"They think they know me but they really don't know me": Beginning to explore the experiences of Mi'kmaq students at a provincial intermediate school.

A Thesis

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Dedication

Just as I was inspired by my parents to value learning, my children, Paul, Chris and Andrea have respected my quest to continue formal schooling. My sister Mary and friend Kathleen assisted me greatly with parenting responsibilities. Phyllis, Leona, Susan and Ron offered suggestions, computer support and steady encouragement. Graham and Fiona provided scholarly direction. Sandra and Gayle in the Education Faculty office have been gracious to me over the course of my Master's study. The Mi'kmaq students and their families allowed me to uncover their realities. To all of you, I dedicate this work.

Abstract

This study explores the schooling experiences of First Nations students at an intermediate level provincial school on Prince Edward Island and the impact of educational practices on them. Two individual interviews were conducted at the school with each of the seven Mi'kmaq students who participated in the research. All participants completed their elementary schooling within their small, band operated, community based school. The voices of the students provide some understanding of what it is like to be in their shoes within the public school environment. The findings highlight personal, social and academic challenges the students encounter as a cultural minority in this educational setting as well as some aspects that are supportive and motivational to them. The findings confirm many of the notions found in the literature, although very few studies have included the input of Aboriginal people. The study proposes new directions for educators to pursue that respect the culture, language, learning characteristics and strengths of First Nations students and their communities.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Overview

When the ideas for this thesis began to evolve, our country and continent were considered by many to be reasonably secure and predictable places to live. Now, as we address the impact of the attack against the United States in September 2001, and the subsequent declaration of a war against terrorism, that sense of order and predictability has been put to the test. Our relationships with peoples of other cultures have taken on a greater priority. Finding ways to live safely and peacefully on our planet, for the short and long-term futures, has become a matter of great urgency. In this context, research that explores the experiences of adolescents from a Mi'kmaq community in an off-reserve intermediate school could make a timely contribution to the fostering of mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation within our region, province, and nation.

The history of relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada provides few examples of Aboriginals determining for themselves what is in their best interests. Central to this study is my conviction that it is time to listen to what Aboriginal people have to tell about their experiences and to validate their input in shaping a society that is responsive to the needs of all citizens.

In undertaking this study, I have encountered a range of terminology used in reference to original inhabitants in either a global, North American, or Canadian context. As the literature examined in the thesis development has mainly been related to a Canadian context, I will use the

terms that follow, as they are currently understood in Canada.

The term First Nations will be used to refer to both Status and Registered Indians as defined by the Indian Act, as well as non-Status Indians who, despite their claim to Native ancestry, do not fall under the Act. For some, status may not have been afforded because their ancestors were not listed federally, or their status was lost as a result of Indian Act regulations on marriage (Coelho, Costiniuk, & Newton, 1995). From my perspective, cultural identity is rooted more in how individuals define themselves than in an ability to meet particular criteria established largely by non-Aboriginal federal officials. There may be occasions when reference is made to Natives or Indians, in which case either term could be substituted for the term First Nations. The Mi'kmaq are First Nations people of Atlantic Canada and southern Quebec.

The term Aboriginal will be used to refer to three particular groups:

- the First Nations who include the 633 bands represented by the Assembly of First Nations and non-Status Indians (Aboriginal Times, June 2002).
- the Metis, who gained recognition by the federal government in 1982 as having partial Native ancestry.
- the Inuit, who were referred to in the past as the Eskimo and traditionally inhabited areas of Northern Canada.

Should the term Indigenous be used, it is to be understood in the same sense as Aboriginal.

(To simplify the use of terminology and to avoid debate over grammatical usage, I will employ First Nations rather than First Nation. The context will indicate if the reference is being made to the total population or to a specific segment of the population. I have opted to make reference to people, as opposed to peoples, through the thesis.)

These definitions have been drawn from an Ontario educator's resource book (Coelho et al., 1995). Various authors refer to the importance of discerning which term is preferred by a given population, as one group may be more comfortable with a particular term of reference over other terminology (Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000; Department of Education, New Brunswick, 1999; Saskatchewan Professional Development and Research Unit, 1996). In preparing this thesis, I have employed the term Mi'kmaq, as it is currently accepted by the members of the First Nations community in which the research participants live. As the youth with whom I spoke during my research identified themselves as Micmac, I will respect their terminology when I quote from their conversations with me.

Topic and Purpose

In the same way that people routinely remark, "How are you?" without stopping to hear the response, many children return home from school each day and offer a casual, if any, reply to the age old question, "So how was your day in school?" My research has been an attempt to pose that question with full sincerity to several Mi'kmaq students attending a provincial intermediate school in rural Prince Edward Island, Canada. Their input has been carefully recorded and analyzed and the impact of current educational practices on these First Nations students has been explored. There are a number of considerations to be mindful of in clarifying the rationale or purpose for the study and my motivation as a researcher in undertaking this work.

For the past 13 years, I have been a resident of a rural community situated about a half hour travel time from the Mi'kmaq community referred to in this study by the pseudonym Epekwitk. This was the Mi'kmaq name for Prince Edward Island at the time of the first European contact

(Nova Scotia Department of Education, n.d.). The total Canadian population of First Nations people has been estimated as a million and a half, a figure that most likely includes Status and non-Status Indians (Pauls, 1996). The 1996 Census data gives a much lower population figure of 488,000 as the number who are registered under the Indian Act. There is acknowledgment that certain reserves or settlements were incompletely enumerated when the Census count was calculated. This numeracy debate may explain why the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development reported yet another number with 601,000 registered under the Indian Act at that time (The Daily, January 13, 1998).

Currently, there are 332 residents living on-Reserve. There are 312 Aboriginal people and 20 non-Aboriginals (Margaret Sark, personal communication, July 12, 2002). The main buildings that I have noted on different visits to Epekwitk are: the family residences situated along or running off the main road into the community; the Council building where the Chief and band employees, such as the Director of Education and the Band Registrar, have their offices and where the community gymnasium is located; the band operated school for students from kindergarten (age four) to grade six; a church with a nearby monument to Epekwitk soldiers who served in the First or Second World Wars; and a house that has been renovated as a cultural center highlighting the history and traditions of the Mi'kmaq. Other buildings, enterprises, natural attractions and newly launched projects related to eco-tourism contribute to the fabric and economy of Epekwitk.

From 1989 to 1994, I was a teacher at the intermediate school chosen as the Research site. In September 2002, I am returning to the school to assume the role of teaching vice-principal. As both a teacher and resident of an area close to Epekwitk, I have found others and

myself in this region relatively unaware of the people or way of life in the Epekwitk community. Geographically, Epekwitk is situated at the end of a lengthy local road, which is accessed from a busier secondary highway. Many residents of near-by communities, especially those to the west of Epekwitk where I reside, go about their lives having little or no contact with or knowledge of our First Nations neighbours. The people of Epekwitk travel to a village about ten minutes from their community for some of their day-to-day needs and activities. Like most of the population of the western region of the province, they travel to the city in the eastern section of the county to access a number of businesses and services. An outline of schooling arrangements for the Epekwitk students will clarify how this brief geographical and social context is relevant to the research focus.

From kindergarten to grade six, Epekwitk students are educated in their community at the band-operated school of roughly 40 students. At grade seven, the students leave Epekwitk each school day for their intermediate and secondary education within the provincial school system. The intermediate school of 400 students and the secondary school with 730 students are situated 30 and 40 minutes respectively to the west of Epekwitk. In these settings, the Mi'kmaq students are a small cultural minority amidst the larger Non-Aboriginal majority. The majority group has been schooled since school entry in provincial consolidated elementary schools. Each of these schools is attended by approximately 200 students. The students in the provincial system are accustomed to classes of 20 to 30 students working at a grade level, and they may already have made connections with students in other schools through common school or community programs. The Epekwitk students are less familiar with the class sizes they encounter at the intermediate school, and they arrive with a much smaller group of classmates from their band

operated elementary school. While the Epekwitk elementary students do participate in an annual music and art venue along with the provincial elementary students of the area, they do not arrive at the intermediate level as acquainted with either the provincial school system or other students who have spent at least six years within it. Simply traveling about 40 kilometers by bus to arrive at school is a new undertaking for students who, until grade six completion live in homes that are within walking distance of their elementary school. The students in the provincial elementary schools begin Core French at the grade four level and continue this as the second language curriculum at the intermediate school. Students from Epekwitk have much less exposure to French as they receive training in the Mi'kmaq language at the Epekwitk school. Mi'kmaq instruction is not part of the provincial curriculum. While one could identify an array of contrasts between the band school and the provincial school, one distinction I will note is the degree to which the First Nations culture is represented by the decor displayed within the Epekwitk school. Upon entering the main entrance of the Epekwitk school, one is surrounded by works of art and messages that convey traditions, beliefs, and symbols of the Mi'kmaq. The intermediate school has a large dream catcher hung in the cafeteria, but there are few other visible symbols that relate to the Mi'kmaq people.

During the five years I spent teaching at the intermediate school, I provided a number of Epekwitk students with learning assistance, primarily in an individual or small group setting. These students were given additional support with challenging areas of the curriculum, this often being in mathematics. I recall arranging a meeting with teaching personnel at the band operated school to address the relative difficulties the Epekwitk students experienced in mathematics in contrast to strengths which were often shown in language arts. The staff at the Epekwitk school

shared similar concerns regarding student progress in mathematics, but offered no particular explanation for this pattern.

Sometimes, the intermediate school administration would turn to the Resource Program as an alternative service for some Mi'kmaq students who encountered difficulties in Core French. These students tended to arrive at the intermediate level with fewer upper elementary experiences than the other students in French second language learning.

In recalling my involvement over the early 1990s with Mi'kmaq students, I was cognizant that this prior background with Mi'kmaq students and their community could be helpful in developing a rapport and trust with other students who participated in this research. While working with the Epekwitk students, I would reflect on the many ways that their life experiences living on-Reserve contrasted with that of my three children who have First Nations ancestry through their grandmother, a recently deceased member of the Nisga'a Nation from British Columbia. This personal link with First Nations people remains an aspect of my motivation to develop an understanding of schooling experiences from the participants' perspectives.

All students make transitions as they leave one school or one level of education to move to another. It is my contention that the transition for the Mi'kmaq students of Epekwitk into the provincial school system and the experiences they have while attending merit articulation, exploration, and analysis.

Significance

According to data collated in September 2000 and provided to me by the Atlantic Regional Office of Indian and Northern Affairs, there are a number of Mi'kmaq communities in the Maritime Provinces who follow a similar arrangement as Epekwitk in educating their youth. Many bands operate an elementary school in their community and enroll their students in provincial schools for grades 7 to 12. Thus, this research will be of potential interest to the members of Epekwitk as well as other Mi'kmaq communities in Atlantic Canada, particularly those involved in the education of youth.

The literature on Aboriginal education makes little reference to studies, which document the contributions that youth can make by sharing their own educational experiences. The report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), released in 1996 after extensive consultation with many Aboriginal citizens across Canada, recognized the lack of Aboriginal input on educational matters (Orr & Jerome-Paul, 2000). I envisioned this study as one step in the process of changing how concerns about Aboriginal education are addressed. The Epekwitk community, from the youth to the elders, has many strengths in working cooperatively towards decisions that are best for all members. The colonial model of educational control has not encouraged the First Nations people to participate or assume leadership in educational arenas. This work is intended to redress that trend and communicate to the Mi'kmaq youth and their communities that their stories are of fundamental importance in creating needed reforms in First Nations education.

In a broader context, about half of Canada's Native students are educated in provincial school systems (Porter, 1995). In Atlantic Canada, the common curriculum developed by the

Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation purports to be inclusive of all learners of diverse backgrounds. Provincial Ministries of Education and their school boards articulate a commitment to ensuring that all students experience success in schools. RCAP states that our Canadian education system is not helping Aboriginal students to acquire the skills needed to participate fully in the country's economy or to acquire the knowledge of Aboriginal languages and traditions to pass on their cultures. I view my study as one that could support the efforts of policy makers and educators at the provincial, school board, and school levels in this province to ensure that our educational practices are helping First Nations students to succeed in school and beyond.

Research Questions

A qualitative research design has been used in this study to capture the descriptions of some First Nations students' experiences within their intermediate provincial school. The research was approached from a phenomenological perspective, as it focused on what the participants experienced as students at the intermediate school and how they interpreted that environment (Patton, 1990). Patton defines a phenomenological study as, "One which focuses on descriptions of what people experience and how it is they experience what they experience" (Patton, 1990, p. 71). The descriptions in my work were obtained through interviews.

The research was conducted at the school, the setting where the experiences described by the participants unfolded each day. In-depths interviews were undertaken in order to discover the students' perspectives in as natural a manner as possible. The research questions I chose to explore were:

1. How do some First Nations students, living in a Mi'kmaq community on Prince Edward Island, describe their experiences at a provincial intermediate school?

2. What is the impact of current educational practices on these First Nations students?

Limitations

I realized that the study would portray the experiences of the seven students with whom interviews were conducted. While some common themes emerged, I recognize that the findings and analysis cannot be generalized to a broader population. My intent, as an educator whose perspective is influenced by the mainstream, was simply to open a window into the world of each student who was interviewed. The research can be viewed as a bridge, which will communicate to the students interviewed and their Mi'kmaq classmates that their input is valued and necessary.

I cannot claim to represent completely the perspective of students whose First Nations cultural background is different than my own. The understanding that I have acquired has been dependent on my ability to establish the trust and communication necessary to be permitted an inside look at the students' worlds.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the purpose and focus of my research and a description of some prior knowledge and experiences that I had acquired in teaching students from Epekwitk. Chapter two will present findings from the literature, which provided new insights, extended or

clarified some initial perceptions on the topic, and identified aspects that have not yet been explored.

I was aware from the outset that research in First Nations communities needed to be approached with care as lives could be affected by the process. My intention in doing this research was to have a positive impact on the education of First Nations students and to encourage collaborative dialogue and cooperation among all involved.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

A brief depiction of the knowledge and experiences I acquired as a teacher of First Nations students was presented in the preceding chapter. This synopsis illustrated that I approached my research with some initial perceptions and experiences that I clarified or connected with findings in the literature. I recognized that other educators might also have reflected on educational interventions with First Nations students. The on-going literature search helped identify whether related research had been conducted, what it had shown, and where there were gaps or unknowns in the research that this study could address.

As my theoretical stance as a teacher evolved during the 1980s and 1990s, two educational trends were influential. One school of thought that has influenced educational practices is the recognition that children learn best when they are actively and meaningfully involved in relevant learning experiences. Children arrive at school with an important knowledge and experiential base. The teacher's role is seen as one of facilitating learning so that students draw on prior knowledge and experiences to construct new understandings and abilities. The "whole-language" movement and "hands-on mathematics" approach grew out of these beliefs about learning.

Another theoretical strand promotes schools as inclusive environments where all can succeed. Students of all capabilities and backgrounds are to be provided with instruction that is tailored to meet their unique needs and learning styles. Diversity and equity considerations have

taken on greater priority in curriculum development and instruction. Schools are to be places where all students can experience a sense of belonging and success.

In conducting a review of pertinent literature, I looked for how the contemporary theoretical assumptions noted above would be emphasized in the material that explores the educational experiences of Aboriginal students. These ideas were included in some of the literature that was examined, although a great deal of the material focused on the history of Native education in Canada. An historical perspective is essential in understanding the attitudes, beliefs and experiences of First Nations people in relation to public education. In presenting a review of the literature, an overview of the historical material will first be noted and an exploration of contemporary practice will follow.

Historical Aspects

Before Contact.

Archeologists have found evidence that Paleo-Indian people were living in the areas now considered as the Atlantic Provinces, northern Maine and eastern Quebec about 10,000 years ago (Paul, 2000; Perley, 1997). The Mi'kmaq and the Maliseet who now comprise the First Nations population in this area of Canada are considered to be descendants of the early Paleo-Indian. Whether their ancestry goes back 2000, 4000, or 10,000 years, it is clear that these First Nations were well established prior to the first European contact about 500 years ago (Johnson, 1995; Pellissier, 1976). Perley (1997) outlines the system used by the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet to fairly allocate winter hunting territories to different family groups. Great value was placed on communal possession and respectfully sharing the natural bounty (Paul, 2000). Before the

coming of the Europeans, the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet were already "progressively dynamic entities which took advantage of their contacts with the neighbouring Aboriginal nations by exchanging ideas, knowledge and commodities" (Perley, 1997, p. 2).

Early Contact.

History offers evidence that the early Europeans depended on the First Nations people for their survival in the new colony. Pauls (1996) suggests that the European presence in North America would have been short lived if the Native people had not shown the immigrants how to find plant and animal food, build homes and travel the lands and waters in a range of climatic conditions. The Maliseet and Mi'kmaq were allies of the early Europeans in the development of their fur trade but, with increased European settlement, there was a growing devaluing of the Native people and their culture. This time period was one of "oppression, suppression, exploitation, subjugation, and dispossession of lands from Aboriginal societies" (Perley, 1997, p. 5). Paul (2000) describes how the participation of the Mi'kmaq in trading with the French and the British, though initially profitable, disrupted and destroyed traditional patterns of living and led to the development of an economy in which the Mi'kmaq were not equipped to participate. "Thus the die was cast for the decline and near extinction of their culture" (Paul, 2000, p. 43). The historical accounts of Johnson (1995), Pauls (1996), and Pellissier (1976) portray similar scenarios as the compassionate, supportive reception and allegiances extended by the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet to the colonists began to deteriorate as the French and English colonization increased.

In 1763, Prince Edward Island, known as Ile St-Jean, passed from the French to the British and became St John's Island. In 1767, the Mi'kmaq were not included in the division of

the Island into 67 lots. Despite various initiatives to acquire land for their use, they remained without land title for yet another hundred years. With Prince Edward Island joining Canada in 1873, responsibility for Aboriginal peoples became a federal matter. Epekwitk and three other areas of the province were established as reserves in the early 1900s under the Department of Indian Affairs.

Provision of Formal Education.

In reviewing the history of the European settlement in this region, it is apparent that the First Nations people have faced enormous barriers to preserving their social and political structures, their beliefs and traditions, their lifestyles and languages, and other fundamental aspects of their cultural identity. As one examines the literature on Aboriginal education, it becomes evident that Native people have encountered discrimination in educational settings. "The education that has been provided to Native people has been traditionally inferior and designed by the dominant society to complement the racist objectives of assimilation, and acculturation of Native people" (Pauls, 1996, p. 5).

Not long after the arrival of European colonists, work was begun to educate the Aboriginal population in the beliefs, values, and lifestyles of the colonizers. Burnaby (1997) illustrates how the Aboriginal and non-European languages, though widely used prior to colonization, were increasingly threatened as the French and British competed for economic and political power. She notes that the near extinction of our nation's 50 Inuit and Indian languages has resulted from narrow and repressive educational policies. The day schools that missionaries established in the 1600s were intent on accomplishing a transformation from Native spiritualism to Christianity (National Film Board, 1991; Pauls, 1996; Porter, 1995). The system of church-

operated day schools contributed to the abandonment of the traditional Native way of life and the integration of the Native people into the dominant white culture. In the mid-1800s, the federal government joined with the church in establishing residential schools. For much of the next hundred years, these schools took many children away from their families and communities to be educated in the ways of white society. These schools became institutions in which those in authority committed acts of sexual, physical, emotional, and psychological abuse of Native students. The injustices that the church and government permitted within the residential schools inflicted enormous, long-term damage on Native individuals and their culture. "The system was a purposive measure to extract the 'nativeness' from the Natives, to make them into low status, Christian Europeans" (Porter, 1995, p. 7). Paul (2000) describes how Mi'kmaq children were forbidden from using their language in schools and punished if they disobeyed. Writing passionately about the impact of the residential school in Shubenacadie which Mi'kmaq and Maliseet students attended between 1930 and 1967, he asserts, "Children were taught about all the advantages of White life and all the evils of First Nations' isolation, language and culture" (p. 259). By the mid 1960s, with the closure of residential schools, the federal government embarked on a system of federal reserve schools and integrated provincial schools. Battise (1995), Castellano et al. (2000), Pauls (1996), and Porter (1995) describe how the process of assimilation of Natives into the dominant society continued in both the reserve schools and the provincial schools, as the teachers and curriculum perpetuated a non-Native perspective. Tuition arrangements were put in place between the federal and provincial governments for schooling Natives living off-Reserve and for expanding the schooling beyond that provided on-Reserve.

Pierre Trudeau's declaration of the "Just Society" in the early 1970s contributed to an

increased awareness of cultural minorities and their entitlement to be fully and meaningfully involved in the operation of our country. Over the past 30 years, Aboriginal people have begun to voice their right to participate in the provision of Native education. Most all of the literature identifies the release of the policy, *Indian Control of Indian Education*, by the National Indian Brotherhood in1972, as a major turning point in creating culturally appropriate educational opportunities for Natives. Aboriginal input and involvement had at long last been recognized as a critical component in the education of Aboriginal youth.

My exploration of the historical aspects of First Nations relationships with the non-Native society, especially with regards to the formal education system, contributed to my understanding of past experiences. As I wanted my research to uncover the current reality, I shifted my focus to aspects of contemporary practice that the literature highlighted. This provided a knowledge base from which I was able to design my own study.

Contemporary Aspects

Links between Home and School.

An underlying theme in much of the current literature on the education of Aboriginal students is that congruence between the home culture and the learning environment is critical to student success (Cummins, 1996). "Sometimes school can be a foreign and hostile place. Sometimes it is an extension of the home and community. The more firmly centered the classroom is within the context of the community, the smoother the daily journey of each child will be" (Saskatchewan Professional Development Unit, 1996, p. 27).

Ladson-Billings (1994) documents the importance of creating schooling environments that are compatible with students' cultural backgrounds. She maintains that the teacher's awareness of the culture of the students and the use of culturally relevant teaching strategies are critical elements in ensuring academic success for students of minority backgrounds. She takes issue with defining equity as sameness, contending that each child has unique needs. Recognizing and addressing differences is the basis of equitable teaching. The attributes that Ladson-Billings (1994) ascribes to educators who adopt culturally relevant approaches include:

- a positive conception of self and others.
- a willingness to contribute to one's community and to challenge others to do the same.
- a sincere and demonstrated conviction that each student can succeed.
- an ability to combine pedagogy and creativity in teaching.
- a capacity to engage students in connecting their own lives with circumstances in the wider society.
- a respect for and reference to students' prior knowledge and experiences as the foundation for future learning.

Cummins (1996) advocates that parental participation in education is critical in empowering students from subordinate communities to achieve educational success. He distinguishes between a collaborative school orientation promoting active, respectful partnerships with parents, and an exclusionary orientation, which does not recognize or engage the community in the education of its youth.

May (1994) reported on the critical ethnographic research he was immersed in during a three-year period at the Richmond Road School in Auckland, New Zealand. In this school of 200

students, almost half of that population did not use English as their first language. The students belonged to one of the several minority cultural groups enrolled in the school. The staff were multiethnic, as was the school decor and the varied languages used for conversation and instruction. While a number of innovative practices transpired at the Richmond Road School over its history, the role played by one visionary school principal during a 16-year period prior to May's research was crucial in developing the school as a model of multicultural education practice. Some of the characteristics of the school environment that May's research identified were:

- the division of students into multi-age groups, which resembled that, found in extended families and ungraded rural schools.
- the arrangement of students in home teaching groups of about 20 students per teacher.
- the equitable sharing of teaching responsibilities by administration and staff.
- the emphasis on cooperation rather than competition that permeated the school.
- the close links between school and community established by the school's openness to the active involvement of minority parents.
- the cultural recognition and respect afforded to all minority groups that supported their cultural maintenance.

Involvement of Mainstream Population.

The literature I examined pointed to the importance of all members of a population being involved in the process of enhancing cultural awareness. Nieto (1996) reiterates the importance of designing expansive education for all students. She points out that a biased curriculum which presents only the dominant culture is unfair both to those it overlooks and those it includes.

Those who have traditionally been neglected or misrepresented need to see their realities legitimately portrayed. Those whose culture and lifestyle is quite central and present in the curriculum, risk acquiring an incomplete, narrow and unrealistic view of the world. She contends that, "Students from the dominant culture need multicultural education more than others, for they are often the most miseducated about diversity in our society" (Nieto, 1996, p. 313). Nieto (1996) and May (1994) make reference to the development of a school climate where diversity is pervasive and permeates all that goes on within the environment. A recognition of students from all cultural groups is apparent in all that goes on, extending well beyond a particular initiative, program or person.

Corson (1998) and Cummins (1996) present a distinction that could engage the interest and input of all sectors of the population in analyzing and responding to social injustices. They propose Ogbu's theory of voluntary and involuntary minorities as an important starting point in promoting discussion on reforms in the education of Aboriginal peoples around the world. They describe how voluntary immigrant minorities, though they may have arrived in their new homelands as the result of appalling circumstances, can overcome the barriers that their cultural differences present. These newcomers strive to achieve success in their new society as it offers opportunities to them that were previously impossible to attain. Conversely, involuntary minorities have endured a history of oppression since the time of contact with the dominant, colonial cultural group and they are overwhelmed by the differences that separate them from their intruders. "This domination occurs in a setting from which the involuntary minority cannot withdraw, because the setting is their own home" (Corson, 1998, p. 45).

Indicators of Progress and Barriers to Overcome.

In reviewing the literature, I was able to enhance my understanding of the First Nations education issues that have come to the fore nationally and regionally in recent years. This section of the literature review will explore some of the more recent considerations in First Nations education with the movement away from residential and federal reserve schools to a system of band controlled schools and integrated provincial schools. The overall picture presents reason for optimism though areas for improvement and change are still to be addressed. Battise (1995) refers to studies which have examined the role of the Aboriginal community in education. She notes that the federal government has interpreted Aboriginal participation as an administrative responsibility and has not undertaken a redefinition or a restructuring of Aboriginal education. Her view, one that is echoed by other writers, is that the federal government has not required accountability for the educational dollars transferred to the provinces as tuition for schooling of Aboriginal students.

Paul (2000) refers to advancement in student retention since the Mi'kmaq took over the administration of education programs in the mid-1980s. He cautions that, "The impact from this will not be felt to any substantial degree in First Nations communities until 2010 or later" (p.267). Corson (1998), while acknowledging the great hurdles confronting the First Nations and the Inuit in Canada, presents a hopeful sketch of developments in Canada. These include:

- the reversal to the decline of the Cree language and culture in Quebec.
- the launch of bicultural education programs in the tribal community of Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan and with the Nisga'a nation in British Columbia, equipping students to work successfully in both their own communities and in the dominant society.

- the development of First Nations Survival Schools in Toronto, which foster cultural values and practices for those living in urban settings.

A profile of the populations served by the 29 band-operated schools in Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick reflects the efforts of many bands to provide as much elementary education as possible at the local level. The secondary schooling for First Nations students is often undertaken in the provincial school system. In the Maritime provinces, there are:

- nine schools only for kindergarten students.
- one school for age four kindergarten to grade three.
- one school for age five kindergarten to grade five.
- seven schools for age four kindergarten to grade six.
- three schools for age four kindergarten to grade eight.
- one school for age five kindergarten to grade eight.
- one school for age four kindergarten to grade nine.
- one school for grades seven to twelve.
- one school for grades eight to twelve.
- two schools for grades ten to twelve.
- two schools that provide all elementary and secondary education (MacLean, 2001).

Many First Nations students are attending provincial schools for some part of their formal education. Orr and Jerome-Paul (2000) in their case study of a Mi'kmaq community correlate the virtual loss of the Mi'kmaq language by residents under age 40 with the provision

of provincial schooling. They support the development and employment of Mi'kmaq educators as a means of reversing assimilation and ensuring that Mi'kmaq students come to know and value their language and culture. The First Nations Studies Program at St. Thomas University in New Brunswick contributed to the creation of the Micmac-Maliseet Institute, which has been educating First Nations students, teachers, and community leaders for the past 20 years. Leavitt (1994), a Director of this program, contends that Aboriginal education has been much the same as provincial education and that fostering the cultural and community awareness of teachers is of fundamental importance in bringing an Aboriginal context to education. At Dalhousie University, a law program has been put in place to attract students from the Black and Mi'kmaq communities (Davis, 1997). This is another indicator that cultural familiarity and sensitivity are of particular importance in meeting the needs of those outside of the white majority population.

Influences on School Success.

This literature review has been helpful in uncovering some of the aspects that contribute to school success for Aboriginal children. Concerns regarding the academic progress of First Nations students have been raised in various documents. Kehoe (1999) refers to 1991 Statistics Canada figures indicating that 17% of Native people between ages 15 and 49 lack formal schooling or have less than grade nine education. This figure was almost three times greater than that reported for the total Canadian population. While the exact percentages vary, there is agreement that many Native students are not completing high school and illiteracy rates are higher for Native than non-Native populations. A proposal entitled *H.E.A.L., Help Every Aboriginal Learn,* compiled by two Aboriginal women on Prince Edward Island, indicates that 80% of Aboriginal adults in this province have less than a grade 10 education (Bussiere & Clair, 1996). Orr and Jerome-Paul (2000) draw attention to the conclusion of the RCAP 1996 report

which suggests that the Canadian education system has not succeeded in preparing Aboriginal students to play a part in the nation's economy or to pass on their language and culture to the next generation.

A study was conducted in a New Brunswick school district to explore causes of early school leaving for Native students (Porter, 1995). In the introduction to this study, it is noted that 37% of Status Indians in Canada have less than a grade nine education, more that twice the number of Canadian non-Natives in this category. The study reflects a widely held view that many Natives are disillusioned with formal schooling at an early age. To conduct this study, 22 students were interviewed to obtain accounts of their local education experiences. Interviews were also completed with 12 parents or community leaders. The Native people were viewed as the most valued sources of information. Fifty-eight of 92 questionnaires were returned from educators. In the discussion of the findings, these characteristics were found to be helpful in retaining Native students in school:

- parental involvement in their child's education.
- use of culturally relevant learning materials.
- availability of counseling services in directing and encouraging students to complete school in order to pursue career options.
- involvement in activities that promote self-esteem and a sense of belonging in school.
- use of teaching techniques and practices that complement the learning styles of Native students.

Information compiled by the Ontario Ministry of Education (1989) on factors that influence Aboriginal students to drop out of school, contained many of the same findings,

although more importance is given to family background. This encompassed variables such as family style, structure, parental schooling levels and experiences and the economic status of the family. *Factors Contributing to Native Students Success in Provincial Schools,* published in a New Brunswick Department of Education study (1991), offers further insights on the roles of the Band Chief and Council, the School District and the school in shaping the quality of education offered to First Nations students.

Goddard (1997) addresses the importance of strategies to enhance the awareness of ethnocultural diversity among pre-service teachers. He distinguishes between the passive, cognitive recognition of cultural differences and the active, affective appreciation of such diversity. Knowledge must move from the head to the heart if one is to become an effective teacher of all students. Goddard also encourages new teachers to become aware of research on teaching strategies and skills that have been used successfully with First Nations students. He points out that the findings from one context, such as an isolated Northern Manitoba community, though valuable, are not to be considered blindly transferable to another sociocultural context where there are other relevant local considerations (Goddard, 1997). Mindful of the issues Goddard raises, I will point out some of the commonly accepted understandings regarding Aboriginal students.

Many contemporary teachers have a heightened awareness of the unique learning preferences of individual students and the importance of employing multiple instructional and learning methods in their classrooms. The literature on Aboriginal education suggests that Native students have ways of understanding and behaving that are rooted in cultural values that are not necessarily prevalent in the dominant culture. Favaro (1991), in reporting the findings from a five-year pilot project with Mi'kmaq secondary students in New Brunswick, attributes

some of their progress to the significance of cooperative group work as an instructional strategy. He contends "the success of any future initiatives will depend on the willingness and ability of educators to become informed about the values, attitudes and behaviors that are integral to the cultures of the First Peoples".

Sawyer (1991) notes that the research on learning styles highlights tendencies that have been observed by others and ought to be used as an aid in instructional planning. Among these tendencies is a preference for visual rather than verbal learning. Many Aboriginal students are careful observers who readily perceive details such as nonverbal language and prefer to watch closely prior to imitating or performing. Both Sawyer and Porter (1995) refer to experiential, hands-on learning as important activities for most Native students. Their research promotes cooperative group learning as preferable to a competitive approach, which encourages individual accomplishment. Morris (n.d.) has developed a chart, which identifies nine Native values with explanations of the attitudes and behaviors as well as the educational considerations that stem from each value. One example that both she and Sawyer make reference to is an acceptance of silence as a mannerism that allows a Native person to calmly and comfortably respond to a given situation. Porter's work demonstrates that the recognition of preferred learning channels and the selection of compatible teaching strategies are of importance to non-Native as well as Native students.

At the time my research was evolving, new initiatives were underway in Prince Edward Island to address issues related to First Nations education. The Aboriginal Education Committee of the Department of Education, with representation from a number of sectors who are involved with our Mi'kmaq population, conducted focus groups with Aboriginal youth and parents. The Committee designed their project to learn what they can be doing to help Aboriginal students succeed in school. Their report highlights themes that emerged from the discussions and makes

six recommendations to support the success of Aboriginal students in the provincial school system (Prince Edward Island Department of Education, 2001). A thesis completed by a Master of Education student at the University of Prince Edward Island explores the life stories of four Mi'kmaq women from three generations of a First Nations family. This study presents recollections of their experiences in the school system and provides suggestions to encourage greater educational success and involvement of Aboriginal students (Clark, 2001). Other initiatives have been undertaken. For example, the secondary school, which the Epekwitk students attend for grades 10 to 12, has established a Native Studies course which was well received by Mi'kmaq and non-Native students during the two academic semesters it has been offered. In 2001, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada provided funding for teachers in the province to participate in cultural awareness workshops at the Epekwitk reserve. This experience offered educators the privilege of learning about the Mi'kmaq culture from the Epekwitk people who live and work on the reserve. These undertakings, and others, present a hopeful picture that the literature still to be written on Native and non-Native relations will describe a society that respects the roles and contributions of all citizens.

Conclusion

From my review of the literature, I realized that there has been a concerted effort to discover what contributes to successful educational experiences for students from minority cultures and First Nations students in particular. The literature documents the importance of respect and awareness of First Nations people and culture and the need to create schooling environments, which incorporate Native values, attitudes and behaviors. Collaboration with Aboriginal communities and a responsiveness to the priorities of those living in the communities has been recognized as vital in providing youth with meaningful educational opportunities. The

importance of creating schools that embrace diversity and are build on a philosophy of justice and inclusion for everyone was articulated in much of the literature. In my assessment, it is the extent to which theories are translated into practice that will propel our education system to move beyond the injustices that were perpetuated through the pursuit of the assimilation of First Nations people into our dominant culture. I designed my research to discover from the First Nations students currently immersed in their educational milieu how closely their experiences reflected progressive and equitable educational practices. While participant interviews have been widely used as a method of data collection for qualitative research, I found that, among the body of literature related to native education, there was a lack of input from those most directly implicated by what transpires in schools, the students themselves. My survey of the literature supported a number of key concepts that I had identified as worthy of focus in the interviews and also suggested additional directions to be pursued. I saw my work as a unique opportunity to tap into the capacity of youth to frankly and succinctly convey what really matters or in their language, "to tell it like it is".

Chapter Three

Research Methods

Introduction

The preceding chapters have presented the thesis topic and a summary of relevant literature that related to the study. This section of the thesis describes the methodological approach adopted to determine how the topic could be best understood. In outlining the methodology employed for the study, I will make reference to:

- the type of inquiry and particular strategy or orientation that was chosen.
- the selection of participants, research site, and the nature of my role as the researcher in relation to the participants.
- the format used to collect, organize, and analyze the data.
- the soundness of the study.
- the time frame in which the study was conducted (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

In deciding how I would design my research, it was essential to keep the purpose of the study at the forefront. The methods chosen were the vehicles for achieving that purpose. This research was undertaken to learn about the experiences of some First Nations students at the intermediate provincial school, which they attend for grades seven to nine. From the participants' descriptions of their experiences, obtained in interviews, I hoped to examine the impact of particular educational practices on these First Nations students.

Research Genre and Strategy

A qualitative, as opposed to quantitative, research genre allowed me to explore the schooling experiences of the target population in the setting where the students' daily school lives unfolded. I recognized that my own mainstream perspective was unlike that of the First Nations intermediate school students. I was aware of the gap between my daily reality and that of the students and cognizant that I might not be able to access their real viewpoints and feelings. My trepidations were eased by the thoughtful, attentive reception I was given by the 13 students who attended an introductory presentation where I shared my research plans.

A research approach, which proposes the existence of certain variables and then tests for their significance could have led me to design the research from my perspective alone or my way of conceptualizing reality. Potentially, I could miss out on discovering the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and values that constitute the participants' world views or perspectives (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). All qualitative research strategies, undertaken to explore or describe a topic which occurs in a particular context and setting, focus on the participants' frames of reference or the understandings they express about an occurrence in their lives (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The qualitative strategy employed in this study was phenomenological, as the focus was the individual lived experiences of some Epekwitk students (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). "The phenomenological genre tends to focus in depth on the experiences of a few individuals to explore in detail and, often, over time, their deeply held understandings of some facet of their lives" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 63).

The data collected in phenomenological research are the descriptions of experience. The interview is one of the chief sources used in collecting those descriptions (Osborne, 1990). In this study, interviews with some intermediate level First Nations students were conducted to acquire their descriptions of school life.

Population, Site Selection, and Researcher's Role

Osborne (1990) points out that the terms 'participants' or 'co-researchers', rather than 'subjects', are used in qualitative research where people describe their experiences in order to illuminate the phenomenon being explored. He also notes that those who participate do so of their own choosing, having been well informed about the research. The number of participants is whatever will be required to capture the topic of exploration.

In January 2002, the Ethics Review Board at the University of Prince Edward Island granted approval for my research. Shortly thereafter, my request for permission to conduct research with students within the Western School Board (Appendix A) was approved. When I spoke informally with the intermediate school principal at the early stages of the thesis development, he expressed support for the research. He was open to any findings that could improve the school's ability to meet the educational needs of the Mi'kmaq students. Similar encouragement for the study was received from the vice-principal of the receiving senior high school. This person has played a key role in the development of a Native Studies course at the high school and has been the instructor of this course during the second semesters of both 2001 and 2002. I had several telephone conversations with the Director of Education of the Epekwitk Elementary School, and I also contacted the Chief of Epekwitk Band so that community leaders were aware of the study I would be conducting with their youth. I was encouraged by the verbal support they offered me.

Arrangements were made with the school principal as to a suitable time and place to meet with the 16 students from the Epekwitk community for a 30 to 40 minute information session. Home room and subject teachers were notified during the previous week of the date and time that these students were to be excused from their classes so that they could be informed of the research. Teachers were reassured that I would do my best to limit the amount of time that

students would miss classes for the purposes of the research. However, I chose not to ask the Epekwitk students to meet during their lunch break.

I requested to meet only with the Epekwitk students who had received their elementary education within their community, although there were a few other students with First Nations cultural background who attended the intermediate school but did not live in Epekwitk. Of the 16 Epekwitk students, 10 were females and six were males. Half of these students were in their third year of attendance at the intermediate school, enrolled at the grade nine level. Three students were second year attendees at the grade eight level, and five were grade seven students in their first year of attendance at the provincial intermediate school. Three students were absent from school on the morning of the introductory session. I was provided with a small lecture theater that allowed the students to be in close proximity to each other and to me. Jane, the tutor who had been employed by the band a few years prior to support the Epekwitk students attending provincial school, was also present for the information session.

During the introductory session, I referred to a prepared script of information about the research to ensure that all students were well informed (Appendix B). I explained to them:

- who I was and what the research was about.
- why I was interested in doing this research.
- that the research was not in any way connected to marks or grades.
- how the participants would be selected.
- that selected participants would be asked to attend two individual interviews ranging from 30 to 45 minutes.
- that pseudonyms would be used to protect the participants' anonymity as well as the anonymity of any school, community, or group that was mentioned.

- that signed student consent and the permission of parent or guardian would be required for those selected to be interviewed.
- that a participant would have the right to decline from responding to any interview questions and could withdraw at any point up the end of the interview stage.
- that Jane had agreed to be available, elsewhere in the school, to serve as a safety net should any student have become upset during or after an interview.

During the introductory forum, I informed the students from Epekwitk that I wanted all of them to know about my research, although I intended to conduct interviews with six selected participants. The sample selected for interviews would represent a cross-section of students in various stages of transition from the band-operated school to the provincial school. All students present were given the opportunity to volunteer as participants at the end of the information session. Each volunteer simply wrote his or her name on a slip of paper which was then placed in one of three envelopes marked as: first year attending; second year attending; and third or fourth year attending, depending on the number of years they had been enrolled at the intermediate school. As there were not any volunteers who had repeated an academic year at the intermediate level, I realized that could simply refer to the students by the grade level in which they were enrolled.

Ten students submitted their names as candidates for interview selection. Jane remained with me after the session while I randomly selected two names per envelope from those who had volunteered. In her role as tutor, Jane had daily contact with the Mi'kmaq students, and she agreed to provide feedback on the suitability of the randomly chosen names. She was asked to verify that each selected participant met these criteria:

- The student regularly attended school. This was to ensure that the interview data was based on daily school experiences.
- The student could be engaged in conversation. This was important, as I wanted each participant to be at ease with the interview process.

After two participants per level were identified, an alternate third name was determined, should either of the first two have been unable to participate. It was not possible to select an alternate name at the grade eight level, as only two of the three grade eight students volunteered to participate.

I was able to make telephone contact with an adult in the homes of five of the six students selected. This allowed me to briefly explain my research and the various papers that I wished to forward to them. I asked the student whose home I was unable to contact to assure her parents that I would be pleased to speak with them if they so wished. I appreciated the input of the parents I spoke with by phone. One parent sought additional clarification as to the purposes of the research, and another suggested that his child might benefit from having the interview conducted over a few sessions in shorter time segments. I was further encouraged when two parents whom I encountered informally, conveyed to me their appreciation for my having interviewed their children.

The correspondence that was sent to the homes of all selected participants clarified the main points from the introductory session (Appendix C). The letter asked that the students complete the consent to participate form and that the parent(s) or guardian(s) co-sign that their child has understood what this consent involved (Appendices D & E). Each parent or guardian was also requested to provide a signature to grant permission for their child's participation in two interviews. They were informed that the interviews would take place at the school for about

30 to 40 minutes on two separate school days.

As I envisioned the sharing of the introductory letter with students and parents or guardians, I was mindful that personally sharing the reading of the written information might have been more appropriate than simply sending it home. I verified in telephone contacts with the students' homes which method was preferable. I wanted to demonstrate flexibility and sensitivity to individual circumstances and to show a respect for individual preferences in using either visual or auditory channels to completely understand the information provided.

Five of the initial six selected participants returned their signed permission and consent forms. I invited a grade nine student whose name was selected as an alternate to participate in the research, ensuring that I repeated the same procedures related to home contact, information sharing, and securing of signatures. I then became unsure if I would be able to obtain the required permission and consent forms from this participant, as his family was understandably preoccupied with family illness and loss. Since it was important to finalize my list of interviewees and their schedules, I spoke with another grade nine student regarding his interest in participating in the research. This student had volunteered to be interviewed but had not been selected as a participant or alternate. With his agreement, I contacted his home and arranged for the sharing and completion of the required documentation. Subsequently, both of these participants returned the signed permission and consent forms. One other participant relocated after the first interview before I was able to return to verify his data transcription. I chose not to analyze this data as part of my research findings. The next section will clarify how events unfolded which led to the inclusion of an additional female grade nine student, bringing the final tally of research participants to seven students, each of whom I met with for two interviews.

During my visits to the school administration's and band tutor's offices to collect returned documents and schedule first interviews, I encountered informally some of the First

Nations students met during the introductory forum, as well as a few who were absent during that session. I contacted the parent of a student who had not been present at the introductory session to speak generally about my study and to ask verbal permission to invite this student to participate in a pilot interview to allow further field testing of the semi-structured interview. The parent was agreeable to this, provided her child agreed as well. The pilot interview, which I recorded carefully by hand, proved to be a very enlightening experience as the student was very open and reflective. After reviewing the transcription of the interview, I approached the student, and subsequently her parent, to verify if in fact this interview data could be included as part of the official research findings. Both parties were comfortable with this and were provided with the same written documentation and forms that other participants had received and signed. The permission and consent forms from this student were obtained prior to the second interview when the transcription was shared. This student, like all other interviewees, was asked to verify, change, or clarify the information and to add any further thoughts not addressed during the first interview. At an earlier stage in planning this research, some field testing of the interview questions had been conducted with a high school guidance counsellor with extensive experience in adolescent interviewing. This woman worked with the Epekwitk students at the senior high level, and she had an awareness and understanding of these First Nations students. Her input was invaluable in devising open-ended, clear, and appropriate interview questions.

The final participant profile included two males and two females at the grade nine level, two females at the grade eight level, and one female student at the grade seven level. Although I had initially intended on having two students per grade level, I realized that changes in research strategies are often called for in qualitative research. With half of the 16 Epekwitk students enrolled in grade nine at the intermediate school, I was comfortable having more students from that grade level participate.

Data Collection, Organization, and Analysis

Marshall and Rossman (1999) refer to the in-depth interview as a primary strategy in grasping the full meaning of individuals' lived experiences. Osborne (1990) conceives of the interview in three phases. The initial phase builds rapport and ensures that the participant understands what the research is about. The second phase is the actual dialogue, which is minimally structured by a researcher who has a certain knowledge base about the phenomenon but is predisposed to whatever messages the participants' descriptions provide. The third phase is the sharing of additional descriptions that may arise as participants reflect further on the phenomenon. I used this theoretical framework, other insights from the literature, and my own experience and awareness from working in the field of education to devise a list of open-ended interview questions. These served as a guide for conducting semi-structured interviews with the seven participants. In designing the interview, I was mindful of the research questions that guided the process. I ensured that my questions would encourage the students to tell about their intermediate schooling experiences and how particular educational practices impacted on them. As previously noted, an early pilot test of the interview questions was undertaken with a colleague, and questions were reworked based on the outcome of that test. A list of questions used to guide the interviews is shown in Appendix F.

The school staff were accommodating and supportive in permitting students to exit classes at previously arranged times to meet in a private, small room relatively free of distractions from adjacent halls and classes. I ensured that the interview climate was as natural and relaxed as possible to encourage students to respond fully to my questions and to share any of their additional insights. Some of the interviews for which consent was given were audiotaped, while others were copiously hand recorded. Although all participants had returned the required agreement forms to tape record the interviews, four participants stated at the outset

of their interviews that they would prefer not to be recorded. As the interviews proceeded, I continually checked that I accurately understood the participant's meaning.

The data transcription and preliminary analysis ensued as quickly as possible after each interview. Each tape and hand recorded interview text, and a photocopy of each transcription, were labeled and stored in a locked filing cabinet. The stored items will be shredded and tapes will be erased three years after the thesis is accepted.

A preliminary analysis of the transcribed data allowed me to note any initial impressions. I noted points, which I would ask participants to address at the second interview. During the second interview, about two weeks later, I asked each participant to verify that the interview transcription as read aloud was accurate. The participants were given the opportunity to speak about anything that had come to mind since the first interview. A few small changes to the transcriptions were noted by hand. Students conveyed by their nods, smiles, and brief interjections that I had truthfully and fully recorded what they had shared with me.

From repeated readings of the interview transcriptions, I was able to code the data in general categories and sub-categories of themes that connected in some way to the research questions. I was mindful that the findings were the perceptions of the seven students interviewed and that I could not make any generalizations that the emergent themes would be true for all of the Epekwitk students at the school. However, as the data collection involved almost half of the Epekwitk students at the school, I do believe there are reasonable grounds to draw some conclusions from this work. Some of the realities reflected may also be applicable to students from outside the Epekwitk community who are of similar age and have comparable schooling arrangements. Recognizing these limitations, as well as the significance of discrepant data reflecting unique differences for individual participants, I was able to code the data both categorically and cross-categorically. The research findings will be presented in Chapter Four.

Soundness of Study

Marshall and Rossman (1999) note that a criterion for judging the trustworthiness of research proposals is whether they include participants whose meaning making was overlooked in previous policy and research. Orr (2000), who is familiar with the findings on education presented in the chapter *"Gathering Strength"* from Volume Three of the five volume 1996 *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples,* notes that the report highlights the lack of Aboriginal input in addressing educational concerns. In an article on Aboriginal education policy, it is noted that while provinces and territories attempted to draw on the views of Aboriginal people during the 1980s, "There is relatively little documentary expression of an independent Aboriginal voice" (Abele, Dittburner, & Graham, 1996). The present thesis has drawn primarily on the input of the seven Mi'kmaq students who were interviewed about their experiences in a provincial intermediate school.

The motivation for this research grew out of the actual experiences the writer had as an educator working with students from Epekwitk. This connection with the daily teaching environment has contributed to a meaningful understanding of the literature and has been supportive in considering some key aspects to investigate during participant interviews. A striking memory from the past year of teaching in a classroom of 27 grade four students is the comment offered by the one First Nations student in my class. I had expressed appreciation to her for bringing into our classroom an array of objects of meaning to her and her cultural community. I asked if she had collected and carried in a great quantity of material routinely each successive school year. She clarified that this was the first time she had talked to classmates about her identity as, "No one ever mentioned it before."

The soundness of this qualitative study can be assessed according to the four Lincoln and Guba criteria outlined by Marshall and Rossman (1999). These include: credibility,

transferability, confirmability, and dependability.

The credibility of this work has been enhanced by the participants' abilities to accurately describe their schooling experiences. The findings of this study should make sense to the participants and those who read the study, providing a true picture of the lived experiences. Member checking at the outset of the second interview and ongoing verification of meaning in all the interviews added credibility to the data collection.

The rich, thick descriptions that were collected can be construed as a snapshot of the participants' lives. The reader will evaluate if there are aspects of the findings that are transferable to the larger population of Mi'kmaq students at the intermediate and even the secondary school levels or to First Nation students in the province or region who have comparable educational arrangements. The research has not been triangulated by employing a secondary source of data collection, as the goal is to capture the complexity of the topic, not to develop a replicable study (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

The data gathering was undertaken in accordance with clearly articulated qualitative research methods. The motivation to undertake this research stemmed from initial insights about the students' intermediate school environment. An in-depth understanding of the context and its meaning for the research participants has developed from the data obtained in interviews. Patton (1990) suggests that the debate between objectivity and subjectivity be replaced by a discussion of the extent to which the research has fairly considered diverse perspectives, preferences, and circumstances. "The point is to be aware of how one's perspective affects fieldwork, to carefully document all procedures so that others can review methods for bias, and to be open in describing the limitations of the perspective presented" (Patton, 1990, p. 482). By ensuring that the findings generated during from the two interviews with the seven participants were the basis of the suggested conclusions and implications, the confirmability of this research has been

enhanced.

Qualitative research demands a flexible design. As the research progressed, I rethought and reworked decisions I had made about methodology and pursued strategies that responded to unanticipated events. The dependability of the study is rooted in a recognition that the real social world is one of change and that, as the researcher, I would need to decide which changes were appropriate and justifiable.

Time Line

The thesis has been prepared over the course of two years, 2000 to 2002. While the groundwork was laid during the first year, the refinement of ideas, submission to the Research Ethics Board, on-going literature review, fieldwork, data management, sessions with advisors, and extensive writing have transpired over the past year. With approval for the research in place in January of this year, 2002, I was able to communicate with students and their families and complete most interviews prior to the school break in late March. From early April to June, I have worked on completion of the thesis.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the methodological design that was developed to guide the research process. This structure supported me in communicating clearly with the Epekwitk students about my research and in enlisting their willingness to become involved. The framework, which I established to conduct the study, was also helpful in my communications with parents and various school personnel. The interviews allowed me to learn about the intermediate school experiences of the seven First Nations participants and to understand how certain educational practices affect them.

Chapter Four

Findings from Interviews

Introduction

As a parent and educator, I realize that getting children to talk about school is not so easily done. Youth have many more issues and interests that they would prefer to focus on. Certain youth speak quite fully and descriptively while others use fewer words and need to be prodded to provide details. The findings, which are presented in this chapter, are the stories of seven participants whom I met with for first and second interviews. As the themes and quotes are highlighted, it is evident that some participants responded in more depth than others. Students may have found certain questions more relevant and worthy of elaboration than others. I was inspired by the sincere interest the Epekwitk youth showed in the interview setting, and I appreciated the extent to which they allowed me to understand the school experience from their vantage point.

This chapter will identify the key notions that the students brought forth. They are grouped under eight headings, which address the following aspects of the students' experiences at their provincial intermediate school:

- School Performance, with the sub-headings Areas of Challenge and The Transition from Elementary to Intermediate.
- Relationships with Peers.
- Involvement in Activities.
- Cultural Acceptance and Recognition.
- Significance of Tutor.

- Second Language Instruction.
- Perceptions of Teachers.
- Future Goals.

The chapter concludes with profiles of two participants who provided some profound, frank reflections on their schooling. Throughout this chapter and the entire thesis, the pseudonyms have been consistently used to respect and protect the anonymity of all persons, communities, and organizations.

School Performance

Students at the provincial intermediate school attend a number of classes daily and are exposed to a variety of subject areas and teachers over an academic year. A student's schedule or report card makes reference to language arts (English), mathematics, science, social studies, French, physical education (gym), family living, industrial arts, family studies, and perhaps music. In sharing their schooling experiences with me, the Epekwitk students communicated that they have more difficulty with certain aspects of the curriculum than others and that there were differences between their schooling experiences at the band operated elementary school and the provincial intermediate school. These perspectives can be conceptualized using school performance as an overall category, with academic progress and transition from the band-operated school curriculum to the provincial school curriculum as sub-categories to this main theme.

Areas of Challenge

In describing their schoolwork, all seven participants spoke of either disliking math, finding math difficult, or lacking a strong foundation in math. This was also their assessment of French, a perspective I will only mention at this point as it will be highlighted in addressing the area of second language learning. There was not any notable trend with regards to students' perceptions of other school subjects. A few students commented that they did well in and enjoyed certain subjects and performed less well in and disliked other classes. There were relatively balanced numbers on either side of the continuum in reference to learning success in language arts, social studies, science, or the specialist areas such as industrial arts or physical education. The comments that follow were made by six of the seven participants:

> We're different [from the other students] in schoolwork. Some kids can do more graphing and times work. We didn't do as much of that kind of math. In math, I don't like times and dividing.
>
> A lot of students here knew way more in math than we did.
>
> I don't like math. I don't understand. The teacher's off now and the sub explains in a new way.
>
> I don't like math as much. I don't know why. I do math in Resource.
>
> Math ain't too bad. Sometimes it gets hard.
>
> I don't like math, geography, family living. In math, my friend and I sit in front of the class. The teacher put us there. Some of it's hard.
>
> I can't stand math. I hate that class.

I queried the student who made the last of the preceding comments about her background in math and whether she felt she had more difficulty than most other students. She responded:

> I felt I had a bit less actually. Some of it was the same, but some of it wasn't. When I go to high school I think I'm going to take the full year there. Well, I have a hard time understanding it. Sometimes, some days it's really good, like easy, and other days it's confusing and hard to grasp on to.

During the five years I worked at the intermediate school providing individual and small group assistance to students in areas of learning difficulty, I helped a number of students from Epekwitk with math. At that time, I was aware of a gap between these students' capabilities in language arts and the challenges they encountered in math. I also realized that some of these students were discouraged and disinterested in French, a topic that will be considered in more depth later.

The Transition from Elementary to Intermediate.

The interview questions that asked participants about their progress in school, their preferences in subjects, classes or activities, and their ideas for improving their school experience illuminated two strands of thought on the elementary to intermediate school transition. Four participants were satisfied that their elementary schooling was supportive and prepared them well to manage the demands of the intermediate setting. These students commented:

> I was well taught.

> They put pressure on us to do our work and stuff. Like say, if they didn't do that we'd have big trouble here. Mr. Down, he teached here before, so he knows what we had to do.

> We did basically the same kind of schoolwork. Some of it was the same and some of it wasn't.

> At elementary, we had all Native kids. We felt more comfortable. The Kindergarten teacher was a good help and I helped out at Kindergarten. I wish we had changed classes.

Three participants offered some input on how their elementary school could have better prepared them for the change to the intermediate system. Their words convey some dissatisfaction regarding their elementary preparation:

> Elementary school didn't prepare me. No French.

> Here I don't go to gym. At elementary, I loved gym. I didn't have to change [into shorts]. It didn't have classes like these academic classes. They didn't learn us French, science, history, geography, and some other classes that I'm having trouble in. I think they're going to get along now that there's harder classes and stuff.

> We didn't take it last year. We don't really take it, science. All we really did was science fairs and the other kids from Maintown did science. All they really told me was not to be talking. It's more strict here [at the intermediate school]. That's all they taught us. They're not very good over there. In every way, they didn't really teach us good stuff. We just started doing French in grade six.

One student whose profile appears later in the chapter found the adjustment to the intermediate school quite difficult. The elements of her experience indicate that the shift from the Epekwitk school to the larger school environment can be quite tumultuous. She explained:

> I used to cry all the time when I came to grade seven, like I was scared I was going to fail and not get along with other kids, and I just didn't like staying in class by myself. I was always my mom's girl, I guess. I missed her, and I was used to being home with her at lunch. I told the tutor every day that I hated this school. I'd just get to school, and I'd want to go home. I just didn't want to be here. I didn't like any of my classes. I didn't click with anything, and I wanted my mom to be a teacher. I wanted her to be here all the time with me. If we had done things more with other schools like the closest elementary. They should have done a tour earlier in the year and another one later on. I really didn't want to come at all. My sister and brother said the high school was much better.

As the interviews were conducted at school with a focus on school life, it was difficult to discern what findings were most relevant to school performance, as determined by academic progress and succeeding in the intermediate school environment. As additional findings are presented, there may be some overlapping of ideas as the participants' responses were often a

connection to or extension of an idea or sentiment expressed at another point in the interview. With regards to the broad domain of school performance, there appears to be some common threads connecting the realities these students described regarding their intermediate math achievement and their experiences in meeting the demands of a multi-faceted intermediate curriculum. In addition, for some, the leap from elementary to intermediate can be a substantial one. Although it will be explored further in the final chapter, I will note that, as educators, we are somewhat unaccustomed to receiving student input on how we are meeting students' needs. We can become defensive when we are being evaluated, as opposed to doing the evaluating. It is important to be open to discovering the First Nations students' perspectives, such as those articulated by the participants in this study. Knowing the students' perspectives can be a foundation for fostering more effective educational practices from early elementary, through intermediate, to senior high and beyond.

Relationships with Peers

Evidence from literature and eyewitness accounts reiterate that relationships with peers are of paramount importance to adolescents. This reality was clearly conveyed in my interviews with the Epekwitk students. For young adolescents, being 11 to 15 years of age and attending intermediate school is really about being with friends. In my research, I wanted to discover what kinds of relationships the Epekwitk students have with other young people, both in and out of school. The school is not a mini laboratory where the influences on students are purely controlled. There is a reciprocal effect between the world of school and the world outside of school. Individuals are shaped by their experiences in all of life's contexts.

An overarching theme relative to relationships was that the intermediate school fosters an important and broad friendship network. Six of the seven students referred to friendships they have with students in other communities. These comments reflect an open, positive outlook on peer relationships:

> My best friend's Jill. I just met her last year. She's cool! The best part coming to school is because my friends are here.
>
> My friends are from my community. I have others not from Epekwitk. I have the same friends outside of school. I see friends in other communities. Sometimes [it] depends on what I'm doing. What I like best [about school] is just all the friends in it.
>
> I have friends from everywhere. I have friends from lots of places.
>
> The best thing about being at this school is new friends.

Two students described their main friendships being with peers who are not from Epekwitk:

> My friends mostly come from outside of Epekwitk. The best part of day is probably lunchtime because that's when I get to socialize with my friends.
>
> I hang out with everybody. I have a few best friends but lots of friends. Outside of school, I'm mostly home. I have friends up in Maintown. I don't hang out as much with kids at Epekwitk, mostly older ones. I sometimes go to the gym. Mostly on weekends I meet with friends outside of Epekwitk at the rink and stuff. Since coming here, I have lots of friends from the Maintown area. In grades five and six, I hung out with three classmates at the Epekwitk elementary.

One student stated that her friends come from the Epekwitk community. "My friends are mostly from Epekwitk. Others I know at school, I just don't hang out with them."

When I asked the students what they liked and disliked about their intermediate school, two participants stated that the quick five minute breaks between each of their five classes daily do not allow them time with friends. One student described how she needs to pack up to get to her next class and has hardly any time with friends. Another student mentioned that if you have to use the washroom on your break, all your time to chat with friends is gone. When asked what

she liked the most about school, one student replied, "The best part of the day is lunchtime. It would be better if it was longer and we had more time with friends."

In analyzing the interview data, it was evident that having friends mattered considerably to the Epekwitk students. While most participants expressed satisfaction with their relationships with many other young people, a few students had made choices to be affiliated mainly with peers from their First Nations community or primarily with youth who were from other communities.

Involvement in Activities

Youthfulness and activity tend to co-exist, and relationships are often forged as people pursue common interests. From my interviews with the Epekwitk students, I was able to learn about their involvement and lack of involvement in activities within and outside of the school environment. Four of the seven interviewees took part in programs offered outside of Epekwitk such as figure skating, hockey, painting, and swimming.

In meeting with the school principal at the outset of my research, he recognized that only a few Epekwitk students are involved in school sports or band. I am uncertain how their intramural and extracurricular participation compares with the rest of the intermediate school population. A grade seven student indicated she wanted to be involved in school sports, but her mother wasn't home for her to get a ride. One grade eight interviewee expressed satisfaction in her intramural activities. "The best thing I like about school is intramurals. I play at lunch usually. The gym teachers have basketball, volleyball, depending on the part they are doing for gym."

Of the four grade nine students interviewed, one student mentioned playing intramural floor hockey during lunchtime for a part of the previous school year. Another was quite pleased

to have played on the school basketball team this year. In his words, "I tried out for basketball and I was on the team. It sucks now that it's over." Another student expressed regret for passing up the chance to be on the school soccer team this year. All four of the grade nine students interviewed mentioned they would be part of the annual grade nine trip to central Canada. One student was hopeful that the presence of the band tutor on the trip would help her deal with homesickness on her first journey out of province without her parents. In fact, all eight of the grade nine students from Epekwitk were able to participate in this trip.

Four students mentioned an interest in and exposure to visual or dramatic arts, although these activities are not often an available option at the intermediate school. Comments such as these suggest that creative involvements are a source of motivation and satisfaction:

> In school I was always acting. When drama comes, I'll join it. I was always acting in school before. In another province I was in, there was an early bus and the late bus.

> I have acted in Christmas concerts. I love it. I did more at elementary than here. I did some art last year with our tutor. It would improve the school to make it more colorful. It's a dull school.

One participant made it clear that he preferred to head home after school and was not interested in extending his day at school to be part of a sports team. He voiced his objection to the rules that the school had put in place to supervise students who go outdoors at lunch hour.

> We need a bigger area. There's nowhere to go. They think we're not mature enough. That's what they think. In grade seven, we could go all the way to the baseball field. Now we can't even go past the corner. That's not fair. Just because a couple of people go out and smoke, it doesn't mean you can't keep the whole school not going. They're [staff] pretty much speaking for us, that's what they are. In grade seven, we could just run around, do whatever we want. They never ask us for nothing.

The findings that have been presented indicate that the Epekwitk youth do have an interest in a range of interests and activities. They have participated in some intramural and

extracurricular programs that are provided by the school but they have also pursued recreational and leisure interests within their local and surrounding communities. A few students referred to their enjoyment of art and drama as elementary students and conveyed their desire to have such programs offered at the intermediate level.

Cultural Acceptance and Recognition

I was aware of my "otherness" as I attempted to enter into the inner world of the students I interviewed. As a white educator I was more cautious about probing into culture and it's meaning to the participants than I had been in exploring school progress, involvement in activities, and friendships. I had hoped my interviews would illuminate how these First Nations students experience their unique cultural identity within a setting where the white majority accounts for 95 percent of the school population. Ironically, I find myself still uncertain as I compose these few lines regarding my entry as an outsider into another's reality. I feel assured that my trepidation has allowed me to present myself to the students with a certain modesty and respect, making no pretense to know any more about their world than that which they are willing to share. The interview data essentially brought forth three themes related to cultural identity.

One prevailing idea was that the school environment was an accepting, inclusive one where commonalities were more important than differences. Evidence of the first theme was inherent in comments about liking similar sports and activities, being the same age, and wanting to be friends who get along well without fighting. One participant succinctly stated, "Nobody's really too racist." Another referred to a friendship created through family contact. "I spend time together with two girls who are not Native. My dad is a teacher like theirs. They work in fishery instruction."

Another concept that emerged was that, in some classes, all students have been provided

with opportunities to learn about Native people. The students recalled that:

> Last year in Mrs. Smith's class we learned about Native studies. I took in a book. In English, if we are reading a book, sometimes there's a chapter about Native people.
>
> Perhaps in movies like Pocahontas. In social studies, we studied Natives. I enjoyed that, like other different cultures like the Blackfoot. No, there's not as many signs here about the Micmac as in elementary.
>
> In history class we talked about Confederation and how the Natives helped trade furs. At the Heritage Fair, there were Epekwitk kids who did projects on Native people.
>
> In grade seven we studied all the different Native cultures, like Blackfoot and Micmac and in Social studies, this year, we covered Native poets and ways of transportation, like canoes and stuff like that.

The third notion suggests that some Epekwitk students feel unwelcome and excluded within the larger school environment. Four of the seven students interviewed spoke about being unfairly questioned, sensing that other students might not like to see or hear about Native topics, feeling outnumbered and not as important in the total school context, and dealing with others' hostilities towards them. One participant briefly commented, "Others would think its baby to do some Native art." Other students spoke at length of the challenges related to culture, that are perceived or experienced:

> And they asked me, like why do you get your lunch paid for like $2.70 and they wonder why it's different and they don't get theirs paid. I just tell them straight up there is a band council on Epekwitk that pays for that. In a way, it's really not their business. They're just curious but, and they asked me if I know how to speak that language.
>
> Epekwitk is like a big family. We take care of each other. It's not like that for others. They're always fighting, starting stuff with us. They hide their feelings... want to fight, fight. Some people make fun of us behind our back. Others hear them. Oh, they're from Epekwitk. Other people are right amused, look up to us; want to get to know us.
>
> We are not wanted. That's how I sometimes feel. Not to be mean. There's only a couple of us. Then you go to a bigger school and it's all people like us. It would be better to see more Micmac people. Then they would learn more about us. Everybody knows me, or they think they know me but they really don't know me. In Epekwitk, feelings are shared, here they don't know. We show our feelings. If we are mad or sad, we mention to others

> we know. We don't hide our feelings. There are people on Epekwitk who are racist when drunk. A guy who plays basketball, a good player, wasn't able to play when he was at this school since he was from Epekwitk.
>
> I don't get along with many people in my hometown. There's some I get along with. The Othertown people are too rude and hateful, mostly grade 8 and 9s. Some others from Epekwitk are there. That helps. The ones from Maintown area stick together. It would be better if everyone would get along better. I don't like when friends are fighting and want me to take sides. Some of the Epekwitk don't like Maintown and those Epekwitk kids are kind of snobby with me.
>
> I'm not white. They don't like me because of the way I am. I wouldn't mind having respect from other students. I have respect elsewhere. Back here, it's a whole other story. I only hear about Natives from other students who say we don't like you. I don't like getting in trouble. I don't like them talking about my brother.

In describing their connections with peers and the ways in which they participate in the total school environment, these students indicated that they have many positive intermediate school experiences. The descriptions and the emotions that tell of conflict and misunderstanding demonstrate that these same First Nations students have uncertainties about their status within the intermediate school environment.

Significance of Tutor

As they became aware of the research I was undertaking, various intermediate school staff encouraged me to talk to Jane, the tutor for the Epekwitk students. As I checked in periodically to collect returned participant forms, I found Jane's small office to be a hub of activity with the students from Epekwitk coming to her for a variety of purposes. Jane could be found firmly encouraging a student on an assignment that required completion, helping others to better understand their academic work, talking with someone who had dropped in on their break between classes about something related to their life within or outside of school, and providing caring attention to a student who was feeling sick. In a sense, my interviews were verification of

what I was able to witness first hand. The predominant theme that emerged was that their connection with Jane is critical in coping successfully in the intermediate school setting.

Four of the seven interviewees referred to the support she offers with school work. Two of these students pointed to her support in keeping up to date with their work if they are falling behind or finding work difficult. Two others who were not attending French classes also spoke of Jane's instructional support with other subjects. Six of the participants described how Jane assisted them personally, with both small and larger personal or inter-personal matters. Two students referred to times of transition, such as settling into the school at the grade seven level, and three students pointed out that they seek Jane's help if they have problems with other Epekwitk students. Their comments convey that Jane is a helpful and trustworthy adult mentor and role model for these students:

> I see Jane just to visit. She's nice. She helps. She talks to you when you have a problem. I am going to miss her next year. High school is exciting, but you have to leave this all behind. There's nothing I don't like about having a tutor here.
>
> In grade seven I spent a lot of time with her. She just kept telling me that I could do it. She came to one or two classes with me. She comes in handy.
>
> Sometimes I see her to talk. For me she's always there to talk to and help.
>
> I go in and see Jane just to talk. There's someone there to talk to if someone from Epekwitk is giving you a hard time. She'll talk to that student. It's good to have her here.
>
> Say I have troubles with one of my friends or something; I just talk to her about it. Instead of going to the counsellor, I go to her.
>
> It was hard at first. Jane helped to make it easier. The best part about school is Jane's office, just to talk and do some time between breaks. She's there, supports you, tells you that you can do it. She chases you, makes you do the work. It's good. Sometimes it's a pain.

One student summarized all that Jane signified by simply stating, "Jane's a good help." The students approached Jane readily for assistance with a broad range of concerns. She has become a safe haven for the Epekwitk students and they know they can count on her for support in academic and non-academic areas.

Second Language Instruction

At various points throughout their interviews, the participants identified the challenges associated with learning French. All seven students had resided in Epekwitk since birth, and all participants had attended the elementary school there for grades one to six. They had acquired some ability to use their Mi'kmaq language from lessons given regularly during the elementary school day. Their formal education in Mi'kmaq ended at the grade six level, as it is not taught to students within the provincial school setting. Over the past couple of years at the Epekwitk school, the upper elementary students have begun to have a small amount of French language exposure, and I recall this having been the case in the early nineties. The comments which follow point out that students found French to be difficult. Some saw themselves as disadvantaged when compared with non-Epekwitk students who received Core French instruction for 30 minutes daily beginning at grade four:

> It's like in our elementary, we don't have French, so and in their elementary, they don't have Micmac. So it's like going from nothing trying to speak French, like getting no marks. See if they came to our junior high school and we had Micmac language and they tried to get it and they never had it before, they wouldn't get nowhere.
>
> Whenever I came to grade seven, they had French and I had no French in my entire elementary life. That was a big change. It was different.

Some students related that they lost or abruptly stopped developing their skills in Mi'kmaq since concluding elementary and that new skills in French were hard to rapidly acquire:

> They asked me if I know how to speak that language. I used to be able to but now I can't. I really enjoyed studying Micmac. French was hard. I still don't like it, but I learned to adapt to it, I guess.
>
> Teaching us Micmac at elementary didn't help us prepare for junior high. They don't teach Micmac here. I just learned it. Then I lost it. They teach French now. I would offer both.
>
> We speak different languages. I speak English more than Micmac. I can't speak fully in Micmac. I know some words. I took Micmac classes in elementary.

The remarks made by two other participants illustrated their receptivity to learning French. One student merely wanted to experience success in her learning, having told me during our first interview that she didn't like French and clarifying when we met a second time that, "French is getting good now. I'm getting better. I had good marks in an assignment." The other student realized that French was an aspect of her cultural inheritance:

> At elementary, we didn't take French. We took Micmac. Now it's better. They learn more geography, history, etc., now. I wish they had done that for us. I'm French. My grandmother, lots of relatives are French. Here, they don't have Micmac language and arts and crafts. At elementary, we'd learn Micmac and crafts.

As I reviewed the students' comments regarding instruction in Mi'kmaq and French languages, I concluded that discontinuing Mi'kmaq study and being inequitably positioned with respect to other intermediate students in acquiring skills in French creates a unique dilemma for these youth. On the one hand, they take pride in having some basic ability in their native tongue. At the same time, it is hard to be a beginner in French when you enter a new school with

classmates who, though often not competent speakers of French, do have some basic formation in French.

Perceptions of Teachers

During the first interview, I asked students how they got along with their teachers, knowing from my own experiences as a parent and educator that the student-teacher relationship can have a major impact on student performance and attitude towards school. All seven Epekwitk students described their relationships with teachers as being generally positive. One participant stated she gets along "very good" with teachers. Three participants reported that they get along "good", and two other students used the phrase "pretty good." Three participants noted that their teachers were nice. Three participants commented that they liked particular teachers because they explained things well. Three interviewees spoke of liking teachers who had a sense of humor. A number of student descriptions will be quoted to give voice to their sentiments:

> I like Ms. Sand the best. She is just funny. She has a good sense of humor.
>
> In homeroom, the teacher is sometimes cranky. When they get upset, I get cranky, snappy, mouth back. I like Ms. Tone the most. She's nice. She's not as snappy.
>
> There's no teacher that I really like the most. I liked Mrs. Gray in grade seven for math and history. She was nice. She explained things well. It's finished now but I used to like industrial arts. The teacher is friggin' funny. Sometimes it's hard to see him serious.
>
> Teachers that are like, fun to be with. Miss Vicks or Mr. Wisk would be examples. They can be real serious if they want.
>
> She seems to get along really good, understands how I am or whatever. She's the one who recommended me for full year math. She said she knew that I could do it, but it just took a long time to get it in my head. She's most of the time in a good mood, and I find she's a good teacher.

> Mr. Smith, he's always happy, sometimes grumpy. He explains things more. When he's reading a story, he pauses and explains things.

The ideas that were expressed about teachers would possibly be reflected by any segment of the intermediate school population. It is common to hear all students remark approvingly of teachers who are cheerful, pleasant, kind, light-hearted, serious when necessary, confident in each student's ability, and willing to clarify, explain, and generate interest in learning. What is significant here is the students' unique ways of affirming the power of the classroom teacher in creating a warm and caring learning environment that respects where all students are and what they bring to the learning process.

Future Goals

When I asked the Epekwitk students about their plans after intermediate and high school, their responses reflected self-awareness, clarity, confidence, and a sense of purpose. All seven stated they would attend and complete high school. One grade nine student's remarks indicated that he was content with a general, rather than an academic program, although adults at home and school had encouraged him in an academic stream. He responded to my query about course selection for high school by stating:

> All general except for math. I got higher in that. I was going to take general for math but the teacher called home. My mom picked up the form, and she said I had to go to academic. All the teachers, they put academic but I just said general.

Six of the participants readily named future professions or roles they were considering. Their options included becoming a nurse, doctor, lawyer, actor, RCMP officer, business person, photographer, or daycare worker. Three students mentioned studying law. Of this three, one ambitious student said that she was aware of a high school level law course and that she has thought about going to Harvard. Another noted that his sister is preparing to become a lawyer,

and another participant spoke of studying law for Native people at the University of New Brunswick. This student expressed a desire to advance her culture through her professional work and investment in any children she may parent. "Anything to help Aboriginal people. Courts have different rules for us. I'd like my children to do stuff, go to sweats and stuff, take part in drumming. I would teach my kids not to be disrespectful."

Given the statistics that show high drop-out rates for Aboriginal students at the high school level, it was encouraging to hear this group of the Epekwitk students speak with optimism about the future paths they hope to embark on. Their dreams will play an important role in sustaining a commitment to completing their education.

Participant Profiles

To ensure that the findings accurately provide an overall sense of the experiences of the individual participants, I will provide a brief profile of two participants whose stories stand out for me. While these two students talked about some common experiences and impressions, they employed divergent strategies to best manage the intermediate school setting. The contrasting sketches are compiled from my interviews with the two students, Nancy and Claire. Nancy commented on the internal struggles she had in adapting to the intermediate school system. Claire focused more on how the broad educational system has not responded to her needs. As the experiences of these two participants are highlighted, some of the themes addressed in this chapter will resurface.

Nancy.

Nancy was quite fearful through much of her first year of intermediate schooling. She feared failing and being unable to get along with others. She would cry at bedtime and again before getting on the bus. Upon arrival at school, she wanted to go home or have her mother,

whom she was used to seeing during the elementary school lunch hour, be with her. Nancy explained that she met with an Epekwitk counsellor who helped arrange a meeting where she, her parents, some teachers, and school administration were able "to see what things they could do for me to help me out a bit more." Nancy seemed fairly satisfied with the academic basis she acquired at elementary level. "We did basically the same kind of schoolwork. Some of it was, and some of it wasn't." For Nancy, coping with a new and larger world of strangers was a greater hurdle than succeeding in her academic work. She described what she found supportive:

> I like getting extra work, not extra work, extra help I guess, like from the teachers; just to take a little more time to explain things to me, like one on one. I kind of understand things better when there's not a whole class with me.

Since her challenging entry into the world of intermediate schooling, Nancy has progressed well and kept an upper 80's average. She spoke positively of her teachers and the friendships she has made. At this point, her peers are mainly intermediate school friends from outside of Epekwitk.

Claire.

Claire focused on the difficulties she encountered in doing the academic work required at intermediate school. She regretted that she had not attained a stronger and broader academic basis at the elementary level. She indicated that students at the Epekwitk school are now taught more subjects than before and that they will better manage their intermediate schoolwork. Claire stated clearly that she wanted to do more challenging academic work and that she knew this would help her in the future. She described her visits with First Nations friends and relatives in another province who had completed their elementary and secondary schooling in a band operated school. "Those kids get sent back after they start university. It's too hard."

In fact, the academic challenge of the intermediate school, and her own conviction to advance her Native people, are Claire's main link with her school. She stated, "I like my classes, what I'm doing here. In Epekwitk, it was right easy. It's harder. I'd rather [be] here for the work." Unlike Nancy, almost all of Claire's social contacts are from her Epekwitk community. She reported that she has good relations with the intermediate teachers but she feels that the Epekwitk students are not wanted, are belittled, and are made fun of at school. She balances those negative sentiments with a realization that some students "look up to us; want to get to know us." Although she referred to being treated like a kid, Claire shared some positive perceptions about the school administration. "The principals look up to me, expect me to be good. The principal will call me in if I'm upset." Claire expressed equal regard for a police officer who had recently left Epekwitk. "There was this cop. He always helped me. He always wanted the best for me." Another example of the value Claire places on adult role models was her reference to her support from the band tutor. "It was hard at first. Jane helped to make it easier. In grade eight, I didn't have anyone from Epekwitk in my class."

Perhaps the biggest struggle for Claire in the intermediate setting is that she feels unrecognized, misunderstood, and removed from her cultural background. She conveyed her perceptions and sentiments by stating:

> I don't like it here. I'd rather go to an all Micmac school. There's only a couple of us. Then you go to a bigger school, and it's all people like us. If they would see more Micmac people, then they would learn more about us.

Conclusion

The Epekwitk students whom I interviewed were quite open and cooperative throughout the period in which the research was conducted. Some experiences and perspectives were shared

by all or almost all of the small sample of participants. Students from the total school population may have articulated similar notions had I envisioned a broader study. Some experiences pertained to one or two individual students and were not representative of, or common to, most of the participant group. For me as the researcher, this smorgasbord of findings is the reality that the students permitted me to uncover.

It is Claire's brief comment that resounds in my heart as I prepare, after a seven-year departure as a staff member, to return to the intermediate school as a teaching vice-principal for September 2002. In her words, "We lost so much of our culture coming here." Our schools must be places where every child experiences belonging and success. In the concluding chapter, as I explore connections between previous research findings from the literature I have located and the results obtained in this study, I hope to offer suggestions that will contribute to further improvements in the education of First Nations students.

Chapter Five

Discussion of Research Results

Introduction

This study was undertaken to learn about the experiences of some First Nations Mi'kmaq students at their intermediate provincial school. The research questions, which were central to the thesis development, were:

1. How do some First Nations students, from a Mi'kmaq community, describe their experiences at a provincial intermediate school?
2. What is the impact of current educational practices on these First Nations students?

The data was collected over the course of two individual interviews with seven participants in grades seven to nine. The interviews were held at the school during regular school hours in February and March of 2002.

In this chapter, the interview findings will be discussed with reference to the literature that was highlighted in Chapter Two. I will identify some implications of the study as well as directions for future research. An initial commentary will be provided to summarize my overall impressions of the work conducted and its limitations.

General Comments and Limitations of the Study

The findings that emerged from the student interviews were not all unanticipated. They represent a response to the first research question as they document how the seven interviewees described their schooling experiences. As I explore in this chapter the links between the literature I have read and this study, several noteworthy aspects of the students' intermediate

school descriptions will be reviewed. The second research question, which addresses the impact of educational practices, will be considered as the research implications are drawn.

I undertook the thesis recognizing my bias as a special education practitioner, classroom teacher and school administrator committed to creating inclusive, representative school environments. I was aware of some progress that had already been made in this regard within the provincial school system and of concerns that remain unaddressed. As more than six years had passed since I had taught at the intermediate level, the students I had known were now within the 20 to 25 year age bracket. In conducting my research, I was able to approach the younger, unfamiliar Mi'kmaq youth with a more objective outlook. I was cognizant that their experiences were perhaps quite different from those of the students I had known. To some extent I had been spared from the influence of stereotypical negative attitudes that have been perpetuated regarding the Mi'kmaq of Epekwitk as I was not a long term resident of this community. My three children have all attended the intermediate and secondary public school with Epekwitk youth. They share a First Nations cultural background in common and have been raised with a respect for their Nisga'a ancestry, though they have had limited actual exposure to First Nations communities. While Paul, Christopher and Andrea have not often identified themselves as Aboriginal students in the public school setting, they conveyed for the most part a positive regard for the Mi'kmaq students and their community. I have observed that my children have grown more interested in their First Nations identity during their teenage years. Despite these personal connections that stimulate my desire to address Native issues, I was reared in a white monocultural rural community in eastern Prince Edward Island and as such have unquestionably been influenced by that environment. Gratefully, my father's family, born in the late 1800s and early 1900s, travelled broadly for a family of that generation, returning to share with us stories

from Hong Kong mission schools, Native communities in Western Canada and urban experiences from their relocations to New York, Boston and Los Angeles.

In the previous chapter, I recognized that similar results might be obtained through interviews with others within the general population of intermediate students. Some of the findings may or may not be related to being of First Nations background. The perspectives of the Epekwitk students on the transition from a familiar, smaller elementary school to a larger, multi-faceted intermediate school setting would perhaps parallel those of the mainstream population who are also managing this change. The experiences that the participants described with regards to peers, teachers, schoolwork and activities, could well be articulated by many other students. As the interviews were conducted with seven of the 16 Epekwitk students who attended the intermediate school, the findings cannot be generalized to all Epekwitk youth at the school or to other First Nations students in this age bracket. What I have represented are the views of the seven students who agreed to be interviewed. The quality of an interview depends largely on the comfort level of participants and the motivation to share openly and fully on the subject matter. As I met with all participants individually on two occasions, I was able to establish a trusting rapport and engage the students' investment in the dialogue.

To some extent, my research has been a means of heightening my awareness and renewing my conviction to provide all students with successful educational opportunities. I envisioned my study as a means of communicating to the Epekwitk students that I wanted to understand more about their individual and collective viewpoints, sentiments, and lived experiences in relation to their intermediate level schooling. In some ways, the fact of asking the questions was as important to me as the gathering and analyzing of responses. The possibility of uncovering an aspect of particular uniqueness to one or more of the Epekwitk students was a driving force throughout the data collection, coding and categorization. Mindful of the findings,

it may be possible to find connections, parallels and contrasts with the results recorded in this context and the evidence that the literature provides from other research contexts. This concluding thesis chapter will identify ways in which the outcomes from this study confirm, extend, challenge or are unsupported by prior research notions.

Literature and Research Connections

Transmitting culture through language.

As a country, we have ongoing debates about language. The topic is critical as the continuation of languages is synonymous with the perpetuation of cultures. Burnaby (1997) drew connections between the exclusion of Aboriginal language rights from official language policy and the rapid loss of Aboriginal speakers. Orr and Jerome-Paul (2000) attributed the near demise of the Mi'kmaq language in the under 40 age group from a Mi'kmaq community with the integration of students into the provincial school system. In my research, some of the Epekwitk intermediate students whose Mi'kmaq instruction was discontinued at the end of grade six had already lost their acquired native language ability. During the interviews, the Epekwitk students conveyed to me that they valued and enjoyed their elementary school experiences in learning their Mi'kmaq language. Much of the historical literature that I examined documented the gradual loss of indigenous cultures since European contact and colonization and the role that educational institutions played in assimilating the Aboriginal population into the dominant culture (Battiste, 1995; Government of Canada, 1996; Paul, 2000). Cummins (1996) suggests that educators assume an additive or a subtractive orientation towards their role in teaching students from minority cultures. The former perspective empowers students to develop their primary language and culture, though immersed in another context. The latter, overtly or covertly, disempowers minority students. They understand that in order to assimilate to the

dominant culture, they must "leave language and culture at the schoolhouse door" (Cummins, 1996, p. 130). May (1994) and Ladson-Billings (1994) are strong advocates of knowing, affirming and respecting the cultural traditions and experiences that are part of students' past and present realities. While we applaud our country on its capacity to embrace people of diverse cultural backgrounds, my study suggests that at all levels of education we may need to examine more critically how native languages and cultures survive.

Developing collaborative relationships.

The literature points to the mutual understanding between school and community as a key factor underlying student success (Saskatchewan Professional Development Unit, 1996; Leavitt, 1994; May, 1994; Porter, 1995). During the interviews conducted for this research, some Epekwitk students referred to ways they can benefit from collaboration between their community based elementary school and the provincial intermediate school. One participant spoke of an elementary teacher who had been helpful in preparing students for the change from the elementary to the intermediate level. This teacher had previous work experience at the intermediate school and he shared his knowledge of that environment and its demands to equip his students in managing the transition. This strategy could be equally valuable if employed at the provincial school in helping to allay a First Nations student's anxiety and resistance towards learning French. For instance, an intermediate Core French teacher could communicate to the student that certain individual, instructional adaptations will be provided given that the student has had less experience in French at the elementary level.

As the Epekwitk elementary and the provincial intermediate schools have traditionally worked co-operatively and respectfully in resolving questions and concerns, the foundation is already in place to foster a deeper awareness of the other's reality. The polite distance that separates Epekwitk from the other districts, villages and towns within the surrounding region

might diminish with increased opportunities for mutual exchange. This could generate the kind of collaborative action that allows cultures to dynamically co-exist. In such an environment, the Epekwitk students would be less likely to shyly suppress or to be silent about their Mi'kmaq cultural identity. Educators in this province have had the opportunity over the past couple of years to participate in Mi'kmaq Cultural Awareness Workshops. This initiative of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada has been realized through the efforts of local Mi'kmaq communities. As a participant in the first two-day session, I can attest to the value of the cultural sensitization that the workshop provided, largely by drawing on the expertise of the Epekwitk residents.

The developments that have begun are essential beginnings in fostering school and community collaboration. Through collaboration participants acquire mutual knowledge and respect. What happens at school will become more comprehensible and relevant for students and their families. Parental participation, which is so fundamental to school progress, will be enhanced.

Strengthening bonds.

Stereotypical attitudes flourish in an atmosphere of uncertainty and unfamiliarity. Increased awareness and appreciation of each other's uniqueness on the part of adult leaders in all communities can have a productive, trickle-down effect on our youth. This can have both a short and long term impact in minimizing the tensions and mistrust, which arise from misinformation and segregation. While some of the Epekwitk students found they established friendships with the broad population of students at the school, a few felt excluded or unwanted within the mainstream, while two other participants described friendships principally with non-Epekwitk peers. Several expressed dismay about the friction they are aware of within the overall school population. Sometimes this took the form of hostility towards kids from Epekwitk but other times they were unconnected to, but agitated by, the conflicts that transpired between other

individuals or groups. The principal references in the literature to the negative impact of aggressive behaviour on First Nations youth are those that document the injustices inflicted on individuals and their culture in church and government operated day and residential schools (Battise, 1995; Castellano et al., 2000; National Film Board, 1991; Cummins, 1996; Pauls, 1996; Porter, 1995). Fortunately, the Epekwitk students whom I interviewed have not encountered discrimination of this magnitude and conversely, spoke of many aspects of the relationships they developed with many new peers and staff members. The potential for further positive development is a resource to be tapped. One avenue that may further goodwill and nurture positive relationships is the development and promotion of motivational, accessible extra-curricular options. The Epekwitk students did not communicate a major interest or involvement in extra-curricular school-based activities. Participation in recreational activities can provide opportunities for relationships to form and strengthen. This is often the case for youth and for the families who connect in supporting the young people who take part.

Providing advocates and role models.

Orr and Jerome-Paul (2000) and Leavitt (1994) are advocates for the development of the educational leadership capabilities of First Nations students. They are convinced of the importance of developing and employing Mi'kmaq educators, who know their language and culture, to work as teachers in educational settings with Mi'kmaq youth. While the Epekwitk students did not make reference to having Mi'kmaq teachers, they were unanimously convinced of the importance of the band-employed tutor in supporting them within the intermediate school setting. The students looked to the tutor for academic support, personal guidance and affirmation and direction in resolving interpersonal conflict. Her small office served as a home base, a sort of mini-community for the Epekwitk students to connect with as the school day unfolded. As I organized and undertook my research, it was evident to me how vital this individual was for

each of the First Nations students. That message was clearly reinforced when they shared with me in the interview setting what her presence meant to them. Porter (1995) identified the availability of counselling services to encourage school completion and the pursuit of career options as one of the five characteristics that were helpful in retaining Native students in school. In the intermediate school setting, the tutor is the person the Epekwitk students turn to for their assurance that they can manage the range of challenges they encounter. The report prepared by the Aboriginal Education Committee of the Prince Edward Island Department of Education (2001) states that in both the focus groups held with Mi'kmaq youth and those conducted with parents, the availability of an Aboriginal role model or advocate in schools attended by Mi'kmaq students was identified as an important factor in students' school success. The first recommendation of this report is to "Hire Aboriginal staff to act as positive role models, advocates and supports in schools serving more than ten Aboriginal students" (Prince Edward Island Department of Education, 2001, p.14). In the focus groups that the Aboriginal Education Committee conducted and in the interviews I undertook, the Mi'kmaq youth expressed a desire to complete high school. In my research, as noted previously, all but one of the participants articulated long term goals in various career areas. It seems probable that there are already a number of role models who are inspiring the Epekwitk adolescents that they are able to make successful contributions to the society of the future. This study strongly supports this new direction.

Fostering learning and school progress.

I did not find reference in the literature to aspects of the curriculum that First Nations students tend to find more difficult and less enjoyable. As recorded in the findings, almost all of the seven Epekwitk students struggled with math and French, while their preferences and achievement in other subjects varied from one student to the next. Some of the components of

the school day were noted as highlights, these being lunchtime and the classes such as industrial arts and physical education where there is often movement and a range of hands-on, activity based tasks. The Aboriginal Education Committee (2001) documented these same preferences among the students in their focus groups. As a parent myself, I realize that my own three teenagers and their peers are often motivated by interactive experiences and I am not surprised to find this to be true as well for the Epekwitk youth. A common underlying thread that was woven through much of what the students shared about classroom learning was that thorough, more individualized, context based teaching supports their learning. They spoke of learning better when teachers explained things well, had confidence in students' capabilities and used humour to make learning fun. Cummins (1996) highlights the importance of academically and cognitively demanding teaching to engage minority students in school learning.

Some of the literature I examined addressed ways in which First Nations students learn best in school. Goddard (1997) stressed that teachers must be aware of the theories that have been developed regarding effective teaching practices with Aboriginal students. Reviewing some of these beliefs may shed some light on the particular challenges identified by the Epekwitk students.

The report presented by the Aboriginal Education Committee (2001) identified the Mi'kmaq students' preferences for hands-on learning as well as challenges they face in understanding instruction when it is delivered rapidly, in large classroom settings, with limited individualized or small group instruction. This study was undertaken through focus groups with 72 youth. Twenty-one of those participants were Epekwitk young people ranging in age from 14 to 18 years (Prince Edward Island Department of Education, 2001, pp. 2, 6, 16).

In his study of the high dropout rate of Native high school students in New Brunswick, Porter (1995) noted five characteristics that promote learning success and school completion.

One of these aspects is the employment of teaching techniques and practices that respond to the unique learning preferences of Native students. Both Porter and Sawyer (1991) advocate visual, experiential and co-operative instructional strategies as opposed to verbal, theoretical and competitive approaches.

Several of the Epekwitk students appreciated complete teacher explanations, the academic support of the band tutor and classroom and resource room teachers who provided individual assistance, and the opportunity to be involved in activity and fun while learning. Later in this chapter, as I reflect on the implications of my research and look at further avenues for research, I will consider in more depth what may contribute to school success for First Nations students.

Sawyer (1991), Porter (1995) and Morris (n.d.) all refer to the preference of Aboriginal students to learn visually, rather than through instruction that relies largely on auditory comprehension. They note the careful observational skills of Native learners who traditionally have watched whatever was to be learned as it naturally unfolded, thereby acquiring an understanding before imitating or performing. They also make reference to patient, silent, respectful listening behaviors of Aboriginal students and how these can be misinterpreted by others as ignorance or disinterest. The three writers refer to the preference of Aboriginals to work co-operatively as a community rather than competing for individual advancement and to their capacity to learn experientially through hands-on involvement.

Some of the Epekwitk students mentioned that they learn best when material is carefully and meaningfully explained. A few students expressed an interest in visual and dramatic arts though they had few opportunities in school to explore these interests. Activity-based, hands-on learning experiences in group settings were mentioned in my interviews as positive components of the school day. In the focus groups with Mi'kmaq youth, that were part of the Aboriginal

Education Committee project (Prince Edward Island Department of Education, 2001, pp. 6 & 7), these adolescents also made reference to struggles to understand in class and to enjoying most the non-academic, active and social aspects of the school day.

There is little that can be definitively proposed as an explanation for the prevalence of math and French learning challenges that were shared by the participants I interviewed. I can postulate that the teaching methods which have been relied on most heavily in these instructional areas have been designed for auditory learners who can successfully manage rapidly presented verbal instructions, drills, and rote, abstract learning. If many First Nations students learn best when information is linked to a context and opportunity is provided for experiential and exploratory acquisition of knowledge and skills, it is plausible that these instructional techniques could support progress in math and French.

Implications and Conclusions Drawn

The findings that were presented in Chapter Four and the discussion of how they mesh with the body of literature on Aboriginal education provide a basis to speculate on what can be taken from this study. As I draw this thesis to a close, I am mindful of my duty to ensure that the conclusions and implications that I draw are truly based on what the Mi'kmaq students shared with me. The essential point I wish to underline is that little can be learned if we continue to believe that we already know all the issues and have all the answers. We cannot know the experience of those of another culture unless we ask and then listen. The lesson is simple and has been repeatedly presented by First Nations spokespersons. Perhaps it is time to become more preoccupied with the knowledge that the Aboriginal community can impart to us, and less concerned with our instruction to them.

It's time to ask and listen.

Although the study compiled by the Aboriginal Education Committee (2001) has been recently published, the proposal for my research was accepted prior to the committee's decision to conduct focus groups with Aboriginal youth and parents. At various stages of my research, I was encouraged by those from Epekwitk and those from the outside community that my research was vital. An esteemed educator and long term area resident informed me that my work was "groundbreaking!" All acknowledgements aside, what has enabled me to complete the thesis has been the reception granted to me by the students who participated in the interviews. They trusted me to honor their accounts of intermediate school and they allowed me to know something of their individual perceptions, feelings, life experiences, values, and aspirations. The parents of two participants whom I encountered by chance on separate occasions expressed appreciation for including their children in the research. Another father whom I spoke with by phone inquired if I had considered expanding my study to include older students at the secondary level or those who had already left public school. I was struck by the wisdom and power in his statement, "I think it's very important". Recently, two Epekwitk youth who are attempting to contribute to the economy of their community provided me with further verification that this research matters. One of them noted that the move to public school seems smooth for some but very difficult for others. The other young man asked if he could read my thesis and attend its defense. This grassroots validation has compelled me, during bouts of questioning my capacity to carry out this research, to see it to fruition.

It's time for teamwork.

Having been reassured that simply articulating the participants' stories is of value, I also recognize that my study offers other responses to the "so what" question that research seeks to answer. At the root of all other implications is a fundamental requirement for those within the

Epekwitk community and those in the larger community to develop increased familiarity and involvement in common concerns and interests. This interchange must be equitable and respectful with a sincere commitment to preserving the cultural identity and fabric of the various groups involved. Getting to know my neighbour is not akin to making my neighbour more like me, though our past colonial practices have amounted to that.

Promoting communication between the educational administration for the Epekwitk band and the school board, which represents the provincial education department, is a critical starting point in creating the best educational opportunities possible for the Epekwitk youth. Some progress has already been made in this regard. The Aboriginal Education Committee who undertook the project with the First Nations focus groups included representatives from Aboriginal groups and communities, schools that serve Aboriginal youth, law enforcement, the university, the teachers' association and the education department for the province. Discussions have taken place between the Epekwitk Director of Education and the Directors of Education for the local school board and their respective school level personnel regarding ways to meet the needs of First Nations students. The provincial school board official who met with me to convey the board's approval to conduct research at the intermediate school shared with me an overhead visual that he had used in a meeting the previous day. The meeting was an occasion for the school board and school personnel from Epekwitk and the provincial intermediate and secondary schools which receive the Epekwitk students to identify issues related to Epekwitk students entering and succeeding in the public school system. Many of the elements he had depicted on his chart were precisely those I had in mind as I conceived my research, clarified my purpose and research questions and prepared my sketch of what I wished to address in the semi-structured interviews. I was able to launch my study knowing that the findings could provide some direction to the dialogue that has been initiated regarding the educational needs of

Mi'kmaq students. Having collected and analyzed the interview data, I recognize that the willingness to communicate and explore together ways to improve education for Epekwitk youth is a crucial aspect of creating change. Progress will only be made if some of the delicate issues can be confronted without casting blame.

It's time for action in support of minority languages and cultures.

From what the students shared about learning their Mi'kmaq language and the investment that the Epekwitk community has made in language teaching at their local school, it is evident that acquisition of their Native language is a priority in the development of these youth. It is important to develop ways to continue to support this goal when students leave their elementary setting to attend the provincial school. Cummins (1996) acknowledges the challenge of providing actual teaching of students' primary language when the number of students involved is quite low, this being the case at the provincial intermediate and secondary schools attended by the Epekwitk students. Cummins states, "However even within a monolingual school context, powerful messages can be communicated to students regarding the validity and advantages of primary language development" (p. 128). The logistics of offering Mi'kmaq in place of or in addition to French for First Nations students within the provincial school will take some time and effort to resolve. What is important is that the will and action to address this matter be present and that First Nations communities are aware that there is a commitment to supporting them in transmitting their language and cultural values to future generations. Cummins (1996) presents a practical idea that represents a small but important inroad in respecting the primary languages of minority cultures. He suggests that educators invite a "word a day" from all languages represented in their classes so that all students can learn the word itself and its application and significance within the cultural community. In the intermediate

school setting, this could generate a greater interest and appreciation of the cultural diversity that does in fact exist within the school and the community it serves.

It's time to identify and access resources.

Related to the enhanced sharing and exchange between communities and education systems and the development of a climate that encourages diversity is the importance of working towards common educational goals with common purposes and strategies. The Epekwitk students expressed a desire to succeed academically now and in the future and to be able to manage the demands they face in school. Sitting together and discerning how to provide learning experiences for students at the elementary level, which will contribute to success in learning as they move through other levels of their schooling, is an important undertaking. The Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation has involved many representative sectors in the creation of curriculum documents for language arts, mathematics, science, social studies and other curriculum areas. These resources have been developed with the intention that they be culturally inclusive, supportive of tailoring instruction to a range of learning preferences and useful in enriching students to acquire strengths in the various intelligences required in living productive, meaningful lives. It is important to draw collaboratively on such resources in unifying our efforts towards the common goal of ensuring that students succeed in lifelong learning.

The Epekwitk students identified clearly that their tutor is an unquestionable resource for them. Their experiences, like those documented in other instances, highlight the positive contributions of role models in the education of youth. It is important to ensure that Mi'kmaq students are provided with advocates and leaders from within and beyond their community who have a strong commitment and investment in the future of First Nations people. An important first step in encouraging leadership from within the First Nations community is to demonstrate that we welcome their input and leadership. Concrete actions such as making the language,

music, art and varied lifestyles and viewpoints of First Nations people visible within the educational milieu will help create an environment that fosters Aboriginal participation. The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, with offices in various regions across Canada, provides valuable human and material resources to access in improving educational services for First Nations.

Conclusion

As a society, we have the privilege of living in an enlightened, information rich era. With the privilege of enhanced understanding comes the responsibility of using this new awareness productively. Throughout my research, I was curious whether the enlightenment that educators have been provided, through a number of professional development undertakings on diversity education, was in fact changing the face of schooling for First Nations students. Through my interviews with the Mi'kmaq students and my on-going related reading and research work, I am convinced that knowledge must be combined with a commitment to justice in order to generate positive change. I opted to use interviews as a medium for learning what schooling at a provincial intermediate school meant to Mi'kmaq students. It would also be valuable to undertake longitudinal research to track the progress of Epekwitk students through the intermediate and secondary school provincial schools. This could be undertaken in a timely manner, perhaps looking back over a 10-year period, as information on students in an under 30 age bracket would be relatively accessible and insightful. A great deal could be gleaned from examining the profiles and paths of the students within and beyond school to support future Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal efforts in education. The domain of Native education is vast with innumerable aspects to address. My study has been a small beginning towards a massive and necessary endeavour.

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Appendix A
Request for School Board Permission to Conduct Research

Box 71
O'Leary, P.E.I.
COB1V0

December 10, 2001

Ms. Sonia Osborne
Superintendent, Western School Board

Dear Ms. Osborne:

As my sabbatical year unfolds, I am pleased to be at the point where I am requesting permission from you and the Senior Management Team to conduct research within the Western Board. The research has been approved by the University of Prince Edward Island Research Ethics Board. The thesis is a requirement of the U.P.E.I. Master of Education Degree in Leadership and Learning, with a specialization in Counselling. I anticipate conducting the research in January and early February 2002, in order to work on data analysis and thesis completion over the winter. I look forward to returning from sabbatical leave next September with enhanced professional skills to bring to my work with children in the Western School Board.

The qualitative research that I have proposed will explore the intermediate level schooling experiences of some Mi'kmaq students from the [name of] community. Until grade six, these students attend the band operated reserve based school. They enter the provincial school system at grade seven. When I taught at [name of school], I worked with several First Nations students and was privileged to acquire some insight into their culture and community. Since then, I have participated in various professional development opportunities focusing on diversity and equity. To conduct this research, I would like to interview six students from [name of community]. My aim will be to discover how they describe their experiences at their intermediate school and to examine the impact that particular school related practices have on them. The study will be of significance to the Mi'kmaq community, as it will recognize the importance of the perspectives of the First Nations youth. It will also be of significance to educators who work with Mi'kmaq students in band operated and provincial schools, as well as those working to further Native education at the school board or department of education levels.

I will outline briefly how I intend to collect the data, in this case meaning the descriptions of the students' experiences. Following Board approval and Board consultation with the [name of school] administration and teachers, I would like to arrange with the principal to meet with the students from [name of community]. All students from the reserve will be presented with information about the research and the possibility to participate in two interviews

with me at the school. Students will be told that if they are selected to participate, I will be contacting their parent(s)or guardian(s) to inform them that their son or daughter is interested in participating in the research and to arrange for signatures giving parent/guardian permission and participant consent. Students will also be told that selected participants may withdraw from the research at any time up to the end of the interview stage.

I will contact the homes of selected participants by telephone to speak briefly about the research. I will inform the parent or guardian that I wish to provide them with a letter that contains information about the research and the consent and permission forms that will need to be signed prior to any interviews taking place. I will offer to deliver the letter in person to review its contents or to mail it to them. The written information will provide assurance that: participant anonymity will be respected; participation is voluntary; participation is not related in any way to grades or marks; and audio-taping will only be done if both parent/guardian and student are agreeable to this. Although the research has very little risk, the band tutor has agreed to talk with any student who may become upset during or after an interview.

The data will be collected by audiotaped or hand recorded interviews and transcribed soon after each interviews. During the second interview, the first interview transcription will be shared with the participant to verify accuracy and to make any changes or deletions. Additional questions arising from the preliminary data analysis will be presented and responses recorded. I will offer to return again to verify the transcription of any new data should the participant request this. Pseudonyms will be used in all thesis development to protect the anonymity of individuals or institutions. I realize that I cannot guarantee full institutional anonymity, as those acquainted with First Nations education within the province will be aware of the institutions referred to despite the use of pseudonyms. I will be the only person with access to the raw data (taped or hand written) transcriptions and field notes. They will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and destroyed three years after the thesis is accepted. The thesis will be made available upon request to the Band Council, the Western School Board, the administration of the intermediate and secondary schools attended by the [name of community] students and the Department of Education. Please feel free to contact me if you wish further information on the research.

Sincerely,

Margaret Cain

Appendix B

Script of Information Provided at Student Meeting

I want to thank-you for coming to meet with me today. My name is Margie Cain. I am a teacher. I worked at this school for five years before moving to other schools in the Western School Board. This year I am taking a year off to complete a Master's of Education Degree at U.P.E.I. So I'm also a student right now. My biggest assignment is to complete some research. That's what I want to talk to you about today. Before I explain my research to you, I'd like to know each of your names and the grade you are in here. Perhaps we can just start with the student on my right and go around the circle.

****

Thanks. I realize you already know one another but that helps me to get to know you a little. When we finish, I will meet with the rest of the students from [name of community] who are here at [name of school]. I wanted to keep our groups small as I find that more comfortable and helpful. Both groups will be given the same information.

Now, I'll explain to you briefly what I want to study or learn in the research work. I'll also tell you why I think this is important research and how some of you can be involved. I want to do this research to help me understand more about your lives as students at this school. When you came to [name of school] at grade seven, you moved from a smaller school operated by the [name of community] Band Council to a larger school operated by the P.E.I. Dept of Education. Almost all the other students here at [name of school] have been part of the P.E.I. public school system since Grade One. I would like to find out from interviewing some of you what it's like to change school systems when you come here. I also want to find out what your day to day experiences are like now that you are here. I believe that teachers can learn a lot from students if students have a chance to talk and tell their own stories. That is what I want to do, to listen to what you have to say about your lives in school.

This work interests me, as I want schools to become the very best places possible for all students. You have a very special cultural identity as members of a First Nations community. Many others in this school come from French, Irish, Scottish or other cultural backgrounds but together they are part of the larger white majority on P.E.I. The more we know and understand one another, the more progress we can make together. I hope my research helps me to understand more about you and your Native culture. My three teen-age children have First Nations backgrounds, as their grandmother is a Nisga'a from the Prince Rupert region of B.C. This gives me a very personal reason to take an interest in Native people.

To do my research, I would like to interview six [name of community] students who attend [name of school]. I will meet with you individually in a quiet area here at school, for about 30 to 40 minutes and ask you particular questions about your experiences at this school. If you agree, I will record the interview on audiotape or you may prefer that I copy your comments by hand. I will be the only person who reads or listens to the interview records. I will make a word for word typed copy of all that is said in the interview and bring that back at a later date to be sure that you agree that all has been correctly recorded. At that time, I will also have a few

additional questions to ask that I have thought about since the first interview. If I had time to do so, I would enjoy interviewing all who are interested. However, I will need to choose the six names by a draw. Once the names are drawn, I will contact you and your parent(s) or guardian (s) to be certain that everyone is informed about the interviews. The students who will be interviewed will sign a consent form and the parent (s) or guardian (s) will need to sign a permission form. If you are interested in the possibility of an interview, I will pass you a slip of paper. You are free to leave your name or to choose not to do so. That is completely your choice. This research has nothing to do with marks or grades. I wanted all of you to hear about the research even if you are not interested in being interviewed. I will return to talk to all of you as a group at the end of the research to let you know about the research results. For those who are interested, please write your full name on the paper and place it in one of these three envelopes. The envelope marked ONE is for students who are in their first year at this school. The envelope marked TWO is for students who are in their second year at this school. The envelope marked THREE is for students in either their third or fourth year at this school. By choosing two names per envelope, I will have six students to interview who have attended the school for different amounts of time. Does anyone have questions or comments before I pass out any slips?

****

I want to thank all of you for being here. I left the last five minutes open for you to enjoy some juice and a cinnamon roll. I would enjoy chatting with any of you as well during snack or on return visits to the school.

Appendix C

Letter of Introduction to Parent or Guardian

Dear_____,

I wish to introduce myself and to provide you with information about the research study that I am doing. I am a teacher and vice-principal with the Western School Board. This school year I am on leave from teaching in order to complete a Master of Education degree at the University of Prince Edward Island. For my thesis work, I have chosen to research the experiences of some Mi'kmaq students at their intermediate school. I would like to interview six students to find out what kinds of experiences they have while attending [name of school] and to discover what these experiences mean to them. I would like to meet with _____ for two, perhaps three, interviews at the school in February and March 2002.

I have chosen this topic because I have an interest in First Nations education. I know that the [name of community] students attend the Band operated elementary school in their own community before entering the provincial school system at the start of grade seven. I want to provide some of the students with the opportunity to talk about what this change is like for them and to know more about the experiences they have at the intermediate school. I taught at [name of school] from 1989-1995 and I have remained connected with the school, as my three children have been students there. As a teacher at [name of school] I had the privilege of working with several [name of community] students and the opportunity to learn more about the Mi'kmaq people, culture and community.

I believe that the school environment plays an important role in helping students succeed. As a unique cultural group within the school, it is important that all Mi'kmaq students know they are valued, welcome and able to succeed in learning. In talking with the students, I will be asking them questions about their relationships with other students and teachers, their involvement in school related activities, their classroom learning, and other questions related to their lives as students. Once I have obtained the permission and consent forms which you and your son or daughter will be asked to sign, I will request a quiet office at the school where I can have an individual interview with each student. I will make sure that the teachers know that students have permission to be excused from class for the interviews. During an interview, your child may choose not to answer any question that he or she would rather not answer. The interviews will not be connected in any way with marks or grades. The interviews will be tape-recorded using audiocassette if permission has been given by you or your child. If the interview is not audio-recorded, the complete interview will be hand written. I will carefully type all that is said in the interview. I will be returning to reread the typed copy with your child to make sure that I have correctly recorded what was stated. About 30 minutes will be needed for the first interview. The second interview may last a little bit longer, possibly up to 45 minutes. The extra time will be needed to read together the written copy of the first interview and to make sure the information is correct. Your son or daughter may choose to take out or change the information. As well, additional questions may be presented that were not thought of at the first interview or new comments may be noted. I will be available to return again to go over the new information gathered at the second interview. Your son or daughter may choose not to take part in the

research at anytime. If someone decides not to take part, I would like to be informed so that I can make other arrangements.

U.P.E.I. Research and Development has approved my research and the Western School Board has given permission for the interviews to be carried out in the school. The intermediate school principal knows that the research has been approved of and can be carried out with students at the school.

Taking part in the research is voluntary and confidential with very little risk for the students who take part. If your child feels upset during or after the interview, I will ask the Band tutor who works at the school to talk to your child. This research may not make a difference in how your child gets along during their time at the intermediate school but it may be helpful for other [name of community} students who follow. A made up name will be used for each student and the other people mentioned in the study. As well, real names will not be used for any schools or other locations that are referred to. The tapes and the written copy of the interviews will be available only for my use and for your son or daughter who will be checking over the interview information with me. All of the cassette tapes, hand-written interview notes and the typed copies of each interview, will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and destroyed three years after the thesis is accepted. The results of the study will be shared upon request with the families of the students interviewed, the intermediate and secondary schools that the [name of community] students attend, the Band Council, Western School and the Department of Education.

If you agree to have your child participate, please sign the permission form that follows. As well, it is important to have your child's signature and your co-signature on the student consent form. You will be given copies of these signed forms for your own records. Please use the stamped, self-addressed envelope to return this by mail. Thank-you for any effort made to ensure that each student is well aware of what they are consenting to do. I appreciate the time and thought you have given to this letter. I will be providing you with a copy of the signed forms as well as the information needed to contact the Office of the Vice-President of Research and Development at U.P.E.I. If you wish to speak with me for any reason, my home phone in O'Leary is 859-3897.

Sincerely,

Margaret Cain

Appendix D
Parent/Guardian Consent Form

I/We agree that _____(child's full name) may be interviewed by Margaret Cain as part of her research at [name of school].

I/We understand that:

- The aim of the research is to learn about the experiences of some First Nations students at [name of school] and how they manage these situations. By taking part in the research, my child may help others understand the experiences he/she has at this intermediate school.
- My child's participation is voluntary and he/she can withdraw at any time during the interview stage of the research.
- My child will be interviewed two or perhaps three times in February and March 2002. The interviews will be held during the school day in a quiet area at [name of school] Interviews will take from 30 to 45 minutes.
- My child's marks and grades at school will not be connected in anyway to this research study.
- My child can choose not to answer any of the interview questions.
- My child's interviews will be audiotaped if he/she is agreeable to that or hand copied word for word in written form. A typed copy of all that is stated in the interview will be given to my child at their second interview so he/she can make sure that everything is correct and decide about any information to change or leave out. This will also be the case if my child asks for a third interview.
- The interview records will only be seen by the researcher and my child. The tapes and written copies will be filed securely and discarded three years after the thesis is accepted.
- My child and people he/she mentions will not be identified by their real names. Any names of organizations or locations will be changed.
- I/We will be given a copy of this consent form.

(Any ethical questions or concerns should be brought to the Office of the Vice-President of Research and Development, UPEI at: (902) 566-0688 (phone); (902) 566-0756 (fax); or by e-mail to kschultz@upei.ca

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Parent(s)/Guardian(s) Signature(s):
Please sign below to give permission for your child to participate in the research described in your letter and in the section above.
Signature of Parent(s) or Guardian(s): _____
Date: _____
Researcher's Signature: _____

Appendix E

Student Letter and Consent Form

Thank-you for offering to be interviewed about your experiences as a student at [name of school]. I am looking forward to meeting with you and asking you some questions about your school life. Your information will be a major part of my research study on education for First Nations students at your school.

If you are willing to be interviewed, it is important that you understand what the interviews involve and the rights you have as someone taking part in research. You will be given an individual interview in a quiet meeting place at the school. Your teachers will understand that you are allowed to leave class for the interviews. The first interview will last about a half hour. The second interview, to be held several days later, may be closer to 45 minutes as I will read with you a copy of what you told me in the first interview. I will allow time for you to add to, change or leave out any information. I may also have some new questions to ask you that I hadn't thought about earlier. If you would like, I can return for a brief third meeting to ensure that the records from the second interview are also correct.

Even though your parent(s)/ guardian(s) may have given permission for you to be interviewed, I need to have your consent before an interview can be held. The interviews are not connected in any way with marks or grades. If you decide not to sign the interview consent form below, your decision will be fully respected. Taking part in the research is voluntary, confidential and has very little risk. If there is something that makes you upset during or after the interview, your band tutor has agreed to talk with you. Your part in the research may be helpful to other First Nations students who will attend this school.

In addition to the details about the interviews that were noted above, these are the choices and rights you have:

1. You may choose whether or not you wish to have your interview recorded on audiocassette. If the interview is not taped, a hand written record will be made.
2. You have the right to not answer a question. You may simply pass.
3. You have the right to drop out at any time up to the end of the interview stage of the research, which should be completed by the end of March 2002.

If you are agree to be interviewed as described above, please complete this form with your parent or guardian.

Signature of Student: _____

Co-Signature of Parent/Guardian: _____

Date: _____

(Please note: This form should be returned with the Parent/Guardian Consent Form. I will go over the Student Letter and Consent Form again with you before I begin the first interview to be sure that you understand what you will be doing and want to take part in it.)

Appendix F

Questions to guide semi-structured Student Interviews

At the start of each interview, remind students that:

- The interview will last about 30 minutes.
- They do not have to answer every question.
- They may talk to [name of tutor] if they feel upset during or after the interview.

1. I'd like to ask a few questions to help me get to know you. How old are you? What grade are you in? How many people are in your family? Did you always live in [name of community]? What schools did you attend before coming to {name of school]? What do you like to do for fun? Is there anything else you would like to tell me about yourself?

2. I'd like to know a little about your friends. Who do you hang around with at school? What do you do during your breaks or at lunchtime? Who are the friends you see outside of school? What do you do with these friends? Where do your school friends and your other friends come from?

3. I want you to think carefully about this question. Most of the students here at [name of school] do not come from [name of community]. Can you think of three ways that you are the same as the other students at this school? Can you tell me three ways that you are different from these other kids?

4. Here at [name of school], what have you seen, heard, read or discussed about the Mi'kmaq or other First Nations people?

5. I'd like to know what most school days are like for you. What can you tell me about your bus ride to and from school? What can you tell me about your homeroom class? What about the other classes you go to? Which classes do you like the best? What do you like about these classes? Which classes don't you like as much? What don't you like about these classes? What part of the school day do you like the best?

6. How do you get along with your teachers here? Is there a teacher that you like the most? What is it that you like about that teacher?

7. How do you do in school? Do you spend time with [name of tutor]? What do you do with her? What do you like best about having [name of tutor] in the school? Is there anything you don't like about having a Band tutor here?

8. I want to find out if your family has contact with the school. Does your family call the school sometimes? Has your family come to the school for meetings or parent teacher interviews? Have they come to watch sports events or concerts? Why do you think they (come/don't come) to the school?

9. What do you like most about this school? What don't you like? What do you think could make it even better for you?

10. What do you plan to do when you finish grade nine? What do you think you'll do after high school?