design process as they are the primary knowledge holders, key partners in education and should be co-teachers in the everyday practice of teaching (p. 53). Through this engagement, curriculum reflects both Traditional knowledge and Western knowledge and through properly
prepared materials and resources “two ways of knowing” can be reflected in the classroom (Ignas, 2004, p. 55). She concludes that:

Community based research...is a powerful way to empower and motivate Indigenous and multicultural students. Important lessons can be learned from a community based research approach that highlights the significance of producing curriculum that has as its central premise respect for all cultures and culturally unique ways of building knowledge. (Ignas, 2004, p. 55)

Language

We have already seen that Indigenous peoples equate language with their culture and, in fact, regard it as one of three organic elements in the makeup of their identity—the other significant part of the triad being the land. It was Ludwig Wittgenstein who maintained that to “know a language is to be able to participate in forms of life within which it is expressed and which expresses it” (Wittgenstein, 1972, in Walsh, 1991, p. 31). In fact, I have heard First Nations people describe language as their soul. Paulsen (2003) takes a much more holistic view of language by expanding the boundaries to suggest that native literacy, inclusive of ways of knowing and ways of being, holistic learning, oral tradition, storytelling, culture, and language, should constitute what she names as a “living language” (pp. 23-24). She further makes a link between literacy, language, and identity when she posits that literacy and language are the symbolic representation of concept, and thereby language becomes the verbal means of expressing one’s beliefs, knowledge, and values. Kirkness (1998b) in reviewing the critical state of Aboriginal languages in Canada postulates that for First Nations people, “It is our belief and understanding that language is the principal means by which culture is accumulated, shared, and transmitted from one generation to another. Language expresses the uniqueness of a group’s worldview. It defines who you are” (p. 93). She reinforces this notion when she asserts that anyone whose ancestral language is under siege must answer the important question: What do you lose when you lose a language? Her response is that you lose your culture because language is culture and culture is language (p. 93). Joshua Fishman (1996), a world-renowned expert on sociolinguistics, in examining minority-language survival and maintenance and responding to this exact question, eloquently encapsulates what language means to a people.
Most of culture is in the language and is expressed in the language. Language is best able to express most easily, most accurately and most richly, the values, customs and overall interests of the culture. If you take language away from the culture, you take away its greetings, its curses, its praises, its laws, its literature, its songs, its riddles, its proverbs, its cures, its wisdom, its prayers. You are losing those things that essentially are the way of life, the way of thought, the way of valuing, and a particular human reality.

Put another way, we speak of the sanctity or sacredness of language. It is our unique gift from the Creator, therefore it is the mind, spirit and soul of people. Language is important because it is what ties us together, as in a family. Losing a language would be like losing a member of one's family, an article of faith, and a commitment in life. (pp. 81-83)

In short, it must be equated with identity and with who a person believes s/he is. In the earlier discussion of world-view we have seen that all of us are born into a social world of culture and that through socialization we assimilate to that culture. One of the key transmitters of that culture is language.

Given the importance of language to culture and the particular emphasis that First Nations give to their languages, it is understandable that there is concern about their endangered languages. But this should be set in a context. Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine (2000), in the book *Vanishing Voices: the Extinction of the World's Languages*, dramatize the world's language situation in the following statistics:

- 90% of the world's population speaks the 100 most-used languages,
- there are at least 6000 languages spoken by about 10% of the people on earth,
- there may be only as few as 600 "safe" languages,
- the vast majority of the world's languages may be in danger of extinction,
- 80% (149 out of 187) of native Indian languages [in the United States] are no longer being learned by children,
- only 4 of 60 Native American languages in Canada "are truly viable",
- only five of the native languages of what is now the US have as many as 10,000 to 20,000 speakers,
- 17% (50 out of 300) and 27% (110 out of 400), of respectively, Central and South American indigenous languages "are no longer viable".
90% of the estimated 250 Aboriginal languages of Australia are near extinction. (pp. 8-9)

Language endangerment is often compared to the endangerment of the biological species in the world (Krause, 1992) and if this analogy were taken to its logical conclusion, the word extinction as used by Nettle and Romaine (2000) adds an exclamation point to what is occurring on a worldwide platform, let alone within the North American context.

Extinction will occur once the last speaker of a language passes away. Prior to this, a language goes through a stage known as moribund, a descriptor that denotes that the children of those who speak a language are not learning their mother or ancestral tongue, tantamount to a species lacking a reproductive capacity (Krause, 1992). Krause and other experts have guesstimated that of the 6,000 languages on earth, about 50% or 3000 of them will become extinct during this century (p. 6). Most troubling for those who look to revitalize moribund languages is the fact that "safe languages", based upon a minimum number of 100,000 speakers, flies in the face of the reality that the median number of speakers for the languages of the world is pegged between 5,000 or 6,000 people. Based on this, Krause maintains that at the rate things are going this century it is even possible that we will see the extinction of 90% of the world's languages (p. 7)!

Crawford (1995) offers that the crisis of Native American languages is epitomized in increased extinctions and, continuing the biological metaphor, that they are becoming an endangered species (p. 21). Reasons for this language mortality range across a number of factors:

- genocide, social or economic or habitat destruction, displacement, demographic submersion, language suppression in forced assimilation or assimilatory education, to electronic media bombardment, especially television, an incalculably lethal new weapon (which I have called 'cultural nerve gas'). (Krause, 1992, p. 6)

Others lay the blame for the loss of language on the formation of nation-states and its related hegemony of "common culture" (May, 1998). Here they proclaim that the nation-state excludes every bit as much as it includes, despite its democratic overtures, because it requires that all of its citizens adopt a common language and culture for use
in the civic realm or public sphere (p. 275). In short, there is no “cultural democracy” in
the nation state (Fishman, 1991), and the institutionalization of language within the
nation-state correlates to the historical and cultural hegemony of a dominant group or
peoples. Carrying this further, Brian Bullivant in May (1998) observes that:

Certain common institutions essential for the well-being and smooth
functioning of the nation-state as a whole must be maintained: common
language, common political system, common economic market system
and so on. Cultural pluralism can operate at the level of the private, rather
than public, concerns such as use of ethnic language in the home...But,
the idea that maintaining aspects of ethnic life and encouraging the
maintenance of ethnic groups almost in the sense of ethnic enclaves will
assist their ability to cope with the political realities of the nation-state is
manifestly absurd. (pp. 274-275)

The institutionalization of language and culture is interlaced with the political, the
educational, and the economic systems. Hegemony in all areas creates a monumental
task in overcoming the language issue, let alone finding one’s cultural place in this
supposed inclusive environment. In fact, Mufwene (2002) would argue that language
loss and its related loss of knowledge is as much a consequence of economic policies
and political motivation as it is the internal reasons for a speaker choosing not to speak
his or her language. The twin pressures of both colonization and now, globalization,
make an ethnocultural and ethnolinguistic democracy even more complex.

A distinction that Crawford (1995) makes in his assessment of language mortality
is an important one. That is, that languages die from both external and internal causes
that are operating coincidentally. Languages have lives, but extending the biodiversity
metaphor, they “are like parasitic species whose vitality depends on the behaviours of
their hosts” (Mufwene, 2002, p. 393). Yet, forces beyond the speakers’ control, as those
discerned above, either singly or in combination, is conspicuously at play and may
generally be categorized as repression, discrimination and exploitation. However,
external factors such as these never happen without complicity of the speech community
itself as changes in attitudes and values see the speakers shift their loyalties for any
number of reasons to the dominant tongue. Even this is not a simple, uni-dimensional
dynamic as Mufwene (2002) elaborates:
Languages do not kill languages; speakers do, precisely those who are expected to use them rather than those speaking the alternatives to which they shift. In the ongoing competition for survival in changing socio-economic ecologies, a better understanding of such speakers’ decisions, motivations, and the dilemmas they face would help. (pp. 376-377)

Speakers chose to abandon their languages, often under duress, and as a form of self-defence, but the dominant language group often characterizes the process as kind of natural language Darwinism where only the fittest shall survive. Ultimately this smacks again of what Kirkness might well describe as a “blame the victim” reaction or as McCarty (1995) characterizes it, “Whether deliberate or not, the notion of language suicide fosters a victim-blaming strategy” (p. 24).

In light of these realities, what then, are the Indigenous peoples of the world to do, let alone First Nations within Canada? One response took place in the years between 1994 and 1997, when a series of conferences were sponsored by Northern Arizona University, to bring together “tribal educators and experts on linguistics, language renewal and language teaching to lay out a blueprint of policy changes, educational reforms and community initiatives to stabilize and revitalize American Indian and Alaska native languages” (Cantoni, 1996, p. vi). Attending the conference were participants from the U.S., Canada, Mexico and the Pacific. The ultimate outcome of these events was a compendium, two-volume set of books entitled, Stabilizing Indigenous Languages (1996) edited by Gina Cantoni and Teaching Indigenous Languages (1999), edited by Jon Reyhner. Papers were submitted to each by various indigenous educators, tribal Elders, academics, policy-makers, program administrators and many others drawn together by the hopeful outcome of discovering answers to their common issue of Indigenous language loss. It was the Cheyenne educator Richard Littlebear who threw down the language gauntlet when he admonished, “We must quit endlessly lamenting...the causes of language death...instead, we must now deal with these issues by learning from successful language preservation efforts” (in Cantoni, 1996, p. xv). Central to Cantoni’s volume was the work of Joshua Fishman on reversing language shift (RLS). In his sociolinguistic taxonomy for endangered languages, Fishman outlines a scheme for evaluating endangerment suitable for the range of situations encountered within Indigenous languages (Henze & Davis, 1999, p. 6; see
also Fishman, 1991, p. 395). His work is used as the measuring stick for reversing language shift and for determining what stage of endangerment a particular language is at.

Based on his groundbreaking work, and as McCarty (1998) presents it, Fishman believes that reversing a language shift depends on the "intergenerational language transmission—the natural processes in the home, family and neighbourhood through which succeeding generations replenish their speakers" (p. 205). Essentially, this is the pivot point in reversing a language shift. The implication of this is that "school-based efforts, including the development of indigenous literacies, are, in this framework, on the dispensable side...potentially helpful but not critical in ensuring the survival of threatened languages" (McCarty, 1998, p. 205). Fishman reiterates this point in one of his contributions to Cantoni's (1996) work, when he reminds us "that living languages are not primarily in institutions, but above them, beyond them, all around them" (p. 198).

Moreover, schools "should be on tap and not on top of a language," where he insists that, "language does not belong to them...[it] makes use of them" (p. 194). Henze and Davis (1999) would seem to be in agreement as they see a role for schools, but have a much more holistic view of what is required to reverse a language shift.

To intervene in the decline of a language requires education, and we mean education in its broadest, most generous definition. School programs, community-based programs, consciousness raising, child socialization practices in the home, informal apprenticeships—all are implicated. Successful intervention also requires language planning and policy changes at the local as well as state or national level so that the indigenous or minority language can be supported. And finally, intervention means conscious cultural change as well as language change. (p. 7)

Such solutions are easily stated, but so much more difficult to achieve, especially if the majority speaking community is not politically onside.

McCarty (1998) advocates a more holistic approach as she outlines two ways that schools can be sites for language reclamation. The first to work from the inside of the school outward as they initiate language planning and maintenance activities internally and then expand them to the public and familial domains. The second,
alternatively, is to have the community begin on the outside of school and move inwardly as exemplified in Elders and language speakers establishing apprenticeship teams, collaborating in everyday activities, organizing language immersion camps and in permeating the school environment with Aboriginal culture and language (p. 210). Schools have a role to play in facilitating and achieving language reversal, but without intergenerational transmission of the language in the home and the community, Fishman states, "If this stage is not satisfied, all else can amount to little more than biding time, at best generation by generation" (1991, p. 399). McCarty (1998) crystallizes the dilemma in the following.

...the crisis of language loss cannot be resolved if it is left to individuals or families working alone. But neither can extra-familial institutions such as schools assume the language implanting and expanding functions of parents, other caretakers and communities. Fishman is right: Except in museums and books, languages cannot survive without an intact community of speakers. To support the restoration of such communities, some consensual, coordinating agency is needed to raise consciousness about the stakes at risk and to organize action on behalf of indigenous languages and cultures. (p. 210)

This may be the role for schools in some communities, it may be the role of band councils in others, and it may be the role of governmental bodies in other circumstances. It will not always be the same model for each community, but it is clear that if there is not an agency championing the cause, little headway will be made and the confusion over language will continue unabated as well as the correlative confusion over identity. As Henze and Davis (1999) distinguish:

Given exposure to one or more languages and cultural entities besides the traditional heritage language and culture, teachers and parents struggle over decisions involving the attitudes, values, and beliefs children are to be socialized into, and students experience conflict over competing cultural models. (p. 13)

Barbara Burnaby (1996) concludes through a review of the literature that Aboriginal language maintenance, development, and enhancement hinge on four key conditions. Firstly, that regardless of circumstance that the Aboriginal community must be the central decision maker with respect to any language initiative. Secondly, it must
be recognized that there is always a complex of issues to be resolved in Aboriginal communities and the maintenance of language will likely be only one of many strongly valued priorities. Thirdly, it is essential that the support of the majority culture, especially policy makers, is critical to the success of any Aboriginal language policy work. And lastly, echoing perspectives that have been shared earlier, much work remains to be done with each of Canada’s Aboriginal languages in terms of language research, language resource development, teaching materials development, teacher training and training of other relevant language resource people, curriculum development that really reflects the interests of the community, orthography development and implementation, community activities that support the use of language, and other such endeavours. Notably, her assessment is that schools and academics may have a role to play, but only at the invitation of the community.

In a later case study where she examines a Cree decision-making process concerning language, Burnaby (2001) seems to drill down deeper on some of her earlier conclusions. Significantly, she realizes that simply having local control over certain decision-making in a school jurisdiction is not likely enough to ensure that a major change like medium of instruction will be successfully realized. As she noted earlier, there are a complex of issues within any community that may interfere or influence the decision-making. In this instance, a parent preference for the English language was one of them. The community also needed to realize a trust and confidence level in the community-based school board and this took years, not months. She also identified that the “success of change from within is related not only to leadership or control, but also to the essential human and material resources available for the task” (p. 202). Successful implementation of Aboriginal language as the medium of instruction required both “external support and internal mobilization of resources on the part of fluent speakers for teacher preparation, orthography standardization, and materials development in advance of the implementation in the classroom...” (p. 203). Additionally, the colonial stamp on education within communities seems to have informed and influenced parents within this study, as their expectations were more in alignment with earlier Euro-Canadian influences and a resultant inertia to new ways of doing things percolated within the community. Importantly, parental preference for English and French literacies was expressed and a desire to establish a bilingual environment that both honoured and
used two languages was seen as necessary (p. 206). This was but one case study and its findings can only provide an awareness of some crucial factors to be considered going forward, but it does illustrate just how complex revitalization of Aboriginal languages can and will be.

Verna Kirkness (2002) will be given the last word on the preservation and use of Aboriginal languages, based upon a presentation in Toronto that she gave to the Annual Conference on Stabilizing Indigenous Languages. The paper appears to be in collaboration with the noted Aboriginal scholar Jon Reyhner whose work was earlier cited in discussion on how to stabilize and revitalize Native American languages. Within the paper, 10 strategies are discussed that are seen as critical to the task of renewing and maintaining Indigenous languages. A brief summary emphasizes much of what has been said already, but extends the thinking even further as Kirkness entertains both the macro and micro levels of addressing language loss. They are: (a) banking Indigenous languages by immediately recording Elders and other fluent speakers on audiotape, videotape, or CD-ROM; (b) raising the consciousness of Aboriginal peoples about the history of their oppression and the importance of language to culture, world-view, identity and spirituality; (c) mobilizing fluent and partially fluent speakers to contribute to language recovery efforts and getting others to raise financial resources that will enable Aboriginal peoples to save their languages; (d) developing a full spectrum of language training and certification for language teachers, linguists, and others; (e) developing a comprehensive and appropriate curriculum to recreate the intergenerational transmission process in school and community programs; (f) engaging in meaningful research about effective models of language renewal and the nature of language learning; (g) informing national public opinion to create empathy and support through Aboriginal advocacy about the critical state of Aboriginal languages, the reasons for the predicament and what is required to save them; (h) eliminating artificial geographic boundaries and focusing on language families that transcend nation-state boundaries; (i) advocating for Aboriginal language legislation; and (j) working together on family, community, and national levels to establish a common strategy to make Aboriginal languages living and vibrant once again.
Of course, the question that remains is what are schools to do inside these broad and sweeping initiatives, many of which seem outside their jurisdiction. The answer may vary by community, but McCarty (1998) endorses that they are an integral part of the solution and that they must be part of a revolution where they:

...help their communities turn inward, to identify and rigorously protect certain domains from the language of wider communication, to shore up the boundaries around the native language and to give it, in Fishman's words, a safe harbour. If school-based human and material resources are not used for this purpose, the remaining, largely negative forces at work will only speed the rate of language loss. Eventually, indigenous languages will fall silent. Worse, schools and educators will be complicit in the loss. (p. 211)

**Student Voice**

Freire (2006), in commenting upon the sociological reality of disconnect between those who govern and those who are governed, said:

Many political and educational plans have failed because their authors designed them according to their own personal views of reality, never once taking into account (except as mere objects of their actions) the men-in-a-situation to whom their program was ostensibly directed. (p. 75)

Taken from the view of individual or collective agency, students without a voice are deprived of the opportunity to interact with or influence Giddens' institutional principles and properties of the world they live in; they are fundamentally deprived of a participative democracy, one of the principal goals of education. Often, we espouse these kinds of rhetorical ideals, but do not practice or reflect them in what we do. Listening to students is a step in that direction (Lincoln, 1995) as students are a critical part of schools and the educational system.

In general, the research on student voice and full participation within a school environment, spans several domains of school life. Firstly, among the findings in the research, that more engaging curricular and pedagogical approaches fuelled by student input to teachers (Commeyras, 1995; Dahl, 1995; Johnson & Nicholls, 1995; Lincoln, 1995) can make the material more accessible to students. Secondly, consulting students...
about their school experiences and needs (Arnot, McIntyre, Pedder, & Reay, 2004; MacBeath, Demetriou, Rudduck, & Myers, 2003; Rudduck, 2002) and listening to what they have to say about their learning experiences (Heshusius, 1995; Rodgers, 2006; Schultz, 2003) can provide educators with input and guidance for designing more engaging curricula and pedagogical approaches. An offshoot of this is that a stronger sense of agency and ownership is fostered when students are trusted to learn and have their growing maturity recognized (McIntyre, Pedder, & Rudduck, 2005). Thirdly, students can be a vital part of educational reform because of their unique position within schools (Cook-Sather, 2002; Cushman, 2003; Hatchman & Rolland, 2001, Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2003; Rudduck, Day, & Wallace, 1997; Rudduck & Demetriou, 2003; Weiss & Fine, 1993). Fourthly, building teaching methodologies and strategies around themes that emerge from students' own lives has been shown to be more effective in involving students and giving them the confidence to give voice to their beliefs (Hull, 1985; Freire, 2006; McLaren, 1989; Shor, 1987, 1992; Thomson, 2007). Fifthly, student involvement in the curricular and pedagogical approaches used often leads to pathways that counter discriminatory and exclusionary tendencies in education (Banks, 1996; Hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2000) and in the process are not only engaging but also personally and politically transformative. And more importantly, creating a student-informed learning environment where students feel empowered and motivated to participate constructively in their education (Sanon, Baxter, Fortune, & Opotow, 2001; Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001) fosters student engagement. But, perhaps, of paramount importance, in light of this study's focus, "increasing student voice in schools also has been shown to help to re-engage alienated students by providing them with a stronger sense of ownership in their schools" (Mitra, 2003, p. 290).

Reflecting back to Chapter 2 and its treatment of critical theory and the call for the double hermeneutic loop, where lay actors engage with social scientists and between them realize an enhanced understanding of experience and phenomena, there are those who draw a parallel to student voice. Yvonna Lincoln (1995) sees a major contribution of critical theory to the search for student voices in the:

focus on helping students examine the patterns in their lives in such a way as to discern the nearly-hidden structures that shape their own and others' lives. Within such a framework, students can be prompted to
articulate for themselves the hidden curriculum and the near-invisible structures of racism, classism, and sexism that act to undermine their sense of self-worth and esteem. They can be helped to understand the intuited effects of social structures on their lives, and indeed, can be helped to understand the effects of other cultural icons—television, film, print media, dress, and even the functions of language—to sort and separate. (p. 92)

As a method or tool, student voice or constructivist inquiry can be instrumental in helping students uncover the “meta-messages of the larger society” (p. 92). Here we can see “the bringing to life of perspectives that would otherwise be excluded, muted, or silenced by dominant structures and discourses” (Smyth & Hattam, 2002, p. 378). “Voiced research” (Lincoln, 1995; Johnston & Nicholls, 1995; O’Loughlin, 1995) takes the position that interesting things can be said by individuals or groups who do not necessarily take the high moral, theoretical or epistemological ground; in fact, they may be quite removed from the centres of power. What voiced research offers is the opportunity for smaller voices to be heard through the dominant ideology, structures and principles that prevail in our schools. Ultimately, the interactive process between teachers as researchers and students as collaborators in their own learning, can lead to new ways of knowing for both (p. 92). While this speaks to the relationship between the two while they are in school, it is equally likely that students who have come through the experience of school, can, retroactively, interact with a researcher to mutually reveal new truths about that experience and to reflectively determine if these revelations impacted on student agency.

A review of the literature pertaining to studies conducted using phenomenological interviewing or interviewing within other methodological constructs, produced evidence that, indeed, the interviewing of Aboriginal people about their high school experiences is not unprecedented. Ward and Bouvier (2001) examined the differential educational experiences of Aboriginal peoples in urban centres in Canada, Australia and the United States. Familiar themes emerged as their work addresses the maintenance of individual and collective Aboriginal identity, the impact on that identity of disconnection from the land, spirituality as key to understanding Aboriginal world views, and the effects of a colonial legacy. Special emphasis is placed on the stories of students who have been particularly marginalized by poverty, cultural dislocation, and racism. Darryl Bazylak
(2002) interviewed five female Aboriginal students from Saskatoon in his study that sought an answer to how these students “perceived their own success as a feature of problem-solving that focuses on positive factors with a solution-based philosophy driving educational transformation” (p. 135). In other words, what were the factors that caused their success rather than what created failure? He concludes his study with a summary table (Table 2) that I have reproduced below (p. 149).

Table 2.

Factors that Encourage Success and Failure for Aboriginal Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors that Encourage Success</th>
<th>Factors that Encourage Failure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A new understanding of spirituality</td>
<td>Contrasting world views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family involvement</td>
<td>Lack of parental involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>Lack of an engaging curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of self-identity</td>
<td>Schools are goal-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multicultural environment</td>
<td>Lack of cultural content in school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support programs</td>
<td>Low teacher expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug and alcohol avoidance</td>
<td>Drug and alcohol use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal teachers</td>
<td>Loss of native language instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 12 diploma</td>
<td>Placement into alternative programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant curriculum</td>
<td>Lack of career counselling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive and flexible teachers</td>
<td>Lack of teacher flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurturing a gift</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a similar vein, Andrea Williams (2000) in partial fulfilment of her Master’s degree, found in her case study employing qualitative interviewing, that the major influences on Aboriginal secondary student success were academic preparation, cognitive dissonance, perceptions on the utility of an education, levels of support from significant others, personal background or life path events, alcohol and drug abuse and cultural discontinuity. She gives particular emphasis to academic preparedness, an element that she describes as the “Hercules” factor in upholding all other factors (p. 203). Zamluk (2006) from the University of Victoria, used a hermeneutic phenomenology supported by an Indigenous research methodology to realize four major themes in
answering the questions: What are traditional knowledge and teaching methods that can serve as the basis for expression of an Indigenous philosophy and environmental ethic within an urban environmental education program? What themes can be identified that could aid in the creation of a framework for an environmental education program based on traditional ways of teaching and learning? She found that there was importance in Aboriginal education in discovering one's identity; that placing the human being at the centre of education was critical; that relationship, including spirituality was vital; and lastly, that community involvement is imperative for any Aboriginal educational initiative to be successful. Her overall conclusion was that Indigenous education must be rooted in Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, and methodologies. In interviewing four groups comprised of students, parents, community leaders and Elders and exploring why Aboriginal students dropped out of provincial schools, Patricia Makokis (2000) identified five themes as potential reasons: racism/cultural conflict; poor student/staff relations; marginalization; alienation; and systemic labelling. Contrary to Williams’ findings, academic difficulties were not cited as a reason for poor performance or dropping out. Utilizing a narrative inquiry interview-based methodology, Runnels (2007) sought to understand the lived experience of disengagement from formal schooling for five young Aboriginal women in a mid-Northern, Canadian community. Key themes reiterated through the participants included their need to have relationship and connection. Their optimal learning conditions were described as authentic, situated, experiential, guided, and often, culturally relevant. Their marginalization and discontinuance of school were related to: a sense of emotional insecurity in the school, the need for community and a sense of belonging, disrespectful treatment and relational bullying by teachers and/or peers, administrative policy related to placement and psychological needs, and restrictive curricular decisions.

In the review of the literature, two studies stood out for the researcher, not necessarily because they dealt with Aboriginal students, but more because they dealt with important facets of the work that this study is attempting to address and some potential implications for its findings. In the first, O’Connor (1997) undertook a small study and analysis nested within a larger one that examined how 46 low-income, African-American adolescents attending two high schools in Chicago conceived of the American opportunity structure and how they interpreted their own chances of making it,
given their aspirations for the future (O'Connor, 1996). The focus of the smaller study “emphasized the voice and life stories of six African-American high school students...” and analyzed the “dispositions toward struggle as a mitigating factor in the future and academic orientations of African-American adolescents who are acutely aware of structural constraints on social opportunity and mobility” (O'Connor, 1997, p. 597).

In the study, O'Connor (1997) explores the work of John Ogbu, a scholar we examined in Chapter 4, and highlights several key findings. Ogbu took the position that “it is the knowledge of institutional or structural impediments to upward mobility that results in African-Americans’ developing a deep distrust of Whites and the institutions they control (including schools)” (p. 599). He further posits that as a result, African-Americans privilege their collective identity and favour collective struggle in their efforts to fight structural subordination. In other words, there is security in numbers and in the group. The downside of doing so is that it may produce “maladaptive educational consequences” as doing well in school can be interpreted as “acting White” (p. 599), and create a scenario where African-American youth may blame the system for their own inadequate efforts in school. Thus, they maintain an “oppositional identity,” emphasizing external constraints on success over personal accountability, resulting in disillusionment about both school and the future and a failure to persevere in school (p. 599).

O'Connor (1997) takes issue with Ogbu’s perspective in distinguishing that the students’ familiarity with struggle, as experienced in their lives through the actions of significant others, accounted for why they did not just subjugate themselves to the dominant structural principles of their world.

In short, the resilient youths seemed to have received distinct messages (via the actions and ideologies of their significant others), which conveyed that oppression and injustice can be actively resisted and need not be interpreted as given...In short, resilient youths...appeared to have not only insight into human agency at the personal and individual level but also for interpreting Black individuals and collectives as agents of change. (p. 621)

The participants of the study revealed that they were privy to social behaviour and discourses that affirmed the need for struggle and its potential to produce change. They were prepared to take on the struggle and accepted it as part of their reality, but were
not prepared to succumb to it because of the examples that had been set for them. This led them to believe that "...institutions which reflect or contribute to inequality need not be abandoned but must be engaged (through conflict and opposition if necessary) in order to produce positive change" (p. 623).

Importantly, O'Connor (1997) concludes in contestation of Ogbu's position, that while structure does impact upon the attitudes and actions of marginalized people, it does not preclude the possibility that they may think and act in ways not wholly determined by their "place" in society (p. 624). Unlike Ogbu, who argues that there is a "Black cultural frame of reference" that predetermines students' interpretations of their subordination and their orientation towards school, where culture is no more than a "functional adaptation to the historical and social positioning of the group" (p. 624), other researchers argue that culture is more of a dynamic process that involves both structure and agency. "For them culture is the 'active, collective use and explorations of received symbolic, ideological, and cultural resources to explain, make sense of and positively respond to inherited structural and material conditions" (p. 624). Their cultural context, while making them suspicious of society and their chances within it, disposed them toward Freire's political action to transform it.

In another study conducted by Robert Peacock (2002), following a phenomenological methodology that focused on the lived experiences and perceptions of both American high school graduates and drop-outs, he found that there were societal, institutional, family and individual factors that impacted upon the success or failure of Aboriginal students within high school. As this study was the closest I could find in design and intent to that of my own, I will spend some time in detailing its findings. The societal factors included cultural invasion, sub-oppressor and the oppressed, cultures within a culture and racism. In the first, "cultural invasion is both an instrument of domination and the result of domination of one culture by another" (p. 124). The dominated culture begins to see through the eyes of the cultural invader, mimicking them in all facets of life. The second is closely related as "the oppression suffered becomes the model of behaviour and the oppressed become the sub-oppressor" (p. 124), consistent with Freire. Thirdly, "where the American Indian students' differed among themselves at school in language and culture, these differences became secondary
when they were among strangers” (p. 125). And lastly, the participants of this study
became very aware of racism in their lives at a very early age; often before they could
name it they had experienced its impact.

In considering the institutional factors of school, Peacock (2002) identified
teachers, curriculum, language and culture and school environment as significant for the
study participants. His findings about teachers mirrors what the literature has generally
concluded, suggesting that good teachers are those who care about students as
individuals; care about how they are doing and take the time to listen and even to learn
from them. There was also recognition that teacher gender and ethnic background had
little to do with the students’ choice of a good teacher (p. 130). With respect to
curriculum, student response was varied and not unexpectedly ran the gamut from
stating that “traditional” curriculum was needed, but that it could all be spiced up with
interest-based or vocationally oriented courses. Some did concede that Aboriginal
language and culture would be an important part of curricular concern (p. 132). On that
note, students reinforced this notion in declaring overwhelmingly that it was important
because “anywhere you go culture is going to fit into your life some way, some how” (p.
133). Where the school environment was concerned, participants identified many
concerning issues within their schools, but concluded they were still in the right school
for themselves (p. 134). There was a sense of belonging.

Reflecting on family factors, Peacock (2002) distilled the following themes from
the data: alcohol and drugs, poverty, foster home placement, and supportive families. In
the first, alcohol and drugs play a significant and undermining role within the family
structure as young children often found themselves having to fend for and take care of
younger siblings, taking on a parental role. Poverty, the second factor, “evoked
responses of anger directed at those who had everything given to them and a defensive
posture in regards to the students’ own families economic status” (p. 140). The third
finding dealt with foster homes and the fact that almost 50% of the student participants
experienced either an institutional placement or a foster home (p. 140). And finally, the
study found that supportive and involved parents were crucial to the child’s success (p.
140).
The final factor was that based upon individual characteristics and saw five individual factors emerge as important: self-concept, successful student, alcohol and drugs, suicide, and graduation plans. Generally, study participants had a positive self-image and felt optimistic about the future and this turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy. They all had a vision of what a successful student is supposed to be. All of the participants were aware of the dangers of alcohol and drugs and had varied experiences of its impact. It has played a role in the drop-out rate within their schools. Suicide ideation was prevalent among the participants and suicide rates were high in the community. And the last factor was graduation plans, where all participants had a perspective that saw the importance of graduation, regardless of whether they were a graduate or a dropout (pp. 144-147). They had not given up on the concept of graduating.

In summary, then, student voice literature illustrates just how effective listening to students can be with respect to informing schools about many facets of the learning environment. The literature offers examples of scholars and researchers who have conducted qualitative studies attempting to discern from student participants their perspectives on aspects of their lived experiences within school. Specifically, there have been numerous studies undertaken attempting to discern from Aboriginal secondary students what they have lived within school. Generally, the methodology was not the same as that chosen for this study, but interviewing was a key aspect of their methodology. None of the studies I reviewed focused on the school sociology of structure and agency.

Chapter 3 had as its focus the social systems and context set within Canada's history that has impacted upon our Aboriginal peoples. It also focused on some of the structural properties of schools as influenced by the social systems of our country and their implications for Aboriginal people and, perhaps, some shift in how we approach our practice within these structural properties. The author has surveyed how culture can play a significant role in the success of Aboriginal students as long as we are cognizant of its implications; he has explored the parallels between Freire’s homeland Brazil, his work and its possible incriminations for our context; he has examined the world of teachers and how pedagogical practice can potentially make a difference in the lives of Aboriginal
students; he has explored models of Aboriginal curriculum development that have been implemented to facilitate a better understanding of Aboriginal world-view, culture and history and for Aboriginal peoples to see themselves reflected more appreciably in their schools; he has investigated the issue of Aboriginal languages within schools and the reverberating complexities of reversing language shift away from English and the magnitude of such a project demanding involvement from all levels within an Aboriginal language community and beyond; and lastly, he has investigated the power of student voice and, more pointedly, offered some examples of studies that explored Aboriginal student lived experiences within school. Chapter 4 will entertain the methodology that has been chosen for this study to elicit from participants how the social systems and school structural properties have impacted upon them in their lives as individual agents navigating the high school world and its consequences across several levels of their lives, including their identity, family, social conditions and school experience.
Chapter 4.

Research Methodology

Qualitative and Quantitative Research

Borrowing from Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln seems a logical starting point in addressing the research methodology for this study. No two researchers have done more to draw together the "complex, interconnected family of terms, concepts, and assumptions" that "surround the term qualitative research" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 2). They have generically defined qualitative research as "a situated activity that locates the observer in the world" where through "a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible," the researcher attempts to "make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them" (2005, p. 3). They outline the history and then extend the metaphor of a bricoleur to portray the work of the researcher as s/he "produces a bricolage—that is, a pieced-together set of representations that is fitted to the specifics of a complex situation" (2005, p. 4). This suggests that a researcher in designing a study may choose from a colorful palette of methodological practices in realizing and interpreting a portrait or landscape experience. Multiple interpretive practices may be used to discover the essence of an experience or "the socially constructed nature of reality" (2005, p. 10).

Maxwell (1996) stated, "The strengths of qualitative research derive primarily from its inductive approach, its focus on specific situations or people, and its emphasis on words rather than numbers" (p. 17-20). Qualitative study "implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10). There is priority and weight given to the socially constructed nature of reality; there is an awareness of the relationship between the researcher and what is being studied and an understanding that there is no absolute
truth, just our interpretation or approximation of what reality is; and finally, that there is a value-laden nature and subjectivity to all inquiry, despite our best efforts to limit this dynamic and to maintain objectivity or scientific detachment in the process of research.

By contrast, quantitative studies adopt a more traditional, positivistic approach with emphasis on “measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10). Here the claim is that work completed in quantitative study is value-free in nature and committed to objectivism. It is this latter movement that has dominated the social sciences and it is premised on experimental science and the Cartesian sensibility that everything can be analyzed, dissected and measured in such a manner to instrumentally deduce truth from a confusing array of variables within a context, experience or experiment. Its focus is on proposing a hypothesis and experimentally testing it to eventually arrive at a theory. In the positivist or quantitative tradition, then, it is contended that there is a reality out there to be studied, captured and understood. In the postpositivist or qualitative movement there is a preoccupation with the constructivist nature inherent in humans and the more pragmatic need to supplement experimental or deductive design with designs that focus on inductive methodology, “grounded” in an evolving and emerging data and theory. The focus here leans away from universal laws and truths to stress the meanings and interpretations of an experience (Brewerton & Millward, 2001, p. 11).

The qualitative research paradigm has evolved from recognition of the limitations attributed to quantitative research, especially in the areas of social science and human behaviour. It has captured the imaginations of researchers in response to the perceived deficits of the quantitative research paradigm and in the desire to satisfy the “scientist practitioner” who wishes to apply science in a practical environment (Brewerton & Millward, 2001, pp. 10-11). This has not been without controversy or contention and it is fair to say that there is an ongoing debate, if not disagreement, between the two camps based upon the perceived lack of rigor within qualitative research. The qualitative researcher’s response to this issue of trustworthiness is to demonstrate that findings are credible, transferable, dependable and confirmable, the parallel elements respectively to the internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity set as standards within quantitative research (Toma, 2006, p. 412). Despite the concern of the quantitative
community, the net effect has seen a mushrooming of techniques and approaches, inclusive of standards that researchers have developed in their particular efforts to satisfy research needs. The resulting repertoire of methodologies has added to the toolkit of the researcher, regardless of those who might protest or dismiss qualitative research.

This phenomenon reflects the "qualitative revolution" that Denzin and Lincoln characterize in their introduction to *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* and what is really an "evolution" over time in response to the researcher's need to better represent reality and to admit that the black and white world of positivism cannot address the more open-ended, evolving, grey world of human experience (2005, p. xiv). Others have suggested that there is natural and needed complementarity between the two traditions where the qualitative researcher discovers themes and relationships and the quantitative researcher can validate those themes and relationships (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003, p. 24). This, again, suggests the *bricoleur* and the need to be open to possibilities as one methodologically constructs what best suits the researcher's purpose. Specifically, researchers are advised, "to draw on whichever technique is most appropriate to the question posed by the situation at hand" (Brewerton & Millward, 2001, p. 12).

Gall et al. reflect the essence of each tradition and have distilled a useful summary of the differences between quantitative and qualitative research in a table (2003, p. 25). It is germane to this discussion to include it here (Table 3). Strategies of inquiry typically associated with quantitative research include experimental designs or non-experimental designs such as surveys. Qualitative study strategies of inquiry would include narratives, phenomenologies, ethnographies, grounded theory and case studies. Both quantitative inquiry and qualitative inquiry are based on discovering a reality, differing in that qualitative researchers see the tools to do so as being imperfect, thereby introducing some degree of probability into the findings (Toma, 2006, p. 405).
Table 3.

Differences Between Quantitative and Qualitative Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quantitative Researchers</th>
<th>Qualitative Researchers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assume an objective social reality.</td>
<td>Assume that the participants in it construct social reality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assume that social reality is relatively constant across time and settings.</td>
<td>Assume that social reality is continuously constructed in local situations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View causal relationships among social phenomena from a mechanistic perspective.</td>
<td>Assign human intentions a major role in explaining causal relationships among social phenomena.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take an objective, detached stance toward research participants and their setting.</td>
<td>Become personally involved with research participants, to the point of sharing perspectives and assuming a caring attitude.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study populations or samples that represent populations.</td>
<td>Study cases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study behaviour and other observable phenomena.</td>
<td>Study the meanings that individuals create and other internal phenomena.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study human behaviour in natural or contrived settings.</td>
<td>Study human actions in natural settings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyze social reality into variables.</td>
<td>Make holistic observations of the total context within which social action occurs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use preconceived concepts and theories to determine what data will be collected.</td>
<td>Discover concepts and theories after data have been collected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generate numerical data to represent the social environment.</td>
<td>Generate verbal and pictorial data to represent the social environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use statistical methods to analyze the data.</td>
<td>Use analytical induction to analyze the data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use statistical inference procedures to generalize findings from a sample to a defined population.</td>
<td>Generalize case findings by searching for other similar cases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare impersonal, objective reports of research findings.</td>
<td>Prepare interpretive reports that reflect researchers’ constructions of the data and awareness that readers will form their own constructions from what is reported.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So, in summary, qualitative methods distinguish themselves from quantitative methods in that they focus on interpretation rather than quantification; have an emphasis on subjectivity rather than objectivity; have flexibility in the process of conducting research and as such less prominence placed on outcome; have a concern with context, situation, and behaviour as they relate to the lived experience; and lastly, there is a recognition that the research process impacts upon or potentially influences the research situation (Brewerton & Millward, 2001, p. 12).
When assessing the strengths of qualitative research and its potential weaknesses, then, the following reflects some of its attributes. Advantages of qualitative research as culled from Brewerton and Millward (2001), Creswell (1998), Denzin and Lincoln (2005), and Marshall and Rossman (2006) include the following. The data collected is based on the participants' own categories of meaning and there is opportunity to clarify with the participant what was meant. The qualitative data in the words and categories of participants, therefore, tend to lend themselves to exploring how and why phenomena occur. Qualitative research is also useful for studying a limited number of "cases" in depth and for describing complex phenomena from those experiences. Generally, qualitative research also provides an understanding and description of people's personal experiences of phenomena—the emic or insider's viewpoint. There is also the ability to describe in rich detail phenomena as they are situated and embedded in local contexts. Thus, the qualitative researcher is situated in such a manner that s/he can dynamically study and adjust to unfolding circumstances. The data are usually collected in naturalistic settings in qualitative research and, as such, are especially responsive to local situations, conditions, and participant needs. This, in turn, means that qualitative researchers can be especially responsive to changes that occur during the conduct of a study and may even shift the focus of their studies as a result. Lastly, the researcher can use an important case to richly and vividly illustrate a phenomenon to the readers of a study or report.

Conversely, the perceived disadvantages to qualitative research, as determined through the same sources above, are as follows. The knowledge or findings produced might not generalize to other people or other settings. In other words, the findings might be unique to the relatively few people included in the research study. This form of research also makes it difficult to make quantitative predictions. The research tends to deal with shades of grey rather than blacks and whites. It is therefore much more difficult to test hypotheses and theories with the participant pools as the numbers might not support generalizability. As such, qualitative research might have lower credibility with some readers, notably administrators and commissioners of programs or initiatives requiring support. Another observation is that it generally takes more time to collect the data when compared to quantitative research, especially since much of it is interview-driven. Compounding this is the fact that data analysis is often time consuming and filled
with proportionate complexity, as discernment of themes is as much art as science. And lastly, the results are vulnerable to a researcher’s personal biases and idiosyncrasies.

In addition to the above assessment of qualitative research, it is imperative to also be mindful that knowledge is subjective and that postmodernists caution about the nature of traditional knowledge production, especially as generated through university research. Rossman and Rallis extract four critical assumptions from traditional knowledge production critiques to consider in designing an inquiry process.

(a) Research fundamentally involves issues of power; (b) the research report is not transparent, but rather it is authored by a raced, gendered, classed, and politically oriented individual; (c) race, class, and gender [among other social identities] are crucial for understanding experience; and (d) historically, traditional research has silenced members of oppressed and marginalized groups. (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 5)

They go on to assert that as researchers we:

(a) must examine how we represent the participants—the Other—in our work; (b) should scrutinize the ‘complex interplay of our own personal biography, power and status, interactions with participants, and [the] written word’ (Rossman and Rallis, 2003, p. 93); and (c) must be vigilant about the dynamics of ethics and politics in our work. (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 5)

Bridging from these general qualitative concerns to this particular study, there are Indigenous research scholars who would argue that, “we need go beyond… Indigenous perspective to a full Indigenous paradigm” and that Indigenous research “needs to reflect Indigenous contexts and worldviews…” (Wilson, 2001, p. 176). Further, they would contend that “doing research with, for or among Aboriginal peoples in the Americas presents the social researcher with a special set of challenges that are simultaneously personal, institutional, and political” (Menzies, 2001, p. 20). Essentially, their view is that either positivism or postpositivism, quantitative or qualitative research come from a dominant western system research paradigm and that this paradigm is built upon “the fundamental belief that knowledge is an individual entity: the researcher is an individual in search of knowledge, knowledge is something to be gained, and therefore knowledge may be owned by an individual” (Wilson, 2001, p. 176). From the Aboriginal paradigm,
knowledge is considered relational and something to be shared with all of creation, not just interpersonally with the research subjects, but with the cosmos, inclusive of the animals, plants and mother earth (p. 177). Here, importance is given to relationship over reality and leads to what has been termed “relational accountability” (p. 177). What this means for methodology is that you ask different questions: rather than asking about validity and reliability, you are asking about how I am fulfilling my role in this relationship? What are my obligations in this relationship? I must meet and fulfil my end of the research relationship. Rather than allowing a colonial research methodology that puts the accumulation of knowledge ahead of the interests of the people studied, the researcher uses the lens of relationship and community to guide the process. Ultimately, this is seen as part of a decolonizing process where research is conducted with Aboriginal peoples as opposed to on Aboriginal peoples (Menzies, 2001, p. 21). This seemed important in light of the focus on eliciting student voice and having the students inform the work. Establishing a respectful and trusting relationship was pivotal to the success of the study.

Again, repeatedly in this study, we have come across the dualisms of our social reality, and once more we become aware of the different emphasis placed on research in two world-view paradigms: the first aligning more with the Western view of science and its demand for trustworthiness, reliability and validity and the second, more holistically embracing the relational nature of the world and our need to be accountable to the relationships we have in our life. This is not unlike that quantitative/qualitative duality within science and reflects the same need to be aware of both and to attempt to the best of our ability to honour the concerns and the orientations of each. It is possible, for instance, to conduct a qualitative study, honouring the participants, involving and including them in the conversation, while still ensuring that steps are taken to ensure the more traditional Western sense of trustworthiness, reliability and validity. These matters are pursued further on within this chapter.

Phenomenology: Philosophy and Methodology

This study employs a phenomenological methodology in pursuit of its overall purpose. This statement underplays the complexity and the abstract philosophical
underpinnings of the methodology and does not begin to capture the profound depth and richness inherent in such an approach—the intertwining, over time, of a philosophical foundation and the attempts to apply its epistemological principles to the study of human behaviour.

Phenomenology is an umbrella term encompassing both a philosophical movement and a range of research methodologies or approaches (Dowling, 2005, p. 131). This, perhaps, accounts for why there is great diversity in the points of view of thinkers who could be classified under the general rubric phenomenology, and reinforces the notion that it is not a rigid school or philosophic discipline (Moran, 2000, p. 3). Dermot Moran (2000) reinforces that it would be inappropriate to reduce phenomenology into one agreed upon method or one theoretical outlook because those who are most associated with it were:

extraordinarily diverse in their interests, in their interpretation of the central issues of phenomenology, in their application of what they understood to be the phenomenological method, and in their development of what they took to be the phenomenological programme for the future of philosophy. (Moran, 2000, p. 3)

In fact, its most apt description as a "movement" may have been best described by the noted phenomenologist, Herbert Spiegelberg (1982), in The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction, the most comprehensive source on the development of phenomenology.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines phenomenology as: "1) the science of phenomena as distinct from that of the nature of being (ontology). 2) An approach that concentrates on the study of consciousness and the objects of direct experience. From the Greek phainomenon, 'thing appearing to view'" (pp. 1075-1076). The second word that comprises phenomenology is that of logos which means reason or word and intimates a reasoned inquiry. Phenomenology, then, is a reasoned inquiry into the appearance of things. But what is an appearance? The answer to this question fundamentally leads to one of the major themes of phenomenology—that is, an appearance is anything of which one is conscious—and anything that appears to consciousness is a legitimate area of philosophical investigation. Applied to research,
Phenomenology is the study of phenomena: their nature and meanings (Moran, 2000). The focus is on the way things appear to us through experience or in our consciousness. The phenomenological researcher aims to provide a rich textured description of lived experience. Phenomenology asks, “What is this kind of experience like?” or “How does the lived world present itself to me?” The challenge for phenomenological researchers is twofold: how to help participants express their world as directly as possible; and how to explicate these dimensions such that the lived world—the life world—is revealed. Admittedly, this simplicity undermines the complexity and sophistication of the philosophic discussions and underpinnings within the movement of phenomenology. However, this overarching concern of phenomenology both anchors and centres the discussion that ensues regarding the methodology employed.

**Phenomenology as a Methodological Approach**

In the development of a phenomenological method for education, two prominent individuals stand out, Clark Moustakas more closely aligned with a heuristic transcendental phenomenology and Max van Manen with a hermeneutic phenomenological leaning. The difference between heuristic and hermeneutic inquiry is in the first’s preoccupation and focus on the depiction or description of an experience, achieving layers of depth and meaning through the process of interacting, exploring and elucidating; it does not include history, art, politics or other contextual signifiers. The description is complete in itself. There is no room for interpretation (Moustakas, 1994, p. 19). Clark Moustakas outlines his variation of phenomenological description where descriptive research is less concerned with an abstracted level of experiential essences than it is directed toward an analysis that maintains the wholeness of the experiences related by research participants. The Moustakas approach, which has been applied in disciplines outside psychology, is set forth in two books, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Moustakas, 1994) and *Being-In, Being-For, Being-With* (Moustakas, 1995). In the former, he concludes that his transcendental phenomenological model:

offers a valuable resource, a way of knowledge and discovery of the meanings and essences of human experience. It offers processes and methods that require effective listening and hearing, seeing things as they appear and as they are, not judging them, learning to describe experience
rather than explain or analyze it, focusing on a core question and exploring in depth the everyday constituents of human experiences. (1994, p. 175)

This clearly reinforces that the emphasis is on description only and certainly to obtain that outcome his approach is valid and creditable. However, in terms of an Aboriginal population and focus, it does not seem to have the potential to address the cultural and historical characteristics and differences, given that our understanding of the world is constructed by language and traditions of our heritage (Caelli, 2000) and that “culture plays a role in the phenomenological research process, as it is impossible for humans to think aculturally" (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005, p. 1264). Or, as Lawler (1998) expresses it:

In our thinking about phenomenologies, that is, in our thinking about what it is to be, we also cannot escape culture nor individual circumstances, such as gender, colour, height and shape. One cannot ‘be’ in a culture-free way. One does not have culture without humans to embody and experience it in a lived and expressed (or expressive) way and to pass it on to successive generations who themselves embody a culturally mediated way to be-in-the-world, to think about that world, reflect on it, or describe it in language. (p. 107)

Further, there are those who believe that because of the Aboriginal oral tradition and the narrative nature of communication that phenomenology can assist in interpreting “unspoken significant meanings of the experiences of indigenous peoples that might otherwise not be recognized” (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005, p. 1272). As Struthers and Peden-McAlpine (2005) conclude:

Phenomenology provides a seamless link with indigenous peoples and their culture, as it employs the natural inherent methods of oral tradition, narratives, and stories, and depicts the quintessence of time during the research process...phenomenology is consistent with the lifeway and values held by indigenous society. Thus, phenomenology is an appropriate research method among this population. Phenomenological inquiry provides a vehicle to obtain implicit cultural meanings of indigenous experiences; is a method for recording indigenous culture, events, and the essence of experiences throughout past, present, and future time; and is a manner whereupon narratives and stories that are told can inform... (p. 1274)
What is called for is a phenomenological tradition that recognizes that “the research process of phenomenology is circular, moving back and forth between the part and whole during thematic analysis. Thematic analysis of the whole produces findings that offer an in-depth understanding of the whole of a phenomenon” (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005, p. 1267). From an Aboriginal perspective, this is seen as a “harmonious, amenable, and acceptable research method to use in societies such as those of indigenous peoples that possess a holistic worldview” (p. 1267). What is called for is phenomenological hermeneutics, what van Manen (1990) describes as “a philosophy of the personal, the individual, which we pursue against the background of an understanding of the evasive character of the logos of other, the whole, the communal, or the social” (p. 7). It is fundamentally a writing activity that seeks to know what it is to be human, to study lived or existential meanings and to attempt to describe and interpret these meanings to a certain degree of depth and richness (van Manen, 1990, p. 11).

So, rather than being unrealistically restrictive, binding lived reality up within narrowly described possibilities for the study of complex human behaviour in an even more complex social and cultural setting, there is the possibility for phenomenology to open itself up to the non-object nature of qualitative and valuative meaning. Deetz elaborates:

Meaning structures are filled with privileged interests and it is from these that perceptions of objects and events are formed. It is not sufficient to describe these as naturally occurring for the rightful value of all knowledge is the improvement of human existence. (p. 13)

Meaning plays a central role in phenomenology and it cannot be fully derived without addressing the objective/subjective dualism. It does not seem possible to objectively collect data on the human experience as we might in the natural world. After all, phenomenology came into being to address this deficiency. “Phenomenology was able to overcome these inadequacies by grounding science in conscious experience rather than in the natural world” (Deetz, 1977, p. 57). The separation between objective world and subjective persons is considered more of an abstraction than the reality of subject and object combined in an intelligible world. So, if “behaviour and meaning of behaviour are not two separate entities but conjoined in experience as meaningful behaviour” (p.
57), then it stands to reason that deconstructing that behaviour will require interpretation. In fact, Stanley Deetz declares, "Interpretation is not experienced as something the person does—as arbitrary or personal. Interpretation is not added to the world: it is the World" (p. 60). Further, not only do people interpret the world, but the world interprets people in that its existence presupposes us and precedes each individual as a social way of being. In this process, "prejudice" is an accepted feature. "Prejudices, far from invalidating investigations of our particular World, are the very conditions which allow our investigations and the World to be understandable and relevant to ourselves and others" (p. 65). Husserl's presuppositional state to be achieved in epoché cannot be possible in such a world. "The phenomenologist himself is an historical being existing in a particular language and culture world—Lebenswelt" (Deetz, 1977, p. 59).

Hyde and Smith (1979) observe that:

As interpretation develops understanding, understanding shows itself in both a synchronic and diachronic form. Understanding is synchronic in that any particular act of understanding is a structuring of language at a specific moment in time; it becomes situation bound. Understanding is diachronic because once it is situated by interpretation it goes beyond the particular interpretation and forms the historical tradition moving language through time. (p. 353)

Thus, phenomenology addresses both the situational structuring of language and the continuing human evolution or growth in its process. Communication between individuals from various cultural backgrounds requires interpretation; interpretation requires both a "pre-consciousness" of the world and an historical sensibility to initiate an interaction between them and the lived experience, and study of such interactions requires a thought-model like phenomenology, making possible an interpretive approach to them so that understanding through Gadamer's (1989) "fusion of horizons" (p. 306) might be realized.

With this in mind, we turn to a second educational phenomenologist, Canadian Max van Manen (1990), whose *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* links phenomenology with the study of teaching and utilizes a blended view of its purpose as being both descriptive and interpretive (van Manen, 1990, p. 26), thus aligning itself with hermeneutical phenomenology. His approach seemed
best suited for the purposes of this study. Although van Manen pays homage to Husserl (1970a, 1970b), the father of phenomenology, in desiring a rich description of experience through rigorous methodology, he also tips his hat to both Heidegger (1962) and Gadamer (1989), transformers of Husserl's original phenomenological vision, in recognizing the need for hermeneutic inquiry (van Manen, 1990, p. 26). The aim, according to van Manen, is for the researcher to "(re)unite...with the ground of their lived experience" and therefore with "the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world" (p. 9); to "explicate the meanings as we live them in our everyday existence, our life world" (p.10). van Manen makes use of the hermeneutic circle in consideration of his methodology and his writing as he advocates a part-whole analysis (pp. 92-95) and a pre-understanding orientation, both of which acknowledge the experience of a phenomenon in a whole experience and also the role of the researcher in the research process (Dowling, 2007, p. 138).

van Manen (1990) views his hermeneutic phenomenological research methodology as a dynamic interplay among six research activities:

1. Turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world; (p. 30) [Interesting phenomenon]
2. Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it; (p. 30) [Lived experience]
3. Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon; (p. 30) [Essential themes]
4. Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting; (p. 30) [Writing]
5. Maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon; (p. 31) [Pedagogy]
6. Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (p. 31) [Parts and whole].

It is not the purpose here to review every facet of his methodology, but in borrowing his structure, I can discuss key aspects of his method as germane to each activity and their applicability to this study. I have taken the liberty of giving each of these activities a title (seen above in italics) so that they may serve as section headings. Embedded within
these sections are the more traditional components of a qualitative research study, as seen in the following outline.

1. Interesting Phenomena
   a. Participants
   b. Bracketing
   c. Data collection
2. Lived Experience
   a. Interviews
3. Essential Themes
4. Writing
5. Pedagogy
6. Parts and Whole
   a. Data analysis

Other methodological considerations are given separate treatment at the end of the chapter, including ethics, generalizability, reliability, validity, delimitations and limitations.

**Interesting Phenomenon**

I have established that the purpose of phenomenology is to explore the essence of a phenomenon or lived experience and "so an appropriate topic for phenomenological inquiry is determined by the questioning of the essential nature of a lived experience: a certain way of being in the world" (van Manen, 1990, p. 39). One has to place the question of the study at the heart of the research through all stages. "To truly question something is to interrogate something from the heart of our existence, from the centre of our being" (p. 43). We must "live the question and “become” the question (p. 43). In van Manen’s educational orientation the question establishes the “what-ness” of the pedagogic experience; it means that we have a question of knowledge that is steeped within the educational context of lived experience. For the purposes of this proposed study, the following central question is posed:
• **What are the lived educational experiences of graduated Aboriginal secondary students?**

The interest is in the lived experience of Aboriginal secondary graduates, indigenous to the Yellowknife area, who have graduated from one of the local high schools. The interest is in what we can learn from Weledeh Yellowknives Dene nation students who have succeeded in secondary school. What personal factors contributed to their success? What institutional (school) factors contributed to their success? What challenges did they encounter? In order to better understand the context and setting of this study and by extension the implications for these questions, see Appendix B for an overview of the community and the school.

**Participants**

Besides a deliberation on the overarching methodological orientations, a deeper consideration of the dimensions that comprise them brings additional clarity to the selection of phenomenological research as the driver of the study. In entertaining what sampling approach should be used, it became clear that the essential criteria for selecting participants is that they had experienced the phenomenon being studied rather than that they come from a "bounded system" (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). As part of the sampling process there are several stages that were considered: identifying the population from which the sample will be drawn; defining a sampling frame—an identifiable and discrete set of population elements; and, sample selection, based upon some strategy to extract the participants (Thomas, 2006, p. 395-396). Here, the selection of participants was based on a purposeful and criterion-referenced strategy rather than on a case or site-specific requirement (Gall et al., 2003, pp. 178-179). In other words, all of the participants had experienced a particular high school and all had graduated from that high school.

For convenience sake, six students were drawn from a pool who had graduated from École Akaitcho High School, selected in such a manner that they represented the last three years, two each from the years 2004 to 2006, in order to ensure representation over time and to avoid time-specific issues or particular graduation cohort relevant influences. Convenience was based upon accessible location, the fact that the
researcher was familiar with and works within the setting and the potential population, and that the researcher was able to obtain approvals and consent for participation more readily because of familiarity. While often convenience sampling is seen as “the least systematic and defensible approach” (Thomas, 2006, p. 401) in sampling techniques, I believe it was warranted given the integral nature of the sample to the purpose of the study. Thomas (2006) buttresses this thinking in recognizing that:

the hallmark of useful sampling strategies is that they are purposively chosen to accomplish specific goals related to the inquiry” and that one of the primary goals of a sampling strategy is to achieve “representativeness of the population of interest. (pp. 401-402)

The intent was to get a cross section of relatively recent graduates who focused on the meaning of individual experiences over that of their group. An attempt was made to select an even number of male and female participants to determine if there were any gender-based differences in achieving secondary graduation. Other criteria like grade-point average, age, or family structure and affiliation were not considered as the researcher’s interest was in what the lived experience was for those Aboriginal students who have graduated and not to presume any other criteria to avoid bias. A form of snowball or chain sampling was used as the researcher requested the support of the École Akaitcho High School administration, guidance personnel and school secretary to recommend students who had met the following criteria: the participants would be Weledeh Yellowknives Dene who had legitimately met the NWT graduation requirements of the Department of Education, Culture and Employment. They also will have resided in one of the two small ancillary communities known as N’dilo and Detah or within Yellowknife, long enough to be included as official band members. A form of oversampling took place to ensure the minimum two per year participation outlined above. Priority was set using the following guidelines: In addition to the criteria set above, participants must have lived in the general vicinity of Yellowknife and be willing and able to participate in the process over a 4-week period. This ensured, to the degree possible, that should a participant not be able to complete the full study that a fall back position could be achieved. Fortunately, only one selected participant declined to participate prior to the interviews and thus it was possible to select one of the reserve pool participants. The reserve pool of four participants were not informed that they were on “stand by,” but
rather the researcher intended to treat any participant as if they were originally selected for the study. The "stand by" students were not informed that this was their status. The goal was to have each participant enter into the relationship between the researcher and participant without any encumbrances. The focus was on the emic perspective rather than the etic. That is, the "participant's perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it (the emic perspective), not as the researcher views it (the etic perspective)" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 101, Gall et al., 2003, p. 438). The emphasis was on the actor's views rather than on the researcher's interpretation, notwithstanding previous discussion about the transformative nature of the double hermeneutic loop. While the first informed the study through the discovery of emerging themes it was inevitable, as discussed earlier, that the researcher's own lived experiences and the need to interpret the data would be reflected throughout the study. However, Chapter 5 includes a comprehensive recording of the each participant's interview and commentary. Each interview for each participant was reviewed with the participant to ensure authenticity.

van Manen, in addressing Husserl's epoché or what has become more commonly known as "bracketing," proposes that we must explicate our assumptions and our pre-understandings. Our problem often is not that we know too little about a phenomenon, but rather that we know too much (1990, p. 46). So, unlike Husserl who advocates that a complete suspension of prejudices is not only desirable, but also possible, van Manen believes the researcher must examine prejudices in order to allow the views of research participants to be "heard".

It is better to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories. We try to come to terms with our assumptions, not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even to turn this knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character. (p. 47)

The question of when to employ "bracketing" or more accurately at what stage of a study it should occur generates some discussion. Following Husserl's lead would have the researcher do so immediately and would see the focus of the study being purely on description. Others believe that bracketing should take place in the analysis phase of the research and is not appropriate while interviewing, for instance, when closeness with the
other takes priority (Dowling, 2007, p. 136). Yet others believe that research is not truly phenomenological unless the researcher’s beliefs are reflected in the data analysis (p. 136). van Manen, while not fully clear on the timing, seems to suggest that it should take place at the beginning of the study and should inform the process throughout. Given this author’s belief that it is not possible to eliminate our prejudices or prejudgments, this is the approach taken.

**Bracketing**

It is evident that the subjective nature of phenomenology is likely a departure point for those who believe more in a quantitative perspective. Alfred Schutz, a social phenomenologist, took the philosophical position that:

> social sciences should focus on the ways that the life world—the world every individual takes for granted—is experienced by its members....

[He further elaborated that] the safeguarding of [this] subjective point of view is the only but sufficient guarantee that the world of social reality will not be replaced by a fictional non-existing world constructed by the scientific observer. (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005, p. 485)

The researcher needed to better understand the philosophical perspectives behind phenomenology and how people experience a phenomenon. It is equally clear that bracketing my own preconceived notions or ideas about, culture, education, Aboriginal learning, and my own dominant, white male position of privilege was a necessary condition to allow for the participants’ voices to be heard. Moustakas (1994) credits Husserl with labelling this concept as époché, wherein “we set aside our prejudgments, biases and preconceived ideas about things.” Moustakas then goes on to cite Schmitt (1968) who said that we must make every effort to “invalidate,” “inhibit,” and “disqualify” all commitments with reference to previous knowledge and experience” (p. 85). Essentially, he believed that you could place the world in suspended animation without action where it is “cleared of ordinary thought and is present before us as a phenomenon to be gazed upon, to be known naively and freshly through a ‘purified’ consciousness” (p.85). This is seen as an on-going process and not just a one-time event.
The obvious question is how one enters into a state of époché or practices this form of bracketing. There are no set recipes or steps as it is an experience unique to the context and situation being explored. It concentrates on the myriad *hows* and *whats* of everyday life and captures “the interplay between discursive practice and discourses-in-practice” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005, p. 496), through the analytical and logical discernment of subjects in the conversations of the participants. How one brackets is both as simple as being aware of the principle of bracketing and as complex as trying to operationalize it given my own biases and world-view. Moustakas clarifies this as he acknowledges:

> although the Époché is rarely perfectly achieved, the energy, attention, and work involved in reflection and self-dialogue, the intention that underlies the process, and the attitude and frame of reference, significantly reduce the influence of preconceived thoughts, judgments, and biases. (1994, p. 90)

He also believes that if the process is approached with dedication and determination, we can see, hear and view things differently, letting go of our prejudices and clearing the way to knowledge and truth (p. 90).

Marshall and Rossman (2006), in describing phenomenological interviewing, assert that the researcher, prior to the interviewing phase of the study, must use a similar process to that later described in the Seidman (2006) interviewing process where there is an uncovering or peeling back the layers of one’s own experiences. Again, it is crucial to bracket off your own experiences from those of the interviewees. “The purpose of this self-examination is to permit the researcher to gain clarity from her own preconceptions, and it is part of the ‘ongoing process rather than a single fixed event’” (Patton, 1990, p. 408). This is one of the central goals I had as a researcher in embracing this particular focus for study. While I hoped that the study results might contribute to the body of knowledge on Aboriginal education and experience, more selfishly, I saw this as an opportunity for growth and better understanding. I must admit to being trapped inside the stereotypical “white, iron cage” of Western world-view and rationality. I am open to others and attempt to be culturally, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually sensitive and aware, but recognize that I cannot escape my upbringing or the
culture that I am from. As Nerburn in Peacock’s study, *The Perceptions and Experiences of American Indian High School Graduates and Dropouts*, states:

> The white world puts all the power at the top...it is just the way you were taught to think...when you came among us, you couldn't understand our way. You wanted to find the person at the top. You wanted to find fences that bound us in, how far our land went and how far our government went. Your world was made of cages and you thought ours was too. Even though you hated your cages you believed in them. They define your world and you needed them to define ours. (p. 7)

This is my reality. I can no more change my culture or my path than can Aboriginal people change theirs. That should not be the concern. Rather, how open we are to each other’s stories and what we may learn from one another is paramount if we are to change the realities of the past. We need to be “strong like two people,” counsels Elizabeth Mackenzie, respected Elder from Behchoko (Rae-Edzo), a community approximately 100 kilometres to the south of Yellowknife and part of the Treaty 11 Dene.

I have lived in Yellowknife for just over 16 years and have been part of Yellowknife Catholic Schools for all of that time. I have been both a principal and a Superintendent within the system. In both these roles I have had considerable contact and interactions with the Aboriginal people of the area. Admittedly, this has generally taken place within the context and safety of school and this could be considered “my territory.” While much of my experience has been set inside the institutional setting, I have had over the years, considerable exposure and experience of the Dene culture. The impressions left upon me have been so strong that it has motivated me to undertake this study so that I become even more familiar with their history, culture and world-view. In some small way, perhaps, this can serve to further open and advance the dialogue that is so necessary if we are to make changes to better meet the needs of Weledeh Yellowknife's Dene children and ensure that their success is realized on their terms.

Every day brings evidence that the First Nation or Dene way is not really something I fully understand or appreciate. Everyday I am challenged to think differently and to reconcile my world with theirs. Increasingly, I have an expanding awareness of my own ignorance. In retrospect, recognizing our differences and the gulf between our realities should not have been surprising. However, the fact that I did not recognize the
substantial world-view differences suggests that I must have come to the North carrying
a simplistic assumption that Aboriginal people were probably less advanced than the
“white south” and that paternalistically I needed only to assist or support them to change
their circumstances and help them to realize a better quality of life. I realize that
assumption is both false and dangerous. But these assumptions have underlined the
colonial conquest of Indigenous peoples, not only in North America, but also throughout
25).

My interest in this study was not only to contextualize whom the Dene people
are, but also more importantly, it was my hope that my study would illuminate the First
Nations Dene school experience. More specifically, it was my desire to see this study
explore the structural properties of schools with an eye on how student voice might
inform the work of our educational system. The failure of other approaches in Canada
since pre-confederation is well documented, as we have seen, canvassing such
iterations as church run missionary schools, government supported missionary schools,
day schools, residential schools, industrial schools, secular, government controlled
schools that eventually became reserve schools, and finally, integrated, provincially run
public schools (Friesen, 2005, pp. 75-85). Essentially, there remain only the latter two
alternatives within Canada and some very uneven results and experiences (Hampton,
1995, p. 8). Other models or approaches are being given emphasis, especially by
Aboriginal scholars and practitioners: witness the Joe Duquette High School in
Saskatoon (Haig-Brown et al.), various Indigenous schools in Edmonton and
internationally, the Maori model in New Zealand (Smith, 2000b, p. 209-224). Through
both the literature and this study, it was my hope through a better understanding of
Aboriginal peoples’ voices and what they express as their needs, to influence, at a
minimum, a change in myself and potentially, more broadly, a change in the attitude and
approach towards Aboriginal people in a school and a school district. At the same time,
the participants as co-researchers, might equally be involved in a process of reflexive
monitoring, supporting their own self-discovery.
Data Collection

There were two sources of data for this study: the transcripts of audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews with each participant and the written summaries of each interview, largely presented in Chapter 6 of this study. Each participant was given a background information sheet prior to the first interview (see Appendix F), seeking general demographic information, present vocational status, personal interests and interview logistical information. They were also given the interview guide sheets in advance of the interviews to allow participants to contemplate the questions before hand. Participants were initially contacted by the Aboriginal Language and Culture coordinator for the school district in question, to give them some comfort, to offer them choice on interview location and to allow them to pose any questions they may have about the process or the questions. All participants were encouraged to elaborate on any topic they wished and to not feel entirely bound by the semi-structured interview format. All of the participants elected, however, to essentially follow the outline proposed.

The interview summaries were based on transcripts that were professionally produced, as I enlisted the services of a highly recommended and competent transcriber for this important work. My interest was in ensuring accuracy and efficiency, as I wanted to invest my energies in the interpretive process rather than in the transcription of recorded interviews. It is recognized that experience with transcription can bring value to a research enterprise like this one. However, the approach chosen allowed me to spend time in recording my immediate recollections of the respective interviews and to begin assembling my thoughts under loosely organized headings. After each set of interviews the recordings were sent to the transcriber so that upon their quick return, I would immediately be able to write up the participants summaries, using the conceptual headings and elements from the right-hand side of the Structuration: Social Practice chart, where the individual agent experience is outlined. The interview questions were aligned with the headings, seeking to elicit information that would elaborate upon these facets of the student's lived experience. This was in response to van Manen's (1990) belief that in phenomenological pursuits, a form of preconceived structuring or fore-conception can take place prior to any analysis (pp. 168-172).
Interview summaries were sent to each of the participants for their review, feedback and correction. E-mail addresses had been secured before hand with the knowledge that several were either already or soon to be living outside the city. Changes were made based upon their input. Two responded with minor corrections or edits. The first clarified the age of one of her siblings and the second clarified that she had graduated in four years rather than five.

**Lived Experience**

“We gather other people’s experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves” (van Manen, 1990, p. 62). We learn from those experiences and with reflexivity, perhaps can apply that learning to our own context. The nature of the datum to be collected is reflective of both the lived experience and the method chosen to elicit life’s living dimensions. For van Manen, he includes a myriad of possibilities to employ as the portal to these phenomena, ranging across interviews, protocol writing, observing, descriptions in literature, biography, diaries, journals, logs and even art. For the nature and purpose of this study, the primary vehicle that made sense was the interview. Again, van Manen’s perspective on the hermeneutic phenomenological interview is instructive. He sees the interview process serving very specific purposes:

1. It may be used as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon, and;

2. The interview may be used as a vehicle to develop a conversational relation with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience. (p. 66)

He cautions again that the interview process must stay true to the fundamental question and avoid the digressions inherent in the unstructured, open-ended interview methodology.

**Interviews**

The phenomenological design of interviewing seemed to support the cultural, emotional and individual sensitivities that would be required in approaching the Aboriginal participants. It could be aligned with the traditional First Nations view that
allows for storytelling and listening. Thus, to honour van Manen’s concern on focus, there was a semi-structured interview process, where a series of structured questions anchored the conversation (see Appendix G) while allowing for other more free-flowing questioning and probing to obtain additional information as appropriate (Gall et al., p. 240).

The phenomenological inquiry process, defined by Seidman (2006), where three in-depth interviews are conducted with each participant ensured emic integrity. “The first focuses on past experience with the phenomenon of interest; the second focuses on present experience; and the third join these two narratives to describe the individual’s essential experience with the phenomenon” (Marshall & Rossman 2006, p. 104). Successively through each level of interview, the intent was to have the prior interview inform the next in pursuing meaning from information shared previously. The semi-structured format allowed for a series of structured or targeted questions, as van Manen suggests, with the ability to then probe more deeply using the open-form questions referenced earlier to obtain additional information.

In this approach interviewers use, primarily, open-ended questions. Their major task is to build upon and explore their participants’ responses to those questions. The goal is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study. (Seidman, 2006, p. 15)

An interview guide with topics to be covered and the “anchor” questions were predetermined for use.

More specifically, the first interview explored the student’s contextuality/life history to the present, their educational background and experiences with a particular focus on agency. The second interview focused on what the student felt about his/her school experience, what they liked about school, what might have been obstacles in achieving success in school, and what changes they would like to see in the school system—with a focus on the agency-structure dualism. This interview also addressed relationships with other students, teachers, parents and other participant-identified people. The final interview zeroed in on the meaning of the participant’s experiences, their vision of a “successful” school and what they would suggest to make others’ educational experience better. The general questions posed at the end of Chapter 2,
regarding elements of Giddens' TS, were the overarching considerations in structuring the interview questions and process. Students were asked to share their thoughts, perceptions, and feelings about being an Aboriginal graduate of École Akaitcho High School. These perspectives about their secondary school experience included what they believed to be the best things about it, the worst things about it, the supports they had and from what origin, who the most influential people were in assisting them in graduating, what they are presently doing, and many other aspects of their educational (macro/institutional), family, social and personal (agency) domains. Their goals, values, and priorities were also elicited as part of their lived experiences. Biographical and experiential profiles of each participant have been created based on the personal narratives collected during the interview process. Detailed descriptive information about the perceptions and behaviour of these young Aboriginal students was sought, remaining as faithful as possible to students’ perceptions of their actual experiences.

**Essential Themes**

We have seen that there is a difference between our pre-reflective lived understanding of the meaning of time and a reflective grasp of the phenomenological structure of the lived meaning of time. Gaining access and insight into the essence of a phenomenon is a difficult task where making explicit the structure of meaning is central to the whole phenomenological method. van Manen (1990) equates this to conducting thematic analysis, a process often associated with literature. Here the “text” is life itself, the lived experience, and the description and interpretation produce discovery and disclosure. He describes the process as one where “grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of ‘seeing’ meaning” (p. 79). Phenomenological themes are, in fact, the structures of an experience. Or as van Manen more eloquently describes, “metaphorically speaking they are more like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes” (p. 90). Concretely, van Manen identifies three approaches toward uncovering or isolating thematic insights of a phenomenon in life’s text:
1. Holistic or Sententious: In this approach we attend to the text as a whole and ask, What sententious phrase may capture the fundamental meaning or main significance of the text as a whole? We then try to express that meaning by formulating such a phrase.

2. Selective or Highlighting: In this approach we listen to or read a text several times and ask, What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described? These statements we then circle, underline, or highlight.

3. Detailed or line-by-line: In this approach we look at every single sentence or sentence cluster and ask, What does this sentence or sentence cluster reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?

We are then tasked with finding commonalities across the descriptions that seem to thematically express the common meaning(s) in the phenomenon or experience. In this we see a whole-part-whole movement, or the hermeneutic circle. This is reminiscent of Ricoeur’s 3-step textural interpretative methodology of naïve reading, structural analysis and comprehensive understanding, another whole-part-whole hermeneutic scheme (Lindsbeth & Norberg, 2004, pp. 149-150). This was the strategy applied in the analysis of the data collected in this study.

van Manen (1990) also speaks to the “triad structure of conversation,” where he describes a conversational relation between the speakers, and the speakers have a relationship with the notion or phenomenon that implicates them and sustains them in the dialogue (p. 98). In the hermeneutic interview there is both a science and an art in continuing to ask questions that keep the interviewee focused on the substance of the thing being questioned (p. 98). “The art of questioning is the art of questioning ever further—ie. the art of thinking,” says Gadamer (1989, p. 367), a proponent of the dialectic or of the art of dialogue. In this sense, the conversation or the dialogue is a series of questions and answers and the interviewee becomes a co-investigator of the study (van Manen, 1990, p. 98), much like a Socratic conversation. This becomes even more apparent in the steps that van Manen advocates post-interviews, where:

both the interviewer and the interviewee attempt to interpret the significance of preliminary themes in the light of the original phenomenological question...and thus the interview turns indeed into an interpretive conversation wherein both partners self-reflectively orient
themselves to the interpersonal or collective ground that brings the significance of the phenomenological question into view. (p. 99)

Writing

There are two key features within this stage that need to be highlighted. The first is the power of anecdote, the narrative story and its place within a phenomenological pursuit and the second has to do with the writing process, its “thoughtful nature” and its place as a method within phenomenology. In the matter of the former, van Manen views anecdote or story as something depicted in narrative form, a popular and meaningful method of presenting aspects of qualitative or human science research (p. 115). That is because they help to “make comprehensible some notion that easily eludes us,” they are “social products…” that begin their “course as part of an oral tradition” (p. 116). Lindseth and Norberg (2004), invoking Ricoeur, present that we have a pre-understanding of life, which finds expression in the shape of stories. “A story is a whole, which gives meaning to particular events, which give meaning to the whole story” (p. 149). Within story we weave a dialectic tapestry of past, present and future where the past is brought into the present to shape the future. As with Ricoeur, “narrative expression allows for the development of a plot, which can explain activities in terms of connections among events over time” (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005, p. 1269), a focus on the sequence in which actions and events have occurred within an understandable context. Again, part of the appeal of this methodology for this study was the potential inherent in the methodology for compatibility with Aboriginal sensibilities.

van Manen (1990) believes that anecdote or story may play a role in describing the human experience because they can be a counterweight to abstract theoretical thought, show how life and theoretical propositions are connected, may provide an account of certain teachings or doctrines which were never written down, may be encountered as concrete demonstrations of wisdom, sensitive insight, and proverbial truth, and finally may ultimately acquire the significance of exemplary character (pp. 119-120).

Again, narratives are integral to Indigenous peoples, part of Indigenous culture. “Without narratives in an oral tradition, there is no history, no reference” (Struthers &
McAlpine, 2005, p. 1270). Story telling gives a unique expression to experience and in the indigenous lifeway it is the centre of the world. "Narratives or stories are a means of relaying information to others, telling of wisdom gleaned through living, preserving common characteristics of a culture, and passing truths on from generation to generation" (p. 1270). Oral tradition naturally accommodates the essence of the past, the present and the future and even within contemporary Aboriginal youth, this "imprint" was likely to show itself. Additionally, within phenomenological terms, story "operates in the tension between particularity and universality" (van Manen, 1990, p. 120), or if you will, between the parts and the whole.

On the matter of writing, van Manen (1990) characterizes it as the phenomenological method without technique, where it is closely fused into the research activity and reflection itself. It has "led to a transformed consciousness that has created a certain distance and tension between understanding and experience, reflection and action" (p. 124). Writing externalizes the internal, whether of the researcher or of the study participants. Writing is our thoughtfulness, it separates us from what we know and yet it unites us more closely with what we know; it distances us from the life-world, yet it also draws us more closely to it; it decontextualizes thought from practice and yet it returns thought to praxis; it abstracts our experience of the world, yet it also concretizes our understanding of the world; and lastly, it objectifies thought into print and yet subjectifies our understanding of something that truly engages us (pp. 127-129). Writing and rewriting really constitute a continuation of the questioning nature of phenomenology, where the rigorous interrogation of an experience is taken to new depths: "constructing successive or multiple layers of meaning, this laying bare certain truths while retaining an essential sense of ambiguity" (p. 131). Writing phenomenologically is a reflexive activity that attempts to understand recollectively the nature of being within the context of the experience or phenomenon in question. This proved to be the case for this researcher and it is hoped that what has been written reflects the multiple layers of meaning as discerned through the co-joint understanding of researcher and participants.
**Pedagogy**

What, perhaps, separates van Manen’s approach to phenomenological research is his focus on, in and through pedagogy. He makes the point that while pedagogy is commonly linked with the act of teaching, instructional methodology, curriculum approach, or education in general, that “we may have to accept the possibility that the notion of pedagogy is ineffable” and that even human science may not produce an unambiguous definition (p. 143). It is not teachable in a direct or straightforward manner and yet van Manen sees its potential in its hermeneutic phenomenological grasp of the meaning of pedagogy and its possibility of praxis. “Learning to understand the essence of pedagogy as it manifests itself in particular life circumstances contributes to a more hermeneutic type of competence: a pedagogic thoughtfulness and tact” (p. 143). For van Manen, pedagogy is neither the theory of teaching nor the application of the theory, it is neither the content nor the process. Rather he sees pedagogy as the experience of reflective questioning while living with and side-by-side, children.

Pedagogy is not something that can be “had,” “possessed,” in the way that we can say that a person “has” or “possesses” a set of specific skills or performative competencies. Rather, pedagogy is something that a parent or teacher continuously must redeem, retrieve, regain, recapture in the sense of recalling. Every situation in which I must act educationally with children requires that I must continuously and reflectively be sensitive to what authorizes me as pedagogic teacher or parent. (p. 149)

We need to exercise the pedagogic practice of textuality where “our texts need to be oriented, strong, rich, and deep” (p. 151). We need to be steeped in pedagogic practice, where as researchers we do not separate theory from life, and we are oriented to the world in a pedagogic way, where we produce understandings, interpretations, and formulations to strengthen our practice (p. 152). Our goal is to produce a rich and thick description of a phenomenon in all its experiential ramifications so that “in textual terms, these epistemological considerations translate into an interest in anecdotal, story, narrative, or phenomenological description” (p. 152). The outcome we are seeking is to use human science as a critically oriented action research vehicle, to become more thoughtfully or attentively aware of aspects of human life and to act in social situations that ask for such action. “Phenomenology responds to the need for theory of the unique,
and phenomenological reflection makes possible a neglected form of pedagogic learning: thoughtful learning" (p. 157). If we achieve this form of pedagogic competence, then we will see it in our practice and we will see it in our interpretation of the meaning of pedagogic situations like those in this study. A reflective praxis is often what is missing in public schooling, especially the point of view of students. Without reflection on what experiences means to them as individuals in combination with their values, beliefs, and the context within which they live out their daily lives, it is not grounded in their world and therefore does not have meaning.

**Parts and Whole**

True to Gadamer's vision of phenomenological study, van Manen (1990) maintains that the research process is practically inseparable from the writing, but because there is an iterative quality to this process and the outcomes of the study evolve in the process, we are advised "to keep the evolving part-whole relation of one's study in mind" (p. 167), a process that van Manen characterizes as working the text. In a sense, in keeping with the spirit of a phenomenological study, the researcher must have a "fore-conception" of some potential structuring strategies: thematic, analytic, exemplificative, exegetic, or existential (pp. 168-172). Each has potential dependent on what the study produces and what it dictates for representation. Essentially, the researcher must not only maintain vigilance in the part-whole dualism, but while in the process, must interpret the data always with an eye on how best to structure it.

**Data Analysis**

It is one thing to write theoretically about how to discern themes from the data elicited through the interview process and to participate in the part-whole dualism that many phenomenologists advocate. However, it is quite another matter when, as researcher, you begin to attempt to see your way through the process in a pragmatic application. The reader will recall that van Manen (1990) outlines three possibilities for interpreting texts or the texts of life: Holistic or Sententious where we ask, "What sententious phrase may capture the fundamental meaning or main significance of the text as a whole?" Selective or Highlighting where we ask, "What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience
being described?" Detailed or line-by-line where once more we ask, "What does this sentence or sentence cluster reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described" (p. 93)? This researcher committed to this process and made every effort to follow form, but the reality is that when confronted with the pages of transcripts, the magnitude of this interpretive process being both science and art resonated with me. As Seidman (2006) suggests, "Most important is that reducing the data be done inductively rather than deductively" (p. 117). The interviewer has an obligation to come to the transcripts prepared to let them speak for themselves (p. 117). Some of the "shaping" of the data was determined by the interview format as the interviewer had set questions based upon Giddens' work and the right hand side of the chart that developed to pursue this study. As such, the data for each participant have been presented in categories that aligned with this approach. The overall format and presentation of the interview results takes the following form.

1. Contextuality/Positioning
   a. Community
   b. Family
   c. Friends/Role models
   d. Parental support
2. Identity
   a. Self-concept
   b. Culture/Tradition
   c. Personal motivation
3. School/Institutional experience
   a. Contextuality
   b. Ontological Security
   c. Belonging
   d. First Nation perspective
4. School: Perception of Structural Properties
   a. Teaching
   b. Culture
   c. Curriculum
This does not mean that the researcher was adopting these categories as the themes of discovery, but rather they provided the structure for the process and this partially addressed van Manen’s (1990) counsel to have a fore-conception prior to engaging in the process, an approach that honours human science’s quest to be systematic in its study of human experience. This also allowed me to set the study within the theoretical framework that I had chosen to guide and inform my efforts. In other words, what degree of agency did these Aboriginal high school students have within the institutional principles of our society? Furthermore, the overarching organization for the three interviews reflected Seidman’s recommended 3-tiered methodology, described earlier. The ultimate outcome was participant profiles, a recommended part of the process that Seidman (2006) uses effectively (p. 119).

We interview in order to come to know the experience of the participants through their stories. We learn from hearing and studying what the participants say. Although the interviewer can never be absent from the process, by crafting a profile in the participant’s own words, the interviewer allows those words to reflect the person’s consciousness. (p. 119)

The narrative form of the profile allows the researcher to transform the learning into telling a story, of making sense of the social world, relying upon the words, feelings and experiences of the participant. Since all transcripts were in electronic format it made the process of working with direct quotes an easier proposition. Ellipses were used when omitting material from a sentence, paragraph or even when skipping whole paragraphs. The author also deleted from the profiles certain characteristics of oral speech that a participant would not use in writing, for example, repetitious “ahs,” or “like,” and “you knows” that are idiosyncrasies of participant speech and not really reflective of the content of the story.

Having immersed himself in the transcripts, getting a sense of the whole, different parts began to surface that over time became the themes that seemed best to carry the participants’ messages. These emerging themes or motifs were recorded directly on the transcripts. It was easier and more manageable to use actual hard copy data and a manual approach to the analysis. A computer software was not used in the process based upon the limited number of participants and the need to have a more
tactile experience with the data. Coming from a humanities background proved useful in the process, as this kind of interpretive work is a mainstay in literature. Transcript pages had sticky notes attached to them, in addition to the margins where notes were made beside significant lines of speech using key words and phrases such as "family", "teacher", "language and culture", "identity", "relationship", and "belonging" for example. Subsequent readings of each young participant’s words produced more notes in the margins: questions, linkages with other parts of the transcripts, observations, and other significant segments of speech. Again, allowing the participant voice to come through was a priority in the work and it was important to discover each participant’s experiences and his or her themes prior to determining a more global analysis of the commonalities and differences across the group.

Only then did a cross-referencing occur of the participant interviews, in an attempt to find those commonalities and differences. Using the hard copy of those transcribed interviews, complete with margin notes and sticky notes, sections of narrative and dialogue were organized on chart papers according to potential themes. Finding an overarching organizing principle for the themes identified required living with the data over a period of time, immersing myself in the segments of narrative and "listening" to the participant voices to distil the themes that seemed most evident in their words. Eventually the themes that emerged became those contained in Chapter 6.

Other Methodological Considerations

Ethics in Research

Lastly, van Manen (1990) addresses the effects and ethics of human science research, especially as it relates to pedagogical research, a conceptualization that he sees much differently than traditional researchers as he defines it not as teaching, instruction and curriculum, but rather as a manifestation in particular life circumstances, contributing "to a more hermeneutic type of competence: a pedagogic thoughtfulness and tact." While he initiates this discussion in the final stage of his methodology, it is clear that he believes that awareness of the following cautions should permeate the entire study and its process.
1. The research may have certain effects on the people with whom the research is concerned and who will be interested in the phenomenological work.

2. There are possible effects of the research methods on the institutions in which research is conducted.

3. The research methods used may have lingering effects on the actual “subjects” involved in the study.

4. Phenomenological projects and their methods often have a transformative effect on the researcher himself or herself.

   (van Manen, 1990, p. 162)

To this we might add that within an Indigenous research paradigm, the need to be respectful of culture, language, knowledge and values of Aboriginal people. A paraphrased summary of the Ethical Guidelines for Research set out by the RCAP in its report, captures the essence of this.

1. Research about Aboriginal people must reflect their own perspectives.

2. A purpose of any study of Aboriginal peoples should be to establish the authenticity of orally transmitted knowledge.

3. A multiplicity of viewpoints must be represented from each Aboriginal community.

4. The consent process is extremely important and should be fully understood by the participants.

5. Collaborative procedures in Aboriginal community-based research are essential.

6. Results must be presented when possible in accessible terms so participants can understand the meaning of the research and the implications for their lives.

7. It is extremely important that participants in the study receive some benefit from the research.

   (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996, p. 1)

Every effort has been made to observe both van Manen’s cautionary guidelines and the ethical guidelines outlined above.

On the issue of ethics in interviewing, Steinar Kvale (1996), in *Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*, offers the standard but important counsel to pay attention to the moral qualities of an interview. He outlines the ethical guidelines of informed consent, confidentiality and consequences. In short, it is
necessary to brief participants about the purpose and procedure of both the study and
the interview itself and to indicate that I intend to use the interviews within the study
(1996, pp. 109-117). Written consent to interview the participants was obtained from the
participants themselves, all over the age of 18. The age range of the participants was
between 18 and 22. A participant’s list was devised, cover letters of the study sent to
participants (students), permission forms reviewed with them and signed off (see
Appendix E) and there was a continuous checking in with them to ensure they were still
comfortable with the process. Each participant was informed and assured that s/he was
free to withdraw from the study at any time by verbal or written notice and to disallow the
use of his or her data.

Closely linked to this is the matter of confidentiality where protecting the
participants’ privacy is paramount. Here the use of fictitious names was one measure the
researcher took to ensure anonymity. Participants did not know who the other
participants were and they were never interviewed successively, allowing for time and
space separation so that they would not see one another. Lastly, the consequences,
whether anticipated or unintended, were considered in the process. The onus was on
the researcher to do no harm and this was seen as critical to the study’s success (Kvale,

Digital recordings of all interviews were stored in my personal computer,
identified by participant-letter, interview number and pseudonym. Transcripts of the
interviews and other correspondence with participants were identified in a similar
manner. Transcripts were printed off for the purpose of working with them effectively, but
were destroyed using a paper shredder once the interpretive process was complete. No
identifiers were used in the data summaries other than pseudonyms as a measure to
fully protect participant identities. Signed confidentiality agreements were kept in my
home filing cabinet under lock and key.

Other considerations included obtaining ethics approval from Simon Fraser
University, permission from the Weledeh Yellowknives Dene Band to conduct the study
(see Appendix C), seeking permission from Yellowknife Catholic Schools to conduct the
study (see Appendix D) and ensuring that École Akaitcho High School was familiar with
and knowledgeable about the progression of the study. In the matter of the first, in recognition of the First Nation communities right to control research activities on their land, and in respect for the community in which the researcher lives, consent for this research was requested and obtained from the Band Council with the agreement that a summary report will be given to the Band.

In summary, then, the hope was to capture the essential experiences of the participants in a meaningful manner that would be entirely respectful of the person and the privileged opportunity to interact with them. Every effort was made to maintain integrity and purpose without compromising or offending any of the participants or their communities.

**Generalizability, Reliability and Validity**

In the social sciences and qualitative research particularly, the concepts of generalizability, reliability and validity have been characterized as the “holy trinity” of any research endeavour (Kvale, 1996, p. 229). The cause of this emphasis partly stems from the crucible of the quantitative/qualitative debate on the trustworthiness and credibility of findings, especially as one conducts a qualitative study. Some have called this the legitimation crisis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 19). Ensuring that results are objective and credible, and ultimately can withstand the rigor of close scrutiny and examination, is paramount in research. The verifiability of study results is the linchpin to determining the truthfulness of the knowledge being shared in the work. The three concepts will be briefly explored in the following.

**Generalizability**

A common question asked of research studies, and perhaps, especially, interview-based ones, is whether the results are generalizable. Scientific knowledge and quantitative studies have laid the groundwork for this expectation as in the positivistic tradition the goal of social science is to be able to develop laws of human behaviour and then universally apply them. Of course, the opposing view within a more humanist or qualitative perspective has been that every phenomenon or human experience is unique and therefore has its own “fingerprint,” structure and logic (Kvale, 1996, p. 232). Again,
we see the dualistic nature of our world and the field of social science. Given the latter perspective and the very unique nature of this particular study, the generalizability of the findings will be limited. One of the limitations of qualitative study can be its use of a small sample set. While the findings gleaned from the study are germane to the particular locale and situation, they may not be applicable to a broader audience or locations. This is more fully addressed in the delimitations and limitations later in this chapter. However, that does not diminish the potential of the results to generate further discussion and contemplation of the lived experiences of high school Aboriginal students and what the implications may be as the quest to improve Aboriginal student performance continues.

Reliability and Validity

Gall et al. (2003) define reliability in a simple, but effective manner as they state that it “is the extent to which other researchers would arrive at similar results if they studied the same case using the exactly the same procedures as the first researcher” (p. 460). Kvale (2006) states “reliability pertains to the consistency of the research findings” (p. 235). While Seidman (2006) distinguishes that the essence of the issue, especially as it relates to interview-based methodologies, is contained in the question, “Whose meaning is it that the interview or research brings forth?” (p. 22). A phenomenological method followed with diligence can obviate some of the concerns that are often posed as troubling in qualitative research, but as Seidman (2006) assesses:

…the fact is that interviewers are part of the interviewing picture. They ask questions, respond to the participant, and at times even share their own experiences. Moreover, interviewers work with the material, select from it, interpret, describe, and analyze it. (p. 22)

Simply put, interviewers are part of the process and it is a factor that must be acknowledged in the process and ultimately recognized as a legitimation of the interviewer as an instrument in the research (p. 23). However, there are steps that can be taken to ensure the optimum reliability or trustworthiness of the data collected (Creswell, 2003).
The flip side of the reliability coin is that of validity, often seen as the truth and correctness of a statement (Kvale, 2006, p. 236). There is a tendency for this interpretation to reinforce a faulty assumption that validity is concerned with the end results only, whereas it really speaks to the internal rigour that is applied throughout the research and interview process (p. 236), including thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, validating and reporting (p. 237). Validity concerns itself with the quality of craftsmanship involved with obtaining trustworthy knowledge (p. 241). The methodology employed, the integrity and ethics of the researcher and the willingness of the researcher to check on findings to the point of being a devil’s advocate all contribute to an internal robustness within the research (pp. 243-244). Ultimately, the interpretation of analysis also must be seen through the validity lens. In the case of a phenomenological study, the application of the theory that underpins the study must be in alignment and of use to the themes presented as the results of the study (p. 244).

Other measures taken to ensure the reliability of the interview process (Seidman, 2006, pp. 78-94) included: listening more and talking less; asking questions of clarification when there was uncertainty of meaning; asking more on a subject when topics of interest surfaced or when more detail would serve to elaborate; exploring the topics rather than probing, allowing the participant to shape the direction of the
conversation; asking open-ended questions and avoiding leading the participant; avoiding interruptions if at all possible in order to keep the flow of the participant’s story moving; limiting researcher interactions, including my reactions to participant responses in an effort to maintain neutrality; tolerating silence to allow the participant to reflect and respond in their own time and words; and, lastly, keeping in mind that the interview “is not designed to test a hypothesis, gather answers to questions, or corroborate opinions. Rather, it is designed to ask participants to reconstruct their experience and to explore their meaning” (p. 92). This is what separates the phenomenological interview from other forms of interviewing.

Additionally, through the three-interview structure there was the opportunity to ensure validity because of:

features that enhance the accomplishment of validity. It places participants’ comments in context. It encourages interviewing participants over the course of 1 to 3 weeks to account for idiosyncratic days and to check for the internal consistency of what they say. Furthermore, by interviewing a number of participants, we can connect their experiences and check the comments of one participant against those of others. Finally, the goal of the process is to understand how our participants understand and make meaning of their experiences. If the interview structure works to allow them to make sense to themselves as well as to the interviewer, then it has gone a long way toward validity. (Seidman, 2006, p. 24)

It was useful to keep Wolcott’s (1995) perspective in mind as he questions the emphasis placed on reliability by suggesting, “the problem with reliability is that the rigor associated with it redirects attention to research processes rather than research results” (p. 167). Kvale (2006) also cautions about too much emphasis on validity, citing that it could be counterproductive as a “legitimation mania” takes effect as every validation effort produces outcomes that require further validation, a never-ending spiral (p. 252). While rigor is important and every effort was made to realize credible and valid data, there was a concentrated focus on the results and the emerging themes to provide a basis for interpretation and learning. “Ideally, the quality of craftsmanship results in products with knowledge claims that are so powerful and convincing in their own right that they, so to say, carry the validation with them, like a strong piece of art” (p. 252).
Delimitations

1. The individuals chosen to participate in the study were Weledeh Yellowknives Dene, Treaty 8, graduated students from École Akaitcho High School in Yellowknife, NWT.


3. The researcher knew some of the participants of the study because the researcher has lived in Yellowknife for 16 years. However, their selection was achieved through an independent process described earlier and the researcher has had no association with any of the participants in his professional capacity.

Limitations

1. This study was limited to six participants from École Akaitcho High School in Yellowknife, NWT and therefore limits the generalizability of its findings.

2. Recognizing and respecting the diversity that exists among Aboriginal peoples, the delimiting of this study to only Weledeh Yellowknives Dene participants means that the results will not necessarily be applicable to other NWT Aboriginal groups.

3. This study only represents secondary school graduates.

Critical Considerations in Phenomenological Research

When performing a phenomenological hermeneutical study, the aim is to disclose truths about the essential meaning of being in the life world. We search for meanings within an evolving and continuous process where the researcher finds thematic meaning units by meeting the “text” on its own terms. Much of what has been written to this point illustrates just how difficult it is to take a human lived experience and try to objectively capture the essence of the meaning. Our starting point is in this very fact. The complex and unique nature of humans, their conscious being, signals what is the primary challenge in the phenomenological pursuit. From Husserl forward, the attempt to engage and describe human experience and consciousness in a manner that had credibility within scientific circles has dominated the human science agenda. Much of the difficulties one must embrace are related to this ongoing contemplation.
Phenomenology has been described as a method without technique (van Manen, 1990, p. 131) and all efforts to formulate a methodology have been taken with an eye to conducting a rigorous interrogation of a phenomenon to effectively elicit the essence of its meaning. Fundamentally, the unfolding of the phenomenological movement has attempted to address how to action what has been, for the most part, a philosophic enterprise. Conceptually and philosophically, the research community understands what phenomenology aspires to—what theoretically is desirable—but, because of the qualitative nature of human science, method has been elusive and, to some degree, abstract. That is why considerable time has been spent on summarizing Max van Manen’s approach as it has guided the method used for this study.

Another key question raised in phenomenology has already been alluded to within the overview of van Manen, and that has to do with the theory/praxis distinction. How is the phenomenologist to understand the relationship between practice and theory? Or in other terms, there is a danger of privileging the lived experience over the non-lived experience. “The danger here is that the value that is attributed to what is learnt through personal, or practical, experience is done so at the cost of what might be learnt through theoretical or abstract reflection—a mere reversal of rationalism” (Barnacle, 2004, p. 61). van Manen’s response to this is to treat phenomenology as the need for a “theory of the unique,” a commingling of theory and pedagogy (van Manen, 1990, p. 155). He sees the need for a strengthened relationship between research and life where five attributes, in his words, may be realized.

1. One can strengthen the intimacy of the relation between knowledge and action by re-instating lived experience itself as a valid basis for practical action.
2. We can further strengthen intimacy between knowledge and action by moving toward a personal and lived sense of principled knowledge.
3. Also, research and life are drawn more closely together in our understanding of research/writing as a form of thoughtful learning.
4. We should remind ourselves that, from a reflexive point of view, research and theorizing themselves are a pedagogic form of life and therefore inseparable from it.
5. Finally, if we think of phenomenology as a kind of action oriented research, then an intimacy between research and life immediately suggests itself. (pp. 155-156)
This blending of theory and praxis is suggested as an alternative view within the phenomenological tradition.

Another challenge presents itself in this approach to phenomenology as, “there is a danger that the phenomenological practitioner, by virtue of the immediacy of their practical experience, is treated as having access to some sort of pure, or unmediated knowledge or understanding” (Barnacle, 2004, p. 62). There is little question that an educator will have a “fore-grounding” in pedagogy and that there is a danger that it will colour the findings from the study. These form part of the prejudices that need to be bracketed as van Manen describes the process. However, if we accept van Manen’s premise, explicating the assumptions and pre-understandings will have to be central to fully understanding lived experience.

Another issue in the field of phenomenology resides in experience itself and in its expression through an individual, whose “experience cannot be treated as an unproblematic or privileged site of knowledge production—like some pure or untainted original source” (Barnacle, 2004, p. 63). Experience is constructed and re-constructed within an historical, cultural and dynamic context, and as such, is prone to signification and presumed meaning before it is surfaced through the researcher. Thus, an interpretation may become an “interpretation of an interpretation.” It seems that this is a premise that must be lived with, as we know that there is both a prejudicial aspect and a contextual influence to an experience. However, careful questioning and scrutiny and a consciousness of these factors, guided my efforts in this regard.

On a more practical level, and related to this point, the truthfulness of a lived experience can be suspect as we expect that the narratives offered by research participants represent accurately their truth. This presupposes that the interviewees are fully aware of their lived experiences. “Sometimes interviewees may say that they do not remember, or they do not seem to understand the meaning of the question we ask. The interviewees may not be willing or dare to narrate” (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004, p. 152). Additionally, “as the interviewees can only understand their lived experience in relation to their pre-understanding and the interviewer can only understand the narrative in relation to their pre-understanding, there is a risk of misunderstanding” (p. 152).
Understanding necessitates a constant vigilance in the process of ensuring that the researcher clarifies what the subject means. This is even further compounded by the fact that a text may have more than one meaning and that such meanings are again open to more than one interpretation. This requires that interpretations themselves be sifted to ensure an “internal consistency of the interpretation and the plausibility in relation to competing interpretations…” (p. 152). Careful attention was paid to ensuring that participants had access to the writing of their “sections” within this study and that to the best of our abilities, it reflected our mutual understandings.

All of this implies that there is a continuum between art and science in the application of phenomenological hermeneutics and that as researchers we must employ artistic sensibility in eliciting the whole experience from participants, scientific structural analysis to unearth full meaning and critical interpretation to arrive at a complete and full understanding of a phenomenon or lived experience. Interpretive research, and particularly phenomenological hermeneutic research, should be closely related to society and how study questions relate to social issues and most importantly be grounded in concrete life experience. For our purposes, this meant the context of school and the hermeneutic task was to work out the world of interconnected possibilities implied in the human activity of Aboriginal senior secondary graduates to determine if there were significant commonalities in their individual lived experiences to suggest potential changes in the whole institutional context. For as Deetz (1977) insightfully observes, “It is the finding of the interconnections and roots of our experience in such a way as to allow history to interpret us and open previously unseen but traditional possibilities for existence” (p. 65), that holds great promise in the phenomenological hermeneutic inquiry.

The next chapter presents participant profiles in their own voices. They are presented in chronological order beginning with those who graduated in 2004 and ending with those who graduated in 2006. The individual agent profiles are organized around the headings of social contextuality/positioning, identity, school/institutional experience and perception of the structural properties of school contained within the right-hand side of the Structuration: Social Practice conceptual framework (see Figure 1).
Chapter 5.

Results

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore and understand the lived experiences of six Aboriginal students who all had attended a northern high school in Yellowknife, NT within the past three years. Three-fold interviews, using Seidman's interviewing process, were conducted employing a semi-structured approach exploring the social, structural and individual factors of their experiences—the objective and subjective realities of their lived experiences while in high school. Specifically, the research questions were as follows.

- What are the lived educational experiences of Aboriginal secondary graduate students?

Sub-Questions

- From their perception, what personal factors contributed to their success?
- From their perception, what school factors contributed to their success?
- From their perception, what challenges did they encounter?
- From their perception, how did they overcome these challenges?

Assisted by Giddens' Theory of Structuration (TS) in providing a necessary framework for the study, and by a literature review that examined the structural properties of both our society and our schools, the overall intriguing issue is how these successful students found their experience.
The phenomenological methodology used to conduct this study included the three interviews per participant, 18 interviews in total. Two participants came from each of the graduating years of 2004, 2005 and 2006, although it became evident over the process that two of them, in fact, took an extra year to complete their high school studies. So, while they may have begun with a particular cohort, they may not have graduated with that cohort, or if they did, they may have elected to return to school to upgrade. Three of the participants were female and three were male, but the representation was not a balanced distribution over the three years. All participants were Weledeh Yellowknives Dene Band members as confirmed through the Band Council’s membership rolls. The interviews were conducted at the pleasure and convenience of the participants and generally were held within the Board office of the school jurisdiction, with the exception of one that was held in a local eatery. Participants were given a choice about where they were to be interviewed. The location did not seem of significant relevance to them and all were comfortable in coming to the Board office, perhaps reflective of their general comfort level with their school.

Each interview for each participant is presented separately, framed by the sub-sections suggested by Giddens’ work on the right-hand side of Structuration: Social Practice conceptual chart at the end of Chapter 2 (see Figure 1). The main headings of social contextuality/positioning, identity, school/institutional experience and perception of structural properties of school anchor the respective sub-headings of: (a) community, family, friends/role models and parental support; (b) self-concept, culture/tradition, personal motivation; (c) contextualty, ontological security, belonging, First Nation perspective; and teachers, culture and curriculum. Language is explored in an earlier section in contemplation of culture and tradition as associated with the individual’s identity. Emergent themes that evolved from the interview process discerned by the researcher through the van Manen essential theme methodologies will become evident in the next chapter, which contemplates an interpretation and potential implications for practice. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants to ensure confidentiality.
Participant 1: Mike

Mike was an 18-year-old Aboriginal male who graduated from high school in 2006. He lived with his aunt and uncle, both Aboriginal, in the City of Yellowknife. Presently, he is upgrading at the same high school from which he originally graduated. Previously, he took a full slate of academic preparation courses and continued to do so by taking English 30-1, Math 30-1 and Physics 30, all university preparatory courses. His average on his core courses while in high school was a solid 67%, where he seemed to perform better in the maths and sciences than he did in the humanities. His attendance in high school can only be characterized as excellent, in stark contrast to his K-8 attendance record where he missed significant time. Mike had no disciplinary record during his time at high school, indicating that his behaviour and conduct was appropriate to a high school setting.

Social Contextuality

Community

Mike grew up in Yellowknife, NT, despite having, "moved around a lot" within the city. He hinted at an unstable home environment, a notion that he confirmed later when discussing his family circumstances. He viewed Yellowknife as a safe town that really, despite the instability, felt like home and he would choose to return to the community, even if he were to leave to attend post-secondary school.

Family

At the time of the interview, Mike lived with his aunt and uncle, after having experienced a rather turbulent existence with his natural mother who had him until about the age of eight or nine. Social Services intervened at that stage, took him away from his mother for a couple of years, returned him to her for a short while, and then apprehended him, again, this time permanently. When probed further about why he was apprehended, Mike bluntly and succinctly offered, “Alcohol and drug abuse.” Mike appeared to have been a knowledgeable actor in these events by saying that he “wasn’t in a very stable situation growing up,” and had little contact with his father, who he
vaguely remembered and who "hasn't really played a major role in my life." He has two younger brothers who live in Hay River, NWT, with another uncle on his mother's side of the family. Most of his sense of family was from the perspective of his mother's side of the family as he acknowledged, "...I really don't know my father's side of the family." We see at play the strong sense of extended family within Mike's circumstances.

When asked to elaborate more fully on his relationship with his aunt and uncle, both of Aboriginal descent, and his present living circumstances, Mike began with quite a poignant appraisal of the initial transition.

Well, I kind of have a pretty good relationship with them. When I first moved in with them our relationship was kind of rocky. Coming from where I came from I wasn't really—I wasn't really taught certain things so when I came there they were trying to teach me and they were trying to pack in like all these years of education into like the short time that they were going to have me. 'Cause what they told me when I first moved there—and I've come to like terms with them and I've learned to talk with them—when I first moved with them they said it was like—I was in the body of like a 13- or 14-year-old but mentally like emotionally I was probably like seven or eight due to my upbringing. So it was kind of rough for me to adjust and I got used to it and I've grown a lot since being there.

He credited his aunt with being the reason he was where he was today, as she initiated the living arrangements with Social Services and desired to raise him within her family. Mike saw her as the "strict" disciplinarian and the individual who insisted on his full cooperation and effort under her roof. To his uncle, he ascribed a fatherly role, who was nurturing, supportive and the "nice parent." Collectively, on balance, he believed that both "parents" were the reason for where he was today and he is quite circumspect and appreciative of their efforts on his behalf. Within the household he also lived with a cousin, the child of his aunt and uncle, who he viewed as a best friend as they "...[hung] out with each other and [did] all the same things and stuff."

**Friends/Role Models**

Mike saw himself as a congenial individual who got along with most people: "A lot of people tell me I'm like really a friendly person, easy to talk to." He placed a great deal of emphasis on this ability to "get along" and on being "easy to talk to," without people
pushing "their values upon you," or pushing "what they want upon you." When queried further about who else might have been important to him during his high school years, beyond his aunt and uncle, Mike couldn't think of anyone that played any kind of importance in his life. He saw himself as essentially a shy person and related, "I'm not a person to get really attached to someone in the shorter period of time unless I spend a lot of time with them." Further, Mike saw his limited social interactions as a result of a measured intent on the part of his aunt and uncle.

Well I haven't really had a social life outside of my immediate family and that was kind of because my aunt and uncle they kind of just wanted to raise me. They only had so much time so they wanted to spend as much time as they could like molding me. And when I started out this was probably a good thing because I wasn't exactly a good person when I was younger. I used to do some really bad stuff and they kind of knew that and that's why they kind of kept me inside.

He did say, however, that he had social acquaintances at school and hung out with them at school. These students were both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal and generally, he recalled most of them having graduated with him. When asked who his role models were during this time, Mike predictably named his uncle as a significant influence and another cousin's husband, a hardworking carpenter, who Mike saw as "looking out for his family, too." When asked about this emphasis on family, Mike said that it was important in the context of his own life and that it was something he valued. This theme was reiterated when he spoke even more glowingly of why his uncle was a role model for him.

Well my uncle I kind of have him as a role model because he's been sort of that father figure in my life so far and he's told me about his life and how he has gotten to where he is and he's kind of like—when he was in school he was like focused and dedicated and he just focused on school all the time. He had to go down south to do like I think it was like a four-year course or something he was telling me about and he didn't really want to spend all that time down there because he had a family with him too and they kind of had to move. So he just focused all his time in school and he ended up getting it finished in less than a year. So I was kind of like 'Wow, that's pretty good.' He has kind of been a role model for me to like work hard and get far in life and stuff and focus on your family.

Mike had a deep admiration for his uncle and deemed him the person he most trusted because "he kind of understands me."
Parental Support

Mike chose to speak about his aunt and uncle as his parents when asked questions regarding parental role in his education and life. His social sense of himself was dominated by discussion of family and it permeated much of the first interview. In particular, he cited their support and guidance as being instrumental in his high school success. As with his personal transition into their home, there was a parallel transition at school, as again he recognized:

_They’ve gotten me through it. Pretty much when I first started at school I was kind of—I wasn’t really a good student. I’m smart and teachers have been telling me that all the time I’ve been going to school but I’ve really been lazy and still kind of am that way today. I have to change. But they have kind of encouraged me to do my homework and to get more on school and stuff._

He attributed to them challenging and supporting him in achieving Grade 12 graduation, a goal that he believed was one of their initial motivators for taking him in.

When asked if his family attended church or believed in a Creator or Great Spirit, Mike confirmed that they were not “church goers,” but they believed in an Aboriginal spirituality and a Creator, and this was reflected in their daily lives. Mike took on these beliefs and placed value on this spiritual orientation. He did not offer further elaboration despite some probing.

Identity

Self-concept

Mike was asked to summarize how he felt about himself at the present time, what level his confidence was at and generally how he felt about how his life was going. Again, a sense of growth and maturity was reflected in his response.

_Well when I was younger I used to be like really self-conscious. I wasn’t really feeling that good about myself but recently within like that last past year or even maybe less than that, I’ve kind of gotten like a big boost of confidence and I kind of like really believe in myself and that is partially_
due to like me just wanting to change and wanting to do different and that is partially because of my cousin's husband.

Mike's cousin's husband, an apprentice himself, surfaced again as Mike, in discussing his career aspirations, cited the husband as influencing him to pursue his practical, "hands-on" and technical aptitude in servicing and installing car stereos. He had been planning on pursuing some form of computer technician program, but had recently determined that the former was more desirable. Mike was asked about whether he would make any changes in his life right now, and somewhat surprisingly, he responded:

If it was up to me right now I would probably move out of my situation—like move out with my aunt and uncle—and that's not because I don't like them. It is because...they've gotten me to a certain point and it seems like I'm kind of stuck there with them and I want to move out and grow but I'm just kind of staying there to be with them too.

Here, there was both a recognition that he must move out to move forward with his life, and yet, there was also a deep sense of attachment, gratitude and appreciation for his aunt and uncle—what they have been for him.

Culture and Tradition

Thinking about high school, Mike was asked whether Aboriginal culture had been part of his schooling experience or his life. Again his response was limited, but he affirmed that it had played a role in his life especially, where:

It has taught me to like—it has kind of developed my personality and gave me sort of a spirit and a sense of belonging and just made me understand life more and understand why things are a certain way and not to be a certain way.

In beginning to parse out what his Aboriginal heritage and culture meant in his life and in the success he has had in school, Mike was asked what languages he spoke and how important the Dene culture was for him. He clarified that he wasn't really Dene, although his name was on the Yellowknife Dene band's membership, and that his mother's language was Chipewyan from the Fort Resolution area. He had not learned his Aboriginal language or culture, given his personal circumstances, and therefore they
had played a very limited role in his life. When further questioned on how he felt about being an Aboriginal person, Mike first responded with a very materialistic position, stating,

*Being an Aboriginal person is kind of—there is different opportunities and there is different stuff available to you like healthcare—well that is just Northwest Territories—but there is other stuff that is paid for me by the Band and I feel that like helps out a lot—like dental bills and stuff that is paid for by the Band. They help out with school or other activities if you want to do them.*

When pursued further on this, he elaborated, “I don’t feel really any different than any other person feels. I’m not really judged for being Aboriginal or anything.”

When exploring the idea of whether Mike had experienced racism within his high school, he was able to define that, “Racism is kind of like judging people or putting down people just because they are a certain nationality or because they come from a certain place.” He expressed that he had never experienced racism while at his high school or, in fact, in his everyday life.

*I haven't really experienced racism in my life but I think what it comes from is maybe a past event that happened between certain people or just a certain event because there has to be something that creates that dislike or maybe it is jealousy or something…*

He promoted that changing this kind of behaviour began with people understanding that these actions often have stemmed from the past and that over time people change and therefore cannot be held accountable for what their ancestors did before. Past behaviour does not necessarily predict future behaviour.

**Personal Motivation**

In discussion about what motivated him in school, Mike stated, “Well just wanting to have a better life after high school and wanting to have a foundation for my future.” He again credited his aunt and uncle for encouraging him to get good grades, and for helping him see the big picture and the need to do well in school. Again, some of his motivation seemed to be in pleasing these two important people in his life. The urgency
of this somewhat humorously came out when he was asked who made the biggest difference to him in realizing graduation. "I would have to say that would be my aunty. She kind of pushed me to do my work and make sure I get through high school." When the interviewer characterized her as the strict one, Mike laughed and acknowledged, "Yeah, she was. Still is." There is a strong sense of expectation for Mike as represented in his aunt's goals for him. Mike also owned that on the occasions where he didn't do well, that it was usually his own personal shortcomings that got in the way. He named laziness or a lack of effort as his chief nemesis in this regard. Mike was asked when he realized that he was going to stay in school and that he was going to graduate and just how he came to that realization.

Well I didn't really just make that decision one day. It was kind of just like that was what the plan was to just finish high school and then figure out what I was going to do after that. Just get my Grade 12 and make sure I have that because that's pretty much what you need to go anywhere else.

Again, the sense of a disciplined overall agenda marked his response, but additionally, and perhaps more revealingly, in acknowledging his aunt and uncle once more he also identified what may be one of his innermost drivers. "They wanted to take me in to make sure that I get my Grade 12. To make sure that I have that to start off with later on in life. To make sure that I don't end up like my mom who didn't get her Grade 12."

When asked to reflect on what personal factors contributed to his successful graduation from high school, at first Mike found the question confusing, stating that "all my life mostly in like math or sort of the more science stuff it has been pretty easy for me. Like in math I would get good marks on tests just by paying attention and stuff." But later he clarified that he eventually overcame a propensity to procrastinate through a combination of remembering the overarching educational goal and on exercising some self-discipline, two factors that his aunt and uncle continuously reinforced in him. Questioned about what school factors helped him succeed, Mike quickly offered that he felt teachers were responsible in that they reinforced some of the lessons from home. "Well what really helped me get through from the school was kind of the teachers supporting you telling you that you need to get this done, offering help and kind of just their understanding, so it helped me too." This was reiterated when he responded,
"...they have helped me get to where I am," to whether the school played a role in where he was now in his life. Interestingly, he put the human face on this question and personalized the school.

Lastly, in this section, Mike was questioned on where he saw himself in five years from now and what his goals were? His answer seemed to add value to many of the experiences he had had in recent years, as he expressed a desire to have his own business, become financially stable, be a successful person living on his own and, perhaps to even start his own family. He did not see himself attending university, but rather a technical program where he would learn to work with auto stereos and peripheral installations or, maybe, home theatre installations.

**School/Institutional Experiences**

**Contextuality**

Mike did not remember much of his early school years, but of what he did remember, he characterized it as a “fun point in my life, being a kid and just hanging around—not having...as many responsibilities as you do now.” Generally, he saw school in a positive light and given his background, this might have been accentuated in contrast to his home life. Mike took all of his K-8 education within the public school system and then made a change to the public Catholic school system in Grade 9. This change was reflected as he recalled his lived experiences within high school.

*In high school starting out like my first two years of high school I wasn’t really—I was sort of more of a shy person and I was kind of scared to get to know people. Coming from the public school I didn’t really know anybody so I just kind of kept to myself, talked to maybe one or two people here and a few people there and then really in Grade 11 I started talking to people more and then in Grade 12 I kind of opened up more. I kind of wish that I wasn’t as shy in the younger years so I could get to know people better—maybe have more close friends.*

Asked whether he liked the school, he responded, “The school is okay, yes.” When asked about why he stayed to graduate from high school, he came back with a previous refrain, “Well that was kind of my aunt and uncle’s goal and I realized if I want
to get somewhere in life, I need my education, I need my Grade 12 diploma if I want to do something.” Overall, Mike was determined to complete, reinforced by his need to please his aunt and uncle who invested significantly in him.

In reminiscing about a really great school experience or experiences that he had, Mike offered:

*Well probably the best school experience for me was probably the grad retreat partially because it’s a time where I was able to hang out with people just kind of outside of school and have fun and interact with them and kind of just hang out and be friends.*

Given what he has previously described as his limited social interaction outside of school and fairly constrained social relations within school, this seemed to suggest a regret he earlier expressed:

*I say if I had that social life outside of school, I would have done better in school because I wouldn’t have spent so much time talking to other people because I would have been able to do that outside of school. So I would have been able to focus on homework more but that didn’t really happen.*

Continuing with this theme, Mike suggested his worst experience in high school was starting out in Grade 9 because he didn’t know anybody, felt shy and scared and concluded that it was just an awkward experience. Personal relationships seemed important to him and the need for social interaction was a constant desire for him. Extending from this, he felt his biggest challenge in high school was related to this need for social interaction, as he picked up on his earlier statement above where he felt the need for social interaction distracted him from “settling down and just doing the work. Actually like paying attention in class, copying notes and not being lazy.”

**Ontological Security**

In the realm of ontological security, Mike was asked what he liked about school and again, he answered that activities with other people were important and what made school comfortable and enjoyable. What he disliked about school and what made him uncomfortable was falling behind in schoolwork and feeling like he could never recover.
...sometimes it seems like you get caught up in homework or if you fall behind a little bit you’ll miss a couple of classes and then it seems like you just fall back and you try and catch up and it just keeps piling up and once you fall into that rut it is kind of hard to get out.

He saw the ideal school as a safe, friendly environment where supportive teachers proactively offered their assistance. Asked about whether he felt his high school was a good place to be, he responded affirmatively that it was a nice school where people were pretty friendly and it wasn’t too cliquey. “Everyone kind of knew everyone.” Overall, Mike felt quite comfortable at his high school. Finally, when asked if he could relive high school, what he might do differently, his response fell within the personal domain as he asserted:

I wouldn’t be so shy. I would be more outgoing and I would try and get involved more in school to try and develop those friendships with people ’cause I notice like people that went on the Vimy Ridge trip or the Students Against Drinking and Driving (SADD) trips (the first a Social Studies expedition to Vimy Ridge around Remembrance Day and the second, a trip to a national Canadian Youth Against Impaired Driving convention) and stuff, they seemed to enjoy it. So I wish I could have gotten more involved in those activities.

In exploring the power and control that Mike felt he had within his high school, he was asked whether he felt he had any influence or say in what happened in his school, whether opportunities were offered to students for input.

Yeah, we were. There were many opportunities where we were like asked for input or if there were any ideas we have, we should put them forth. So they give us a lot of opportunities to help suggest what would be going on...

Queried more on whether he felt he was in control of his high school experience, Mike qualified that he was with respect to courses selected, but, perhaps, not in much else. But he then, retrospectively, added that this kind of leeway really did give him control of his high school experience. He also added that he could have been a leader within his school, should he have chosen to be. With respect to the rules that were in force within his school, Mike felt that “most of the rules were fair” and that generally, he would not
have changed anything about how the school operated. He had a rather perfunctory and business-like view of school when he offered the following synopsis.

The things I liked about the structure of the school is I like the way it is put together like it's got a nice setup. It is eye pleasing, I guess, the structure. I can't really say there is anything that I really liked for me. High school is kind of just like an experience, like something you went through just to go to school. And there wasn't anything I disliked about it. Everything was kind of there for a reason.

For Mike, there was almost a matter-of-fact necessity about school, a necessary experience prior to the rest of your life unfolding.

Belonging

Mike believed that while he initially did not feel like he belonged in his high school, especially in Grades 9 and 10, that progressively he became more comfortable.

The first year or two...I didn't really feel like I belonged because I kind of came from the public school. I didn't really know anybody. But after that like Grade 11/12 I became more like—I don't know how to say it exactly...but like 'in' with the group, I guess.

This seemed to have more to do with the social dynamics within the high school than any other potential alienating factors. It may also have had to do with Mike's own personality and disposition, as he alluded to earlier.

Mike was asked to describe the ideal high school, as a means of determining just what kind of school would work best for him and make him feel the most comfortable. He gave an endorsement to his high school as he thought that the variety of program options that were offered to students with different interests was an important feature. He also placed special emphasis again on activity-based learning, rather than "just the run of the mill like English, math and stuff."

First Nation Perspective

Asked to reflect upon his high school experiences through the lens of a First Nation's student, Mike was requested to comment on what he thought caused Aboriginal
students to leave school before graduating. He responded with an answer that implicated their home lives and potentially their social realities. "Well a part of the reason is probably just because of their upbringing or maybe problems at home that they don't really understand or can't really do anything about, I guess." When pressed that it could be argued that he had had a difficult home life and yet he had graduated and why couldn't these other students do the same, Mike offered:

Part of the reason I've been able to do that is because of my uncle. He has been there for me and he's like talked to me and I've understood that I needed to get this done if I want to get somewhere in life. If I want to be successful, if I want to have the things I want, I have to get school done. And he kind of made me understand that and explained it to me and he told me about his upbringing and how he went through kind of a tough time but he got school done because he knew he had to do it. And that's what kind of motivated me too.

Mike knew clearly that his uncle made a difference for him in being a stabilizing influence in his life, whereas fellow Aboriginal students may not have had such support. Notably, this aspect of student performance fell inside the socio-economic sphere.

In attempting to conclude on how schools might better accommodate Aboriginal students and their culture, Mike was asked to suggest how this might best be accomplished. His response seemed to align with some of the research literature on curriculum as he recommended, "I think what would be good though is if they offered a course for Aboriginal students like Aboriginal studies or something where they did studies on different Aboriginalities in the Northwest Territories and stuff." Although he claimed that culture did not really matter in the teaching and learning environment, he still saw the need to honour Aboriginal people and to have their perspective shared through the programming at the school.

**Perceptions of the Structural Properties of the Institution**

**Teaching**

Mike did not feel that he had a favourite teacher over his years in the high school, principally because “there hasn’t really been that teacher that’s been with me through
like many years...I haven’t really made a connection with one certain teacher, I guess.” When queried further to describe the qualities or characteristics that Mike would attribute to a good or favourite teacher, he portrayed a teacher that had taught him for two or three years, someone he could talk to for help or for guidance on other matters. He stressed that relationship was important, that there would be a connection. He followed this by stating that a good teacher was someone who really wanted you to learn and was prepared to do whatever it took to see students succeed. “They are willing to help and go out of their way to kind of like answer your questions or maybe find out information that you need...” Conversely, a bad teacher in Mike’s mind is “someone that just goes up there and teaches a lesson and then just says ‘do it’ and then they go off and do their own thing. They are not really there to help or explain stuff.” They teach the concepts, but not the students. Again, Mike stressed that connection was very important and the willingness to spend extra time with the student to ensure that s/he completed the work and overcame any difficulties with the work. Mike felt that teachers in his high school cared about him as an individual and that signs of this included them going out of their way to help him, being proactive in recognizing that a student needed help and providing encouragement throughout.

When the conversation shifted to how he learned best, Mike indicated that a “hands-on” orientation was best for him. “For me what works best is sort of the hands-on stuff with someone there to kind of guide you if you have any troubles or anything.” However, when asked whether the teacher’s teaching style made a difference for him, Mike confirmed that it did, but his preference for teaching style seemed to contradict his learning style preference. “Well what I find works better is kind of if they give you the notes and then they can explain it and you know you are getting the correct information rather than maybe misinterpreting some stuff.”

Culture

“Does a teacher’s culture/race/ethnicity make a difference in how they teach?” That was the question posed to Mike in an effort to determine whether as an Aboriginal student this might be a factor in effective teaching. His response was a short, unequivocal, “I don’t think it makes a big difference in how they teach, no.” A deeper questioning focusing on the claim that an Aboriginal teacher was the best kind of teacher
for an Aboriginal student to have, elicited a lukewarm reaction as Mike claimed it would
depend, but overall he could see it making a difference in establishing “a better
connection with that person because they view the same nationality and stuff,” and
essentially shared the same kind of world-view. But in exploring his experience within his
high school, Mike professed that he had few, if any, Aboriginal teachers and that, “…it
didn’t really affect my learning at St. Akaitcho. I didn’t really notice any difference
between different teachers.”

Mike was then questioned about whether his high school made an effort to
recognize Aboriginal culture within its programming, events and activities. He initially
confirmed that there was recognition of Aboriginal graduates at the school’s graduation
ceremony, an event that likely stayed with him because it was one of the most recent in
his history with the school. He also recalled a feeding of the fire ceremony, although he
wasn’t really clear about its significance.

*I can’t remember exactly what it was but they did a—everyone like went
outside and they had like a fire going and then they had two Aboriginal
Elders there and they were like feeding the fire. I can’t exactly remember
what that was for but that was pretty neat.*

He also thought that there had been Dogrib language courses offered that Aboriginal
students could take advantage of along with Northern Studies, a compulsory course that
all students took to graduate. Its focus was not entirely on Aboriginal peoples in the
North, but there was considerable material within the course that contemplated the
northern Aboriginal perspective.

**Curriculum**

Extending the conversation above, Mike was asked to comment on the courses
offered in his high school. His favourite course was physical education because he saw
it as a fun course with an emphasis on physical activity and on group-based events.
Again, the sense of relationship with others played strongly in Mike’s sensibilities. Mike’s
personal dislike was for English, a subject that he viewed as “just kind of a hard subject
for me to understand.” In particular, he found that essay writing “…never really seemed
to work for me.” Remarkably, he was able to put this into perspective when he said, “It is
kind of the left brain/right brain thing. I’m more of the math and science oriented type of person.” Combined with his more technical, hands-on aptitude discussed earlier, it was not surprising to learn that Mike really appreciated a new facility, the Kimberlite Career and Technical Centre, which offered a wide array of vocational programming options, something that perhaps was missing previously.

**Participant 2: John**

John, like Mike above, graduated in 2006, and was 18-years-old. He, too, lived within a unique family context as he resided with his natural mother, who was Aboriginal, and a stepfather, who only recently adopted him in 2004. He lived all of his life in Yellowknife, NT. John’s mother had a number of relationships in her life. Presently, as of this writing, John joined the Armed Forces as an infantryman. His aspiration was to eventually go to post-secondary school at the expense of the military and to become a fighter pilot. John was in a modified high school program, where he experienced good success with vocational courses or what are called Career and Technology courses. His overall average in his core courses was a respectable 63%. He experienced significant reading difficulties in his school career, but enjoyed “hands-on” courses. John’s attendance at high school was excellent; where over the 4-year period he rarely missed classes. John appeared never to have been the subject of any disciplinary action in his high school career.

**Social Contextuality**

**Community**

Born and raised within Yellowknife, John expressed a desire to live somewhere warmer stating that he was adverse to the cold even after a lifetime of living in his home community. “It’s a nice place. Lots of good people. Everyone is really friendly. I don’t really like the climate though. I’m not used to it after 18 years. Much rather go down south, you know.” He lived with his mother, brother and an older sister who had just come back to town. His mother was separated from his father, but he still had good
relations with both. Shortly after this interview John left to join the infantry, as he headed to Petawawa, Ontario to take basic training.

**Family**

John was the youngest in his family of two sisters and a brother. One sister, 21, pursued her automotive ticket at NAIT in Edmonton and was close to landing an apprenticeship at one of the auto dealers in that city. The second eldest sister, pregnant at 18, struggled in raising her child, but had recently formed a strong relationship with a correctional officer and with it some stability. His eldest brother who is 24, John described as “the odd one out,” but who was taking a diamond cutting and polishing course and this, he saw, as holding potential for him. John did, however, think that his brother needed to move on with his life, move out of the family home and, perhaps, get rid of his friends, people who he saw holding back his brother.

John’s mother was “a tough lady,” who had to live through a number of difficult experiences.

*She went through the residential schools...I guess she almost got raped by a priest or something like that and—I don’t know—she’s been through a lot having all of us and raising us and it’s been really tough on her ‘cause she didn’t go to school because of the whole residential and the raping and, I mean, it was pretty bad on them...*

In addition to this, she had several significant relationships with men as John grew up, as he observed that his brother and sisters had a different father than he had.

*My mom she...they got divorced because—well, actually my mom she was getting beaten up one night by their dad. Like this is over a course of years of abuse and like she did it for the kids so they’d grow up. I don’t know, she tried to make it work but I guess one night they were like fighting and stuff like that and she just couldn’t take it anymore so she shot him and that’s been really traumatizing on her because my sister...has hated my mom for that for so many years because like—I mean I think about it and if someone is doing that and if you push a dog into a corner for so long, it’s going to jump back and bite. So it is self-defense and I think about it a lot and she’s always talked about it like she didn’t want to do it. I don’t know, my sister keeps giving her a hard time like ‘Well you shot my dad’...It’s been pretty rough.*
His own father died when he was 16, an event he does not attach much significance to, as he had no real relationship with him. His stepfather was much more significant in his mind, but even this relationship may be undermined as he had recently split from his mother.

Yeah, they’ve been together for a long time and just recently they broke up because my mom—I don’t know—she has some foolish thoughts every now and then and I guess he was just tired of it kind of. But I think they’ll get back together sooner or later.

As a residential school survivor, John’s mother only managed to complete Grade 8 or 9, while his stepfather, a cab driver, only completed Grade 11. This played a role in his father’s encouragement for John to complete high school as he “Always pushed me to go—like he was the one that always pushed me to do better in school and if I got bad grades then he’d get real mad but I understand what he meant and how he felt about me in school. So, I think that’s what he wanted. You know, since he had a bad school history he didn’t want me to have one.” Asked what role his mother played in his education and life, John acknowledged her support.

Yeah, she was really supportive on waking me up in the mornings and cooking me breakfast if I needed it. She was there for a lot of it too. And if I did get bad school marks, she wasn’t as strict as my dad but she was still ‘You know, you’ve got to get your work done’ and such.

On the matter of whether his family was churchgoing or whether they believed in a great spirit, John offered a perplexing and antithetical response, saying, “No, no, no. My mom is really Christian but I don’t know why she doesn’t go to church. She reads the Bible and such like that but she doesn’t attend church.” This may not be surprising, given her history in residential school. However, John stressed that she was a believer and by extension so was he.

Just Jesus and God. She really believes in that stuff. I mean I believe but I don’t know why, but I kind of keep it to my own...I don’t sort of show it to everyone that I believe in God but I do. I believe in Jesus and God. There’s got to be a being up there.
Friends/Role Models

While John had friends in high school and they were important in terms of his social life, he did not equate their support with that of his parents. All but one of his group of friends graduated at the same time as he did, and the one that didn’t would graduate one year later than he did. Asked who his role model was growing up, John responded with a rather surprising, “Tom Cruise.” John’s career aspiration was to become a fighter pilot like Tom Cruise’s character in *Top Gun.* Yet, when asked whom he trusted the most, he identified his stepfather as the individual he had a special relationship with. “…I’ve just known him for so long and he has shown me that I can trust him. Yeah, I trust him with like anything.”

Parental Support

John saw himself as an easy-going person, a people person, who rarely found himself disliking anyone. He can’t abide rude people, however, and would often times take umbrage with people who he saw being rude. He credited his mother and father for instilling this in him and, in fact, they are the people he saw as having been important in his school years. He differentiated between parental support and friendship.

*Well they were always there. Always helping me out. I mean they were—you can’t get what you get from your parents from a friend. A friend, you know, they are there too—they are people that you grow up with but nothing like your parents.*

There was a strong connection between John and his parents accentuated by John’s admiration and respect for them.

Identity

Self-concept

In addressing his confidence level and comfort in his life’s direction, John expressed some satisfaction in his progress to this point.

*I have a lot of confidence in what I’m doing. At first I wanted to go to school and maybe be a welder...always wanted to adventure and being*
with the Armed Forces would always give me that opportunity to get out there. I mean I’m confident that it will help me with my references and if I ever get a job or go to school, that would be really good on a reference. I don’t know, I’m confident that I’ll do good in the Armed Forces and I’m really going to try.

He felt that he had made good decisions and that hard work, a good attitude and some good fortune would ensure that everything would work out for him. He didn’t believe that he would make any serious changes in his life and he was confident that it would unfold as it should.

**Culture and Tradition**

On the matter of his Aboriginal language and culture, John only spoke the English language, having had limited exposure to Dogrib. He said that his mother spoke Dogrib extensively to his grandmother, who spoke no English and that the language gap meant that he did not have relationship with his grandmother. John really did not see the value of his language and culture.

> I wouldn’t say it is really important but others would say that it’s good. I’m not really into it. I don’t know, I don’t think it’s going to help me succeed in life but I mean it is an important thing to some people—culture. And hunting and trapping and stuff like that. I mean I used to do that when I was younger with my uncle but I don’t know, not anymore. I mean it helped people survive for the longest time but, I don’t know, in this day and age I don’t see it as much of a use.

John appraised that a strong work ethic, discipline and good relationships would likely be more valuable to him in the long-run. In fact, when he was asked how he felt about being an Aboriginal person, he neutrally proclaimed that he was, “Just a person.” As far as he was concerned, he was just like anyone else and for him there was no racial or cultural difference.

> …I mean I look at people and just see them as normal people but some people—I don’t know—they’re racist and I don’t like that kind of stuff. So I tend to not hangout with people like that and keep them out of my life.
In talking about his experience with racism, John only recalled one incident in his high school years.

*Once in Grade 10 I think. No, Grade 9. In gym class someone called me a squaw. Well I wasn’t thinking and I ran up to him and I pushed him around and it got pretty bad but it was resolved there. He stopped calling me that—we are good friends now. It is kind of weird how that happens. Yeah, I guess he respects me now and I respect him and the problem was resolved.*

Questioned on how to resolve racist attitudes and behaviour, John suggested that communication is important.

*Just talking, I guess. Talking with the person. I mean in my case I kind of freaked out because my mom told me never to take that kind of stuff lightly and, I don’t know, I freaked out but it wasn’t anything big. I mean talking is the best thing you can do.*

While talking may be the thing to do, getting the other person’s attention was crucial in this incident as well. He did acknowledge that the school and the teachers would address racism if they saw it. “Like if it was seen then it was dealt with.”

**Personal Motivation**

In addressing why he stayed in school to graduate, John suggested that his personal motivation to join the military had a great deal to do with it.

*Well I found out that I needed to have Grade 12 to get into the army. Well you have to have Grade 10 but if you want to get farther than just being in ground infantry, you’d have to have a Grade 12 diploma. So that’s why I did it.*

He had a target in mind and pursued it to completion.

Asked what personal factors might have contributed to his success, John initially stated that having a vehicle made his life easier, giving him the independence he felt necessary to run his own life. He then shifted his answer to affirm his friends and his desire not “to be left behind” when they graduated. He could not offer any other personal
characteristics that helped him be successful. When asked what school factors might have contributed to his success, John instantly offered:

*The teachers. I think it was the teachers. They always pushed me to do better in school. I was never not pushed to bring my grades up. So that was a lot of help. And to go back still to all the friendliness—like all the—I don't know—it was a really good atmosphere because just getting along with all the teachers and them helping me out.*

Teachers played a strong, supportive role in John's school experience, pushing him to do better and demanding his best.

John didn't believe the school played much of a role in pursuing his military dream, something that he has had for a very long time.

*No, I wouldn't say it does for where I'm going I don't think...Well I've already had this plan for a long time now and I don't know, I'm just taking it like day-by-day and I'm going to go to the army and I'll figure it out there. I don't know yet. I'm still kind of blank-minded about the whole life after school. I think this is going to be a really good chance for me to give it a lot of good thought.*

John had a very direct, career-oriented interpretation on whether school has assisted him in getting to where he presently was. It had been part of a journey that is incomplete in his mind as he still sought direction and destination.

John, in clarifying his goals in life and in assessing where he sees himself in five years, was able to confirm:

*Well I'm joining the Armed Forces for three years—a term of three years. I really don't know what I'm going to do after that but I'm going to do that for three years and hopefully after that I'll know.*

He believed that his military experience would provide a gateway to further education, paid for by the Armed Forces, as he potentially pursued his dream of flying jets.
School/Institutional Experiences

Contextuality

John didn't believe that he performed very well while in high school, saying he "just made it by," and he related the lesson learned in terms of his present aspiration.

I slacked off a lot. I didn't do my homework for most of the part and I really regret it. I was going to go upgrade but I didn't want to go back. So the military...I really can't slack off, I need to do my best.

Originally he had thought about becoming a welder, something that he had shown some prowess in, but then had a change of heart. Overall, he cited schooling as his biggest challenge growing up.

I don't know, I wasn't really disciplined when I was younger. I didn't really want to be at school for the most part but I regret that now. I didn't see it as—I mean I was pushed but I was just not motivated enough, I guess. Yeah, it was a tough challenge 'cause like, I don't know, I'm not really a fast learner like some people I know. I know a few people that are crazy—like minds are sponges and, I don't know, I'm not like that for the most part. I don't know, I found it a hard struggle to keep my grades up and leave class with C's or B's, some A's.

John recognized his own limitations and was quite self-aware.

John remembered very little of his primary or elementary years in school, vaguely recalling playing in sandboxes, having fun and learning the ABC's and 123's. However, when asked to share his lived experiences at high school, he was more successful, relating he felt very accepted.

I really liked high school. Friends were the—I think were the main focus in school for me 'cause everyone at St. Akaitcho were all friendly. I mean not one person was like outcasted. Everyone had their—I don't know—it was like you blended in...at St. Akaitcho, I mean you can go into any crowd really and you'll know like just about everyone. There would be no hate kind of.

He went on to say that his school was one where people would stand up for one another.
Well there was this one time where I went out for lunch and I guess this kid was getting bullied... and I was walking by and like it was almost like instinct—me and a few friends we went up to them and we were like ‘Hey man, we’re not going to let you fight him’. ‘Cause he was just walking back to school alone and there was like five guys and then once we did a whole bunch of other people did it and that—Yeah, I think that was pretty significant ‘cause if one person stands up then a whole bunch of others will.

He said there was a real spirit of togetherness within his school and that the atmosphere was a friendly one.

Always smiles in the hallways...Lots of really good memories. I made a lot of good friends. Friends that I know I’m going to keep for a long time. The teachers were all really nice, principals were nice. Yeah, just the basic atmosphere of the place. I mean it was a good school. If I could do it all over again I’d probably work on my homework a lot more but I mean for the atmosphere I was in, it was a really good place.

In describing a really great high school experience that he had, John recollected two similar events.

At the beginning of the year we had religion retreat. That was really fun. Yeah, I liked that. That was a good time to just spend time with everyone in the grad class. I liked that. And at the end of the year when we had the grad—the camping trip—that was really fun. It was really cold but it was really fun just standing around the fire and listening to stories and such.

He was remembering two retreats sponsored by the school, the first a Grade 12 religion retreat and the second, an annual graduation retreat put on as a closing graduation class activity. The common thread for John in the two events was the connection and relationship with his peers and “just the laughter...there was a lot of laughs.” John was so positive about his high school experiences that he could not remember any of his experiences that were unfavourable or negative. Although when asked what challenges he faced in high school, he did offer that the subject of English was particularly trying.

I was always bad in English and that’s what you need to graduate so my last year it was my main priority and I really focused in and did all my assignments and passed the exam and I think that was a really good
achievement because I brought my mark up from Grade 10 to Grade 11 and then [Grade] 12 was the highest. I thought that was pretty good.

He remembered the school and the teachers offering tutorials and that he took advantage of them, sessions where he could get one-on-one assistance.

**Ontological Security**

Part of what John liked at his high school was the variety of courses that he could take, especially the vocational ones.

_The courses that we could take. I mean earlier before the Kimberlite Career and Technical Centre (KCTC) building opened up, I guess courses like welding or electronics, mining, woodworking—stuff like that—and mechanics. Those courses were—well, they were around but I mean I guess they weren’t really focused on…I took full advantage of it. I took my small engines, all my welding courses and I took a bit of woodworking but I didn’t really get into it so I just stayed with the welding and the small engine mechanics._

The KCTC was proximally located to the high school and was built to foster an interest in and exploration of the trades. For John, math and calculus ranked among his main dislikes at school. "I'm not really good with math. I didn't really like calculus. I tried it and I didn't do too good. I dropped that. So I don’t really like calculus or math." For John, a good school was one where “great help and good people” played a prominent role. It was also one where bullying was non-existent. "Never did like bullies—people who like push others smaller than them. I never really saw that at St. Akaitcho—only a few times but that's in different cases and it was never bullying. So, I mean, I'm totally against that."

John felt very comfortable in his high school, an experience that was fun.

_Waking up early and going to school was just—it was fun—always fun going to school. You’d see familiar faces. I mean I see people that have home schooling and I don’t think that’s really [a] good thing because you don’t have…social skills really and making friends is hard so I think school is a really big part in people’s lives and it really defines them. Just going to school everyday was—I don’t know—it was enjoyable for me. Like I see other people and it’s like ‘Oh, I don’t want to go to school today’ and I'm like ‘Why not go to school?’ I mean it is going to get you places._
You know there are people there that are friendly and your friends are there. I mean I enjoyed it.

John saw school as a fact of life and pragmatically assessed that it needed to be. So much so that he rarely missed school. “No, not if I was—unless I was really sick then I wouldn’t go. But I hardly ever was sick so I went basically all the time.”

John remembered his high school as a place where student input was valued. He placed particular emphasis on the staff of the school that sought student input and opinion, both formally and informally. He offered an example. “Surveys. I think they did a lot of surveys. Yeah, that’s actually a good one. Lots of like student input was really something that they needed. I mean they always looked for it…” He said that the administration of the school was approachable and would take the time to listen and respond. He also believed that he had power in his high school journey. “Yeah, I had a say in what I did.” In fact, he believes that all the Grade 12 students were leaders within the school. “All the grads were leaders, I guess. Everyone looked up to them I guess. Every year they do, I guess.” John liked the parameters the school set out with its rules and felt they were necessary to function as a cooperative community. John was very positive about his high school experience and couldn’t think of anything that the school could have done to improve his experience. He liked the structural aspects of the school, the protocols and the expectations. He felt the school was supportive and when asked what he might change, could only offer a personal and individual perspective on how to improve. “I’d pay attention to my math and my sciences from the get-go in Grade 9. I would have started there and really worked at it.” He felt that his high school experience had shown him that he needed to be more disciplined and with hindsight he was now prepared to apply this knowledge to his next learning venture.

Belonging

John felt like he belonged in his high school and was entirely complimentary about it. He felt that he was part of an equitable learning community, where he was “just like any other student. Everyone was treated the same.” He had little else to say on the topic of belonging, other than he felt valued as a student.
First Nation Perspective

John stressed the home environment when asked about what he felt caused Aboriginal students to leave school before graduating. He set this inside a personal perspective about his own family.

For the most part I think it’s—I mean my mom she stopped drinking about 12 years ago—a long time ago just to get us back and she really changed her life around and I think because a lot of parents they drink and more so Aboriginals because—I don’t know—they’ve been exposed to it—like they weren’t used to it I think and they take it and abuse it. Kids see that and—I don’t know—I mean in my case I’ve never had to deal with it so I couldn’t really understand why kids would drop-out but I mean I can see that the stress of somebody hating you and calling you names would push a person to just forget about school. Yeah, like I mean just the negativity that some parents I think—that would be the biggest thing—if someone was being rejected and not loved, I guess, would want to drop-out...

John placed great emphasis on family dysfunction and personal motivation in assessing what some students experience and why they potentially drop-out. Asked what schools might do differently to improve things for Aboriginal students, he was hard pressed to identify anything he would change. “I can’t really—No, I wouldn’t want any changes. The way I grew up was good and I want my kids to have the same. I wouldn’t want any changes.” In particular, he said that the friendships that he had in high school were critical in his success, adding to his sense of belonging. “...I knew that that’s what you need to succeed is good friends as well as your parents. Your parents are a big thing but you need to have friendship.” For John, the twinned pillars of parent and friend support made all of the difference in his success.

John’s impression of the schools he attended, viewed through an Aboriginal lens, was unwavering. He stated that, “Yeah, they’re good schools. Still again, significance—making friends would be the biggest significance, I guess.” He did not attach importance to Aboriginal culture, but reinforced that friendship is paramount. Even when he was asked how schools might be made better to accommodate Aboriginal students, his response reflected his comments on what causes Aboriginal student drop-out, as he said, “Maybe some counseling for kids for homes that aren’t safe. Yeah, counseling for kids that need it the most.” He did not frame successful Aboriginal student performance
within a cultural context, but rather through a familial set of structures and responsibilities.

**Perceptions of the Structural Properties of the Institution**

**Teaching/Learning**

John most identified with one of his social studies teachers who he described as personable, talkative and funny. He appreciated that this teacher demanded good work from the students but at the same time gave them the support required to attain the goals he set for them. “He’s a pretty good teacher too and I learned a lot from him. And I liked social studies. Always pushed for us to do our work and, I mean, he was a good teacher.” John saw the ideal teacher as a hybrid mix of personality, entertainer and spontaneity. A good teacher was genuinely interested in his work and his students and was prepared to invest the time to make his teaching stimulating. The ideal teacher connected with students and showed an interest in them personally, but not at the expense of getting quality work. The work came first and the teacher was very disciplined in his approach to getting the work from students.

John’s preferred learning style was tactile, hands-on activity. His example came from the welding shop that he described as follows. “Yeah, like we’d hardly do any board work. Like we’d do like tests and stuff like that but it would be straight to the floor and doing the welding so I think hands-on is a big importance.” This seemed antithetical when compared to what his expressed preference is for teaching style though. “Lectures. That was really shown in biology. Just all biology is stuff that you should memorize—well you have to memorize to pass really. Lectures are really good because when they are speaking you just write down…”

**Culture**

John did not believe that the culture or ethnicity of a teacher makes any difference with respect to their ability to teach. He did allow that, “The only difference it would make is if I couldn’t understand them. But that’s hardly ever the case.” He saw his school make the effort to affirm Aboriginal culture, acknowledging that they, perhaps, were doing more about it than he was.
They took really good note on the Aboriginal festivities—I mean things that we do. But I don’t know—I mean if they know them and it’s my culture, I should know but I don’t and if they do that then they are trying to bring it out.

Curriculum

John’s favourite subject was biology, “cause it’s interesting to learn about shell organisms and life generally. Yeah, I really liked biology. The teaching style was really good.” Conversely, John detested math, as he stated he took the lowest level possible because he found it hard.

I mean I took a low math. Just the harder stuff—I wasn’t really good with the pure math. I just didn’t apply myself. I mean I know I could have done better but I just didn’t have too much motivation in math.

Pure math was the highest-level math from the Alberta curriculum for university bound students. The Northwest Territories used most of the Alberta high school curriculum. Generally, John enjoyed his classes and did not believe anything was missing from the programming offered at his high school.

Participant 3: Ericka

Ericka was predominantly raised within the community of Detah, just outside of Yellowknife, NT. She was 20 years old and from a family of six, including her natural parents and three brothers. At the time of writing, she was a full-time, second year student at the University of Northern B.C., majoring in biochemistry and molecular biology and had career aspirations of becoming a doctor. Ericka was a solid student who completed high school with a 63% average in her core courses. Ericka graduated on time from high school, despite taking her Grade 11 at a U.S. high school in Illinois. She was part of the 2004 graduation cohort. Her attendance record at both of her high schools was excellent with the exception of her final Grade 12 year where it appeared that she was not quite as committed as in her earlier years. There was no evidence of any disciplinary concerns for Ericka on her school cumulative file.
Social Contextuality

Community

Ericka was born and raised for the first six or seven years of her life in Peoria, Illinois. Her family moved to the Yellowknife area in about 1995 to the Aboriginal community of Detah, which is located approximately 26 kilometres outside of the city, except during the winter months when the ice road shortened the distance to a more geographically accessible five kilometres. Ericka described her community as “homey” and welcoming—“pretty much like a big family.” As a student at the University of Northern B.C., Ericka lived within an apartment suite with three other roommates and described the experience like “what it would have been like growing up with sisters.” A family metaphor seemed to dominate much of what Ericka stressed and gave value. Ericka saw herself as a “fairly caring person,” “open-minded,” and non-judgemental. She strove to be genuine and allowed for people to show “me who they really are,” dropping the masks that frequently project certain images.

Family

Ericka’s nuclear family was comprised of her natural mother and father; three brothers aged 28, 22 and 17, and Ericka as the lone female child. Both her parents were employed by one of the newly developed diamond mines, DeBeers Canada. Her mother worked within the human resource field while her father was a warehouse supervisor. Her eldest brother was a fourth year apprentice electrician, her middle brother was “in-between schools,” and her youngest sibling was still in the high school that she graduated from. When describing her role in her family, Ericka stated, “My role is usually taking care of my brothers when my mom is not around. It is kind of sad! [laughs].” There was a self-depreciating quality about her that permeated the conversation, perhaps stemming from living with her three brothers for her entire life and being “the one who gets picked on sometimes.” She described her extended family as huge and she was able to put her role within her own family in perspective in light of her large clan.

I’ve got—I don’t even know how many aunts and uncles—about 9 or 10, dozens of cousins and from my cousins I’ve got nieces and nephews from them—so like second cousins but I call them my nieces and nephews.
Let's see. I'm the only girl that doesn't have a child which is kind of sad but at the same time it makes our family that much stronger. So we all kind of get together. If somebody needs something our entire family is there so I know I've got that as a backup other than my brothers. Like I was kind of going through a really tough time in school and I can call my cousins and be like 'I need to talk'. So it is kind of like even though I'm the only girl in my immediate family I feel like I have a lot of sisters.

A strong sense of kinship underlined her equally strong sense of community, a feeling bolstered by the fact that the majority of her family lived within a 2-kilometre radius!

Erika was questioned about who was important to her during her school years, and she unhesitantly identified her mother as a strong and constant influence. She described her as “always there” for she and her brothers and as a person who, despite other obligations, “still put family first.” She elaborated with, “She was always there telling me to ‘Do your homework, clean your room’—all the regular stuff. It’s like ‘You can’t study in a cluttered room!’ kind of thing.” Queried further about whether she had significant and important friends, she was able to name someone from her present schooling experience, a current roommate, who gave her unqualified support during what could only be described as a very difficult and emotional personal set of circumstances.

...she’s been my support. Like I’ve had quite a few things happen to me this year like I lost three friends in a span of three weeks so there is a lot of times where I was just like ‘I want to give up, I want to quit, I want to go home’ and she was the one person who was like ‘You can’t do that’. Like even though I couldn’t talk to my mom or I couldn’t talk to my dad about wanting to drop-out of school because I know they would be supportive and be like ‘You have to stay in school, I know this is really hard’—but I felt that even though I’m really close to my parents knowing that they would be very disappointed at the fact that I was thinking about dropping out of school made it very difficult for me to bring it up to them. But having Jessica there, she was very understanding and it wasn’t just a one-way where I would sit there and spew my guts out to her. She had a very good response to—she always knew exactly the right things to say pretty much.

Ericka lost three very close friends within the span of three weeks, in the past half year. She had struggled with the emotional trauma caused by this and as evidenced above, had contemplated quitting school. Despite the enormity of this personal tragedy,
Ericka persisted under trying circumstances and admitted that the decision-making had been hard. She expressed that eventually she was able to share what was happening with her parents and that their response was just the right blend of challenging her and supporting her.

After I finally came up with the courage to tell them that I was really thinking about dropping out of school, my parents were just like 'You can't do that—if you drop out of school, what are you going to do?' Telling me that I'd probably sit at home or I'd probably mope around a little bit and by being in school it would be easier for me to keep my mind off of everything that has been going on. And they encouraged me to go to counseling and stuff like that to talk about it when there was nobody else around. So they were really supportive.

Ericka was then asked whether her family went to church or believed in a Creator or Great Spirit. Her response was intriguing.

My grandma on my dad's side—she is First Baptist and my grandma on my mom's side is Christian. She's not really into like Lutheran or Methodist or anything. She just considers herself Christian. And, yeah, my entire family—we don't go to church. My two grandparents do but like my immediate family we don't go to church but we do believe in a higher power and that there is a God and pretty much Christian views.

Friends/Role Models

In exploring more fully her high school years, Ericka was asked to characterize her friends of the day and whether or not they had graduated. She was asked specifically whether they were Aboriginal or not.

I had a blend of friends. I wasn't stuck to one specific group. Like I would hang out with like—I don't know—a few people that I played volleyball with and a few people that I played soccer with and just from random sports. And then, of course, there's the people from my community who I grew up and still talk to and still hang out with when I'm in town. They have all graduated but a couple of them graduated a couple years behind, but they still pulled it off.

Here, the activity of sport was a cultural mediator where the emphasis was on the competition and common goals. Her Detah friends remained important to her and she
was very aware of whether they graduated or not. As a supplementary question, Ericka was asked who her role models were. She began by running through several possibilities, almost thinking out loud, as she named a boss at Diavik Diamond Mines, a nice guy and in her estimation a good leader; her cousins because, while they were all financially struggling and trying to raise a family, they were still going to post-secondary school; and lastly, she lauded her elder brother who had shown exceptional dedication in becoming an electrician, despite her perception that he was older than is typical for an apprentice.

**Parental Support**

When asked to clarify what role her parents played in her education and life, Ericka began with the fact that the first two of her brothers graduated from high school and she attributed this to her parents having high expectations and ensuring that all of them got to school, despite the distance from Yellowknife.

*I graduated from Akaitcho High so they've always been there pushing us forward to go to school and make sure we got on the bus and to make sure we had rides after school from activities because that's pretty much the only reason I know my oldest brother stayed in school was for sports. And that was a major role why I stayed in school is because I love sports and my parents were very supportive of not just us and our after school activities but in our school and they made sure we did our homework. Even though my dad was working a two-week on/two-week off rotation, he'd still call and be like 'I heard you didn't do well on this assignment'*

It was apparent, with three high school graduates in the family and a fourth one pending, that Ericka’s parents played an important role in their success. Her father, in fact, was a high school graduate and her mother, a former residential school student, completed Grade 10 and then took her GED to completion. Ericka explained that her mother continued to learn, despite not completing her formal high school and that she took advantage of learning opportunities within her company. When Ericka graduated, there was a real celebration of the occasion marked with the purchase by her immediate family and some of her extended family of a laptop computer. She was made to feel special.
Ericka worked for Diavik Diamond Mines in the past summer and indicated that she really enjoyed the experience working within the truck shop. It caused her to consider becoming a heavy-duty mechanic, a temptation that she elected not to pursue as a matter of pragmatics as she wanted to pursue employment that would sustain her over a lifetime. "Our mines are only going to be open for about 10-15 maybe 20 years, no longer, and ... I'm only going to be 40. I wouldn't have enough money to even think about retiring so I would have to move somewhere else..." She had obviously taken a long view of her life and been quite deliberate in her choices. Probed about whether any people other than her parents had played an instrumental role in her education, Ericka cited two other sources:

A lot of the teachers at St. Pats. The teachers, [and] my grandma on my dad's side. She was really supportive. She took me in to the state—like I moved down to Illinois for my eleventh grade and went to school there and she was very supportive there and even with after school activities... She is very supportive of my schooling. So are my aunts and my cousins on my dad's side and all of my cousins on my mom's side. So I've got a wide range of support from my entire family.

Identity

Self-concept

Ericka was asked to describe how she felt about herself and how she would rate her self-confidence. Given her experiences depicted above, it was not entirely surprising to have heard her say,

I was kind of broken down. I'm not going to lie. I was pretty beat down with life and it was really hard for me to keep going but now I'm starting to build up my confidence again and through determination I'm pretty sure that I want to get—well I'm not pretty sure—I'm sure I want to get good grades and to graduate from university because I would be the first one in my entire family to ever graduate from university on my mom and my dad's side. So, that is a good kick in the rear-end to keep going...Yeah, I kind of like the way I am just right now. Pretty confident and everything seems to be going a lot better than it was a couple of months ago.

Despite all that had happened to her, there was a resolve to complete her university education, partly out of a sense of family pride and partly because she
believed that if she didn’t there would be a great deal of regret later as it would impact negatively on her life. “That if I don’t do it now, I’ll probably end up doing it later and thinking ‘I should have done it sooner—I should have just gone to school.’” Asked what changes she might make in her life at school, she lamented not studying harder during her high school and that she hadn’t tried to find more of a balance between study and personal recreation or leisure time. She believed that this was impacting on her present study habits, and as a result she was “having to teach myself ways to study or what works best for me…”

Culture and Tradition

When responding to the question, “What languages do you speak and where do you speak them?” Ericka claimed to speak only English, but maintained that, although she didn’t speak her Aboriginal language, Dogrib, she could understand it when certain people were talking. She was comfortable, for instance, when her mother spoke, but found it difficult to understand her grandmother who was fully fluent.

…it is just hard for me to put the pieces together into making my own sentences to speak it. Like I can understand like the basic, general topic they are talking about but if I were to sit there and try to make a conversation with them, I wouldn’t be able to. I would have to throw in English words here and there.

In a sense, she had to bridge between her fluent language, English and her Aboriginal language, Dogrib. Her parents did not speak the Dogrib language at home, although her mother would always assist Ericka when asked what a sentence meant. She did glean some of her language through her grandparents and their stories.

I used to sit and talk to my grandfather and he would tell me stories or even now I will kind of go and see my grandma every once in a while and I’ll ask her ‘Tell me a story’ or she’ll sit there and tell me something that her grandma told her. She’ll speak mostly in Dogrib but every once in a while I guess I get a look on my face like ‘What?’ and she’ll repeat it in English. So that is what has helped me kind of learn and understand it a little easier.
In exploring this further, she was asked how important the Dogrib language and culture were to her. She was very aware of both her language and culture and feared that they may be lost. She also knew that she was part of that equation.

*It is really important to me. I’m scared we are going to lose it so I’ve been asking my mom more recently to speak Dogrib to me and like I want to learn the language other than just being able to understand it. I want to be able to teach my kids it so that it doesn’t actually die out. Recently I’ve been beading and like making slippers and gloves and stuff and trying to keep our culture alive.*

And even more sadly, she was alive to how this had happened.

*It wasn’t until just—probably about four or five years ago where I actually realized. Like I look at the kids in Detah or like the youth and young adults in Detah and N'dilo and we all speak English. None of us know how to bead. None of us know really how to sew. And then you go to the smaller communities like Rae Edzo and Wha Ti and stuff. Like all the little kids that are two or three years old they are learning to speak Dogrib before they speak English. I think it is good that way but, yeah, I just keep thinking Yellowknife area has gotten Detah and N'dilo to kind of look away from our cultural perspectives and stuff and it is starting to fade away a little bit.*

Notably, she understood that smaller, more remote communities, with a homogeneous Aboriginal population were more immersed in their cultural practices than were Detah and N'dilo, communities situated near the community of Yellowknife. She made a connection between language and culture loss and the influence of the urban centre. She believed that her Aboriginal language and culture was part of her identity and that a better effort must be made to preserve their way of life.

*It’s been passed on from generation to generation. I mean like all of our ancestors have lived the way they live—like they all hunted and gathered and they made their own clothes from what they were hunting—the caribou and stuff. It is just very important to know where we came from and like that helped us develop us into who we are today. I think it is very important that the young people now recognize that we are Aboriginal students, we are Aboriginal people and that it needs to be saved and it needs to keep going on.*
This urgency and sense of pride was carried on in her response to how she felt about being an Aboriginal person as Ericka declared that she was a stronger person because of her cultural upbringing and that beyond the title of “Aboriginal woman,” there was a strong sense of Aboriginal community and being a huge family. While her extended family is large, when she spoke about being a huge family she was referencing a huge Aboriginal family, that despite its trials, tribulations and dynamics, always came together in times of need. The pride Ericka had for who she was, for her cultural roots was palpable.

*Racism means to me—[pause]—people putting down somebody else’s culture. Just stereotyping them so much and so far...they believe that you’re no different than everybody else in your same culture or race. It is just a way to beat somebody down.*

This was Ericka’s response to a request to define what racism meant to her. She expressed that she never experienced racism personally, but recognized that a “few bad apples” always existed who would “say really mean things to other people and it is just—it is very hurtful even though they weren’t saying it directly to me.” In her high school, she felt racism expressed itself through a few individuals, but that the school itself, overall, was not racist. “I never really saw very much racism. I never saw very much segregation between like the Aboriginal students and the non-Aboriginal students.” Her response to what needs to happen to change racist behaviour was dependent on the individual, but generally, she saw hope in education.

*For each individual it is going to be different. I think getting more out there that we are all not one stereotype. We don’t all have a thick Native American accent. We all don’t use dog teams and stuff like that. Just get them educated and let them know that we are people too and that there’s no difference between us other than our skin’s color.*

Ultimately, for Ericka, her final assessment regarding racist attitudes was summed up in a post-modernist perspective as she stated, “...like with this time and how much the human race has evolved. It is really sad. It is disappointing to know that there are still people out there who base you [on] and stereotype you from your race.”
Personal Motivation

"Why did you stay to graduate from high school?" Ericka was asked. Her response was that to not graduate never felt like an option.

Like I couldn’t imagine dropping out of school when I was only 16 or 17 because I was still under my parents’ roof and I have no experience and I had little that I could build off of so if by graduating school at least I had somewhat of a building block to get my life to where I want it to go.

When pressed on what personal factors contributed to her graduating, Ericka attributed her success to her bulldog determination, a characteristic she associated with her competitive spirit in sports, especially volleyball and soccer. This foundational personality trait translated into her pursuit of other endeavours and she ascribed some of her development in this area to her high school experiences. Above this development, she returned to a refrain heard earlier as she assigned sports credit for both her sense of belonging and for facilitating her relationships with other students. Sports became a touchstone for Ericka that allowed her to grow in confidence and connect with others. She granted that other activities like drama, band and SADD acted as a mediator for other students as well. Sports just happened to be her area of interest and strength, and it yielded the added benefits above.

Ericka was then asked what school factors might have contributed to her success while in school, and she immediately cut through the institutional nature of school to key in on the teachers being responsible for a great deal of her success. The reader is reminded that she took her Grade 11 year down in the United States and this offered her a unique comparative perspective, as she believed that the southern high school experience was the complete opposite of her northern high school experience. She keyed in on the sense of community and compared it favourably to her home community, Detah. There was a lack of cliques and a formidable school spirit that she couldn’t quite put into words, but offered an example as proof of her perspective.

A lot of it—when I really realized that our school was so close was probably during the religion retreat and the grad retreat. Like that’s just something you don’t hear about where your entire grad class goes out camping and, you know, doing activities to get to know each other... Like I’m not sure but I know down in the States when I went to school there,
everybody thought I was weird because I was so excited about going on a religion retreat and they have never heard of such a thing. And that is one of the things that I really appreciated because it really does get you to know everybody in your grad class. That is probably one of the reasons why I do know everybody in my grad class and that I still talk to most of the people in my grad class.

Ericka picked up on the thread of connection in her belief that some of her teachers were like a part of her family because they were trustworthy and she had a long-term relationship with many of them. She completely credited the school with her success to this point in her life and believed it was one of the only reasons that she continued on with post-secondary schooling, rather than ending up at Wal-Mart or at a mine site.

Ericka had clear goals for herself as she aspired to be in medical school within five years and ultimately to become a medical doctor. This had been her life’s ambition as far back as Grade 7 and now had been refined even further as she identified obstetrics or pediatrics as her preferred specialties. For her, the connection with young children was central to her ambition as well as serving her community. She knew how big this dream was and fully comprehended the kind of work that it would require. She was equally cognizant of the kind of pressure that she was putting on herself.

I’ve felt the pressure especially with this past semester where it has just been one thing after the other and it has been so hard to keep going. Just knowing that there is everybody at home thinking ‘Oh, she couldn’t handle it’ or ‘She had to drop-out’ kind of thing. It was another thing that kind of kept me going through and kept [me] into school.

For Ericka, it was never an option to drop-out—it was a fact of her life that she must complete.

School/Institutional Experiences

Contextuality

Ericka had fond early memories of schools as she recalled playing in the sandbox in elementary school, going outside for recess and playing with her friends as
the highlights. Her school career began in Illinois, where she remembered monthly visits with aunts and uncles, and generally a close connection with her father's side of the family. Her high school memories focused on growing in her relationships with friends, moving from a small, clique-focused existence to one where she felt that she was a friend with her entire graduation cohort.

Like I can't remember how many people I graduated with—it was probably about 70 or 80 people—but I can name every single one. Like every single person in my grad class which I think is very good and it shows how close of a school and community sense that we had at St. Akaitcho. And, yeah, well and my experiences there were very pleasant and I really liked going to St. Akaitcho. I actually miss it.

Relationships were important to Ericka and this was borne out in her observation that the school was about far more than academics, seen in her statement that, "It was more along the lines of like how you grew personally and how you made personal contact with everybody else." Her overall assessment of high school was that it was great.

There are two high school experiences that stood out for Ericka, one, unsurprisingly, from the world of sports and the other from her graduation experience. The first was from an event called Super Soccer, the largest indoor, pan-territorial soccer tournament held in Yellowknife, where her team was in the finals against the other local high school and she was the goalie. It had come down to a shoot-out and there was a bipartisan crowd with predictable frenzied excitement and cheering. Unfortunately, the other team won the shoot-out and Ericka felt very responsible for the loss as the goalie.

I was broken down like 'I can't believe I let that goal in, it slipped right through my hands' but then my team members and like everybody in the school were like 'You tried really hard, you did really good, you made good saves,' 'You did all right, you did great, you tried your best'—that was something that really brought me up was knowing that there were people there still supporting me.

For Ericka, the supportive climate of the school and the focus on the person rather than the win, made a difference.
Ericka’s other stand out memory in high school was at her graduation retreat, an event where the school mandates that all of the graduating class had to go out to a camp site and spend two days in organized activities and events as a spirit-building and culminating high school experience. This was seen as an ending ceremony, completing a full circle experience that began in Grade 9 with a welcoming retreat. One particular aspect of the retreat was the highlight memory for Ericka as they completed a sharing circle, where graduates could speak about their experiences within the school over the four years and what it had meant for them. In the circle only the person who had the “talking stick” may speak. All others must listen with respect.

...then also one thing that I really loved about school was during our grad retreat the—I can’t remember what they called it...like the stick talk where we all—my entire grad class—we were all sitting in that little cabin all sitting around and talking about our experiences in school and like, yeah, some people cried. I was one of them; I’m not going to lie. But like thinking about school and just remembering all the good times even though we all weren’t friends and we all didn’t hang out.

When reminded that this activity has its origin in Aboriginal traditions, Ericka admitted to only realizing this after the fact, when she said:

I didn’t really make that connection until a couple days after when I was telling my mom about it and she said she remembered doing stuff like that...That you have to respect the person who is holding the stick. I was like ‘Oh, yeah, I guess it makes sense’.

When asked to relate a time in high school that wasn’t so uplifting, Ericka returned to a motif that she had plenty of experience with. She was just entering Grade 9 at her high school when a close Grade 12 friend committed suicide over the summer. Death had played a heart-rending role in her life where four close friends lost their lives within a 5-year period, three of them within a 3-week period. Of course, this made her other challenges within high school pale by comparison, but she also identified finding the balance between her sporting life and her school life as challenging. She again credited her teachers with helping her find her way.

I’d go to my sports and then I’d be home at like eight or nine at night trying to study or work on an assignment and it was really easy when I
was able to talk to my teachers and be like 'I don't understand this question' or 'How is it that I'm supposed to go about writing this paper?' and they were always there and they were easy to talk to and told me 'Yeah, you can go at it from this angle or you can work on it from that angle'. It made it a lot easier...

Ontological Security

It has already been established that Ericka felt very comfortable in her high school setting because of the community feeling that she continuously stressed, an aspect of her schooling career that set it apart from other schools she had attended. Teachers who both challenged and supported her with constant reminders personified that comfort. "...they were always like ‘You have to do well on this assignment’ or ‘You need to start working on this now’ and they were kind of a constant reminder of ‘You need to succeed’ pretty much." In fact, she saw some of her teachers acting in the role of parents, beyond the technical expectation of *in loco parentis*.

...*it was like having another set of parents pretty much but they saw you in school and if you weren't in class, they would make sure that you'd get to class. Stuff like that. Things that parents couldn't do because they are at work.*

In an attempt to discover how much power or influence she had as a student within her high school, Ericka was asked whether she had a say in school operations or whether she had any influence. She believed she did to some extent, but concluded that it wasn’t really necessary because she enjoyed the school, felt at home within the school and that, “You can’t improve something that is already really good.” She did see herself as a leader within her sports activities and made an effort to accommodate teacher requests when asked and to be proactively involved to the degree that she could be.

Asked what rules were in her high school and whether they were fair or good rules, she remembered a hall pass system designed to encourage only students with permission and a hall pass to be in the halls. At the time she thought it was objectionable, but retrospectively, she understood it better, "...now that I look at it, you know, it was intended to keep the hallways clear and to keep the students in class...” She also objected to a no-hats in the classroom rule that she felt was just arbitrary and
made no difference in the learning of students. Set within a cultural context where ball caps have become an integral part of Aboriginal communities in the North, this, perhaps, underscored why it was noteworthy for Ericka. The other structural aspect of school that she disliked was a move from approximately five 1-hour classes in a day to four 80-minute classes per day. She saw classes as too long and enjoyed shorter instructional sessions more and felt that she learned better in the previous approach.

Belonging

Ericka felt like she belonged in her high school and saw this reflected in her daily reality as “every day as soon as you’d walk...through the front doors, you’d see friends or teachers or, you know, it was very accepting.” For her, the high school she attended was “the perfect high school.” She felt part of the school and felt like she mattered.

First Nation Perspective

Ericka was asked to contemplate what caused Aboriginal students to leave school before graduating. She quickly identified socio-economic factors when she said:

A lot of Aboriginal students that I know come from—not really broken homes but they are not exactly the best...I know a lot of people who are forced to drop-out of school to get a job and help pay for rent or food or stuff—help to support their family.

She described that for some of her peers, they never enjoyed the support that she received and she felt privileged by comparison.

It was very sad for me because seeing this from outside the box and knowing my parents were so supportive and that they were able to give me pretty much whatever I really needed for school where other students they’d have to fight and argue and be like ‘I need this for a class’ and stuff. It was just hard for them to get that support from their friends and family and I feel very privileged that I was able to, but it really made me sad at the same time seeing that there are other people struggling with it and felt the need to drop-out.

As nicely as Ericka fit into her high school, she understood that her experience was a result of an intersection of strong family support, school and teacher connection
and the sporting opportunities that she had. Not every First Nations student had the favourable conditions that made for her success.

Ericka was asked to consider how schools might be made better to reflect and accommodate Aboriginal students. She concluded that while students may need to know compulsory courses like biology, chemistry, and math, that the teaching of Aboriginal culture might encourage more Aboriginal students to attend classes and school. She appreciated that for some Aboriginal students they learn differently and have a different world-view—that they come “from a different point of view so they kind of need to bring it [learning/teaching] in from another area so they can understand it and wrap their minds around it.” Making the learning meaningful and cloaking it within the context and experience of the students is how Ogbu, Gay and Kanu would frame it—culturally responsive teaching.

**Perceptions of the Structural Properties of the Institution**

Teaching/Learning

In responding to who her favourite teacher was in high school and why, Ericka identified a couple that made a difference for her. She saw one teacher, who played the role of teacher advisor within the Teacher Advisor Program, as key in her development. She described him as “always there for students” and easy to talk to. He was someone who would be proactive in assisting students, whether on the academic or personal front. The other teacher who had standing for Ericka was a biology teacher who she described as a friend, but who understood the dual nature of her profession.

...she had the leadership role, she was able to...let you know when she was in friend-mode or when she was in teacher-mode and she was just really easy to talk to and, you know, whenever I had a question whether it was personal or academic, I knew I could go and talk to her about it.

Pushed for her ideal of what a good teacher is like, Ericka emphasized an individual who knew the content of the course but could explain it in “layman’s terms so that I could understand it.” She stressed as well that the ideal teacher had to be able to form personal relationships. In her opinion, the bad teacher was someone who could teach
the content, but not the student. Ericka emphasized that every one of her teachers cared about her as evidenced even on the final day of her high school career at graduation where teachers took the time to congratulate her on her accomplishment. They had been actively involved in putting the graduation ceremony together for students and students knew this and appreciated their efforts.

In addressing how she best learns Ericka cited repetition as important for her. She would re-write notes, read the text section associated with the notes and sometimes review the content with student peers in her class. She taught herself this technique, because “the more I see it, the more I remember it, the more likely it is going to stick for me.” She obviously favoured visual learning. Ericka thought that teaching style made a difference, but stressed that it can be very individualized and subject dependent.

...for certain classes or certain subjects it’s easier to learn certain ways. Like for sciences I found that through diagrams and writing and small groups, it was easy to learn but for math I found that through examples and one-on-one time it was easier for you to learn.

She appreciated just how difficult it was to accommodate everyone’s learning styles when noting:

I mean there’s not one specific way to teach everybody how to learn something. I mean some people are visual people, some people are readers, [and] some people are hands-on. It is hard to compensate for everybody who learns differently.

Culture

Ericka was asked whether a teacher’s culture, race or ethnic background made a difference in how they taught and answered affirmatively, suggesting that they likely taught the way they were taught in their upbringing. “But I don’t really know if it is cultural that it is like that. It might just be their upbringing that made them the way that they were or made them teach the way they were taught.” Ericka was not making the connection that culture played a role in how a person was raised, but did understand that our perspectives and experiences influence how we live our lives.
Curriculum

Ericka had an affinity for the life sciences over the physical sciences, reflective, perhaps, of her relationship orientation and the gravitation towards life and the ecology of the world. She loved biology, but despised physics; she saw the wonder in the human body and how it worked, but couldn’t see any point in understanding “how fast you have to throw something or…the different angles certain things have to be…” Generally, she felt her high school curriculum and programming was much like hundreds of other schools using a provincial set of curricula and found it to be comprehensive enough for the purpose for which it was designed. However, when reminded of earlier comments she had made about there being a lack of an Aboriginal perspective in the programming, she felt that the school could have offered some Aboriginal culture-based course to supplement what she had learned at home.

...I learned how to bead from my mom and my grandma and by kind of watching them but that would have been nice to have an Elder or somebody else from a community teaching you how to bead or, you know, make drums so that we can get the cultural aspects so that it wouldn’t be lost—our culture.

And she saw an advantage beyond this in what the non-Aboriginal people might learn and appreciate.

...it is not just that those classes would be offered to just Aboriginal students. Like non-Aboriginals would probably take—I know a lot of my friends even down at university wanted to learn how to bead because they think it's beautiful, it's great artwork. So for other people to learn about it, it would just be nice because now it wouldn't just be forced upon like the Aboriginal population to keep it alive because there'd be also like non-Aboriginal people who are able to incorporate it and who would have appreciation for such beautiful artwork of beading and snowshoe making...

Certainly she favoured having Aboriginal role models within both the community and the school and believed having the Aboriginal perspective taught in courses at the schools would be ideal.

...not just seeing an Aboriginal person as a teacher but...seeing them as somebody with higher authority. That would be great. Like I know a
couple of people who are actually going to school right now in Aboriginal Studies to come back and teach Aboriginal courses. So we actually do have—like not just... Northern Studies but to actually have a First Nations Studies as part of our high school curriculum.

Ultimately, she wished to see the day when she and some of her Aboriginal peers graduated from post-secondary institutions to fill professional roles within her community. "It would be a very, very proud day to see Aboriginal doctors and like more RCMP officers and lawyers and teachers."

**Participant 4: Amanda**

Amanda was a 20-year-old whose hometown was Yellowknife, NT. She did, however, spend significant portions of her life in Alberta, Saskatchewan and even, Australia. She came from an Aboriginal mother and father who had not been together since she was two and she had one 27-year-old brother. Amanda had no memory of her mother and father together, but did remember a shared custody arrangement in the early post-split years. Amanda’s high school career, while ultimately successful, might best be characterized as turbulent in the early years. For instance, she was largely absent from Grade 9 as she admittedly followed a group of her friends that did not value school. As a result, her parents made the decision to send her to a private boarding high school in Saskatchewan with the goal of getting her away from these friends and getting her “on track” with school. This seemed an interesting choice given the legacy of residential schools in the North. Amanda’s attendance and performance both improved while in this setting, however. At the conclusion of Grade 10 she returned to Yellowknife and the high school involved in this study. Attendance was a bit uneven as there was evidence of very high attendance in stretches and equally, stretches of high absenteeism, suggesting a rather ambivalent relationship with school. Despite this record, Amanda showed general improvement from Grade 9 to 12, ending up with a 61% average in all of her core courses. Her best overall average was achieved in her Grade 12 year, 2005-2006. Predictably, all of Amanda’s disciplinary matters related to her attendance issues and there is little to suggest that beyond this that there were any other disciplinary concerns.
Social Contextuality

Community

Amanda’s principal residence in the North had been Yellowknife, a city that has been an intermittent home over her lifetime. It would be safe to say that she had spent about half of her life within the community that she described as “small and cold.” Since graduating, Amanda had moved to Burnaby, B.C., living with her boyfriend. At the time of this interview, she was back in Yellowknife for a short interim, living with her boyfriend’s parents and working a term position at the local hospital’s foundation. This had been precipitated by a shortfall of money and her intent was to get a nest-egg prior to returning to B.C. Her boyfriend was on a four-week on/two-week off rotation, where as a driller, he flew into remote northern communities to do his work.

Family

Amanda came from a hybrid family, originally her mother, father and older brother, but once her parents divorced at two, the custodial arrangement alternated between the two of them for a period of time. Then she moved with her mother to Calgary and her father remained in Yellowknife and she maintained contact with him over holidays. Her mother moved back to Yellowknife with Amanda in the year 2000. Her father, a cameraman for the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) was remarried at about this time. Her mother, a human resources specialist, remarried a few years ago. Amanda had positive feelings about her parents and indicated that they have helped her out a great deal, that they got along together, and interacted civilly when it involved she or her brother. Her eldest brother, perhaps a casualty of the marital breakup, described by Amanda as not “around too much” and “always leaving,” had apparently chosen to remain in Calgary and lives there to this day. She elaborated in saying that, “He was the bad apple. Didn’t graduate. I don’t think he is living the greatest life in Calgary.” She further punctuated his situation in assessing that:

He’s an alcoholic and so he is always quitting his jobs—he always finds a new one—and then he will just disappear for a couple of months and then call again one day. He has a child who he doesn’t talk to anymore. She’s six.
When questioned on whether her family was spiritual or attended church, she responded, "No. I was forced to go to church at my boarding school." Overall she said that she was still journeying, trying to find answers for herself. She offered little else on this topic.

Friends/Role Models

Amanda saw herself getting along with people most of the time and rated a person's personality as the most important factor in relationships. In reflecting back on her high school life, she had a boyfriend who was important to her, a "first love," and she indicated it is the same boyfriend she had spoken of earlier. She said that he was, "super nice" and has "always treated me well." The only other friend that she can recall being important to her during high school was a young woman that she qualified was only a friend because, "...she has changed. She is more mature so she is not running around doing bad things." Amanda had apparently been selective in what qualities she wanted to see in her friends and in maintaining friendships. This friend graduated from high school, while her boyfriend did not, a fact that she attributed to "His friends too—because school was stupid and he didn’t need it." She believed peer influence was strongly at play in his decision-making. She says, "He was really smart, but would rather get high than actually go." In her girlfriend’s case, she followed a similar pattern to Amanda, skipping school in Grade 9 with her, being sent to boarding school for two years, and then returning to graduate late at a local Yellowknife high school. They did not graduate together. She accredited her friend’s eventual success to “maturity” and just growing up, a phenomenon she saw in herself as well. Amanda, asked about whether she had any role models, summarily retorted, “I don’t think I have any role models. I don’t really look up to anybody. I look to people for advice.” Those she looks for advice from included the circle of friends above and her parents, “anybody I know I can count on and will give me their honest opinion.” She especially trusted her parents, who she felt more on an equal plane with, because “they can’t ground me anymore,” and she now could “tell them things.”
Parental Support

Amanda also believed that her parents played a supportive role in her education and life, suggesting in the early years that, "I did good in school. I had my homework time every night. I wasn't allowed to do anything during those times." However, in Grade 9 she began not attending school, choosing to spend time with friends, "hanging out with them." She thought that it was easier in Grade 9 to be absent, because, "we weren't as watched." Amanda had a practical and perfunctory perspective on this period in her life, commenting that, "It doesn't bother me too much because I smartened up before it was too late. I graduated on time. And that's all that really matters to me." Her parents intervened in her school life, recognizing that she was not performing well, and sent her to a boarding school in Saskatchewan for her Grade 10 year. Amanda actually looked forward to going, partially out of guilt for her behaviour to that point, and partially because she knew she had to get away from her friends. Her new environment was easier for her because:

There wasn't much to do so there wasn't a lot of distractions in the town. All my friends had the same rules so it was easy. If I wanted to go out there was nobody to do anything with anyway.

Furthermore, "It was a 20-minute walk to even get into town. And we had alarms on the doors so there was no way we could get out." As restrictive as this sounds, Amanda felt this was all right as all of her friends had the same conditions and they literally and figuratively were all in the same boat.

Amanda was limited in her knowledge about her parents' educational backgrounds. Her father went to Ryerson and graduated with a diploma that enabled him to be a cameraman. Her mother, pregnant with her at the age of 16, had to complete her high school through the GED process. Subsequently, she took further training within various organizations she worked with, to advance her human resources skill set. Amanda did not recall any other significant person who was important or encouraging in advancing her education.
Identity

Self-concept

Asked how she is feeling about herself and what level of confidence she has, Amanda was quite direct.

*It's mixed feelings. I'm still not sure what I want to do with my life and that kind of sucks but I haven't figured it out yet. I'm still trying out different things which is good. For the most part I'm happy. I'm happy with my experience—my work experience which makes me more confident with applying for other jobs. I think for the most part it's going okay. It is just frustrating not knowing what I want to do.*

Like others her age, Amanda was not certain about her life's direction, but felt good that she was exploring her options. That said, in evaluating her life at this stage, she had more of a short-term orientation, stating, "I don't really have any goals. I wish I would have saved money." This seemed to be her only regret and what she deemed her only challenge.

Culture and Tradition

Amanda was asked what languages she spoke and where she spoke them. She indicated that she only spoke English, had not been raised traditionally, despite the fact that her mother was of Dene ancestry, and said that her Aboriginal heritage was "not important." Explored further, she concluded she thought this was because "We weren't really close with our extended family. My mom, I think, she decided that—I don't know." Asked to keep going with this, she stated, "I think she decided she didn't want to be Catholic anymore because I think she was raised Catholic. I don't know the entire story behind it. I know kind of bits and pieces." These bits and pieces seemed to be an intermixing of culture and religion. Her mother was raised Catholic and while Amanda seemed confused about the implication of this on why she might not have been raised traditionally, she concluded with "I'm not sure. I don't know what our heritage is really. I don't know about it at all." This, despite the fact that her extended family was a large one that resided within Yellowknife and surrounding area and that many of them lived more traditionally than her family had. Amanda didn’t believe her mother was purposeful in
depriving her of a more traditional upbringing or in instilling her culture within her, but saw it as more happenstance. "Well she wasn’t really—like her mother had her when she was 14. So my mom was given to her grandparents and then my grandmother died—my great-grandmother—so my mom’s grandma—it’s really complicated." She continued with:

And she died when my mom was very young so it was really only her grandpa to raise her and I don’t think he was around that much ’cause he had a lot of children too. So she kind of grew up with her cousin.

Amanda ended this topic in logic, determining, “Well I mean when she had my brother, assuming she was with my dad before that too, she was 16 so it was before that so I don’t think she really had an opportunity.”

Amanda’s response to how she felt about being an Aboriginal person could best be summarized as a mercenary one. “It has its benefits,” she says. Asked to flesh this out, she says, “...there’s more sponsorship for school... I automatically got a $500 scholarship from Diavik when I graduated. Then plus all the money we get from the mines and stuff—just lots of free stuff.” She was alluding to the impact benefits agreements that First Nations have struck with the various diamond mines that had or were establishing themselves in the North. She also recognized that there was an affirmative action policy within the North, “More opportunity. Priority one.” By this she meant, preferential hiring is in place for Aboriginal peoples and they were given priority in the hiring process. She saw a shadow hanging over this, however, as she declared, “Yes. But I think people are racist.” Asked what she meant by this, she clarified:

...well like I see the way my friends—even my boyfriend say—’It’s not fair that Indians they get all this just because they are Native and they come to work and they don’t do anything and blah, blah, blah’—you know, people just don’t think it’s fair that we have all this stuff. It’s like always a big argument.

Queried on how she felt about this, her tack shifted as she said, “It is kind of frustrating. I don’t know why—I mean, yeah, some people do take advantage of it but not everybody. I think some people just ruin it for us.” Amanda knew that these benefits were a right, but at the same time felt that a minority of Aboriginal people abused the “system” and ruined
it for the majority who accessed their benefits responsibly. Amanda vacillated on this issue, and that equivocation was captured in her final comment on this topic:

\[
\text{I use it a lot. Like I don't take advantage of it—well I guess I kind of do—I don't take everything—milk the government just 'cause I'm Native. I use my benefits...Like my free prescriptions and stuff like that. I don't go overboard with it.}
\]

There was almost an apologetic tone to her comments.

Questioned on what role Aboriginal culture might have played in her schooling experience, Amanda was blunt. "It didn't really play a role." She also couldn't recall any events or activities within the school that reinforced the Aboriginal perspective or worldview. She did acknowledge that both a Wildlife course and a Grade 10 Northern Studies course had an Aboriginal perspective in them, but since they were offered in her Grade 10 year when she was out of Territory, she had been exempted from taking them. "So, I didn't really experience that stuff."

On the topic of racism, something that she had addressed to some degree previously, Amanda defined it as, "When one group of people is judgmental, I guess, towards another race." She claimed not to have experienced racism personally, but had seen it expressed with other Aboriginal people. Earlier in the interviews she had made this comment on why she felt she hadn't experienced racism. "Well people don't usually look down on me. I don't know why, maybe I don't have the accent. You can tell when somebody was raised in communities." Here, she alluded to the fact that communities tended to be more homogeneous and traditional and therefore there was a stronger likelihood that they would use their Aboriginal language and thus have an accent when speaking the English language. We have seen that Amanda was not taught her Aboriginal language and that she had predominantly been raised in English speaking towns or cities. She went on to say that discrimination against more traditional First Nations people was illustrated in other ways. "Yes. You know, the way they dress, the way they tip. You know, when people sit down—'Oh, well I'm not going to give them good service because they're Indian and I know they're not going to tip me.'" Amanda believed because she was raised in a "white" way and in a "white environment," she had been spared this kind of treatment. She felt blessed about this and was quite
comfortable with it. Coming from a mixed heritage, Aboriginal and white, she was comfortable in what she saw as advantages from both worlds. “Because I’ve got the nice, clear complexion. We’ve got good skin. We don’t bald as fast and as much.” This, in addition to blending in with the white world was the best both worlds have to offer.

Pursuing the racism theme further, Amanda, saw little racism within her last high school, admitting, however, that she didn’t see everything and that there likely was some. She saw the source of racism as a self-feeding kind of phenomenon, where “We all feed off of each other’s opinions I guess. So if enough people are saying that...there is something wrong with this race then there is going to be other people that follow.” She didn’t imagine that this kind of behaviour could be changed and if people chose to behave this way, “I’d probably just tell them not to talk to me about it. If they wanted to be racist then don’t—involves me.”

**Personal Motivation**

In addressing what personal factors contributed to her achieving high school graduation and success, Amanda felt that guilt played a part. “I started feeling guilty when I didn’t finish my homework and it just felt really good to do it so I kept doing it.” She also described it being rewarding, because “it made my parents really proud.” She did add, however, that it was her parents who provided some outside motivation. “My parents would like buy me things and they were easier on me when I did that. So it was kind of like—I guess it was kind of a bribe—you know.” As we have seen before, “money” talks for Amanda and that seemed to run through some of her answers in the interview.

On what school factors contributed to her success, Amanda began with the structured and regimented approach used at her boarding school in Grade 10, where:

*They made me succeed. They helped me in—when I was in my boarding school it was a lot more strict with assignments and stuff and when I didn’t finish my homework the teachers would make us stay after school until it was done.*
In her mind, she was taught some of the discipline required to succeed and some of the work and study habits necessary. This had some carry over into her last two years in her Yellowknife high school where she commended her teachers. “My teachers they just cared more. And if like I really needed help, they noticed and they talked to me about it. We had the little gold coins—it was exciting getting a gold coin!” The gold coins were part of a recognition program the school ran, where gold coins could be converted into prizes. This proved memorable and significant for Amanda.

In five years from now, Amanda offered the following as some of her goals.

I hope to have a career finally that I really enjoy and that’s on the go. And I hope to own a house—maybe. And, maybe getting married soon, maybe not. Kind of seeing how this goes with my boyfriend now.

She doesn’t see herself in the Northwest Territories, preferring Alberta or B.C as possible locations to live. She expresses that she wants “to travel around and see how that goes.”

School/Institutional Experiences

Contextuality

Amanda was asked how good her grades were coming out of high school and her response, to some degree, seemed to parallel the pattern of her high school efforts and attendance.

Grade 9 was bad. I think I pretty much failed everything. Grade 10 I passed most of my courses but I really struggled with math. I always struggled with math. Grade 11 was about half and half. Failed some, passed some. Grade 12 I had to redo Grade 11 classes and I passed everything with like good grades.

Pressed on whether she would have changed anything, she regretted not taking more advanced courses and taking what she now saw as the easy way out.

I think I probably would have not taken the easy classes in high school. I would have taken the more challenging one. I’d take English-2 rather than
English-1 and I think that raised my chances of going into a post-secondary school.

She actually had the numbers reversed as English-1 is the university preparation English, but the essence of her meaning was that she had limited her post-secondary chances in her earlier choices. However, she did credit herself with doing her best work in Grade 12 where she really tried hard.

Amanda did not believe that high school helped her in any way with what she was doing at the time of this writing. Her duties with the hospital foundation she was working for included “Planning fundraising events, tax receipts, various administrative duties, answering the phone, taking messages, running around…” She bluntly assessed, “I don’t think I learned any of those skills at school.” She had learned on the job and not relied on school-based learning or skills.

When asked what her biggest challenges were while growing up, Amanda reflectively offered, "I think my mom was hard on me when I was growing up. That’s what made me rebel more. So she was kind of a challenge sometimes." She connected this with her mother’s general unhappiness. “She was just angry a lot and took it out on me and my brother growing up.” But now, she saw her mother differently, happier because “She found a new guy who treated her right and it made her this whole new person.” Intriguingly, Amanda believed she had the better relationship with her mother, whereas in high school she felt it was with her father, because she was “Daddy’s girl” and he was easier on her. However, a reversal of roles seemed to have taken place as he “lectures me a lot….” Pressed on what, she responded,

For school. I owe him money so he’s lecturing to get a job all the time. I know I need a job I don’t need someone telling me all the time. It just makes me angry. So, yeah, it is mostly school that he gets mad at me about. That I have to do something with my life and I have to decide and do it right now, do it this second.

While Amanda believed he was coming from a good place and was concerned for her welfare, she pragmatically finished that she would “go to school when I know what I want to do.”
Amanda had very limited memories of her time in elementary school, vaguely recalling one mean teacher that she didn’t like. By contrast, and predictably, she remembered high school more vividly as an uncomfortable time to begin with.

I hated school to begin with in high school. It was harder. I always had different teachers instead of having the same one like I always did for all my classes. I didn’t go to school with a lot of the same people or even really go to school at all to begin with.

Obviously, the format of schooling changed with the advent of high school as it shifted from a homeroom design to a rotary timetable. We have already seen that her high school career was not typical as she experienced three different schools over the Grade 9 to 12 span, the last two of her years at École Akaitcho High School. She described those years in this way, “My last couple years of school I sort of liked more probably because I was doing better and I understood the work and I wasn’t as shy, I guess. So when I needed help I asked for it.” She added that she remembered the classes being smaller and that “the teachers seemed to care a lot more” than at the other local high school she attended. Overall, she did not like school and asked why, she said, “The work. You know, having homework everyday after school and just kind of not being paid for it because now I’m being paid for everything that I do.” She reinforced that, “It was just hard. It’s challenging. I don’t like big challenges.” Asked why she stayed to graduate then, she again showed her pragmatism in stating, “Because I was almost done. I may as well finish it.” Additionally, for Amanda, she recognized that her employment opportunities would be limited if she didn’t complete Grade 12.

I think I realized that there wasn’t going to be a lot of opportunities for me if I didn’t graduate because there are a lot of people who—even if it is the most simple job, they are not going to hire you because you don’t have your Grade 12.

“Tell me about a really great school experience or experiences that you’ve had.” When this question was posed to Amanda, she suggested that the Grade 12 religion retreat was special for her. She didn’t remember it with great clarity, but what did stand out for her was “a lot of talking,” “sharing,” and group activities. She added that similar things happened on the graduation retreat, another event of some importance to her,
where she got to know some of her "grad mates." Asked about a bad experience in high school, Amanda was quick to the point. "Exams were the worst time. I'm not a very good studier so I was very worried." She found this a very stressful time. Asked what other particular challenges she experienced while in high school, Amanda zeroed in on "People wanting to skip and wanted me to go with them." She also cited trying to reconcile her schedule. "I guess trying to juggle two jobs and going to school and doing homework—fitting everything into my schedule was challenging." Amanda was employed part-time while attending school, and remembered being "busy every day of the week."

Ontological Security

What Amanda liked about school was not having the same level of responsibility as she endured at the time of the interview. She had obviously found independent living an experience that did not come easily. She had a workplace comparison to describe the difference. "And it wasn't like I was going to get fired if I didn't show up once." She also enjoyed her friends while at school. What she disliked was the homework, which she found boring. She also made a distinction between some of her courses as she said, "Well like there are some classes—the fun ones like cosmetology or art or something—those ones I looked forward to. But math and science—those ones I really dreaded going to." She preferred the hands-on classes to the more theoretically based ones. In Amanda's mind, what made for a good school was "teachers that care," and that it was a place where "students respect one another."

Amanda felt very comfortable in her high school and thought it a good place to be. "I don't think I would have wanted to be at a different school." She had already commented upon the fact that teachers were key in helping her be successful in her high school experience. Asked if she had any influence on what happened in her high school, Amanda believed she did through an active student council. However, she qualified that she "didn't really get involved in that kind of stuff."

"Well there is rules that every school has—no swearing, no skirts above your knees, no spaghetti straps, respect each other, be in class on time..." is the response that Amanda gave on what kind of rules there were in her high school. She saw them as
fair, sensible and respectful for everybody. The only rule she balked at was the one where students had to ask permission to go to the washroom. For her, this was embarrassing. "Maybe having to ask to go to the bathroom. I guess it was kind of a safety thing but I don’t like to announce to the whole class that I have to use the bathroom." In addressing structures or protocols within her high school, Amanda had little to offer in the way of improvements or changes that she would have made. She liked how things were run and generally thought that anything that might not have been good was insignificant detail.

Belonging

Amanda felt she belonged in her high school, but was uncertain about whether she was valued. She said that she was “pretty quiet,” and kept to herself for the most part. She had a small group of friends and generally she felt like she fit in. "There wasn’t anybody that was really mean and it wasn’t a cliquey school." She described her school as pretty ideal and could only suggest that, perhaps, starting school later could have improved it. She was pinpointing that there is research that suggests that for young teens in particular that having a later start and going later in the day is actually more ideal because it accommodates their learning time/style better.

First Nation Perspective

In responding to the question about what causes Aboriginal students to leave school before graduating, Amanda offered, “Maybe their parents in some cases. In other cases their friends. Their parents may not even care that they did.” She knew that support from the home is important. When asked, given her high school experience, what she would want to see changed, she could think of very little. She did suggest, however, “Maybe closer contact with me. So that I know and I can do something and make sure that they don’t go out when I know that they have homework or whatever.” Not surprisingly, Amanda couldn’t suggest much about how better to accommodate Aboriginal students, reaffirming, really, that you are what you have experienced. In fact, when asked finally how schools might be made to better reflect and accommodate Aboriginal students, she flatly opined, “I don’t think that they should be honoured more
than other students.” She saw this from an equity perspective, perhaps taking on one of the two sides of her identity that she had shown throughout the interviews.

Well I mean like, you know, that would be really stupid if people held this one student more just because they are Native—whatever. You know, like we get all these prizes or they take all the Aboriginal students out on this big trip because they did so well or something. It’s just not fair. There’s white people that come from bad homes too.

She believed that showing any accommodation could set up a bad precedent for Aboriginal students. “I mean I think that other people might be—other students would be very upset if Aboriginal students were treated better or had more or whatever.”

Perceptions of the Structural Properties of the Institution

Teaching/Learning

Amanda’s favourite teacher was a Biology teacher who “did everything she could to make me pass.” She was there for her everyday after school, confirming her conviction that the best teachers are “the ones that care.” She believed this teacher exhibited a special understanding of her circumstances and gave her the benefit of a doubt.

She gave me my individual attention and if—like she would make little exceptions for me ‘cause she knew that I was trying my hardest. So that she would make sure that I would pass even though—’cause it was too late. It was my last semester. I couldn’t drop-out and take science whatever instead of biology. So I think she understood that.

Amanda self-described herself as a visual learner. “I think I’m a visual learner. Like I can’t just write it down and understand it. I had to like—like you had to explain to me and we had to do exercises and experiments or whatever—for me. Or hands-on learner for me…” So seeing the learning and where possible experiencing the learning in a hands on fashion was important to Amanda. In combination, Amanda’s ideal teacher was friendly, had a sense of humour, gave her extra time, and most importantly, “They called my parents when I was doing well, not just when I was doing bad.” This played into her motivation for doing well as she admitted that making her parents proud “made me feel
good too.” Amanda returned to a motif seen earlier when asked what stopped her from doing well. Simply put, it was her friends. “Not like they put their arms up and said I’m not allowed to go into a classroom but it was like pressure. I always wanted to hangout with them.”

Amanda did not enjoy reading and named it as her worst way of learning. “I just can’t like sit there and I can’t read things carefully. It doesn’t make sense to me. I think I skipped like five words every line.” This is partially why she believed a teacher’s teaching style did make a difference. Again, for her, projects, fieldtrips, using her hands and her eyes, were important strategies or factors in her learning.

Culture

When asked if a teacher’s ethnicity made a difference in how they teach, Amanda didn’t believe so. She thought that teaching and learning styles were much more important. She had already registered her opinion on whether the school had made any effort to recognize Aboriginal culture in their programming or protocols. It was not something that Amanda necessarily paid attention to, nor felt was very important.

Curriculum

Amanda had already alluded to her favourite subject earlier, identifying cosmetology, a Career and Technology course, as the one she enjoyed the most—a combination of fun, practical career orientation and hands on learning. Biology and math were both named as her worst as she found them difficult and boring. Relevancy was important to Amanda. She could see no application for either of these courses.

Participant 5: Josephine

Josephine, a 20-year-old, hailed from Detah, one of two small Aboriginal communities located just outside of Yellowknife, NT. She came from a family of six, inclusive of her Aboriginal father, Caucasian mother, two brothers and one older sister. Josephine was employed at DeBeers Diamond Mine as an underground dispatch operator, having worked her way up from housekeeping and food services through an
ancillary company. She had been employed with DeBeers or its affiliate company for just over 16 months at the time of this writing. Additionally, she had three other part-time jobs, two in retail and one within the corporate office of Ekati Services. She claimed to be working all of the time, a fact that was enabled by her 2-week in and 2-week out rotation from the mine site. Josephine appeared to be a hard worker and an ambitious one. This seemed to be a quality that served her well in high school. She started with the 2004 cohort, and graduated with them. She scored a decent 61% average on her core courses while maintaining excellent attendance standing, especially in her first two years. There was some drop off in her attendance in her later years, something quite typical of many high school students. Josephine had an excellent disciplinary record with absolutely no blemishes.

Social Contextuality

Community

Josephine described the 400-member community of Detah as small and dominated by several key family clans, where "Everyone gets along. Everyone knows everyone." It was a close-knit community and everything that entailed, both the upside of relationship and the downside of this kind of intimacy. Her father, an original inhabitant of the community had lived there all of his life and her mother, a transplant, had been here for just over 30 years. Her father said that he would never leave his traditional lands and to date, that remained the case. Josephine, with age had realized the same passion and connection to the land that her father had. "I kind of want to move back there maybe some year down the road." Like all young people, she wished to explore her world, but she heard the call of the land. "Like I always say—people are like 'Are you going to move out of Yellowknife?' and I say 'Yeah, for a couple of years but I know I'll go back'."

Josephine has followed in her older brother and sister's footsteps in moving out of the family home immediately following high school. This was mostly precipitated by her consideration of her mother who had to drive her into Yellowknife, some 30 kilometres away, for her employment. She initially didn't want to be a burden to her mother and so she moved in with her older brother who already resided in Yellowknife, and then later changed to live with her elder sister for a 2-year period. She then moved
in with her brother again, who now owned a home, and he became her landlord. She admitted to trying to move back home once, but her mother held firm. "She said once I'm out, I'm out. So I was like 'Okay, understandable.'"

**Family**

Josephine had three siblings, one older, 29-year-old sister and one 27-year-old brother, and one younger brother who was 16. They were close, having lived through the sibling relationship dynamic that typifies most homes. Her father, of Aboriginal Dene descent, was a strong figure in Josephine's life, who, while lacking a formal secondary education, was still a commanding figure both in her life and within the community. He was well known at all levels of Aboriginal politics, having been involved as chief of the band council, in treaty negotiations, in self-government deliberation and negotiations, and in participant agreements for the diamond mines. He was a well-respected leader within his community and beyond. He was very connected to his traditional lifestyle and the land. Her mother grew up in Whitecourt, AB until about the age of 13, when she moved to Yellowknife. Josephine told the story of her parents meeting in a local fast food outlet over 30 years ago and recently celebrating their thirtieth wedding anniversary. "It was love at first sight."

Josephine came from a very large family on her father's side, but a small extended family on her mother's side. She exclaimed, in illustrating the size of her father's extended family, "On my dad's side there is a lot! Growing up I swear I was related to everyone. In some way we were related." She described herself as being close to a male cousin who was born on the same day as she was and who was a constant companion in activities throughout her early years. She was also close with her godparent's daughter because her godparents "were like a second mom and dad to me growing up," and so naturally there was a strong affinity between the children. She also had a best friend who grew up with her and, in fact, was the one that Josephine graduated with as described earlier. Her best friend attended the University of Victoria.

Josephine was a self-described "Daddy's girl," who loved the outdoors, played sports and was generally rough and tumble in her demeanour. She personified this relationship further when she said, "Even growing up he called me 'My boy' 'cause I
wasn't a girlie girl growing up. Like my mom tried to make me wear dresses but I said no. I like my jeans, my sweaters and ball caps." She didn't, however, have the patience for fishing and hunting, two activities her father enjoyed and she found boring or disliked because, "I never liked seeing animals killed." She did support many outdoor pursuits her father had to do, like cutting down wood and bringing it back to the family home.

Josephine was an outgoing, congenial person who believed that she got along with most people. When asked who was important to her during her high school years, Josephine instantly identified that:

*I really wanted to make my dad proud. Just because he doesn't have an education and I want him to say...'I don't have an education but my kids do' kind of thing. Like I just wanted to make my dad proud.*

In fact, Josephine was very aware of the family legacy as she named:

*...there's a lot of people in Detah that never even graduated or made it past Grade 11 or 10. I kind of feel like my dad is proud of that and proud of us 'cause like three out of the four right now have graduated...*

Three of her family graduated from high school and a fourth, her younger brother was on track to do the same. She knew this was quite an accomplishment and contrasted it with her school-based friends and cohort from her school in Detah.

*...when we graduated from Grade 8 from Detah, there was I think five of us that grew up and went to Grade 9 all together. And out of the five, two of us graduated at the...time we were supposed to. And like I kind of feel bad for that 'cause like half of the Aboriginal students that come to town or whatever or wherever...they don't all graduate at the same—like at the time they are supposed to.*

As if to illustrate her point, Josephine told the story of a younger cousin whom her family adopted at Josephine’s encouragement and insistence. Samantha (a pseudonym), as a young child, came from a tumultuous home and was not attending school. Josephine’s family made the decision to adopt her as a means of supporting her and providing the kind of home environment that would stabilize her life.
...I asked my mom one day she was over and I asked her to sleep over and my mom said ‘Yeah’ and then I was really talking to my mom and said that like Samantha doesn’t have a good family right now. Like her mom was an alcoholic and never had—like her boyfriend left her and her brother is living with like his mom’s sister kind of thing. Like her kids have been taken away from her. But, like, I didn’t like it ‘cause seeing Samantha she never showed up for school like every day. It was always like every second day or maybe just for two days out of the week. So we adopted her and she had to be behind in school ‘cause she wasn’t up to the educational level but she’s been with us now, still and she’s going to be turning 19 in April and she is graduating. She is a couple of years late but she is still graduating.

Josephine portrayed her family as a church going one, especially her father who attended Catholic Church every Sunday. She described him as “very Catholic.” His faith was inherited from his mother who Josephine said was equally faithful.

Like we used to go to her house all the time ‘cause she would always have candy for us or she would just like sit there and tell her stories. But she always had a Bible in her bedroom or on her bed when we went to go visit and she always talked about…the Lord a lot. It wasn’t…extended like ‘Oh, the Lord wants you to do this and this.’ It was just like funny stories that she would read from the Bible.

Organized Christian religion was at least a two-generation proposition in this family, and possibly, three, if Josephine and her siblings were to be counted, although she seemed less convinced of its merit.

Friends/Role Models

Josephine described her friends as a mix of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, broadening to include the latter once she hit Grade 9 and changed schools. She credited sports with being the catalyst for her widening circle of friends, as her athletic endeavours kept her both busy and exposed her to other friendships. “So in a way by Grade 11, me and the friends I grew up with in Detah kind of…drifted apart ‘cause I had to do things everyday where they didn’t.” She highlighted that there was a diversity of people and backgrounds on the teams that she played for and that she was exposed to different experiences as a result of her association with representative high-performance teams.
...we made a team and played together—we practiced twice a week and we had tournaments every other three months and we traveled a lot together. Like I’ve been everywhere except for BC and Newfoundland. We went to like Moncton, Ottawa, and Calgary—like everywhere—Regina, Saskatoon—everywhere. We even went to Hawaii for a volleyball tournament.

This exposure and these experiences broadened Josephine’s world-view and allowed for her to grow and develop, but meant, coincidentally, that she grew apart from her lifelong friends, who did not travel the same path. She did not want to be self-limiting.

Like some of the people in Detah like the farthest thing they’ve been to is Edmonton and I just don’t want to go there. I know there is a world out there so I want to go see it kind of thing. Whereas they just want to go to one place and that’s it.

Josephine’s primary role model was her eldest sister, who she saw as an independent woman, living on her own, making a living and who had supported her throughout her life. She also identified two local sports figures as important, one a female hockey star who eventually played for Cornell University and the other a female volleyball athlete who made a university level team. For Josephine, these two people represented a dream she had that as of this writing was unrealized. She wanted to be like the volleyball player who “was really good. She played on a university team and I wanted to do that. I wanted to go to school to play volleyball. But. that didn’t happen yet—not yet! It’s going to happen but just not yet.” Despite her successful employment, Josephine was mindful of a dream yet unachieved and there was regret in her appraisal of her present circumstances.

And also kind of like sad that how I always said I wanted to be a university volleyball player. I always said ’I’m going to go to school after high school.’ When that didn’t happen I said ‘Oh, next year, next year.’ And then next year became no and another next year and I’m kind of like—I know my dad doesn’t look down on me but I kind of feel like I didn’t go as far as he wanted me to.

She equated this with pursuing a professional career as compared to just “living...an office job for all my life,” and she desired a university “degree behind my back...”
Josephine was very aware and knowledgeable about her contextuality, even as it applied to her own success. She believed that as she moved from the Detah School in Grade 8 to the high school in Yellowknife in Grade 9 that she was educationally behind.

...‘cause coming from Detah I wasn’t at the educational level—like Grade 9 I swear I was like Grade 7 level and I was really scared in Grade 9. But in Grade 11 I knew I had to start asking for help. Like I had never asked for help in class—Grade 9/10. Never. But then in Grade 11 I was taking a tutor class...

One of her close friends, the one of two she earlier identified as part of her Detah cohort that graduated on time, was Josephine’s reason for graduating.

That's what made me kind of like want to like get out ‘cause she was a little bit smarter than me so I kind of like wanted to be like if she can do it, I can do it too but I just need that extra help.

They graduated together. In turn, they badgered others of their peer group to get to school.

‘Why didn’t you go to school today?’—you know—‘Why not?’ ‘It’s only six hours out of your day to like go do something instead of stay home and sleep.’ We’d always push them and then finally they did graduate.

Here we see friends picking up friends, perhaps, in the absence of other influences in their lives. In this way, the majority of Josephine’s peer group did graduate from high school, although not always on “schedule”.

Parental Role

When describing the role her parents played in supporting her education and life, Josephine credited her mother as the disciplinarian and the individual who ensured that she did her homework and followed through on her school obligations. She was the driving force behind Josephine and her siblings completing school.

I had my parents pushing me going to school everyday. So even if I wanted to dropout, my parents wouldn’t let me. They’d force me—they would probably drive me to school everyday kind of thing and like my
mom would probably even sit in class with me and made sure like I went to school.

Her father, although strongly supportive, was more limited in his active assistance because of his limited exposure to a formal education. He felt comfortable with story telling, but far less secure with science or math questions. She also credited her older brother for taking an interest in her during high school and saw the nature of their relationship shift from a bickering and juvenile one to a more mature and supportive one. Her elder sister continued as well to influence her. Josephine’s family had been a constant presence in her school journey and she appreciated that they had made a difference for her.

Identity

Self-concept

Generally, Josephine felt quite good about herself as she was employed, making good money and could do her “own thing when I want.” We have already seen, however, that she had some remorse about not completing or even beginning university. It seemed to be somewhat of a preoccupation and it had left her a little unsettled. It may be the “next” thing in her life and she seemed to be on the cusp of making that decision. It had hit her that “I should really do something.” Her eldest brother continued to provoke and prod her into considering more schooling.

Culture and Tradition

Josephine was also asked what languages she spoke and where she spoke them? She stated that her Dad was Dogrib, but that she couldn’t speak her Aboriginal language. “I know some words but half the time I don’t even know what it means ‘cause I hear people say it. Like masi cho...everyone knows what that is so I know what it is.” This was an acknowledgement of thanks in her language. Yet her Dad spoke Dogrib to all the Dene people he knew. She did take some lessons in school, but said it was limited because “it was mostly on...numbers or months. It wasn’t like speaking sentences or anything.” Her father didn’t teach his language to his children and Josephine believed he now regretted this.
I think now though he is realizing that like slowly the cultures are going away—just a lot of technologies nowadays. Like no one takes a dog team anymore except for when they are racing basically 'cause everyone has boats now or ski-doos and when my nephews come around, he speaks Dogrib to them trying to like make them understand...When Tyrone [pseudonym] is at my parents' house my dad will ask 'Pass the salt' and he'll say it in Dogrib and Tyrone knows. And that way I am kind of jealous of that 'cause he never taught us. But, I think, all the Elders are starting to realize that like obviously their culture is going really slowly. They want to bring that back.

Belatedly, there was recognition that language and culture must be taught in the home, and that, in essence, at least one generation had been skipped. Josephine sorrowfully admitted that she was “more of a city girl” and that she was not really into her culture. She would attend drum dances but would hesitate to go to big cultural events like “conferences” or annual meetings. While she felt badly about this, she did not really see changing her approach to life.

Questioned on how she felt about being an Aboriginal person, Josephine had a mixed response. Her words captured this ambivalence best.

I have my moments when I feel like I don't want to be an Aboriginal. I'm not like completely, but just when I go around town and I see like half the bums are Aboriginal—like more than half—and...if I didn't finish school that's what I always pictured is that...what I'm going to look like or be like—I grew up with [names a friend] and she didn't graduate because she had a kid when she was in Grade 11 kind of thing. So that is what I always thought about. And just seeing stuff like that like the bums outside just makes me feel like, you know, that's how—is that what other people think of us kind of thing—you know? Like do they see the other Aboriginals that have done something like Lela Gilday and stuff like that?...I just have those kind of mixed emotions sometimes.

She was ashamed about how she believed some people perceived Aboriginal people. She questioned whether perceptions got made based on the street picture she had depicted or more on the successful Aboriginal people who had achieved something in their lives. This question had obviously played heavily on her mind. This came from a young Aboriginal woman who had seen successful role models, even from within her own family. She wondered if it wasn't a self-fulfilling prophecy as young Aboriginal people might not be able to see healthy role models for what they were.
I just don't think that half the people that didn't graduate...like they don't look up to that. They just see like—same as their parents—or stay-at-home parents—like they see that is how they are going to end up. They don't want to or have or want the time to look elsewhere. Like if they are in it right now, they will stay there.

There was a sense of despair in this response and the overwhelming implication of some of the lived realities of Aboriginal people struck home through her words. Her fear was that Aboriginal people couldn't escape the iron cage stereotypes that were often portrayed by others. She reiterated the unfairness of this in commenting, “And what’s really unfortunate, I think, is that often times there is a stereotype around...which is not fair because we could say the same thing for a lot of non-Aboriginal people.”

Josephine was proud of being Aboriginal, despite these comments, as she reflected with pride on:

*just growing up and seeing my grandma sew and stuff like that. And then—I don’t know—just how they live on the land kind of thing. It amazes me because I can’t cook and they can do like anything—make like a fire with two sticks and I’m like ‘Uh, does anyone have a lighter?’*

She foresaw a time when she would try to learn more about her language and her cultural traditions.

*Yeah, eventually I want to start ‘cause I think there is—well there has always been talk...how they are going to start a Dogrib language thing. So if they do start a class, I wouldn’t mind taking it...just so I can understand...Elders and stuff like that.*

From a cultural perspective, Josephine said that the Elders within her community valued an education and encouraged the young people to graduate. They desired for their young what they had not been able to achieve. It was something that they wanted and they pushed the young to achieve it. Asked to think about what role culture might have played in her schooling experience, Josephine spoke about her Social Studies classes and her Northern Studies course being about the only source of Aboriginal cultural perspective that she experienced in her high school. The content of the two did address some aspects of history through an Aboriginal perspective.
In contemplating the issue of racism, Josephine saw it as, "How they just judged a book by a cover and not really looking inside." She believed a great deal of the misunderstanding around race relations could be attributed to this kind of attitude and the unwillingness of people to take the time to get to know one another. She made the analogy about cliques as well. Asked whether she had ever experienced racism as an Aboriginal person, she described some rather hurtful comments that seemed to be typically thrown at Aboriginal people.

...when people say—if people say like 'Oh, did you ever have braces?' 'cause my teeth are straight. And right away they will be like 'Oh yeah, she did and didn't even have to pay for them 'cause that's how they are 'cause they get everything for free.' Like that kind of makes me feel sad. Like, I don't know, 'cause...when people say stuff like that like how they say 'Oh, we're taking all of their money—all the hard-working money' and stuff like that. That makes me feel uncomfortable kind of when they say that.

This form of generalization and stereotyping was something that Josephine had experienced. She was unclear about whether that was within her high school, or more generally within her community. She was clear that she didn't believe racism was prevalent in her high school, rating it very low on this kind of behaviour. If she experienced racism within the school, her reaction was "not to dwell on it" or to give it any credence. She was not going to allow others to define her. "I was going to be my own person and whatever they said I kind of made it go in one ear and out the other."

Personal Motivation

When asked why she stayed to graduate from her high school, Josephine concretely named that she had to have her graduation photo on the wall at home beside her brother's and sister's. She underscored that, "'Okay, I've got to have my picture there too' and so, yeah, back again it's mainly 'cause of my dad I wanted to graduate for him." She believed that the personal factors contributing to her success in school included her own motivation to achieve graduation, her fear of turning out like some of the Aboriginal people she knew who hadn't graduated, and lastly, a developing work ethic that saw its fruition in Grade 11 and 12. She reiterated that her parents continuously shuttled her to town to take part in school-based activities, either during
school hours or even after school hours. She knew that the school contributed to her success as well, identifying teacher willingness to help her, regardless of the time involved.

Well the teachers offered to help other than during school hours. Like they were there say if I had volleyball practice at…4 to 4:30 to 6 [pm], they'd say ‘Oh, you can come at 6 [pm] right after volleyball and stay ‘til like 8 [pm.] ‘cause that's how long they sometimes stayed. So we were allowed to go there after practice sometimes and go hangout with them or like get some extra tutorials or ask questions on like the science or math or whatever. Like they were there not only during school hours but different hours—even on weekends.

Teachers weren’t just teachers for Josephine, as they showed her they cared and took an interest in her. She also shared that the school facilities like the library or computer laboratory were open until 5:00 or 6:00 p.m. She again indicated that the extra-curricular and sports programs were instrumental in her development and in her eventual relationships with her peers.

I say that if I didn’t play sports, I wouldn’t have known as much of the students there…. ‘Cause everyone at St. Akaitcho was like a big sports fanatic. And like if I didn’t play, I don’t think I would have made as much friends as I did.

In five years time, Josephine, picking up on earlier comments, desired to have a university degree, a good job and to be in a position where she is not “wishing that I want to do something else.” She saw herself having her own place to live and still being close to home. She valued coming home and regrouping with family.

**School/Institutional Experiences**

**Contextuality**

Josephine had a pronounced inferiority complex when she moved from her Detah School to her high school. She felt like she was academically behind, a combined result of not having “up-to-date teachers” and her own poor self-confidence, where
especially in her first two years her attitude and mental state were reflected in the following.

*Like Grade 9 I was basically scared the whole year 'cause I was like 'I hope the teacher doesn't ask me for the answer 'cause I might not know it.' And then after a while—if I said an answer and it was wrong, I'd be like 'Oh, why? —Could you tell me the answer please?'—like, ask.*

She felt that while the school was welcoming, she didn’t personally have the confidence to express herself and was more than hesitant to ask questions.

*Yeah. I was too embarrassed...if I asked for help on...a really easy question and...I'd be afraid...the students would be like 'Oh, how can she ask that question, it is so easy.' I didn't want to be scared so I just kept to myself.*

Essentially, Josephine got in the way of herself for fear of embarrassment and compounded this by pretending that she understood concepts. “So I just...started to pretend that I got it but I really didn’t. I was really scared.”

Josephine’s earliest memory of school within her community of Detah is associated with the outdoors when she recalled, “during the fall time, the whole school would go out into like the big hill behind the lake and go for a nature walk. Like we always did that in the fall. And we’d go out and pick berries...” She also remembered playing on boy’s sports teams because there were so few girls and so they couldn’t have their own teams. The upside of this was that they became quite skilled and competitive as athletes in both soccer and volleyball.

*I don’t want to say we were pretty good but we were like decent, we had like a hard kick—so like when we go kick like you could hear people saying ‘Holy, like they’re chicks and they are playing on a boys’ soccer team.’ Or the same with volleyball I’d like serve the ball and if I get an ace, they’d be like ‘Oh, that was just from a girl.’*

Josephine’s first memory of high school happened even before she arrived at the physical plant, as she had to get up early to catch the bus into Yellowknife and for her this was a rude and discordant start to her day.
You had to get up an extra hour early to get ready for the bus... If you weren't there at the dot, the bus was gone, it didn't care, if you were running behind it—No, it was gone... I hated that.

She also remembered a great deal of trepidation about Grade 9 and the high school, accentuated by her father who had told stories to her about how strict they were and how different the high school was from what she had experienced to date. She admitted that within a couple of months she knew that her father's version of things was exaggerated and she became more comfortable. She especially acknowledged that several of the staff made a difference for her and assisted her in overcoming her initial fears. She singled out an English teacher that she had throughout her four years, who had accommodated her learning style, a resource teacher who she established a trusting relationship with and a school counsellor who established a warm and caring relationship with her. Overall, she characterized the staff of the school as friendly and caring, more human than she thought they were going to be.

Josephine believed her high school played a significant role in where she was presently in her life. This, despite a slow start as she has described it. In fact, she saw herself as a role model for younger students who lived in Detah and connected this with one of her favourite memories of high school. In Grade 12, she won a Northern Lights Award, the school's highest recognition of achievement, a blending of academic accomplishment, community contribution, character and general active school citizenship. She expressed that she was shocked in winning but overcome with happiness as she was recognized for being a role model for the school. Josephine's worst moment in high school was related to a soccer practice when she broke her teeth on top of the head of another student; the other student bled profusely while she almost passed out with pain. Eventually they found her broken tooth impaled in the other student's forehead. Josephine couldn't get into a dentist for a few days and so had to attend school with a very broken smile. However, her greatest challenge in high school was in overcoming her academic deficits and admitting to herself that she wasn't doing well. Overcoming this meant having to risk embarrassment and to reach out to teachers for help. "It took a lot of guts for me. That's how I felt. Like just even talking to a teacher
after class. I was so nervous..." Josephine was extremely self-conscious and struggled with getting support because of her inability to overcome her insecurities.

**Ontological Security**

We have established that Josephine had some discomfort and insecurity around attending her high school, especially in the initial stages. However, she generally assessed that she was quite comfortable at her high school, especially since she had friends from her previous school who were part of her cohort coming into the high school. Teachers and staff made an effort to make her comfortable by reaching out to her and to some of her fellow Aboriginal students. She cited one teacher as an example, a Program Support Teacher who “...was more involved in helping like—I’m going to say like slower—like Aboriginal—like I always saw her helping one of the Aboriginal students or...helping them out or talking with them. She was a big factor.” Josephine also praised the school for being culturally inclusive and felt this went a long way in making students feel comfortable in their environment.

...it was nice to see that they are bringing like different cultures into school. Like showing them different cultures. That was interesting. Like with the Inuit and like sometimes the Chinese and stuff like that. Just ‘cause in school there was a mix of cultures going to school. Not only white people or Aboriginal. There was like a mix of everything. So that was good to see that they brought not only one or two cultures in but different ones.

Josephine said that it was her own personal agency, or lack thereof, that prevented her from having more say in or control of her high school experience.

...‘cause I wasn’t the one to go talk in public or something. Like I was always shy so I was the listener one, the follower. Like as much as I would have liked to—during...meetings or something like—attend like the school meetings that the students...had or like have suggestions about...what should happen in the school or stuff like that...I wouldn’t really say much ‘cause I was like the shy one that didn’t like to talk in public.

It was apparent in talking about this that Josephine believed that there were opportunities to give input to the school and to take initiative and she was often awed by
what other students were doing. One example she offered was a student led, in-house television program put on every morning to start the school day.

...like the kids who can go—like how they had...15 minutes on the TV every morning...where they had like some TV show and like I always looked up to those students 'cause like 'Wow! They can go on TV and like'—I don't know, I'd be like no way, I'd hide behind the camera.

It was suggested that different students have different strengths and aptitudes and that Josephine shouldn’t feel that she didn’t contribute in other ways. She retrospectively acknowledged this in stating, “…obviously I made like some sort of mark in school because if not I wouldn’t have got[ten] the Northern Lights Award. So, in some way, I did help and do stuff.” Her way was to lead by example and she felt that she had really done so for her community and the Aboriginal students who have followed her.

Josephine’s perspective on the rules within her high school was that they were balanced and reasonable. The philosophy she described as underpinning the school’s approach was essentially one of natural consequences.

Like they weren’t…overly strict or anything. Like if you didn’t show up to class, it was your responsibility. Like for you to show up and get the work done...kind of thing. Like they were there to help you but if you weren’t there to put in the effort, I think it is kind of…your fault. You should be pushing yourself because…the teachers are there to help you. Like they are there to stay after hours and stuff like that. But also your job is to put in the effort—they can’t do everything for you...

Josephine felt that there was a fairness and equity in how the rules were applied and was hard pressed to remember any she would have changed.

On the matter of structural or operational issues, Josephine, like Ericka before her, talked about the shift in period length, moving from five 50-minute periods to four 80-minute periods, as a bad thing. However, as she experienced the longer periods more, she saw the benefit of them.

...at first I didn't like that but then it also gives you more time in bigger classes like math and stuff like that or socials or English. Like if you have time in class left, like if the teacher says, you know, 'Okay you have half
and hour to do your homework, study, ask questions. ... You had extra time to do stuff instead of ... rushing ...

Overall, Josephine couldn’t name any organizational or structural issue that she would have changed. She found her school a fun experience and emphatically stated, “I’d totally relive high school.” Asked if there was anything she would have done differently, she predictably responded:

I’d ask questions more, I’d be more confident in myself. If I didn’t know something I’d have to go get help instead of ‘I’ll wait, maybe next time’ kind of thing. But, no, I would get more help at the ... beginning instead of waiting very long.

Belonging

On the issue of whether Josephine felt like she belonged within her high school, she was quick to reinforce that she did, despite her own personal discomfort already reviewed. “I didn’t feel out of place or anything.” When she was asked to describe her ideal school, she highlighted that it must be like a “second home” because students spend so much of their time there. She also accentuated that it should “feel warming when you ... go to school everyday,” and this meant welcoming and inclusive. She also featured that the ideal school should take advantage of modern technologies as, in combination, they have made life easier, unlike when her father was growing up. Josephine enjoyed the conveniences and had been influenced strongly by the modern world.

First Nation Perspective

Josephine believed that Aboriginal students dropped out of school because they were behind academically, like she had been, and that there was a real reluctance to seek help.

The same thing I had a fear — was because they knew that they didn’t have — they weren’t up to par like educational level. Like I think they were just afraid to like ask questions as I was but they were like more afraid of asking for help.
She knew that she had to overcome this fear and believed that it really holds some Aboriginal students back. Ultimately, she described it as a situation where these young people do not fit in, not because of race, but more because of academic level. "Yeah, not feeling like they fit in...because they're not at the level that they should be at their age or at their grade-level kind of thing." Challenged that she was in the same situation and managed to overcome this issue, Josephine took credit for making herself do it, for reaching out and getting help.

Josephine added that she thought that other influences kept Aboriginal students from finishing high school as well, unlike when she was going through school.

*They just—alcohol abuse. Like they learn about that stuff and drugs. Like I remember growing up we never like touched alcohol, we never touched a cigarette or anything. We were always out playing baseball or hopscotch or whatever...and if I go...there now, everyone will be standing around and not doing anything. That kind of makes me feel like why has it changed? It is all because of everything these days coming in—everything that is new like more drugs and alcohol and I think that is a big factor too.*

She believed that the influx of prosperity brought by diamond mines and resource-based exploration had contributed to this as it was easy for Aboriginal students to get employment with mines that must meet quotas for hiring Aboriginal people under the impact benefit agreements they signed. Several people she knew didn't:

*have Grade 12 but they have this good job and to them they think like they don't need a high school diploma because they already have this good job. But like sooner...than later, it's not going to be like that. Like you are going to need a high school diploma for...every job.*

Prosperity could bring some social ills as well as a short-term complacency that may not serve Aboriginal people well in the long-run.

*Questioned about her overall impression of her high school from a First Nation's perspective, Josephine thought that she was accepted as an Aboriginal person.*

*Going to school, teachers made me feel as if I'm equal and so did—I'm not going to say all students—but like 98% of the students didn't judge
me or anything just because I was Aboriginal—they didn’t. So that was a big plus that they didn’t judge me because I was Aboriginal...Like I’m glad people I graduated with and throughout my four years were not that.

Asked how school might better accommodate Aboriginal students, Josephine believed that more is required of students rather than the school. It was up to the students to make the most of their opportunities, to put in more time and effort and to reach out for help when needed. Personal agency was a huge factor for Josephine. Even under difficult circumstances, it was up to the individual student to persevere. She offered this concluding example.

Well like I know like my friend...she graduated but right after graduation she had a daughter who is my goddaughter. But [she] knew—like all she got was high school—she knew she has to get—like she wants for herself and her kid to have a better education. Like just for herself. So she knows her kid is safe kind of. So she had to leave her kid here with her mom, like with family, ’cause family is always going to be there to help you out...She went to Edmonton for six months for schooling. Now she has a like a first welder thing under her belt. So, like, if they need help you know your family is always there willing to help you out...

When there’s a will, there is a way, and it is up to the individual to figure their way forward, regardless of how long it takes.

**Perceptions of the Structural Properties of the Institution**

**Teaching/Learning**

Josephine identified her favourite teacher as the English teacher who taught her through all four of her high school years, not so much because of the content area, but more because he encouraged her in self-advocacy and personal agency.

...he was the one that basically said, you know, ’If you don’t ask for help now, you may not get to graduate on time, if you don’t ask for help, if you don’t start now.’ He was the one that made me open my eyes and realize that I have to start doing stuff for myself. No one’s going to...read my mind and say like ‘Oh, she needs help, I’m going to go ask her.’ Like I was the one that had to go do it.
Extending from this, Josephine believed that a good teacher was someone who was supportive both personally and academically; someone who had an outgoing personality and could draw students in. And, although she said she didn’t see it in her high school, a bad teacher was someone who showed blatant favouritism to students and who was unable to maintain some professional objectivity. Obviously, to measure up as a teacher in Josephine’s judgment, was a very exacting proposition. She saw the ideal teacher as someone who was outgoing and funny, balanced off by a more serious and caring side. She described the “push/pull” relationship that defined the balance required to connect in the following.

...if you want to sit in a corner by yourself and not be noticed—like I'm sure they will come up to you and be like ‘Hey, do you want help?’ but if you push away, they’ll want to get in to help you more ’cause they will know that you are struggling...

Teachers needed to be able to “read” their students and use their judgment about when to intercede and reach out. She conceded that teaching is not an easy job.

Josephine was asked in what ways she learned best. For her, a form of personal coaching and repeated examples worked very well. She also appreciated group work and interaction, learning from her peers. Her best teaching style was one-to-one interaction with the teacher, however. Relationship and connection were paramount in her learning environment.

**Culture**

Pursued further on teaching preferences, Josephine was asked whether she thought that a teacher’s culture, race or ethnicity made a difference in how they taught? She didn’t believe so, and felt paradoxically that learning from teachers of different cultural backgrounds was of value and more interesting. Told that some research suggests that Aboriginal students learn better from Aboriginal teachers, Josephine indicated that this has not been her experience. “But it didn’t work that way for me I don’t think.” Her explanation was interesting as she proclaimed because her father had not promoted his culture with her at home, that reinforcing it at school would not have made
a difference for her. Without the background coming from the home front, she did not believe it could ever resonate with her at school.

Asked, beyond this, whether her high school had made an effort to recognize her culture, had sponsored activities and events that reflected her culture, Josephine came up with a couple of examples. She remembered P.E. classes teaching Dene games and then having them integrated into the Grade 9 retreat held annually at the school. She even remembered them being included in the concluding Grade 12 retreat, four years later. Asked how this made her feel, she responded with some pride:

\textit{It was good. And then later they'd ask like—then like after that they started to ask ...about how I grew up in Detah and ...was anyone in my family like...strict to the culture kind of thing—you know. It was interesting to see like they were also asking questions about our culture.}

Here we can see some intercultural dialogue.

**Curriculum**

Josephine's favourite subjects were Social Studies and Chemistry, "...even though I didn't do well..." in those classes. She recalled that both of these subject areas became increasingly difficult for her, but that she remained intrigued with the content of each. Her worst subject was math, a fact she attributes to having had a generalist teacher in her K-8 experience, who didn't know math well.

\textit{I remember in Grade 10 they put me in Math Pure and I was like ‘Whoa, what am I doing in this class, I do not belong here.’ So I had to go down— I didn't really mind 'cause I knew I wasn't at the Pure level.}

Math Pure was the university preparatory level math and Josephine was not comfortable in taking it. Again, her belief that she was behind played a role in her decision-making and, yet, there was a maturity in the process as she was prepared to accept this limitation and to pursue a level of math that was more pragmatic and useful for her.

When asked what might have been missing from her high school programming, Josephine, like others before her, bemoaned the fact that there was no Dogrib language instruction.
The only thing I wanted to see but I knew...it was going to be really hard was...I wanted to see like Dogrib class 'cause they have like French. Like I wish it was but at the same time I knew it was difficult. So like just to get someone to...come in everyday and like teach a whole class—like I knew that was difficult.

Josephine elaborated that finding a Dogrib language speaker who knew their language and could pass it on, was an extremely difficult state of affairs. Coming from her personal background and the context of her community, she was well aware of the language capacity limitations.

**Participant 6: Tom**

Tom’s parents gave birth to him in Yellowknife just over 21 years ago. He self-described as Métis. He actually resided in the community of N’dilo, on the outskirts of the city. At the time of the interviews, he was attending the University of Alberta as a third year Arts student. He graduated from high school in 2004 with a 64% average in his core courses. He rarely ever missed classes, a record that stretches out over his entire school career. With respect to discipline, Tom had no issues or problems with behaviour in high school. Tom was the eldest participant in the study.

**Social Contextuality**

**Community**

Tom lived in the community of N’dilo, adjacent to the urban centre of Yellowknife, NT, while he attended high school. This small Aboriginal community sat near the original “old town” of Yellowknife and was steeped in the early history of the larger City. Tom said that “for an Aboriginal person you’d feel comfortable,” but in the same breath claimed that most of the N’dilo community saw he and his cousin like white kids because of their Métis heritage and their rather borderline acceptance may have been symbolically represented in where they lived within the community—crested on the Yellowknife side of a large mount looking down upon N’dilo in the “valley”. Prodded for his feelings on how this made him feel, Tom said:
I guess I kind of felt hurt in a way because I was native but at the same time I didn’t really feel as native as they felt because I wasn’t really taught as traditionally as most of them were...Eventually we found a common ground and we fit in there. But, I don’t know, it always seemed like a lot of those children resented us in a way and they were jealous in a way.

Tom began his University career in residence for his first year, but had lived the past two years with his parents who moved to Edmonton while Tom’s father completed an MBA. Uniquely, both he and his father were attending university at the same time. Tom’s mother worked for the federal government and had been able to arrange for an assignment in Edmonton, while her husband completed his degree.

Family

Tom began with the following description of his family.

Well most of my family has had an education so, I guess, none of them are really bad role models in a way. So I could pretty much go to anybody for advice and they would all pretty much tell me that education was the way to go. Everyone was pretty supportive throughout my childhood and loving family...Both my parents went to university, so did my brother and most of my aunts and uncles did too.

As alluded to earlier, his father was taking an MBA, but already had a law degree. His mother also attended university and had a degree in Native Studies. He believed that they had a lot to do with his graduating and any school success he had.

...if I ever needed advice or help on maybe an assignment or something or help studying or studying methods, they would always tell me the way they did it. And if I ever had a question they would pretty much be able to answer it or tell me someone else that I could go to that would be able to answer it. And, I don’t know, they are always just really supportive of me going to school and trying hard and if I ever did fail they would just tell me to keep trying.

In general, Tom believed he had so many examples of success around him through his immediate and extended family, that graduating was never really a question, nor was whether he would go on to university.
Changing topics, Tom was asked about whether his family went to church or believed in a Creator or Great Spirit. He admitted that his family did not attend church regularly, but “usually just for midnight mass at Christmastime,” suggesting a Catholic Christian upbringing. Tom professed to more of an Aboriginal spirituality, stating:

Well I believe in Aboriginal medicine men and the fact that there are other ways of healing besides just western medicine. And I just started really believing in that since I came to university and took some native studies classes. But before that I wasn't really around any traditional knowledge besides my grandparents who died a while ago.

There was a sense of an awakening within Tom as a result of his post-secondary experience with Native Studies.

When I first took native studies I learned a lot of stuff that I'd say most Canadians don't know...I learned the real history of Canada in a way because it is stuff they don't teach in textbooks and it kind of just gives you the truth of what happened with residential schools and explained a lot of why Aboriginal people are how they are today. So, I don't know, it just made me mad that a lot of people misconceive Aboriginal people and the fact that they were all—a lot of people are uneducated in that area.

Here we see a young Aboriginal person becoming acquainted with his own heritage and an understanding of his people’s history as seen through more of an Aboriginal lens. Not only are a lot of people uneducated in this area, but also he, himself, had been.

Friends/Role Models

Tom saw himself as a fairly easy-going person who got along with people most of the time. He valued people who had some moral fiber and were positive, who could be trustworthy and show respect regardless of whether their beliefs were aligned with yours. Tom was asked who was important to him during his high school years and he almost resignedly stated that the friends he had in middle school, who should have naturally followed him into high school, ended up dropping out in Grade 10, and as a result he felt alone, with the exception of some Grade 9 students he had met in his first year. He acknowledged that he didn't make that big an effort to make friends and that it
was only when a group of new Grade 9 friends from his elementary school came to the high school in his Grade 10 year that he ended up hanging out with them. He then identified a big shift in Grade 11 when he acquired a girlfriend. Probed about whether his friends were predominantly Aboriginal or Caucasian, he mulled the question over and offered that while he had never thought about his friendships in this way, that, in fact, most were Aboriginal, but he had white friends as well. He attributed this to where he lived and natural group affinities that developed over the course of his early life. He also alluded to the fact that groups had already been formed within the feeder schools and this was carried over into the high school. Eventually he felt that by Grade 12 he had become friends with everybody, but not best friends like those he went to K-8 school with. Of these friends, all were Aboriginal, a fact that Tom saw as entirely coincidental, and ascribed to how things naturally evolved within his K-8 school where he had had longstanding relationships with them.

Asked who his role models were during his time at high school, Tom cited two individuals, one a cousin who was three years older than he and the other a peer and close friend of his cousin’s, both of whom were athletic and involved in many sports. He remembered his cousin being on the honour roll as well. What really impressed him was that they had a deep friendship and that they respected one another. Tom also saw his older brother and his father as important role models in his life, the former because he was in university while still supporting a wife and child and “just seemed like he had it together,” and the latter because he was a life-long model who taught him how to play sports and taught him much of what he knows today. When asked whom he trusted the most in his life, he expressed that it would be both of his parents, equally. It is evident that he had a strong relationship with them as he openly expressed his admiration for them.

**Identity**

**Self-concept**

Questioned on how he felt about himself, Tom was optimistically realistic, commenting that, “…I feel like I’m still young and I have a lot of options as to how to live the rest of my life. But I’m happy with the choices I’ve made so far.” He added, “I guess
there is always confusion as to what you are doing with your life but the fact that I'm learning more about my heritage—I'm happy with that—and whatever else is going to happen it will happen." Tom placed trust in his life unfolding as it needed to as long as he continued to make good choices and remained open to learning. Tom's only comment regarding any changes he might make in his life referred to a regret in not training more and trying to make the university soccer team. He had always been an athlete and sports had been a huge part of his life.

**Culture and Tradition**

Tom's response to the question on what languages he spoke was "...pretty much only speak English," but that he had begun taking Spanish in the past two years of university. He did say that he took the Dogrib language throughout Grade 1 to 8 and in his mind this was important, "...because it taught me that I was different than everybody else—the fact that I was native." He qualified this statement with, "Even though I'm not Dogrib, it's better than completely ignoring the fact that I'm Aboriginal." Tom felt strongly that there should be more recognition of Aboriginal language and culture in the schools, a sentiment explored more fully later on.

Tom was asked to elaborate on how he felt about being an Aboriginal person. His answer in direct quote was more powerful than anything this writer could describe.

*I guess you could say it is pretty tough sometimes because I know that a lot of people are racist in this country and it seems like you can't really talk about those kinds of issues around most people because they will get offended because they are not really educated about it. I don't know, it feels like I'm definitely a minority and sometimes I guess you could say it is kind of embarrassing when you see—I don't know—the fact that 90% of Aboriginal people are in poverty and a lot of stuff like that. I don't know, a lot of mixed feelings.*

Tom obviously had some ambivalent feelings about his ethnicity, seemingly torn between the poles of two worlds, where "uneducated" people made judgments and stereotyped Aboriginal people based on surface impressions. He went on to express, despite some misgivings about being Aboriginal, that:
I'm proud to be Aboriginal, the fact that I'm succeeding in life and beating the odds I guess. And I'm angry at the fact that the situation that the overall Aboriginal population is in and I'm sad that most Aboriginal people don't know their history...

He saw the plight of Aboriginal people as a complicated one and believed there's a role for all of us in Canada to be educated and to become aware, like he believed happened for him more recently. Part of the answer was supporting young Aboriginal students to stay in school. "I think parents try to—even if they haven't graduated from high school—they should try to persuade their kids to stay in school and set good examples for them."

Another part of the answer for Tom was to have young people like himself begin to play a role in encouraging and supporting younger Aboriginal youth in communities.

I think that they should probably just get more Aboriginal leaders like you consider us to work with kids like that—kids that are confused at a young age and they think that if there is no hope for them kind of thing. 'Cause I know that when those kids that I grew up with in N'dilo when they saw the fact that I went to university, a lot of them talked to me afterwards and said 'That's awesome, man' and then they kind of tried harder in high school and they said that they are starting to do more with their lives like go for—what's it called—go for the trades and stuff like that.

When speaking to the role that Aboriginal culture may have played in his life and his school, Tom expressed similar ambivalence as when he spoke on what it felt like to be an Aboriginal person, only this time there was a twist in his take on what he had experienced.

It didn't really have that much of an impact on it at all. The only impact that it would have had was other people being racist towards me because I pretty much considered myself white because I had grown up around white people where there are not very many Aboriginal...customs alive in overall society today. As a kid I wasn’t around that very much—as much as a lot of other kids I guess. So, yeah, I pretty much just felt equal to everyone else...at the same time I felt like an outsider because I know inside you feel a little bit different because you are native and you know that you are physically different because of your skin color but I don’t think it negatively had an impact on me.

Here, Tom alluded to a form of reverse racism from within his community, perhaps, at a student level, an example of what St. Denis referenced in her study as a...
"sell out" and how such individuals are treated as a result. Tom had felt the pressures from both sides of the cultural bridge and had indeed been walked upon from both sides. Ultimately, in assessing what role Aboriginal culture took in his life, Tom stated, "No, we didn't really practice that many traditional practices really. We are assimilated I guess." Encouraged to comment more deeply on this, he offered what forms assimilation had taken in Aboriginal lives.

...everything we do is technologized—we email, we watch TV, we go to the grocery store to buy all of our food and we go to school, we go to church like at Christmastime—that's probably one of the biggest things—church—even though we don't go all the time...the fact that we don't live a traditional lifestyle. We don't have to go out and hunt anymore.

He concluded that life was much more comfortable now, but wistfully referred to his grandfather's hunting and survival stories and "listening to his stories it just seemed like a more peaceful time...less politics and more understanding of the way of life." Again, Tom seemed torn between the traditional lifestyle and the urban, modern way of living.

Picking up the thread of Tom's earlier comments on racism, he was asked for his definition of racism. He retorted:

Where one race or culture...thinks that they are better than another one and they just kind of have negative ideas about it—a different race than theirs...It was created, I guess. What's the word? Socially constructed. And, yeah, I just think when one race is judged and seen as lesser by another.

Tom claimed to have experienced racism, with examples coming from his experience in his university and the City of Edmonton. What really bothered him was that he was not always sure that people's reactions were racially motivated, and it was this second-guessing about whether or not they were that became wearying.

Oh, I definitely do question it a lot because I watched a video in one of my native studies classes...it said that even though a lot of Canadians see themselves as not being racist, they are because they are just not educated on Aboriginal issues and stuff like that. So all they can do is go by what they hear and prejudices and stereotypes. So a lot of people—this lady, I guess, she is a racism expert and she said most of Canada is racist. So I guess that kind of made me realize that when I am wondering
if they are racist, that a lot of times they are. I’m not saying that everyone is or even that the majority of Canada is but I know that—I guess that kind of gives me justification in believing that a lot of times people are being racist.

Tom believed racism was evident, but not prevalent in his high school. In saying that, he didn’t experience it with his teachers, but more generally in the attitude of some students who stereotyped Aboriginal people when they were overheard commenting on them being alcoholic and hanging out around the Gold Range (a famous, local drinking establishment). He suggested that racism had a subversive quality about it, shown in the whispered conversations that he sometimes observed between people.

Asked how to change this kind of behaviour, Tom believed in education, a point he had made before. He saw people as pretty much the same, especially now that Aboriginal people don’t live the traditional lifestyle.

We have the exact same lifestyle as them even though we have different beliefs in like traditional values and spiritual values and healing methods. But, overall, we are pretty much the same and they should learn that people in general are—like everyone in the world has 99% of the same genomes. So it is not like skin color is simply differentiating you from each other. I think they just have to get to know more Aboriginal people…

Tom felt strongly that the answer was as simple and as complex as people getting to know one another, to proactively step out of our comfort zones to talk to one another and thereby eliminate our discomfort with someone we think strange or different, based on our limited social horizons.

Personal Motivation

Pursued on why he thought that he stayed to graduate from his high school, Tom retrospectively believed that his girlfriend at the time and her parents had an influential role as they placed a high premium on graduation. He also saw his parents as instrumental, especially in offering the additional enticement of a vehicle to achieve honours. He also stated that, “...just the fact that my whole life I’ve been planning to go to university,” played largely in motivating him to succeed. He also believed that
personal characteristics like will power, intelligence, work ethic and competitiveness assisted him in achieving his goal.

Asked to amplify what role his school played in contributing to his success, Tom immediately commended one teacher in particular, who not only took an interest and had faith in him, but also in a lot of students within the school. This teacher’s interest, trust and friendship meant a great deal to Tom, as he continuously checked in with him and monitored how he was doing. Beyond teachers, Tom thought that the sports program gave him something to look forward to and another arena where he could do well.

Tom saw himself returning North as part of his goals over the next five years, although he was not yet certain what his specific career plans were. He continued to sort that out as he attended university. The possibility of returning home and giving back to his home community was one option that had gained more traction with him recently.

*When I first started taking native studies that was what I was thinking. That I should return home and try to help as much people as I can and educate them with what I learned... Just making them more aware. I don’t know exactly what I’d do to make change but maybe it would be in the form of sports, helping them to gain confidence in that way or maybe it would be running as an MLA like my dad did or running for some type of politician.*

A leadership role was one possible goal for Tom over the next few years.

**School/Institutional Experiences**

**Contextuality**

In reflecting upon his high school experience, Tom recognized that he didn’t really apply himself up to his potential up to Grade 11. He said this shifted heading into Grade 12 when his parents offered him a car if he achieved honour roll status. He now saw that there was an unanticipated consequence to this because “...once I did start doing good, I started feeling a lot better about myself, I guess, knowing that I could
actually do it—I could actually get those grades if I tried." Additionally, he saw his Grade 12 year as instrumental in changing the way he performed his work:

\[ \text{...'cause if I didn't develop that work ethic that I developed in Grade 12, right now I'd probably still be going about it the way I was in Grade 11, which is leaving everything until the last minute and just underestimating the difficulty of the course load.} \]

Self-discipline and organizational skills continued to have bearing on his performance in university.

Tom remembered the first day of school as one where he was "pretty freaked out," until he met one of his best friends, a Philippine student. For him, friendships were important and played a vital role in his early years in elementary. This experience may have a parallel with his first high school experience as he described feeling like an outsider and intimidated as a Grade 9 student coming into high school, now the youngest in a school where "a bunch of big Grade 12 guys" seemed to rule the school. Their familiarity with the school and its teachers lent them an air of confidence that was, as of yet, foreign to Tom. They were all used to being in such a large environment. He asserted that this changed over his four years, especially in Grades 11 and 12, as soccer became a medium in helping him gain confidence and friends.

\[ \text{...I played sports all the time so I had my whole entire soccer team that I was on which was a high performance soccer team. That definitely helped me a lot being on that soccer team because we had practices like three or four times a week and, yeah, sports definitely helped me throughout high school with confidence and just something to do, something to occupy myself with.} \]

Asked whether he liked his high school experience, Tom clarified that he liked the teachers, but didn’t always appreciate what he saw as cliquey behaviour within the school. He didn’t see these groups formed along race or ethnic lines, but rather more groups formed along common interests.

Tom took great pride in the fact that he achieved honour roll status in Grade 12 as one of his great high school experiences and, this was quickly followed by winning three other awards at graduation, generally affirming his combined academic and
athletic accomplishments. In combination, this was the first time that Tom had ever received school awards and it stood out in his mind—a celebration of his achievement and of him as a person. By contrast, his worst time in high school was not affiliated with the school so much as his personal life, when his girlfriend broke up with him. He added that a feeling of abandonment set in when close friends who dropped out compounded this event. He quickly admonished them, however, by saying, “Well they chose it though. They chose to play video games instead of go to school.” He was even more bluntly direct in his assessment of their choices, when he accused:

\[
\text{I feel that they were lazy in the sense that they just didn't want to try anymore even though they were smart kids and I feel that I would have been better friends with them today if they hadn't dropped out and they would have had better lives today if they didn't drop-out.}
\]

There was a hint of anger in his voice as he said this, perhaps relating back to his earlier comments that people need to be educated to see the big picture and that if they could see it, they might not make the choices that they were making. Tom could not recall ever experiencing significant or difficult challenges in school because he “was lucky to have the family that I had. A lot of other students—things like that might have affected them more than affected me because I had such a support system.”

**Ontological Security**

In approaching how secure Tom was in his high school, how much he felt he belonged, we began with what he liked and disliked about his high school. He mentioned that he liked the unity within the school and the great school pride it had. He saw this as part of the sports participation when the school would recognize significant achievements and celebrate special events within the school. He also felt that the teachers were “pretty good,” that they were supportive and positive. He enjoyed learning there. His only dislikes seemed to have been the aforementioned cliquish-ness and the fact that several of his closer Aboriginal friends dropped out.

Tom’s response to what makes a good school was an interesting one in light of the conversation to this point.
Well a school that can accommodate everyone's needs I guess 'cause it is becoming a more multicultural society. So more options ... in terms of languages and ... I think that Canada's history should be taught differently in the sense that Aboriginals should be mentioned a lot more in terms of how all this land came to become the government's and how ... they should change a few things in social studies and history.

Once more Tom seemed to be keying in on some of the mythology surrounding colonial actions and that the Aboriginal perspective needed to be strengthened and woven into Canadian history. Given the multicultural nature of many of our schools today, Tom believed that a diversity of teachers would also be an asset and he suggested, “maybe one or two Aboriginal teachers there just to show they exist.”

Tom believed that what helped him most in getting through high school was his support group, comprised of his parents, extended family and some of the close Aboriginal friends that he had. Overall, he saw his high school as “a good place,” and he felt comfortable there. He particularly highlighted his sports teams as a factor in this as they kept him connected and they were part of his support network. He also factored in his girlfriend, at least for the time they were together. To determine what level of power Tom felt he had in his school, he was asked whether he felt he had any influence on what happened in his school. Tom didn't believe he had much until he landed on the honour roll. He felt he was more respected then, especially by the teachers. When questioned on whether he had a say or was in control of his high school experience, Tom succinctly answered, “Yes, I had all the power because I was the one that made the decision.” Tom felt that he was a leader among the Aboriginal students, particularly because he graduated with honours, but that he would not have characterized himself as a leader within the school. He now believed that he was becoming more of a leader as he learned, grew and evolved as a young Aboriginal person.

Tom felt that the majority of rules within his school were “adequate and justified.” He cited the “no tolerance” rule (for violence) as an obvious one designed to maintain a safe environment, and like some other participants, thought the hall pass “thing” was good even though a lot of people didn't like it at the time. He wasn't sure that these rules helped people necessarily get along, but he was sure that they probably helped people
do better in school, allowing them to focus on school work and not socialization. Examined on what school structures he liked or disliked, Tom outlined the following.

I liked the extra-curricular stuff and I'm sure that helped people get along a lot. Well, bells and schedules you pretty much need those because otherwise there is no control I guess. And teachers they—well they played a big part obviously because they taught the material and...for the most part I liked the teachers, they had good character... And the administration, yeah, I didn't have a problem with them either.

He summarized that he felt teachers and administration tried to get to know the students personally and that this seemed to make a big difference for students. Asked if there was anything that he would like to relive or do differently, Tom, regretted getting too serious with his girlfriend because it interfered with the full experience of high school and especially Grade 12 and getting to know his graduating class better. It was apparent that Tom was maturing as a young person and able to put a great many things into perspective.

**Belonging**

Tom did feel that he belonged in his high school and described that he always felt welcome, especially because of the teachers who made a real effort in this regard. Given the chance to comment on what the ideal school would be for him, Tom replied:

I think there should be more variety in terms of culture. They would incorporate some Aboriginal culture...I guess they'd have a few Aboriginal teachers due to the fact that there are a lot of Aboriginal students that would go there.

He emphasized that he was answering the question from the perspective of an Aboriginal student and that he recognized that there may be other ways of improving for the entire student population. To highlight this, he added, “but to help everybody I guess just give different methods of learning...Like more hands-on learning, more visual learning.”
First Nation Perspective

Questioned more on what he believed caused Aboriginal students to leave school before graduating, Tom ruefully offered:

*I think some of them don't feel that there is any hope. They just see the majority of Aboriginal people not graduating so they just think ‘Okay, why would I or why do I even have a chance to do that?*

He reinforced this answer with some further disincentives. "I'm sure family environment could have something to do with that. There could be a lot of abuse. There could be alcoholism. Yeah. I'm sure there are a lot of factors."

Tom was posed the following question, "What changes in education or the schools you attended would you want to see for your children?" In other words, "How would you change school?" Here was his response.

*Well if I were to raise my child like with an Aboriginal culture more so than I was raised, I'd want them to have that type of learning in the school. Like maybe some kind of Elders teaching Aboriginal history or Aboriginal stories which is traditional knowledge. Or, just have Aboriginal teachers to make them feel more comfortable. That would make them feel more comfortable...Because there would be that spiritual connection. But, yeah, just mostly teachers.*

Tom had been strong on this theme throughout the interviews, and it seemed certain that his exposure to university level Native Studies had an effect on him.

Asked, in general, what was good for him in school, Tom concisely answered, "Sports mostly. They bring a lot of people together and just fun." In this short statement there was, perhaps, more depth than he realized. He assessed further, that he believed "Sports are probably really good for Aboriginal people as well in general." He thought that they could help boost confidence levels and that they were healthy, competitive means of expressing themselves.
Perceptions of the Structural Properties of the Institution

Teaching/Learning

Tom named a math teacher as one of his favourites because she was exceptionally supportive in his Grade 12 year and assisted him in achieving the honour roll. She was responsive to his questions, took the time to really explain things to him and generally, had an approachable demeanour that made him feel comfortable. Tom also thought that teachers reciprocated when they saw students putting forward the kind of effort he did in his final year. He stressed that relationship and connection was instrumental in the teacher-student paradigm, “because we are all people…” He felt that he was more than just a number in his high school and that being treated as a person made the difference for him. When Tom was asked to identify what he thought motivated him in high school, he reaffirmed the role that his relatives played in role modeling that an advanced education is important, but he was also able to add “the fact that you see a lot of people without education that are unsuccessful and they are living in unfortunate conditions…It makes you want to succeed.” Modeling played a large role in Tom’s motivation and he also credited his teachers with impressing upon him the importance of completing an education. In fact, Tom cannot recall anything ever getting in his way in completing his education. He was hard pressed to name any obstacles that presented difficulties because he “usually put school first.”

Shifting the focus to his learning style, Tom discerned that he best learned through hands-on activities, rather than board notes and a teacher speaking to them. He liked for things to be demonstrated for him and then to have the opportunity to use his own hands to try out the learning. He believed that teachers could make a difference in their teaching style by incorporating “the teachings into actual projects…you learn a lot better because you’re actually experiencing what you are being taught.” In assessing whether a teacher’s culture makes a difference in their teaching, Tom was a bit equivocal.

*I’m sure someone’s culture or ethnicity would affect the way they teach because that’s who they are. But if they are professional they can separate that from what they are trying to teach. But, I don’t know, I never*
really noticed teachers in high school that were...biased...towards other cultures.

But when probed more on whether Aboriginal teachers could make a difference in the learning for Aboriginal students, Tom was more certain.

Yes, I think that Aboriginal teachers could make a positive difference for Aboriginal students because, yeah, for one they’d see a role model and, yeah, the fact that they do have the same culture probably—they’d feel more comfortable learning from that person. Yeah, I’d say culture does have a role.

Culture

Tom was further asked whether his high school made an effort to recognize Aboriginal culture, to make him feel like part of the school? He could not recall "any cultural activities or anything in Aboriginal areas." Pressed on this, he did admit that there was Northern Studies taught, but this was the extent of what he believed happened.

Curriculum

In high school, Tom loved physical education and math, the first because of the physical activity and his athletic prowess and the second because of his math teacher and the success he experienced. However, since leaving high school his favourite subject was now Native studies, "because it is really enlightening and teaches you about all the issues that have been going on in Canada that a lot of people don't know about. Yeah, it is just really intriguing." This consciousness raising and improved knowledgeability was having an impact on Tom. Asked what was missing from his high school programming, Tom was quick to point out that there was no offering of Aboriginal language after Grade 8.

Probably just an Aboriginal language because I had been taking Aboriginal language up to Grade 8 and then all of a sudden it was gone and all the other students had French to continue on with but there was no Aboriginal language.
He said this made him feel discriminated against, although he conceded that it was really more a feeling of being left out, that there may not have been a teacher who could teach Dene and equally there may not have been enough students interested in taking the Aboriginal language.

Chapter 6 has explored the lived experiences of six Aboriginal student participants who all successfully graduated from the same high school over the span of a 3-year period. Their stories are rich and diverse, but are anchored by the common experience of high school. In the next and concluding chapter, common themes will be drawn from their stories through an interpretive process that will allow for some discussion of these same themes. The implications deduced from the study findings will complete the chapter.
Chapter 6.

Discussion of Findings

Introduction

We have seen in Chapter 5 the rich and diverse stories of six participants who have all experienced a shared education within a common high school. The purpose of this study has been to explore and understand the lived experiences of these participants in the context of their high school and to attempt to comprehend what personal and institutional factors played a role in their successful graduation. And, conversely, what challenges they posed, and how the students overcame these. The particular questions the study aimed to address were as follow:

- **What are the lived educational experiences of graduated Aboriginal secondary students?**

Sub-Questions

From their individual perceptions:

- What personal factors contributed to their success?
- What school factors contributed to their success?
- What challenges did they encounter?
- How did they overcome these challenges?

These questions were framed through the window of structuration, Giddens’ theory of dynamic interplay between personal agency and institutional structures, with the desire to describe and characterize these experiences to determine if possible, what facilitated their success. A conceptual framework was conceived as the structural underpinning of this study integrating aspects of Giddens’ Theory of Structuration to examine and
explore the lived experiences of graduated Aboriginal students within the social institution of school. Additionally, as review, van Manen's (1990) phenomenological method maintains that the research process is practically inseparable from the writing, but because there is an iterative quality to this process and the outcomes of the study evolve in the process, we are advised “to keep the evolving part-whole relation of one’s study in mind” (p. 167), a process that van Manen characterizes as working the text. The researcher must have a “fore-conception” of some potential structuring strategies (p. 168) while in the process, and must continuously interpret the data with an eye on how best to structure it. The Structuration Social Practice framework (Figure 1) underwent many transformations in an attempt to reconcile Giddens’ TS, the findings of the literature review and the need to represent the findings from this study. It was a fore-conception that was to frame the entire writing exercise and over time, influenced by the research, and thought about within the parameters of the study and through the perceptions of lived experiences by these Aboriginal participants, the frame would be changed to better reflect the author’s learning. This was a process much like structuration itself, where the two-headed coin of research and practice, played themselves out over the course of the study, contributing to the whole, and continuing beyond the life of the study itself. This duality characterized a reciprocal relationship where each presupposed the other (Giddens, 1979, p. 53). By using van Manen’s phenomenological methodology, thematic possibilities suggested themselves from the input and feedback given by these Aboriginal secondary graduates that potentially could improve the efforts of high schools in accommodating the unique needs of Aboriginal students. Upon the completion of the discussion of these findings, the framework is again reviewed with an eye to refinement and reflective of the participant and researcher “understandings, interpretations, and formulations,” and it is hoped that these will serve “to strengthen our practice” (van Manen, 1990, p. 152) as an educational institution.

The balance of this chapter then, explores and examines 10 themes that have been elicited from the data in Chapter 5. Several of the themes, as noted above, were not originally set as titles within the right hand side of the framework and represent some of the emergent findings of this study. They have been placed in an order within the overall structure of the right hand side of the conceptual framework, anticipating the re-conceptualization of the framework, which will be illustrated at the end of the thematic
findings' section. Specifically, the following is the structure and order of the discussion. Under the heading of Social Contextuality/Positioning, three themes are addressed: (a) the broad societal context is thought about through the window of Giddens’ Theory of Structuration, (b) the lived socio-economic context of these students and the implications is considered, and (c) the strength of relationship in their lives is examined. Under the Identity heading four themes are discussed: (a) the implications of the participants’ seeming ambivalence about their Aboriginal identity is entertained, (b) the consciousness of these Aboriginal students is contemplated, (c) the resilience and persistence that seems to characterize the efforts and lives of these study participants is explored, and (d) the spiritual interconnectedness of these students is reflected upon.

There were no thematic findings that seemed to fit within the School/Institutional Experience grouping, but under the Perception of Structural Properties, three structural properties of school surface: (a) teachers, (b) language and culture, and (c) extra-curricular activities. These themes then lead to a completion of the chapter with, firstly, a re-conceptualization of the Social Practice chart based upon the findings of this study, secondly, an outline of possible suggestions for future research, thirdly, suggested implications for practice and, finally, concluding thoughts on the study.

Social Contextuality/Positioning

Theme: Giddens’ Structuration and Contextuality

The reader will recall from the end of Chapter 2, some of the overarching questions posed using Giddens’ Theory of Structuration as a base. How enabled or constrained have these students been in availing themselves of the allocative and authoritative resources of the institution? How enfranchised have they been within the norms and social conduct of a place called school? What has been their dialectic of control, the autonomy/dependency tension, between themselves as individual actors and the social structures of school? What rules, skills and knowledge have had to be drawn upon to assist them in realizing success in school? Have these habituated routines been comfortable or have hidden assumptions, discourses, ideologies and constructions inhibited their successful participation? Has the contextuality of school with its
associated rules and regulations, a location where they as individual agents have been positioned, enabled them or constrained them? What voice have agents had in the formation of the rules and in how they are exercised? Have these norms been overwhelmingly hegemonic in nature or has there been “ontological security” within the setting?

It seems at first blush that all of the participants in this study, Mike, John, Ericka, Josephine, Amanda and Tom, believed they were ontologically secure in their high school, felt increasingly comfortable over their years there and that they shared a sense of belonging. Each of the participants was successful in graduating from high school, and, in fact, Tom and Josephine received recognition for their achievements at the school. This outcome, then, representing the goal that society has of our school system and, on the surface, also representing the kind of success that society desires of its schools, especially as it relates to Aboriginal student achievement. These students were enabled through a combination of personal agency and institutional structures or supports to successfully graduate. They felt enfranchised and all believe that they had a voice, had power and control over their high school experience and interacted favourably with the institutional structures and principles within their school. In general, all participants felt comfortable with the habituated routines, the rules, both allocative and authoritative, and the overarching expectations of the school. They successfully traversed the high school landscape and felt good in the process. But the finer question concerning success on whose terms or how success is defined may hinge on the issue of whether hidden assumptions, discourses, ideologies and constructions inhibited their full and knowledgeable participation?

What first must be addressed as a partial response to this question is the contextuality and experience of the six Aboriginal students who participated in this study. All acknowledge their Aboriginal identity and all were willing to participate in a study that would undertake to determine what combination of personal agency and institutional structures made them successful in their secondary schooling. Some even expressed pride in their heritage, notably Tom, Josephine and Ericka. In other words, they accepted, broadly, the frame of reference for the study. Having said that, it is evident through the responses offered in the study that all of them lost, or more accurately,
never found, their Aboriginal language and to varying degrees, even their culture. Reasons for this are unique to each participant, but the most common undercurrent is that it was not taught, even when (whether it was valued or not) there was the capacity to do so. Parental assumptions that Euro-centric priorities and outcomes would provide greater success for their children may have played a role in this phenomenon. This is not to ignore Verna Kirkness (1998b, 2002) or Verna St. Denis (2002) and their respective cautions about blaming-the-victim, but rather an acknowledgement of what even one of the participants, Tom, was able to name. “We are assimilated, I guess.” He offered that:

...everything we do is technologized—we email, we watch TV, we go to the grocery store to buy all of our food and we go to school, we go to church like at Christmastime—that’s probably one of the biggest things—church—even though we don’t go all the time...the fact that we don’t live a traditional lifestyle. We don’t have to go out and hunt anymore.

The “cultural invasion” in some sense is complete. The hegemonic structures of our society have played their hand and in this sense, Giddens’ structuration has brought us to this point which Ward and Bouvier (2001) make very clearly:

While the source of who we/Aboriginal people are comes from our/their history, our/their language and culture, it is also shaped by interaction or in relationship with others. The importance of history, language and culture to the formation of identity has gained much attention in cross-cultural studies (p. 6).

Kirkness equated the loss of language with the loss of culture and while it cannot be said that these participants have lost their Aboriginal heritage, it is clear that they have lost something. If we accept this equation, then we must say that they are not whole in their Aboriginal identity and the intergenerational effects of assimilative policy has reverberated in the lives of each of these students. Acknowledging that identity is shaped by society as it is constructed in relationship with others, based on differences of race, class and gender (Ward & Bouvier, 2001, p. 6) and that school has been no small part of the process, it must be stated that they do indeed have an identity. It is what it is, now. It is, as we have seen in the historicity section of the literature review, what might be expected after 200 years of contact with a hegemonic Euro-culture, residential schools and other institutional structures of Canadian society. They are whole in their identity as an Aboriginal youth in the NWT in the year of 2008. But a deeper appreciation
for what language and culture mean to identity may be lost. Within each of the families of
the participants, there seemed a willingness to embrace the Euro-centric “script” and
structural principles of the schools of which they were a part. There was recognition and
desire to work within the societal structures and expectations set out by the dominant
culture; to work and live within the Euro-centric framework institutionalized over the past
century. The structures of domination have had their effect to the point that all of
the participant families seemed willing to adopt and embrace the principles that have over
time become the mainstay of our present society. We have seen the struggle, and to
some degree the regret that Josephine highlights in her family as her father now
reflexively wishes that he had paid more heed to passing on his language and culture to
his children. He now makes an effort with one of his grandchildren. We remember that
Josephine believes that the implications of this may well mean a lost generation for her
language and culture. For three of the six, again, Tom, Josephine and Ericka, there is a
cognizance of this and remorse; they are somewhat knowledgeable actors about their
history and plight, but they cannot change the past. Only two of the participants, Tom
and Ericka, by virtue of age, experience and post-secondary learning, perhaps have
experienced Freire’s conscientização or at least, exposure to an education where they
comprehend the implications. In Giddens’ terms, they are, perhaps, practically
conscious, where they know, but cannot express fully what has happened to them. Their
discursive awareness is limited and as such their ability to reflexively monitor the
structural forces in our society is bounded by limitations of age, experience and time.
Yet, there is hope in education as we see that with experience and the double
hermeneutic loop, the potential in time and space to intersect with other knowledgeable
actors and societal structures to produce locales or stations of understanding is high. As
these intersections occur and as these actors become more knowledgeable, they have
the potential to transform their worlds and maybe to influence how our schools bring
together students who meet to name the world to facilitate that transformation.

Set against this backdrop, it would be difficult to state that any findings from this
study could be completely valid, given that the many structural principles of our society
have permeated our institutions. Nor can we forget Social Dominance Theory and its
implications or the related institutional influence as reflected in group-based hierarchy.
Institutional socialization within schools has evolved over time to reinforce the dominant
hegemonic values of society, in effect becoming a hierarchy-enhancing microcosm of society (Sidanius & Pratto, 2004). Furthermore, it could also be argued that all students, inclusive of Aboriginal students, become part of the differential reward system within the institution of school, as behaviour compatible with the institutional expectations and roles is rewarded and that deemed incompatible is punished. In a sense, compliant students are congruent and non-compliant are incongruent (Sidanius & Pratto, 2004). These pressures combine to reward hierarchy-enhancing behaviour while ensuring that hierarchy-attenuating behaviour is smothered in the hegemony of the institution. In this way, "rather than nurturing the individual, the schooling experience typically erodes identity and self-worth" (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996, Vol3, Chp5, Intro to Education). It could be that the participants are vulnerable to a "false sense of security" or at least an assimilated one. There is a danger that "the language of conquest" (Jacobs, 2006b) or colonization could be used in attempting to discern what factors have contributed to the success of these students. In a very real sense, Giddens' duality of structure has been at play as these Aboriginal student agents have iteratively interacted with and within the hegemonic social structures of our society. We must be mindful of St. Germaine's (1995) paradox where he cautioned that success in school could become failure in the Aboriginal cultural community and failure in school could become a success of a different sort for the community (p. 3). Fortunately, and more optimistically, there seems to be more universal implications in the findings that this study has unearthed and in this there is hope.

**Theme: Socio-economic Status**

While progress has been made since the National Indian Brotherhood's declaration in 1972 that 'Indian control of Indian education' was to be the key determiner of whether Aboriginal peoples would regain their identity and establish parity within Canadian society, much has remained the same in Aboriginal peoples' lives. While efforts have been made to establish local control over education, to improve educational facilities, to increase engagement and achievement of Aboriginal peoples, to train Aboriginal teachers to work in their own communities, and to infuse Aboriginal content into educational curricula and programs (Friesen, 2002, p. 80), there remains a serious disparity between Canadian Aboriginal peoples and their white counterparts. This finds
expression in high unemployment, low labour force participation, economic dependency, poor health and high rates of incarceration (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 102). Some of this is reflected in the Northwest Territorial experience as we explored in the Problem section of Chapter 1. Further, where youth are concerned, a report put out by the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (2004) has assessed that First Nations children and youth continue to experience harrowingly unacceptable and disproportionate levels of risk across the following dimensions: poverty, urbanization, substance misuse, education, youth suicide, accidental injury, child welfare, sexual exploitation, and youth justice (pp. 9-12). In 2006, the Assembly of First Nations produced a report card on the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal People at 10 Years* (Assembly of First Nations, 2006), a damning condemnation of the lack of progress made in the last decade and a characterization of complete failure on the part of Canada to achieve many of the recommendations contained in the original work. What is especially disconcerting, however, is the description of First Nations children’s reality:

- 1 in 4 First Nations children live in poverty, compared to 1 in 6 Canadian children. They have double the rates of disability, and over one third of their homes are overcrowded.
- Year-end 2003 data from DIAND indicated that 9,031 First Nations children on reserve were in child welfare, representing a 70% increase from 1995.
- A recent report has found that 0.67% of non-Aboriginal children were in child welfare care as of May 2005, compared to 10.23% of status Indian children.
- As many as 27,000 First Nations children are currently under care. (p. 2)

And in general, First Nations communities rank 76th out of 174 nations when using the United Nations Development Index 2001. This is compared to other Canadian communities who rank 8th (p. 3).

The balance of this theme section will focus on the socio-economic conditions and opportunities for the participants and their families, parental employment and the nature of their families. Within the Social Practice chart, this would fit best within the Social contextuality/Positioning category.
Socio-economic Conditions and Opportunity

The socio-economic conditions for the study participants, as reflected through their perceptions, did not seem to wholly correlate with the rather damning description above. Mike’s life certainly had many turbulent and difficult years as he experienced a revolving door in his mother’s home in his early life. Stability came to his life later than the majority within the study. Once it did with his aunt and uncle, it seemed that his socio-economic conditions improved as well. Generally, the balance of participants, John, Ericka, Josephine, Amanda and Tom, experienced relatively stable and economically sound homes. Related to the stable home environment was a parallel stability in employment for the parents and in what life opportunities they could provide for their children. Employment and economic opportunities have translated into broader experiences for the student participants, more encouragement to pursue a variety of activities and a more divergent and complete view of the world, seeming to give credence to the research that says that poverty, more than matters of culture, serves to create the disparity so often experienced by Aboriginal students. It is not so much cultural discontinuity that keeps students from performing well in school as much as it is the socio-economic conditions they so frequently experience. This is not to say that there isn’t a role that cultural discontinuity potentially plays, a notion earlier explored and commented upon in a later theme, but in the order of magnitude, impoverishment is a first order cause of disparity within the school system. However, it cannot be forgotten that such socio-economic circumstances are usually rolled up in the marginalized experience of minority people based upon their race and ethnic identity. More will be said on this momentarily.

Macro-structural Variables

Related to their socio-economic standing, regardless of their formal educational standing, those parents who were gainfully employed seemed more aware of possibility and emphasized the importance of an education in the lives of their children. While their formal education may not have been what they now desired for their children, their informal education, an education in life, appeared to give them a big picture view of what their children need to succeed in the world, albeit a world dominated by one world-view. Further, it would seem to bear out that genes are not necessarily the most powerful
influences on intelligence, but environments are (Berliner, 2005, p. 30). We remember from Chapter 1 that the Aboriginal “early school leaver” or the “drop-out” phenomenon is usually the result of 42 potential factors (Mackay & Myles, 1995, p. 161); that the issues for early school leavers, generally, cut across a wide spectrum of potential causes, including but not limited to the following: leaving home prematurely, conflict with parents, involvement with the justice system, pressure from friends, family or marriage responsibilities, pregnancy, boredom with an irrelevant system, conflict with teachers and administration, attendance and punctuality problems, appropriate fit of school programs and many other social issues (pp. 176-177). Significantly, many of these factors are not within the school’s sphere of influence. There is a powerful effect from poverty on schooling and out-of-school factors are as significant, if not more significant, in addressing school achievement, as are any in-school factors. Remember Kanu (2006) “suggesting factors other than cultural discontinuity may account for attrition among Native students” (p. 129). Some of these factors included having to take care of younger siblings at home; having no money and needing to work; having problems with parents, foster parents, or guardians; having legal issues; and, other social or family related issues (p. 130). Josephine contextualizes this for the local area of this study as she singles out an especially concerning reality for students who drop-out. “It is all because of everything these days coming in—everything that is new like more drugs and alcohol and I think that is a big factor too.” So, in sum, this study seems to support Kanu’s reiteration that an examination of other macro-structural variables must be considered to fully account for poor school performance. Ericka is able to frame this nicely in terms of this study when she states:

_A lot of Aboriginal students that I know come from—not really broken homes but they are not exactly the best…I know a lot of people who are forced to drop-out of school to get a job and help pay for rent or food or stuff—help to support their family._

She followed this up by juxtaposing her own situation with that of her peers in observing:

_It was just hard for them to get that support from their friends and family and I feel very privileged that I was able to, but it really made me sad at the same time seeing that there are other people struggling with it and felt the need to drop-out._
Mike as well is able to discern this disparity between his Aboriginal peers and himself, noting, "Well a part of the reason is probably just because of their upbringing or maybe problems at home that they don't really understand or can't really do anything about, I guess." He recognizes that he was fortunate and that what made the difference for him was a strong and supportive family.

*Part of the reason I've been able to do that is because of my uncle. He has been there for me and he's like talked to me and I've understood that I needed to get this done if I want to get somewhere in life.*

What this study seems to support is that students who do not have to contend with those out-of-school factors, stand a much better chance of performing well in school, aided and abetted by economically advantaged parents who can enjoy all the latitude that this kind of security can bring. Personal agency is much more likely from students and families who do not have to worry about where their next meal will come from. Family and parental support is a much easier proposition when there is socio-economic stability within the household. With it come the luxury, the time and the wherewithal to contemplate how best to support young children as they grow up, attend school and forge their lives.

**Healthy Family**

A side note on this theme is an acknowledgement that socio-economic stability provides as well the potential for healthier role models, whether they are parents, siblings or mentors from within the family sphere. Notably, with the one exception of John who recently experienced familial disruption, the participants of this study seemed to have parents or surrogate parents who were healthy and contributing constructively to a quality of life that supported their children in a positive manner. By extension, older siblings in two instances, Tom and Josephine, born of these environments have become role models for their younger siblings. Generationally, they are carrying on the legacy of their parents. What also seems true is that healthy parents have made healthy choices in what they want for their children, including whom they desire their children to associate with. The positive and constructive involvement of these healthy parents in the
lives of their children has had a rippling effect through the family and in the selection of role models for their children.

Theme: Relationships

One of the overarching themes elicited from the responses offered by the participants was how important the construct of "relationship" was to them in completing their schooling. Significant relationships included those with parents, role models, friends and even the school, all contained within the Social Contextuality/Positioning category on the right hand side of the Social Practice chart. Another way to view this is in the notion of community and the Aboriginal valuing of an ecosystem or Pobihushchy's (1986) "eco-centric" description where unity is achieved through community with all. We explored the Aboriginal world-view and its emphasis on this web of interdependence and on the complete unity of being (Pobihushchy, 1986) where reciprocity within relationships and decision-making is paramount. There is a strong emphasis on kinship where family is considered the immediate, extended and community members and where family or group take precedence over the individual. Relationships build this sense of community. Without exception, all of the participants stress relationship and give particular distinction to parents or their surrogates.

Parents

The family structure in three participant contexts saw an original nuclear family, complete with the biological birth mother and father in place. In the other three situations, all had significant surrogate parents, either biologically related or connected through marriage. In the case of Amanda, one of the latter three, the birth mother and father continued to play a role in her life and education, despite a marital split. In all cases, the presence and active involvement of two parents was the norm. However, this does not necessarily mean that a single parent might not have affected the same kind of outcomes. Rather, it seems the connection and relationship with "parental" role models was what was critical to the success of each of the participants. Parents played a role in emphasizing the need for an education, in providing support to their child in meeting the expectations of school and in ensuring that they attended. More critically, there seems to be a respectful, caring and loving bond that is foundational to these parent-child
relationships. The participants were generally eager to please their parents and were filled with pride when they achieved success in school, not so much for themselves, but for their parents. They wanted to please their parents and to honour them. Home was a place where education was given value and where the day-to-day reality of completing the tasks of schooling were expected, accommodated and provided for.

Parents, regardless of their own educational background, made a difference in the lives of the participants, in expecting them to complete schoolwork and in expecting them to graduate from high school. It didn’t seem to matter whether the parents had actually graduated from high school or not, but rather whether they placed value on graduating. This may tie back into them accepting the Euro-centric principles of the school and accepting the dominant societal values, but within this frame, they were able to appropriately support their children in realizing graduation. Generally, it must be said that for the most part, the homes of the participants were stable environments that provided nurturing and support as they grew up. In the cases of Mike, John and Amanda, even later intervention and stability made a difference in their lives. Of particular note, Mike only realized this stability in his Grade 9 year and it still had significant impact upon him. Parental relationship and connection made a difference in all of their lives.

Role Models

Extending this theme and applying it to participant siblings who came from the same home environment, in four of the six instances, Tom, Josephine, Ericka, and John, sibling influence or example, was instrumental in their achievement. This goes beyond role modelling and strikes at the core of what relationship means. "The individual does not form an identity in opposition to the group but recognizes the group as relatives (included in his or her own identity)" (Macivor, 1995, p. 76). This interconnectedness seems to be an intrinsic aspect of the relationships between and among immediate family members and even beyond to the extended family and community. It is significantly evident in at least four of the six circumstances that were explored in this study, John, Ericka, Josephine and Tom, that extended family and community played a central role in the lives of these Aboriginal students, either as role models or more directly as caregivers. The importance of extended family or family as role models is
underscored by the story of Josephine and her family who took in a cousin to ensure that she could have a supportive family. We also see her admiration for her older sister, who lives as a strong and independent woman. It is emphasized by Mike’s circumstances as his aunt and uncle ensured that he had a stable and loving home and that he could achieve graduation. He also cites his cousin’s husband, a carpenter, as an important role model, both because he has such a strong family orientation, but also because he has become an apprentice. It is seen in Tom’s situation where an older cousin is his guiding light, because of his achievements in both sports and academics. Ericka admires her older brother, who has shown persistence in becoming an electrician. All are examples of loving and caring relationships. All are examples of exceptional role models either within the immediate family or the extended family.

Friends

Certainly, relationships included friends who played a central role in the lives of the majority of the participants, either as confidants, supporters or fellow travellers. This category, Friends, fits within the Social Contextuality or positioning contained in the Social Practice chart that we have used to frame this study. These relationships were especially valued as they were often peers, constantly in their lives, experiencing similar phenomena and spending significant portions of each day together. Often these friendships were long term ones extending back into early elementary school and community. It would be safe to assume that they had long-term impact on each of the participants, especially during their school years. As the participants experienced their final school years, however, their friendships, while still important, were not as dominant as they formerly had been. As they advanced in education, it became increasingly more challenging and increasingly, many of their friends dropped out. The net effect was one where they had fewer and fewer of their original Aboriginal friends graduating with them. We see this with Ericka, who recognizes that this is happening and feels badly that her Aboriginal peers do not enjoy the same level of support that she has had. We see it in the case of Amanda, who at first joins the disengaged in Grade 9, only to reengage to graduate with one friend from her original cadre of friends, and only because the friend had changed. We see it with Josephine, who had a mix of friends because of her sports involvement, which in turn led to rich and diverse learning opportunities as she travelled
around our country. She recognized by Grade 11 that she and her Detah friends were drifting apart and that her peers were retreating to the comfort and security of their community. She saw this as self-limiting and knew that she wanted to have more life experiences beyond the community, having whetted her appetite on the travel associated with her sport’s teams. We also see this in Tom who is able to relate that all of his close early friends from his community had dropped out of school by the time he was in Grade 10. This had to be, at times, an isolating, lonely and challenging experience on the one hand, and concurrently, a rewarding, but changing one on the other. The push-pull dynamic at play resembles the one that occurs in St. Germaine’s (1995) paradox posed earlier, where a child may have to choose one culture at the expense of another and in so doing, see success in school become failure in their cultural community and failure in school become a success of a different sort for the community (p. 3). Study participants had to abandon life-long friendships in order to continue, but lost the comfort and security of those friendships as the price of continuing, while their friends lost the potential opportunities that an education might provide. To stay in school meant potentially losing one’s friends, while dropping out would ensure friendship, but would result in lost educational opportunity. Runnels (2007) found something similar in her study of school disengagement for five young Aboriginal women. “As young adolescents the participants felt the pull of two very different kinds of community. One of those was a community of peers that placed itself in opposition to the school and family aspirations for school success” (p. 93). This is reminiscent of O’Connor (1997) and his consideration of Ogbu’s work, as he defines this kind of behaviour as oppositionally defiant, where a group identifies along minority lines and does not accept the institutional expectations. This is Ogbu’s primary and secondary discontinuities, or a case of being an “involuntary minority” (Runnels, 2007, p. 93), where they become educationally maladaptive in their defiance. The particular dilemma and ongoing concern for these participants is the potential for these peers to look upon them with either diffidence or envy. In the case of the first, there could be feelings of anger and resentment as they see a peer continue on with something that they are not, especially if they are feeling anger and hostility towards the institution of school. Concurrently, there may also be feelings of envy as they see their peers continuing on and succeeding where they have failed. Nor is this likely to be the end of such a dynamic
as many of the study participants will retain connection with their community at a minimum and/or will return to live in their community once they have completed their educational journey. These friends have stood in contrast to their educational goals and their life choices. The question of whether these different paths will create difficulty or impact upon relationships is a very real prospective cause of consternation. Ultimately, will their community accept them, or will what Tom experienced in his earlier life become the reality for them? Will the community see them as too “white” in their pursuit of their education?

Given the strong need for relationship and connection as evidenced in this study, one cannot overstate the importance or significance of friendship. As we have seen, the presence or absence of friends plays a role in the school experiences of the study participants. As the study participants grew older, experienced more and had varying exposure to the world, the need to graduate took on a different timbre and hue. In some cases, friends graduated with the participants. In other cases, they dropped out, victims of a variety of deterrents or life factors, invoking some of the reasons cited in Chapter 1 for early school leavers or the maladaptive educational pressures described by O’Connor. However, whatever their status, the relationships remained important in the school-life trajectory of all the participants.

School

The other kind of community defined by Runnels (2007) is “pro-social, welcoming and re-affirming of participation in the school community or the wider community of learners” (p. 94). Of course, one has to qualify here that what is ontologically secure for students may well hinge on many of the variables discussed in the literature review and contemplated in consideration of Giddens’ Structuration Theory. In the case of this study, it would appear that the participants would view their school in terms that Runnels (2007) employs in the second type of community. Their relationship to the school has been a positive one. It is notable that all of the study participants believe that their relationship with the school was constructive, affirming and in general a comfortable environment. Some of the participants, notably Ericka, even expressed that they missed high school. All of the participants saw the life-world of the school as ontologically secure, despite the fact that they believed it could improve in recognizing their Aboriginal
culture. It is apparent that the school is doing some good things for there to be such a favourable overall response. What seems to be at the heart of this positive relationship is actually the relationship and connection to the people within the school, both the staff and fellow students. There is a strong sense of community within the school, where people look out for one another. Repeatedly, participants acknowledged the support, proactive interventions and care that teachers and staff exhibited. More of this will be explored in the theme addressing teachers, but it should be stated here that the institutional culture of the school was built upon the foundation of relationship, community and a sense of family, epitomized in the words of Ericka who saw teachers as another "set of parents" and as part of her family, and in the words of Josephine who described her school as a "second home." There appears to be an inclusive culture, where all students are valued and appreciated. This goes beyond the official and formal vision or policy objectives often espoused by schools and seem woven into the cultural cloth and climate of the institution through the actions and words of its staff. They seem to put a paramount premium on relationship and every participant specifies at least one adult in the building that took the time and interest in them as people. This connection made a difference in their respective lives.

Identity

Theme: Ambivalence about Aboriginal Identity

There is a range of reaction from the study participants when it comes to how they feel about being an Aboriginal person. This theme addresses the cultural identity of the participants, the dilemma they face as Aboriginal people in our society and a question of assimilation. Within the Social Practice framework, this finding aligns best with Identity, especially as it relates to cultural sensibilities. On one end of the spectrum, some of the participants, John and Amanda, didn't feel that their Aboriginality had much of an impact on their lives, nor do they believe it should have. They accepted that they were just part of the cultural mosaic and deserved no more recognition than any other person. They have accepted and integrated the egalitarian cultural mosaic or the multicultural paradigm. On the other end, participants like Tom and, to some degree
Josephine, expressed a sense of shame because they were identifying with stereotypical descriptors of "street" Aboriginals and feeling the comparison in a very real way. They believed they couldn’t escape the typecasting regardless of their own personal agency and success. One participant, Tom, articulated an uncertainty based on the perceptions of the general public or society to Aboriginal people and how it reinforced a minority feeling within him. Further, above the stereotyping that he believes happens, he is angry at the socio-economic reality that many Aboriginal people experience, the odds stacked against them. He is happy to have beaten the odds, but is painfully aware that many don’t. The perception of the researcher was that Tom felt ashamed of his good fortune. He feels caught between two worlds, both of which do not know the history of Aboriginal peoples within Canada. Furthermore, he finds himself further perplexed and self-conscious when interacting with others, because he is not sure whether some people’s reactions to him are racially motivated or caused by other factors. Adding to the confusion for Tom is his identification at being “white” throughout most of his life and the recognition that he has been assimilated. This has also played its hand in how he is perceived and received by his own people and community. You will recall that he felt that most of his home community saw his cousin and him as “white” and there is a sense that they were not really accepted. Juxtaposed against his newfound knowledge about his Aboriginal identity, gained through his university Native Studies program, there is a dualism that has grown within him. For Amanda, who claims not to have been impacted by her Aboriginal identity and racism, there is an acknowledgement of stereotyping that takes place in society. Taken together, the responses from the participants about their Aboriginal identity and what it means for them, suggests an ambivalence that should not be unexpected or surprising. This ambivalence or uncertainty cannot help but have an impact on a person’s identity.

**Cultural Identity**

Cultural identity, as we have seen within the Culture section of the literature review, is reflected in the social values, cognitive codes, beliefs, behavioural standards and world-views of a people (Delgado-Gaitín & Trueba, in Gay, 2000, p. 8). Those who belong to the same culture share a broadly similar conceptual map and way of interpreting the world. Now, it is possible for people to identify in many other ways other
than culturally. For instance, identity is likely a composite of many factors such as race, class, education, religion, location and gender. Time also plays a role in who we are and how we identify ourselves, as our personalities evolve. It is evident, even in their early lives, that such is the case with the participants of this study. As Weaver (2001) suggests the influence of these aspects, as they collide over time and space, reflects fragmented identities, multitudinously constructed and intersecting in an ever changing, sometimes conflicting array of possibilities (p. 240). This can be exacerbated by a familial context that does not promote or instil a cultural foundation. We may see this in the case of Mike, Amanda and to a lesser extent, John, Tom, Josephine, and Ericka. At the very least, given that all people will encounter the multi-faceted aspects of their identity formation, it would seem that a cultural foundation is important to understanding who you are as a person. It is a frame of reference that precedes our birth, is fully intact upon our arrival into the world, and becomes a central part of our world-view. In this sense, we become the sum total of our individual life experiences, but we are also the cumulative total of the history, culture and language of our ancestors. The past is present in the present. Our culture and our identity are inherent in our past and we, in a pervasive sense, are imbued with qualities, characteristics, values and culture intrinsic to our fore bearers.

**Dilemma**

Identity ambivalence will always be part of our human condition, but it is not made easier if society does not accept a particular culture or heritage. This is so, because identity is a combination of self-identification and the perceptions of others (p. 243). If the perceptions of others are overwhelmingly negative or unaccepting, regardless of the reasons, then it is very conceivable that Freire’s (2006) postulation that “self-depreciation” (p. 63) is the inevitable conclusion to the kind of oppression that minority identities experience in their lives. Haig-Brown (1995), you will remember, suggested that “cultural self-hatred” (p. 281) could develop over time. It is Haig-Brown who makes the point that this phenomenon may occur in Aboriginal people who have “learned self-helplessness, a socialized belief that no matter what you do, as a member of a particular cultural group you cannot make a difference…many First Nations people grow up hearing and believing negative stereotypes about their personal and cultural
backgrounds" (p. 279). There may not be a cultural self-hatred within all of the study participants, but there is certainly cultural ambivalence, and a sense of dilemma, both a product of structural elements and principles within our society and the resulting personal agency choices they have to make.

Assimilation

Significantly and fortunately, the majority of respondents had a strong sense of self that in important ways appeared to transcend the importance of cultural heritage. But even this observation may live in the shadow of our hegemonic society. A quick review of each of the study participants' responses reveals that all of them do, in fact, have good feelings about themselves and generally a commensurate level of confidence as they each anticipate the future. Mike feels loved, supported and appropriately challenged by his aunt and uncle. He is very comfortable in his own skin and at one point, states that he, "doesn't feel differently than any other person." He sees himself on an equal footing with everyone and believes ethnicity has not been an issue in his life experiences. He seems to accept the societal paradigm that is in existence. John, equally, feels good about himself and is prepared to join the military, perhaps as symbolic of the Western world-view as any structural element there is, where order, discipline, command and control and a concomitant power structure are amply evident. In a sense, he anticipates joining an institution that very much represents the Western nation state. Amanda, while uncertain of her life and career goals, is confident and much of her self assuredness seems to be connected to being raised in a "white" way and in a "white environment," resulting in her being accepted and in her immunity to some of the abuse and racism other Aboriginal people experienced. Josephine feels good about herself, about being employed and making good money and having the ability to do her "own thing when I want." As a "city girl," she appreciates the Western amenities a city affords and admittedly has not embraced the more traditional aspects of her culture. Particularly remarkable with Josephine is her fear of turning out like some of the stereotypical Aboriginal "street" people or Aboriginal people she knew who didn't graduate. She does not see them as casualties of the structures of domination, but rather as representatives of a people who have not achieved one of the symbolic rites of passage to a better life. Tom, too, is optimistic and happy with his life choices so far, but
as we have seen, he "pretty much considered myself white because I had grown up around white people where there are not very many Aboriginal...customs alive in overall society today." And he accepts that "we are all pretty much the same," with the exception of skin color. Is this, then, a case where the success of these graduates rests on their ability and willingness to accept the institutional frame of reference and on a willingness to adopt the "white," Western values that permeate our schools and our society? Is it a case of the more assimilated an Aboriginal family becomes, the more comfortable they are with the institutional structures of our society?

**Theme: Consciousness**

The reader will recall that Anthony Giddens (1984) contemplated the notion of action in outlining and discerning the distinctions between discursive consciousness, practical consciousness and unconscious motives/cognition (p. 7). A quick review will serve to discern the types and levels of consciousness. By discursive consciousness he meant having a discursive awareness that can be expressed. This was differentiated from practical consciousness, where actors know about social conditions, but cannot express discursively. The third level of consciousness was earlier characterized as "unconsciousness," a form of "social imprinting" that is unknown in the consciousness, but that skeletally frames how a person may act. Here, we address the reflexive monitoring and knowledgeability of the actors.

More generally, when we think of consciousness, often other analogous terms come to mind such as awareness, knowing or possibly appreciation or recognition. We often hear that the opposite of conscious is unconscious, suggesting that an individual is unaware, not knowing or appreciating a particular subject or fact. This introduces the theme of consciousness in relation to Aboriginal culture. Typically, we might apply the unconscious descriptor to non-Aboriginal people who have been conditioned to accept the Euro-centric world-view and never really questioned their position in the world. This study shows that it is a term that can be applied to Aboriginal people as well, perhaps a natural consequence to what Tully (1995) characterizes as "cultural diversity" (p. 10). He maintains that not only do cultures overlap geographically and come in a variety of types, but that they are also densely interdependent in their formation and identity, a
result of complex historical processes of interaction with other cultures. This crossing of dynamic cultures is normal activity the world over, complicated even further by the reality that cultures are not internally homogenous as “they are continuously contested, imagined and re-imagined, transformed and negotiated, both by their members and through their interaction with others” (p. 11). Consequently, all six of the study participants could be said to be at varying levels of consciousness about their Aboriginal culture. Notably, the two who are less unconscious, are Tom and Ericka, both of whom have gone on to post-secondary schooling and been exposed to deeper levels of understanding and learning about the world, life and the people within it. Tom especially has retrospectively come to terms with how little he knew about himself and his cultural heritage and identity. It may be said that he has become more discursively and practically conscious. He has made an effort to learn through Native Studies courses offered through his university more about Aboriginal peoples, their culture, history and world-view. He better appreciates what has happened to Aboriginal peoples within Canada and as a more knowledgeable actor, he now believes that he is in a position to take a role in transforming the lives and experiences of his own people. Mike, Ericka and Tom believe that some form of Aboriginal studies should be offered in the school curriculum as a means of educating Aboriginal students particularly, and non-Aboriginal students more peripherally, about Aboriginal traditional life and world-view. Not being conscious of Aboriginal history and culture, for them, is no longer an acceptable excuse. The balance of this theme section considers the need for Aboriginal studies within schools as a means of supporting and promoting Aboriginal consciousness.

**Aboriginal Studies**

Three of the study participants believe that one way of improving their high school experience would have been to offer Aboriginal or First Nations Studies. In many universities, this is better known as Native Studies. What they are alluding to is a course or program where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students would have the opportunity to learn about the Aboriginal perspective. They were not fully explicit in their comments, but within the context of the interviews held it was apparent that what they were advocating for was a series of courses or a program, based on Aboriginal values such as respect, caring, sharing, honesty, kindness and spirituality, where students learn about Aboriginal
language, cultural knowledge and activities. Topics might cover the range of traditional lifestyle, seasonal activities, food, clothing, shelter, transportation, recreation, traditional roles of men and women, child-rearing, survival on the land, leadership, and the general lifestyle of Aboriginal peoples indigenous to their communities.

Within the Northwest Territories, there are already two vehicles that are supposed to address these matters and it would seem somewhat disconcerting that these former students have limited remembrance of them. The first has been described in the literature review on curriculum, Dene Kede, a community-based effort in cultural curriculum for children in kindergarten through to Grade 9. The curriculum is integrated across and through the other subject area disciplines, taking an experiential learning approach while emphasizing the local Aboriginal cultural activities. It draws upon community participation, the student’s personal experience and the teaching of Elders. While it is a relatively recent curriculum, it was assuredly in place through the school careers of these students. The second initiative is Northern Studies 10, a 3-credit mandatory course, designed to give secondary school students in the Northwest Territories knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the historical, cultural and social foundation of their Northern society; to help them appreciate the importance and uniqueness of the Northwest Territories as a distinct Northern region in Canada and in the world and to promote informed, respectful and engaged citizenship in a rapidly-changing society. The three units of study include: the study of Northern history and cultures, the study of significant Northern Issues, and lastly the exploration of land claims in the NWT context. On the surface, this seems to be somewhat responsive to what the students were suggesting. However, only one of the participants, Josephine, remembers the course as anything significant for them, suggesting that it did not leave a strong impression on the majority. Perhaps what is called for is a more authentic treatment of Aboriginal culture and perspective over the span of K-12 and in particular, over the high school years. Implied in the word authentic is the active participation of the Aboriginal community in the conception and organization of whatever is adopted and implemented. To date, the response has been in the delivery of Native Studies, while the students in this study have loosely alluded to it as Aboriginal studies or First Nations studies. Collectively what is being suggested is an intentional focus on Aboriginal history, culture and world-view, both infused or integrated within the curriculum and more
particularly in courses offered over the span of K-12. Marlene Brant Castellano, in speaking about what Native Studies means to the Aboriginal university student and their search for identity, assesses,

I think that the appeal of Native Studies to Aboriginal students is related to explaining ourselves to ourselves, bringing the world into focus because we acknowledge and value the perspective that we have. And as we learn more, that perspective comes into sharper focus. We acquire rational tools of research, analysis and argument to talk about the world in terms of social justice and human rights and we are able to form bridging relationships with others who adopt congruent ethical positions. So Native Studies is personally liberating and socially empowering. (Castellano, in DeGagné, 2002, p. 121)

This would support the possibility of Freire’s conscientização, or cultural circles, as students come to know themselves, see themselves framed within the historicity of Aboriginal peoples, understand what this has meant in terms of societal structures, and then eventually exercise their personal agency by engaging with the Other to dialogue about their lived realities. It was Freire’s conviction that all human beings, no matter how submerged in a “culture of silence” are capable of looking critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others. This is also foundational to Giddens’ double hermeneutic loop and to van Manen’s hermeneutical phenomenology, where equipped with the proper tools for such an encounter, aided and informed by knowledgeable Others, the individual can gradually perceive personal and social reality as well as the contradictions within it, become conscious of his or her own perception of that reality, reflexively monitor their lived realities and then deal with them critically.

**Theme: Spirituality or Spiritual Interconnection**

Another theme that surfaces comes from the common experience that a majority of study participants expressed as significant in their time at the high school. This may have been more top-of-mind because it was one of the last events in their high school career, but it seemed much more meaningful than merely an ending event. Four out of the six participants, Mike, John, Ericka and Amanda, identified the graduation retreat offered as a mandatory concluding graduation exercise as their best high school experience. Two, John and Ericka, identified a Grade 12 religion retreat, held at the
beginning of their Grade 12 year, as also memorable. Reasons offered for this, included interacting with friends, hanging out with classmates, listening to each other’s stories about school, the intense and personal sharing circle, connecting with all students, sharing, talking, laughing, fun and group activities. There was a strong emphasis expressed by the participants on spirit building, community building and sharing. Ericka especially brings this to the fore as she speaks to the sharing circle activity that is a staple feature of the graduation retreat. This activity is facilitated using an Aboriginal custom where the “talking stick” gives priority to the one who holds it and signals that respect must be paid to that individual. There is an atmosphere of reverence for one another, for the land where they camp, and for relationship. Again, we are mindful of the totality and oneness of the Aboriginal world-view where there is interconnectedness of all living things and an interdependence among them. This web of interconnectedness is between and among the individual, the community, in this case the graduation class, and between the community and nature. As Graveline (1998) more eloquently describes it,

In Aboriginal Traditional forms, the spiritual infuses a person’s entire existence within the world. A spiritual connection helps not only to integrate our self as a unified entity, but also to integrate the individual into the world as a whole. Spirituality is experienced as an ongoing process, allowing the individual to move towards experiencing connection—to family, community, society and Mother Earth. (p. 55)

For Aboriginal peoples, generally, the circle is central to their culture and is used in many aspects of daily living and teaching. Fyre Jean Graveline (1998) again, captures the sacred nature of the circle where she relates that, “part of the energy of the Circle has to do with the physical structure: a Circle has no head and no tail, no beginning and no end. Everyone is equal in a Circle; the point of reference is the middle, which is both empty and full of everything. Everyone is equidistant from the middle so there is no sense of hierarchy” (p. 130). It is through the Circle that Aboriginal people believe they will gain inspiration, renew personal vision and recreate a cohesive community. There is a connection between people within the Circle that promotes sharing, decision-making, conflict resolution and healing. “The Circle is a form that arises in nature and is imprinted upon our culture as well as our individual cells” (p. 130). The circle is a sacred space
and, perhaps intuitively, these participants are attuned to this. Graveline (1998) elaborates:

Because inequality, evaluation, separation and individualism are built into the School environment, special efforts have to be made to make the Circle a safe space, a ‘ceremonial basket’ where life-affirming things can happen. To do so, we can return to the ceremonial Traditions of our Elders. If we are going to honor spiritual interconnectedness, a central teaching of Circle work, care must be taken to do more than place ourselves in a circle formation. If our intentions are to revitalize rather than appropriate the powers of the Circle as an Ancestral form, we must invite the Ancestors and the other powers of life into our learning spaces... (p.132)

The school, through the retreat opportunities, offers students both the occasion(s) and the sacred space or “ceremonial basket” where life-affirming things can happen and where Aboriginal spiritual interconnectedness can occur. It is true that the students are not consciously aware of the significance of this activity, and Ericka even acknowledges not realizing it until after the fact when she shares with her mother. But it is apparent that the event and the sharing circle in particular have an impact on the four who cite it as memorable. The Aboriginal sensibility of spiritual interconnection may account for why it had such an impact upon them. This important element does not fit at present within the conceptual framework that was devised as an outline for this study, but is placed here in anticipation of the re-conceptualization phase.

The two participants who didn’t identify this event as their best experience, Josephine and Tom, had graduation recognition and awards as their standout memory, understandably more personal and momentous than other experiences might have been. The common denominator for the others who chose the graduation retreat as special was the sense of community and spiritual connection that permeated all of the activities throughout the event. Relationship and connection with people was an extraordinary part of their shared experience. Harkening back to the literature review and the section dealing with Aboriginal world-view, we recollect that the inward landscape or metaphysical journey to discovery marks the Aboriginal way. The great mysteries of life and their answers lie within one’s self and in the recognition that we are all part of the web of life, qualities that seem to permeate the retreats offered through their high school.
Theme: Resilience, Persistence and Motivation

Although the participants’ homes have been described as relatively stable, when we reflect back upon the words and experiences of our study participants, we can recognize that the majority faced life circumstances that were, at times, difficult or traumatic. Their social contextuality or positioning was not always favourable as often factors beyond their control conspired to create trying circumstances in their lives. This theme situates within the Identity heading of the Social Practice chart and, in particular, reflects the personal motivation of the participants. The following considers their life circumstances and also the possible source of their engagement in school.

We remember Mike and his early childhood, where an unstable home life with his mother, caused Social Services to intervene on an ongoing basis. He was no stranger to her alcohol and drug abuse. We recall that Ericka experienced the death of three close friends within the span of a 3-week period; death being something that most young people never encounter until much later in life. We get the sense of the impact that this had on her life as she continues to struggle with what has happened. We have seen John’s recent family break up, as his father left his mother, who as he describes her “has some foolish thoughts every now and then...” However, considered in the context of her abusive first marriage, the murder of her first husband, and the possible sexual abuse at the hands of a priest within a residential school, the intergenerational impact within the family seems apparent. We also saw in Amanda’s situation, an early marital break up of her parents, and the possible consequences, seen in her brother’s circumstances as he struggles with drug and alcohol addictions. Only Tom and Josephine seem to have escaped the traumatic, life-changing circumstances, such as those described above. Although, within Josephine’s extended family, we get the sense of some difficulties as Josephine’s family adopts her cousin, Samantha, in order to provide her with a stable home, an experience she had not had. While it might be argued that the modern family typically has difficulties and that such occurrences are sadly part of the present day fabric of life, it seems, based on the results of this study, that these Aboriginal families have had a disproportionate share. Yet despite the fact that five of the six participants have experienced troubling and trying circumstances in their lives, they have shown a remarkable resiliency and persistence in completing their schooling. What accounts for
this? It would seem that regardless of circumstances, that significant adults in the lives of these participants were also very resilient and persistent. Whether parents or surrogate parents, these adults provided direction, motivation and support to the participants in realizing their schooling goals. They have risen above some of their own personal circumstances to ensure that these young students could achieve graduation. Significant relationships played a role in the outcomes for these study participants, a theme explored earlier. The contribution and support of key and significant others, whether parents, siblings or teachers, has made a difference in the lives of each of the six individuals. In all cases, they set high expectations for them while providing high levels of support. In each case, there seemed to be a valuing of school and the ultimate goal of graduation, something we have already commented upon. There is an appreciation of the utility of a formal education and the possibility that it will bring to these young people. We think about Tom and Ericka who are in university, Josephine who desires yet to go to university and Mike, who intends to pursue a post-secondary diploma; all of them see value in a high school education, but even more so they desire to go beyond this level. In combination, these factors seemed to have produced some of the characteristics necessary for the family and the student to persevere and to be unwavering in their pursuit of an education.

Motivation for these students seemed to come from similar sources as those that DeGagné (2002) found in his study. These were adversity and expectation, obligation to others, love of learning and an internal concentration on goals and achievement. Firstly, as we have seen, most of the students in this study encountered some form of adversity, like personal circumstances, the fear of failing in the eyes of family or significant others in their lives, and concerns about “confirming the worst perceived shortcomings of Aboriginal people in the eyes of others” (p. 80). Secondly, we also saw many of the students feeling obligated to family members to complete Grade 12 and there was also the sense that it would be important for the community and therefore another level of obligation. Thirdly, many of the participants knew that completing an education would only benefit them and that learning for the sake of learning was a good and healthy thing. And fourthly, these students seemed compelled to complete, regardless of the obstacles, perhaps because of the ingrained expectations of significant others in their
lives, or maybe more because they had an internal drive and determination to achieve graduation, no matter what the obstacles.

Engagement

On a subtler level, there may be another factor at play within the six participants that has been suggested in the work of O'Connor (1997), who believed that, dispositions toward struggle are a mitigating factor in the future and academic orientations of minority adolescents who are acutely aware of structural constraints on social opportunity and mobility (p. 597). His argument was essentially that minority students are very mindful of the institutional and structural predispositions in our society—that they cater to the majority world-view and as such, their journey will necessarily be one of struggle and difficulty. This awareness is always in the background and plays itself out in some minority students in their determination to fight the odds regardless of how difficult it is. In fact, these students embrace the challenge. In this study, we see this recognition expressed in a variety of ways. Consider, Tom, who in comparing himself to some of his Aboriginal peers and friends who have chosen not to continue school, believes that they have made poor choices, a result of not seeing the big picture and understanding that by disengaging from the institutional structures of school, they end up hurting themselves. Tom retrospectively, because of his Native Studies experience in university, understands the implications of hegemony on Aboriginal history, on how Aboriginal people have been portrayed and on how they have been colonized. He is better able to frame now, what he knew as a younger high school student: that institutionalized structures within school would require an extraordinary effort to engage the status quo and to meet hegemony on its own terms; perhaps a microcosm of working within the Euro-centric scripts that Youngblood-Henderson (2000) decries. Mike shows some awareness of this phenomenon in recognizing that many Aboriginal students leave school before graduating, perhaps in what O'Connor (1997) describes as "maladaptive educational consequences" or "oppositional defiance" (p. 599) to the dominant institutional structures of school. But it may be that he sees more deeply the consequences of the history of Aboriginal peoples in the socio-economic realities that they face and the implications as students drop-out in despair and desperation. He credits his uncle for helping him to see school for what it was and for what it may provide to him. We have explored the seeming
acceptance of the institutional structures of our society, especially school, by both parents and students, and we can see that Mike, while not fully aware of these structures, at least can name what some of the consequences have been and understands that he had to work against some of these forces. John also recognizes some of the results as he sees the family dysfunction within Aboriginal families as part of the consequence of their historical treatment, stemming perhaps from self-hatred. We remember him saying, "...I couldn’t really understand why kids would drop-out but I mean I can see that the stress of somebody hating you and calling you names would push a person to just forget about school. Yeah, like I mean just the negativity that some parents I think—that would be the biggest thing—if someone was being rejected and not loved, I guess, would want to drop-out..." Again, the intergenerational effects have played a hand and John has seen the repercussions; almost intuitively, he understands that the life circumstances of Aboriginal families seems linked to the past, and he is aware that embracing school meant also engaging with the past and its institutional after-effects. Ericka identifies that the communities of Detah and N’dilo have been impacted by their proximity to the urban centre of Yellowknife and that this has had grave consequences on their Aboriginal language and culture. She understands that her generation has "looked away from our cultural perspectives" and that it is "starting to fade away..." She knows that her school has not fully reflected her culture and believes it should accommodate the Aboriginal students more. Again, there is a recognition that the institutional principles of school have not reflected the Aboriginal world-view and a cognizance also that, while she has engaged with school as it exists now, it would likely be beneficial to many Aboriginal students if school could better reflect them as people. Josephine, too, is aware that modern life is reflective of a dominant culture and that her Aboriginal culture has faded to the background. As we have seen, she is a self-described "city girl," denoting that she has embraced aspects of life more congruent with modern, urban life, than that of her traditional Aboriginal ancestors. She seems to be on the cusp of understanding that there must be some form of reconciliation between the life she lives now and that of her Elders, and that she has been somewhat complicit in this erosion. She seems more prepared to engage in this intercultural dialogue and to infuse some of the Aboriginal world-view into the institutional structures of our society. While it may not be said that all of the participants of this study were equally conversant
with the structural constraints of our society, and by extension our institutions, it can be said that to varying degrees the majority recognized the need to engage these institutions to produce positive change that better reflects them as people (p. 623).

**Perception of Structural Properties**

**Theme: Teachers**

Without exception, participants within this study all perceived teachers, generally, as one of the structural properties of the school that most made a difference in their achievements. As such, this theme sits within the Perceptions of Structural Properties of the school. Almost all of the students were able to identify at least one and sometimes several teachers who were there for them over the length of their high school career. Each of these teachers had, at some point, taught the respective students, but the relationship between them extended beyond the classroom walls. Here there is an intersection of relationship, teaching, and personal connection. This theme contemplates efficacy, personal attributes, mentorship and support, cross-cultural orientation and learning style.

Qualities that the participant students variously attributed to these consequential teachers, included personable, talkative, funny, easy to talk to, outgoing, responsive, encouraging, approachable and friendly. More importantly, however, they also said that these teachers proactively sought them out to support and assist them both academically and personally; that they gave them time and patiently responded to their needs; that they showed a genuine interest in them personally and that participants felt like they mattered as a person; that they understood their professional role, but could counterbalance this with personal support; that they all taught students and not just curriculum; and, lastly, they set high expectations for the students, but offered high support to achieve them. This last point is strongly suggested by each participant as an effective aspect of their relationship with these teachers—they both challenged and supported the students. Individual attention, personal coaching and one-on-one teaching was also an effective part of the teacher’s approach.
Efficacy

On the surface, these observations seem to align with the research literature presented by Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003), Bergstrom, Cleary and Peacock (2003), and Kleinfield (1995) who have all suggested that what matters most in successfully teaching Aboriginal students is teacher efficacy and not cultural discontinuity. Certainly, each of the participants of this study downplayed the role that culture played in their learning success, although several, Mike, Ericka, Josephine and Tom, instinctively felt that an Aboriginal world-view and sensibility would likely make a difference for Aboriginal students. What is most notable with these six participants is that they identify more universal human qualities of relationship and caring as important and give far less precedence to cultural knowledge or awareness as eminent in their learning. For these students, cultural discontinuity seems to play less of a role in their lived experiences. However, one cannot be sure that this is valid as what would need to be tested is whether being steeped in their Aboriginal traditions and world-view would make even more of a difference for them. Certainly, some of the students felt that this would have been a welcomed phenomenon and at the very least they feel that it would have made them more comfortable. The question that remains unanswered is just how much of a difference exposure to their Aboriginal culture, language and history within their school might have made in the performance of these students? If we are to accept the findings of Ogbu (1982, 1987), Ladson-Billings (1992, 1994, 1995a), Cajete (1994), Stairs (1995), Gay (2000, 2002), St. Denis (2002), and Kanu (2005, 2006), it would seem appropriate to integrate Aboriginal culture into many facets of the structural properties of schools. At the very least, it would likely enhance the relationship and connection with teachers, especially if they were to become familiar with the Aboriginal culture of the students, their backgrounds and their context. For Gay (2000), this is culturally responsive teaching, while for Ladson-Billings (1992) it would be a culturally relevant pedagogy. It is quite likely that the teachers from this study did, in fact, have some familiarity with the students’ cultural context, but this did not come out in the findings.

Personal Attributes

Taken as a collective, the findings from this study seem to support Bergstrom, Cleary and Peacock (2003) who determined that good teachers and teaching roughly
split into teaching and personal characteristics. Positive teaching attributes included having cultural knowledge, using encouragement, using explanation, using examples and analogies, having high expectations, being fair and demanding respect for all learners, being flexible, being helpful, being interested in students, listening and trying to understand and using multiple approaches. Personal attributes included being caring, being friendly, being fun, being mellow, being open-minded, having patience, respecting students and staying (as opposed to leaving the school or community) (p. 160-170). Some would argue that these attributes just represent good teachers and teaching, but the critical differentiator is having cultural knowledge and using it to better connect and understand students.

**Learning Style**

Another finding that seems to bear consideration under the teaching theme is that of learning style. The predominant preference of the study participants was what they called a hands-on orientation. Four of the six participants expressed this directly, while the other two expressed that visual learning, group work and one-on-one coaching worked best for them. This, in turn, translated into a preference for project-based assignments, demonstrations, experiments, vocational experiences and experiential learning activities such as field trips. Learning is alive, experience-based and steeped within a real-world orientation.

**Theme: Language and Culture**

Aboriginal people speak about language and culture in the same breath, as much as they do culture and the land—each comprising the sacred triduum of Indigenous identity. Fluency in an Aboriginal language is seen as critical because without it Aboriginal culture will be lost because it is impossible to translate the deeper meaning of words and concepts into the languages of other cultures. This has been described as “linguistic culture”, the role that language plays in the community. “It includes how language is used (stories, gossip, conversation, negotiation, etc.) and how language maintains individual and group identity and transmits material, social, and cognitive culture from one generation to the next” (Leavitt, 1995, p. 126). Additionally, “the studying and honoring of oral traditions and orality in children offer essential insights into
natural learning. The human oral orientation to education offers techniques as well as windows into the world of Indigenous education" (Cajete, 1994, p. 131). Once more, Marie Battiste at the RCAP hearings, captured the intimate interrelationship between Aboriginal language, culture and thought:

The language is the cement and the bonds. It provides the moral communion, if you will, of the community. And when we begin to take that language away from the people, when we replace it with this other language called English, we tear the people away from the very rudiments of that language in terms of the relationships of people to each other, the relationship to their universe, their relationships to the animals and plants. We take away their interconnectedness and we leave them empty, lost and alone. (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996, Vol.3, Chp5, s3.5.5)

Peacock (2002) framed the essential debate on whether or not language and culture should play a role in schools in all of its complexities.

The debate generated is not only between Indian and non-Indian but is a subject of contention within the tribal community as well. Not only is it argued whether or not school is the proper place to teach language and culture, but how and what should be taught is challenged...The traditionalists believe that language and culture do not belong in schools but should be taught by the elders or family...Others are of the opinion that because schools played such a powerful role in the decline of...Indian languages they should be expected to play a role in their restoration. (p. 164)

Loss

Sadly, all of the study participants did not know their Aboriginal language and had limited, if any, exposure to their culture. As we have seen, the reasons for this are varied, but the net effect is that all of the students were not intimately familiar with their Aboriginal identity. Again, this frame of reference comes from the Aboriginal scholars who acknowledge the interwoven nature of Aboriginal identity as including language and culture. Some of the participants, Tom, Josephine, and Ericka, expressed interest in learning more, and, in fact, have begun to pursue a better understanding and working knowledge of their ancestors. None of the participants could be described as knowledgeable actors with respect to their culture and history. This seems foundational if
ever they are to find this missing piece of themselves, part of their Aboriginal identity. As
discussed earlier in the Language literature review section, schools have a role that they
can play in facilitating the cultural conversations that need to take place. It is not possible
for them to provide for the whole solution, but schools can begin to support a two-way
integration that engages both Aboriginal students and their cultures and non-Aboriginal
students and their cultures. Portraying positive contemporary images of Aboriginal
people, grounded in their Aboriginal language and culture, may contribute to an
Aboriginal child’s sense of inclusion. This goes beyond a strict interpretation of language
and culture as teachers and schools make an effort to read literature written by
Aboriginal people, provide varied perspectives of historical events, explore different
world-views, and consider Aboriginal artistic expression in the arts. Learning goes
beyond this infusion of Aboriginal content into the institutional principles and structures
of school to a construction of new understanding by all. Any efforts made to reinforce
Aboriginal language and culture should likely be attended to, as a partial answer to the
loss. It is apparent through the study participants that many factors have contributed to
the loss of their language and culture and it will require redress through an equal number
of responses both within Aboriginal families and communities and by societal institutions.

**Theme: Extra-curricular Involvement**

Three of six study participants, Ericka, Josephine and Tom, identified clearly that
their involvement in extra-curricular activities within their high school, made a
considerable difference in their overall school experience. In particular, for these three it
was their athletic pursuits that played a role in their ontological security within high
school. Some of the other participants, like Mike, recognized that involvement in extra-
curricular activities could have made a difference in their overall high school experience,
acknowledging that clubs, travel and outside the classroom activities would add value
and contribute to their sense of belonging. For the three participants mentioned above,
school sports or elite sports, and especially team sports, contributed favourably to their
self-concept, feeling of belonging and relationship building. Sporting activities generated
enjoyment, connection and the opportunity for them to demonstrate their sport and
physical competencies. These competencies in the sports setting and the feelings
generated by their participation seems to have had a powerful bearing on their
confidence levels as they indicated that they had positive feelings of pride, strength and passion about themselves. This seems to have parlayed itself into the classroom and the school generally as all three of the students who played school sports also achieved success in several other domains, recognized by the school in year-end ceremonies and celebrations. These students became well rounded and accomplished young Aboriginal people and they realized that they were role models for other Aboriginal students. Additionally, these students formed relationships with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students alike, all of who accepted them based upon their athletic prowess and competence and not based upon their ethnicity. Beyond the physical and sports competence, sporting activities seemed to enhance their respective social competencies. Extra-curricular activity is an area of school life that needs further examination in the context of Aboriginal student performance within high school. It is also not a topic I originally included in the conceptualization of this study. It, too, will need to find a home on the right-hand side of the framework.

**Team Sports**

Enjoyment and attraction to team sports seemed especially notable with these young students, who spoke about soccer, hockey and volleyball participation and performance. It may be that what most attracted them to these sports, aside from the need to experience the joy of participation, was the cooperative nature of team sport, a characteristic of many Aboriginal traditional activities. While the competitiveness of these individuals came out in the interviews, they also stressed the sense of community, togetherness and the spirit of gamesmanship and sportsmanship that permeated these activities. Team dynamics such as possessing a common goal, cohesion, sharing, cooperation, helping and working together to achieve a common outcome seems to fit well with the Aboriginal valuing of the group. At the same time, sport may have been an equalizer, as sports do not necessarily recognize ethnicity first, but rather competence and skill. The proverbial “equal playing field” literally may be a reality. The participants also stressed the diversity of the other players on the teams they were part of as a factor. These participants were a part of something beyond culture and ethnicity and the medium of sport facilitated social competencies and comfort among them as well as a sense of belonging.
Reconsideration of the Conceptual Framework

Prior to the presentation of the thematic findings, it was suggested that they might influence a refinement of the conceptual framework used to hang this study upon. That is because van Manen’s phenomenological methodology anchors the belief that as researcher there is a continuous re-evaluation and re-conceptualization, prompted by the themes, for a potentially new structuring strategy. Several significant re-conceptualizations occurred over the course of this study, but as suggested earlier, only a modest fine-tuning of the right-hand side of the framework has been conducted to better portray the combined thematic voice of the study participants. It was not necessary to add every thematic element into the framework as many were already represented. A revised conceptualization of the study framework can be seen in Figure 2. For instance, under the Social Contextuality/Positioning heading we can find family, friends, role models and parental support, all of which were anticipated and did, in fact, surface in our discussion of relationships. This was also true of the Teacher theme as it was contemplated under the Perception of Structural Properties segment of the framework. However, the thematic findings suggested that some additions needed to be made.

The first was to acknowledge Giddens’ Theory of Structuration, by placing it as the first consideration when attempting to understand the lived experiences of Aboriginal students within the context of society and its microcosm, school. The dynamic interplay between and among the structural principles and institutions of our society over time, has led to a Western context that becomes part of every person’s lived reality and undergirds every agent’s experiences, regardless of setting. The second was to include Socio-economic conditions under the Social Contextuality/Positioning heading. Both the literature and the findings from this study support that a contemplation of the socio-economic conditions of Aboriginal people generally and the participant families in particular, is warranted. This is especially so, in light of the discussions centring on the notion of cultural discontinuities and their impact compared to socio-economic conditions of Aboriginal families and their related life limitations. Any contemplation of Aboriginal student performance will necessarily entertain these two issues. Under the Identity heading, it seems appropriate to add now, Consciousness, Ambivalence and Spirituality
as outlined above. The first two are very much intertwined with how and whether these students identified themselves as Aboriginal students and strikes at the heart of the

**Figure 2:**

**Structuration: Social Practice—Revised**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural/Institutional (School-System Integration) Objective</th>
<th>Individual/Agent (Student-Social Integration) Subjective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Systems of Interaction</strong> (Macro-level)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Historicity: Ellipse of the Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Historicity: The Canadian Context</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Aboriginal Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Historicity of Education in the NWT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- World-view Differences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Social Dominance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Institutions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School: Structural Properties of the Institution</strong> (Micro-level)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Curriculum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Voice</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledgeability</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dialectic of Control?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Self-concept
- Culture/Tradition
- Ambivalence
- Consciousness
- Spirituality
- Personal Motivation

**School Experience**
- Contextuality
- "Ontological Security"
- Belonging
- First Nation Perspective

**School: Perceptions of Structural Properties**
- Teaching
- Language and Culture
- Curriculum
- Extra-curricular Activities
rather ambiguous feelings many of them had in interacting with the institutional principles and structural properties of our society. The spiritual component admittedly needs further exploration, but seems inherently part of the Aboriginal community and sense of well-being. Under the Perceptions of Structural Properties heading, the word Language has been added to the sub-heading, Culture, to better reflect the interwoven nature of the two and the need to take some responsibility in supporting Aboriginal languages in our schools. Lastly, the sub-heading Extra-Curricular has been included within the key structural properties of school that these students felt did or could have made a difference in their school experiences. The changes made occur on the right-hand of the framework because it represents the personal agency of the Aboriginal actors of this study and it was the purpose to determine what emerging factors contributed to their success. While a “fore-conception” was possible prior to the study, it was by its very nature a series of open-ended questions that would lead to new discoveries and new learning, and therefore a re-thinking of what was relevant and important. This process of reflexive monitoring and the double hermeneutic loop enabled the researcher to re-invent his thinking and to embrace both the dialogue with the participants and the interior dialogue with himself to better position the findings.

Suggestions for Future Research

The themes from this research suggested above offer other opportunities for further inquiry. Research opportunities in considering the implications of extra-curricular activities for the ontological security of Aboriginal students; consideration of what form of Aboriginal studies program might be most effective within a school jurisdiction; contemplation of what form of praxis is most effective in engaging students in the transformative, intercultural dialogue advocated by Freire and Giroux; seeking answers to the question of the role of cultural continuity in learning styles and its effectiveness; and, attempting to discern what role Aboriginal spirituality may have in student success. One of the most intriguing questions might be what role extra-curricular activities play within an integrated school environment in facilitating a sense of belonging for Aboriginal students? Or, perhaps, more particularly, what role sports play in providing Aboriginal students with ontological security in high school? The review of the structural
properties of school did not consider extra-curricular activities and yet it seems they played a vital role in the experiences of some of the study participants. Activities outside of the classroom seemed to have an impact on the performance of these successful Aboriginal students, in terms of their acceptance within the school, their ability to form relationships outside of their immediate group of friends, their enhanced social competencies and their exposure to broader life experiences. Is this significant as a “bridge” or a mediator in connecting the two worlds that Aboriginal students must contend with when entering an integrated high school?

Another potential area for study would be to examine what existing Native Studies or First Nations Studies high school programs exist within Canada and to determine the content and approach that they take in engaging students within a high school setting. Is it a program of studies? Is it a course? When does it begin? Should it begin prior to high school? Is it mandatory or optional? Are both Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal students in the program? How is the local Aboriginal community involved in the delivery of the program? What is its history? How was it developed? What are the goals and outcomes identified by each? How successful are the programs in achieving the outcomes? Is there an alignment between the research on effective Aboriginal practice within schools and actual practice?

Drilling down deeper on actual practice or methodology, the question of how to engage both Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students in a meaningful and transformational cultural conversation presents itself. Freire (2006) has offered cultural circles, Giroux (1988) advocates for border pedagogy, Gay (2000) promotes a culturally responsive pedagogy, Nussbaum (1997) insists on a cross-cultural understanding, Stairs (1995) desires a cultural brokerage, and Ladson-Billings (1992, 1994, 1995a) calls for a culturally relevant pedagogy; all long on philosophic underpinnings, but perhaps short on practical application. How is democratic dialogue and cultural contestation accommodated within the institutional structures, principles and life-world of the school? In other words, what is best practice in engaging students in the kind of critical cultural conversations that might realize the kind of outcomes each of the above scholars desires? Are there examples in the field where this form of cultural brokerage is being practiced? What are the practical attributes and characteristics of a successful approach?
to this transformational, intercultural dialogue? What are the outcomes from such an approach? What are the next steps once such an approach is established? How has such an approach made a difference?

How do Aboriginal students learn? Or as framed earlier, "The question that remains unanswered is just how much of a difference exposure to their Aboriginal culture, language and history within their school might have made in the performance of these students?" The theme dealing with teachers affirms many attributes that seem to make a difference in teaching these Aboriginal students, but calls into question the cultural discontinuity theory. Firstly, is this accurate? If more studies were conducted that attempted to determine, like Kanu (2006), what role cultural congruence plays in the learning of Aboriginal students, it could be especially useful. This study affirms the findings of Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003), Bergstrom, Cleary and Peacock (2003), and Kleinfield (1995) who have all suggested that what matters most in successfully teaching Aboriginal students is teacher efficacy and not cultural discontinuity. But would culturally responsive teaching, or culturally relevant pedagogy make an even bigger difference for Aboriginal students? The second aspect to this question is what learning style implications there may be for Aboriginal students. Again, this study seems to support an experiential, hands on orientation supported by example, project-based activities, cooperative grouping and visual preferences. Again, there is a danger in ascribing an ethnically specific learning style, because there will always be exceptions and, moreover, there are always those who wish to generalize the preferences into a stereotype. However, as Gay (2000) frames the issue:

Characteristics of learning styles are pedagogically promising to the extent that they illuminate patterns of cultural values and behaviours that influence how children learn, and they provide functional directions for modifying instructional techniques to better meet the needs of ethnically diverse students. (p. 147)

Gay believes that responding to the learning style question can promote cultural continuity in the teaching and learning process. Is this the case?

The much-heralded Joe Duquette High School situated within the city of Saskatoon, claims that much of its success with Aboriginal students lies in its focus on
Aboriginal spirituality. "Joe Duquette's successes and its uniqueness are based primarily in the consistent and insistent commitment of all involved to a focus on Aboriginal spirituality within the school and all the relationships there" (Haig-Brown et al., 1997, p. 33). Spiritual activities unique to the Plains Cree and respect for the teachings of Elders are central to everything the school does with its Aboriginal students. With respect to the vision of the school, this was a very deliberate validation of both Aboriginal cultural and spiritual traditions and values, and represented the touchstone of the school.

When you talk culture and spirituality in our school, it needs to be talked about in the context of wholeness and health and wholism and not in isolation. Culture and spirituality in our school is not a component unto itself, it's a marriage of wellness and wholeness and integrity. (p. 34)

Unlike the secular nature of the majority of our public schooling, this school places at its heart the spiritual dimension of a people. The short examination earlier of the theme, Spiritual Interconnection, may in fact suggest that further exploration of this important facet of Aboriginal life should be conducted. How do we account for the positive response that these study participants had when they experienced a graduation retreat that featured a combination of the land, the community and the sharing circle? Does a conscious and overt effort to address both Aboriginal culture and spirituality within the school or institutional environment, make the kind of difference that the Joe Duquette High School claims? Joe Duquette High School is one model for "making the spirit dance within" (Haig-Brown, 1997). Are there other institutional approaches that might be employed to accomplish the same thing? Are there other examples of Aboriginal schools where this kind of emphasis has been shown to be effective? How might Aboriginal spirituality be infused within an integrated public school setting?

Implications for Practice

Just as this study suggests areas of interest for future study and consideration, it also has implications for potential practice. We will remember that van Manen (1990) expressed that pedagogy is the experience of reflective questioning while living with and side-by-side, children. We need to listen to learn from those children or from student voice. We need to be steeped in pedagogic practice, where as researchers we do not
separate theory from life, and we are oriented to the world in a pedagogic way, where we produce understandings, interpretations, and formulations to strengthen our practice (p. 152). Our goal, again, is to produce a rich and thick description of a phenomenon in all its experiential ramifications so that “in textual terms, these epistemological considerations translate into an interest in anecdotal, story, narrative, or phenomenological description” (p. 152). The outcome we were seeking to achieve was to use human science as a critically oriented action research vehicle, to become more thoughtfully or attentively aware of aspects of human life and to use these findings to improve upon present practice. “Phenomenology responds to the need for theory of the unique, and phenomenological reflection makes possible a neglected form of pedagogic learning: thoughtful learning” (p. 157). The purpose of this study was to better understand the issue of Aboriginal student performance in schools, especially high school and to get a student perspective on what that experience has been for them. By listening to student voices, it was hoped that there might be some findings that would assist in better supporting Aboriginal students in school performance. In recognizing what worked for them, perhaps there would be some changes in the structural properties and institutional protocols that would benefit Aboriginal students. The following is based upon the “knots in the webs” of Aboriginal student school and life experiences, through which it is hoped that we have realized some “meaningful wholes” (van Manen, 1990, p. 90), some meaningful understanding that may lead to improved praxis.

**Structural Accommodation**

Our institutions, particularly schools, must structurally accommodate Aboriginal students, creating conditions under which the minority student can meaningfully engage in conversation with the dominant culture of the school. This is not just about reinforcing their language and culture within the context of school. From a grassroots perspective, it is even more imperative that opportunities for engagement be created so that intercultural dialogue may be established not only between cultures of different countries around the globe, but especially for different cultures within our own country. As a microcosm of our society, schools are situated to instigate and accommodate this change in structural principles, to initiate the beginning of this “world reversal” (Tully, 1995, p. 21), so that students may “learn the art of mutual recognition” (p. 23). As part of
a structuration process, students would participate in a "multilogue" (p. 24), where "habitual forms of recognition," often stultifying in nature, "need to be upset and reversed from time to time" (p. 25). When viewed through the optics of community, an analogy can be made to Tully's (1995) argument that "citizens have a sense of belonging to, and identification with, a constitutional association" when "they have a say in the formation and governing of the association" and when "they see their own cultural ways publicly acknowledged and affirmed in the basic institutions of our society" (p. 197).

**Relationship Building**

A key finding from this study has been that relationship on many levels is paramount for Aboriginal students. What are the implications of this for our practice within schools? How might we better achieve consistently, the quality of relationship suggested by each of the study participants, at the school level, especially with teachers? The kind of connection that made a difference for these students should be reproducible at every level of schooling, given a commitment by the school jurisdiction, schools and teaching staff. What kind of activities and events would foster opportunities for relationship development? And how might these be implemented in a culturally responsive manner? The questions are a good starting point for contemplating how to structurally accomplish this in a more planned manner. Extra-curricular activities seem to be a vehicle that facilitate and mediate for Aboriginal students. These do not just have to be athletic in nature, but could also include travel, art, crafts and other interest avenues that rise above the cultural boundaries of the participants. Events like graduation retreats and other forms of retreats have the potential to reinforce their culture, spirituality and interdependent relationships. Cultural camps, on the land experiences and other cultural activities can be integrated into the life-world of the school. Community events like feasts or drum dances may well facilitate relationships beyond just teacher-student ones. Connecting with the Aboriginal community, making school more accessible and comfortable for families of the students and proactively seeking to involve them in school-based events and activities would seem to hold high potential. The implementation of a mentorship program, such as the one proposed next, involving teachers, school staff, community adult members and Elders may well hold possibility, especially if the relationships between the school and community are strengthened. This
speaks to the need to learn how to talk to one another and to overcome the "institutional shyness" that both parties experience. To be "strong like two people" requires that each culture engages with the other, contests and debates with one another and through the process comes to know one another and as a result, reciprocally change in the process. This can only be done in relationship with one another.

**Mentorship and Support**

One striking construct that emerged, upon reflection of the words and thoughts of the study participants, was how critical it was for them to overcome "institutional shyness" and the role that teachers played in this phenomenon. Remember that several of the participants, Josephine, Ericka, and Mike, alluded to the fact that they were reluctant to seek out help, a possible cultural norm. Eventually, once they asked for assistance, they began to bloom under the tutelage of a caring teacher or teachers. This roots even deeper as several alluded to the fact that they felt awkward and self-conscious when first joining the school. Imagine if teachers were assisted in more formally recognizing and engaging with Aboriginal students in a planned way. Imagine how an intervention-minded approach might better assist Aboriginal students in connecting both personally and institutionally. Imagine if, instead of having to wait until high school, these students are "taken under wing" within a mentorship program designed to assist them in becoming socially comfortable, culturally supported and academically engaged. In particular, such a program could minimally begin at Grade 6, a stage where adolescent turbulence frequently begins; where they are beginning to traverse the risks of adolescence; and, where self-consciousness plays dramatically in the student psyche. Such a program would assist students in establishing meaningful connections with a significant adult in the school setting. This adult ideally would be Aboriginal, but that would not be as critical as having any adult, regardless of ethnicity, take an interest in students. A mentor's prime purpose would be to help the young person define and achieve their goals. Since the expectations of each child would vary, it would be the mentor's focus to encourage the development of a flexible relationship that responds to the mentor's skills and interests and the young person's needs. The overarching concern for the mentor would be to expose the student protégé to new experiences, while encouraging positive choices, promoting self-esteem and supporting
academic achievement. The building blocks of such an approach would include the mentor building a relationship with the protégé, listening reflectively and asking good questions, and lastly providing supportive, tangible feedback to the student. The key to success would be in establishing a direct, one-to-one connection with the student, where the student would feel comfortable in accessing the mentor for counsel and advice. The ultimate goal would be to help convince each student that they belong, that someone does care for them within the institution, and that the school experience can be fun and worthwhile. From the student perspective, it would be expected that they would establish a personal connection that they are comfortable with; that they would experience more educational success because of academic coaching; that they would feel more of a connection to the school; that they would, over time, assume increasing control over their own learning; and lastly, that they would become positive contributors to the school environment and to the community at large. Ultimately, such a program would not leave personal connection to chance, but rather would proactively anticipate each and every Aboriginal student’s needs, adjusting to them and allowing their particular circumstances to dictate an appropriate response.

Aboriginal Studies

As alluded to under the theme of Consciousness, there is also a need to review, research and consider what form of Native Studies program might better engage Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students alike. Part of this process should include a review of present practice and how effective it has been. For instance, a review should be undertaken of the Northern Studies 10 course offered in the Northwest Territories as well as how better to integrate Dene Kede into other curricular areas. It would appear that they have not, as of yet, had the desired effect if the small sampling of this study is representative. Whatever the result, there should be a revitalized effort to examine and explore the curricular means by which the Northwest Territories and its school boards might better educate their students about the history of the Territorial Indigenous peoples. The focus could very much be on some of the main outcomes suggested for a prospective program. Again, the emphasis being on Aboriginal students knowing themselves, seeing themselves, naming the world and on the possibilities of
transforming it. Part of that transformation would include those who are non-Aboriginal as fellow travellers on the path to understanding.

Content of such a program, especially at the high school level, should have as its focus the general aim of making both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students more aware of the cultural and historical perspectives of Aboriginal people within the Canadian mosaic. A major objective of such a course would be to foster a greater feeling of pride and personal awareness amongst Aboriginal students and for the non-Aboriginal students to develop a greater cross-cultural sensitivity and appreciation. Ultimately, it would be to promote the development of positive attitudes in all students towards Indigenous peoples. Intercultural dialogue and understanding would be one of the principle methodologies and goals of this approach. General learning outcomes might be something like what follows.

- Students will define culture and compare cultural similarities between and among many cultures in the world.
- Students will consider their own culture on a day-to-day basis.
- Students will discuss the harmful effects of ethnocentrism as a divisive force in our world.
- Students will display an understanding of who Aboriginal people are and what Aboriginal culture is.
- Students will compare indigenous peoples from around the world to better understand their similarities and differences.
- Students will appreciate the influence of Aboriginal peoples on the development of Canada.
- Students will increase their knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal ceremonies, rituals and languages.
- Students will explore the Aboriginal perspective of Canadian history and set it within the context of World history.
- Students will be able to identify and describe the structure and importance of Aboriginal families including traditional values.
- Students will explore the roadblocks Aboriginal people have faced in their history.
- Students will understand Aboriginal contemporary issues and their historical basis.
Students will understand such concepts as world-view, colonization, Euro-centric, ethnocentrism, Aboriginal, indigenous, and others in order to form a working vocabulary and knowledge of Canadian Aboriginal peoples.

Cross-cultural Orientation

We have seen in the results above that teachers really do make a difference in the lives of students. On so many levels, the teachers of the Aboriginal students within this study group have done many of the right things. Unfortunately, it would appear that much of what they do and how they relate to the students is because of their personal agency and not necessarily because of school or district protocol or policy. One potential practice to consider for any school district attempting to improve in its delivery of education to Aboriginal students is to establish a cross-cultural orientation process that will help teachers understand the local Aboriginal community context, culture and worldview. This, of course, would be dependent on context and the demographics of a school or school district. Where there is a significant population of Aboriginal students, and where there are concurrent high levels of disengagement, a cultural orientation would seem a good starting place in changing the dynamic of what is happening. As we have discussed, addressing the cultural identity of students will not solve the problem of disengagement on its own, but it is a good starting point in understanding who the students are before us, part of an effective teaching repertoire that the research supports. By overtly setting up a program that sets out to educate participants about who their Aboriginal students are, what their beliefs, values and customs have been and the potential implication for teaching practice, a district would go a long way to ensuring that teachers and staff can optimally connect with their students. Necessary to such a project is the involvement of the Aboriginal community, its leaders and Elders. This kind of foundation can only begin to improve the prospects of a cultural conversation and the kind of connection that is so valued by students and promoted by the authors of the various studies cited herein, that proclaim relationship and the personal characteristics of teachers as paramount in the success of Aboriginal students. Inherent in this process of dialogic interchange is the kind of cultural conversation that has been repeatedly underscored throughout this dissertation, where all parties have something to learn and understand. Interestingly, a seamless extension of this process may well be Friere’s
cultural circles or conscientização, which could provide the vehicle for not only two-way learning, but in this case, for consciousness raising for the Aboriginal students who may not be intimately familiar with their own traditional past. Included, as part of the Aboriginal studies that the student participants advocated for, might be an ongoing conversation structured to continue within the context of the school and its everyday structural properties.

We can again turn to Alaska for a model that builds off their Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools. Essentially, Aboriginal educators got together in 2003 to create guidelines for a cross-cultural orientation program that would support the schools and educators attempting to implement the standards for culturally responsive schools (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 2003). The guidelines are organized around various roles related to culturally responsive schooling in Alaska. They encourage schools to strive to be reflections of their communities by incorporating and building upon the cultural traditions and knowledge of peoples indigenous to the area. Each section of the guidelines addresses a particular educational role group, briefly describes the group’s responsibilities toward cross-cultural understanding, and then lists specific actions for the respective group. The sections address: (a) communities, tribes, and Native organizations, (b) school districts and administrators, (c) principals and teachers, (d) schools and school staff, (f) state policy makers and state education agencies, (g) tribal colleges and universities, and (h) sponsors of cultural immersion camps. Eight general recommendations are offered to support implementation of the guidelines. It is not a new concept to address cross-cultural orientation sessions for those who will be working with Aboriginal students, but the practical guidelines and recommendations make this work a useful document for those who might wish to establish their own program. Non-Aboriginal school staff cannot fully begin to understand Aboriginal culture unless structural elements are put in place to facilitate such learning. This does not negate the fact that teachers within this study seem to have been successful with Aboriginal students based upon their own personal and professional agencies and their determination to meet both individual as well as the diverse cultural needs of the students. Again, we are reminded of how important connection and relationship are in the learning equation for all students.
Cultural Circles and Reflexive Monitoring

As referenced above, part of the "conversation" advocated above, can be informed by the work of Freire and Giroux, whose stance on culture is instructive as it assists us in understanding how culture plays a role, much like cartilage between bones, in connecting and buffering agency and structure, the micro and the macro, to mediate and transform society. Giroux (1988) succinctly captures this conception:

For Freire, culture is the representation of lived experiences, material artefacts, and practices forged within the unequal and dialectical relations that different groups establish in a given society at a particular historical point. Culture is a form of production whose processes are intimately connected with the structuring of different social formations, particularly those that are gender, age, racial, and class related. It is also a form of production that helps human agents, through their use of language and other material resources, to transform society. In this case, culture is closely related to the dynamics of power and produces asymmetries in the ability of individuals and groups to define and achieve their goals. Furthermore, culture is also an area of struggle and contradiction, and there is no one culture in the homogeneous sense. On the contrary, there are dominant and subordinate cultures that express different interests and operate from different and unequal terrains of power. (pp. 116-117)

For Freire and Giroux, culture represents a starting point in the discourse between agency and structure, between the micro and the macro, between particularities and the more universal. Freire views cultural power as an opportunity to bridge between the political and the pedagogical, as a means to use one of society's institutions, school, perhaps the key institution in terms of transmitting social practices and ideologies, to effect the kind of transformation that Giddens sees taking place in the crucible of critical reflexive monitoring. The asymmetrical quality he ascribes to this dialectical exchange is an acknowledgement of Giddens' knowledge base, necessary for agents to better understand their social context and the social structures available to them, to better exercise their agency in a responsible manner. This process does not presume a superficial understanding of one's own culture and experience, but rather demands a critical analysis of the culture of the oppressed in relation to the dominant knowledge base. In the language of Sidanius and Pratto, the dominant, hegemonic group and the negative reference group must better know the Other. But even more essentially, the negative reference group must know itself. Such is the case in this study,
where it seems that participants may not fully comprehend their culture and by extension may not really know themselves. Only once they do can a responsible dialogue, both on the macro and micro levels of society be achieved. George Erasmus (1977) has advocated that Aboriginal people must throw off the yoke of epistemological colonialism and begin the process within themselves. This requires a revitalization of all Indigenous cultural aspects including language. Schools may partially facilitate the ways and means to ensure that Aboriginal students become conscious agents, knowledgeable about themselves, so as to meaningfully engage in the conversation. However, it cannot happen in isolation and must include the Aboriginal community as the key drivers of the process. Ward and Bouvier (2001) cite Stuart Hall who argues that:

> identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from,' so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. (p. 28)

Aboriginal voice and power in choosing what paths they wish to pursue individually and collectively is personal agency, a part of a process of “reconstruction” where Aboriginal students come to understand what it has meant to be Aboriginal for other generations (Ward & Bouvier, 2001, p. 29). Only through this continuous and constant reflexive monitoring will understanding be realized.

In essence, Freire, Giroux and many of their contemporaries are calling for a Critical Pedagogy (CP), dedicated to resisting the harmful effects of dominant power. Its intent is to politicize the educational process in such a way to encourage agents, students and citizens to question and deliberate upon the hidden political assumptions and the colonial, racial, gender and class biases of schooling, a process that Giroux (1993) has called a “pedagogy of representation” (p. 115). We see here the intersection of agents and their social identities/esteem, social context, social institutions, cultural ideologies and historical background and all of their complexities. Part of the process must be one of “destructuring” or reshaping the contours of our social practices, an area where schools have an important role to play.
Interculturalism

Our institutions, inclusive of their structural properties and principles, must be established in such a way to allow for people and students to have a voice, both from a cultural and participatory perspective. As Asha Varadharajan (2000) eloquently describes:

...the grinning pluralism that the notion of harmonious diversity conjures up precludes the possibility of genuine difference—indeed, of dissidence. Multiculturalism should not be viewed as a state of quiescence. It should be envisaged as a domain full of conflict in which dominant and minority cultures contest meanings, identities, values and interests on a regular basis. This characterization is not to be confused with a desire to foment hostility; rather, my intention is to insist upon the fraught nature of struggles for self-definition and equity, upon the difficulty they present and the intricate attention they demand. (p. 144)

Echoing Varadharajan in advocating for a new kind of constitutionalism to meet the demands of a "strange multiplicity" of cultures in our land, James Tully (1995) remarks:

Not only do cultures overlap geographically and come in a variety of types. Cultures are also densely interdependent in their formation and identity. They exist in complex historical processes of interaction with other cultures. The modern age is intercultural rather than multicultural. The interaction and entanglement of cultures has been further heightened by the massive migrations of this century. Cultural diversity is not a phenomenon of exotic and incommensurable others in distant lands and at different stages of historical development...No. It is here and now in every society. Citizens are members of more than one dynamic culture and the experience of "crossing" cultures is normal activity. (p. 11)

There is a changing human composition afoot across the globe and here within our own country. Student behaviours will always be reflective of the cultures that they draw from and will always provide the beginning point for what Nussbaum (1997) in channelling Cornwell and Stoddard identifies as interculturalism. "Interculturalism...connotes the sort of comparative searching that they have in mind, which they argue, should prominently include the recognition of common human needs across cultures and of dissonance and critical dialogue within cultures." (1997, p. 82). As human beings we are all common in our differences. Only through "border pedagogy" (Giroux, 1988, 2006) will students begin to embrace more of a "world citizen" perspective and an appreciation steeped
within their own particular experience of the global diversity that is part of our social imaginary. All the evidence suggests that the massive dislocation, movement and interaction of peoples caused by decolonization and globalization will increase cultural diversification and potential conflict. More than ever, a form of cultural citizenship (Rosaldo, 1994, p. 402) is being called for, both within our society and its microcosm, the institution of school. This oxymoron refers to the right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense, to be free and belong, to be an individual agent and a part of the larger society, to have diversity within unity and community.

**Culturally Responsive**

Perhaps more importantly, how does a school jurisdiction structure itself to become a culturally responsive institution? What lessons, considering the research work of Gay, Ladson-Billings, Freire, Stairs, Ogbu, Battiste, St. Denis, Reyhner, and so many others whose contributions have moved the Aboriginal quest for recognition along its resilient path, can assist the leadership of our schools in realizing such an environment? How do we infuse the cultural dimension of our Aboriginal students into the culture of the school? Beyond the Aboriginal studies, this study and its research suggest there is a role for schools to play in supporting language revitalization. While there are logistical and professional issues in doing so, the point made by many of the scholars here is that you begin with what you have and move forward as capacity allows you to do so. It begins with teaching staff who are culturally responsive and also pedagogically competent. It begins in relationship with the students, in challenging and supporting them to achieve their potential, in establishing an ethic of care for them that says that they are important, and in establishing an environment where the spiritual interconnection is fostered and promoted and where it is culturally and institutionally embedded so that students are conscious about its meaning and implications, both in its historicity and in its traditional customs, beliefs and values. Only through a reinforcement of Aboriginal culture and identity will young Aboriginal youth avoid the identity ambivalence suggested in this study, avoid the confused reactions that many of them experienced when confronted with many of life’s experiences and therefore, be able to feel more ontologically secure in who they are as people and continue their educational journey. Schools as institutions can only exercise control over what they are responsible for. There are many facets of
Aboriginal student life that fall outside these parameters that as educators we do not have influence over. But that does not stop us from doing what we can, from considering best practice research and learning from those who have particularly focused on the Aboriginal learning experiences, and especially those that have included the Aboriginal student voice, whose words so powerfully inform those of us who will listen.

Conclusion

“The task of democratic equality is to create impartial institutions in the public sphere and civil society where this struggle for recognition of cultural differences and the contestation for cultural narratives can take place without domination” (Benhabib, 2002 p. 8). So, what does this mean for schools within the Western modern social imaginary? And what does this mean for Indigenous peoples within Canada? Or for the Aboriginal students within our schools? Cajete, (2000) in contemplating what Aboriginal peoples must do to engage our society, may offer a solution that will serve all of the cultural mosaic that is Canada. He poses that:

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

Schools as a microcosm of society must accommodate and facilitate such an examination. As we have seen, habituation and routinization take root very early in our lives and in the context of this study, we have seen how social dominance so effectively takes hold. We have also seen how dramatically it has impacted Aboriginal peoples and these study participants. Schools with a revised mission and purpose might offer the grounds to create new world citizens where accommodation of diversity will not be looked upon with fear and a sense that it will create disunity, but rather will be seen as a forum for cultural conversations where diversity is recognized and accommodated in various ways so as to have a sense of belonging, and identification with the institution.
Moreover, by insisting on the “citizens” having a say in the formation and governance of the institution and in ensuring that they see their own cultural ways publicly acknowledged and affirmed, the seeds of unity and understanding may be planted to grow into the social institutions and practices of our society (Tully, 1995, p. 197).

Gert Biesta (2006), in defining a democratic education for a human future, furthers this line of reasoning in recognizing the duality inherent in the agency/structure dichotomy of our society, in having concern for the uniqueness and singularity of the human beings and a concern and responsibility for the worldliness of the world, in ensuring that there are institutional worldly spaces, spaces of plurality and difference. We must do so because “the real question, how to live with others who are not like us, will not go away” and is why the impetus or the promise of democracy “is, after all, a commitment to a world of plurality and difference, a commitment to a world where freedom can appear” (p. 151). Perhaps it is a commitment to a plurality where the Aboriginal red tile may finally fit within Canada’s educational mosaic.
Reference List


Runnels, S. A. (2007). "I'm still learning": The lived experience of disengagement from school of five young Aboriginal women, Unpublished Master of Education, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada.


Wotherspoon, T., & Satzewich, V. (2000). *First nations: Race, class and gender relations.* Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada: Canadian Plains Research Center.


Appendices
Appendix A.

Definition of Terms

Aboriginal
The term Aboriginal refers to those people who are self-declared as being descendent from the original inhabitants of the region now designated as Canada, regardless of legal status conferred by the federal government of Canada. In the past the term Native has been used. Capital letters are used to denote their national status. "Aboriginal people refer to the Indigenous inhabitants of Canada when we want to refer to in a general manner to Inuit and to First Nations and Métis people, without regard to their separate origins and identities" (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Vol1, p. 2).

Akaitcho
These are the peoples of the T'satsaot'ine (translation: metal or copper people) who were known for the pots, knives, and other tools they made from copper collected in the northerly parts of their territory. Before trapping for the fur trade changed traditional occupancy and land-use patterns north of Tindé e (Great Slave Lake), the traditional territory of the T'satsaot'ine consisted of lands around Great Slave Lake north to the Coppermine River, and east to the Thelon River. Today the peoples call themselves and their territory after the great T'satsaot'ine leader Akeh-Cho: the Akaitcho Peoples and Akaitcho Territory. (Yellowknives Dene First Nation Council, 1997, p. 4).

Dene
Indigenous people of the NWT, of the Athapaskan linguistic family, refer to themselves as Dene. Translated it simply means the people.

Weledeh Yellowknives Dene First Nation
The Indian people of the Mackenzie Valley of the Northwest Territories are known as the Dene (pronounced 'Dennay') The Weledeh Yellowknives Dene call themselves after the river and bay (Weledeh-Cheh) in the southerly parts of their territory, where they traditionally spent summer. The Weledeh is shown on government maps as the Yellowknife River. In the Weledeh Yellowknives dialect, wëleh in English means the fish known as coney (or inconnu) and deh means flowing water or river. Weledeh Yellowknives Elders tell a story in which Alexander Mackenzie decided to call the river "Yellowknife" after what the European explorer thought the people camped at the mouth were calling themselves. Elders today believe their ancestors and the interpreter were actually informing Mackenzie about the copper knives they held in their hands at the time. (Weledeh Yellowknives Dene: A History, p. 4)

Euro-Canadian
This term is used to indicate the dominant Canadian culture's orientation to the traditions, values, beliefs and practices derived from the immigrant cultures of Western Europe.

Euro-centricism
The European colonizers' model of the world. (Youngblood Henderson, 2000, p. 60)
First Nations (Indian)

The usual meaning of 'Indian' in Canada refers to those Indigenous people who are recognized by the federal government as having 'Indian status' by virtue of the Indian Act. In recent decades, such people are more likely to refer to themselves formally as being 'First Nations.'

(Morrison & Wilson, 2004, p. 10)

Graduate

A student who has met the minimum graduation course requirements and expectations as outlined by the Department of Education, Culture and Employment is deemed a graduate. Typically this will mean achieving 100 credits as outlined in the Senior Secondary Handbook for the NWT.

Traditional

There is a link between world-view and tradition.

Worldview provides people with a distinctive set of values, an identity, a feeling of rootedness, of belonging to a time and place, and a felt sense of continuity with a tradition which transcends the experience of a single lifetime, a tradition which may be said to transcend even time.

The construct 'Traditional' links geographical space and worldview. If the inhabitants of an environment have inhabited it for several generations or more, they will come to perceive it and relate to it in a Traditional way.

(Graveline, 1998, p. 19)

---

4 It should be stated that I would generally use the terms Aboriginal or First Nations when referencing our Canadian indigenous peoples. When other authors are quoted and use terms like Indian or Native American, I will honour their usage.
Appendix B.

The Context and Setting

Yellowknife is named after the Yellowknives Dene who moved into the region in the early 1800’s (Watt, 1990, p. 21). They hunted the lands, fished the Great Slave Lake and traveled seasonally into the Barrenlands. They also engaged in adventurous trading, “ranging boldly north to Great Bear Lake and beyond: their implements were made of native copper, obtained from the Inuit on the Arctic Coast” (p. 19). It was the copper knives that led the explorer, Samuel Hearne, to call the Dene the “Yellowknives” (p. 19). The history of the region is generally reflective of the rest of Canada as the traditional lifestyle of the indigenous peoples of the area was in full force until the arrival of “southerners” in pursuit of resources—in Yellowknife’s case, principally gold. In 1896, gold was discovered in Yellowknife Bay by miners who were on their way to the Klondike. However, a “Klondike-like” rush was not the result as the topography of the area made the country inaccessible and it wasn’t until the early 1930’s with the arrival of reliable aircraft and improved transportation that visible “development” began to take place (p. 26). Nineteen hundred and thirty-four marked the beginning of a boom as sizeable quantities of gold were discovered on the shores of Yellowknife Bay. Gold, the foundation cornerstone of capitalism, like in other areas of our country and world, drove the growth and the “rush” by desperate men to escape the clutches of the depression (p. 29). The legacy of gold and its intertwined past with the City led those who lived there to coin the phrase, “The city where the gold is paved with streets.” This was only to be replaced with the arrival of the next resource-based boom in the early 1990’s when the city was described as “a diamond in the rough,” and sought to formalize its standing by adopting the title of the “Diamond capital of North America.” Interestingly, the Dene people call Yellowknife, Sombe K’e, which roughly translated means “where the money is,” or the “money place.”

The last of the gold mines closed in Yellowknife in 2004. Today Yellowknife is primarily a government town and a service centre for the diamond mines. On April 1, 1999, its purview as capital of the NWT was reduced when the territory of Nunavut was split off from the NWT. As a result, jurisdiction for that region of Canada was transferred to the new capital city of Iqualuit. Consequently, Yellowknife lost its standing as the Canadian capital city with the lowest population. Presently its population is approximately 19,155, or just shy of half of the Northwest Territories’ population (NWT Bureau of Statistics, 2007).

Within the vicinity of Yellowknife are two small communities known as N’dilo and Detah, both First Nations communities in the North Slave Region of the Northwest Territories. The first is a small Dene community located just outside of Yellowknife on the tip of Latham Island, home to a population of approximately 200 people. The second is located approximately 6.5 kilometres from Yellowknife by ice-road or about 27 kilometres by all-season road and its name means “Burnt Point,” depicting the geographic profile and location of the community, a traditional fishing camp used by the Dene for hundreds of years. Notably, it is likely the first settlement in the area. According to the 2001 census, it has a population of approximately 180 people (Statistics Canada, 2001). Both communities comprise the Yellowknives Dene, along with about another third of their total population who live in the city of Yellowknife (Tsetta, 2005, p. 1). The Yellowknives Dene First Nation represents both and uniquely there are two chiefs, one from each of the smaller communities. Their area of jurisdiction is known as the Akaitcho Territory government. In combination, the three communities and surrounding region, is the home for about 1,000 people that make up the Yellowknives Dene (Tsetta et al., 2005, p.1) and the Akaitcho Territory is the centrepiece of land claim and self-government negotiations currently underway.

The School

As early as 1947, the dream of a separate school system in Yellowknife began. The Yellowknife Roman Catholic School District Number 2 was born on July 11, 1951. The original building, called Akaitcho School, was opened in 1953 and offered Grade 1 to Grade 9. In 1961 the École Akaitcho High School was erected. On April 4, 1964 the school was destroyed by fire, but was rebuilt and reopened on November 1, 1964 (Dawe, 2002). Later, a new school replaced it in 1995. The school is the only Catholic high school in the Northwest Territories and enjoys a long history in the City as well as a quality reputation. As of September 2006, there were 533 students enrolled in Grades 9 through 12 and 35
FTE instructional staff, 2.5 administration and 12 support staff members served the school. Aboriginal enrollment at the school was 35% with 189 students of indigenous descent. Of those, about three quarters (139 or 73%) are Dene students and in turn about 20% or 40 students are Weledeh Yellowknives Dene band members. These numbers are reflective of the school's recent history and its composition.

The school's Mission statement reads:

With Christ as our model, the community of École Akaitcho High School is dedicated to developing our unique talents as responsible, caring citizens.

The school has the following Beliefs and Values Statements:

Beliefs

We believe:

Every person is unique with individual needs.

All individuals have the potential to learn and develop intellectually, socially, emotionally, physically and spiritually throughout their lives.

Our school district respects cultural diversity.

A learning partnership with the home, school, parish and community is essential.

Values

Integrity: We maintain the principles of truth, fairness and respect in our interactions with others.

Care: We provide a learning environment that is secure, compassionate and nurturing.

Respect: We show regard for self, others and the total environment.

Responsibility: We are accountable to self and others for our actions, behaviours, and learning.

Leadership: We promote and develop the talents within our community of learners.

The school provides a complete program of core and complementary subjects in a traditional classroom instructional format. It also provides opportunities for students to participate in alternate delivery models through distance and online education services and by means of independent study. It provides French Immersion and Aboriginal programming, and supports individual student needs through special education support, counselling, and a Teacher Advisor Program. The Catholic identity of the school is supported by the presence of a chaplain, a committed Catholic staff, regular liturgical activities, service projects and the Religious Education Program.
Appendix C.

Band Research Request Letter

Chief Edward Sangris  
Yellowknives Dene First Nation  
Dettah Office

Dear Chief Sangris,

I am writing this letter as a courtesy and as information to the Chief and Council members. I am a student at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. To graduate, I need to write a research document. I would like your support in completing the research.

Since I am studying educational leadership and I am working with students in Yellowknife, I would like to write about the Aboriginal student experience in high school. I am not getting paid to do the research. Students who participate will be volunteers too.

This is the research process:
1. 6 graduates from École St. Patrick High School agree to participate.
2. Listen to the stories of 6 graduates from École St. Patrick High School.
3. Meet students for 1-2 hours and ask them the questions attached to this letter.
4. Record their stories and give a copy to each participant for their comments and corrections.
5. Meet the students in a sharing circle and ask the questions attached to this letter.
6. Record their stories and give a copy to each participant for their comments and corrections.
7. Write a descriptive research document that includes each of these student’s stories.
8. Keep the graduates identities and information confidential. When the research paper is finished, dispose of the information.
9. Share this research with the local and general educational community.

This research document can contribute to improvements within École St. Patrick High School and Yellowknife Catholic Schools based upon these Aboriginal student experiences, perceptions and input.

Should you have any concerns or input, I am happy to come to a Band Council meeting to address this matter or meet with you personally. My phone number is 766-7409, should you have any questions. Thank you.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Kern Von Hagen  
Researcher
Appendix D.

Board Research Request Letter

Dear Yellowknife Catholic School Board,

As you are aware, I am a student at Simon Fraser University working on my doctoral degree in educational leadership. The focus of my dissertation is on the lived experiences of Aboriginal students who have graduated from high school. In particular, I will be exploring their stories and perceptions of École St. Patrick High School and what we can learn from students who have graduated from secondary school. I will specifically focus on how students viewed their own efforts as a contributor to success and what supports the high school provided in their journey.

This study is intended to be qualitative and descriptive, not evaluative, and student participation is voluntary. If they consent to participate in this study, I will arrange to meet with them in person for a series of 1-2 hour interviews in which I will ask them the questions that are included with this letter. The interviews are intended to be semi-structured so these questions are a guide for discussion. I will be recording the discussions to assist me in analyzing the data. I will then transcribe the data and provide all participants with a copy for their comments and corrections, if any. Once participants have reviewed the transcript, I will contact them again either in person or by telephone to discuss the data and correct or add to any information in the transcript. The data collected from the interviews will be kept in a secure location and I will be the only person who has access to it. Once my dissertation is completed, I will dispose of the data in a manner that honours confidentiality.

Additionally, I will conduct a focus group interview session including all study participants. Again, this will be semi-structured to allow participants to share their stories and to allow for natural interactions. This format is meant to supplement the individual interviews and to allow for participants to address any omissions from earlier interviews. The process for this activity will be the same as with the interviews above.

The risk to participants is minimal. Their identities will be kept confidential in the study findings. There is a risk that other participants may share identities, but there is little likelihood that linkages could be made to statements or comments made by specific individuals.

The proposed benefit of this study is to potentially increase the understanding of the both the local and general educational community about the Aboriginal experience in high school and to contribute to improvements within École St. Patrick High School and Yellowknife Catholic Schools based upon these Aboriginal student experiences, perceptions and input. Participants are free to withdraw their consent and discontinue their participation at any time.

I am seeking permission to conduct this study within École St. Patrick High School. The implications will be that I will seek the assistance of school administration and staff in selecting the six participants, all of who have graduated. I will also require supplementary information regarding attendance, performance, discipline, participation in extra-curricular activities and the like to assist in profiling the participants. I need your consent to conduct this study within one of your schools as described.

Should you require further information or clarification, I am happy to supply it. Thank you.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,
Kern Von Hagen
Researcher
Appendix E.

Participant Request Letter

Dear ...(named participant).

I am a student at Simon Fraser University working on my doctoral degree in educational leadership. The focus of my dissertation is on the lived experiences of Aboriginal students who have graduated from high school. In particular, I will be exploring your stories and your perceptions of school and what we can learn from students who have graduated from secondary school. I will specifically focus on how you view your own efforts as a contributor to your success and what supports your school provided in your journey through high school.

This study is intended to be qualitative and descriptive, not evaluative, and your participation is voluntary. If you consent to participate in this study, I will arrange to meet with you in person for a series of 1-2 hour interviews in which I will ask you the questions that are included with this letter. The interviews are intended to be semi-structured so these questions are a guide for discussion. I will be recording our discussions to assist me in analyzing the data. I will then transcribe the data and provide you with a copy for your comments and corrections, if any. Once you have reviewed the transcript, I will contact you again either in person or by telephone to discuss the data and correct or add to any information in the transcript. The data collected from the interviews will be kept in a secure location and I will be the only person who has access to it. Once my dissertation is completed, I will dispose of the data in a manner that honours confidentiality.

Additionally, I will conduct a focus group interview session including all study participants. Again, this will be semi-structured to allow participants to share their stories and to allow for natural interactions. This format is meant to supplement the individual interviews and to allow for participants to address any omissions from earlier interviews. The process for this activity will be the same as with the interviews above.

The risk to you in participating is minimal. Your identity will be kept confidential in the study findings. The proposed benefit of this study is to potentially increase the understanding of both the local and general educational community about the Aboriginal experience in high school and to contribute to improvements within your high school and its district based upon your experiences, your perceptions and your input.

If you consent to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time. If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at home 867-920-7082 or at work 867-766-7409. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research, please contact the Director, Office of Research Ethics, Simon Fraser University, by e-mail at hweinber@sfu.ca or by phone at 778-782-6593.

Sincerely,

Kern Von Hagen
Appendix F.

Background Information Survey

Background Information

Please answer the following questions by filling in the information requested. Please print your responses.

Name: ________________________________________________

Address: ______________________________________________________

Phone: ___________________________ E-mail: _______________________________

Birth date: ___________________ Age: _______________________

Parent names: ______________________________________________

Marital status (single, married, divorced, separated): ______________________

What year did you graduate in? _______________________________________

What are you doing now? (Work, apprenticeship, on the land, post-secondary school, other). __________________________________________________________

If you are employed, where and for how long? _________________________________

If you are attending school, where, what program and what year are you in?
________________________________________________________________

How do you spend your free time? (sports, hobbies, interests)
________________________________________________________________

If you were quoted in this research, instead of your real name, what made up name would you like me to use? ________________________________

What are the best time/s, days of the week, and place for you to meet for interviews?

What dates would work best for you?
Appendix G.

Individual Interview Questions

Interview One: Personal History and Context

1. Tell me about your community? What community do you live in? What is it like?
2. Tell me about your family, both immediate and extended.
   - How would you describe your role and place within your family?
3. What role have your parents played in your education and your life?
   - What educational background do your parents have?
   - Has anyone else been important in supporting your education and your life?
4. Does your family go to church?
   - Do you believe in a Creator or Great Spirit?
5. What is your present living situation? Where do you live? Who do you live with?
6. Do you get along with other people most of the time?
   - What conditions or circumstances help you to get along with people? (Personality, respect, treating you as an adult, being sensitive to you as a person, listening to you, giving you time).
7. Who was important to you during your school years? Why? Are they still in your life?
8. Do you have significant and important friends? What makes them really good friends?
9. Did they graduate from high school? Why or why not?
10. Who are your role models? If you had to describe one person you really admired and wanted to be like, who would it be (parent, mentor, Elder)?
11. Of all the people in your life, whom do you trust the most? Why?
12. How do you feel about yourself right now? Do you have confidence in yourself? Is your life going the way that you want it to?
   - What changes would you make?
13. What languages do you speak and where do you speak them?
   - How important is the Dogrib language/culture to you?
14. How good were your grades coming out of high school?
   - Do you think that you did your best while you were in high school?
   - Did your performance in high school help you in what you are doing right now?
15. What were your biggest challenges while you were growing up?
   - What support(s) did you have and from whom?
16. How do you feel about being an Aboriginal person?
17. Where do you see yourself in 5 years? What are your goals in life?
Interview Two: School Experiences

1. Try to recall your earliest memory of school. Tell me the whole story about what school was like for you in elementary.
2. Tell me the story of your high school experience.
   - What are the lived educational experiences you had?
   - Did you like school?
3. Why did you stay to graduate from high school?
   - What personal factors contributed to your success?
   - What school factors contributed to your success?
4. Do you think school played a role in where you are now in your life?
5. Tell me about a really great school experience or experiences that you’ve had. (Who was involved? What were you doing? What was happening in your life at this time? How did you feel about yourself?).
6. Tell me about a time when school wasn’t so great. (Who was involved? What were you doing? What was happening in your life at this time? How did you feel about yourself?).
7. In thinking about school in general, what challenges did you encounter?
   - How did you overcome these challenges?
8. Thinking about school, how has culture been a part of your schooling experience?
   - What role has culture played in your life? (Note: culture is defined as the beliefs, customs, practices, and social behaviour of a particular nation or people; a group of people whose shared beliefs and practices identify the particular place, class, or time to which they belong).
9. What are some things you liked about school?
   - What did you dislike?
10. What makes for a good school?
   - What makes for a bad school?
11. What does racism mean to you?
   - Have you experienced racism?
12. On a scale of 1-10 with 1 being no racism and 10 being the largest amount of racism possible, how would you rate the level of racism in the schools you were part of?
13. Where does racism come from and if you experienced it, how did it affect you?
   - What would it take to change this kind of behaviour?
14. What helped you the most to be successful in school?
15. How did you feel about your high school? Was it a good place to be?
16. Did you feel comfortable there? What made you comfortable/uncomfortable?
17. Did you have any influence on what happened in your school? Did your school try to get your input on things? Did you “see” yourself in your school?
18. Who made the biggest difference for you, supporting you in graduating?
19. Did you feel that you “had a say in” or were in control of your high school experience? Did you feel like you had any power? Were you or could you have been a leader? Why? Why not?
20. What “rules” were there in your high school?
   - Were these fair or good rules?
   - What rules would you have changed?
   - Did you get along in your school?
21. What did you like about the way your high school was run?
   - What did you dislike about the way it was run? (Schedules, bells, classes, extra-curricular, attendance, discipline, teachers, administration).
22. If you could relive high school again what would you do differently?
Interview Three: Thoughts and Perceptions of Your School Experience

1. Who was your favourite teacher? Why?

2. What makes a good teacher?
   - What makes a bad teacher?

3. What would the ideal teacher look like?

4. Do you think teachers cared about you? How do you know this?

5. What motivated you in school? What made you want to do well?
   - What stopped you from doing well? What things got in the way of you doing well?

6. In what ways do you learn best (reading, viewing, hands-on learning, coaching or by example)?

7. Does the teacher’s style of teaching make a difference?
   - If you could decide the best teaching style, what would it be? (Lecture, small groups, one-to-one, hands-on, project-based).

8. Does a teacher’s culture/race/ethnicity make a difference in how they teach?

9. What was your favourite subject? Why?
   - What was the worst subject for you? Why?

10. What was missing from the programming in your school?

11. Did your school make an effort to recognize your culture and to make you feel part of the school? What kind of activities or experiences reflected your culture?

12. Did you feel like you belonged in your high school? Did you feel valued in your school?

13. What would the ideal school be for you?

14. As you look back on your school years, when did you know or realize that you would stay in school?
   - How did you make this decision? Was it a bunch of small things that led to this decision or a big thing that made you decide?

15. How did your family respond?
   - How did your friends respond?

16. What do you think causes Aboriginal students to leave school before graduating?

17. What changes in education or the schools you attended would you want to see for your children? How would you change school? What would have helped you?

18. What was good for you?
   - Did you know this when you were in school?

19. What makes a good student?
   - What makes a bad student?

20. What are your impressions of the schools you attended from the perspective of a First Nations student?

21. How might schools be made to better reflect and accommodate Aboriginal students?