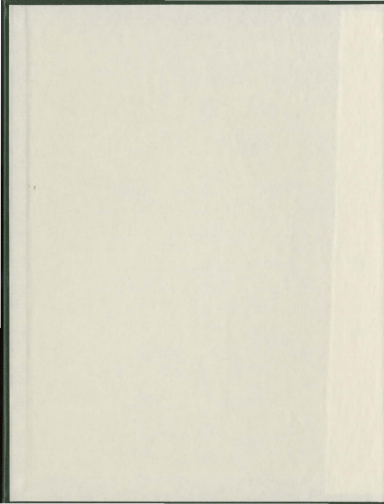


EDUCATIONAL LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES ON
ISSUES AND CONCERNS IN ABORIGINAL
EDUCATION IN ALBERTA

DON HINKS



**EDUCATIONAL LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES ON ISSUES AND
CONCERNS IN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION IN ALBERTA**

By

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated in loving memory of

Mark Tallman, Arthur Nahachick, Tyson Grey, and Aaron Grey,

Students who taught me the importance of living life to the fullest.

May you rest in peace

and

my Mother,

Josephine Hinks,

I wouldn't be where I am today without your love and support.

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined the perspectives of educational leaders in Alberta regarding issues and concerns in Aboriginal education. A questionnaire was emailed to participants including principals, vice principals and lead teachers from across the province. Participants responded to questions regarding Aboriginal education, issues and concerns in Aboriginal education and possible solutions to make the current state of Aboriginal education better.

Responses were subjected to qualitative analysis and yielded a number of emergent themes and predominant categories. The study was driven by the following general research question: What are the perspectives of educational leaders regarding the issues and concerns involved with Aboriginal Education? The subsidiary research questions were:

1. What do you see as the current state of Aboriginal Education in the province of Alberta today?
2. What are the major issues facing Aboriginal Education in the province of Alberta today? Please list practical examples that you might recall.
3. What can be done to improve Aboriginal education throughout the province?
4. What are some innovative methods that you have used to improve the delivery of education to Aboriginal students? Please elaborate.
5. List some suggestions as to how the delivery of education to Aboriginal youth could be improved to better meet the changing needs of today's society.

6. Are there any additional comments/points you would like to make regarding Aboriginal education in Alberta?

The study found that educational leaders perceive that Aboriginal education is not effective for Aboriginal students in today's society and that something has to be done to improve the results. The study's findings included a discussion of the issues faced by educators in Alberta as well as suggestions on how to improve the delivery of Aboriginal education. Two major findings of the study were that there presently exist many problems in Aboriginal education today but there are many things that educators can do to improve teaching practices to help these students.

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Finally, a huge thank you to the principals, vice principals and lead teachers who volunteered to take part in my study. Without their support, this thesis truly would not have been possible.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to the Study

Aboriginal Education has long been under the microscope. There has been much debate as to the many issues that face Aboriginal learners and educators today and what can be done to make Aboriginal education more successful at all levels. In the day and age in which we live, achievement for any learner should be the norm but that is not always necessarily the case. That being said, it is important to investigate what is happening with Aboriginal education today. Key factors need be identified in the progress and hindrance of education for Aboriginal students and the appropriate adjustments made to ensure each and every one of these students have the opportunity to be successful in their respective setting.

Although changes have taken place over the years to combat many of the problems that Aboriginal youth face in completing their education, there is still much work to be done. In a recent Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) exclusive, it was reported that Government of Alberta documents indicate that only 19.6 per cent of Aboriginal students complete high school within three years of entering Grade 10. The provincial average is 70.7 per cent. Alberta is not the only province, however, struggling with completion rates of Aboriginal learners. British Columbia has released some startling information that made many people take notice. The British Columbia Human Results Commission released its report in 2001 and some astonishing facts were revealed. One of the biggest of which, was the fact that "38 per cent of Aboriginal students graduate from high school, compared to 77 per cent of non-Aboriginal students" (Caffrey & Mattson, 2005, p. 5). Less than one half of Aboriginal students

graduate from high school compared to non-Aboriginal students. So the best question that came from all of this is why?

Butler and Wotherspoon (1999) indicated that, "Education problems are also intertwined with poverty, violence, alcohol and drug abuse, discrimination, and other difficulties that many Aboriginal people encounter in their day to day lives"(p. 2). Additionally, in 1998 The British Columbia (BC) Teachers' Federation released an article outlining a number of factors hindering Aboriginal education. Of particular interest was the issue of poverty. "Today many people of Aboriginal descent live in poverty, whether on a reserve or in urban communities. Research on students from all groups shows a high correlation between poverty and lack of success in school" (BC Teachers' Federation, 1998, p. 4).

In an earlier report done by the BC Human Rights Commission in 2001, three very important factors were evident that prevented the progress of Aboriginal learners to varying degrees:

1. Aboriginal peoples are under-represented in key decision-making positions.
2. Many school districts don't have a comprehensive policy, formally supported by the Board of School Trustees to provide the institutional framework for planning, implementing, and evaluating Aboriginal education; and,
3. There appears to be a lack of accountability on the part of government and school district for funds targeted for Aboriginal learners (Caffrey & Mattson, 2001, p. 17).

Based on the research that has been done, it is obvious that there are many significant factors that impact Aboriginal education and the completion of their

schooling. Poverty, funding, isolation, leadership, absence of culture in the curriculum, family responsibilities and attendance are all still running issues among Aboriginal students and as a result are negatively influencing education. Until these issues are addressed, Aboriginal youth will continue down the path they are currently on and will struggle to succeed to complete their schooling.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to survey principals and teachers to determine what were the current issues facing Aboriginal education in our province and the methods used to increase academic success for these students. This type of research could also shed some light on this issue while at the same time help people gain a better understanding of what circumstances young children have to go through in making education become a reality.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

In selecting this topic, research material that is representative of Aboriginal people and education has been difficult to locate. Other than a few materials supplied by Alberta Education and a few small articles on the subject, there is a dearth of information on what the issues and concerns are in Aboriginal Education in Alberta. What currently exist are frameworks and policies that recommend what the province should be doing to make Aboriginal learners more successful in the school setting. For example, we have *A Survey of the Literature on Aboriginal Language Learning and Teaching* (Alberta Education, 2007), and *Our Words, Our Ways, Teaching First Nations, Métis and Inuit Learners* (Alberta Education, 2005). Other examples include *Setting the Direction, Partnerships in Action: First Nations, Métis and Inuit Learning*

Access and Success (Learn Alberta, 2006). If we are to prepare students to be successful in school and to be productive members of society, we must look at moving from policies and frameworks that make recommendations, to policies and frameworks that hold jurisdictions and their teachers more accountable for what they are doing for Aboriginal students. We must look to our educational leaders who can influence the necessary changes needed to help these students achieve academic success. Instructional leaders are crucial in making this happen; yet, there is a lack of research available in this area. This study examines the perspectives of principals and teachers to learn about what they consider to be the issues and concerns with Aboriginal education and what can be done to better help these students in school.

1.3 Research Questions

The study was guided by a general research question and several subsidiary research questions. The general research question was: What are the perspectives of educational leaders regarding the issues and concerns involved with Aboriginal Education? The subsidiary research questions were:

1. What do you see as the current state of Aboriginal Education in the province of Alberta today?
2. What are the major issues facing Aboriginal Education in the Alberta today?
Please list practical examples that you might recall.
3. What can be done to improve Aboriginal education throughout the province?
4. What are some innovative methods that you have used to improve the delivery of education to Aboriginal students? Please elaborate.

5. List some suggestions as to how the delivery of education to Aboriginal youth could be improved to better meet the changing needs of today's society.
6. Are there any additional comments/points you would like to make regarding Aboriginal education in Alberta?

1.4 Significance of the Study for Research and Practice

This type of research has been considered very controversial over the years because of the nature of the topic. Although there is limited research done in this area, the research does show that there are a variety of factors that affect Aboriginal education. Factors such as lack of Aboriginal content in the curriculum and life on reserves come up consistently in the research as being key factors that affect the education of Aboriginal youth. It is important however, to continue this investigation as to what other elements exist that act as barriers so that the picture becomes clearer than it exists presently.

The research has been controversial due to the fact that Alberta had placed its focus on other issues of concerns. Alberta Education stated in the article, *Setting the Direction*, that, "In the mid-1990's Albertans were concerned with the operating deficits and accumulated debt and supported a policy direction aimed at addressing these issues" (Learn Alberta, 2006, p. 8). With the focus now shifting on to the identification and remediation of educational difficulties that Aboriginal youth are experiencing, Alberta has finally targeted these students as needing help. In the broader scope, Alberta is recognizing that in the world in which we live, its people are the key to the future, so that Alberta particularly, can compete successfully within a global context. As Alberta Education states, "Effective policy direction and solutions aimed at engaging and

supporting First Nations, Métis and Inuit people to reduce the barriers to gain improved access to post-secondary learning opportunities, the economy and society will play a pivotal role achieving these broad policy objectives" (p. 8).

Understanding the history and diversity of Aboriginal students will be the key in making the necessary changes needed to improve completion rates for these students. In a release entitled "Our Words, Our Ways" from Alberta Education (2005), "Aboriginal students, regardless of whether they are gifted, bright, average or struggling, come to the classroom with histories and worldviews that are unique (p. 1). By becoming more familiar with these worldviews, teachers will be better prepared to teach Aboriginal students by adapting instructional strategies to best meet the needs of the learners in their charge. "Becoming more aware of how cultural beliefs and practices affect teaching practices will help individual teachers make better and more culturally responsive choices throughout the teaching day" (p. 2).

When looking at the literature on the topic of Aboriginal education, there is indeed a wide array of information that exists but when we narrow the search and focus specifically on what has hindered Aboriginal student progress in the past and now in the present and why, there is only limited data that is available. This study then was developed to explore the perspectives of educators regarding what the issues and concerns are with Aboriginal education. If we want to create a society in which equal opportunity exists for each and every student, we need to look at the current way in which business is being done in education. We need to look to our governing bodies in education for direction but more importantly we need to look to those people who are in the trenches with these students everyday. These are the people that can make the

biggest difference and there is no one that knows these students better than the teachers that see them each and every day for ten months during the year. With effective leadership and guidance, teachers can adapt to the current situation and make the changes required to tackle the on going problem of high school completion rates for Aboriginal students.

Educators in leadership positions must take the role of educating people and raising cultural awareness in schools. This can make the biggest difference in understating and educating Aboriginal students. Standardizing what Alberta, as a whole will do with FNMI (First Nations, Metis, and Inuit) education, rather than letting individual jurisdictions decide on how they will attack this issue on their own, is something that needs to be considered. An example of this is how the funding for these students is spent. In doing some investigation on the subject, the government currently leaves it to individual jurisdictions on how they want to spend the money it gets for FNMI students. Therefore, the jurisdiction itself determines how this money is going to be spent and there are no stipulations or conditions that state that this money will be spent solely on FMNI kids. This money, if properly directed, could bring to any respective school additional resources and manpower to assist in helping Aboriginal learners in the classroom. Such avenues are not accessible to every classroom teacher and school in Alberta.

1.5 Terminology

For the purpose of this study the following definitions were used:

FNMI: Acronym used by Alberta government to identify Aboriginal peoples.
 FNMI refers to; First Nations, Métis and Inuit people in the province of
 Alberta.

1.6 Delimitations

Delimitations are used to "address how the study will be narrowed in scope" (Creswell, 2008, p. 207). This study included the following delimitations:

1. Only principals and teachers in Alberta willing to participate in the study were given a survey; and
2. the study examined only the perspective of these individuals regarding Aboriginal education in Alberta.

1.7 Limitations

Limitations "identify potential weaknesses of the study" (Creswell, 1994, p. 110). The limitations of this study included:

1. The reliance of the research on the perspectives of the participants that were given a survey; and
2. the study only used one approach to gather data.

1.8 Assumptions

The following assumptions were made when conducting the study:

1. that the participants based their responses to the survey questions based on their experiences in working with Aboriginal students in the province of Alberta; and
2. that the participants were truthful when responding to the questions on the survey given to them.

1.9 Organization of the Thesis

This thesis contains six chapters. Chapter 1 gives an introduction to the study by presenting the purpose of the study, the significance of the research, the research questions, definitions, delimitations, limitations, and assumptions that guide the research. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature starting with what the issues and concerns are with Aboriginal education as well as what is being done to rectify these same issues and concerns in Alberta. Reference is also made to similar issues that are happening in other parts of the world including Canada. Chapter 3 will look at the research design and methods used to analyze the survey information. Chapter 4 presents an analysis and interpretation of the data. Chapter 5 discusses the findings of the study with reference to the six survey questions participants responded to in the survey. Lastly, Chapter 6 presents a number of conclusions resulting from the study as well as their significance for research and practice in education.

CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

Aboriginal Education in Alberta

When looking at what the current state of Aboriginal education in Alberta it is important to look at its history. Two important developments took place that affected aboriginal education significantly. The first was the Indian Act, which was established in 1876 and the second was the amendment made to the Indian Act in 1920, making it mandatory for First Nations and Inuit parents to send their children to Indian residential schools.

2.1 The Indian Act and Residential Schools

The Indian Act of 1876 was of importance due to the impact it had on education for Aboriginal people. The development of the Indian Act only reinforced the Canadian government's power over First Nations peoples in an effort to promote assimilation. Under the Indian Act, education of First Nations and Inuit peoples became the responsibility of the Federal government. Unfortunately, placing these children in residential schools caused a conflict for many of these children. "Residential schools were established to assimilate First Nations and Inuit children into dominant English-speaking, Christian culture. Many of the values and morals of this culture were in conflict with traditional Aboriginal values and customs" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 3). Children as young as four years of age were removed from their families and taken away from their homes to attend these schools. In addition, because these were English-speaking schools, students were not allowed to speak in their own language nor were they able to follow their traditional customs. The impact that this had on these children

was devastating, "As a result, they often became ashamed of their language, culture and family. Some parents were forbidden to visit their children and did not see them for several years at a time" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 3). "Through the residential school system, generations of Aboriginal people were removed from their home communities and forced to abandon their language and culture" (Williams, 2002, p. 5).

That so many of these children were taken away from their families and many at such a young age resulted in a loss of culture in many respects. Parents were not able to raise their children and that traditional sense of family was broken. Everything that made the First Nations and Inuit students unique was basically stripped from them because the residential schools taught them that everything they held dear was wrong. Furthermore, in terms of education itself:

Many residential school students received an inferior education. Because they spent only half of each day in the classroom, they did not have the same opportunities as other children. In the eyes of the system, First Nations and Inuit people were only fit for menial work. It was considered a waste to prepare them for anything more. Many children left the school at age eighteen with the equivalent of only a grade 5 education. (Alberta Education, 2005 p. 5)

Although there are reports that residential schooling was a positive experience for some First Nations and Inuit students, others did not feel the same way. "Many felt a loss of cultural identity, the loss of opportunity to develop parenting skills and the impacts of trauma" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 4). "It is believed that the impact of these experiences have contributed to and continue to contribute to the loss of a healthy cultural identity and to the maintenance of cultural values inherent in essential culturally based skills" (Ruttan, 2000, p. 84).

Residential schools were not only a problem in the province of Alberta because they were also a problem in other parts of Canada as well. Cherubini and Hodson (2008) recognize the part residential schools played in Ontario and how negatively it impacted Aboriginal students:

Aboriginal children were transported away from their families and communities and registered in boarding schools to ensure their physical disconnection from their cultural surroundings. The missionary activities within the schools were primarily directed towards transforming the students' Aboriginal values and practices. Those who legislated and operated the residential schools declared that Aboriginal languages were at the core of students' identity, and as a result felt justified in eradicating their practices in what is commonly referred to throughout the literature as acts of cultural genocide. (p. 2)

In addition to Alberta and Ontario, an Elder from Nevada retells her story of how residential schools affected her as a child growing up:

I grew away from a lot of the traditional things when I went to residential school. The missionaries were trying to civilize me. We couldn't talk Indian. There was a fence there; when we crossed those lines, we did not talk Indian at all. All the teachers would get mad and we were afraid. Everything was military style. It was so hard. I felt so alone. (Piquemal, 2004, p. 5)

To put the impact of residential schooling into perspective, Deputy Superintendent Duncan Campbell Scott (1913) estimated that overall, "fifty percent of the children who passed through these schools did not live to benefit from the education which they had received therein" (p. 615). "In the aftermath, many Aboriginal people did not acquire a higher education, which led to continued poverty and segregation from mainstream society" (Aisaican, 2001, p. 4).

2.2 Family and Aboriginal Education

Family plays a huge part in Aboriginal education as it does for most children, but the family set-up for many Aboriginal children is quite unique. It is not uncommon for many Aboriginal children to be raised by extended family. Grandparents, older siblings,

aunts and uncles, cousins, or even close family friends have been known to take care of the children. In fact, "Sixty-five percent of Aboriginal children on reserves and 50 percent of children in urban settings live with two parents. In comparison, 83 percent of non-Aboriginal children live with two parents" (Statistics Canada, 2001). This is a significant number due to the fact that when children bounce around like this between family members, it makes it extremely difficult for students to be successful in school. While some students are able to stay extended periods of times with these extended family members, there are still many more that go back and forth between them. This disruption from school to school is an important factor to consider because there is no guarantee that when children move to another school they will be at the exact same place in the curriculum as they were at the previous school. Students are then are faced with starting something new or having to catch up with the rest of the class. Unfortunately for some Aboriginal students, their cumulative records read more like passports than student reports because they go between family members so much.

Although having that extended family support is great in many ways for these children, it disrupts a significant amount of learning that needs to take place for them to be successful. Transiency is one of the key factors as to why many Aboriginal students struggle with education.

Another factor that needs to be considered is many of the traditional customs Aboriginal people adhere to. It is not uncommon to have children absent from school for extended periods of time. Hunting, weddings and funerals are commonplace and all members of the family are expected to attend them. "Family events and gatherings are very important. Students may be out of school for several days at a time to attend them"

(Alberta Education, 2005, p. 31). These gaps throughout the course of the year can take its toll on academic success for Aboriginal students. While many students are able to catch up and stay on top of their studies, there are many more that do not. This is in large part to the nondirective approach that Aboriginal families take with children. "It is a deliberate parenting approach that expects children to mature and determine their own actions from an early age. Noninterference also reflects a preference for experiential learning" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 31). Although intentions may be good in this case and the purpose meaningful, to let young people make these kinds of decisions on their own is not a strategy conducive to learning. While some do make good decisions, there are many more that do not and as a result, these students do not make it completely through the educational system. Instead they get bits and pieces of education from year to year and reaching their educational potential is often jeopardized.

Another point worth noting when it comes to family and its impact on education is the fact that there is not very much reading material in most Aboriginal families' homes. This is due to the importance of oral tradition in Aboriginal culture. Because much of the history is passed down from generation to generation through word of mouth, there is little exposure to written text. "Because of this, some Aboriginal students may have had less early experience with reading than students from other cultures and may view reading as less important" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 32). Of course, this has a dramatic impact on learning as it has been well documented that those children who are exposed to reading material at an early age will have a greater success rate in school than those who are not.

It is important to note that because of the closeness of family in the Aboriginal culture and because many come from large families, there is an expectation that exists among these people that older siblings stay at home and provide care for the younger members of the family. "This may affect their ability to take part in extracurricular activities, and to complete homework and assignments on time" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 32). Due to this responsibility, older children are obligated to look after other family members and as a result this directly impacts their ability to do well in school as well as participating in other socializing activities. These responsibilities take higher precedence over education and impact educational opportunity and success in a variety of negative ways.

Finally, parental involvement is another issue that comes up when talking about Aboriginal students having success in school. When children bounce around from home to home as these children do, it is very difficult to get parents or guardians into the school to talk about student learning. Parental involvement is very low in Aboriginal cultures but there are reasons as to why this is the case. "One of the outcomes for low involvement rates for Aboriginal and other minority parents, through their nonparticipation, is that they are held partly responsible for the negative statistics regarding their children without an understanding of the reasons" (Friedel, 1999, p. 139). Baskin (2002) explains that there are a number of theories associated with the absence of Aboriginal parents within the school system. "One is that these parents are not informed about the educational system and how it operates. They do not have access to the cultural knowledge or power that would assist them to act in positive ways" (p. 7). Baskin also suggests that residential schools is another factor why parental involvement

is lacking from Aboriginal parents: "Specific to Aboriginal parents is the history of coercive assimilation policies as being responsible for the barriers between them and the school. This would involve the alienation felt by many parents due to their horrific experiences in residential schools" (p. 7). A final explanation that Baskin suggests for the absence of Aboriginal parents in school is that of stereotyping and how they feel stereotyped by schools. "Thus they see that achievement expectations for these students are low and that the administration is unwilling to include them in any decision making at the school. It may likely be that these parents do not become involved in the school because no one asks them for guidance or advice" (p. 7).

There are many reasons as to why Aboriginal parents or guardians do not make it into the school but the important thing to note is that their absence has a dramatic impact on the education of their children. Family in general means so much to the Aboriginal people that it only makes sense that their involvement would be critical to student success. Getting family involved means that the education of these students can be fostered both at school and at home. Lowe and Tassone (2001) suggest that "The correlation that exists between family, schooling, achievement, self esteem and heightened career aspirations demonstrates the need for greater work to be undertaken to provide learning environments which allow for students to grow in self esteem through achievement of real learning outcomes" (p. 16).

2.3 Aboriginal Content

While there exists a vast array of Aboriginal resources available to classroom teachers, there is still a lack of Aboriginal content in the curriculum. While there are components of Aboriginal culture in the Social Studies curricula from K-12, there exists

only three courses solely devoted to it. As it currently stands, Aboriginal Studies 10, 20 and 30 at the high school level are the only courses that are available to students. It also needs to be pointed out that these courses are high school optional courses and are not mandatory for students.

"Aboriginal content - whether in a story, a math example or a problem - solving technique - can have a profound impact on how they see themselves. It can also affect their understanding of how others see them and their cultures" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 52). As pointed out, the impact of Aboriginal culture in and on the curriculum can have a positive influence on Aboriginal students if it is included in the school curriculum. Unfortunately, there are not enough Aboriginal teachers to teach these classes properly and the non-Aboriginal teachers cannot teach the content properly because they are not qualified to do so. While there exists a variety of resources that can be used in the classroom to support Aboriginal students with their learning, there are still very few educators with the necessary credentials to teach it.

While the benefits are obvious for the inclusion of Aboriginal content in the classroom, there are also many negatives associated with the lack of the same content in the classroom as well. "A lack of content in the classroom also speaks volumes. Without opportunities to reflect on their histories and cultures and to engage with their peers in this reflection Aboriginal students may feel isolated, unheard and invisible" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 52). So although steps have been taken by the Alberta Government to incorporate more Aboriginal material into schools, there still needs to be a greater infusion of Aboriginal content into Alberta classrooms. Furthermore, there needs to be greater attention paid to ensuring that more Aboriginal people become involved in

education to better teach Aboriginal culture or at the very least provide non-Aboriginal teachers with the proper training to ensure Aboriginal perspectives are taught the way they should be. "Only after we become aware of the cultural differences and understand them well enough to accept them as equally valid and good are we prepared to teach these students" (Gilliland, 1999, p. 5). Until that time, the provision of materials is inconsequential due to the fact that there are very few people outside of the Aboriginal spectrum that can use them effectively and efficiently inside the classroom. However, including Aboriginal content in everyday teaching practices is a must and is critical to the success of all students in Alberta, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. "In a classroom of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, infusion of Aboriginal content encourages all students to become aware of their own perspectives on particular topics or concepts, and to increase their knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal groups" (Alberta Education, 2005 p. 53).

Similarly, in the province of Ontario, Cherubini and Hodson (2008) describe how the lack of culture presents a disconnection for Aboriginal students in how they relate to the material being taught:

In short, the education of Aboriginal children in Ontario schools is overwhelmingly punctuated by struggle – struggle to see one's culture or language in the classroom, struggle between conflicting values, struggle for understanding and a never ending search for relevance that often results in spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical disconnection from that education. (p. 11)

Anderson, Horton and Orwick (2004) further accentuate this point by saying that the Ontario curriculum does not take into consideration cultural identity for First Nations students. "The provincial curriculum does not allow First Nation students to learn in their own language or learn their own history in a meaningful way" (p. 8).

In Australia, Tripcony (2000) recognizes the importance of students' identity and how educators need to value their backgrounds. "The starting point is, of course, to recognize the identities and backgrounds of all students, and demonstrate that we value life experiences they bring to the learning situation. For Aboriginal students, this means accepting them for who they are" (p. 9). "Aboriginal children need to develop pride in themselves. They need positive support to overcome negative self-concept and self-esteem" (Groome, 1995, p. 14).

It is not surprising then to see why Aboriginal students in Alberta, Ontario and Australia are struggling with current curriculum outcomes. With very little cultural content present, Aboriginal students are disengaged in learning simply because it has no relevance to them. "Overall, integration of indigenous content into the school's curriculum is limited. The incorporation of indigenous content into curriculum remains dependent upon the efforts of individual teachers rather than a school-based approach to curriculum development and reform" (Herbert, 2003, p. 8). Until this can be rectified, until people truly know what it is to be Aboriginal, students will continue to struggle with their education.

2.4 Culture and Assessment

One of the biggest problems that is plaguing Aboriginal students' academic achievement is current assessment techniques in education. Considering the Aboriginal culture is heavily engrained in oral and observational learning, traditional paper and pencil assessments do not adequately assess the abilities of Aboriginal students. "Written assessments may not allow them to demonstrate their learning as effectively as oral presentational activities might" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 113). In addition,

because of cultural values, Aboriginal students tend to shy away from class discussions and participating actively in groups. Furthermore, due to a variety of community events such as births, marriages, deaths, and ceremonies that cause students to miss numerous days of school, students cannot deliver assignments on time. This alone interferes with Aboriginal students' ability to demonstrate to teachers what they can do with the material. Also a portion of the final mark is tied to characteristics such as participation, effort, and attitude, which hurt the overall marks of Aboriginal students as well. Due to the fact that Aboriginal students are somewhat shy and less assertive than non-Aboriginal students, they may receive lower grades when these kinds of characteristics are factored into overall grading.

When you consider that the majority of assessments are paper and pencil and because teachers are still struggling with properly assessing Aboriginal students, this drastically affects the achievement levels of these students. Due to these many different circumstances that the Aboriginal student experiences, they are consistently penalized in a variety of different ways when it comes to assessment practices, including:

- single rather than multiple assessment methods;
- inflexible deadlines (with late penalties or "0" for incomplete assignments);
- time-limited assessments;
- marks awarded zeros for incomplete or missing assignments;
- failure to match testing to teaching;
- surprising students with pop quizzes;
- grading first efforts, rather than providing ample time for teaching, practice and feedback before evaluating products. (Canady & Hotchkiss, 1989, p. 69)

Although there are changes being made to existing assessment practices there is still much to be done when it comes to properly assessing Aboriginal students. Once the cultural aspect is taken into account, then and only then will assessment be authentic and valid for Aboriginal children. As Chamberlain (2005) points out:

Our perceptions of the ways others think and act depend on our cultural perspective, which depends, in part, on our understanding that cultural differences do exist among groups. Equally important is the ability to recognize the vast diversity within cultural groups. Without such recognition, we run the risk of stereotyping people. (p. 197)

2.5 Learning Disabilities

Another issue affecting Aboriginal education is learning disabilities. When children have a learning disability, it places a serious strain on what they can and cannot do when it comes to their schooling. However, a learning disability is nothing to be ashamed of. If properly diagnosed and with the correct supports, any child has the ability to be successful. The problem that exists for Aboriginal students is that many parents do not want to have their children tested due to the stigma and labels associated with having a learning disability. For many parents there is also a level of distrust that exists and putting their faith in the hands of psychologists is not something that happens consistently:

It is not uncommon for Aboriginal parents to be reluctant to have their children assessed or labeled as having learning disabilities. Parents may regard psychologists with distrust, wondering if they are working in the best interest of their child. Some Aboriginal families who follow a more traditional way of life may prefer to seek the advice and support of healers or traditional teachers, feeling that psychologists have a limited scope of practice and understanding. (Alberta Education, 2005, pp. 123-124)

For these reasons alone, it can be difficult at times to get parents to fill out the necessary documentation to have their children tested for a learning disability. If

learning disabilities are not diagnosed and ultimately go untreated, any student for that matter is going to struggle in school. The biggest difference here between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is the trust factor. Aboriginal people have a hard time extending that trust and as a result will rely on those people that they are most familiar with. Realistically however, these are not necessarily the right people to be helping because they do not have the credentials required to diagnose learning disabilities.

If the student is diagnosed with having a learning disability, it is also very important for educators to understand that these students can learn in other ways and that all students have strengths that can be used to assist them in this process. One teacher retells an account where they used art as a way to turn the student's disability into a gift rather than a hindrance:

I have come to learn that some students with learning disabilities can successfully process their thoughts through art. Despite first appearances, they often know their topic well. A student who had never successfully written an essay before was struggling to write one about Canadian history. As I was walking around the room, I saw that she was drawing instead of writing. I knew this student liked to draw, so I asked her to create a picture about the topic first. I told her then we'd see if she could write about it. She drew a beautiful picture about British Loyalists coming to Canada. The setting, the people, the action and the reaction – they were all a part of her picture. I suggested that she write a paragraph or two about each part. Then we combined it into an essay. She now knows that by drawing something first, she creates a unique mind map from which to write. (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 124)

When talking about learning disabilities, the importance of getting them diagnosed is instrumental for the success of the child. Although not all Aboriginal parents consent to testing, some do. It is important then for educators to not view a learning disability as a handicap but rather as an opportunity to teach these students in different ways to bring the strengths of these students to the forefront. Too many times teachers see a learning disability as an obstacle that cannot be overcome; however, realistically, with the proper

supports, there is no reason why these students cannot be successful in any classroom setting.

2.6 Common Mistakes

One of the biggest misconceptions that are generally associated with Aboriginal students is that if there is an existing problem with their academic achievement, it is most likely a learning disability. In fact, there are other barriers besides disabilities that are affecting the learning processes of these students. Some of these things include sensory or physical disabilities, problems at home, absenteeism, discomfort in school settings, reserved personalities and giftedness.

All of these issues do affect learning but it is important to note that none of these are learning disabilities. For instance, "Sensory or physical disabilities: Learning disabilities are not caused by visual, hearing, speech or mobility impairments. However, if these problems go undiagnosed and without intervention, they will present barriers to learning" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 124).

Similarly, problems at home can have a dramatic impact on what is going on with Aboriginal children. It is important to note that many of these families live in poverty stricken conditions and students frequently come to school hungry or tired and have difficulty focusing at school. "Many Aboriginal children live in poverty and/or may face multiple incidents of trauma in their lives. For many of these children, daily survival takes priority over daily schoolwork" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 124).

As mentioned previously, absenteeism is not uncommon among Aboriginal children. Family and community commitments all take precedence over school and kids miss extended periods of time and develop a pattern of poor attendance. "They may be

behind in their learning because their exposure to educational concepts has been interrupted. This is different from having a difficulty with learning" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 125). When it comes to discomfort in the school setting, Aboriginal students may not feel safe in writing or speaking their thoughts. This may have to do with these students being laughed at or ridiculed in the past. These students worry about not knowing the answers to questions and believe that the only time you answer a question is when you know that it is true. "Other students may be unsure of how to ask for help or be uncomfortable asking question" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 125).

Due to their culture it is a common characteristic that Aboriginal people have generally reserved personalities. This can also be misconstrued as a learning disability but in actual fact it is not. "A quiet student who may seem unresponsive may simply be expressing a cultural comfort with silence. In many traditional cultures, learning to observe is highly valued. Students may need to watch others first before beginning to act themselves" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 125). It is important to note that just because students may not be responding actively in class it does not necessarily mean that they do not know what is going on with the material that is being covered. The truth of the matter is that being shy or reserved is a cultural characteristic, not a learning disability.

Piquemal (2003) supports this point about Aboriginal students:

A lot of our kids sit back: they want to learn by observing. They learn a lot like that. The teacher then sometimes says "look at me, pay attention, answer me!" The kids are listening, they are hearing everything; they are not distracted. It's more of a respect. They are taught like that, especially if they are taught by their grandparents; it's a cultural thing. You don't look at them straight in the eyes, because it would be challenging them. (p. 38)

"For Aboriginal people, it is discourteous to maintain constant eye contact or even give eye contact in specific communicative context. In situations when an Aboriginal child is

being reprimanded it is highly unlikely that eye-contact will remain" (Elchelebi, 1999, p. 12).

Similarly but different in approach are the literacy programs in Australia and how they distinguish boys and girls in terms of their learning needs. Landis (1997) comments:

To say students are selected on the basis of teacher judgment does little to change the fact that how teachers perceive students attitudes/displays of cooperation towards school-related tasks represents a powerful influence upon reasons why students are placed in special remedial as well as advanced academic programs. (p. 3)

Although many Aboriginal students do struggle with their studies, it is important to point out that there are many students who are quite talented and who do very well in school. The problem for many gifted students and why they often get mistaken for students who have a learning disability is that they have trouble organizing their thoughts. As a result it is hard for these students to show teachers exactly what it is that they can do. "Students who are very bright may have difficulty organizing their thoughts, focusing on tasks and managing boredom. Their performance in the classroom may not accurately reflect their true potential" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 125).

Although there are many signs that would indicate that a child has a learning disability, it is important to understand that this is not always the case. Other factors such as sensory or physical disabilities, problems at home, absenteeism, discomfort in school settings, reserved personalities, and giftedness need to be treated as separate entities and not be mistaken as learning disabilities. In doing so, students can be properly assessed and accommodations can be made to ensure students can be successful in their respective settings. This kind of system would certainly alleviate some of the pressures

that Aboriginal students are facing today and would infuse new teaching methods into the present educational system.

2.7 Aboriginal Language

In the 2001 Census, Statistics Canada stated that:

- 15, 010 Alberta residents reported Cree as their mother tongue;
- 2765 residents identified themselves as first language speakers of Dakota/Sioux;
- 2630 reported Blackfoot as their mother tongue;
- 625 Albertans identified themselves as native speakers of Ojibway;
- 250 people said their native mother tongue was South Slave;
- 225 said it was Chipewyan (Dene);
- 100 said they were native speakers of Inuktitut (most widely spoken in the northern regions of Canada);
- 1760 Albertans said that an Aboriginal language other than those listed above was their native language.

In total, 23, 380 Alberta residents identified themselves having an Aboriginal first language (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 2).

It is important to understand that language plays a big part in Aboriginal education and culture. With so many Aboriginal children being raised by other family members, especially grandparents, it is not uncommon for some children to speak their native tongue as their first language. While most teachers are non-Aboriginal and speak English, it is easy to see why this would be a problem for those Aboriginal students. While most of the curriculum is delivered in English and with some Aboriginal students not identifying English as their first language, it would not be unreasonable to suggest

that some educational concepts would get lost in translation. "The Cree phrase *kinchiyawiwiniaw nehiyawewin* means the Cree language is our identity" (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 3). Furthermore, Battiste (2000) suggests, "Aboriginal languages are the basic media for the transmission and survival of Aboriginal consciousness, cultures, literatures, histories, religions, political institutions, and values. They provide distinctive perspectives on and understandings of the world. . . ." (p. 199).

If language is indeed everything that Battiste claims it to be, it is obvious to see what an impact that language would have in instructing Aboriginal students. While many Aboriginal schools have Cree classes as a way to preserve culture built into their schedules, the majority of the curriculum is still being delivered in English to many students who identify an Aboriginal language as their first language. It only stands to reason that if curriculum was delivered in the native tongue to these students, that academically at least, these students would be more successful in school.

To expect these students to be taught and to understand curriculum concepts in English really puts these Aboriginal children at a disadvantage. If language is the essence of the Aboriginal people, why is this not being taken into consideration with their education? In his research, Battiste (2000) recognizes the significance in developing an educational system that is open to diversity. He further states that "There is clear and convincing evidence that student achievement and performance in school and pride in Aboriginal communities and heritages are directly tied to respect for support of the students' Aboriginal languages" (p. 4). Alberta Education puts the importance of language in this context: "Aboriginal languages are key to creating

appropriate learning environments for Aboriginal students" (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 4).

Language is such an important factor to take into consideration when talking about Aboriginal students' struggles in school. Many Aboriginal people consider language the "lifeblood" of their people and how being able to identify with the language helps people know themselves and as a result promotes a sense of pride in oneself:

Language is the outward expression of an accumulation of learning and experience shared by a group of people over centuries of development. It is not simply a vocal symbol; it is a dynamic force, which shapes the way man looks at the world and his philosophy of life. Knowing his maternal language helps a man to know himself; being proud of his language helps a man to be proud of himself. (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, pp. 14-15)

This example shows how important it is to ensure language is preserved for Aboriginal students, especially those students who speak an Aboriginal language and identify it as their native tongue. The problem however is that more and more teachers are going away from Aboriginal languages and are defaulting to English in their teaching practices. "Many teachers working in First Nations schools stopped using Indigenous languages for classroom instruction as they had in previous years and reverted to English as their primary language of instruction" (Blair, Paskemin & Laderoute, 2003, p. 3). Until language is taken into consideration, students who identify an Aboriginal language as their first language will continue to struggle with an educational system that is primarily delivered in English.

2.8 Life on Aboriginal Reserves

To say life on Aboriginal reserves can be difficult would be an understatement. Aboriginal people struggle every day just to get by and it is understandable that when Aboriginal students attend school, their focus may not completely be on their studies.

For many reserves in Alberta and Canada for that matter, poverty runs rampant through these communities. In 2002, "Canada dropped from first to eighth as the best country in the world to live primarily due to housing and health conditions in First Nations communities" (Statistics Canada, 2002). The quality of life is obviously very poor. Housing conditions are below standards and health is certainly a factor for Aboriginal people living on reserves. "The First Nations infant mortality rate is 1.5 times higher than the Canadian infant mortality rate" (Statistics Canada, 2002).

With these kinds of conditions it is not surprising to discover that the First Nations suicide rate is more than twice that of the Canadian rate. This is one of the main causes of death among First Nations people, especially for Aboriginal youth. Another killer of many Aboriginal people is disease. Health Canada in 2000 estimated that diabetes is at least three times higher than the national average. In addition, tuberculosis rates for First Nations populations are an estimated 8-10 times higher than the rest of the Canadian population. Finally when it comes to disease, HIV is a common killer of Aboriginal people. "Aboriginal peoples make up only 5% of the total population in Canada but represent 16% of the new HIV infections. Of these, 45% are women and 40% are under 30 years old. HIV/AIDS cases among Aboriginal peoples have increased steadily over the past decade" (Health Canada, 2000).

As mentioned before, housing and living conditions are a major concern for Aboriginal people, but just how bad is it? To put it in perspective, in 2003 Health Canada did some research and found out that 12% of First Nations communities had to boil their drinking water and approximately one quarter of water treatment systems on-

reserve pose a dangerous risk to human health. It is estimated that about 25% of First Nations water infrastructures are at a high risk of contamination.

In terms of housing conditions and due to family obligations, it is estimated that housing density is twice that of the general population. This means that many Aboriginal families live in overcrowded homes, creating a breeding ground for disease and insanitary living conditions. It has also been estimated by Health Canada that more than 100 First Nations communities are under a Boil Water Advisory for drinking water.

In regards to employment opportunities, there is very little in terms of work. In 1996, according to Health Canada, First Nations people have the highest unemployment rate at 27%.

Unfortunately the news does not get any better when it comes to education. "About 70% of First Nations students on-reserve will never complete high school. Graduation rates for on-reserve populations range from 28.9% - 32.1% annually" (Indian Northern Affairs Canada, 2002). In terms of post-secondary education, a 2004 report from the Auditor General indicates that only 27% of the First Nations populations between 15 and 44 hold some kind of degree or certificate, compared to 46% of the Canadian population within the same group.

With all the problems that Aboriginal people go through living on reserves, it is not surprising that many Aboriginal students are not successful in school. The fact that 70% of students on reserves will never attain a high school diploma is a staggering statistic. However, when you take into consideration what reservation life is like and the many hardships that accompany living in isolated places such as these, it is understandable that there are other things on the minds of the students. In fact, survival

for these people is priority number one, not education, and that is certainly shown by the results in recent years.

In 2009 a study was released that captured the experiences of first and second year teachers in Saskatchewan that were working on reserves. One of the questions asked them what were their concerns when it came to teaching on reserve. Here is what they had to say:

Teaching on reserve presents unique challenges stemming from (a) a pervasive culture of poverty, (b) educational disadvantage and scarcity of resources, (c) the complex dynamics of small, close-knit communities, and (d) the pressures of working in an educational environment that is often highly politicized, where teachers and administrators rarely enjoy stability or security. Consequently high teacher turn-over is common. (Arcand, Cottrell & Legare, 2009, p. 831)

Other teachers reported the complexity of working with students with such diverse needs and working with teacher assistants in their classrooms:

Because of the high number of students designated with special needs, many teachers have teaching assistants available to them. However, most felt unprepared to work with other adults in the classroom. They also acknowledged the complexity of working with (teacher assistants) TAs who were both parents of the children they taught and also members of the community where the teachers worked and lived. (p. 833)

These examples illustrate that there are many difficulties when working on reserves. As much as the children go through in their daily lives, teaching on reserves also presents its own unique set of problems for teachers as well. While students might just be thinking about surviving from day to day, teachers are faced with the overwhelming needs that these students have as well as working in highly politicized environments that can be quite hostile. It is no surprise then that reserves present interesting challenges when it comes to the education of Aboriginal students and not surprising as to why so many students do not graduate.

In addition, because reserves are not desired places to work for many teachers, turn-over rates are high. "Many perhaps most, non-Native teachers accept teaching positions on reserves with the intention of completing a couple of years before landing the job they really want" (Taylor, 1995, p. 225). This is significant for the simple reason that without consistency, stability and continuity, students continually have to get used to new teaching practices just about every year. Also the issue of trust comes up and students will not do as well with their studies if a relationship cannot be established between student and teacher.

2.9 Post-Secondary Education

With so few Aboriginal students completing high school it is no surprise that even fewer are attending and completing programs in post-secondary institutions. In an article released by Malatest (2002) entitled *Best Practices in Increasing Aboriginal Post-secondary Enrolment Rates*, the following factors were identified as being challenges in Aboriginal post-secondary learning:

- Lack of funding and financial support for growing affiliated independent Aboriginal educational institutions;
- Lack of specific funding for Métis, non-Status and Bill C-31 persons who are not eligible for funding;
- Specific support services for key learner groups are a challenge, particularly women (high numbers), men (low numbers) and mature learners (high numbers);
- Lack of Aboriginal instructors and staff;
- Lack of diversification of subjects at the post-secondary level; and,

- Lack of community support at the community level to address cultural and social barriers, including treatment and awareness of chemical/alcohol dependencies.
(p. 11)

Due to a variety of factors, Aboriginal students are struggling not only to get into post-secondary institutions but once they get there, they are still running into obstacles that permit them from reaching their potentials. "Many students, I find, lack the financial means to enter post-secondary institutions based on limited funds. They have difficulty, I find, in balancing their personal, school and family responsibilities. As well, I find there are many female student parents who are sole support providers for their families" (King, 2008, p. 2).

A common theme that comes up throughout the research is the fact that culture and language are lacking not only in K-12 programming but in post-secondary institutions as well. "To begin with, the language, learning styles, teaching styles, communication modes, and cultural patterns reflected within most postsecondary institutions differ greatly from the traditional teaching pedagogy of Aboriginal peoples" (Preston, 2008, p. 11). Until the cultural aspect is taken into consideration and the necessary resources are made available (i.e., more Aboriginal staff, culturally diverse courses), post-secondary Aboriginal students will struggle. The Aboriginal communities in Alberta are very diverse with a rich culture that needs to be recognized. "Particular attention must be given to respecting the diversity/complexity of the native communities as well as the desire with many of the communities to provide leadership in both the identification of needs and in the designing of responses to those needs" (MacIntyre, 1992, p. 9).

In Australia, many of the students feel shame for speaking their native tongue. One student reported on how embarrassed she felt when she was using Aboriginal words. "Lecturers do not take into account the Aboriginal way of saying things. Some students are made to feel shame, anger and be in tears as a result of using Aboriginal words. One lecturer said to one student, "Could you please explain so we could all understand the secret?" (Buchanan & Egg, 1996, p. 23). Another student voiced her displeasure with her program because her cultural background was not taken into account:

It made the course so much harder because cultural background wasn't taken into consideration. I found the course very difficult because, in some ways I didn't really know what I was doing. The academic procedures were totally new to me. I had to go over the instructions several times to ensure that I met their deadlines. I had no assistance at all. I didn't have any contacts. I didn't understand the new kinds of writing. I am not sure if the course could meet my needs. (p. 24)

While isolating each community's unique characteristics is a difficult task, there is no reason why common threads from these same communities cannot be identified and woven into post-secondary programming. For this to come to fruition there has to be recognition by all secondary programs that the current way business is being done is not working for Aboriginal students. Instead a partnership needs to be formed between secondary institutions and Aboriginal people. Doing so will strengthen Aboriginal success in post-secondary institutions and improve programming. "Utilizing both community resources and college resources, the partnerships must identify priorities in relation to long term goals and then cooperatively work towards achieving such goals" (MacIntyre, 1992, p. 9). Not only will this partnership improve educational success but it will also improve the quality of life for all Aboriginal people.

2.10 Solutions

Despite many of the difficulties that Aboriginal students go through there are a number of things that can be done to assist these kids with their education. This section explores the possibilities that exist in making education better for Aboriginal students.

2.10.1 Getting to Know Students

One of the first things that the research shows is that getting to know the students is perhaps one of the best ways to help them in school. Getting to know them as an individual, what their home life is like, who their families are, finding out what they are interested in and learning more about their culture are all strategies that teachers can use to get to know their students better. Students can have a wealth of information and it is important that teachers tap into this the best way they can. In doing so, teachers will set up the students in their classrooms for a much better chance of success. Wilson (2001) contends that relationship building is an important factor in ensuring success for Aboriginal students and teachers in the classroom, "Only when they both feel they have an investment in the outcome of the relationship can gains be made towards meeting each other's desire for success" (Wilson, 2001, p. 8)

When teachers take the time to get to know their students better, especially family and culture, teachers are more aware and are able to recognize the cultural influences that affect learning. "Offering kindness, trust and a positive awareness of family and culture sets the stage for students to feel welcome and to want to attend school every day" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 30). Teachers can also use the same culture and find ways to incorporate it into the existing curriculum. In addition, understanding where students come from will help teachers counter stereotypes as well

as help teachers build on student's strengths. "The more teachers know about each of these elements in their students' lives, the more information they have to create an understanding of their students' lives" (p. 30).

The other important thing to note for teachers when they are getting to know students is that Aboriginal peoples in general are very shy and they have a tendency to be very quiet in the classroom setting. To overcome this, teachers need to act as models and first share information about themselves if they are to expect students to open up to them. "Then, when opportunities arise, the teacher can invite students to share information about themselves and their cultures" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 32). In an interview that Alberta Education did with an Aboriginal teacher about getting to know students, the teacher suggests that those initial moments are critical in fostering that relationship between teacher and student. "When you take the time to talk to students, remember: the first moments are scared; they involve the honoring of the dignity of each life that you meet. Take the time to listen with your heart" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 33).

2.10.2 The Importance of Language

Because of the way language shapes the way of thinking for Aboriginals, it is important for educators to recognize the significance of language and figure out how it can be incorporated into instruction. When taking language into consideration it is important to understand that Aboriginal language, especially the Cree language, is highly developed and quite complex. For those students who speak the language, English can be difficult for these students to understand so it is important that teachers be able to identify with this and find ways they can tap into it. "It is important to give

students time to articulate their thoughts and to find ways to help them express themselves clearly and comfortably" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 34).

It is also important for teachers to be aware of tone, volume and pitch. Aboriginal people often speak in softer tones. "They listen carefully to voice inflection and so may be very sensitive not only to what is being said but how it is being said" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 34). Because language plays such an important part in the Aboriginal culture, language has a strong influence on thought and speech patterns. As a result, delay times in between responses can vary. "The pause time for European people tends to be less than two seconds. The pause time for Aboriginal peoples tends to be about four or five seconds" (p. 35). That is double the pause time than the European group which is significant because if this is not noticed by teachers early on, this pause could be misconstrued as students not knowing the information being presented in class. It needs to be remembered that Aboriginal people are a reflective group and in large part due to their language, Aboriginal students may not jump in and participate in classroom discussions like non-Aboriginal students perhaps would. Alberta Education suggests, "To accommodate the learning needs of Aboriginal students, teachers can increase "wait time" – the thinking time may give students after asking a question and before expecting a response. Generous wait time has been shown to increase the length and quality of student responses" (p. 35).

This wait time is essential for teachers to identify if Aboriginal students are going to have the opportunity to show what they are able to do academically. This is something that is very difficult for non-Aboriginal teachers to comprehend, as many of these teachers do not have this understanding. As Battiste (2002) points out "Indigenous

pedagogy accepts students' cognitive search for learning processes they can internalize, and Aboriginal teachers allow for a lag period of watching before doing" (pp. 18-19). It is critical then that non-Aboriginal teachers collaborate with Aboriginal teachers to recognize the importance of language and all its nuances so Aboriginal students have the ability to express themselves in their own unique way.

In regards to language it is also important to remember that the Aboriginal people have a history deeply rooted in oral tradition, a tradition in which most of the culture has been passed down through stories, music and song. This oral history, if incorporated properly, could pay huge dividends within the classroom. Tapping into the songs and stories, provides teachers with more resources they can use to help Aboriginal students in the classroom. Littlebear (1996) states that "Most elements of these cultures are transmitted from generation to generation through oral means: stories, legends and poems. This body of oral literature provides a tremendous resource to teachers and fits well within the framework of current educational practices" (pp. xlii-xv). If teachers are able to gather enough of these resources, they can easily incorporate a variety of them into regular instruction. In doing so, not only will students be able to relate to their studies more but they will also see that their teachers are trying to connect with them, thus fostering that relationship between teacher and student even further.

2.10.3 Elders and Community Members

Elders are integral members of any Aboriginal community and are fountains of information that teachers can use in the classroom. Their knowledge, experience, and just their presence can make a huge difference in the lives of Aboriginal children and especially their schooling. "Elders also close the generation gap created by the legacy of

residential schools and strengthens the pride and kinship felt by Aboriginals" (Learn Alberta, 2006, p. 34). Teachers need to find a way to get this valuable resource into the school and make these connections with the Elders because they are the foundation of what the Aboriginal culture embodies. Elders can become involved in many ways in the school serving as storytellers, sharing the history of their people and community, as well as explaining to students about the flora and fauna of the area and their significance to the Aboriginal people. "All of these opportunities can enrich the shared experiences of teachers, students, and community members, increasing the pool of knowledge to be tapped for future learning, and build the general climate of support for education" (McCarty & Schaffer, 1992, pp. 123-124).

Once again it is to be remembered that Aboriginal people, including elders and community members, are very shy and may need to be asked to come into the school. Aboriginal people in general really want to get involved in the school but are unsure of how they can do so. It is essential then that teachers seek out elders and members of the community and invite them in to be apart of the classroom setting. Elders specifically are deeply respected in the community due in large part to the wisdom they have to share. They are also able to share much about culture through their language and give valuable insights on past present and current worldviews. Battiste (2000) suggests that, "Elders are the critical link to Aboriginal epistemology [i.e., thought and worldview] through the Aboriginal languages" (p. 201). She also states that "It seems obvious that Elders and others who can pass on Aboriginal identity, language, and culture should be directly involved in the modern educational system" (p. 205).

It is important to note that to have Elders in for the sake of having them in is not adequate. An Elder must have some kind of meaningful involvement if they are going to have any impact on education for students. It is also important to note that not every Elder has the same knowledge as the other and that each Elder has his own unique style and gifts to offer:

Different Elders hold different gifts. Their contributions to schools and classrooms can be significant when they are involved in meaningful ways such as bringing traditional ceremonies and teachings into the school or classroom; providing advice to parents, students, teachers and school administrators; providing accurate information about Aboriginal heritage and Aboriginal communities; and acting as a bridge between the schools and the community. (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 71)

Welcoming guests from the community into the school is a great idea. They along with Elders can provide so many different perspectives on a variety of topics that come up in the curriculum. In addition, because many of these people work in the community, if used properly, this possibility can improve programming and support teachers in the classroom. "Aboriginal business people, visual and performing artists, professionals, traditional teachers, athletes, storytellers and others have much to offer that will enrich programming and support cultural continuity" (Alberta Education, p. 74). Just like Elders, community members have to be meaningfully involved if they are going to be effective in the school setting. Finding out more about these people through school-community liaison workers and other Aboriginal people at the school could improve teacher lessons but more importantly, improve student performance. When you meaningfully involve these individuals, students are able to connect with their own people and see for themselves why they were able to be successful. "Welcoming the

community into the classroom increases the effectiveness of teaching practices and, as a result, accountability to Aboriginal students" (p. 75).

Relevance is perhaps one of the most important factors that contribute to student success. Finding issues or topics that have some kind of meaning to students will keep them engaged and keep them focused. That is why getting other people involved in the classroom is such an important strategy in the development of student self esteem, image, confidence, and of course educational achievement. Making education matter to the Aboriginal student is key to the successful development of the child in school and getting Elders and community members involved is a crucial step in making this happen. As one teacher explains:

A traditional teacher visited our class of students with behavioral challenges and brought his teachings about the drum. Students who normally wouldn't have been able to focus for more than five minutes sat still and gave this teacher their undivided attention for half an hour. He was teaching about something that mattered to them. (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 75)

2.10.4 Infusion of Aboriginal Content

Just as a lack of Aboriginal content in the curriculum poses a huge concern for Aboriginal students, an influx of it can have the opposite effect. In Alberta there is a vast array of material available out there which teachers can use to help supplement what they are doing in the classroom with their students. One of the major projects that Alberta Education has undertaken is to increase Aboriginal awareness and relevance to all students in the province. It is also important to note that many of these materials are curriculum-related and can be used with confidence by teachers. In addition, including these materials into regular instruction is not difficult. "Infusion of Aboriginal content is

not an add-on or a special event – it is an integral, embedded and ongoing aspect of classroom experience” (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 53).

The infusion of Aboriginal content is a giant step in the right direction in ensuring that all students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, have the opportunity to learn about the historical contributions of Aboriginal peoples as well as learning more about their cultures. An infusion of Aboriginal content means that Aboriginal students can be proud of their cultural backgrounds in addition to learning more about themselves. This connection between content and student will foster learning to a new degree as students learn better when they have a connection to the material. “Infusion fosters this connection. It also encourages Aboriginal students to become aware of multiple perspectives within Aboriginal groups” (p. 53).

Although it may be easier for the Aboriginal teacher to incorporate Aboriginal content in the curriculum, Alberta Education offers a variety of suggestions to all teachers when they are in the process of selecting these resources. Alberta Education suggests that there are three things that teachers should look for: voice and source, intent, and complexity.

To assess **voice** (through a short story, film, text), Alberta Education (2005) suggests that educators ask the following questions to test its effectiveness:

- Is the material respectful and truthful in both tone and information?
- Is there anything in the material that could embarrass or hurt an Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal student?
- Could the material foster stereotypical thinking in either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal students?

- Does the material present a one-sided view of history, religion or lifestyles?
- Does it measure success in life by only one standard?
- Does the material present Aboriginal cultures and peoples as distinct from one another, or does it portray pan-Indianism (a generic presentation of "Indian culture")?
- Does the work reflect respect for the roles of women and Elders in Aboriginal cultures?
- Is the language respectful and free of any racist or insulting words or images?

To assess **source**, the following questions should be asked:

- What is the author's (or artist's or filmmaker's) background or experience that qualifies him or her to portray Aboriginal peoples and cultures?
- Does the author's perspective strengthen or enhance the portrayal of Aboriginal peoples, cultures or issues?

To assess **intent**, the following questions should be asked:

- Does the work interpret ways of life with a deep knowledge of them? Non-Aboriginals are seldom intimately familiar with or deeply knowledgeable about the realities of Aboriginal contemporary and traditional ways of life.
- Does the work present a balanced, factual view? Or does it describe events in terms that state or imply the superiority of one group over another?
- Does the work attribute advances to one group but not another? For example, does it name the European explorer but not the Aboriginal people who guided the explorer to "his" discoveries?

To assess **complexity**, make sure that it is presented and undertaken in a way that reflects, as closely as possible, the daily lived experience of the activity; for example:

- Bannock making connects to teaching about sharing. When students are making bannock, invite another class to share it with them. (Serve it with black tea, butter and jam.)
- Making miniature tipis is in itself simply a craft activity, not a cultural learning experience. When an Elder or traditional teacher guides the students through the teachings associated with each tipi pole and the symbols painted on the tipi, tipi making becomes cultural infusion. (pp. 54-56)

These strategies by Alberta Education give every teacher the necessary tools to select good quality Aboriginal resources for everyday instruction. To include Aboriginal material for the sake of including is not sufficient. There has to be some substance to it and the material has to take a number of very important cultural considerations before it can be used. Not taking cultural aspects into consideration when infusing Aboriginal content could make students feel uncomfortable and hinder progress in the classroom. A variety of strategies such as telling Aboriginal stories as part of a language arts class, erecting teepees as a group, incorporating hands-on activities, bringing in Elders, community members, and parents in the classroom, and being open to other cultural perspectives are all strategies that teachers can use to bring Aboriginal content into the classroom successfully. "The infusion of Aboriginal content into regular curriculum ensures that all students have opportunities to learn about the historical and contemporary contributions and cultures of Aboriginal peoples" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 53).

2.10.5 Involving Parents

Like all parents, Aboriginal parents and extended family that act like parents, play a vital role in the education of their children. Establishing positive relationships with parents is an excellent strategy teachers can use to get these parents involved more with their children's education. The problem that exists is that many teachers do not know how to get parents involved in the classroom. Teachers need to realize very early on that the initial meeting should take place when the student first joins the classroom. This ensures that the meeting between parents and teacher will be a positive experience rather than a situation where the teacher has to call home due to something negative happening at school. This first meeting will set the foundation for a positive relationship between parents and the teacher. Doing so will encourage parents to get involved a little more in their children's education and activates teachers in reaching out to parents to create an opportunity for them to come into the classroom. Teachers can invite parents to:

- meet informally in the classroom or, if this is not practical, ask to visit them in their home or at a friendship centre, recreation centre or Métis/band office;
- attend student presentations, portfolio reviews and other activities throughout the school year;
- contribute their knowledge about their cultures to curriculum-related activities;
- contribute their talents to classroom and school-wide activities such as organizational skills or carpentry, craft and creative skills. (Alberta Education, 2005, pp. 62-63)

It is also important to consider time and place when inviting parents into the classroom. Parents may be busy working or preoccupied with other family or community commitments so it is important to take note of this when trying to get them involved in the school. Alberta Education (2005) lists five effective strategies that teachers can use when taking into account the busy lives of parents:

- when scheduling classroom and school events, consider the work hours of your parents and how to best accommodate them;
- arrange for childcare during family events at the school;
- offer to meet with parents at their home;
- offer parents who are unable to volunteer during school hours other options for contributing;
- be sensitive to the fact that some families may be dealing with economic stress. Consider this when setting field-trip fees, asking for contributions for bake sales or planning events that involve transportation. (p. 63)

Making these kinds of concessions for parents will go a long way in a relationship of trust and understanding between parents and the school. In addition, just as Elders and community members need meaningful involvement in the school, so do parents. Teachers need to recognize the fact that parents need to be involved with the decisions and activities involving their children. It is important that the attention is directed toward the child and ways of how parents can help in their schooling. It is important to be flexible when having these meetings. "Invite parents to actively participate in decisions concerning their child. Schedule meetings around their availability. Ensure that they are kept up-to-date through classroom newsletters or phone

calls" (p. 64). It is also important to help parents understand their rights by going over with them the protocols of the school. This way when issues arise, parents will know what to do regarding decisions about their children.

It needs to be recognized that each parent, just as every student, has unique strengths that need to be tapped into if they are going to be utilized properly in the classroom. "Recognize parents' strengths and commend them for the ways they support their children's education and learning" (Alberta Education, 2005 p. 64). It is also important to be clear with parents about expectations and to have high expectations when wanting parental involvement. Teachers need to make it clear to parents what they expect from them and their children. For example, attendance is generally a problem for most Aboriginal children, so encouraging parents to get their children to school as regularly as possible may be an expectation that a teacher may want to explain to parents. "Help parents and students understand the benefits and work collaboratively to develop strategies that support and enhance student attendance" (p. 64).

Making expectations clear, working together with parents, showing them that they are understood and that everyone is on the same page when it comes to the child, will show parents the importance of getting involved. This also shows them that the teachers are on their side in making sure that their child gets the best educational opportunities possible. Teachers just need to make sure they are patient, work with parent strengths, and make parents comfortable.

2.10.6 Effective Instructional Strategies

The relationship between student and teacher is the biggest factor in what teachers will get out of a student academically. Once teachers get to know their students,

the process of tailoring the learning process needs to begin in order to best accommodate the needs of students. In order to do this, teachers need to gather as much information as they can about the students. This can be done through their interactions with them, conversations with parents and other teachers, and through everyday observations of students in a variety of situations. Once the information has been gathered, teachers can then start incorporating a variety of strategies to best meet the needs of their students.

Alberta Education (2005) offers a variety of instructional strategies that teachers can use for Aboriginal students:

- engaging and motivating them;
- reflecting their cultures and worldviews;
- helping them focus;
- organizing information for ease of understanding and remembering;
- offer a variety of approaches and learning materials;
- offer appropriate support that includes modeling, guided practice and independent practice;
- offer opportunities to transfer skills and ideas from one situation to another;
- offer meaningful connections between skills and ideas, and real-life situations;
- offer opportunities to be independent and show what they know;
- offer encouragement to self-monitor and self-correct;
- offer tools for reflecting on and assessing their learning. (p. 80)

These are just a few strategies that Alberta Education suggests using when teaching Aboriginal students. Using any number of these strategies will help teachers in the classroom when teaching students. These same strategies can be used across the

curriculum and can accommodate a wide range of student differences. Some strategies will work for some students while others will not. It is at the discretion of the teacher as to what strategies work best for individual students. It may be one strategy or a variety of strategies that work best for any particular student, but teachers will have to use the knowledge gathered previously to properly apply effective instructional strategies.

One final instructional strategy that Alberta Education promotes highly is the idea of service learning. Service learning brings students, school and community closer together. "Students provide a service to the community and in doing so, learn more about their community and about themselves while practicing skills such as goal setting, problem solving and planning" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 104). This strategy is very useful and also shows to the community that the students and the school is concerned with tradition and Aboriginal culture while at the same time teaching students valuable skills that they need. According to Alberta Education, service learning benefits students and communities by:

- building connections among students, their schools and their communities;
- improving school climate as students work together in positive ways;
- showing the community a positive image of youth, leading to stronger support for students and schools;
- creating greater awareness of community needs and concerns;
- increasing community capacity to address key issues. (p. 105)

By taking part in service learning initiatives students learn a numbers of skills that will benefit them as they progress through school. Service learning encourages students to:

- strengthen academic knowledge and skills by applying them to real situations;

- build positive relationships and work with a variety of people;
- discover new interests and abilities;
- set goals and work to achieve them;
- work cooperatively, and also learn the importance of individual responsibility;
- take on leadership roles;
- learn the value of helping and caring for others. (p. 105)

These attributes are all desirable qualities of any student while at the same time bringing school and community closer by working together to achieve attainable goals. Some examples of projects that students can be involved in are: planning appreciation days for volunteers and school staff, teaching an afterschool program with younger children, offering babysitting for special events held at the school, and starting school wide projects that focus on cross-cultural understanding. Regardless of the activity, there are good lessons about culture and school to be learned when participating in a learning service project. These are highly engaging activities that students can easily connect with because they pertain to both their culture and their community. "For Aboriginal students, service learning reflects the commitment to community that is traditionally a vital aspect of Aboriginal cultures" (Alberta Education 2005 p. 104).

2.10.7 Technology

In today's society, technology plays a huge role in what is happening and what is going to happen with education in general. Technology, if used wisely, can have a dramatic impact on the way Aboriginal education is currently being delivered. Using computers, web sites, CD-ROMS, DVDs, audio media, Smartboards, digital cameras and the internet, are all examples of educational tools that teachers can use to

supplement what they are doing in the classroom. Teachers must use these materials consistently if they are going to have an impact and similarly, the more exposure students get to these resources, the better they will become at using them. Robust (2002) writes:

Indigenous groups with access to tools of information and communication technology can use them to cross boundaries and also to enhance their learning capabilities, to gain knowledge, adapt, and control. However, for them to take this journey and use the tools to achieve their goals by modifying existing arrangements they need the space to explore the medium, to set goals, and evaluate their usefulness for their own situations. (p. 2)

As Robust points out, students must have access to this technology if it is going to have any meaning to them. Letting students explore and to decide for themselves if they see value in it will help students set goals and achieve them. Not to say that technology is the only means by which students will achieve in the classroom but rather it is just another strategy that teachers and students can use together to promote student achievement in school.

Another way in which technology could be used is to help with language. With many students speaking Cree or English as their primary languages, technology could foster the growth of an existing language or perhaps even a second language. There exists a variety of web sites that can be used to promote language learning in the classroom, but it should be cautioned that these need to be weeded through carefully before they are used. While there are many useful web sites, there are many more that do not meet the necessary requirements to be deemed effective. Teachers need to make sure they go through these sites before they use them. With that in mind, and if the teacher considers the site effective, this type of technology can prove to be very useful. "For language learning, it is important to hear the language, better to see it and hear it used in

context, and best to be able to use it in context. The new multimedia technologies make it increasingly easier to hear, see and use language" (Buszard-Welcher, 2001, p. 337).

Furthermore, Yeoman (2000) identifies two other possible advantages to computer-mediated learning:

- (a) it tends to be informal, and for language learners in classroom situations it might sometimes allow students who are not comfortable with speaking out to feel more comfortable participating in a discussion; (b) computer conferencing can allow many people to share thoughts and ideas, thus potentially stimulating further exploration and reflection that might not otherwise occur. At the same time, e-mail still permits transmission of private messages to one or a number of individuals. (pp. 128-129)

There are many possibilities that present themselves when technology is used in the classroom. However, technology is just another tool that both teachers and students can use to make educational opportunities better. Technology needs to be used in combination with other instructional strategies to meet the needs of their students so they can be successful in all areas of their schooling. As Alberta Education (2007) points out however, technology is a tool and there is no excuse for hard work. "These are useful tools, and they greatly change the dimensions and possibilities for documentation and instruction, but they are no substitute for human desire and effort (pp. 70-71).

2.10.5 The Role of Teachers

All of the possible solutions listed in this section of this paper are very relevant, but these are just a few that come through the research. One of the main things that needs to be brought up is that teachers are ethically and morally responsible to teach students the best way that they can. Although the solutions listed are targeted at teaching Aboriginal students specifically, this does not mean they have to be used. However, it is the teacher's responsibility to make sure appropriate strategies are incorporated to best

meet the needs of all the students in their charge. It only stands to reason that the responsible teacher would not only use these strategies but also seek out others and create some of their own to make sure they are accommodating the needs of each and every student in their classroom.

Currently The Alberta School Act is undergoing changes to make it more effective. The following shows what the role of teachers are and what the proposed changes are.

In the following, existing legislation is displayed in non-boldfaced text with proposed amendments displayed in **bold-faced** text:

18(1) A teacher while providing instruction or supervision must

- a. provide instruction competently to students;
- b. pursuant to the Teaching Quality Standard, possess the knowledge, skills and attributes related to interim or permanent certification, as applicable, and apply them appropriately toward student learning;**
- c. teach the courses of study and education programs that are prescribed, approved or authorized pursuant to this Act;
- d. promote goals and standards applicable to the provision of education adopted or approved pursuant to this Act;
- e. encourage and foster learning in students;
- f. continually improve teaching practice through professional development activities that reflect:**
 - (i) goals and objectives based on an assessment of learning needs by the individual teacher;**

(ii) a demonstrable relationship to the teaching quality standard; and

(iii) alignment with the education plans of the school, the school authority and the Government;

g. regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students, the students' parents and the board;

h. maintain student records, including assessment and attendance, and make them available as required;

i. maintain, under the direction of the principal, order and discipline among the students while they are in the school or on the school grounds and while they are attending or participating in activities sponsored or approved by the board;

j. build student rapport and engender respect for a safe and caring school environment;

k. work cooperatively with various partners in the school community;

l. attend meetings or conferences called by the principal or superintendent;

m. subject to any applicable collective agreement and the teacher's contract of employment, carry out those duties that are assigned to the teacher by the principal or the board (Alberta School Act, 2010, pp. 10-11).

There are many things that teachers are responsible for and with the proposed amendments, the existing roles of teachers will clearly expand. All components of the School Act, both existing and proposed, suggest that teachers are the foundation in ensuring that students are provided with the best educational opportunities possible. When looking at the School's Act, it is hard not to take notice of such points as,

professional development, encouraging and fostering learning in students, working cooperatively with partners in the school community, building student rapport and providing instruction competently to students. The School Act is the basis of what teachers in Alberta are to adhere to in making sure students are properly educated. Failure to do so not only means that students are not educated the way they were intended to be, it also indicates that teachers are refusing to do their jobs. If The School Act is the guide that all teachers are required to follow, not following it surely means that students are not getting the education they deserve. Teachers are therefore professionally obligated to do everything they possibly can to make sure the individual needs of students are met, thus improving the educational attainment for all students.

2.10.9 Summary

Chapter two provides a rich description of the many issues that currently plague the educational difficulties that Aboriginal students are experiencing. Issues such as family obligations, lack of Aboriginal content in the curriculum, current assessment practices, learning disabilities both diagnosed and misdiagnosed, language barriers and life on reserves are impacting Aboriginal achievement negatively. Despite the many hindrances that are affecting the education of Aboriginal students, the literature does indicate that there are many things that can be done to alleviate some of these issues. Solutions such as building relationships with students, incorporating and understanding language, utilizing Elders and community members in education, infusing cultural content into everyday teaching practices, meaningfully involving parents with what is going on with their children, incorporating instructional strategies that meet the needs of students, using technology and teaching living up to professional obligations as

educators are all things that the research outlines as effective tools in helping Aboriginal students doing better in school. Only when these factors are taken into consideration and solutions applied properly will teachers and students be able to come together and combat the many issues that affect education.

CHAPTER 3

Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Before research can begin the researcher must design a plan to carry out the research based on the information that is being sought after. After choosing the methodology, participants are selected and data is collected and analyzed. Throughout the process the researcher must address concerns regarding trustworthiness and reliability of the data collected. In addition, strategies must be adopted to address the ethical considerations of the study.

3.2 Research Design

According to O'Donoghue (2007) the initial stage of research consists of two steps: making an observation that prompts a person to seek further understanding and formulating a research question that focuses on the issues on which the research chooses to focus. Regardless of the field of study, the choice to pursue further understanding from the respective phenomenon comes from the interests of the researcher. A statement of the problem to be studied arises from the individual's desire to obtain knowledge.

Bell (2005) outlines a series of steps that must be carried out when undertaking a research project:

You will need to select a topic, identify the objectives of your study, plan and design a suitable methodology, devise research instruments, negotiate access to institutions, materials and people, collect, analyze and present information, and, finally, produce a well-written report. (p. 1)

Once a topic is chosen and the objective of the study is determined, researchers must decide which research approach would be most effective in getting the information they require for their research. Quantitative, qualitative, action and critical theory are examples of research approaches used in education and although one approach may be chosen, researchers may use a blended approach depending on their purpose. Each approach has its own strengths and weaknesses and the "approach adopted and the methods of data collection selected will depend on the nature of the inquiry and the type of information required" (p. 8).

Qualitative research, in particular, is used to investigate topics that are not easily studied using statistical procedures (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Qualitative research is an "approach to social science research that emphasizes collecting descriptive data in natural settings, uses inductive thinking, and emphasizes understanding the subjects point of view" (p. 274). The data collected provides a rich description of the situation studied and its purpose is to provide understanding about this situation. In this study a questionnaire approach was chosen to determine the perspectives of principals and teachers about issues and concerns in Aboriginal education in Alberta. The participants responded to a series of open-ended questions that were sent via an email attachment; this allowed the participants time to answer the questions at their own pace and on their own time and in the setting of their choice without the presence of the principal researcher.

3.3 Questionnaire Approach

This study uses a qualitative approach to seek the perspectives of educational leaders regarding issues and concerns in Aboriginal education in Alberta. There are

several advantages to using an emailed questionnaire. It is less obtrusive than a face-to-face interview; it eliminates interviewer bias; participants have more time to think about their responses and can respond at their own pace, at their own time and in their own setting. Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh (2002) add that by using a mailed questionnaire participants are more likely to respond truthfully about matters with which they feel uncomfortable. Some disadvantages of using this approach include low return rate, limited generalizability, misinterpretation on the part of respondents, longer wait time for responses, and less personable in the sense that there is no face-to-face interactions between the participants and the principal researcher.

When designing a questionnaire the researcher must decide whether to use open ended questions or closed ended questions based on the type of information that is sought. Since the purpose of qualitative inquiry is to seek the perspectives of the participants, an open ended approach is much more effective. Open-ended questions permit free responses, provide a wide range of responses, allow for individual time frames and are easier to construct. The disadvantages of open-ended questions are they are tedious and time consuming to analyze, the responses will differ in length and the meaning of some responses may be unclear to the researcher (Ary et al., 2002).

An email list was created on the researcher's personal email account so that participants' names and addresses did not show up in correspondence and kept individual identities anonymous. An introductory email was sent to all participants outlining the timeline for the project, the purpose of the study, giving information on what to expect, thanking them for their time, and letting them know they could withdraw at any time.

3.4 Selection of Participants

The researcher contacted a number of school jurisdictions to seek approval to conduct a study on the perspectives of educational leaders in Aboriginal education. Help was also attained by Alberta Education as to what jurisdictions would be best suited to the research that was being carried out. Purposive sampling is selecting a nonrandom sample "because prior knowledge suggests it is representative, or because those selected have the needed information" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006, p.6). This sampling method was used since the researcher was seeking input specifically from principals and teachers regarding Aboriginal education in the province of Alberta. Using information given by Alberta Education and through connections made with other jurisdictions through previous employment and committees, email addresses for principals and teachers across the province were acquired and an introductory email explaining the purpose of the study and inquiring if they would be interested in participating was sent. Upon receiving replies from interested individuals, follow up emails were sent thanking participants for their interest with the consent form and questionnaire attached. If participants had any questions, emails were exchanged back and forth or phone calls were made answering any questions that the participants had.

3.5 Data Collection

In this study, data was obtained using a questionnaire developed by the researcher. The questionnaire was emailed to participants and responses were either emailed or faxed back. Once responses were received, the researcher saved all consent forms and questionnaires on his personal computer and backed up the data on a USB flash memory. Files were named using pseudonyms.

3.6 Data Analysis

Although it is now possible to use computer programs to analyze qualitative data, "the preference is for less structured, open-ended data collection with structuring taking place later through content analysis or emergent themes" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006, p. 462). Although there are many ways to analyze data, researchers are obliged "to monitor and report their own analytical procedures and processes as fully and truthfully as possible" (Patton, 1990, p. 372).

For this study, the researcher obtained 22 questionnaires each with 6 questions. To begin data analysis, computer files were created containing all the responses to each of the 6 questions. Each question was coded with a letter to separate each of the six questions. After reading each response to each question several times, the researcher grouped all the common words and phrases and identified themes that emerged from the data. After identifying these common themes, the researcher put them into different files, coded them, and took quotes from responses to formulate an accurate description of the participants' views of the questions asked. These themes will be explored in Chapter 4.

3.7 Trustworthiness

It is the duty of all researchers to make sure that the methods used to collect and interpret data are trustworthy. Upon reading any research report, the reader must be made aware of provisions used by the researcher to guarantee trustworthiness of the data. In the past, researchers were required to quantify their data and report on any errors or statistical probabilities which is undoubtedly impossible for naturalistic inquiry. The four criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability, and

confirmability. These measures applied in this study make "valid inferences from data" to ensure "consistency of the data" thus addressing the trustworthiness of data collection and interpretation (Ary et al., 2002, p. 451).

3.7.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the truthfulness of the "researcher's observations, interpretations and conclusions" (Ary et al., 2002, p. 451). The researcher must represent the thoughts, opinions, beliefs and ideas of the participants as accurately as possible and assure the reader that all efforts were made to report the true findings of the inquiry, in other words, capturing the essence of what the participants have to say. In order to ensure credibility the researcher spent considerable time reading and coding the data, direct quotations from participant responses were used to explain themes that emerged from the data. Since the researcher was not physically on site, the influence of the researcher in participants' responses was considered to be negligible.

3.7.2 Transferability

If the findings of a naturalistic inquiry can be applied in other contexts or with other respondents, then the findings are transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In other words, it is the reader who ultimately determines the transferability of an inquiry. In regards to this particular study, if a reader decides to use the findings they will prove transferability if they believe findings are applicable in other contexts. The researcher feels that he has provided a substantial amount of evidence on the research topic in question, necessary for anyone to make transferability judgments.

3.7.3 Dependability

An inquiry is deemed dependable if the findings "would be repeated if the inquiry were replicated with the same (or similar) subjects (respondents) in the same (or similar) context)" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). In order to provide a check for dependability, the researcher must make it possible for other individuals to check the consistency of results. The findings of this study arose from participant responses to the questionnaire given. The researcher kept a detailed account of all responses, and ideas that emerged from each response. Therefore, conducting an audit trail should not present any difficulty.

3.7.4 Confirmability

The interpretations or conclusions made must be independent of researcher bias. Although it is impossible to completely remove bias, in order to ensure confirmability the researcher must be honest as possible about their own bias, give reasons for decisions made during the research process and report strengths and weaknesses of the approaches taken. Confirmability is also communicated using an audit trail. "An adequate trail should be left to enable the auditor to determine if the conclusions, interpretations, and recommendations can be traced to their sources and if they are supported by the inquiry" (Erlandson, Harrison, Skipper & Allen, 1993, p. 35). As stated in the previous section, detailed accounts of the research process were kept by the researcher and should facilitate this process.

3.8 Ethical Issues

In order to carry out this research at Memorial University, the researcher had to comply with the "Policy on Ethics of Research Involving Human Participants" (2003)

and obtain approval from the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR), an ethics review board. Decisions made by this board are governed by the following ethical principles:

- respect for human dignity and autonomy of the person through protecting privacy and confidentiality, and free and informed consent,
- respect for vulnerable persons,
- respect for justice and inclusiveness, and
- minimizing harm, maximizing benefit and balancing risks and benefits for research participants. (Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2003)

The study proposal was submitted to the ICEHR of Memorial University and approval was granted.

3.9 Summary

This chapter outlined the research design and gave justifications for the methodologies used throughout the research. An emailed questionnaire was determined to be the most appropriate way to gather information that would satisfy the purposes of the study. Detailed descriptions were given as to how data was collected and analyzed. The issues of trustworthiness and ethical concerns were also addressed at the end of the chapter.

CHAPTER 4

Analysis and Interpretation of Data

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter the researcher presents the six open-ended questions used in the questionnaire and discusses the various themes that emerged from the data collected. The themes are explained with reference to responses given by participants.

4.2 Emergent Themes

This study examined educational leaders' perspectives of issues and concerns in Aboriginal education in Alberta. Data was collected via an emailed questionnaire and each item was analyzed separately to identify various themes that arose from the data. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) contend that after reading through the data "words, phrases, patterns of behavior, subjects' ways of thinking, and events repeat and stand out" and the researcher must search "for regularities and patterns as well as for topics" (p. 173). Using participant responses to each item on the questionnaire, the researcher explains the emergent themes for each question below. This chapter concludes with a summary of the predominant categories evident in the data.

4.3 Current State of Aboriginal Education

The first item on the questionnaire asked: "What do you see as the current state of Aboriginal Education in the province of Alberta today?" All participants agree that the current state of Aboriginal education needs to be improved if these students are going to be successful not only in all aspects of their schooling but in life as well. Many of the participants agree that it is alarming to see so many students not complete high school, considering the high Aboriginal population in the province of Alberta. One

participant made the comment that our current educational system caters to students on the "university track" and does not take into consideration the different learning needs of individual students:

The current system caters to students on the university track. It does not accommodate students with different learning styles. FNMI students are at risk for not completing high school for many reasons and need a range of services to support their education. Our society is based on a white Anglo-Saxon, Christian philosophy. (Jan)

Jan's statement emphasizes the fact that each and every student learns in different ways and that there needs to be more accommodations made to meet the needs of these students. Furthermore, because our society looks predominantly at the white Anglo-Saxon, Christian philosophy, other cultures, including Aboriginal, are not being sufficiently addressed or recognized as needing help. As a result, Aboriginal education continues to be a challenge, but teachers are doing what they can in the classroom and continue to look for new strategies to best meet the needs of these students in the classroom setting:

Aboriginal Education is a challenge in all schools. In any classroom or school that I have been in, efforts are successfully being made to ensure that the needs of Aboriginal students are being met and also that information is available to students who wish to learn about aboriginal heritage. In my grade level the aboriginal perspective is also an important part of the Social Studies curriculum. That being said, schools are still looking for more ways to improve in this area. (Beth)

The fact that Beth identifies that each school she has been in Aboriginal education has been a challenge is an alarming revelation. Obviously this individual has worked in a number of schools with some kind of Aboriginal student population and has experienced some difficulty in teaching these students. Although Beth states that successful efforts are being made in teaching these students, it is interesting how she acknowledges that

education for Aboriginal students has been a challenge in all the schools she has worked in. This is a very real depiction of the current state of education in Alberta for these students and the struggle that they experience in school and the problems that exist for the teachers that teach them.

This item on the questionnaire was designed to elicit a broad sense of what educators thought of the current educational set-up in the province. The only real theme that emerged from the data is that they see it as a problem and that improvement needs to be made. As one participant commented, "The current state of Aboriginal education in my opinion is that it is not meeting the needs of the students. If it were, we would be experiencing greater success in the areas of literacy, attendance and high school completion" (Kori).

This next section will deal with what educators see as being the major issues facing Aboriginal education today.

4.4 Issues Facing Aboriginal Education in Alberta Today

The second item on the questionnaire asked: "What are the major issues facing Aboriginal Education in the Alberta today?" A variety of themes emerged from the data:

- attendance;
- culture;
- funding; and
- measures of success.

A discussion of each theme follows.

4.4.1 Attendance

Attendance is perhaps the theme that came up the most frequently in the data analysis and perhaps the issue that concerned participants the most when talking about Aboriginal education. All participants agreed that due to lack of attendance this was the single most defining factor that hindered educational progress. With extended leaves of absence from school to attend family functions or taking a week off here and there for hunting, participants acknowledged the fact that many Aboriginal students suffer as a result of their non-attendance. "Some aboriginal students will leave school for weeks at a time to assist their families with hunting, fishing and trapping. This attendance issue causes great concerns for teachers" (Jen). With students being absent for extended periods of time, it is no surprise that Aboriginal students are struggling with their schooling. These gaps present huge obstacles for these students to overcome because they are continually playing a game of catch up, which they are not capable of doing. As a result, academic scores suffer and Aboriginal students achieve at much lower levels than their non-Aboriginal classmates.

The other problem that arises about attendance issues is the fact that students are missing school for reasons other than traditional events in the community or family reasons. As one participant mentioned about a junior high student, it was left up to the child to decide if they wanted to go to school or not:

A major issue in aboriginal education is, simply put, attendance. In my experience, with the aboriginal students I have taught, there is an apathy that exists toward education and its importance in their lives. This apathy seems to be shared by influences in the home. It is difficult for students to feel engaged in their education when they are not encouraged or motivated to attend school. In one personal experience, when a guardian was called about their junior high student not being at school on a particular day, they replied that the student was in their room, but the guardian would check to see if they wanted to come to

school or not. This, in my opinion, shows the general attitude that exists toward education. (Dana)

As pointed out earlier in the literature review, education may not always be the number one priority to Aboriginal people for a variety of different reasons. That said and as Dana demonstrates in her example, there was nothing standing in the way of this particular student attending school other than the student's decision on whether he wanted to attend school or not. With the Aboriginal tradition of non-interference and leaving children to make their own decisions, it is obvious this plays a huge role in the attendance rates as well as their achievement levels in school. To leave these kinds of decisions to students at this age is not a good idea. At an age where students do not particularly like school, to leave this very important decision in their hands is difficult for any educator to comprehend:

In one particular case, a five year old missed a day of school and when she returned and I asked if she was sick she replied no. Her grandmother with whom she lived had a day off and she wanted to spend it with her. I remember another situation when a guardian called the school to inform us that one student would not attend school and when I asked about another member in the house, she replied that she wasn't sure and that the student was in his room. There are very few students at five years old, and even fewer that are older, that if given the choice would not choose to stay home with their family or in their room entertaining themselves. All students, whether Aboriginal or not, do not have a choice to stay home until they are 16. (Ben)

As Ben points out in his example, all students, Aboriginal or not, have to be in school until the age of sixteen. At that that age they are legally allowed to make their own decisions about school and if they wish to attend or not. Why is it then that these students are not in school? Whatever the answer might be, the fact that these students are staying at home when they should be in school presents numerous challenges for these same students when they are in school. Self-esteem levels drop and school does not

become a desired place to be because they feel 'different' than everyone else. The gap continues to widen each and every time they are out of school for extended periods of time.

With students making their own decisions, it is not surprising that they are deciding not to attend school and even less surprising that when they do that, it is difficult for them to keep up with what is going on in the classroom and as they progress from grade to grade:

Aboriginal students, as a result of lower attendance rates and frequent school changes, are facing frustration in school because they lack key skills to build on as they progress through school. Many of my junior high school students have a reading level between grades 3 and 6. This trend continues until they 'fall through the cracks'. (Stefanie)

This example shows that the more time students miss school, the further behind they are as they get into the higher grades. When they get to this point, teachers have a hard time helping them because they are so far behind. These students do not enjoy being at school because they do not have the necessary skills to keep up with concepts being taught. This is just another reason why students have a tendency to drop out long before they complete high school.

Another issue affecting Aboriginal student attendance is the fact that many students do not live with their parents:

The most major concern facing Aboriginal Education is attendance. This can be because many students stay with a variety of different family members. It is difficult sometimes for the students to know where they are staying the night so it is next to impossible for the school to know where to contact them if they are not at school (Dan).

This example illustrates that there may be other things on the minds of these students than education. With these students not knowing where they are staying on any given

night, it is difficult for them to focus on their studies or even attend school. In addition, many schools have incorporated safe and caring initiatives and many schools have policies in place that has the school call home every time a student is absent from school. As Dan's quote explains, with students bouncing around all over the place, it is difficult to see where they are in order to make sure they are safe. When students are in situations such as the one Dan describes, getting to school might not always be an option for these students and shelter for any given night takes the priority over everything else.

4.4.2 Culture

For many of the participants, culture echoed loud and clear as being a major factor affecting Aboriginal education today. It was perceived by survey participants that the lack of culture in schools proposed a huge issue because students learn more effectively when they are taught in cultural ways:

Culture is the key to open the learning doors of the indigenous mind. Until senior leaders discover that providing traditional teachings to our young people is the way to improve student learning (by increasing self esteem, confidence and pride in their tribal connections) nothing will improve. As an example, an Aboriginal school in a major urban setting had an administrator that brought in a very strong Native spirituality component that involved sacred sweats, sacred dancing and drumming and substantively improved student learning at the school. After four years the senior leaders removed the principal and returned the school to a focus on 'academics'. The result was a drop in student achievement and a decrease in cultural programming at the school. Go figure. . . (Brad)

This demonstrates the impact that culture has on Aboriginal students and how teaching them in traditional ways can affect learning and achievement. In this particular case this principal had a strong connection with the Aboriginal culture and was able to use this in his school to help the students feel good about themselves and their culture. This translated into success in the classroom as the students performed better academically. Adversely, when this principal was moved to another school and another principal

brought in who did not have as strong of a cultural bond to Aboriginal ways, the students and the school seemed to take a turn for the worse and the students learning suffered because of it. A point worth noting here is that moving principals around is common practice in the urban centers of Alberta. Unfortunately, when you have situations as the one Brad describes, the people who are affected the most are the students and in this case, this move ended up being detrimental to all the people directly involved with this respective school.

When you look at culture and Aboriginal students and the lack of Aboriginal content in the curriculum, it is not difficult to see why students are having difficulties with their education. "There is also the issue of schools being able to provide Aboriginal students with meaningful links to their past" (Paul). Students have very limited opportunity to learn about their own histories as there are very few courses in the current curriculum that have a focus on Aboriginal perspectives. While there exists a couple of option courses at the high school level that are about Aboriginal history, there is very little in the current curriculum that ensures that all students will learn something about Aboriginal history. Many of the participants identified that there was a need to "Offer curriculum that is culturally sensitive" (Chris). Furthermore, participants agreed, "Cultural activities embedded into the curriculum and school life are lacking" (Brad). This is a good indication of how little there is in the Alberta K-12 curriculum and how difficult it is for non-Aboriginal teachers to try and include Aboriginal activities into every day learning experiences for all students. Not that these teachers are not trying, but rather they lack the backgrounds to be able to do it effectively for Aboriginal students:

A gap remains in teachers' effective delivery of FNMI perspectives. The typical teacher may not know how to best present these, despite best intentions.

Resources have improved and teacher training has included both multi-cultural and anti-racism elements for years. It takes time, understanding and effort though for teachers to effectively relay cultural mores. This difficulty may be particularly pronounced where there are limited populations of visible FNMI youth or families. (Steve)

4.4.3 Funding

A third theme that emerged from the data analysis was that of funding. Although many of the participants did not give many practical examples of why this was a problem, they did at least suggest that the way FNMI funding is spent by jurisdictions was a problem for Aboriginal students education because there is no accountability:

Money is still doled out for FNMI student programming and used to take students on activities and ventures totally unrelated to building capacity for improved self-esteem and academic knowledge. (There is no accountability by this government to account for where and how these dollars are spent). We need a model like the Special Needs allocations where school boards are required to account for every dollar spent and ensure that the dollars are targeted to areas of support for student learners. (Bruce)

Bruce is referring to the fact that jurisdictions are not held accountable as to how FNMI dollars are spent. As it stands now, there is no standardized process in the province of Alberta that makes schools spend all of the FNMI dollars on FNMI students. Currently it is left to the discretion of each jurisdiction on how these dollars are going to be spent. Some school divisions spent it entirely on FNMI students while other school divisions may choose to use these dollars for a combination of FNMI students' and non-Aboriginal students' programs, activities, and other ventures that a jurisdiction may have planned for that money. It needs to be remembered that each school division in the province is allotted money based on each identified FNMI student in every school. This dollar amount works out to be a little over eleven hundred dollars per student and depending on the numbers of FNMI students at any given school, this could work out to

be a substantial amount of money. That said, as Bruce's example demonstrates, not all of this money is necessarily targeted at FNMI students and there is very little accountability to jurisdictions to ensure that it is.

Unfortunately there is no research to give any kind of indication that dispersing FMNI money the way it is currently distributed, is solving achievement differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. At the same time, there is no evidence to show that spending all FMNI dollars specifically on Aboriginal students is an effective strategy to improve education for these students. It only stands to reason however, that making sure that this money goes to where it is needed most for FNMI students, that it will help in some way if spent wisely. For example, more resources can be purchased and more teachers can be placed in front of students.

Perhaps not understanding the issues that Aboriginal students face on a daily basis is a reasonable explanation as to why some jurisdictions choose to spend the money the way they do. "Not all parties agree on what the problems are and how to fix them. One example: Provincial FNMI student funding is spent differently in every school division and in every school, yet no research has really shown that it is an effective way to solve the achievement difference" (Patty). In any case funding is a problem that needs to be addressed by the government. Accountability measures need to be put in place to ensure the money goes to where it was intended. In addition, a handful of participants expressed a grave concern for those Aboriginal students who cannot attend other schools due to there not being any tuition agreements in place:

When students do strongly desire to complete their education, there can arise issues of tuition. We, in our division, are currently unable to accept students from band run schools as there is no existing tuition agreement. These students want to come to high school here because their only other option is distance learning.

We, as teachers, desire to help them continue their studies, but are not able to, based on the policies currently in place regarding these students. (Brady)

It is disconcerting to think that these Aboriginal students are being turned away from wanting to attend high school due to money. Although this is not a common practice in the urban centers of the province, this does take place often in northern community schools. Aboriginal students want to attend school but due to tuition agreements not being in place, these students are turned away. In a society and a world that promotes equality and equal opportunity for each individual, this seems to be discriminatory. Just as the government needs to look at funding allocations for FNMI students, it also needs to look at how tuition agreements are negotiated. Money should not stand in the way of providing students with excellent learning opportunities, but as these participants point out, money is a real concern when it comes to Aboriginal education.

4.4.4 Measures of Success

One final theme that came through the data was that of success and what is considered successful. Many of the participants stated that measures of success mean different things to different people and in this case, when it comes to Aboriginal people, this statement could not be more true. When it comes to measuring success, the current set up looks at success as compared to achieving post-secondary entrance into various institutions. The problem with this however, is that success can be measured in a variety of other ways that have significant meaning to people that are not being recognized by today's educational standards. "The measures used to ascertain success, are the same measures used to assess success for the 'white' population, and many of them are biased toward post-secondary achievement" (Matt). If measures of success are geared toward the 'white' population as Matt suggests, it is easy to see why this was a concern for

many of the participants included in this study. It was determined by many of the participants that success has to be measured in different ways if it is going to have any meaning to Aboriginal people and be recognized by society as a whole:

There are other ways to assess success. Success may involve personal satisfaction with artistic contributions to society, or leadership in traditional communities, or engagement in traditional ways of life. This is not to discredit the measurement tools of the province; high school completion is undoubtedly a key element of success in today's world, regardless of one's culture; it is only to note that other measures of success may be relevant as well. (Morris)

Aboriginal people have a variety of skills and talents that are displayed in school, but are not deemed as being 'relevant' by current educational practices. Aboriginal students are very talented in artistic endeavors as well as athletics, but neither of these is considered important in the realm of academia. How students are doing in the four core subjects of Mathematics, Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies appears to be all that is considered important. Universities do not look at how a student is doing in art or physical education when looking at entrance requirements. That said, what is deemed as being successful in school and at the university level may not be exactly what Aboriginal people themselves see as being successful. "A difference in how culturally 'Success' is seen. What Alberta Education sees as successful is not always what a Cree family or Dene family would see as successful" (Pat).

It was also brought up by a handful of participants that even when Aboriginal students were able to complete high school and attend university, that when Aboriginal students attained degrees, they had no intention of using them:

My example takes me back to my hometown - Prince Albert, SK. In an effort to increase the number of Aboriginal teachers in this northern community, SUNTEP was created. SUNTEP is a college program whereby students train to become teachers. I enrolled in a summer physical education course to go towards my Phys Ed degree. I paid my tuition, bought my books, attended all the classes,

completed the assignments and worked a full time job. All of my Aboriginal peers had their tuition paid for, their books purchased and they received payment for attending classes. Finally, many of my peers after receiving their degrees chose not to teach. (Sean)

Even though there are Aboriginal students who are able to do well educationally and attain degrees, diplomas and various certificates. Sean's example illustrates that not all Aboriginal students have any intention of using them. This could have something to do with the fact that when these students return home, other things in the home or in the community take priority, such is often the case with Aboriginal cultures. This is a good example of what society sees as being important and how the Aboriginal culture differs. Society sees attainment of education as being one of major factors of success whereas Aboriginal cultures may place more emphasis on looking after family, hunting and other traditions.

Measuring success means different things to different people and although society measures success by how much education a person may have, Aboriginal people measure success in their own way that has the most meaning to them and education may not be the highest on the priority list.

4.5 Improving Aboriginal Education

The third question asked to participants was, "What can be done to improve Aboriginal education throughout the province?" A number of themes emerged from the data collected as participants listed a number of suggestions on what can be done to improve Aboriginal education. The following themes emerged from the data:

- attendance and parents;
- leadership;
- funding;

- elders;
- culture;
- offering full time kindergarten; and lastly,
- other solutions

4.5.1 Improving Attendance

Many participants agreed that improving attendance and educating parents is one of the keys to improving Aboriginal education. "The biggest thing is getting the students to school. It does not matter how good the school or teachers are if the students are not present to learn" (Gerald). It was obvious to many of the participants that did the survey that the first course of action was getting students to school more frequently. Gerald's statement indicates that regardless of the school and teachers, students must attend school if they are going to learn anything. This is the first step in ensuring students are being educated, at least to some degree. Participants further stated although this is the first step, there is still much to be done to encourage students to attend school. Some participants agreed that educating the parents would be a huge step in making sure students get to school more frequently. In doing so, this would prepare students with the necessary skills needed when they first enter school:

Many people, both native and not, are concerned about Aboriginal students' attendance. Some schools have liaison officers whose job it is to get students to school. This is a great first step but if the parents are educated more then it can be unnecessary. Schools or school boards should provide new parents or all in the community at a given age, say three, with a set of skills that are essential to students entering school. This in turn can lead to early success and enjoyment in school, which can lead to more positive behaviors down their schooling careers. If students are playing catch-up with their learning it can make school a place that is not enjoyable which can cause students not to want to be there, which leads to missing school and could eventually lead to dropping out. (Garrett)

Garrett's example shows that attendance and education of parents go hand in hand in making sure that students are going to be prepared to go to school and more importantly attend school. With the skills that Garrett alludes to, students will not be in the catch up process because they will have the necessary tools they need when first entering school. This in turn will provide better results academically as well as encourage students to attend school on a regular basis. When students see themselves doing well, school will be a desired place for them to want to be and if Aboriginal people hold true to form with their tradition of non-interference, students will be free to make the decisions that best suit them and success will certainly guide the decisions that they make. Chances are if they are successful in school, they will want to attend school because of it.

Although children to a large degree are able to make their own decisions, it must not be overlooked that family still plays an integral part in students attending school, especially at a young age. It has been suggested by a number of participants that getting parents on board with incentives would be a good way to ensure that students attend school regularly. "Also parents can be rewarded for getting the students to school on time and often. If a child misses one day or less a month the family can get something like a Tim Horton's card. It is a small incentive but often it is the parents that are not taking the children to school" (Bruce). For many readers this might sound absurd that rewarding parents for getting students to school is a viable option, but for the Aboriginal way of life this is a very realistic strategy. Considering that Aboriginal people have a different way of life and place emphasis on other priorities that they see as being important, a rewards system might not be all that far-fetched. A rewards system at least provides extrinsic motivation for parents to ensure that their children attend school. Of

course it would be preferred that parents would be doing it intrinsically for the good of their kids, but a rewards system would at least be a start in helping students get to school regularly and making sure parents are more involved in the education of their children. As one participant puts it, "Aboriginal parents must be very involved in their children's schooling" (Rick). If it takes a reward initiative to get parents more involved, so be it. The majority of participants recognized the way to get children to school is through the parents and new strategies need to be implemented to reach parents if students are going to be in school on a consistent basis.

4.5.2 Leadership

A second theme that emerged from the data is that of leadership. Participants acknowledged that leadership at all levels has to greatly improve if Aboriginal students are going to progress positively in their schooling:

Senior leaders need to spend time with true Elders, not 'popcorn Elders' appointed by a school board because they were a good volunteer at the school. Senior leaders need to go back into the bush and spend a week in a Spirit Quest with 'Medicine People' who can provide them with the necessary knowledge, skills and attributes required to lead their FNMI programs into the 21st Century, rather than see them being held captive to pre-1900's mentality that never changes. (Bill)

Bill identifies a need for leadership but a leadership that is culturally understanding of what it truly means to be Aboriginal. He suggests that being a 'token' Elder is not sufficient, but rather those Aboriginal people that really know and breathe the culture are the people that need to be learned from if effective change is going to happen. In doing so, these senior leaders as Bill puts it, will be better adept at making decisions regarding education for Aboriginal students. This understanding is critical in ensuring that cultural

aspects are taken into consideration when any decision is being made about Aboriginal education.

The other point that came through the data is that leadership, especially with all those people who are in charge of FNMI programming, need to do a better job of recognizing what it means to be Aboriginal by immersing themselves a little more into the culture. Many participants pointed out that this lack of cultural understanding is hurting Aboriginal education and until this changes, FNMI students will continue to struggle in school. "Leadership at all senior levels of governance from superintendents to trustees, to government departments responsible for FNMI programming are lacking the knowledge, the skill, the connectivity to Aboriginal realities that are necessary to undertake the next steps in building capacity for improved FNMI student learning" (Bob). Once again the idea that higher ranking officials in charge of FNMI programming not knowing enough about Aboriginal culture comes up again and again in the data analysis. The question that also arises as a result is that if these people are in these positions of creating programming, how can they possibly do this effectively when they do not possess the knowledge necessary to create this programming.

Very few senior leaders have ever participated in anything other than a round dance or smudge sharing ceremony. This is akin to about how much we know about the brain and how it works, which is very little; and is why we are not making any headway in education. This is also why many of the Aboriginal program models in place have a distinctively 'residential school flavor' where leaders who do not understand the Aboriginal reality are holding FNMI students captive to their way of thinking rather than learning how to improve FNMI student learning. (Steve)

This example clearly demonstrates the current direction in which Aboriginal education is situated. The lack of understating that exists is deemed unfair by many of the participants that answered this item on the questionnaire. The general consensus by

many is that the solution here is for these higher-ranking officials to learn more about Aboriginal culture so that programming is representative of the FNMI population. Participants acknowledged that until this is rectified, current educational programming will not meet the needs of Aboriginal students. Students will continue to struggle for the simple reason that current models of programming are vastly outdated and because the culture is not being understood the way it should be:

Just ask any senior leader (responsible for FNMI programming) when it was that they last visited an Elder (one appointed by the community and not appointed by a school board) with tobacco and asked for prayers and knowledge to better understand the young ones who they are responsible for. Ask them when the last time it was they participated in a sacred pipe ceremony or sacred sweat lodge – then and only then will you come to know why we are still locked into pre-1900s ways of thinking about how best to program for our FNMI students. (Jen)

4.5.3 Funding

A third theme that came up when talking about improving Aboriginal education was the issue of funding. Just as many participants explained that FNMI money not going to FNMI students presents a problem, they also agreed that making sure these same students got this money would alleviate some of the problems that these students are currently experiencing with their education:

Schools need to keep receiving the extra FNMI funding to be able to provide extra supports to this specific student population. Studies have shown how differently most of these students learn, so having more resources available for schools to access will increase the different kinds of programs they can offer the FNMI students. (Patty)

Being able to provide extra resources for Aboriginal students would certainly help, considering that much of the research and according to many of the participants that took part in this study suggested that Aboriginal students have unique learning styles. This money, if properly distributed, could bring in more culturally relevant

materials for schools to put in classrooms so that teachers have more resources to draw on when teaching Aboriginal students. However, as another participant in the study points out, not all school jurisdictions make sound decisions when distributing this money, "School divisions sometimes decide poorly on how to spend the extra FNMI dollars, and are never required to state where the money is spent" (Dan). This of course has the adverse affect on how many materials around Aboriginal culture will be in any given school. Patty's and Dan's examples demonstrate that the FNMI money can play a huge role in any school if it is spent wisely (Patty), but at the same time can have the adverse effect based on the decision making abilities at the jurisdictional level and what they deem as being 'important' to their needs (Dan).

The majority of the participants agreed that the way that FNMI money is being spent is not effective for the FNMI student population. Furthermore, it was the consensus that until school divisions are held more accountable for this money, the same practices will continue to be in place, practices that have been failing Aboriginal students for years:

Jurisdictions have to be held accountable for the FNMI money that is given to them each and every year. This money can mean a lot for these students because it can provide additional resources to schools in the shape of culturally relevant books, programs, and guest-speakers to truly make a positive difference in the lives of not only Aboriginal students, but all students. In a province where there is a strong Aboriginal presence, it only makes sense that the entire population shares in the knowledge so that all students are well versed in the society in which we live. However, we need to get more Aboriginal resources into schools to make this happen. Yes Alberta has a strong Aboriginal population, but most of our schools have a poor Aboriginal resource base. Spending the FNMI money the way it was intended to be spent ensures that each school has some materials they can use to raise cultural awareness for all students. Anything is better than the current setup we have in this province. (Doug)

Doug's example shows that the money can have a significant impact on the lives of all students in Alberta. The idea of cultural awareness is very important because for non-Aboriginal students, it helps them learn about cultural perspectives and it helps Aboriginal students connect to the material that is being covered in class. This will give Aboriginal students a sense of pride and raise self-esteem, two things that Aboriginal students struggle with in school. In any case, funding plays a big part in how the current structure of Aboriginal education operates within the province. A handful of participants indicated that although money is important in terms of Aboriginal education, it is worth noting that throwing money at a problem that has existed for decades is not the answer to solving the concerns in Aboriginal education today:

FNMI money has to be spent effectively if it is going to achieve the desired results we are looking for in our classrooms. Throwing money at a problem does not make the problem go away. Money has to be strategically spent to have any kind of impact on Aboriginal education. What's the good of having an abundance of resources when you don't know how to use them? Teachers can have all these resources in their classrooms or located in the school's library, but they have very little use when no one in the building knows how to apply them. For the FNMI money to really have an impact there has to be some degree of training of staff to properly apply these materials. Until that time, these resources will continue to collect dust on the shelves they currently occupy.
(Marie)

This point by Marie is well taken for the simple fact that many non-Aboriginal teachers do not know how to effectively incorporate Aboriginal resources into everyday teaching practices. They do not have the necessary training to synthesize what the Aboriginal perspectives are, which makes teaching them virtually impossible. FNMI money therefore needs to go toward buying resources but it also needs to go toward some kind of training program for teachers to be able to deliver cultural perspectives effectively. The very cruel truth to all of this is the fact that Marie is exactly right; these resources

that schools do have will continue to collect dust until they can be implemented the way they need to be by teachers. Using the FNMI dollars would be one way to ensure that teachers get the training that they need to effectively teach Aboriginal students. "After all, the resources are only good in the hands of those people who know how to use them" (David).

4.5.4 Elders

Not surprisingly many of the participants acknowledged that Elders can play a very vital role in the education of Aboriginal students. Their knowledge, perspectives, and just their presence can mean a lot to any school and especially the students. A number of the participants suggested including Elders as much as possible into the school setting would benefit students and that their contributions should not be taken lightly, "The role of the elders in an aboriginal community is vastly overlooked. If possible, elders should be present in the school to present the aboriginal point of view on many outcomes taught in schools. They may also serve as excellent role models for youth which is lacking in many aboriginal communities" (Kori). The impact of Elders is more critical than one might imagine. In many communities, Elders are considered the essence of what the Aboriginal culture embodies, so including them in the school setting makes a lot of sense. "Elders can make a world of difference to any student. They possess the knowledge that I greatly lack when teaching Aboriginal perspectives to my Aboriginal Studies 10, 20, and 30 programs at the high school level. I use Elders consistently to enhance these programs so that I can better teach the students in my classes" (Dana).

Effective use of Elders can really broaden the cultural horizons of all students in school. With so much of the Aboriginal history being passed down through oral tradition, Elders are great storytellers who can present Aboriginal concepts in the curriculum in a different manner than the traditional non-Aboriginal teacher can:

When it comes to talking about traditional hunting practices and uses of animals, I generally take my students on fieldtrips to show students how Aboriginal people killed, skinned, and used these animals. Since I have Aboriginal connections up north, I take my students so they can see how a particular animal is skinned and what the hide is used for. Students get a first hand look of what it is to be Aboriginal and engagement for these activities is very high. From time to time, the Elders that run this learning opportunity for me will even teach students how to set snares and traps and what signs to look for when looking for animal activity. The boys in class particularly like this and I find I can get reach them more when I incorporate activities such as these into the curriculum. The Elders I use can teach them things I could never teach them and it helps Aboriginal students particularly connect with their culture a little more. (Kevin)

Kevin gives a practical example of how Elders can be used to better educate students. The interesting thing to note here is how Kevin acknowledges that student engagement levels greatly increased when these types of activities were applied to enhance student learning. The other interesting thing worthy of note is that Kevin took students to these places as opposed to having the Elders come to him. Sometimes an effective strategy is working around the Elders and taking what they can give as opposed to having them work on your time, "I always talk to Elders first to see what their availability is and what I want to accomplish by having them help me with a particular concept I may be teaching. They tell me what they need me to do instead of me telling them what I need them to do" (Helen).

In any case, the significance of Elders is not to be underestimated. They can be a valuable resource in and out of the classroom if they are meaningfully included in the education of Aboriginal students. Kevin's and Helen's examples show the importance of

reaching out to the Elders to enhance the learning for their students as well as demonstrating understanding of what it takes to get Elders involved. One participant stated,

Aboriginal people are very shy and it takes a lot for them to trust you. They believe education is important yet they don't know how to get involved. I seek these people out (Elders) and I get to know them as best I can and try to utilize their strengths. I explain to them what I am doing in my classes and I explain how they can help me. I ask for their help and I open the door for them to get involved. Although they may not always get involved, the rate of return I get from the Elders has dramatically enhanced student programming. Sometimes all you have to do is ask. (Charles)

4.5.5 Culture

Another theme that came from the data analysis was that of culture and not just culture in the traditional sense of the word but rather culture that encompasses many different connotations, both good and bad. One participant suggested that if there were stronger cultural influences within the community that this in itself would encourage students to attend school on a much more regular basis, "Aboriginal education would greatly improve if there were stronger, culturally significant influences in the community to stress the importance of education and the benefits it can have to achieving a brighter future. This is especially important in rural and remote areas where resources are minimal and options are few" (James). Another participant commented that for students to do well, educators need to culturally differentiate and look at Aboriginal education as a completely separate entity. In doing so, educators need to look at assessment practices, curriculum and more importantly the needs of Aboriginal students specifically to help students be successful:

Also, if we are looking at Aboriginal education as a separate entity, we need to culturally differentiate rather than make everyone adhere to the same curriculum and assessment practices. We, as education professionals, learn about, and

appreciate the importance of differentiating for our students' various learning needs, but when assessments, outcome requirements and provincial testing come into focus, we give very little differentiation. We cannot offer our students a broad view of the world, show them all of the options available to them, and then confine them to limited options for overall success. (Brad)

One participant acknowledged how important it was to look at the past and the present to see what the problems are and how things can be done in a different way, "The issues need to be looked at honestly and critically. Gain an understanding of the past, reflect on what is working and not working at present and begin to build the bridge to a sustainable future in a global community" (Garrett). Along the same lines, another participant suggested that many of the old textbooks look at Aboriginal people in a less than positive light resulting in many Aboriginal people having feelings of being inferior:

The Aboriginals were done a huge injustice by being referred to as savages in the early textbooks! Indeed many of my friends and their parents denied their ancestry when I was growing up due to their feelings of inadequacy. One need only to look at the statistics of alcoholism, drug abuse, foster care and enrollment in the correctional facilities to realize that the current tactics are not working either. (Bob)

This particular example demonstrates that there is a need to correct this and update current practices and resources that truly reflect Aboriginal culture. As Bob suggests, the current way education is being done is not working for Aboriginal students. To move forward, we need to correct the injustices and stereotypes that have been associated with Aboriginal culture for so many years.

Other participants indicated that for change to really take place, teachers need to be trained to some degree to be able to teach and understand Aboriginal culture better, "Educators must be in-serviced to understand the aboriginal culture" (Sean). Others suggested that educational concepts needs to be related to Aboriginal culture to have an

impact, "Relating education to the aboriginal culture - extremely important - e. g., having a sweat lodge or a sweet grass ceremony recognizing Metis students" (Rick).

A limited number of participants suggested that what is currently being done throughout the province is working well:

From what I have seen a lot of what can be done is being done. There are aboriginal liaison workers who are able to help, the Social Studies curriculum puts importance on the past of the aboriginals as well as aboriginal perspectives and many schools will have guest speakers or dancers in to talk about aboriginal peoples or to demonstrate dances, crafts, etc. (Bill)

Although the extent to which culture was identified by participants was varied, the importance of culture came through very strongly in the data. In varying degrees, participants recognized that culture has to be a part of their education in order to help Aboriginal students be successful in school. To neglect this component does Aboriginal students an injustice because they are not on an equal playing field with their non-Aboriginal classmates. "There has to be an integration of culture into the curriculum that can benefit all students" (Sue). As Dave, puts it, "Teachers need to do a better job of providing meaningful links to these students' heritage if we have any hope of making their educational experience the best it can be" (Dave).

4.5.6: Offering Full Time Kindergarten

Another theme that came through from the data was that of offering a full time kindergarten program to all students. "Offering full time kindergarten ensures at least that all students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, get off to a strong start in their educational careers" (Barry). Currently in Alberta not all school jurisdictions offer full-time kindergarten programs. Some jurisdictions offer an alternate day program where students will come Monday and Wednesday, with another group of students

coming to the same program on Tuesday and Thursday, with both groups alternating Fridays. Another jurisdiction may offer a Monday to Friday program with one group of students coming to school in the morning and another group of students going to school in the afternoon. There are many different combinations of kindergarten programming that exist in the province but there are very few jurisdictions that can afford to offer full time programs do to the current funding model. "Until the government adjusts the current funding model, the majority of schools will only be able to run half-time programs. Kindergarten students only receive half the funding as a student going to school in grades 1-12, but the kindergarten group is where we should be focusing our attention" (Bill).

Bill's example has a lot of merit because if these students are targeted and given the opportunity to go to full-time programming in Kindergarten, they are set up with the foundation of skills that they need as they progress further with their education. A full-time program gives students double the instructional time that they would not otherwise get in regular programming. "Any student, Aboriginal or not can benefit from extra time in school and to identify these early learners as needing more time is a good start in setting up all kids for success" (Patty).

Another point that came out about kindergarten programming is the fact that it is not mandatory for students:

How can we set students up for success when parents don't even have to send their children to kindergarten in the first place? Parents have the option of sending their kids to kindergarten or waiting a year and sending their kids to grade one. How can they even enter grade one when they don't have the basic foundation they need to enter grade one. Government needs to take a stronger stance on this issue if students are going to be successful in school. If this trend continues into the future, kids will continue to struggle and will always be in catch-up mode as they progress to each grade. (Steve)

Steve's example illustrates the importance of sending children to school at an early age and for government to make kindergarten mandatory for all students. There is a strong correlation between early years in school and quality programming to students being successful in school. Steve's example shows the importance of reaching these kids at a very young age and how important it is that students have full time kindergarten programming and increased instructional minutes each and every day.

When it comes to Aboriginal students particularly, participants commented that full-time programming is essential in setting them up to be successful in school:

The only time many Aboriginal students do any reading and writing is when they are at school. It only makes sense then that we increase the amount of time that students spend in school. Making every kindergarten program in the province full time ensures that Aboriginal students specifically have more opportunities to read and write, two skills that Aboriginal students desperately lack and continue to fall behind in as they move on from grade to grade. (Dan)

Unfortunately Dan's comment about the only reading and writing that an Aboriginal student does is in school is very true. Aboriginal students continually struggle with aspects of reading and reading and many of them fall behind very early on in their educational careers as a result. Providing a full-time program for these students at least gives them more of a chance to develop the basic skills that they need as they progress to each grade. "At such a young age, students absorb so much knowledge that having a full day program Monday to Friday in kindergarten is the best solution to help Aboriginal kids. The more time they spend in the school the better off they'll be" (Erin). Another participant made the comment that, "Kindergarten is the most fun time for students because it is a combination of both learning and fun. Having a full time kindergarten ensures that Aboriginal students foster a love of learning at a young age

that will hopefully help them transition from grade to grade and make them want to stay in school longer" (Marie).

4.5.7 Other Solutions

There were a variety of other suggestions that participants came up with that need to be noted when talking about possible solutions to the issues facing Aboriginal education today. These solutions did not show up in other parts of this section of the paper for the simple reason there was not enough information present to do so. This section then offers a broad overview of solutions, but no practical examples of how they have been used in classrooms to help Aboriginal students. The following is a list of solutions that a number of participants came up with to combat the issues and concerns in Aboriginal education today:

- hire more Aboriginal teachers (Joanne);
- hire more Aboriginal counselors – career and personal (Joanne);
- establish and implement early education programs for these students (Joanne);
- offer early reading intervention programs to the students who are experiencing delays and need to be brought up to grade level (Joanne);
- offer parent literacy programs (Kyle);
- offer parent/school community activities and sessions to bridge the gap (Kyle);
- establish a mentor pool of representatives from the culture (Rick);
- counseling programs should be provided so that students may be guided throughout their schooling (Rob);

- including career counselors in the budget and making them available to rural northern communities would help give direction to struggling youth (Rob); and lastly,
- engage the FNMI leadership in a discussion intended to develop additional relevant measurements of success (Bill).

These are all worthwhile ideas on how to improve Aboriginal education but these ideas need to be fleshed out a little more. These examples are included to give readers an idea of what other solutions exist to help Aboriginal education improve from its current state.

4.6 Innovative Teaching Methods

The fourth item on the questionnaire asked, "What are some innovative methods that you have used to improve the delivery of education to Aboriginal students? Please elaborate." The interesting thing about this item on the questionnaire was that there were no common themes that emerged from the data analysis. Very few participants had similar strategies in working with Aboriginal students in their classrooms. Most had their own ideas and ways to educating Aboriginal students. This section of the paper will look at a variety of strategies that educators used to help their students.

4.6.1 Ben

An interesting example that one of the participants gave was going out into the bush and taking part in traditional Aboriginal hunting customs:

I have taken students into the bush twice a year, shot a moose, deer or bear. Demonstrated how to offer up tobacco to the Creator for the gift of the animal and the teachings it would bring. Skinned the animals and showed the students how to eat bone marrow, both raw and cooked. How to use hide and every other part of the animal so nothing was wasted. Taught them how to survive in the wild using only what Mother Earth provides. (Ben)

Ben also gives another example that is similar in nature to the one described above that he used to teach Aboriginal students, "I built a Sacred Sweat Lodge with the students and then did a first sweat with them. Taught the students what they need to know about the protocols behind this experience and the offerings that need to be made to ensure good things happen to them and their families" (Ben). Ben's examples are good practical activities that Aboriginal students can easily relate too. In addition, the fact that Ben took his students into the bush to actually live these experiences might be a desirable change of pace from the regular classroom setting. The activities were hands-on and the students had the opportunity to do a lot of the work themselves which allowed them to understand why doing these sorts of things are important to the Aboriginal people. There was a strong connection to the Aboriginal way of life and tradition in Ben's activities, which makes it easier for Aboriginal students to relate to and to succeed in.

Ben also gave three other examples that were heavily enriched in Aboriginal culture:

- talking to students often about the Seven Directions teachings, about Sacred Medicines and their use, about how different tribal families have different uses for the same thing;
- praying with them four times a day using traditional medicines for healings; and
- getting involved in cultural activities such as drumming and dancing.

All of Ben's examples were strongly connected to Aboriginal culture in some way. It was unclear if these activities were in one particular class or if they were dispersed among a variety of different classes. In any case, Ben's use of these kinds of activities with Aboriginal students shows how cultural content can have an impact on

programming. These activities were easy for students to relate to and participate in but more importantly, these activities helped students to be successful with their schooling.

4.6.2 Jason

Another participant identified the importance of emphasizing Aboriginal culture when it came up in Social Studies texts and taking the time to discuss this as a class:

My Social Studies curriculum and textbook puts a good deal of importance on the Native Peoples' history and perspectives in the past and present. I make sure to spend time discussing and doing activities with students on these topics. There are discussions on Aboriginal life before the fur trade as well as after; we discuss what kinds of things were and are important to the Native Peoples and even take a virtual tour of the "Head Smashed in Buffalo Jump" World Heritage web site. (Jason)

The fact that Jason takes the time to highlight Aboriginal cultural aspects and perspectives is an effective strategy in the classroom with students. Not only do all students in the class have the opportunity to learn about Aboriginal peoples through the Social Studies curriculum but Aboriginal students particularly have something they can relate to and feel proud about. Aboriginal students are generally very quiet in class but Jason's strategy provides a way for Aboriginal students to get more involved by participating in these discussions and activities. In fact, with their backgrounds Aboriginal students can enrich these sections of the texts. This further presents opportunities for Aboriginal parents and families to get involved in the school. What students do not know about their culture, they can certainly find out from their families and even more worthwhile, have family members come into the school to share what they know about a particular topic being studied in class.

Although this may be considered a small gesture on the part of the teacher, the reality of the situation is that it is not a small gesture. The fact that the teacher took the

time to thoroughly go over Aboriginal perspectives from the Social Studies textbook is a testament of how he sees and values the different backgrounds of his students. This small, but very important strategy on his part, allows for the cultural awareness of all students to be enhanced and gives his Aboriginal students a sense of belonging, something that most Aboriginal students struggle with on a daily basis.

Jason also emphasized the importance of having fun and being safe at school for his Aboriginal students:

In regards to all subjects, much like the rest of the students I try to make school a fun place to be for my aboriginal students. I also make school a place that is important to be at. I try to set these students up for success, while still challenging them so that they can improve their skills in all areas. In the rare instances I have had any racial name calling with students, I deal with it seriously and quickly. (Jason)

This example illustrates that having fun at school is a good strategy to use in order to increase student motivation and their desire to come to school more often. There is a strong connection between fun and learning and considering that many Aboriginal students make their own decisions about whether they want to come to school or not, trying to incorporate activities that are fun is a good way of making sure that Aboriginal students come to school on a consistent basis.

The second part of Jason's example demonstrates the need to feel safe in one's learning environment. Although Jason does not give much information here, it is quite clear that remarks made to Aboriginal students in a racist way are dealt with. This does much to foster the relationship between student and teacher. A major problem for Aboriginal students is that they feel no one is advocating on their behalf. The fact that Jason treats each racial comment as a serious offense shows his Aboriginal students that they will be looked after when they come to school. With Aboriginal students

continually struggling to try to fit in, Jason's example shows the importance of not dismissing these kinds of racial innuendos and dealing with them very seriously. When students have a hard time fitting in, as many Aboriginal students feel that they do, ridicule and racist remarks have a tendency to keep them away from school. For these students to know that they will be protected and feel safe when they come to school will in turn make school a place that Aboriginal students want to be.

4.6.3 Sarah

Sarah only gave one example of what she did in her class but her example is very practical in how she utilizes the strengths of her Aboriginal students to help them be more successful:

For the students who do attend regularly, project-based learning has proved successful with achieving understanding and reinforcing skills. The majority of our Aboriginal students enjoy the arts and the opportunity to create is enjoyable for them. More assignments requiring artistic skills (drawing, painting and crafting) have proven successful. Reading and writing skills are often low, likely due to poor attendance throughout schooling and insufficient time to master these skills, so assignments requiring lengthy portions of either tend to cause frustration and do not get handed in. I try to make the most of my time with them and give them shorter assignments that play to their artistic strengths. I use art as another way of representing and instead of having a student write a story or a response to a question in a class like Social Studies, I will have them draw or sketch out what they are thinking and accept that instead of a written response. Aboriginal students, artistically speaking are among the most talented students I have ever had the pleasure to work with. (Sarah)

This strategy that Sarah uses to best reach her Aboriginal students is very interesting in the sense that she is using the strengths of her students to demonstrate what they know and what they can do. As many Aboriginal students struggle with written response items, Sarah's example shows how there is more than one way to abstract information from students while at the same time still satisfying curriculum objectives and assessment procedures. Additionally, as Sarah points out and a common theme

throughout this paper, attendance is a huge issue for Aboriginal students. To combat this she ensures that projects are broken up into smaller chunks and shorter time periods so that Aboriginal students have the opportunity to get some of these projects done and get marks for the completed work they are able to hand in. Sarah further pointed out that lengthy assignments rarely get turned in for grading so getting the most out of these students while you have them and using their existing strengths are just a couple of strategies that can be used to accommodate the needs of these students.

4.6.4 Gabe

Another strategy that Gabe refers to is using song and movement for smaller children to help with the many different learning needs of Aboriginal children:

I have taught younger Aboriginal students and have incorporated movement and song into learning the letters and their phonetics songs. The program that I use, *Animated Literacy*, has a character for each sound that has its own song, motion, and coloring page. It gives the students a chance to learn the letter in a variety of learning styles, which can help all types of learners even if they are not learning in their first language. (Gabe)

Song and movement are great strategies to use with young children, but the interesting thing about Gabe's example is when he refers to language and Aboriginal students. Despite the fact that Aboriginal students may be hearing these songs in English, which very well may be their second language, students are still learning fine motor skills through movement. In addition, the *Animated Literacy* Program that Gabe refers to has a song for each letter of the alphabet. These songs and movements are repeated over and over throughout the course of the school year so Aboriginal students will expand on their vocabulary, sounds as well as their movements and comfort levels for Aboriginal children will improve. Setting up students early at a young age for success is critical for students doing well in future grades. Singing along with movement is also a way for

students to have some fun while they learn which also means that students at a very young age will want to come to school on a regular basis.

4.6.5. Amy

Amy gives a number of strategies that she uses in her classroom to help Aboriginal students become more successful. Of particular note is the fact that Amy does a lot of relationship building and recognizes cultural differences when Aboriginal students show up to her classes:

- a) Students first and foremost need to be in attendance and on time to receive the benefits of education. Rather than criticize or point out tardiness or absenteeism I encourage these positive behaviors by celebrating their presence and recognizing when they are on time.
- b) Respect the cultural norm of little eye contact.
- c) Use the few Cree words that I know to make connections. Interestingly, sometimes I was teaching them new vocabulary. (My mom took a Cree communication course).
- d) Recognize that many households have multiple families and extended families all living together. Often times the children have a lot of responsibility in looking after the younger members.
- e) Find out what inspires specific students to attend. Sometimes it is an art class or a favorite sport. Other times it is a wholesome snack. I had one student who never missed a class during basketball season. Once in class this student was engaged in all the other subjects.

Amy's examples are very powerful in the sense that she has gone out of her way to recognize and accept Aboriginal cultural differences for what they are. The fact that Amy does not criticize when students do not attend school and praises students when they do show up to school is a strategy that is not typically used in education today. For Aboriginal students this may indeed be a very helpful strategy in making them want to attend school. For these children to come to school and get nothing but grief for their lack of attendance may not be a constructive strategy to use. On the other hand, celebrating when they do show up and praising them for being in class may be a more conducive strategy to ensuring students attend school a little more frequently.

Amy also describes how accepting she was to the fact that families can put a strain on education due to the fact that many of these children have responsibilities in the household that they need to take care of. Amy shows that this is the norm for many Aboriginal families and she accepts that. Traditional Aboriginal households are not going to change any time soon and giving students grief because they have to look after younger siblings or perhaps a sick parent is not going to help these students. Amy's strategy is one of acceptance and understanding for what and who the Aboriginal people are and she adjusts as a result. Even her example of not making too much eye contact is a good example of this because eye contact is not something that Aboriginal people are comfortable with. Amy takes the students for what they are and she does her best to work with them based on what they can give her.

The final point that needs to be recognized with Amy's examples is the way she tries to relate to kids and build relationships with them. The fact that she has learned a bit of the language and tries to use it to make her students more comfortable is very

admirable. Furthermore, taking the time to figure out what students like most about school, finding commonalities, and trying to use these things to encourage students to come to school is quite a useful strategy. Making those kinds of connections with students and trying to figure out what makes them tick will show students that teachers have a genuine interest in who they are. These interests that students have could go a long way in the information gathering process for teachers and give them valuable insights on how to get these students coming to school more often. That said, it needs to be pointed out once again that acceptance of who these children are is the first step in helping them do better in school.

4.6.6. Dana

Dana also has some interesting strategies to help Aboriginal students. One strategy was having a year-long celebration to raise cultural awareness in the school, "At my previous school we celebrated a year long FNMI theme to raise awareness of the culture. We brought in elders to build a tipi, storytelling, the Yellow Ribbon Dancers, made bannock and stew and made crafts" (Dana). This was certainly an interesting school goal to recognize Aboriginal students in the school and an excellent way for Aboriginal students to get involved with helping their non-Aboriginal classmates understand more about their culture. More importantly, this specific idea by this school stresses the importance of being creative and finding appropriate ways of raising the overall cultural awareness for all the students in this particular school. Just as impressive was how the school was able to make this a school-community undertaking by having Elders and other Aboriginal groups come in and share their experiences and knowledge with the whole community. Dana did not include how this impacted Aboriginal students

and their education in her example but at the very least, there must have been a strong sense of pride and belonging for these students.

Another example that Dana gives is using peer assessment to help students learn from each other:

Most FNMI students are visual learners and work more effectively in an informal atmosphere. Because of the amount of time children spend as part of an extended family, FNMI children are used to playing, working and learning with and from each other. Therefore, peer tutoring is a natural strategy for these students. When I plan and teach lessons, I am aware of the different learning styles of all of my students and offer a variety of activities and choices. (Dana)

Dana shows us some very unique insights into the Aboriginal way of life. Aboriginal people have a tendency to keep to themselves because that is where they feel the most comfortable. Dana has identified this as something that she can use within the classroom. By grouping students with the people they know best and feel more comfortable with, Dana is helping her students be successful. Students will be more open with each other and meaningful dialogue and feedback can take place between classmates. These students will learn more from each other in a peer-tutoring format in any open class dialogue than working with people they do not feel comfortable with.

4.6.7. Other Innovative Strategies

There were a number of other strategies that came out of the data analysis that teachers have used to help Aboriginal students in school. The following is a list of other strategies that many of the participants acknowledged that have helped them when teaching Aboriginal students:

- more individualized instruction with a program assistant as the students tend to have a high rate of absenteeism (Carla);

- allowing students to receive Physical Education credits for working on a trap line is an example (Carla);
- allowing students to arrive later in the day as the standard day does not work for some (Sean);
- relationship building with families. Home visits, phone calls home about students (successful things). Advocating and supporting families at meetings (Paula);
- assisting students with transitions, grade to grade, schools to schools, foster care to homes, and graduation to adult studies. Every student has different strengths and needs; sometimes it is difficult to make sure they are being supported in the way they need through life's different transitions (Paula);
- helping staff to understand certain cultural differences that they were not aware of (John);
- helping students get to appointments such as mental health (Amy);
- hiring Aboriginal liaison workers for the district to assist schools (Amy);
- offering Early Reading Intervention to students who were not reading at grade one level (Amy); and
- hosting cultural days at school inviting the community and families (Kyle).

These were the other examples that came out through the data analysis and were included in this paper to give readers more examples to consider when looking at implementing strategies to help Aboriginal students with their education.

4.7 Improving the Delivery of Aboriginal Education

The next item on the questionnaire asked participants to, "List some suggestions as to how the delivery of education to Aboriginal youth could be improved to better

meet the changing needs of today's society." There were only a couple of detailed responses to this item, but as in the previous item, participants had their own ideas on how the delivery of education could be improved. However, no emergent themes came through. This section will look at these detailed responses that participants gave and are summarized at the end with a list of shorter strategies that came out of the data analysis.

4.7.1. Improving Communication

An interesting comment that came from one participant was improving communication between agencies involved with FMNI children:

Better communication between agencies that are involved with FNMI children that are at risk. Often it is difficult to truly know what is going on in a child's life when there are so many agencies involved and children are moved from schools to schools and communities to communities. It is difficult to expect a child to do well educationally when they are worried about what is going to happen to them tomorrow or the next day. Often school staff have expectations that the students are unable to meet. (Patty)

Patty's idea of improving communication is an interesting idea because communication is lacking when it comes to those agencies involved with Aboriginal students. Many Aboriginal students bounce around from home to home and there are a few children that get placed in foster care. Many of these children have Aboriginal social workers, liaison workers and counselors but communication between all these agencies and the school is very poor. Many times teachers are at a loss as to what is going on with these students because they just do not know what is going on with them. As a result teachers hold them to the same set of expectations as they do for all students. The problem with this is that when Aboriginal students have so much going on in their lives and no one knows about it, for them to be held to the same standards is just not fair. Agencies have to do a better job of communicating with the school as to what is going on in the lives of these

FNMI students. Information such as where they are coming from, why they are there and how they were doing in their previous school are all pertinent things that schools need to know when they receive these new students. Unfortunately teachers are not on a need to know basis and when these students enter the classroom, teachers do not always know what to expect from them; for many of these students, school is not on the top of their list. As one participant put it in response to this item on the questionnaire, "The students' emotional needs have to be met before they can be expected to look at their educational needs" (Kori).

4.7.2. Leadership

Another participant really emphasized the importance of leadership and how the people in charge of programming need to understand what FNMI programming actually is. It is recognized that the best leadership will come from Elders who can provide the necessary wisdom to those in positions of authority to help Aboriginal students with their education:

Spend hundreds of thousands of dollars ensuring senior leaders (superintendents, trustees, and government departments responsible for FNMI programming) understand FNMI programming. Stop thinking that elected and appointed leaders can solve the situation. True leadership will come when you go to community Elders (those appointed in by the community in the traditional way and not through some "electoral" process brought about by Western culture and they in turn provide the wisdom required by senior leaders to create the reality that is good for FNMI children). (Bob)

Bob's example is a strong one in the sense that leadership is needed to improve the quality of current programming for Aboriginal students. Bob's suggestion of having Elders provide wisdom to senior leaders is an interesting idea. Elders would have the experience and background needed to guide senior leaders in a new direction that could really enhance student programming. With what they know about Aboriginal tradition

and culture, Elders can be very useful in how curriculum can be developed and at the very least give senior leaders some insight about what it means to be Aboriginal. It is not known exactly how much Elders are consulted when curriculum is developed or even if there are any Aboriginal people in general that help decide what programming is going to look like. However, it only stands to reason that Elders have the knowledge necessary for senior leaders to learn from in order to implement quality programming for Aboriginal students. The way things are being done currently is obviously not working as Aboriginal students struggle with their education on a daily basis. As Bob alludes to, it is time for a change and having Elders more involved in the process could have a significant impact on the curriculum taught to Aboriginal students.

4.7.3 Role Models/Change

Another suggestion that came from the data was that of role models and change. Participant Glen gives a detailed account of what an effective leader can do and what it can mean to Aboriginal people. He goes on to say how important it is to bring back a sense of pride to the Aboriginal people, a sense of pride that has been missing for a long time. Glen also suggests that there is a need for change especially in the day and age in which we live:

The suggestion that comes to mind is: role models. Aboriginal guest speakers who are successful in their chosen fields to encourage, assist and to instill a sense of pride in Aboriginal culture are needed. It is time to embrace change. As an evolving technological society we cannot go back to living in teepees, hunting buffalo and living off the land while embracing a nomadic lifestyle. Nor have government handouts helped the Aboriginals' proud culture. Rather it has enabled multiple generations to barely live at the poverty line with little ambition to move beyond mere subsistence. Tragically, a few of my acquaintances who chose not to be the next generation of welfare recipients were actually criticized by some of their reserve for 'acting white!' This fortunately is not the case everywhere. On a reserve in the Okanagan there is an incredible role model who also happens to be the Chief. He has mandated that all residents must work for

the benefit of the reserve and he is extremely proud of the reserves independent wealth. They run their own casino, vineyards, and businesses. Children attend school every day and are successful with their studies due to this working mentality that the people have. This reserve is 100% self-sufficient and residents enjoy a high standard of living and personal accomplishment. (Glen)

Glen's detailed account is a good example of what effective role models can do for people. In this case, a Chief with a strong work ethic mandates that everyone is going to work for the betterment of the community. The end result is that the reserve is sustaining itself and more importantly, at least in terms of this study, the students were in school and achieving academically.

Glen's idea is also very bold in the sense that it goes in a completely different direction than what many of the other participants have suggested throughout the course of this paper. The idea of role models is perhaps nothing new, but the idea of Aboriginal people getting away from traditional ways of life is. As Glen points out, in the technological age in which we live, it makes no sense to go back to old customary ways of living. Change needs to be embraced and people need to get with the times to be successful. Glen's idea might not go over well with many of the Elders of Aboriginal communities, but it certainly is an interesting concept and demonstrates a different kind of thinking that does not show up anywhere else in the literature or in this data analysis.

4.7.4. More Strategies for Delivering Aboriginal Education

The following is a list of other strategies that participants gave to deliver Aboriginal education in today's society. These strategies are in point form and are offered to give readers additional ideas on what they can do to help Aboriginal students with their education:

- increase access to counseling services (Paul);

- institute a save every child program wherein the students are matched with a teacher who develops a relationship with them to help them through their schooling challenges (Paul);
- use technology as a teaching tool to entice student curiosity – perhaps using cell phones in a class activity as an example (Paul);
- offer focus intervention strategies targeted at literacy improvement and math skills improvement (Sam);
- provide website resources and other best practices from which principals/leaders could draw on to deliver Aboriginal education (Sam);
- make available leadership courses to young Aboriginal women (Tony);
- I think that it would be very helpful for aspiring teachers in their university studies to be given more preparation in this area. Especially in cases where teachers are likely to head to rural schools, more time could be spent discussing issues that may arise and strategies for dealing with those issues (Joanne);
- begin school later than August and complete earlier in the year, the hours of operation for the day - shorter (Tara);
- more in-service for teachers on the needs of the aboriginal youth (Tara);
- improved governance of tuition agreements and communication between government, band and educational institutions (Dana);
- more options for attending school and completing courses outside of a structured school day and more course offerings in the traditional school setting (Kori);
- improved access to resources within the community such as libraries, computer access, internet availability and local career counseling (Kori);

- provide career counselors who are readily available to meet with youth, especially in rural northern areas where resources and options are limited, so that Aboriginal youth can see the broader options available to them and create some goals for the future (James);
- one thing that could make a difference here is teaching materials that Aboriginal youth can relate to. They could be more interested in topics that directly relate to them (Garrett);
- practical lessons and assessments that teachers can use to begin their integration of FNMI culture into classroom instruction (Carla);
- provide exemplars of success: classroom instruction demonstrations, communities where FNMI engagement is effective. (Tom);
- more involvement with the FNMI liaison workers (Helen);
- integration of cultural practices, interaction with elders, celebration of language (Helen); and lastly,
- staff should be required to have more knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal Youth and families (Arthur).

4.8 Additional Comments

The last item on the questionnaire asked participants, "Are there any additional comments/points you would like to make regarding Aboriginal education in Alberta?"

Only a few participants made additional comments to this item on the questionnaire.

This section will list in point form the final comments that participants had in relation to Aboriginal education.

The following are a list of those final comments that participants had in relation to Aboriginal Education:

- (a) "I attend many workshops and conferences about Aboriginal education in Alberta, and at every one I meet people who are frustrated with the lack of accountability that school divisions have in regards to FNMI success" (Patty).
- (b) "It only takes leadership from the heart, rather than the mind, to create a reality in education that will work for our Aboriginal children. Is your heart pumping...?" (Bill).
- (c) "I fully support the focus and research that is being done in the area of Aboriginal education. We now need a plan to proceed with measureable goals to document the progress or lack thereof" (Carla).
- (d) "My views are often seen as controversial by my peers who I taught with in British Columbia as they are book learned with no practical experiences. I understand that my perspective may not be deemed as politically correct. My views come from living in northern communities and having friends and relatives who have native ancestry. My sister has a different father than me. He was native. In fact his father founded the Indian and Metis Friendship Centre in Prince Albert. My best friend of 39 years is Metis. When I got married, four of my five bridesmaids were Metis. I share this to illustrate that my intention is to help, assist and love others, Aboriginal or otherwise not to neither condemn nor criticize" (Jack).
- (e) "Alberta needs a clear vision of what 'it' will look like when there is no longer a problem. Martin Luther King had a dream, and he defined it with specific examples. I am not certain that we have that certainty of vision yet. We know there's a problem... but..." (Michael).

(f) "Having the school liaison workers is very important as they bridge the gap with the family as they understand why things happen as they do" (Paula).

(g) "Only that I feel it is extremely important to focus on Aboriginal education as there is a great diversity there, and it is the responsibility of educators to make sure they are meeting the needs of the students. We cannot hope to see success if we do not attempt to acknowledge the diversity of need that comes with cultural differences (Toni).

(h) "In many ways, you are struggling against some accepted cultural beliefs and ideas whether real or imagined. There are very real concerns with people not showing up at designated times or not getting enough of a particular need, be it proper food or sleep. School is not always easy but learning can be very difficult for you if you show up half an hour late everyday tired and hungry. You often hear of the expression that it takes a village to raise a child but if no one in the village is offering discipline or rules, then the children will do what they want. This makes things even harder for the teachers in the beginning years" (Garrett). And,

(i) "As has been stated in this survey, I truly believe that Aboriginal Education is very important in our schools. That being said, many schools have students from several different cultural backgrounds and while Aboriginal education is important, I do not believe that Aboriginal students should have their needs put in front of the needs of other students, nor behind them (Bob).

4.9 Summary

The researcher has presented a variety of themes that arose for each item on the questionnaire and used numerous quotes to reveal participants' points of view. As is evident from the headings, some questions shared common themes but there were some

instances where it was difficult to find common themes based on participant responses. Such themes are identified as predominant categories by the researcher since they were present in more than one instance.

CHAPTER 5

Findings and Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The main purpose of this study was to examine educational leaders' perspectives of issues and concerns in Aboriginal Education in the province of Alberta. Specifically, it was anticipated that the study would help educational leaders in the delivery of Aboriginal education.

The study was guided by a general research question and six subsidiary research questions as outlined in Chapter 1. Chapter 4 presented and described the themes and predominant categories that emerged from participant responses. This chapter will discuss the particular findings of the study with reference to participant responses, using the subsidiary research questions as a guide.

5.2 Research Questions

What do you see as the current state of Aboriginal Education in the province of Alberta today?

Without exception, all participants saw that there was a need to improve Aboriginal education throughout the province because its current state is not working for these students. Participants recognized that student completion rates are not acceptable and that the current way students are being taught is not working for Aboriginal students. Participants acknowledged that it was time for a change and that current educational standards did not hold true for Aboriginal students. In addition, participants agreed that there is still much work to do in Aboriginal education because the results are

showing everyone that what is being done is not working or more needs to be done to improve the current situation.

What are the major issues facing Aboriginal Education in the Alberta today?

Please list practical examples that you might recall.

There were many common themes that emerged from the data. Of particular consequence, participants identified attendance, culture, funding and measures of success as being factors that are influencing Aboriginal education today. Participants acknowledged that with students being away for extended periods of times that learning concepts is very difficult. It seems students are always playing the catch-up game, a game they cannot win because they fall further and further behind each time they miss school for extended periods of time. Participants acknowledged that there were many valid reasons as to why students missed school but educationally, it was hurting them drastically.

In terms of culture, it was made very clear that there is not enough cultural content in the curriculum and students are suffering a result. Participants suggested that there needs to be more opportunities to explore Aboriginal culture and traditions in the classroom setting. These students need to feel a sense of belonging and pride that they are not currently experiencing in many schools throughout the province. Participants agree that the absence of culture is making it difficult for Aboriginal students to connect to current programming. In addition, participants acknowledged that it will take time for resources and for teachers to be able to effectively deliver quality programming. That said, they also recognized that until these things happen, students will continue to struggle with the current curriculum.

The third theme that came out of this item was that of funding. Of particular note was the fact that not all of the FNMI dollars are going to address Aboriginal students' needs. Participants made it very clear that these students need this money to get more Aboriginal resources into the school so that cultural awareness would become more prevalent for all students in the province. Many believed that until proper accountability measures are put in place, FNMI dollars will continue to be spent inappropriately, continuing to have a very negative impact on Aboriginal education.

Finally, the last theme that came out of this particular item on the questionnaire was that of measures of success. Participants suggested that there are many different measures of success outside the realm of academics that are not being recognized. Aboriginal students have many talents such as their artistic ability and athletics but unfortunately the world of academia does not see these as being important. Participants stated that there are many degrees of success and that it is important to recognize them as being such. Furthermore, what Aboriginal people see as being a measure of success might have more meaning to them than what a university might perceive as being important.

What can be done to improve Aboriginal education throughout the province?

There were many ideas on what could be done to improve Aboriginal education in Alberta. The themes that came out of this item were attendance and parents, leadership, funding, elders and culture. Attendance and parents came out of the data analysis as being very important. Getting to school consistently and having the parents on the side of the school would make a big difference in alleviating some of the problems that students are having with their schooling. That something like offering

parents a reward for getting their children to school on time and frequently could be a strategy to help students attend more regularly and help them with the concepts that they are struggling as a result of being absent from school for extended periods of time.

Another idea that came up was that of leadership - that current leadership does not have the necessary skills to implement quality programming for Aboriginal students. The suggestion that came from this item was that leaders need to spend more time getting to know the Aboriginal way of life and finding ways of getting these perspectives into the curriculum. Spending time with leaders of Aboriginal communities would give FNMI leaders more insight into what it means to truly be Aboriginal.

It was also no surprise that funding came up in this area. Simply put, it was the consensus of many that the FNMI money should go to where it was intended to go and that is to the Aboriginal students. This money was looked at as being able to bring more resources and programs into the school to help with cultural awareness.

Elders came up consistently throughout the course of the study and when it came to improving Aboriginal education, many survey respondents recognized the importance of Elders and how they could bridge the gap to some degree in improving Aboriginal education. It was felt by many that their presence, knowledge, and backgrounds were something that could be tapped into to gain valuable insight into Aboriginal culture. In addition, having Elders in the school for storytelling or assisting with concepts brought up in the Social Studies curriculum are just a few ways in which Elders can help in the school. It was also suggested that just the presence of Elders in the school could give students a sense of pride and belonging and help them to engage more in programming.

The idea of culture came up - including more of it in classroom activities and of course in the curriculum. Some participants stated that Aboriginal people were done a huge injustice in the early textbooks and that this needs to be rectified as we move into the future. Other participants stated that what was being done in the current system is exactly what needs to be done and that things will get better. In any case, the concept of culture echoed loud and clear in this study as being both a major problem and a major solution.

Finally, the idea of full-time kindergarten was mentioned by a number of the participants. It was their thinking that if students were able to attend a Kindergarten program each and every day for full days, this would set students up for success as they progress throughout the grades. Many felt that full-time kindergarten would give students the educational foundation that they need to be successful. It was also deemed to be important to have a full time program due to the fact that students miss so much time throughout the course of the year.

What are some innovative methods that you have used to improve the delivery of education to Aboriginal students? Please elaborate.

There were a number of practical strategies that participants gave to help the current state of Aboriginal education. Their lists included strategies such as taking students out into the bush to learn more about their traditions and customs, taking the time to discuss Aboriginal perspectives in the Social Studies curriculum, using student strengths, incorporating movement and song into activities, accepting students for who they are and raising cultural awareness. Each participant gave proven strategies that each of them used in their own classroom to work with Aboriginal students. Participants

included these examples because they saw them as working for them with the Aboriginal students they have worked with over their careers.

List some suggestions as to how the delivery of education to Aboriginal youth could be improved to better meet the changing needs of today's society.

There were only a few detailed responses to this item on the questionnaire but this might in large part due to the fact that participants were asked to give solutions to improve Aboriginal education on a previous item in the questionnaire. That said, the ideas of communication, leadership and role models were raised by individual participants. Although these were from individual participants and only a few really detailed responses came through the data analysis, the researcher was able to compile a list of strategies that readers could use to help them with Aboriginal education. They ranged from things such as using technology and increasing counseling services, to developing a website of Aboriginal resources that teachers could go to help them supplement what they were doing in their classrooms with these students. Participants did not give much detail when it came to this item so the list was compiled based on participant responses.

Are there any additional comments/points you would like to make regarding Aboriginal education in Alberta?

There was only limited response to this question but there were a few interesting comments from participants. When it comes to Aboriginal education in general, participants were in agreement that there does exist a problem in today's society with what is happening with the education of Aboriginal students. Everyone saw this as being an issue that needs to be addressed but there is still the problem of what the issues are

and what needs to be done about them. It was brought up that the province of Alberta needs to have a clearer vision of what they want to do with Aboriginal education because as it stands now no one seems to know what to do to help these students. In any case, it was interesting to have some final thoughts from the participants because it really solidified from the beginning of the research to the very end that the literature and the educators that teach Aboriginal students every day, recognize that there are problems with Aboriginal education that need to be solved now, if Aboriginal education is going to improve in the future.

CHAPTER 6

Implications

6.1 The findings and conclusions from this study present several implications that are relevant to practice and research.

6.1.1 Implications for Practice

This study examined the perspectives of educational leaders on the issues and concerns with Aboriginal education in the province of Alberta. It provided participants with the opportunity to reflect and voice their thinking with respect to the issues they face in providing the best education possible for Aboriginal students. A number of suggestions were made by participants as a result of taking part in this study, suggestions that would have not otherwise been published.

It is therefore recommended that educational leaders discuss issues in Aboriginal education with their academic staff and work towards improving the delivery of Aboriginal education. This could be done at regular department meetings, general staff meetings, administration meetings, board meetings or during professional development days both at the school level as well as jurisdictionally. By discussing the issues particular to each school, educational leaders can develop a plan to address these issues and potentially include this plan in school improvement initiatives.

The culture and climate of each school varies and therefore the needs of each school varies to one degree or another. Although a formula exists to determine the resources available to each school with FNMI money and school budgets, this formula does not mean Aboriginal resources are plentiful in all schools. In order for Aboriginal

education to be delivered in an equitable fashion, rural and urban schools need to be consulted so that their unique needs are addressed.

It is therefore recommended that Alberta Education initiate a process of review and evaluation of the delivery of Aboriginal programming in Alberta in order to determine the specific needs of community schools and to develop ways and means to address those needs.

Teachers have many roles in the delivery of Aboriginal education that deal with specific classroom practices. Educational leaders should have a different set of roles by nature of their position and the power they have to influence change. In this study, educators responded to many questions in terms of what the issues are with Aboriginal education and what can be done to improve the current situation.

It is recommended that Alberta Education, by working with educational leaders, come up with what teachers can do in classrooms to help Aboriginal students with their education. Distinctively defined roles of what teachers should be doing with these students would aid teachers in terms of a clearer direction to go in.

6.1.2 Implications for Research

The general population agrees that a solid education is important in securing employment, yet the employment needs of each region depends on a variety of factors. For example, geography would be a key determinant as to who would get hired or at least how many. In addition, there is little research available to delineate what aspects of Aboriginal education are important for the workforce, that is what skills need to be taught in order to prepare students for a variety of jobs in today's society.

It is therefore recommended that the Government of Alberta conduct a study to determine the impact that Aboriginal education has on the workforce.

The economy of a province is largely determined by whether or not young people can secure meaningful employment. If our government wants to provide a sustainable economy, they need to provide funding for research and development to determine the skills that employers seek.

On an even larger scale, improving Aboriginal education can improve the province's and nation's economy and increase competitiveness in the global marketplace. Aboriginal education will influence society and it is important for these students to be involved in the workforce if Alberta is going to compete in the global marketplace. Although they did not specifically mention globalization, they did recognize that Aboriginal education has an impact on the province. Again, the impact is not fully explained in the literature. How does a country improve Aboriginal education to meet the needs of globalization?

It is therefore recommended that the Government of Canada conduct a study to determine the impact that Aboriginal education has on globalization.

6.1.3 Concluding Comments

This study offers a variety of benefits to the following groups or individuals: the schools, teachers, department heads and administrators; all school boards, Alberta Education; and the researcher. All of the participants in this study were asked to reflect on and communicate their perspectives regarding Aboriginal education in Alberta. Such an exercise is valuable because it forces participants to reflect on their classroom practices, their role in the delivery of Aboriginal education and the needs that they have.

By giving participants the opportunity to participate in this study, they are given a voice – the opportunity to make their perceptions known and to give suggestions as to how the delivery of Aboriginal education could be improved. All school districts and educators across the province will benefit from learning about methods used to improve the delivery of Aboriginal education. Correspondingly, should educators alter/adapt their approaches to instruction in a positive manner as a result of the findings of this study, students would be the obvious beneficiaries of such changes.

Another beneficiary of this study is Alberta Education. This study can be viewed in terms of an independent evaluation of the perspectives of educators in order to examine the current issues facing educators of Aboriginal students in Alberta. In addition, individuals involved with curriculum development can use the suggestions given to guide future programs and initiatives.

The researcher is also a beneficiary in this process. A number of benefits accrue to the researcher:

- the development and fine-tuning of a multitude of skills related to conducting qualitative research;
- the acquisition of considerable insight into the perspectives of educational leaders on the delivery of Aboriginal education,
- the development of an extensive network of educational leaders from across the province,
- the opportunity to give back something to the Aboriginal culture as the researcher's start in education came on a First Nations reserve in northern Alberta,

- the acquisition of a variety of innovative methods to use in the classroom for Aboriginal students; and
- the intrinsic satisfaction from knowing that the exercise was an exceptional learning experience.

It is the researcher's hope that educators and stakeholders from across the province will use the findings of this study to help significantly improve the delivery of Aboriginal education.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire

ISSUES AND CONCERNS IN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION IN ALBERTA

A study to be conducted by Don Hinks
E-MAIL: dhinks@phrd.ab.ca

Invitation To Participate

Introduction

Greetings principals and teachers in Alberta. You are invited to participate in a study examining the current issues facing Aboriginal Education in our province.

Data Collection

Data will be collected via a listserv. Your participation will consist of responding to the items on a questionnaire (see Appendix B). Your participation is voluntary and anonymous.

The survey will take approximately 30 minutes to complete; you may use extra pages if necessary.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. You are also free to not respond to any particular survey item. The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethic policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-738-8388. The results of the research will be made available to the university community in a web-site upon completion of the study.

Thank you in advance for participating in this study.

ISSUES AND CONCERNS IN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION ALBERTA

TEACHER SURVEY

PAGE 1

SECTION A: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Please complete the following:

1. Please check off which region of the province you are presently working in:
 a) Northern ☐
 b) Southern ☐
 c) Eastern ☐
 d) Western ☐
 (NOTE: If work with several districts, please check all that apply.)

2. I am currently working as a(an)
 a) replacement (term) classroom teacher ☐
 b) permanent classroom teacher ☐
 c) department head ☐
 e) assistant/vice principal ☐
 f) principal ☐
 g) other (please specify)

3. The student enrolment of my school is in the following range:
 a) 025 - 200 ☐
 b) 201 - 400 ☐
 c) 401 - 600 ☐
 d) 601 - 800 ☐
 e) 801 - 1000 ☐
 f) 1001 - 1200 ☐
 g) 1200 + ☐

4. I am:
 a) female ☐
 b) male ☐

5. Experience:
 a) 1-5 ☐
 b) 5-10 ☐
 c) 10-15 ☐
 d) 20-25 ☐
 e) 30+ ☐

[Please do not mark in this space: Survey Number _____.]

*PAGE 2**SECTION B: PLEASE RESPOND TO THE FOLLOWING:*

1. What do you see as the current state of Aboriginal Education in the province of Alberta today?

PAGE 3

2. What are the major issues facing Aboriginal Education in the Alberta today?
Please list practical examples that you might recall.

PAGE 4

3. What can be done to improve Aboriginal education throughout the province?

PAGE 5

4. What are some innovative methods that you have used to improve the delivery of education to Aboriginal students? Please elaborate.

PAGE 6

5. List some suggestions as to how the delivery of education to Aboriginal youth could be improved to better meet the changing needs of today's society.

PAGE 7

6. Are there any additional comments/points you would like to make regarding Aboriginal education in Alberta?

Please use extra pages if necessary.
Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

TITLE

Educational Leaders' Perspectives on Issues and Concerns in Aboriginal Education in Alberta

RESEARCHER

Don Hinks, Faculty of Graduate Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled "Factors Affecting Aboriginal Education in Alberta."

THIS FORM IS PART OF THE PROCESS OF INFORMED CONSENT. IT SHOULD GIVE YOU THE BASIC IDEA OF WHAT THE RESEARCH IS ABOUT AND WHAT YOUR PARTICIPATION WILL INVOLVE. IF YOU WOULD LIKE MORE DETAIL ABOUT SOMETHING MENTIONED HERE, OR INFORMATION NOT INCLUDED HERE, YOU SHOULD FEEL FREE TO ASK. PLEASE TAKE THE TIME TO READ THIS CAREFULLY AND TO UNDERSTAND ANY OTHER INFORMATION GIVEN TO YOU BY THE RESEARCHER.

It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not to take part in the research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal Education has long been under the microscope. There has been much debate as to the many issues that face Aboriginal learners and educators today and what can be done to make Aboriginal education more successful at all levels. In the day and age in which we live, achievement for any learner should be the norm, but that is not always necessarily the case. That said, it is important to investigate what is happening with Aboriginal education today so that key factors can be identified in the progress and hindrance of education for Aboriginal students and the appropriate adjustments made to ensure each and every one of these students have the opportunity to be successful in their respective setting.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study will survey principals and teachers in Alberta about the current issues facing Aboriginal education in this province and the methods used to increase educational success.

WHAT YOU WILL DO IN THIS STUDY

To participate in this study you will be asked to complete a survey consisting of two parts. Section A which will ask you for various demographic information and Section B will consist of approximately 6 open-ended questions.

LENGTH OF TIME

You will receive a survey via email that will take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. Once completed you can then email your responses back to me.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

The purpose of this study is to survey principals and teachers in Alberta to determine what are the current issues facing Aboriginal education in this province and the methods used to increase educational success. The researcher perceives no harms accruing from this research.

With respect to the benefits of this study, the researcher proffers the following as potential benefits accruing to you and other study participants as well as future educators in Alberta:

- You are given a voice and will have the opportunity to make known your perceptions of the major issues in Aboriginal education in Alberta. Also, you will be asked for suggestions as to how the delivery of education for Aboriginal students could be improved to increase educational success for these kids.
- Educators of Aboriginal students across the province will benefit from learning about methods you use to improve the delivery of education as well as some of the things observed in teaching Aboriginal students that both enhanced and hindered academic success.
- Should educators alter/vary their approaches to instruction and practices in a positive manner, students would be the obvious benefactors of such changes; and
- Individuals involved with curriculum development can use the suggestions you give to guide future programs and initiatives.

PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY

You will not be asked to identify yourself on the actual survey instrument. When you submit your survey responses, these responses will be downloaded to an external (flash) drive. After the analysis has been completed, the flash drive will be stored in a locked file cabinet in my university office.

It should be noted that in the final write-up of the study, pseudonyms will be used. The above measures/procedures will ensure that the information received will be kept confidential and anonymous.

REPORTING OF RESULTS

Information collected will be used for a Master of Education thesis. Data will be reported using direct quotes, summary statements and trends that arise.

QUESTIONS

You are welcome to ask questions at any time during your participation in this research. If you would like more information about this study, please contact:

Don Hinks
Researcher
(780) 348-5341
dhinks@phrd.ab.ca

Dr. Jerome Delaney
Faculty of Education
Research Supervisor
(709) 864-2071
jdelaney@mun.ca

The proposal for this research has been approved by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research at Memorial University. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 737-8368.

CONSENT

YOUR SIGNATURE ON THIS FORM MEANS THAT:

- You have read the information about the research
- You have been able to ask questions about this study
- You are satisfied with the answers to all of your questions
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing
- You understand that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.

If you sign this form, you do not give up your legal rights, and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

The researcher will give you a copy of this form for your records.

YOUR SIGNATURE

"I have read and understood the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project, understanding that I may withdraw my consent at any time. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records."

Signature of participant

Date

RESEARCHER'S SIGNATURE

"I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study."

Signature of investigator

Date

Telephone number: (780) 348-5341

E-mail address: dhinks@phrd.ab.ca

