

**Education Transformation: Issues for Implementing An  
Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George, B.C.**

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History and First Nations Studies

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## **Dedication**

For Sean and James

and to all the students who yearn for a voice.

## Abstract

This thesis presents some of the issues relating to the possible implementation of an Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George, B.C. The colours of the Métis Sash (red, black, blue, white and green) are used as a framework in my research. I use red to represent history; black to represent challenges and “dark” periods of history; blue and white (the colours of the Métis flag) to represent philosophy and green to represent growth and prosperity and how that relates to benefiting community. An historical overview of Aboriginal Education in Canada in Chapter Two presents the red and black threads of history, while relevant Indigenous and complementary theory discussed in Chapter Three presents the red, blue and white threads. Chapter Four presents threads of all colours in interviews with: Pauline Clarke, Superintendent of Schools for the Inner-City District of the Winnipeg School Division; Lorne Belmore, Principal of Children of the Earth High School in Winnipeg, Manitoba; Theresa Cardinal, Department Head of Cultural Services for Edmonton Public Schools; Gloria Chalmers, Director of Programs for Edmonton Public Schools; and Mary Stevens, an Aboriginal Educator from Edmonton; who discuss the implementation of the Aboriginal Choice Schools in their respective communities of Winnipeg, Manitoba and Edmonton, Alberta. Chapter Five brings focus on the efforts made towards establishing an Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George and threads of all colours are presented through interviews with: Ben Berland, Aboriginal Liaison for School District No. 57; Paul Michel, Director of the First Nations Centre at UNBC in Prince George, British Columbia; Trish Rosborough, Director Ministry of Education Aboriginal Education Enhancement Branch; and Dr. Lorna Williams, Assistant Professor and Director of Aboriginal Teacher Education at the University of Victoria in Victoria, B.C. Chapter 6 weaves all these threads together to appraise the challenges and benefits of creating an Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George, B.C. Through my research, it becomes evident that the challenges include: notions of segregation; funding; finding a location for the school; political will; establishing community partnerships; staffing; curriculum development; and elements of “risk-taking.” However, my research also shows that there are benefits in implementing an Aboriginal Choice School structure which reflect positive and necessary movements in education. Such benefits embrace: holistic learning; inclusion of culture, family, and community within the school environment; a place of belonging for Aboriginal students that validates and embraces Aboriginal culture; opportunities for University transfer programs; direct community benefits with increased success of Aboriginal learners; and a greater awareness throughout the entire school population of Aboriginal knowledge and its relevance to our modern society. Finally, at the end of this thesis, I offer recommendations and conclusions so the idea of establishing an Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George may be revisited and the invaluable opportunities that await in this vision of Aboriginal Education can be realized.

## Table of Contents

Title Page.....	i
Dedication.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
 Chapter One – Introduction.....	 1
1.1 – Background.....	1
1.2 – Methodology/Methods.....	12
 Chapter Two - A History of Aboriginal Policy and Aboriginal Education: <i>Giving Context to Our Needs of Addressing Aboriginal Education in Canada</i> ...28	
2.1 Canadian Indian Policy: Transition, Assimilation and Integration .....	30
2.2 Indian Education and State Policy.....	36
2.2.1 Traditional Indian Education.....	37
2.2.2 Mission Schools.....	39
2.2.3 Residential Schools.....	42
2.2.4 Currently in Canada.....	46
2.3 Indian Control Over Indian Education.....	50
 Chapter Three – Intellectual, Indigenous and Educational Theory.....	 61
3.1 Howard Gardner and Multiple Intelligences.....	61
3.2 Eber Hampton and “Meta-Theory”.....	68
3.3 Gregory Cajete - Indigenous People and Science.....	76
 Chapter Four – Changing the Curricular Landscape: Winnipeg and Edmonton.....	 82
4.1 Children of the Earth High School – Winnipeg, Manitoba.....	83
4.1.1 Red – History.....	87
4.1.2 Black – Challenges, Dark Period of Implementation.....	90
4.1.3 Blue and White – Philosophical “Colours”.....	96
4.1.4 Green – Benefit to Community.....	100
4.1.5 Métis Sash – The Final Threads.....	104
4.2 Amiskwaciy Academy – Edmonton, Alberta.....	105
4.2.1 Red – History.....	108
4.2.2 Black – Challenges, Dark Period of Implementation.....	112
4.2.3 Blue and White – Philosophical “Colours”.....	116
4.3.4 Green – Benefit to Community.....	121
4.4.5 Métis Sash – The Final Threads.....	125
 Chapter Five – Envisioning New Possibilities: The Prince George Experience.....	 131

5.1 Prince George, British Columbia.....	131
5.1.1 Red- History.....	131
5.1.2 Black – Challenges, Dark Period of Implementation.....	136
5.1.3 Blue and White – Philosophical Colours.....	144
5.1.4 Green – Benefit to Community.....	151
5.1.5 The Métis Sash – The Final Threads.....	154
Chapter Six – Weaving the Sash Together: Conclusion and Recommendations for Pedagogical Progression - Bridging the Divide Within a Contemporary Canadian Community.....	158
6.1 Conclusion.....	158
6.2 Recommendations.....	174
Works Cited.....	178
Appendix A.....	183
Appendix B.....	184
Appendix C.....	185

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I would like to acknowledge the territory of the Lheidli T'enneh Nation. It is in their land that the community of Prince George has been built and where I have had the fortune to live, work and be educated.

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## **Chapter One - Introduction**

### **Background**

I have chosen to write my Masters Thesis in the field of Aboriginal Education. Choosing to complete my thesis in this area of study was an effortless decision. The education of Aboriginal people is something that I am wholeheartedly committed to through my family, my career and all the relationships I hold in my life.<sup>1</sup> My own personal background, along with the educational and employment experiences I have had in Prince George all influenced my decision to explore the topic of Aboriginal Choice Schools.<sup>2</sup>

I am an Aboriginal female of Métis ancestry who began University with the intention of ultimately becoming a high school teacher. However, as is the case with many University students, my path towards completing an education degree has taken on other routes: a career, meeting my husband Andrew Robinson of the Nisga'a Nation, and us starting a family, and a desire to pursue graduate studies. Although my graduate studies were halted for a period of time with the births of our two children, I never lost focus that I am committed to continuing to serve the environment of Aboriginal learning in whatever capacity I am able. This leads me to this point in my post-secondary education: my goal is to contribute, and hopefully improve educational opportunities for all students, especially those of Aboriginal ancestry.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this work, I use the term "Aboriginal" to include all students who self-identify as Indigenous, First Nations (status and non-status), Métis, Inuit, or Native.

<sup>2</sup> The terms "Aboriginal Choice School" or "Provincial Aboriginal School" are utilized interchangeably throughout this document. The most important thing that distinguishes an Aboriginal Choice School or Provincial Aboriginal School from other Band operated or Private First Nations Schools is they are schools that have an Aboriginal philosophy as their foundation, and are publicly funded and belong to a Public School District or the Province where the school is included as part of that operational structure.



As I look back over the last six years since I completed my undergraduate degree, I realize that my interest in Aboriginal Education began long before I became a graduate student at the University of Northern British Columbia. I am myself Aboriginal, but I did not find out that I am Métis until I was about twelve years old. It was around this age that my mom, Patrice Michelle Caden, found her birth mother and discovered she is Métis. My mom was born in St. Boniface, a small French Canadian community outside of Winnipeg and her family is from St. Vital, Manitoba. She was adopted when she was six weeks old by a non-Aboriginal couple. My mom was always told that she was French and American because that was the only information that her adoptive parents were given about her heritage. She tells me about the prejudice that existed as she was growing up towards “half-breeds”<sup>3</sup> and how she believes the Children’s Aid Society was trying to secure potential parents for Aboriginal babies by not telling adopting parents that children like her were Métis. As a result, my mom grew up in Winnipeg and Calgary separated from her culture and unaware of her heritage even though she visibly looks like a Métis woman. She met and married my father, John Caden (who is of European ancestry) in 1977 and they raised me, my brother and my sister in Smithers, British Columbia. From the time I found out about my heritage, I have been on a journey of self-discovery and self-reflection where I am constantly growing and learning about my history and myself.

I have faced many of my own personal struggles with identifying myself as an Aboriginal person because I felt as though I did not have the right to embrace that part of my identity since I did not grow up within my culture. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith says, “For some Indigenous students one of the first issues to be confronted is their own

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<sup>3</sup> “Half-breed” is often used as a derogatory term that was and is used to describe those of mixed European and Native heritage and historically has been associated with Métis people.

identity as Indigenous and their connected identities to other Indigenous peers” (Tuhiwai Smith 1999:136). Since I, like my mom, grew up being visibly Aboriginal, the discovery of our heritage was something that has had a dramatic impact on the course of my life. I felt an overwhelming sense of needing to know more of my history and as I grew older, I made it a priority to learn and know my mom’s personal background and this “other” family that I am related to, but did not previously know. I continuously contemplated what my heritage should mean to me as an Aboriginal person.

When I started attending UNBC in 1995 I came to understand how I could be empowered through my own educational progression as an Aboriginal person at the post-secondary level. I began to free myself of the burden of feeling that that I should not identify myself as Métis, or that I could not relate to the experiences of other Aboriginal learners. I chose to complete my undergraduate degree, with a double major in History and First Nations Studies, and I was enlightened and inspired to embrace a part of myself that I was never sure how to include in my life. I now understand that choosing to pursue the First Nations Studies program was not only an educational choice, but also a choice that reflects the support and reassurance that I needed to continue working in the field of Aboriginal Education, which is so important to me and my identity.

Consequently, it was in my undergraduate studies that I began pursuing the topic of Aboriginal Education and this is where I believe my research for this thesis began. I think that I was desperately trying to understand the depths of the experience that Aboriginal people had, and are still having, within our educational system in Canada. I wanted to be better prepared to be a teacher and an advocate for Aboriginal youth within the public school system, and to be able to educate the larger public school community

about Aboriginal learners. Ultimately, it became necessary for me to do this study to further understand my own history and how the educational experiences of Aboriginal people within Canada impact our present generation of Indigenous youth.

I graduated with my undergraduate degree in May 2001 and began my graduate studies the following semester. Then in January 2002, I was employed by School District No. 57 as an Aboriginal Education Worker. It was while working in this position of supporting Aboriginal students at the secondary level that I realized how much I am able to contribute to the educational journey of Indigenous youth within the community of Prince George even as I was continuing my own education in graduate studies. As an Aboriginal Education Worker I supported Aboriginal students who face unique challenges on a daily basis while they pursued their educational endeavours during their secondary schooling years.

Some of the unique challenges facing Aboriginal students are explained in a study completed by the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) titled, “Educational Transitions for First Nations Learners: Transitions and Interventions.” This study describes some of the challenges as: transitioning from rural or band operated schools to an urban public school system; a misunderstanding by teachers, administrators and fellow students of the cultural context that Aboriginal students enter the learning environment from; and feelings of alienation and isolation that transfer into a disconnection with the learning environment (Matthew 2001: 30 -32). For the purposes of the above-mentioned study, FNESC characterizes that, “First Nations Learners, as a group, fit the definition of at-risk learners and...First Nations people fit the description of a segment of society that is faced with poverty and an environment fraught with a variety

of economic, health, social and cultural challenges” (Matthew 2001: 8). I am grateful that the School District gave me the opportunity and privilege to work with Aboriginal students in a supportive role as an Aboriginal Education Worker while some students were confronted with unique and difficult circumstances.

The First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) in 2001, says that “Aboriginal Support Workers are identified by students as key members of their support network: students find in these individuals someone they can rely on to be there for them over the course of their schooling” (Matthew 2001: 38). FNESC notes that Aboriginal Support Workers are “key in terms of promoting home and school and school to school communication, and in giving the students individual support” (Matthew 2001: 38). In School District No. 57 of Prince George, Aboriginal Education Workers are utilized in several areas of the school to act as a liaison for the Aboriginal students and bring culture and sensitivity into the school. Whether I provided support at the student’s home, with Administration or teachers, with the course content, or with social or emotional issues, my students enjoyed the opportunities I brought to them at the school where they could experience Aboriginal culture and can feel proud to be strong members of the school community.

It was during my employment with School District No. 57 that the concept of an “Aboriginal Choice School” was brought to my attention and I became immediately engaged with trying to educate myself and understand what exactly an Aboriginal Choice School is and what it would have to offer Aboriginal students as well as the community at large. I learned that fundamentally, the biggest difference between an Aboriginal Choice School and a standard public school or even a private or Band operated school, is that it is

a school within a public school district that incorporates an Aboriginal philosophy within its foundation. I initiated the research directly related to this topic during my employment with School District No. 57 where I worked with secondary students. This research continued during my most recent employment at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) where I worked with post-secondary Aboriginal learners as a part-time Sessional Instructor for the Northern Advancement Program.

The Northern Advancement Program at UNBC serves northern and Aboriginal students as they make their transition from their home communities to University. Students in the Northern Advancement Program are offered an opportunity to receive additional support during their first year of studies at UNBC and also take two courses that are designed to ease the transition to University life. These two courses, Arts 101 and Arts 102, are the courses I taught during my employment at UNBC and it was while working in this position that I could offer support to Aboriginal post-secondary students. I did this by participating in the organization and delivery of extra-curricular activities, providing the students with assistance in accessing other University services through referrals and accompanying them to service providers, and also by making myself available to them in whatever capacity I was able. Thus, UNBC gave me an opportunity similar to the School District, where as the Instructor for the Northern Advancement Program, I was able to be in a role of support during the student's first year at UNBC. I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to welcome these Aboriginal learners into our institution in their pursuits of higher education.

The supportive roles I carried out with the School District and the University had a profound effect on increasing my interest in researching the topic of Aboriginal Choice

Schools. With these employment experiences I realized both personally and professionally that it is imperative that the academic, social and emotional needs of First Nations learners be given special attention while cultural differences become honoured both inside and outside of the classroom. Consequently, all of my experiences reaffirmed my belief that Aboriginal Choice Schools are a unique opportunity to provide quality and choice to secondary learners within a Public School District.

While simultaneously raising our children, working, and writing this thesis I have utilized a combination of experience and education that includes extensive research to produce a valuable MA thesis on the topic of implementing an Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George. I have always strongly believed that in order for First Nations curriculum to be taught in a manner that is most effective it should be taught in a way where Aboriginal people are included in the process. Because of my employment experience, I can personally attest to the fact that high school students respond well to Aboriginal-based curriculum and support when it is offered to them at school and take advantage of the opportunity to participate in cultural events, or Aboriginal-based, academic courses such as First Nations Studies 12. Aboriginal Choice Schools are one way to integrate an Aboriginal approach to learning and have Aboriginal people at the forefront of a student's educational experience.

It was almost three years ago that Paul Strickland stated in the *Prince George Citizen*, "The proposed Aboriginal Education Centre in Prince George, a secondary school with an Aboriginal cultural focus, would be the first of its kind in the province" (Strickland May 27, 2004: 1). During this time of the initial stages of my research, I was excited to read this and I felt that our School District would be extremely fortunate to

have the opportunity to utilize the knowledge and talents of Aboriginal people in our community while delivering a school curriculum that is equivalent to what students learn in a conventional secondary school. School Board trustee Michelle Marrelli added, “If the provincial government came on side with us, together with the Aboriginal Education Board and the Prince George school Board, we have **a chance to make a dramatic difference in the lives of these kids**” (Marrelli May 27, 2004: 1, emphasis added). I believed that our community was indeed making headway in making an Aboriginal School a reality for our students.

However, soon after the media in Prince George revealed that an Aboriginal Choice School might be established, I began to sense conflicting responses to the initial, positive undertones that got me excited in the first place. For instance, when the concept of an Aboriginal Choice School was discussed with my students and co-workers, I realized that establishing such an institution in Prince George was going to face some obstacles before our community would whole-heartedly accept such a school. While I definitely had students who were excited about the opportunity to attend an Aboriginal-based school, I also had many students who did not want to be removed, or feel like they had to be removed, from their current school regardless of their performance and success just because they are Aboriginal. Likewise, I had parents who did not want to see their children segregated from a regular public school because they are Aboriginal. I personally believe this is reflective of the fact that Aboriginal students have historically been marginalized within education through experiences such as Residential Schools. Even at Amiskwaciy Academy, the Aboriginal Choice School in Edmonton, Phyllis

Cardinal, the first Principal of Amiskwaciy Academy, notes, “Skeptics remain, including those still haunted by memories of segregated schools” (Mahaffy 2003: 16).

The notion of segregation does not lie solely with parents and students. Teachers and Administrators who believe that it is important that Aboriginal people are a part of the mainstream school community do not necessarily want to see Aboriginal students move to an Aboriginal Choice School. So while the idea was supported by the Aboriginal Education Board and the School District Trustees, Paul Michel, Mavis Erickson and Paul Madak note in their report titled, “Why an Aboriginal Public School?: A Report to the Prince George School District No. 57 Aboriginal Education Board,” that after extended discussions about this opportunity, the school did not receive the necessary support it needed to be implemented (Michel, Erickson & Madak 2005: 5). It then became a reality to me that while I had my own reasons for believing that an Aboriginal Choice School was a necessary step in the advancement of Aboriginal Education, I had to re-examine why our community would be hesitant in implementing an Aboriginal Choice educational opportunity.

I know from personal experience that the Prince George School District does indeed service a large population of Aboriginal students and has always been progressive with their implementation of Aboriginal-based opportunities. This can be seen with the creation of an Aboriginal Education Board, having Ben Berland as an Aboriginal Liaison Worker and also having a large number of front-line workers employed as Aboriginal Education Workers within School District No. 57. What exactly would our district need to make the dream of having an Aboriginal Choice School become a reality?



Because of my employment and post-secondary education, I was aware that there are schools within Canada that have adopted the concept of an Aboriginal-based philosophy for the formal education of Aboriginal students. This approach to formal education is extremely valuable in the eyes of their founders. For example, in Edmonton Alberta, Amiskwaciy Academy, which is part of the Edmonton Public School system, states on their website that:

Long before history was recorded with pen and paper, Canada's Aboriginal people passed on their values, customs, knowledge and experience by example and through their gift of story telling. Amiskwaciy Academy was created to honour those traditions and to give students the opportunity to achieve academic excellence while learning to integrate respect, responsibility and balance into everything they do.

Amiskwaciy (pronounced a-misk-wa-chee) is the Cree word for Beaver Hills. This name is derived from Beaver Hills House, which is the name the Cree people used for early Edmonton. The name honours both Edmonton's history and the important role Aboriginal people played in shaping that history.

The Academy is open to any student with an interest in understanding the values and traditions of Aboriginal culture. Our unique mix of programming, options, activities, events and personal guidance is designed to give students an opportunity to understand and appreciate the past, while preparing them for the challenges of the future (Online 2006: <http://www.amiskwaciy.epsb.net>).

In Winnipeg, Manitoba there are two Aboriginal-based schools operating within the Inner city public school system. They are Children of the Earth High School and Niji Mahkwa Elementary. Michel, Erickson & Madak note, “while they are based on an Aboriginal philosophy of education, the programs they offer reflect the Educational Standards and Outcomes directed by the Province of Manitoba” and “The idea of an Aboriginal School is no different than the idea of establishing ‘community based schools’, ‘Traditional schools’, Montessori schools, and French Immersion schools within the public school system” (Michel, Erickson & Madak 2005: 12, 23). Likewise,

Phyllis Cardinal explains “We’re not a segregated school; we’re a school of choice” (Mahaffy 2003: 16). An Aboriginal School within a public school district then becomes another educational option for all students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

I began this thesis with the feeling that if one examines the history of Aboriginal Education, the need and urgency of an Aboriginal Choice School becomes obvious. Not only does the history of First Nations Education in Canada show how the policies to “educate” Native people were undeniably detrimental to so many facets of First Nations culture and well being, but it would also show how Aboriginal-based philosophies that are being incorporated into some contemporary classrooms could contribute to student success. Creating an opportunity in Prince George to incorporate such philosophies holistically within an entire school program would bring validity and strength to the inherent knowledge of Aboriginal people and the communities they are from.

Since we have strong examples in our country of success stories in regards to the implementation of Aboriginal Choice Schools within public school districts, I felt it would be a good idea to take a close look at the factors that contributed to their successful implementation and the obstacles they had to overcome to make their schools strong and integral components of the public-school community. I decided that this could be accomplished through a method of interviewing key people that have been involved in the process of creating Aboriginal Choice Schools and I began my research as to who these people are. By combining history, knowledge and stories, my objective was to bring forward a comprehensive approach to understanding the issues for implementing an Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George. I wanted my research to demonstrate that having an Aboriginal Choice School might be the first step in truly integrating and

accepting Aboriginal knowledge as valid in the process of learning and allowing Aboriginal students to feel a true sense of belonging in a public education system.

### Methodology/Methods

In this section of the chapter, I will discuss my research methodology and methods used to examine the issues influencing the implementation of Aboriginal Schools first by distinguishing the two terms from each other. Max van Manen explains the term “methodology” as follows:

“Methodology” refers to the philosophic framework...the methodology is the theory behind the method, including the study of what method one should follow and why... methodology means “pursuit of knowledge.” (van Manen 1997: 27-28)

On the other hand, the term “method” can be explained as encapsulating the “methodology” through the procedures and techniques that were undertaken in the research process and how the researcher arrives at the results of the research (van Manen 1997: 28). The remainder of this chapter will explain my methodological approach adopted within this work and the methods that were utilized to achieve my research goals.

In examining the factors that influence the implementation of an Aboriginal Choice School, it was necessary to approach this work in a qualitative research format. John Creswell says that “one undertakes qualitative research in a natural setting where the researcher is an instrument of data collection who gathers words or pictures, analyzes them inductively, focuses on the meaning of participants, and describes a process that is expressive and persuasive in language” (Creswell 1998: 14). For this qualitative study, the research was completed with a specific methodological approach in mind.

In regards to my methodology, I believe it is important to acknowledge that my research has operated within an academic structure where not all researchers are completing investigations that will directly impact their lives. Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes, “Most research methodologies assume that the researcher is an outsider able to observe without being implicated in the scene...other more critical approaches have made the **insider methodology** more acceptable in qualitative research” (Tuhiwai Smith 1999: 137, emphasis added). Therefore, in this research I am identifying myself as performing my research as an “insider” since I am a Métis woman (and therefore hold an inherent bias) and a former employee of School District No. 57 where I worked as an Aboriginal Education Worker. Linda Tuhiwai Smith says,

At a general level insider researchers have to have ways of thinking *critically* about their processes, their relationships and the quality of richness in their data and analysis. So too do outsiders, but the major difference is that insiders have to live with the consequences of their research on a day-to-day basis for ever more, and so do their families and communities. (Tuhiwai Smith 1999: 137, emphasis added)

I take the responsibility of this research very seriously and believe that it is imperative that I acknowledge the impact that one can have when attempting to provide ideas concerning the transformation of the delivery of education to Aboriginal students and the impact that may have on their communities. Again, Linda Tuhiwi Smith explains:

Insider research has to be ethical and respectful, as reflexive and critical, as outsider research. It also needs to be humble. It needs to be humble because the researcher belongs to the community as a member with a different set of roles, relationships, status and position...[t]his makes Indigenous research a highly political activity and while that is understood by very experienced non-Indigenous researchers and organizations it can also be seen as a threatening activity. (Tuhiwai Smith 1999: 139, 140)

Indeed, the community of Prince George that I call home for my family and myself will one day be the very place where my children will receive their own public school

education. Therefore, this makes me sensitive to the visionary process of increasing the success of Aboriginal students' schooling and I perceive my research as complimenting this process as I look at the issues for implementing an Aboriginal Choice School.

Also contributing to my methodology is that thematically, I approached this research in what Creswell calls a critical theoretic design:

themes a critical researcher might explore include the scientific study of social institutions and their transformations through interpreting the meaning of social life; the historical problems of domination, alienation, and social struggles; and a critique of society and the envisioning of new possibilities (Creswell 1998: 80)

Using critical theory, I directly address: *the historical problems of domination, alienation, and social struggles; and a critique of society and the envisioning of new possibilities*. Linda Tuhiwai Smith describes how:

One of the strategies which Indigenous peoples have employed effectively to bind people together politically is a strategy which asks that people imagine a future, that they rise above present day situations which are generally depressing, dream a new dream and set a new vision. (Tuhiwai Smith 1999: 152)

I document the fact that although some Aboriginal people find themselves in a discouraging situation when trying to succeed in the current education system, there are other possibilities and opportunities that contribute to the success and acceptance of Aboriginal knowledge as valid and worthy within our contemporary society.

With a critical methodological focus, I approach my research in two different ways. First, I reviewed literature from already researched material (secondary research) and second, I gathered information from interviews (primary research). In addition, the initial method of acquiring information for this thesis began by accessing secondary source material found in the library, newspapers, internet as well as through my employment experiences. The library was the largest source of my secondary material and this is represented in Chapters Two and Three where secondary research forms the

basis of the literature reviews these chapters present. Also, the library was where I was introduced to the book, *Making the Spirit Dance Within: Joe Duquette High School and an Aboriginal Community*<sup>4</sup> and although I realized that this book was not representative of an Aboriginal Choice School that belonged solely to a public school district or Province, it was extremely useful as a source where I could “read” about what an Aboriginal Choice School might represent in the early stages of my research.

I found the local newspaper, *The Prince George Citizen*, valuable in the initial stages of compiling information on the topic of Aboriginal Choice Schools as it gave insight into the local concerns regarding the possible establishment of this educational opportunity. The local paper reflected much of what I was hearing while employed as an Aboriginal Education Worker for School District No. 57 and it was the first place I read about Amiskwaciy Academy, the Aboriginal Choice School in Edmonton. Soon after reading about Amiskwaciy Academy, I was told about Children of the Earth High School, the Choice School in Winnipeg, through casual conversation with colleagues.

Information regarding both Children of the Earth and Amiskwaciy Academy was available on the internet and I was intrigued by the fact that Amiskwaciy Academy is a relatively new Aboriginal Choice School and that Children of the Earth High School has been in operation for over a decade. I was fascinated by the prospective learning opportunity that I could have if I were to research these schools and potentially conduct

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<sup>4</sup> Joe Duquette High School in Saskatoon is considered as an “Associate School” and operates under an umbrella that includes the Saskatoon Catholic School Board, the school council; and the Saskatoon Ministry of Education. Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis this school does not fall under the parameters of being considered a “Choice School” like Children of the Earth High School or Amiskwaciy Academy as it does not operate as a public school within a public school district. However, Joe Duquette High School is exemplary in terms of bringing forth cultural inclusion within main-stream academic curriculum and is used within Chapter Two as a reflection of an Aboriginally-based curriculum structure (see Caledon Institute of Social Policy “The Spirit is Still Dancing” <http://caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/duquette.pdf> accessed 14 April 2007).

interviews there. This helped me decide to include these schools in my study and led me to the primary research process.

The beginning of the primary research (which forms the bulk of Chapters Four and Five) started with defining with whom, where and when I should conduct the interviews. Since the thesis is focusing on the implementation of an Aboriginal Choice School, my interview participants were chosen on the basis of having experience with the implementation efforts with at least one of the following locations: Prince George, Winnipeg, or Edmonton. I wanted at least two individuals from each community represented in the research. Also, I knew the interview participants would have to be selected to satisfy the three essential requirements to having a successful interview. As defined by Rubin & Rubin:

1. They are knowledgeable about the cultural arena and the situation being studied
2. They are willing to talk
3. They represent the range of points of view on the issue at hand

(Rubin & Rubin 1995: 66)

With the assistance of my Supervisory Committee, I spent time designing interview questions that would address a broad range of issues regarding the implementation of Aboriginal Choice Schools and allow participants an opportunity to expand on any topics they felt were pertinent and relevant to my study.

One of the first issues that I was confronted with after seeking ethics approval from UNBC to conduct interviews for this study was realizing that both Edmonton and Winnipeg require a separate ethics approval from their School Districts for any research

requests. Therefore, before I could contact any potential interview participants from these locations and compile a list of interviewees, I completed separate research proposals for Edmonton Public Schools and Winnipeg School Division No. 1. It took months to process my research request before I could make contact with potential interviewees and in the end, I was pleased that both Edmonton Public Schools and the Winnipeg School Division No. 1 provided their own recommendations of who would be the most suitable for me to interview for my study. As a result, I made contact with the appropriate individuals based on each District's recommendations.

Recommendations from Winnipeg School Division No. 1 included: Pauline Clarke, Superintendent of Schools for the Inner-City District of the Winnipeg School Division and Lorne Belmore (Cree) who is Principal of Children of the Earth High School in Winnipeg School Division No. 1. My interview with Ms. Clarke took place at the Board Office of Winnipeg School Division No. 1 on January 15, 2007 and the interview with Mr. Belmore occurred at Children of the Earth High School that same day. Both participants were also contacted by telephone and e-mail before and after the interview was completed.

For Edmonton Public Schools, the recommendations were: Theresa Cardinal<sup>5</sup> (Cree) from the Treaty Six Saddle Lake First Nation in Alberta and Department Head of Cultural Services for Edmonton Public Schools; Gloria Chalmers, Director of Programs for Edmonton Public Schools; and Mary Stevens,<sup>6</sup> an Aboriginal Educator from

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<sup>5</sup> I was extremely fortunate to have Ross Hoffman, Associate Professor in the First Nations Studies Program at UNBC to assist me in making my initial contact with Theresa Cardinal at her home when I was trying to set up an interview time with her. This greatly eased my introduction to Amiskwaciy when I arrived in Edmonton as having a personal contact can greatly aid the interview and research process.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Stevens is a pseudonym for this interview participant, an Aboriginal Educator from Edmonton who chose to remain anonymous, and she will be referred to as such throughout this thesis.



Edmonton. On October 27, 2006 I completed an interview with Theresa Cardinal at Amiskwaciy Academy; an interview with Gloria Chalmers at Edmonton Public School's Board Office; and an interview with Mary Stevens at an undisclosed location. As with participants in Winnipeg, interviewees made themselves available to me before and after the interview were completed via telephone and e-mail.

Although going through a separate ethics approval process in order to research the Aboriginal Choice institutions in Edmonton and Winnipeg slowed down my research progress somewhat, completing the research proposals for each of these District's led to the invaluable opportunity of being able to travel to Winnipeg and Edmonton and visit Children of the Earth High School and Amiskwaciy Academy so I could see these institutions first-hand. Having visited the institutions, not only was I able to interview key educators that are knowledgeable about the topic, but also I am able to provide my own interpretation of my experiences at these schools.

Compiling my list of potential interviewees in Prince George was somewhat easier. I knew immediately that I wanted to interview Ben Berland (Dakelh and Cree), who is the Aboriginal Liaison for School District No. 57 in Prince George. As a former employee of School District No. 57, I was aware that Ben was involved in the preliminary discussions about having an Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George and I felt his experience would be valuable for this thesis. I was able to interview Mr. Berland on June 8, 2006 at the Prince George School Board Office and afterwards we continued having conversations about this topic during the completion of this thesis through telephone and e-mail. Also, I was aware that Paul Michel (Secwepmec), Director of the First Nations Centre at UNBC, had also participated in discussions about

creating an Aboriginal Choice School. Along with Mavis Erickson and Paul Madak, Paul Michel has written a report to the Aboriginal Education Board at the Prince George School District on why an Aboriginal Choice School is an important concept (see Michel, Erickson and Madak 2005). When Paul Michel became aware of my research interests, he offered to be a participant in this study. The interview with Paul Michel took place at UNBC on June 19, 2006 in Prince George.

Then following the advice and support from Monty Palmantier (Tsilqot'in/Secwepmec), one of my thesis committee members, I interviewed Trish Rosborough (Kwakwiltl), Director of the Aboriginal Education Enhancement Branch on July 24 2006; and Dr. Lorna Williams (St'at'yem'c), Assistant Professor and Director of Aboriginal Teacher Education at the University of Victoria where she holds a Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Knowledge and Learning on July 29, 2006. Both individuals were involved in the initial discussions of implementing an Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George. As Monty knew these interview participants in Victoria personally and their involvement with the discussions of having an Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George, he made my meeting and interviewing them much easier by initiating our discussion via e-mail before I arrived in Victoria. Because I wanted to ensure I was being accurate with the transcriptions, contact with these participants continued after the interviews were completed through e-mail.

Therefore interviews that form the bulk of Chapter Four and Chapter Five took place in four different places (Edmonton, Winnipeg, Prince George and Victoria)<sup>7</sup> with nine interview participants in total. I provided my participants with seven interview

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<sup>7</sup> I was fortunate to receive bursaries, scholarships and SSHRC funding during my studies, which made my visiting these locations possible.

questions that had been created in consultation with my Supervisory Committee (See Appendix A). All interviewees received a copy of the interview questions, a consent form, and an information sheet on what my thesis is about and why I am performing the research. The interviews were performed in a structured, one-on-one environment where the interviewees' answers were tape-recorded. In the consent form, the issue of confidentiality and sensitivity was addressed as this is of the utmost importance (See Appendix B). I believe that the interviewees needed to feel that they could be honest and as forthcoming as they thought necessary and confidentiality is crucial in aiding this outcome. All participants were offered an option to remain anonymous within the consent form signed before conducting the interviews. One participant chose the option of being anonymous, and Mary Stevens is the made-up name we chose.

After completing each interview, the words of my participants were transcribed. To ensure that the interviews were being documented accurately, I had someone else<sup>8</sup> listen to, and aid in the transcription of these tapes. Deleting the real name of Mary Stevens from the audiotape ensured the confidentiality of this participant. I also made a final copy of the transcriptions available to all my interview participants for their approval in case they wanted to make any changes before I put their words into this thesis. Therefore, the transcriptions have been thoroughly listened to, read-over and slightly copy-edited.

Once my interviews were transcribed, I was confronted with deciding what method I should use to incorporate the data I received from my interviewees in a way that could honour an Aboriginal tradition. After countless hours of thinking and deliberating

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<sup>8</sup> Tim Lee, who is a long-time close friend, also listened to the tapes and helped me with the transcription process as well as the insertion of some of the graphs and tables for this thesis.

with myself, I decided that it is important that I utilize the interviews and my own experiences found within them as a continuation of the enhancement of my own life journey. I recalled a conversation that I had with Tina Fraser (Maori), a Sessional professor in the First Nations Studies Program at UNBC and BC Initiatives Research Manager, who suggested to me during a conversation we were having surrounding First Nations Theory that I could possibly incorporate the Métis Sash as a theoretical framework for my study. While I thought that was a fantastic idea, I felt I was too far along within my critical theoretical approach to back up and try to integrate the Sash as a framework for the thesis. But because I feel that it is necessary that I utilize something that reflects my own heritage and respect for my culture, and my weaving together this heritage with the issues of Aboriginal Choice Schools, I decided that the Métis Sash (see Figure 1) would be an excellent way to categorize my themes and my interviewees responses while using their words to speak for themselves.

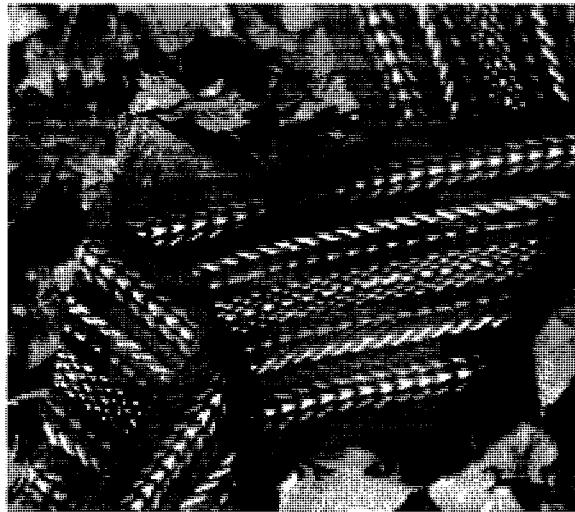


Figure 1 (Fort McMurray Métis Local #1935)

The Métis Sash is something that holds both cultural and sentimental value to Métis people across Canada. As described by the Fort McMurray Métis Local #1935:

The Métis people are known for their finger woven sashes. They were traditionally tied around the waist with the fringes hanging down in order to hold a coat closed. Women have found a style of hanging the sash over the shoulder and connecting it at the side of the waist. Today the sash is made of wool and is approximately three metres long but before the introduction of wool the sash was made with plant fibres. The Métis people are not the only ones that have used the sash. The sash is shared with two other groups. One group is the Eastern Woodland Indians who were the first to wear the sash in the 19th century before any one else. The other group that used the sash was the French Canadians during the uprising in 1837 called the Lower Canadian rebellion. The three groups have the same outlook towards the sash in that it holds cultural distinction and pride.

Fort McMurray Métis Local #1935

One will see the Sash proudly worn and displayed at Métis celebrations as it is a part of the Métis cultural pride and integrity.

In the end, I felt that this is an extremely effective way to display the pride I hold for my heritage and the strong influence it has on the choices I make in my life today. The Métis Sash remains a significant component of Métis culture and it is part of not only my history, but also my children's history and my family's history. I feel the colours of the Sash are a powerful way to weave an Aboriginal philosophy into something of significance in this writing and that the voices of my interviewees can be blended into colours that represent the knowledge that flows through their words. Essentially, my interviewee's stories fundamentally form the experience of the history, challenges, dreams and aspirations of establishing Aboriginal Choice Schools. Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains, "Story telling, oral histories...have become an integral part of Indigenous research. Each individual story is so powerful" (1999: 144). This is precisely how I feel about my interviewee's influences on this research and within the formation of the Métis Sash. By using this model, the responses my interviewees gave to the questions I asked during the interview are positioned within a framework where words create colour and colour becomes an interwoven and meaningful reflection of how important it is to

continue the discussion of an Aboriginal Choice School in our community. The Métis Sash is an effective way to honour the culture, tradition and history of this strong group of Aboriginal people.

The Sash has become the model for incorporating my research into this writing and I want to provide a framework to show the method of weaving my findings into this thesis. The colours of the Métis Sash are: red, black, blue, white, and green. I use red to symbolize the history of the Métis and by extension Aboriginal people and black<sup>9</sup> symbolizes the “dark” period of Métis and Aboriginal history. I utilize red and black in Chapter Two and in this review of the history of Aboriginal Education in Canada because it includes a very dark, black period of Residential Schools. In Chapter Three, red as well as blue and white are used to describe the strength of Aboriginal ways of knowing. I use these colours together because not only does this chapter include some of the knowledge and history of Aboriginal people, but since “blue and white” are the colours of the Métis flag and a symbol for Métis people, I thought it was appropriate to align these colours with a description of theory and models of Aboriginal education as symbols of what Aboriginal Education represents.

For the primary interviews found in Chapter Four and Five, red is associated with the answers provided to me to the following questions:

1. Where are you currently employed and how long have you been working here?
2. What role have you played in developing an Aboriginal School?

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<sup>9</sup> The colour black on the Métis Sash can also be represented by the colour yellow

I feel that the colour red and the history of the Métis can be aligned with the identity of my interviewees and their own “history” with the development of an Aboriginal Choice School.

The colour black in the Métis Sash symbolizes the dark period of Métis/Aboriginal history and I believe this fits with the history of Aboriginal education as described in the secondary research in Chapters One and Two. For my primary research, the colour black fits with the question that I asked my participants about the challenges faced during the creation of an Aboriginal Choice School. The question was:

3. What challenges have you encountered in the development of such a school?

My interviewees provided me with detailed information as to what the most prominent challenges were during the initiation of an Aboriginal Choice School and I believe that the black colour effectively reflects much of my interviewees’ experiences.

The next rows of colours in the Métis Sash are blue and white. These colours symbolize the colours of the Métis flag and as representative of a flag, I have categorized these colours with my questions regarding what the vision for Aboriginal Choice Schools are and what they provide students physically, emotionally, culturally and spiritually. I utilize these colours together in this thesis as representation of philosophy and the “colours” of the philosophy of the discussed Aboriginal Choice Schools.

These interview questions are:

4. What factors do you consider to be integral in providing an environment where Aboriginal learners are delivered an education immersed in Aboriginal Philosophy?
5. How is an Aboriginal School reflective of this?

Essentially, blue and white become representative as a framework for how the philosophical framework of an Aboriginal Choice School is satisfying the needs of Aboriginal learners.

Finally, the last colour of the Métis Sash is green. Green within the Métis Sash signifies fertility, growth and prosperity, and is relevant for the question I asked in regards to the visioning of how these schools are changing the lives of Aboriginal people and their communities. Also, green represents the honouring and protecting of the earth and how Métis/First Nations knowledge prevails in this endeavour.<sup>10</sup> The “green” question I asked participants is:

6. How do you see Aboriginal Schools creating positive change for Aboriginal people and their communities?

The responses to these questions were examined thoroughly in order to identify common themes that emerged and the Métis Sash is utilized to create a concrete way to engage with the interviews in Chapters Four and Five. I found this to be an extremely worthwhile approach to this analysis as it forced me to become very familiar with the interviewees’ answers, and therefore I believe that this approach strengthened my interpretation. The final result is that in the chapters where I present my findings from the interviews, the answers are delivered by the thematic colours so readers are given the opportunity to experience each individual’s unique perspective on the topic of Aboriginal Choice Schools as their experiential knowledge forms the bulk the chapters four and five.

The first part of Chapter Four provides a detailed account of what it took to establish the Aboriginal Choice Schools in Edmonton and Winnipeg. Through the

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<sup>10</sup> My Supervisor, Dr. Antonia Mills, encouraged me to mention this element within my utilization of the colour green. I believe that acknowledging Aboriginal approaches to protecting the earth is an important and relevant part of a holistic perspective regarding Aboriginal Education.



process of interviews and from visiting the institutions, I describe the implementation of these schools, the challenges that were overcome and what a culturally-based option of education in Edmonton and Winnipeg looks like.

In Chapter Five, I recount the experiences of individuals involved in the initial concept of an Aboriginal School in Prince George. This includes research that has been performed by School District No. 57, as well as the primary interviews I completed in Prince George and Victoria B.C. Chapter Six provides examples of the similarities and differences between the communities of Edmonton, Winnipeg and Prince George in their attempts to establish an Aboriginal Choice School and my own conclusions and recommendations in regards to what the next steps could be for the community of Prince George.

Thus this thesis uses a qualitative, critical theoretical approach, to study “Education Transformation: Issues for Implementing an Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George, B.C.” I have collected data through multiple sources of information such as documents and interviews through which I provided in-depth material to put the topic in context (Creswell 1998: 36, 39). For this thesis, the thorough analysis of Aboriginal Education since colonization will provide the reader with sufficient knowledge to understand the context and the necessity of having changes in Aboriginal Education within our community. Aboriginal Education is a topic with clear boundaries that enables me to approach it from both a historical and contemporary perspective.

The education of the Indigenous peoples of this country has impacted the successes and failures of Canada’s First Nations. I am directly addressing the issue of creating an Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George and the obstacles that have

hindered its implementation. The inductive method of this research will hopefully shed further light on the concept of Aboriginal Education and the necessity of making it a priority for Canadian society.

I believe that this thesis could potentially be used by the BC Ministry of Education and all of the public schools within the province for reference on the topic of Aboriginal Choice Schools. I will provide a copy to School District No. 57, to the Districts in Edmonton and Winnipeg where I performed my primary research, the BC Provincial Government, and to all my interviewees. I plan to make this thesis available to the Aboriginal organizations within British Columbia, such as the Assembly of First Nations, the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, the First Nations Education Steering Committee and have it available for the general public to use so that it may benefit the future of Aboriginal Education.

The next chapter, Chapter Two, describes the context of the historical experience of Aboriginal people with the Canadian education system as the history of Aboriginal Education is directly related to the current issues influencing the implementation of an Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George, B.C. Chapter Two represents the colours red and black of the Métis Sash.

## **Chapter Two**

### **A History of Aboriginal Policy and Aboriginal Education: *Giving Context to Our Needs of Addressing Aboriginal Education in Canada***

Unfortunately in Canada, Aboriginal people participate in an education system that has a long history of dramatically and negatively impacting Aboriginal culture. Initially, missionaries sought to convert the “heathen” Indian and administered their Christian ethics through instruction. Then, in collaboration with the federal government, these missionaries created Residential Schools where Native people would be separated from their culture to learn the values of the Euro-Canadian. In this way, the government hoped that Aboriginal people would become assimilated through Eurocentric indoctrination. When mission schools and Residential Schools proved to be a failure, the Canadian government upheld their fiduciary duty to provide all First Nations people with a “quality” public education and integrated Aboriginal students into the formal schooling that is being delivered to all of Canadian society. Now, more and more, we are witnessing a new birth of Aboriginal education that is being delivered by Aboriginal educators to Aboriginal students where the conventional curriculum standards are being met, but traditions, culture and language play an integral role in the curriculum.

An examination of the policy towards Aboriginal Education in Canada shows that the primary goal of the Canadian state has been to deliver a system of education where Eurocentric ideas would ultimately form the dominant mode of thought for all students. The colonizing powers established a dominant relationship with Aboriginal people where the traditional First Nations method of education would be controlled and monitored by a colonial power who gave no consideration to the traditional educational practices and wisdom of the original occupants of the land. Instead, First Nations people were forced

by state policy, into a system of schooling where children did not receive the same instruction as the non-Aboriginal population in Canada in mission schools and Residential Schools (Nicholas 2001: 12). Although not as obvious as it once was, (as in the case of mission schools and Residential Schools), due to state policy Aboriginal children still endure a system of education where institutional racism and class oppression persist, leaving the students with feelings of isolation and alienation in an educational system where they are supposed to be “integrated” (Nicholas 2001: 15). As a result of these educational practices and government Indian policy, and the intergenerational impact of the Residential School Syndrome, many Aboriginal children are not succeeding in the public school system and feel helpless in ever becoming active participants in our modern society (Nicholas 2001: 16).

Initially, this historical analysis of Aboriginal Education in Canada is representative of the colours red and black on the Métis Sash. I will provide a history of Canada’s Indian Policy to expose that blatant racism and oppression embedded in the law of the state has impacted Aboriginal education. Then, I will explain how these laws created by Canadian Indian Policy created various systems of schooling that were foreign to Aboriginal children and have resulted in a struggle for First Nations people to reclaim their place within the formal education system. The alienation and isolation Aboriginal people have endured in mission schools, Residential Schools, and modern day public schools will be exposed and examples will be provided to show how this has impacted the contemporary success of Aboriginal students in formal Canadian educational institutions. The colour black represents all of this. Finally, this chapter will explore how First Nations people may overcome feeling like outsiders within modern societal

institutions through educational opportunities such as a First Nations Choice School. Here, through the example of Joe Duquette High School, an Aboriginal School in Saskatoon Saskatchewan that is referred to as an “Associate School,” I will show how Aboriginal people can become successful in their educational endeavours by becoming key players in delivering formal educational opportunities and this represents the colour red.

### **Canadian Indian Policy: Transition, Assimilation and Integration**

The education of Aboriginal people in Canada is a direct reflection of past and present state policy. It must be acknowledged that the structure of Canadian Indian policy results in the reality that there are Indigenous people who find themselves in a unique relationship with the Canadian state that has been consistently harmful to their recovery from colonization. Since the state is responsible for this relationship and the education delivered to First Nations people, it is important to examine the history of how and why the Canadian state exerted such a profound and detrimental authority upon the original inhabitants of the land. More importantly, before examining the role of education and the state, it must be pointed out that institutional racism and class oppression exist in government policy towards First Nations people and how this has therefore made its way into the classrooms of Aboriginal students.

During what Armitage calls the transitional period from the Royal Proclamation of 1763 to Canadian Social Policy of 1830-1867, the federal government developed legislation that stopped the advancement of First Nations people within their own society and instead, attempted to assimilate First Nations people into the European-Canadian one (Armitage 1995: 74). Andrew Armitage notes, “the Royal Proclamation of 1763

remained the legal base for the conduct of British Indian Policy” (Armitage 1995: 74). In his work, Armitage describes some of colonial policies of 1837 based on the Royal Proclamation of 1763 found in colonial correspondence:

The giving of ‘presents’ in place of ‘substantial Advantages of Territory’ are to be replaced by an administration aimed at ‘inducing the Indians to change their present ways for more civilized Habits of Life, namely their Settlements... compact settlements should be formed...giving them Agricultural Implements, but no other ‘Description of Presents.’ (Armitage 1995: 75)

In regards to education, Armitage cites the following policy recommendation from the Canadian Governor, Lord Gosford:

Believing it...to be incumbent on the State to prepare the younger Generation of Indians for another and more useful Mode of Life, the Committee [Committee of the Executive Council, Quebec City 1836] would earnestly press upon His Majesty’s Government the necessity of establishing schools among them in which the Rudiments of Education shall be taught...it is hoped that the Clergy will give their aid in recommending and enforcing the Measure, as a necessary Part of any Plan for assimilating the Indian as much and as soon as possible... (Armitage 1995: 75-76)

The Bagot Commission formally recognized the endorsement of the Residential School as being a central instrument of social policy towards First Nations people in 1842 (Armitage 1995: 77).

This early time period is a crucial component in the establishment of the Canadian state’s authority over First Nations people; colonial administration decided it had the right to govern Aboriginals and enacted legislation in the 1850’s that would have a single, unified social policy towards Native people that established a legal definition of an Indian within the Indian Act (Armitage 1995: 77, 83). Armitage cites the following legislation of 1850:

[Indians may be defined as] persons of Indian blood, reputed to belong to the particular body or Tribe of Indians interested in such lands and their descendants...persons intermarried with any such Indians and residing amongst

them, and the descendants of all such persons... persons residing among such Indians whose parents on either side were or are Indians of such Body or Tribe, or entitled to be considered such: And...persons adopted in infancy by any such Indians, and residing in the villages or upon the lands of such Tribe or Body of Indians and their descendants. (Armitage 1995: 83)

Prior to this period, no legal definition of an Indian was needed, as individual First Nations defined themselves and even though they were referred to in a collective manner, they were still recognized individually as separate peoples (Armitage 1995: 83).

In 1850, the colonizers enacted legislation that would mark the beginning of a process of institutional racism with the 1857 Act for the Gradual Assimilation of the Indian tribes and the 1859 Civilization and Enfranchisement Act. Wotherspoon and Satzewich note that “the 1857 Act for the Gradual Civilization of the Indian Tribes clearly suggested, in a racist fashion, that Indian people were uncivilized human beings who required considerable coaching to be elevated to a social position in which they would be comparable to Europeans” (Wotherspoon and Satzewich 1993: 16). In hindering First Nations people at the onset of Canadian social policy from continuing to be societies within their own right, the state had assimilationist motives in mind and wanted the Eurocentric mode of thought to be the only one used in the land they were colonizing.

The phase that Andrew Armitage calls the period of assimilation (1867-1950) was given that title because of the deliberate and conscious efforts to acculturate Native people through state policy and education. The policy of assimilation carried out by the colonial government was not one that sought the physical annihilation of Indian people, but a cultural change that would make Native people indistinguishable from other Canadians (Wotherspoon and Satzewich 1993: 28). This was implemented through the

Indian Act of 1867. Armitage describes how “at Confederation, control of First Nations matters was assumed by the federal government, which, under section 91(24) of the Constitution Act, 1867, was given jurisdiction for ‘all Matters’ coming under the subject ‘Indians and Lands reserved for Indians’” (Armitage 1995: 77). By 1867 statutory consolidation of the Indian Act occurred. This single act made stipulations for:

The definition of ‘Indians’; the recognition, protection, management, and sale of reserves; the payments of moneys to the support and benefit of Indians, including, specifically, **‘contribution to schools frequented by such Indians’**; the election of councils and chiefs; Indian Privileges, particularly the exemption from taxation and from debt obligations of all types; provision for receiving the ‘evidence of non-Christian Indians’ in criminal prosecutions; special measures for the control of intoxicants; and provisions for ‘enfranchisement’ (Armitage 1995: 78 emphasis added).

In doing this, Indians became subject to the federal government’s Department of Indian Affairs that was responsible for the daily lives of Native people (Wotherspoon and Satzewich 1993: 29). As time went on and the government discovered facets of Indian culture that were interfering with the assimilation, they simply amended the Act to ban traditional ceremonies such as the potlatch and the Sun Dance (Armitage 1995: 78). By ensuring that cultural activities were illegal, the Canadian government hoped to be able to more easily impose Western culture upon First Nations people.

A profound part of assimilation are the tactics used by the Canadian government to see that “enfranchisement” of Indian people occurred in Canada. Menno Boldt and J. Anthony Long note, “without doubt, the most stable and persistent aspect of Canada’s Indian policy, at least since the Second World War, has been to eliminate special Indian status” (Boldt and Long 1988: 41). By receiving a University education, or living outside the reserve or country for five years or more, an Indian was no longer an “Indian” as defined by the government and was therefore supposedly “assimilated” into Western



culture (Wotherspoon and Satzewich 1993: 30). The enfranchisement tactic that would have the most long-lasting and ill effect on communities was that of section 12(1)(b) of the Indian Act that provided for the loss of Indian status if an Indian woman married a non-Indian man (Wotherspoon and Satzewich 1993: 30). Since this did not apply to Indian men who married a non-Indian woman, this section of the Indian Act has exposed much of the gender biased, oppressive measures of this act put forth by the Canadian government. Wotherspoon and Satzewich describe three convictions that federal officials held that determined the content of their legislation:

1. Indians and their land were to be assimilated. The number of Indians was to be gradually reduced...
2. Indians were not capable of making rational decisions for their own welfare and this had to be done by the department on their behalf...
3. Indian women should be subject to their husbands as were other women. Their children were his children alone in law. It was inconceivable that an Indian woman should be able to own and transmit property rights to her children (Wotherspoon and Satzewich 1993: 31).

Thus the measures of the Act prove to be sexist and oppressive in the nature of how they dealt with Indian and non-Indian women.

By 1948 the Indian Act was becoming tighter and more defined in its requirements for what needed to be done to Indians in order to accomplish assimilation. The new guidelines for future Indian policy included such provisions as, easing the enfranchisement conditions and the early extension of the franchise to all Indian peoples; extending more services to Indians; educating about self-government; and educating Indian children with non-Indians in order to better prepare them for assimilation (Armitage 1995: 79). The colonial power used state policy to not only control a minority group, but to also have institutional measures destroy Aboriginal culture.

Although the periods of integration and self-government show that the Indian Act was now using practical measures to provide the same services to First Nations people as it did to all other Canadians, the federal government still failed to provide Aboriginal people with the necessary tools that would enable them to function in a formal education institution. The post 1951 period saw Indians attending the same schools as non-Aboriginal children as well as surveying of Indian people to analyze their economic and social situation within Canadian society. More important however, is the reaction by Native people to the final step of the integration policy with the implementation of the 1969 White Paper. Andrea Bear Nicholas notes, “the White Paper called for the political integration of all ‘status Indians’ as full and equal citizens of Canada through the termination of treaties and the transference of responsibility for ‘Indians’ from federal to provincial governments” (Nicholas 2001: 10). The federal government advertised this federal policy as being a justified way of bringing equality under the law for all Canadians and having them only differ in ethnic origin (Armitage 1995: 80). In absolving itself from the responsibility for Indian Affairs through repealing the Indian Act, the federal government would no longer have responsibility for Indians and they would, under the law, have accomplished their goal of assimilation.

Native people all across Canada outwardly rejected the White Paper and the government formally withdrew it in 1973 (Armitage 1995: 80). The era of the White Paper marked a birth of resistance to government policies by First Nations peoples and education was a major component in this resistance. In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood called for total control over Indian education and drafted a policy paper

called “Indian Control Over Indian Education.”<sup>11</sup> Andrea Bear Nicholas summarizes the paper written by the National Indian Brotherhood as follows:

[The policy paper] addressed the concerns of Native parents who wanted their children both to succeed in school and to have a strong sense of their own cultural identity. As such, it strongly advocated the principles of local control and parental involvement. It also promoted the principle of cultural survival and was the first to advocate education in the medium of the Native language. (Nicholas 2001: 16).

While the government accepted this paper in principle and seemed to be willing to work with Aboriginal people, Boldt and Long believe that this new relationship only changed the process of the institutional assimilation of Indian people. They state, “the institutional assimilation of Indians in Canada has a long history of unilinear progression...at various stages [it] has been labeled as ‘civilizing Indians,’ ‘helping Indians,’ and ‘extending equality to Indians,’ and it is now called ‘self-government for Indians’” (Boldt and Long 1988: 43). This period of self-government included how First Nations people are seeking the recognition of their right to govern themselves and control the schooling of their children. However, underlying all of this is the fact that the Indian Act is still the formal basis for developing any policy towards Native people. It can be argued that the federal government’s initiatives towards self-government and Indian control over Indian education are still deeply entrenched within policies of assimilation and therefore, Aboriginal people are still struggling to attain these very important goals of self-determination.

### **Indian Education and State Policy**

Following an analysis of the policy that the Canadian government developed in order to “deal” with and strip Native people of their culture, it is not surprising that

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<sup>11</sup> The National Indian Brotherhood is now known as the Assembly of First Nations

Aboriginal people have had a difficult experience with formal instruction. The laws imposed by the state have undoubtedly impacted the way Aboriginal education has evolved within Canada and influenced First Nations students. This analysis will now examine the history of the education of Canada's Aboriginal people and provide evidence to support that the state policy towards Indigenous Education has resulted in alienation, isolation and the feeling of being the disrespected "other" within our society. Finally, it will be shown that through appropriate educational approaches, Aboriginal people can find strength in formal schooling and overcome the difficult experiences endured by past generations.

#### Traditional Indian Education

The traditional education of Indigenous peoples differs greatly from the education that was imposed on them after colonization. Although Aboriginal people did not have formal schools, they possessed a form of education that was a vital component of their society. J.R. Miller describes that traditional Indian education "aims, first, to explain to the individual members of a community who they are, who their people are, and how they relate to other peoples and to the physical [and spiritual] world" (Miller 1996:15). Likewise, Gregory Cajete explains that, "American Indian education historically occurred in a holistic social context that developed the importance of each individual as a contributing member of a social group" (Cajete 1994: 26). Therefore, in this system of tutelage, Aboriginal people were exposed to various educational standards that would meet the needs of the community and their Nations as a whole.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People determined in 1996 that there is indeed a North American Intellectual tradition that exists in the minds of Aboriginals that

has evolved from past instruction and education within their communities. The Commission states: “Elders approach all issues through the traditional teachings of their culture, teachings seem to emanate from the creator” (Canada 1996: 113). In this relationship with the Creator, Aboriginal people were instructed as to how they should relate to the world and all other beings around them. Elder Roger A. Jones describes that:

In all of our teachings, your spirit lives forever. It is only using this vessel for the period of time it is on this realm on Mother Earth. And when we were placed here on Turtle Island, the Creator promised us for ever that life and love. He promised us all of those things that we would ever need to go to that beautiful place. Everything you will ever need is there for you medicine... food...water (Canada 1996: 114).

In this worldview, Aboriginal people had a highly developed social consciousness and responsibility (Kawagley 1995: 8). Within this, Aboriginal people were able to identify themselves as a unique people with a unique system of learning.

Indeed, Aboriginal people had their own customs, rules and practices for the transmission of their knowledge and heritage in order for their society to have strength and survive (Battiste and Henderson 1996: 88). J.R. Miller states, “For all these peoples, instruction was suffused with their deeply ingrained spirituality, an invariable tendency to relate the material and personal in their lives to the spirits and the unseen” (Miller 1996: 16). Therefore traditionally, Indigenous students saw themselves, their heritage and their worldview as a part of their educational system and worked within their culture to learn the values of their society. Elizabeth Furniss explains,

Instead, children learned the skills they needed to survive, and the beliefs, values, and codes of behaviour appropriate to their society by a trial-and-error process of observing and imitating adult behaviour and by listening to stories in which ethical concepts and morals were imbedded. (Furniss 1995: 48)

In a system of education that required lifelong learning, Aboriginal people were required to always be looking and listening to learn (Miller 1996: 17). Games and storytelling

were essential to the transmission of knowledge. For instance, Miller describes how “the learning of vocational skills was accomplished mainly by childhood games or by observation and copying of adult behavior” (Miller 1996: 37). “Also, a family’s store of myths and legends taught, gently but effectively, what was and what was not acceptable conduct by the youngest members of the community” (Miller 1996: 18). Undoubtedly, the success and survival of Aboriginal peoples proves the effectiveness of this sort of education.

This form of teaching governed Aboriginal nations for thousands of years without schools and was an important aspect of their culture. Reflecting the economies and social structures found within Aboriginal cultures prior to the coming of Europeans, there was an ecologically based emphasis on reciprocity, harmony and balance that connected the human, natural and spiritual realms with each other (Kawagley 1995: 10). Miller states that “perhaps the most important features of their educational system were its lack of an institution and educational structure and the absence of coercion and routine” (Miller 1996: 38). Indeed, once Canadian policy began to exert its influence on Aboriginal education, all of the schooling Aboriginal people were once used to would dramatically change.

### Mission Schools

Mission schools were the first schools to dramatically impact First Nations people. The government decided that the initial way education could be used to alter the Native person was through the missionaries. Robin Fisher notes “missionaries had developed quite deliberately and consciously thought out plans of acculturation for the Indians...they came with plans to alter Indian society totally” (Fisher 1992: 120). The

government and Indian Affairs welcomed their motives as it was through the mission that First Nations people would become Christian, civilized, and educated (Armitage 1995: 96). Jean Barman describes, "Education was perceived as the primary vehicle in the civilizing and advancement of the Indian race" (Barman, Hebert & McCaskill 1986: 5). When a First Nations person became a Roman Catholic, an Anglican or a free church member, Indian Affairs recorded this information and used it for enfranchisement purposes. In this, churches became an integral aspect of Indian Affairs and played a significant role in the dissolution of Native society through education as assimilation.

The early schooling established by missionaries resembled what was available to Britain's poorest population (Barman, Hebert & McCaskill 1986: 5). Many Native students resisted or rejected much of the Mission school's programs and preferred to retain and practice their own traditional dances and gatherings (Gresko 1992: 88). Jacqueline Gresko examines two early mission schools, Qu'Apelle (North West Territories) and St. Mary's (British Columbia), and concludes that there was indeed a negative reaction by some Native people in regards to the teachings. She states:

[T]hough some Indians welcomed the missionary concern for their well being in a time of government and societal indifference...Native people were not aware of the increasingly assimilationist government regulations for school staff, nor the financial burdens borne by missionary groups to keep schools open (Gresko 1992: 97).

However, regardless of these negative reactions, mission schools carried on. Robin Fisher describes how William Duncan, when given the mission of converting the Tsimshian people of the Northwest Coast of British Columbia, had one objective: "like most missionaries, Duncan came among the Indians to teach rather than to learn and convert rather than conserve" (Fisher 1992: 132). In the 1860's Duncan was typical in

his assimilation objectives. Through the following rules, one can see how Duncan's educational policies were not aligned with the culture of the Tsimshian; they were:

1. to give up their *Ahlied* [Shamans] or Indian devilry
2. to cease calling in conjurers when sick
3. to cease gambling
4. to cease giving away their property for display [having potlatches]
5. to cease painting their faces
6. to cease drinking intoxicating liquor
7. to rest on the Sabbath
8. to attend religious instruction
9. to send their children to school
10. to be cleanly
11. to be industrious
12. to be peaceful
13. to be liberal and honest in trade
14. to build neat houses
15. to pay the village tax (Fisher 1992: 132-133)

Obviously, educating Native people through missionaries included far more than learning about Christianity. In the case of William Duncan, it included learning about Victorian order and regularity as missionaries worked within the framework of governmental coercion established during the settlement period (Fisher 1992: 142).

The mission schools were an important component of educating Aboriginals to follow the “proper” way of life, according to the government of Canada. As Christianity began to develop foundations within the Aboriginal communities, the traditional schooling of Aboriginal children was becoming replaced with a foreign form of instruction that was radically different from what First Nations people were used to. However, more importantly, mission schools represent the first step in segregating Aboriginal children from the tutelage of their elders and also from the tutelage provided to the rest of Canadian society. Elizabeth Furniss describes, “The increasing moral authority that the missionaries yielded over Native people was part of a more general process of domination of Native societies by colonial forces” (Furniss 1995: 45).



Beginning their education with blatant discrimination and condemnation of their language and culture in the form of mission schools only became worse when Aboriginal people began to endure the 'Residential School experience.'

### Residential Schools

After mission schools were established, the Indian Act and the administrative components of Indian Affairs changed. Therefore, so too did the education of Canada's First Nations peoples. Armitage describes, "The residential school was the central institution through which Canadian child welfare policy was conducted during the assimilation period" (Armitage 1995: 109). It was determined that mission day schools were inadequate to the task of assimilation because of the influence that parents exerted when young students would return from class and the fact that children were still able to be closely associated with their culture (Armitage 1995: 103). By 1879, the Davin Report would become the basis for the establishment and implementation of Residential Schools. Jean Barman explains:

The Davin Report approved American practice with the proviso that schools be operated so far as possible by missionaries, who had already demonstrated their commitment to 'civilizing' Canada's Indians. The Department of Indian Affairs accepted the proposal...Preference was given to the creation of large industrial Residential Schools located away from reserves, and, a few years later, to Boarding schools nearer reserves for younger children. There, attendance would be ensured, and all aspects of life, from dress to use of English language to behavior, would be carefully regulated (Barman *in* Armitage 1995: 103).

It becomes evident that collaboration between the church and state was very close when concerning the education of Indian children. Four churches were involved in the operation of the schools on a contractual basis with the federal government: Roman Catholic orders, Anglican, Presbyterian and United. The Methodist and Presbyterian

churches prior to union in 1925 were each involved in Residential Schools, but this eventually became part of the mission work of the United Church.

The church received operating grants from the federal government, enabling the church authority to become larger and more organized than it would have been without donations. Because of this, the church worked very closely with state officials and looked upon the Indian Agents for the ultimate curriculum they would practice in their schools. Armitage notes “as far as the church was concerned, the approach to First Nations education as expressed by the Indian Agent...was not unwelcome, for its objective was to establish its own form of ‘Christian citizenship’” (Armitage 1995: 105). This curriculum of ‘Christian citizenship’, according to the authorities at the time, would enable Indian children to enter the world as civilized beings once detached from their traditional culture.

However, aside from legislative policy that was obviously racist and oppressive to these young children, the most devastating thing about Residential Schools was and is what actually occurred because of their implementation. Elizabeth Furniss explains, “The physical isolation of children from their families and communities was the central ingredient of the residential school system” (Furniss 1995: 51). Here, children who spoke only their Native language and ate only traditional foods were taken from their families to enter a world that was totally unfamiliar. As explained by Furniss, “The Oblates committed themselves to provide the children with Board, clothing, care, education, and training in two or three trades” (Furniss 1995: 50). Therefore their experience at Residential School was not only to teach them academics, but skills that would assist having First Nations people “fit” into Canadian society (Furniss 1995: 50).

While the children were away from their parents, communities were left “childless” as parents had no children to care for. Celia Haig Brown describes:

Alcohol also became a force in the lives of some families. Some parents, heartbroken at the loss of their children and objects of continuing oppression from all aspects of the dominant society escaped these pressures with alcohol. (Haig-Brown 1988: 123)

Imagine a community without children, a community with adults who felt unneeded and unworthy of being able to provide their children with an adequate educational experience.

Celia Haig Brown gives an example of a mother who “would have on the one hand, the children pleading to stay home, and on the other hand, the government and church insisting that she send them [the children] to school” (1988: 123). Haig-Brown continues to describe how suicide became a reality as the Residential School experience:

...can be seen as a contributing factor to people’s confusion over values and the meaning of life, and symptomatic of the social attempts which may lead to such [suicidal] attempts. (Haig-Brown 1988: 123)

While children were away and communities were left parted from their young family members, traditional ways of life were eroded.

Many children that left their communities to attend Residential School experienced harsh discipline, horrific sexual and mental abuse and lost much of their individual freedom and personal control. As a “student” in these educational institutions, these young children were subject to teachings that taught them that their way of life, culture and language were barbaric and savage. As described by a Residential School survivor in Celia Haig Brown’s book called “Resistance and Renewal”:

At the Indian residential school, we were not allowed to speak our own language; we weren’t allowed to dance, sing because they told us it was evil. It was evil for us to practice any of our cultural ways. (Haig-Brown 1988: 58)

In an investigation of the Williams Lake Industrial School in the early 1900's because of the death of one of the children, Elizabeth Furniss describes the overt feelings of government officials towards Native children and the societies they come from after students began to run away from Residential School:

On initial investigation, Indian Agent Bell claimed that the students had no good reason for running away; rather, it reflected racial characteristics of the Indians. It was in their "wild nature" to resist discipline...Native peoples, they believed, needed to be "tamed" and "civilized." (Furniss 1995: 78)

The schools made Aboriginal children feel "different" and inferior and only instilled a stronger feeling of alienation and isolation from this new society that was supposed to be providing them an education.

Contradicting everything that they had ever learned while being at home with their families, the Residential School experience disrupted generations of Aboriginal learning. Loss of identity, language, and being taught a culture that is not congruent with their own, makes this form of schooling detrimental to Indigenous well-being. Celia Haig-Brown describes the following in reference to language retention:

For some the transition back to their native language was smooth. As time went on, more of the parents only spoke English in response to their own training in the residential school - training which convinced them that their language had no place in Euro-Canadian society... (Haig-Brown 1988: 93)

In regard to state policy and Aboriginal education, it is because of government law that Residential Schools were executed in the first place. In a book written by Chrisjohn, Young and Maraum a spokesperson from the Department of Indian Affairs is quoted as saying:

One thing the Canadian government failed to recognize was the social implications of their policies...in terms of the things that have happened to Native peoples as a result of the residential school era. (Chrisjohn et al 1997: 11)

The role of Residential Schools in the suppression of First Nations culture continued into the 1960's. Armitage explains,

in the end, the Residential Schools did not prepare First Nations children for life in any type of community; not for the First Nations community from which their parents originally came; not for the urbanized white communities to which some tried to go; and not for the idealized Christian community which existed only in the minds of the missionaries. (Armitage 1995: 112)

Thus, the attendance of Indian children in Residential Schools began to drop significantly in the 1970's and Canada began to shift to the "integration" of children in the public school program where the Child Welfare System they believed would ensure equal education opportunities for Aboriginal students. But the impact of Residential Schools on Aboriginal communities is enormous. Not only was this form of schooling (like the mission schools) a method of instruction that made the Aboriginal child feel inferior, alienated, and isolated from the rest of society, but an entire generation was forced to surrender their culture all for the sake of receiving a very limited and inadequate Western education. These feelings of being outside the "normal" system of education would carry forward as Aboriginal people became integrated into public institutions. Celia Haig-Brown describes:

Negotiated solely with the federal and provincial governments,...attendance of Native children in the public school system...was expected to serve as the answer to Native children's educational needs. (Haig-Brown 1988: 66)

Aboriginal students remain to be "integrated" into the system that presently operates in Canada.

#### Currently in Canada

Currently in Canada, most Aboriginal children are attending the same schools as non-Aboriginal children in a Child Welfare system that was developed by the Ministry of Education and the Department of Indian Affairs to "integrate" Aboriginal students.

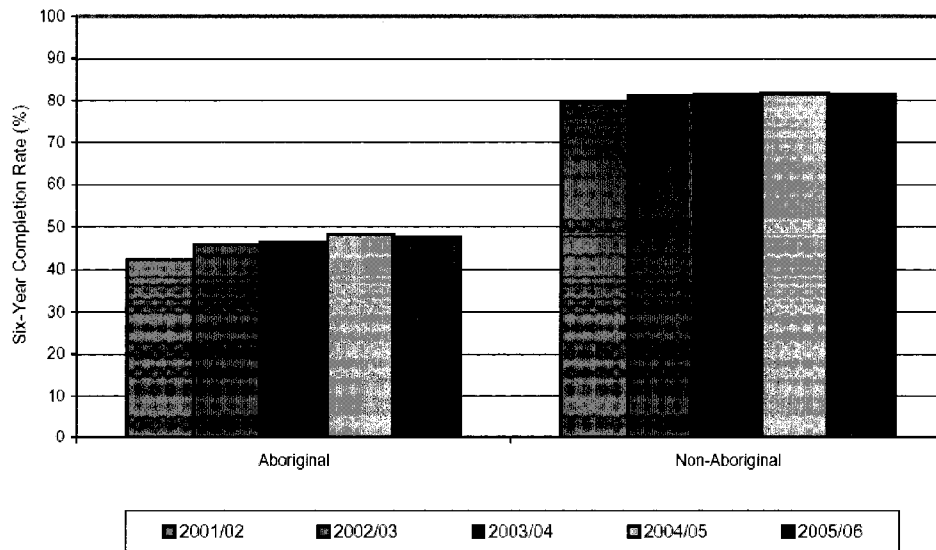
While attending the same schools as the non-Aboriginal population, it is assumed that First Nations children and young adults will be learning in a system that will help them overcome their current social and economic status of being undereducated and underemployed. Celia Haig-Brown notes, “While there was little overt prediction to the effects of integration, it appears that people assumed that teaching the same content in the same ways to Native and non-Native students would provide their children with the same opportunities for employment and further education” (1988: 130).

However, it has been recognized by many scholars that there are great problems associated with the current education system and the success and performance of Aboriginal students, especially at the secondary level of schooling. This suggests there are indeed many areas of serious concern for our Aboriginal learners. In an editorial written for the Vancouver Sun, Fazil Mihlar states: “British Columbia’s schools are, in general, failing the province’s Aboriginal students miserably” (Mihlar, Vancouver Sun February 2004: C.6). Some of the statistics provided in this article show that:

- Aboriginals fail more than 40 per cent of province wide reading tests.
- Only one in five Aboriginals in grade 8 graduate at the usual time, compared to one in three non-Aboriginals.
- Aboriginals take, on average, only one provincially examinable course (courses that prepare students for post-secondary work) while non-Aboriginals take three. (Mihlar, Vancouver Sun: February 2004: C.6)

The statistics provided on the BC Ministry of Education website in 2006 are no less startling and confirm the Vancouver Sun statistics. The data provided by the Ministry shows a disparity between the success and performance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in the years 2001/02-2005/06. Figure 2 from the BC Ministry of Education, “Aboriginal Report – *How are We Doing? 2005/06*” represents the completion rate of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students at the secondary level:

**Six-Year Completion Rate, 2001/02 - 2005/06**  
**Province - Public Schools Only**



School Year	Provincial Six-Year Completion Rate (%)	
	Aboriginal	Non-Aboriginal
2001/02	42	79
2002/03	46	81
2003/04	47	82
2004/05	48	82
2005/06	47	82

BC Ministry of Education: Aboriginal Report – *How Are We Doing? 2005/06*

Not only do these statistics discourage Aboriginal students who are still attending school, but also it impacts how Aboriginal youth perceive themselves within our larger Canadian society once they have finished their years of formal tutelage.

So why is it that Aboriginal students struggle so deeply to become successful in our current educational system? Is it because, as the former methods of schooling the Aboriginal population, the underlying motive in education continues to be assimilation where the same policies that created institutional racism and class oppression in the first

place still exist? I would like to make reference to a paper written by Ward Churchill, a Native American scholar of Creek and Cherokee ancestry, who comments on the current situation that American Indians are experiencing after the experiences of missionary and Residential Schools:

The American educational system as a whole has been amply demonstrated to be locked firmly into a paradigm of eurocentrism, not only in terms of its focus, but also its discernible heritage, methodologies, and conceptual structure. Among people of non-European cultural derivation, the kind of “learning” inculcated through such a model is broadly seen as insulting, degrading and functionally subordinative. (Churchill 1995: 245)

With the term “White Studies,” Ward Churchill demonstrates that the “common opportunity” that has been granted to Aboriginal students is nothing more than the colonizer ensuring that their perspective of the subjects they teach be the only ones presented to the young minds of North America. Churchill uses the example of Universities where he states, “the curriculum is virtually totalizing in its emphasis, not simply upon an imagined superiority of Western endeavours and accomplishments, but upon the notion that the currents of European thinking comprise the only really “natural” – or at least truly useful – formation of knowledge/means of perceiving reality” (Churchill 1995: 246). Indeed, Churchill realizes, from an Aboriginal perspective, that even now when First Nations people are receiving an education through the public school system, they are still being subject to a process where the colonizers want to ensure that assimilation does occur in Canadian society and they feel alienated and isolated within the institution as a result.

Menno Boldt and J. Anthony Long similarly state, “the Canadian government’s approach to institutional assimilation has...a new policy of incorporating Indians into prevailing Canadian institutional structures” (Boldt and Long 1988: 44). They believe



that the institutional assimilation policies of the Canadian government are so deeply entrenched that any initiatives made towards self-government will be shaped by an underlying colonial structure. Ward Churchill believes, “by and large, the ‘educated’ American Indian or black becomes the aspect of ‘broken development’ who ‘compromises [through the] defeat’ of his or her people, aspiring only to serve the interests of the order he or she has been trained to see as his or her ‘natural’ master” (Churchill 1995: 250). Therefore, the “education” of First Nations people in contemporary society is still bound by the age-old aspirations to reshape the mind of the Indigenous and rid them of the culture and tradition they are from.

Marie Smallface Marule recognizes the state theory that has bound Indian people in Canada, and therefore takes an alternative “un-state” theoretical approach to analyzing traditional Indian government. She realizes that it is a fatal mistake “for us to assume that solutions to our problems can be found in European-Western structures, systems, and processes” (Marule 1984: 40). This argues that the values that were in place prior to colonization, that made Aboriginal people successful within their communities, must be reinstated and approaches to formally educating our Aboriginal youth must be changed. It is important for Indian people to believe that success can be achieved once the barriers of colonization are broken and Indian people become confident and strong in their own traditions and knowledge for their people.

#### Indian Control Over Indian Education

Although Aboriginal children are attending public schools, in 1972 the National Indian Brotherhood acknowledged, “the serious problems with integration... suggesting that they could be ameliorated by infusing the integration process with strong elements of

community control” (Nicholas 2001: 18). The process of implementing Aboriginal education under the influence of Native people began in 1973 when the Canadian government decided to accept the basic goals expressed in the document titled: *Indian Control of Indian Education* (Barman, Hebert & McCaskill 1987: 5). In their Policy Paper of 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood states:

We want education to provide the setting in which our children can develop the fundamental attitudes and values which have an honoured place in Indian tradition and culture. The values which we want to pass on to our children, values which make our people a great race, are not written in any book. They are found in our history, in our legends and in the culture. We believe that if an Indian child is fully aware of the important Indian values he will have reason to be proud of our race and of himself as an Indian. (National Indian Brotherhood 1972: 2)

Jo-ann Archibald describes that this Policy Paper represents a “shift in the goal of assimilation to non-assimilation” (Archibald 1995: 295). Indeed, through colonial policies such as mission schools, Residential Schools and integration, none of the concerns of the Native community were considered to be of importance and therefore were not considered to be a relevant component of Aboriginal education.

Once the document *Indian Control of Indian Education* was considered, the Canadian government was forced to assist First Nations communities in the rebuilding of their own education system and learning goals. Verna Kirkness notes:

Under the terms of the 11 major treaties between the Indians and the federal government...the federal government of Canada is obligated to provide funds for the education of Indians. This is an incontestable fact. In no way does the principle of “Indian control” or “local control” contradict or nullify this fundamental federal obligation. The government’s financial responsibility does not justify its dominance over the lives of Indian people. This policy statement demands that Indian parents participate as partners with the government in the education of their children. (Kirkness 1992: 16)

The result of this is that Indian people began to develop their own plans for how education would work in their communities and for their people and Aboriginal

Educators began to address the reoccurring themes inhibiting the success of Aboriginal students within integrated Canadian classrooms.

For example, in April 1989, the Saskatchewan Department of Education developed education ethics for the Indian and Métis population. From kindergarten to grade twelve the province decided to set out four principles that would guide the development of education programs for and about the Indian and Métis people of Saskatchewan. These four principles are as follows:

- Indian and Métis peoples must be given the opportunity to participate fully in the education system at all levels
- The education system must recognize Indian and Métis students are the children of peoples whose cultures are, in many ways, very different from those of the people who established the school system. These differences which may include learning styles, language and worldview, must be accounted for in curriculum, programs, teaching methods and climate in the schools attended by Indian and Métis children.
- There must be co-operation and consultation among the federal, provincial, local and Indian and Métis authorities to ensure co-ordination of efforts to meet the needs of Indian and Métis students.
- Efforts to improve the success of Indian and Métis schools are most effective at the school-community level

(Saskatchewan Department of Education 1989: 5)

These principles establish the short-term and long-term goals of the Saskatchewan Department of Education and demonstrate that education professionals did indeed realize that there needed to be major changes in the school system if it were to ever accommodate Aboriginal students.

With the advent of Band controlled education in the 1970's, further changes were made to schooling practices all across the country. Aboriginal schools began to develop more culturally appropriate curriculum for their students. Murray Smith describes, "Bands have approached curriculum development in two ways. While some communities have added Aboriginal content to the Eurocentric curriculum, other

communities are developing curriculum in their language and adding ceremonies to immerse Aboriginal students into their culture” (Smith 2001: 81). It therefore becomes evident that three major themes emerge as being the most important issues surrounding the education of Aboriginal students. These themes include:

- 1) the recognition of different worldviews;
- 2) the importance of the retention of Indigenous languages; and,
- 3) a development of culturally appropriate curriculum for all students in Canada.

First, the dominant theme of worldviews emerges as a crucial component to educational success for First Nations students. Aboriginal people of Canada recurrently suggest that a holistic curriculum containing the Aboriginal worldview would allow Aboriginal youth to synthesize information and increase their comprehension (Smith 2001: 79). This challenge can be met by revitalizing Aboriginal epistemology and by incorporating a philosophy of educating for balance and harmony in all areas of life (Weenie 1998: 59). As Oscar Kawagley states in his book on the Yupiaq worldview, “the curricula, methodologies, and, often, non-Native teachers and their training are not based on a worldview that recognizes each of us as necessary and interdependent pieces of the universe” (Kawagley 1995: 117). Thus, the fragmented, discriminatory and analytical curriculum that is normally found in a Canadian school is an immediate barrier to Aboriginal learning. Murray Smith realizes, “when one has a holistic perspective integrated into a linear or Eurocentric curriculum only part of this perspective is integrated, which fragments the holistic perspective” (Smith 2001: 79). Therefore it becomes essential that Aboriginal people be given the freedom to devise their own curriculum and create unique learning strategies.

In the book *Making the Spirit Dance Within: Joe Duquette High School and an Aboriginal Community*, Celia Haig-Brown says:

Aboriginal people are working with public schools to address the needed changes with more and more Aboriginal teachers, curriculum developers and culturally – sensitive non-Aboriginal supporters contributing their expertise.  
(Haig-Brown, et al. 1997: 31)

At the Joe Duquette High School in Saskatoon, the pedagogy of holistic learning has been incorporated into the curriculum. Using the concept of the sacred circle (or medicine wheel), the teacher is able to teach the students how to reconnect the physical world with the metaphysical. As described in *Making the Spirit Dance Within*:

Education within the Sacred Circle view is presented as the movement of life to wholeness, connectedness and balance; implicit in this presentation are times of partiality, disconnectedness and tension...Many First Nations use the Circle as a framework to interpret learning theory and from which to adapt and create learning modules. (Haig-Brown et al. 1997: 36)

Using this concept, First Nations people have worked towards the reconstruction of curriculum to address the need to bring meaning into the lives of Aboriginal students. The use of the Sacred Circle promotes an understanding of the interrelatedness of all things in the universe and this is undoubtedly powerful for the Aboriginal learner. For First Nations students who need that connection incorporated into their education, having teachers accept and utilize this concept in the classroom undoubtedly benefits the advancement of First Nations students trying to strive and achieve in a colonial system.

Another extremely important aspect of Aboriginal education that is addressed at schools such as Joe Duquette High School concerns the issue of language. It is extremely important to examine the role of language in curriculum. According to Murray Smith, language “harbours the worldview and dictates to some extent the way one views the world” (Smith 2001: 81). A review of the research indicates that Aboriginal languages

are in danger of being lost, and because of this, there are initiatives being taken to preserve Indigenous languages and enhance the identity of Native people through education. Murray Smith notes, "In North America, many communities are returning to their Aboriginal language... communities are teaching their school curriculum in the Aboriginal language and are immersing the students in the culture along with the language" (Smith 2001: 82). J.S. Frideres and W. J. Reeves state, "Native people have long argued that instruction in the Native mother tongue of young students is a necessity. They argue that a positive identity, high self-esteem and achievement in the school are all related to the language of instruction" (Frideres & Reeves 1993: 44).

In 1996, the Adams Lake Band located in Chase BC, established a Shuswap Native Language program where an immersion program, called *Secwepmectsin*, has been implemented into the Chief Atahm School (Video: First Nations Portraits 1996). The students at this school are being taught about nature, community and Elders through a program that uses a classroom setting to develop the child's inner self through cultural values and spirituality. The instructors in this program want the children to know that they are a distinct people with a language that is part of their culture and a part of who they are. In this program, a certified teacher directs the teachings, but the elders in the community are the ones who are doing the actual teaching. Also, Joe Michel, one of the elders/instructors of this program, realizes that the revival of the language in the children is having a spin off in the community, as many adults now want to learn the language and play a more active role in cultural preservation (Video: First Nations Portraits 1996). Likewise, in Prince George we see programs such as Aboriginal Headstart, where Cree and Carrier culture and language are introduced at an early and influential stage in a

child's life. As early as the age of three, Aboriginal children in our community, including my own son, are able to access an important and integral part of their lives with the Prince George Aboriginal Headstart. Programs such as these are extremely valuable for children and their families as there is a formal introduction to language and culture at a very young age.

The final theme that recurs when addressing Aboriginal Education in Canada is the need for relevant curriculum in the public school system. K. P. Binda notes that "Aboriginal migration into cities has been a developmental process for almost half a century but has increased dramatically in the last few decades" (Binda 2001: 180). The theft of land and resources by the government has forced this migration and in turn, forced Aboriginal children to become students in schools owned, operated and dictated by colonial administration. Provinces such as Saskatchewan and Manitoba started working on Aboriginal Education programs in the late 1980's and implementing them in the 1990's. However, due to the fact that both of these provinces have a high urban Aboriginal population, it only made sense to have curricula reforms in order to achieve greater academic success.

In 1968 the Sto:lo people of the Fraser Valley area in British Columbia began working towards the development of relevant curriculum for their youth through a cultural heritage project (Archibald 1995: 288, 297). Jo-ann Archibald explains, "The elders realized that in order for Sto:lo culture to continue, their knowledge had to be recorded" (Archibald 1995: 297). From this cultural project emerged cultural curriculum that Archibald describes as "elementary social studies curriculum, the Sto:lo Site!" that was first pilot tested in 1979 (Archibald 1995: 297, 305). The Sto:lo Site! is

representative of a First Nations group wanting to ensure that relevant curricula is being utilized in the education of Aboriginal children and that they are learning about their own history and culture. Archibald notes, “many First Nations people adopt a strongly non-assimilationist stance through the development of First Nations curricula” (Archibald 1995: 310).

Again, the Joe Duquette high school represents an initiative to incorporate relevant curriculum for Aboriginal students in the classroom and participate in a non-assimilationist approach to education. It is described in the book *Making the Spirit Dance Within*, that the classrooms are large and tables are arranged in a semi-circle that includes the teachers’ desk (Haig-Brown et al 1997: 107). Posters and murals on the walls aim to provide some inspiration and direction to the students and include posters of successful Aboriginal people who are hockey players, actors, pilots and possible mentors for these students (Haig-Brown et al 1997: 108). Authors describe in *Making the Spirit Dance Within*, “there are posters of Cree Syllabics, the flag of the Métis Nation, World Religions and the Sign Language Alphabet” and various other items that call for students to think about their heritage, their health, and their academic work and future (Haig-Brown et al 1997: 109). By including activities such as the Sweetgrass Circle into the daily routine of the students at Joe Duquette, the commitment to have spirituality as one of the guiding principles in the curriculum at this school becomes evident.

Attending a school that is administering an education that Aboriginal students can relate to results in a more positive school experience as alienation and isolation is eliminated. One student from Joe Duquette states:

It’s successful here because there’s no prejudiced kinds of things here. We’re basically all the same kind of people and they try to show us how to cope with



everyday life, show us what is good and what is was. And it is our choice to make it what we want it to be. (Haig-Brown et al 1997: 129)

Another student explains:

They are really prejudiced there (at other schools). It seemed like they wanted to be my friend because they would be talking to me and stuff. And then when they heard my last name they would kind of stick their nose up in the air and walk away. So my friends told me about Joe Duquette and I came here. (Haig-Brown et al 1997: 127)

These quotes from students at Joe Duquette demonstrate how racial discrimination impacts the motive for students to attend public school institutions. By having Aboriginal people involved with the education of their children, the oppression and racism is eliminated and students are given the full opportunity to be successful in whatever educational pattern they choose.

In the 2004 school year in Prince George British Columbia, the idea of a secondary school such as Joe Duquette High School was increasingly becoming a realistic goal for our community. Media reports show that there was indeed interest in finally realizing the needs of our Aboriginal students and supporting new endeavors for the betterment of their academic experience. From the table presented in Figure 2, one can see that in British Columbia, we are still failing to meet the needs of Aboriginal learners. Therefore, many Aboriginal students are leaving their elementary/secondary educational experience with a greater disadvantage for employment and further education when compared to the non-Aboriginal student population.

Due to the fact that media reports show there has been discussion in regards to implementing an Aboriginal Choice School, it is obvious that the Prince George School District realizes that the educational achievements of our Aboriginal students are dramatically poorer than the non-native students within the district. Dick Chambers, who

was Superintendent of School District No. 57 in 2004, is reported telling the *Prince George Citizen* that “The Aboriginal students in the District as a group are under performing.... we need to do something different from what we’re doing and [a secondary school with an aboriginal cultural focus] is an attempt to do something different” (Strickland May 27, 2004: 1). Chambers continued to say, “The Aboriginal Education Board has been talking about an Aboriginal-focus school for a number of years now, and the (Prince George) school board is interested in pursuing that.” (Strickland May 27, 2004: 1) An Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George is a unique chance to embrace and celebrate the talents of our people right here in Prince George, BC and an excellent opportunity to contribute to what the National Indian Brotherhood desired in 1972 by localizing education and celebrating Aboriginal people and their communities.

As stated by the National Indian Brotherhood in 1972, “Indian children will continue to be strangers in Canadian classrooms until the curriculum recognizes Indian customs and values, Indian languages, and the contributions Indian people have made to Canadian history” (National Indian Brotherhood 1972: 26). In this analysis of the history and contemporary obstacles facing Aboriginal education, I endeavour to demonstrate that with Indian Policy, Indian education in Canada has had negative impacts on Aboriginal communities, including Prince George. This happened through the process of assimilation, institutional racism and class oppression, which, in turn emerged and entered into the formal education of our Aboriginal children everywhere. Although Native people are no longer subject to some of the historical educational horrors that continue to haunt their parents, grandparents and entire communities, the fight against the colonized structure continues. By continuing to develop relevant curriculum and

Aboriginal presence within schools, and to bring forward traditional ways of knowing and learning into the aspects of First Nations students' lives on a daily basis, I suggest we will move into the future on a more solid ground for Aboriginal youth.

Chapter Three moves from a historical analysis of Aboriginal Education to a discussion of intellectual theory developed by both Western and Indigenous scholars. Also, Chapter Three presents scholarly work on Aboriginal educational theory. It will be shown how curriculum can incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing the world and how curricula could be changed to create a more suitable and relevant learning experience for Aboriginal youth.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Intellectual, Indigenous, and Educational Theory**

Following a summary of the history of Aboriginal Education in Canada, it is appropriate to discuss different ways of knowing and learning and how they can relate to Aboriginal students' experiences within our public school structures. There are models that exist within educational academia that support the fact that not all learners are going to succeed within one single, standardized form of education. Models for understanding this can be found with an analysis of academic work completed by scholars like: Howard Gardener, Eber Hampton and Gregory Cajete. All three of these scholars document that there are alternate ways to "learn" and measure learning. Therefore, I will discuss in this chapter theories that have been developed in regards to intelligence and Aboriginal Education. They show that there may indeed be other ways we can effectively and practically deliver an education to Aboriginal learners by utilizing and valuing alternative ways of knowing and learning. The material in this section of the thesis is effectively part of the red, blue and white colours of the Métis Sash.

#### **Howard Gardner and Multiple Intelligences**

Howard Gardner is a non-Native multiple intelligence theorist who lends support in the discussion of the necessity to accept that there are different learning styles among all students. Gardner, who describes himself as a "proverbial Jewish boy," became interested in psychology in Graduate studies and eventually began exploring alternatives to the notion that there should only be one view of "classical intelligence" (Gardner 1999: 27). He investigated psychology, neurology, biology, sociology, and anthropology along with arts and humanities (Gardner 1999: 33). Gardner's work is highly relevant when

discussing Aboriginal Education and Indigenous learning as he creates an understanding that it is wrong to only incorporate and accept one standardized measurement of intellect. Furthermore, his research can be used to support that educators must be flexible within their educational methodology and delivery of curriculum when students from many different cultures and backgrounds are being taught. In reference to Gardner, I would like to briefly discuss his approach of examining “intellect” and demonstrate how his research can contribute to the discussion of Indigenous knowledge and the realm of Aboriginal Education.

Howard Gardner has developed ten different categories of intelligence that form the foundation of his “multiple intelligence theory.” Gardner conceptualizes intelligence as “a biopsychological potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture” (Gardner 1999: 34). In developing his theory, Gardner argues that different categories of “intelligence” exist in the human mind and these categories are independent from one another intellectually.

According to Gardner, the first two intelligences are the ones that we most commonly find being measured and valued in our school structures. These are “Linguistic Intelligence” and “Logical-Mathematic Intelligence” (Gardner 1999: 41). Gardner describes Linguistic Intelligence in the following terms: “linguistic competence is, in fact, the intelligence...that seems most widely and most democratically shared across the human species” (Gardner 1993: 78). Linguistic intelligence includes both the oral and written language and Gardner realizes that “The ability to retain information...has been especially valued in traditional preliterate societies” (Gardner

1993: 92). Indeed, language is an important part of the identity and culture of First Nations people. Murray Smith describes,

Aboriginal cultures are primarily oral cultures...Aboriginal words carry the context with them, unlike English words in which the context is often derived from the surrounding words...Embedded in the language (of Aboriginal people) is a value system of human relationships – between age groups, among family members and among a wider kin group. The language reflects social structure and how people relate to one another. (Smith 2001 81-82)

In the emergence of printing and literacy, the oral aspect of linguistic intelligence has been regarded as being less valuable within our literate and written societal standards. Gardner explains that “while the emphasis in traditional cultures still falls very much on oral language, rhetoric and word play, our culture places *relatively* greater emphasis on the written word – on securing information from reading and expressing oneself properly through the written word (Gardner 1993: 95). However, language can be viewed as an intelligence that remains to be fundamentally identifiable with First Nations and Aboriginal students. Even within our contemporary Aboriginal communities, the oral tradition remains the one considered with the highest regard and is fundamental to the value system of the people. Due to the fact that a more literate form of Linguistic Intelligence is valued by our contemporary school systems, the oral strength of Aboriginal societies becomes marginalized.

Logical Mathematical Intelligence, the second intelligence that is described by Gardner to be most valued within education is more scientifically centered. Gardner explains, “*Logical mathematical intelligence* involves the capacity to analyze problems logically, carry out mathematical operations, and investigate issues scientifically” (Gardner 1999: 42). Although First Nations and Aboriginal students have traditionally

struggled with Math and Science within a Western curriculum structure, MacIvor points out:

Attention to the tribal histories of science will give students insights into the wealth of traditional knowledge related to science and in the process give them a foundation for pride in their people's accomplishments and a more authentic view of the history of science. (MacIvor 1996 *in* Cajete 1999: 45)

Cajete (who I will be discussing in more detail later in this chapter) believes that:

Few schools, which serve Native students, have integrated cultural content in any serious or systemic form. This lack of progress is reflected in the continued under achievement of Native students in science and math. The need for expertise among Native people in the area of science has never been greater because of scientific and technical literacy and skill needed to effect self-determination in tribal resource management, health and economic development. (Cajete 1999: 43).

It becomes evident that Howard Gardner's intelligence theory of "*Logical Mathematical Intelligence*," a category valued by most school systems, is an area where Aboriginal learners could greatly benefit from having the curriculum relevant and meaningful to Indigenous people. This would ease the struggle of Aboriginal students trying to succeed within math and science programs found within the traditional public school system.

Gardner's next three intelligence categories are: Musical intelligence, Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence and spatial intelligence. Gardner describes, "Musical intelligence entails the skill in the performance, composition and appreciation of musical patterns" (Gardner 1999: 42). Gardner explains bodily-kinesthetic intelligence as "the potential of using one's whole body or parts of the body to ...solve problems or fashion products" (Gardner 1999: 42). Spatial intelligence is the ability to recognize and utilize large or small spaces effectively (Gardner 1999: 42). At Joe Duquette High School, there is a blur between Cultural Arts classes and dancing, and all of these could be categorized within the above-mentioned intelligences. A teacher recounts "in Cultural Arts classes,

they (the students) learn to dance the Native dances and they learn to drum and sing” (Haig Brown et al 1997: 52). Drumming, singing and dancing are all integral components of cultures that have survived the onslaught of Western imperialism. Among the Indigenous Anang of Nigeria, Gardner notes:

Infants scarcely a week old are introduced to music and dancing by their mothers. Fathers fashion small drums for their children. When they reach the age of two, children join groups where they learn many basic cultural skills, including singing, dancing and the playing of instruments. (Gardner 1993: 110)

Specifically in regards to Spatial intelligence, Gardner uses Eskimos as one example of an Indigenous population in North America:

Examples of spatial acuity on the part of Eskimos are legendary. For example, Eskimos are said to be able to read as well upside down as right side up, and they can carve complexly designed figures without having to orient them correctly. Eskimos who have never before seen certain equipment are sometimes able to repair it when none of its customary users can: this ability presumably calls for a union of spatial skills with other forms of intelligence. (Gardner 1993: 202)

Gardner adds, “at least 60 percent of Eskimo youngsters reach as high a score on tests of spatial ability as the top 10 percent of Caucasian children” (Gardner 1993: 202). These examples provide evidence that intelligences among different ethnic/cultural groups might need restructuring in the delivery of education in order to maximize success.

Gardner’s final five intelligences include: *interpersonal intelligence*, “a person’s capacity to understand the intentions, motivations, and desires of other people and consequently, to work effectively with others”; *intrapersonal intelligence*, “the capacity to understand oneself, to have an effective working model of oneself...and to use such information effectively in regulating one’s own life”; *naturalist intelligence*, “demonstrates expertise in the recognition and classification of the numerous species...of his or her environment”; *spiritual intelligence*, where one is engaged with cosmic or existential issues and views the “spiritual” as achievement of a state of being; and finally,



Gardner's last intelligence that he includes within his theory is that of *existential intelligence*, or a concern with "ultimate" issues of the human condition such as life, death, physical, psychological and spiritual worlds (Gardner 1999: 43-60). It can be argued that all of these intelligences do indeed play a part in the being of each of us as learners, thinkers and contributors of knowledge within a larger context of society.

I would like to sum up the relevance of the last five intelligences in relation to the experience of Aboriginal people within the measurement of their intellectual being by providing a quote from George Sioui. In his book *Huron Wendat: The Heritage of the Circle* he eloquently summarizes a major differentiating factor related to worldview and ways of knowing:

The Amerindian world vision is circular, as opposed to European-based, linear world vision; Circle peoples see the phenomenon of life as the work of many creators, in contrast to the Christian religious and monotheistic conception.  
(Sioui 1999: 44)

The Medicine Wheel used by many Aboriginal societies within Canada is, "identified as a symbolic cyclical interpretation of life and connectedness and provides a means for individuals to make sense of their world" (Poonwassie & Charter 2001: 130). In relation to the last five intelligences, Poonwassie and Charter explain:

Although the Medicine Wheel has general universal principles, its concepts can be applied to specific or individual issues. It includes all stages of human development from birth to death, connecting all stages with each other, with all living beings, and all life in the universe; thus providing a place of centering for each person in the cosmos. (Poonwassie & Charter 2001: 130)

Obviously, the last five intelligences in Gardner's theory are relevant to Aboriginal people and even provide a foundation for much of an Aboriginal learner's educational needs.

When asked if Gardner believes that intelligences are uniform between groups (of people/races/genders) he responds:

I suspect that if intelligence **fair** tests were developed, they would reveal differences across gender and other readily identifiable groups... Women might perform worse than men on spatial tasks in the West; in an environment where spatial orientation was important for survival (as among the Eskimos), such differences might disappear or even be reversed. (Gardner 1999: 110 emphasis added)

Indeed, when discussing the concept of **fair** testing, Gardner refers to a book titled, *The Bell Curve* written by two American scholars. He points out that these authors tested the “intelligence” of youth that were selected to represent various social, racial and ethnic groups. Gardner explains the following:

On the basis of these data, the authors presented evidence that those with low intelligence are more likely to be on welfare, to be involved in crime, to come from broken homes, to drop out of school... And while they did not make an explicit stand on the well-known data showing higher levels of IQs among whites than among blacks, they left the clear impression that these differences were difficult to change... (Gardner 1999: 8)

Gardner is making reference to the fact that students’ “intellect” and “ability” are measured through standardized testing that is delivered through a Western curricula structure. How would the performance of these students be different if the foundations for their learning were delivered within a more culturally sensitive framework?

I chose to provide Gardner’s “Multiple Intelligences” within this thesis because I wanted to bring forward the idea that we live within a social system where we have learners that come from cultures where different intelligences have been valued and utilized for survival and progress. Gardner’s theory acknowledges that unique intellectual capacities do indeed exist and that they therefore should be acknowledged and valued within schooling structures that seek to provide the necessary means to acquire an adequate education for progress and success in our contemporary society.

### Eber Hampton and “Meta-Theory”

Like Howard Gardner, Eber Hampton, who is a member of the Chicksaw Nation, is a scholar that supports the concept that there are wide-ranging needs for different learners (Hampton 1995: 5). Through his “meta theory,” described in his paper: “Towards a Redefinition of Indian Education,” Hampton provides an Aboriginal Educational Philosophy with his examination of how some Aboriginal people define Indian education within their own terms (Michel, Erickson & Madak 2005: 21). Rather than focusing on **all** learners as Gardner does, Hampton pays particular attention to the educational values of Aboriginal students. Hampton believes that “the failure of non-Native education of Natives can be read as the success of Native resistance to cultural, spiritual, and psychological genocide” (Hampton 1995: 7). In this section of the chapter, I will focus on the philosophical foundation for a “Redefinition of Indian Education” using Eber Hampton’s preliminary definition of Indian Education theory.

As First Nations people move into a phase where they see the possibility to establish an educational circle and curriculum that is their own, Eber Hampton’s paper is an effective demonstration of a possible outline of redefinition (Cajete 1994: 27).

Gregory Cajete writes:

As an Indian educator, Eber Hampton, so aptly states this new circle must encompass the importance of Indian peoples place in the continuance of their ancestral traditions, respect for individual uniqueness in spiritual expression, facilitate an understanding within the context of history and culture, develop a strong sense of place and sense of community, and forge a commitment to **educational and social transformation** that recognizes and further empowers the inherent strength of Indian people and their cultures. (Cajete 1994: 27 emphasis added)

Initially, Hampton approaches his evaluation of Aboriginal Education by examining the journey Native education has taken within Canada. He characterizes this journey into

five phases. These phases include: Traditional Indian Education; Schooling for Self-Determination; Schooling for Assimilation; Education by Indians; and finally the current phase, Indian Education Sui Generis (Indian Education as a ‘thing of its own kind’) (Hampton 1995: 8-10). Eber Hampton sets out to redefine Indian Education through his extensive process of researching and interviewing so that he is able to bring forward how Aboriginal people define education “Sui Generis”. Indeed an Aboriginal Choice School is reflective of this last phase of the journey of Aboriginal education as Hampton describes it as, “a self-determined Indian education using models of education structured by Indian cultures” (Hampton 1995: 10). He further explains that:

The creation of Native education involves the development of Native methods and Native structures for education as well as Native content and Native personnel...The recognition of Indian education as distinctive indicates a legitimate desire of Indian people to be self-defining, to have their ways of life respected, and to teach their children in a manner that enhances consciousness of being an Indian and a fully participating citizen of Canada or the United States. (Hampton 1995: 10)

By performing interviews with Indigenous students who were all enrolled at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Eber Hampton created his theory by redefining Indian education and allowing Aboriginal knowledge and ways of being and thus forging an insightful and effective presentation on how education could be approached with Aboriginal learners.

Hampton organizes his data for the redefinition of Indian Education through “six directions” (See Appendix C). Within the six directions, twelve standards of education for Indigenous learners emerge, and become interrelated throughout his organization. He describes:

The first ceremony I was taught was the pipe ceremony. In it, the pipe is offered to the six directions; first to the one above, and then to the east, then to the south, then to the west, then to the north, and then to the earth...Each direction reminds

me of a complex set of meanings, feelings, relationships, and movements.  
(Hampton 1995: 16)

Through the six directions and the all-encompassing nature of the twelve standards, Eber Hampton is able to work towards a redefinition of Indian education. He realizes that the nature of the six-directions when coupled with the interviews he conducted is complex, but vital for readdressing and reevaluating the needs and necessities for an Indigenous learning experience.

The first part of the process that Hampton uses is looking towards the center of the six directions. Within the center lies the Great Spirit, that includes issues surrounding identity and spirituality (Hampton 1995: 19). For Eber Hampton, **spirituality** is the first standard of Indian Education. In their paper titled, “Why an Aboriginal Public School?: A Report to the Prince George School District No. 57 Aboriginal Education Board,” Paul Michel, Mavis Erickson and Paul Madak describe that when asking members of the Aboriginal Education Board what they felt should be included within Spirituality they cite the following:

Spiritual:

- ⇒ Context of oneself in overall society
  - ⇒ To *Think* in our indigenous philosophies
  - ⇒ Everything has a purpose
  - ⇒ Role of “Spirit” in all aspects of life
  - ⇒ Spirituality is what an individual has been raised with and believes
  - ⇒ Lesson on ecology/Mother Earth
  - ⇒ Field trip to a *Sweat*
- (Michel, Erickson & Madak 2005: 22)

Like the members of the Aboriginal Education Board in Prince George, Eber Hampton’s research shows that his interviewees were equally adamant about the role of spirit within education. Hampton says, “Indian education orients itself around a spiritual center that defines the individual as the life of the group” and he further explains how he was “struck

by the intense feelings of group membership and individual freedom” (Hampton 1995: 21). This all leads into Hampton’s assessment of the second standard of Indian Education: **service**. Hampton notes, “Education is to serve the people. Its purpose is not individual advancement or status” (Hampton 1995: 21). It becomes necessary to acknowledge the reality that education for the Indigenous learner includes community, family and honouring “service” by bringing the value of education back to the people from where the learner came from.

After examining the direction of the spirit, Hampton shifts to the next of the six directions: the East. Hampton says:

Walking the circle of Indian education, facing the east, it is traditional to pray for our children. It is an Indian tradition – it is a deeply human tradition – to pray for future generations...To educate ourselves and our children we must start with who we are, with the traditions, the values and the ways of life that we absorbed as children of the people...The identity of Indian people is that which links our history and our future to this day now. (Hampton 1995: 22)

Encompassed within the direction of East is the third standard of Indian education:

**diversity**. Hampton describes, “Multiplicity, diversity, tribalism, and community-based education are words that point to the active implementation of diverse cultures (Hampton 1995: 21). He recounts that “The fact that over half of the Indian community lives in multi-tribal, multi-cultural urban areas complicates the issue by requiring that Indians of different tribes cooperate to implement their multi-tribal definition of Indian education” (Hampton 1995: 24). Undoubtedly, the diverse nature of Aboriginal people, their communities, traditions and knowledges must be acknowledged in order for it to be included within a Western system of schooling. Madeline MacIvor points out in her paper “Science Education for Aboriginal Students” that:

Our linguistic and cultural diversity is further complicated by post-contact categories such as Métis, status and non-status, treaty and non-treaty, on- and off-reserve, urban and rural, and most recently, Bill C-31. The generic term 'Indian' applied to us by outsiders has little meaning in our lives. (MacIvor 1995: 77)

Within this it becomes necessary to have a respect for cultural diversity not only among non-Aboriginal peoples, but the Aboriginal population as well. By accepting the standards of spirituality, service and diversity and the **culture** (Hampton's fourth standard) Indigenous people can emerge and become included within the wider context of education and knowledge.

The next direction Hampton turns to is that of the South. For Hampton, the South is the direction of summer. He describes:

It is clear that just as the seasons come and go, so too Indian Education has its seasons of increase and decline. The summer of Indian education was before the European invasion. Oral histories, the narratives of early European plunderers, and current traditional practices give us a partial understanding of traditional education and how it adapted to the invasion. (Hampton 1995: 28)

Here, "**tradition**" becomes Hampton's fifth standard of Indian Education. Hampton realizes that in Aboriginal and Indigenous societies, traditions define who Aboriginal people are and preserves their history, language and customs. Hampton also brings forward the fact that this need for continuity with tradition within Indian education is not a "rejection of the artifacts of other cultures nor an attempt to 'turn back the clock'" (Hampton 1995: 22). Alongside the standard of tradition comes a standard of **respect** and for Aboriginal societies, respect is of tremendous importance. Sharilyn Caillou says, "A premise of the First Nations world is that we unconditionally respect all beings because we all begin as seeds from Mother Earth" (Caillou 1995: 67). Eber Hampton understands that there must be an expectation of personal respect present within an Indian education framework (Hampton 1995: 31). By honouring the experiences that Aboriginal

children bring into the classroom, a more democratic environment is created and Indigenous learners are given freedom of personal autonomy where they can feel respected for who they are and where they come from (MacIvor 1995: 77).

Hampton's fourth direction within the six directions is the West. In the West, Hampton includes his next two standards of Indian education: **history** and **relentlessness** (Hampton 1995: 32). Hampton says, "Indian education has a sense of history and does not avoid the hard facts of the conquest of America" (Hampton 1995: 32). As was described in Chapter Two, the history of Indigenous learners' experience within the Canadian educational system shows that Aboriginal learners have had a much different experience with obtaining knowledge and being a part of a standard school experience since the coming of colonization. Similarly, Madeline MacIvor believes that "racist and ethnocentric materials have no place in the classroom, and curriculum materials need to be reviewed" (MacIvor 1995: 83). She continues:

Science educators could, for example, inform their students of how corporate water development in Canada has flooded our people's traplines, hunting grounds, and burial grounds; contaminated fish which traditionally formed a major part of many peoples' diets; and displaced peoples from their traditional territories. (MacIvor 1995: 83)

An understanding of Aboriginal peoples own history in the Canadian context could become possible in a classroom so Indigenous learners could further identify with the complexities of their situation within Canada.

In terms of relentlessness, the desire to still strive for a change of the educational experience of Aboriginal students is the best example there is to demonstrate that Aboriginal people are persistent in wanting the educational experience for their children to be different. Since the 1972 policy paper written by the National Indian Brotherhood,



Aboriginal people have demanded local control and “Indian control” over “Indian education”. Eber Hampton explains:

Indian education is relentless in its battle for Indian children. We take pride in our warriors and our teachers are warriors for the life of our children. (Hampton 1995: 32)

In this relentless battle, new opportunities can emerge and Aboriginal people can become further engaged with the educational experience of their children.

The next direction Hampton turns to is that of the North, and he associates the North with winter. He says, “The current situation in Indian education is cold and dark with just a hint of light that makes it possible to hope for spring” (Hampton 1995: 33).

Hampton argues:

I believe Indian children struggle against a pathological complex endemic to North American society...Indian children face a daily struggle against attacks on their identity, their intelligence, their way of life, their essential worth. They must continually struggle to find self-worth, dignity, and freedom in being who they are. (Hampton 1995: 34-35)

Here emerges standard nine: **vitality**. According to Hampton “Indian education recognizes and nourishes the powerful pattern of life that lies hidden within personal and tribal suffering and oppression” (Hampton 1995: 35). Madeline MacIvor explains “Our peoples have not vanished, nor has our traditional knowledge... despite the fact that our understanding of the world has been ‘denied or denigrated’ rather than respected or utilized, traditional knowledge continues to exist” (MacIvor 1995: 86). This supports the vitality of Aboriginal people and the knowledge and traditions they are able to contribute in an environment of learning. The final standard in the direction of the North is that of **conflict**. Conflict coincides with vitality; Hampton notes “Indian education recognizes the conflict, tensions, and struggle between itself and white education as well as with

education generally” (Hampton 1995: 35). The context of most of the education that Aboriginal students receive is from a Western perspective, and the young Aboriginal learner cannot help but internalize this conflict while trying to learn in an environment that does not necessarily accept or acknowledge their fundamentally different needs within an educational structure.

Finally, the last two standards are found within the Earth. These standards are: **place and transformation**. Place refers to the fact that as Hampton says, “Native community demands a place” (Hampton 1995: 39). This is not only because Aboriginal peoples find connection with Mother Earth, but because some of the Aboriginal students involved in Hampton’s interviews for this work “argued strongly and successfully [for] the importance of continuity and tradition in location” (Hampton 1995: 39). The last of Hampton’s standards, and the one that is reflected in the title of this thesis, is **transformation**. Hampton says “Indian education recognizes the need for transformation in relations between Indian and white as well as in the individual and society” (Hampton 1995: 41). MacIvor supports this stating “Transforming the school experience of our young people could lead to a transformation of our communities” (MacIvor 1995: 91). Indeed, having the inclusion of a redefined Aboriginal educational experience could manifest itself in a capacity that the wider educational community could be proud to be a part of.

In Hampton’s work, the organizational structure of the six directions (Spirit, East, South, West, North and Earth) and the twelve standards (spirit, service, identity, culture, tradition, respect, history, relentlessness, vitality, conflict, place and transformation) challenges educators to rethink and reconsider teaching practices and what is included in

them for the Aboriginal learner. Hampton's work is a model for curriculum and classroom development where needs of many different learners from many different backgrounds can be welcomed and included in a process of education.

### Gregory Cajete – Indigenous People and Science

Science is an area of study where many Indigenous learners find themselves under-represented. Within this under-representation, there is low achievement among Aboriginal students who do participate in scientific subjects, and this results in low enrolment in sciences at a post-secondary level, and an under representation in scientifically related occupations (MacIvor 1995: 74). Howard Gardner's theory of "Multiple Intelligences" and Eber Hampton's "Redefinition of Indian Education" both become directly related to understanding and assessing Gregory Cajete's discussion of an "Indigenous Science Education Model" as a new and creative initiative that can strengthen science education for Indigenous young people.

Gregory Cajete is a Tewa Indian from Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico who believes "Education is in crisis as America finds itself faced with unprecedented challenges in a global community of nations desperately struggling with massive social, economic, and cultural change" (Cajete 1994: 25). Within this change, education must find a way to include all learners to be equipped to succeed in an environment that is in a state of vigorous transformation. I believe that by looking at scholars such as Gregory Cajete and Oscar Kawagley, educators may find that there are indeed components within alternative, indigenous models of learning that become relevant and necessary for all learners to know and appreciate. To encapsulate Cajete's entire scientific paradigm within this section is beyond the scope of the thesis. However, the purpose of mentioning

Cajete is to bring forward innovative ideas surrounding science and education among Aboriginal learners. Here I hope to create an engagement among readers that even in science, there are alternative and more inclusive models for understanding how scientific curricula can be adapted to be more accommodating and engaging for all Indigenous students.

In his book *Igniting the Sparkle: An Indigenous Science Education Model*, Cajete writes “this current work describes a culturally responsive science curriculum...which integrates Native American traditional values, teaching principles and concepts of nature with those of modern Western science” (Cajete 1999: 9). Cajete seeks to bring forward the reality that many Indigenous students feel alienated from Western sciences as it appears irrelevant, and in many ways contradictory, to that of their own culture, worldview and experiences. He writes “Science is a cultural, as well as an individual process of thought and has been utilized in some form by every human cultural group” (Cajete 1999: 13).

There is a cultural nature in science as it reflects the group from which it originates (Cajete 1999: 16). Therefore, Aboriginal learners find themselves in classrooms learning scientific curriculum that is virtually void of validating their ancestral connection to the scientific world. Science then becomes a subject that doubts their reality, their beliefs and their existence. Cajete explains, “Traditional Native American systems of educating were characterized by observation, participation, assimilation and experiential learning” (Cajete 1999: 27). This system of education results in science becoming fundamentally different between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people as it was a learning process that was constantly being exercised in the

daily lives of Indigenous learners within cultural traditions, ceremonies and practices. As stated by Cajete, “if the teaching and learning of science is supportive of the student’s culture orientation, ‘enculturation’ is the result. If the teaching and learning of science is at odds with the student’s cultural orientation, the result is ‘assimilation’ forcing students to abandon or marginalize their own way of knowing to reconstruct a new...way of knowing” (Cajete 1999: 97). As quoted in Cajete’s writing, Dr. Rayna Green explains:

Contrary to the general insistence of Western scientists that science is not culture bound and that it produces good...many native people feel that scientists are thoroughly Western, rather than ‘universal’ and that science is negative. They insist that the practice of Western science trains alien, unfeeling people who bring environmental and human damage in their wake. (Greene 1981 *in* Cajete 1999: 31)

Also, Aboriginal students experience alienation as they feel as though scientists and science curriculum views Indigenous science as folk-lore and primitive and being of little or no value to the modern world, and especially in the classroom (Cajete 1999: 31). Students are taught according to Western scientific paradigms, leaving anything that is not “fact” as simply speculation, myth, or fantasy.

Similar to Cajete, Leroy Little Bear believes, “In order to appreciate and ‘come to know’ in the Native American science way, one has to understand the culture/worldview/paradigm of Native American people” (Little Bear *in* Cajete 1999: x). In a lecture that I attended recently at the University of Northern British Columbia in Prince George, B.C., Dr. Leroy Little Bear outlined the basic differences between an Indigenous perspective regarding science and a Western scientific paradigm as follows:

Figure 4

Indigenous	Western
Flux	Static
Waves	Matter
Animate	Inanimate
Relational	Isolational
Renewal	Singularity
Place/Space	Time
Chaos	Certainty

(Little Bear 2007)

In this lecture, it became apparent that while there has been little acknowledgement of Indigenous scientific knowledge, scientists are indeed re-evaluating the reality that Indigenous science is able to make great contributions to further understanding our world and making further scientific discovery through scientific propositions like quantum physics and quantum mechanics (Little Bear 2007). Scientists are realizing there is somewhat of a collision between probability and the fact and the fundamentals of Indigenous science are emerging as legitimate ways of looking at the world. Transcending the values of Indigenous science is something that all learners could be made aware of within a classroom and through further curriculum development.

In Cajete's analysis of Indigenous science and its relation to Western curriculum, Cajete realizes that in order for Native students to relate to Western science and scientific methodology, there are various levels of cultural adaptation that must take place (Cajete 1999: 96). Cajete quotes Glen Aikenhead who states:

Indigenous knowledges of nature tends to be thematic survival oriented, holistic, empirical, rational, contextualized, specific, communal, ideological, spiritual, inclusive, cooperative, coexistent, personal and peaceful. (Aikenhead 1997 *in* Cajete 1999: 96)

In order for curriculum to become accessible, a facilitation must occur to have students be equipped to have a “cultural border crossing” that would enable them to develop the skills of accessing Western science while still maintaining an ambition to achieve their goals guided by a Native scientific philosophy (Cajete 1999: 98). Cajete believes “an approach which integrates scientific, technological and Indigenous knowledge into real life situations and issues has the best chance of being effective” (Cajete 1999: 98). Cajete offers one suggestion that is proving useful within another cross-cultural science-technology model:

Applying an anthropological approach from an Indigenous perspective to the teaching and learning of Western science is another possibility since this promotes “autonomous acculturation,... (or) intercultural borrowing or adaptation of attractive content or aspects.” This would be a more constructive and culturally affirming alternative for Native students than assimilating, or enculturating themselves into Western science. Students may act as anthropologists learning from another culture. Like cultural anthropologists they would not need to accept the cultural ways of their ‘subjects’ in order to understand or engage in some of those ways. (Cajete 1999: 99)

By having students act as “anthropologists”, the method of learning and acquiring the knowledge found within Western science becomes something that students can feel more comfortable with when crossing the “cultural borders” that exists within classrooms.

Developing curriculum that will address the necessity to include Indigenous knowledge as part of a main-stream scientific paradigm is something that involves an immense amount of work and dedication by educators, learners and communities to turn it into reality. The importance of having Aboriginal learners able to see themselves within science and as having an important contribution to make within a Western scientific learning structure cannot be emphasized enough.

All three of the authors presented in this chapter emphasize the fact that there are indeed alternative ways of knowing and learning within our complex and ever-changing societies. Howard Gardner brings forth concepts relative to unmasking the many different capacities of learning and acquiring knowledge while Eber Hampton establishes a theory around Indian education that includes the many foundations essential to having a successful educational experience for Aboriginal learners. Finally, Gregory Cajete speaks in regards to science and the Indigenous learners place within the scientific paradigm. An Aboriginal Choice School, a school with an Aboriginal philosophy at its centre, is a place where these truths can be exercised in a safe, welcoming environment and where Indigenous curriculum standards and instruction could be honoured and embraced. Chapter Four shifts from secondary research to primary research and expands on examples of Aboriginal Choice Schools that are established in Edmonton and Winnipeg, where one will read about the vision these school districts employ in their efforts to change the curricular landscape.



#### **Chapter Four: Changing the Curricular Landscape - Winnipeg and Edmonton**

Both Winnipeg and Edmonton are pioneers in Canada in regards to establishing Aboriginal Choice Schools within Public School Districts. Children of the Earth High School in Winnipeg opened its doors in 1991 and Amiskwaciy Academy became a part of Edmonton Public Schools in September 2000 (Belmore, Cardinal, Clarke, Chalmers, Stevens Personal Interviews: January 2007, October 2006). The factors that were involved with the implementation of these institutions reflect everything from the history of Aboriginal student's experience within the Canadian education system, to how an Aboriginal philosophy can become inherently successful within the current Western academic learning environment.

The excerpts of the interviews provided in this chapter will be woven through the model of the Métis Sash. Each colour of the Sash has been aligned with the interviewees' answers to the questions discussed in the interview. Red represents the history of the interviewees' experience with the school; black represents the challenges associated with the implementation; blue and white represents the philosophy of the schools; and green represents how these schools are aiding in the advancement of community and education where they are developing Indigenous concepts of growth and prosperity. As explained in Chapter One, I have sought to let the interviewee's words speak for themselves; how these words are interpreted will be at the discretion of the readers. I hope these interviews provide a unique and beneficial insight into the issues surrounding Aboriginal Choice Schools.

A thematic analysis of all nine of my interviewees' answers is provided in Chapter Six where conclusions and recommendations are presented. The purpose of this

Chapter is to allow my readers an opportunity to learn from the experiences of my interviewees as they describe their own journey of establishing of an Aboriginal Choice School. I provide my interviews with Children of the Earth first since they have had the most experience of establishing an Aboriginal Choice School within Canada although it was the last school I visited.

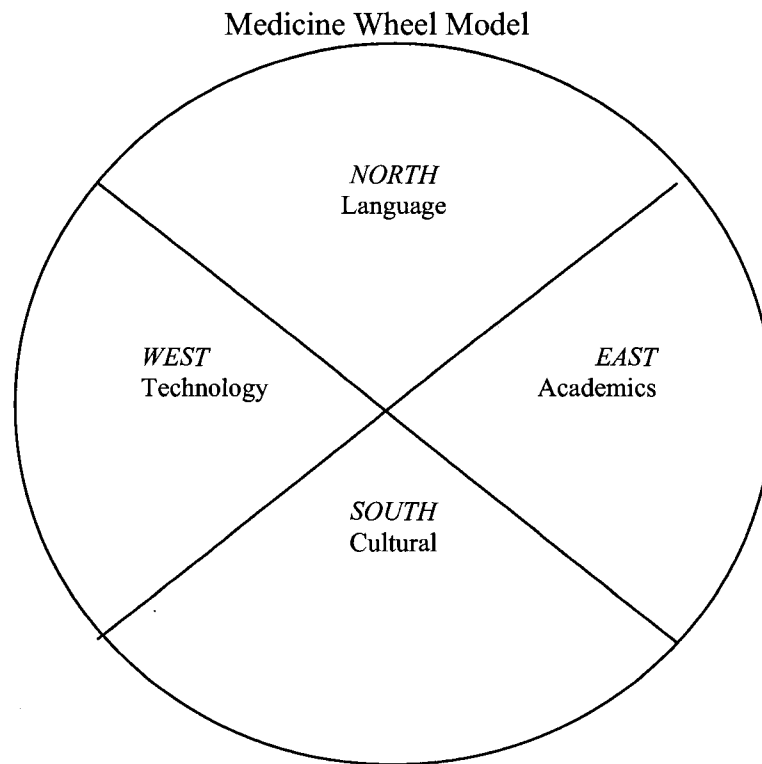
### **Children of the Earth High School – Winnipeg, Manitoba**

Children of the Earth is one of two Aboriginal Choice Schools within Winnipeg, Manitoba. The other school is Niji Mahkwa, an elementary Aboriginal School that is utilized by a large Aboriginal population within this same urban center. Because my focus is on senior years of schooling, I did not visit Niji Mahkwa or interview the staff that work directly within that school. To complete my research surrounding Children of the Earth High School, I traveled to Winnipeg in January 2007 and was fortunate to be able to arrange an interview with Pauline Clarke, the Superintendent of Schools for the Inner-City District of the Winnipeg School Division and Lorne Belmore, who is Principal of Children of the Earth High School, and Chair of numerous committees and Boards (Belmore and Clarke Personal Interviews January 15, 2007). The interviews with each of these participants will be woven through the Métis Sash consecutively.

Like all of my interviews, I found my experience in Winnipeg to be a fascinating way to experience first-hand both the physical and emotional presence of an Aboriginally focused model of education. Michel, Erickson and Madak (2005) summarize the philosophy of Children of the Earth as follows:

Children of the Earth High School and Niji Mahkwa School are philosophically based within the culture of the Aboriginal students they serve. The educational philosophies of both schools include the “whole” child, not just the academic child...it can be seen that both schools use the Medicine Wheel as their

educational foundation. The model adopted by Children of the Earth High School is presented below:



Michel, Erickson & Madak 2005: 25

On the website for Children of the Earth, called “Children of the Earth: Where our Students’ Spirits Soar”, Lorne Belmore says:

Children of the Earth is a unique educational setting in which our students are given the opportunity to gain knowledge of and experience Aboriginality in their daily educational lives. In all academic areas aboriginal perspectives are incorporated into current Manitoba curricula, enriching it and making its outcomes more meaningful to our students. (Children of the Earth: Where Our Spirits Soar: online)

In 2005, Children of the Earth received a national award from *MacLeans* magazine for being one of the ten best high schools in the country. They were winners in the category of “Special Community” and within the article published August 22, 2005 the authors explain:

Last fall, 150 Children of the Earth students, their faces painted in the four colours of the medicine wheel, travelled across town for a school spirit competition. Some went by school bus but others took public transport, chanting a cheer in Ojibwa the whole way. "These are inner-city youth, going out in public and showing their school spirit," said a proud guidance counsellor, Pat Mousseau. For Aboriginal kids who haven't always had an easy time being part of a minority in school, their affection for the native programming-based Children of the Earth is quite a change....Native students face pressures related to poverty, suicide, gangs and young parenting, among other issues, and the school becomes their safe place. "We can't change the environment they live in," says Mousseau, "but we hope to provide them with strategies to be able to deal with what's going on effectively and make positive choices." After graduation, fully 75 per cent go on to pursue post-secondary studies. "They strive for high goals, like being lawyers and doctors," says Mousseau. "Through coming to this school, they see this as something that is attainable." (Bergman, MacQueen and Marley: online)

The website for Children of the Earth is representative of the professional, dynamic and innovative approach this school district has taken in terms of engaging with Aboriginal Education. On the "Welcome" page of this site, one can read:

At Children of the Earth we strive to incorporate Aboriginal values and perspectives into our everyday lives. We believe in a holistic approach to education that integrates the physical, academic, social and spiritual well being of our students. We recognize that our students have attitudes, desires and abilities that differ widely and that changing times present new challenges and demands. Hence, we believe that the basic purpose of education is to provide a pathway through which each individual may realize self-respect, self-fulfillment and their relevance in a dynamic society. (Children of the Earth Where Our Spirits Soar: Online)

My interviews and my experience visiting this high school confirm the presence of these core values and objectives in the Children of the Earth Aboriginal Choice School.

The first interview that I completed was with Pauline Clarke at the School Board Office of the Winnipeg School Division. We sat in a Board Room at the Board Office and although I had not even been to Children of the Earth yet, I realized through my interview with Ms. Clarke that this school was established with an immense amount of dedication and hard work on the part of all people who were involved in its creation. I

was already anticipating that I was going to be enlightened and enriched by seeing the Children of the Earth school in operation, and my interview with Ms. Clarke only increased my excitement. The interview took approximately one hour and was an extremely comfortable and informative experience. As an administrator for the Winnipeg School Division, Ms. Clarke is an invaluable resource because her perspectives include addressing issues such as the political, financial and collective will of the people within the Winnipeg School Division and community.

As with Pauline Clarke, my interview with Lorne Belmore was informative and compelling. This interview was completed at Children of the Earth High School where I was able to experience first-hand what the school looked like, the kind of relationship Mr. Belmore and other staff members displayed with students and the actual physical structure of the school. Lorne Belmore describes the school's physical structure as follows:

The centre atrium represents the body of our spirit guide the Thunderbird; the wings of the school align with the body to create the full Thunderbird. Our student lounge and library in the centre of the school are of circular design to represent the nest and womb from which all life comes forth into our community. The colours represent the four directions and four races of people that walk in our lands and are shown together to represent the quest for racial harmony. (Belmore E-mail: April 2 2007)

In this Thunderbird configuration, one finds everything from regular classrooms, to classrooms where senior students engage in a University Transition program, to a daycare so students who are parents are still able to access an education that accommodates their circumstances.

As I arrived for my interview at Children of the Earth, I passed by a group of students who could tell that I was a bit "lost" and had no idea where to go as I entered

through the side door rather than through the front entrance. They immediately pointed me in the direction to the school's central office where I knew I would be able to locate Mr. Lorne Belmore. I immediately sensed this school was different from schools I have worked in within Prince George. The walls display lines of the colours that represent the four directions and four races and as such, honour the Aboriginal membership of the city of Winnipeg. The Aboriginal staff at the school was something I took notice of immediately. From the secretary to the teachers, to the Principal, there were Aboriginal faces everywhere. Also, just witnessing the number of Aboriginal youth in the halls and office made me realize that these learners are indeed choosing to access their education at this institution and Mr. Belmore's interview reinforced why Aboriginal students would make the choice to come to Children of the Earth. Lorne Belmore has worked within his position for over five years and is the leader within an institution where he deals with the ongoing challenges of providing a unique model for learning within a public education framework.

### **Red: History of Children of the Earth High School**

The history of the establishment of Children of the Earth is represented through the colour Red. Traditionally, the Colour Red on the Métis Sash depicts Métis history. Because red represents "history", I wanted to include it as the colour to represent my interviewees' answers to the second question and their own "history" with Children of the Earth school. This question is: What role have you played in developing an Aboriginal School?

Pauline Clarke provides the following response to this question, noting the history of the establishment of Children of the Earth and why the Winnipeg School Division felt

it was necessary to adopt a new vision in regards to Aboriginal Education within their community. Pauline Clarke explained:

What I'm going to talk about today is to do with the Winnipeg School Division. In the Province each school division sets their own program's policies in a general framework laid out through the Department of Education. And so each school division can take initiative, as they wish, to develop different kinds of programming, and in the school division...given the nature of our student population and families living here, it was very important to us to see what we could do to support our Aboriginal students, and so what I'm going to talk about is really what the School Division has done, although there might be some pieces from the Province as well.

Let me just back up a little bit and give you a bit of a history of how we got to the point of developing an Aboriginal school. I think for the last thirty years, the Winnipeg School Division has recognized that we have a very diverse student population...but our main concern has been are we doing enough to support our Aboriginal students? A lot of our Aboriginal families move in and out of the city, they come from their home communities. They come into the city for the year - they may go back in the spring. So we have to say, look at our educational programs and decide whether we're meeting their needs, but we also have a large urban Aboriginal population where they really are urban dwellers, some of them not necessarily connected to any home community around the Province and their plight is one that's caused a lot of distress for people working in the schools when they see how much help the children need - how they don't even want to stay in school...

In the 1980's the Board of Trustees put a task force in place called "The Task Force on Race Relations." The intent was to hear from all the different communities that make up our School Division and ask them what would they like to see happen in the School Division that would make life better and education more relevant for their children. In July of 1989 one of the recommendations to the Board was to establish an Urban Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee. One of the tasks that was given to the Advisory Committee was to look at the feasibility of what was then called a "Survival School." In the literature in the 1980's the term used to describe Aboriginal people was "native," hence "Native Survival School." The Urban Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee was given the task of looking at this type of approach to see if the Division should consider establishing such a school. It was an interesting time. My role in the Task Force was Superintendent, assigned to work alongside the Chair of the Task Force, Trustee Anita (Neville), and the other trustees as well. The Task Force also had representatives from the community. Meetings were held in the community to ensure that the voices of community people were heard.

When the Urban Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee was put in place I was Superintendent sitting on it. By the late 1980's, almost the same time as this Task Force was coming into place, the Chief Superintendent at that time was very concerned that the children attending our inner city schools (and many

of them were Aboriginal students) were not achieving the way that we wanted them to...so he proposed to the Board of Trustees to change the structure of the School Division. Initially the change was to maintain an elementary-secondary organization, but to pull out from that the twelve highest needs schools based on demographic data, such as poverty, and assign one superintendent to this group to work with them. The twelve schools were grouped together and I was made the Superintendent responsible for that group of twelve. The following year, that group of twelve grew to sixteen, because the people working in the schools really liked that way of working, and then in 1990 that group changed from sixteen to twenty-one. At this time the structure of the entire Division changed, moving from elementary/secondary and a group of inner-city schools to four districts: north, south, central and inner city.

The inner-city district is the group of schools that I'm responsible for and is the only group that is based on the socio-demographic data. The other groups are based on geographic areas with some schools that are very high income communities and one or two lower income. The highest need schools are all within the inner-city district. The Chief Superintendent at the time, Jack Smyth is his name, was the main person behind making the shift to a more responsive organization.

In 1990, therefore, there was a new organizational structure and the establishment of the Urban Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee. The committee started talking to people in the community and also had many Aboriginal members from the community sitting on it. In the fall of 1990 the committee recommended to the Board of Trustees that a Native Survival School be established within the Winnipeg School Division for September 1991. The goal was to address the number of dropouts, therefore, having students stay in school to graduation. The school was to provide high quality academic programs in a context of Aboriginal culture and languages. This is a very quick progression, from the idea of having a survival school to actually opening the school was about eight months. In principle, the recommendation was agreed to by the Board of Trustees and for the next eight months we started dealing with many questions and plans. What would the school look like? How many children, the curriculum, where would it be located? The budget, the management process and how do we involve the community? The Board of Trustees in approving the school also made it clear that the normal policies, practices and funding of the School Division would apply. However, the Aboriginal community would be involved in the decisions that were made in the management of the school. (Clarke Personal Interview: January 15, 2007)

Pauline Clarke's long-standing history of working with the Winnipeg School Division shows how the establishment of Children of the Earth High School was not something that happened immediately, but instead represents a progression of moving forward trying to resolve issues of meeting the needs of inner city Aboriginal learners.



Lorne Belmore, while not having the same history of involvement with the establishment of Children of the Earth High School, provided poignant insight in terms of his own history with an Aboriginal School within Winnipeg. He said:

The role I played in the development of an Aboriginal school isn't from inception, but from the development of an existing model. When I came to Children of the Earth High School, five years ago, a lot of the programming was thought out, the groundwork was laid, however issues, in terms of enrollment numbers, and I perceived what the job had to be for me was to get our enrollment numbers up and further develop existing programs and to implement new programs to further the cause of preparing future leaders to take the schools' mandate and to actually put it into a form that benefited both the students in terms of their cultural and spiritual identities and their future roles as productive citizens of our country. (Belmore Personal Interview: January 15, 2007)

Through these interviews, it becomes obvious that the idea of establishing an Aboriginal Choice School in Winnipeg arose out of concern and regard for Aboriginal children and an issue for its stakeholders is that of developing a strong model for appropriately educating the Aboriginal youth within the Winnipeg School Division.

### **Black: Challenges for Winnipeg**

As the history of my interviewees' experiences with the establishment of Children of the Earth has been represented, I now move into the colour on the Métis Sash that represents the "dark" periods of Métis history/Aboriginal School implementation. Within this colour, I would like to provide the response to the following question: What challenges have you encountered during the development of such a school (that of an Aboriginal Choice School)?

Pauline Clarke explained the challenges she encountered as the Superintendent:

The challenges from our side, the Division, back then...we weren't really clear what we could work with in our framework. We knew we were not allowed by law to hand over the responsibility of the school to people who weren't within the School Division. Legally we couldn't do that, so it took us quite a long time to figure out with our lawyers, in reviewing the Public Schools Act, what we could

do and what we couldn't do and still have the school remain within the Division. We worked through that; it took us a year and a half. The school actually opened before we had the management structure finalized, but eventually we came to an agreement with the community, which they signed off on.

One of the challenges was funding. The Division agreed upfront that we would give all the funding that we would normally give to any school to this school. This meant that the school could rely on the money for hiring staff and equipment. What the Division wanted and what the community had agreed to, was that they would provide funding for all the other things that wouldn't normally be funded through the regular Provincial/ Division funding. This included funding for programs and to offer courses on Aboriginal tradition, culture and languages and additional staff to work on community outreach. Unfortunately the extra funding didn't materialize as we had hoped. That was a real challenge where we were expecting funds because the agreement was outlined in writing, but it didn't work that way.

Determining the location of the school was certainly a challenge. The final decision on location required us to relocate another school out of the building to put the school in. This was a major disruption for the school that had to move out, and their staff and students.

The Board of Trustees, through the Advisory Committee, was working with people who represented the community, however, not everybody liked the idea of setting up a separate Aboriginal school, and some people thought that we were streaming Aboriginal students out of the mainstream, segregating them. Those words came up, and there was quite a discussion about the merits of doing this. The Division stated that the new school will be a choice, we're not forcing anybody to go there. It's just another choice that parents and students have just like the choice they have to attend a French immersion school or the choice they have to go to a vocational school or the choice they have to go to a school in this neighborhood rather than that neighborhood. It's a choice, and for some families this would be a better choice because this school will respect the Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal history, and help develop self-esteem in the students. Children of the Earth opened in 1991 and we opened Niji Mahkwa, the elementary school, in 1993. So we have schools for Nursery to Grade 12.

The funding, the community, who speaks for the community - that got to be quite difficult at times. We were working with the community partner called The Thunder Eagle Society that came together just for the purpose of being the partner for the school. After the school was running a few years, as often is the case, that group of people went their different ways, moving out of the city, going on to other things. They were not registered anymore as a non-profit organization with the Province, and at that point the school's community and parents were) establishing themselves. As is evident when a new school is established there is no parent council or student council. Because one is starting from scratch, it was good to have a community group to work with it. After 3 years the school established their own parent council and student council, and they are able to speak for the school themselves. The community group isn't as necessary, because you have the people who are actually at the school and who are working

with the school.

The Thunder Eagle Society no longer exists and we work with the parent council and student council, just as we would in any school. The additional funding for cultural programs was added by the School Division, over and above our recommended funding, after we realized that the community was not providing it. This situation was a difficult one because we had established the school based on certain commitments and then when those commitments didn't come through, there was some concern, but the main thing was to have the school up and running and moving forward. We just made sure that happened. There were a number of community meetings. When the school agreed to put the school in place in the first instance, there were community meetings held because we wanted to get the word out to get the students registered. We did a lot of work on that in a hurry.

Hiring staff, that was a challenge. We had the staff hired completely from scratch. There were no staff there to work with. We hired a principal who was from outside the Province at the time and at the last minute, he accepted the job, and then after that he turned it down. We had to scramble with hardly any time at all before the school opened to get somebody from our Division to step in. Fortunately we were able to do that. Some of the staff that were hired both there and Niji Mahkwa (we wanted a lot of Aboriginal staff) came from outside the City. They found that it was different working in the City and working in home communities, it's a different climate. The students are different, many of the students here are quite streetwise and in the home communities they weren't necessarily the same way...I think some of the teachers really struggled to come to terms with teaching in a city and all that that brings. It wasn't a smooth path, some of the parents weren't really sure what was going on at the school. They wanted their children there, but weren't really sure what they were getting in the way of program. Lots of discussion had to happen and clarifying of what was really going on in the school. The way the school is different to a regular high school is because of the Aboriginal languages that every student learns (Ojibway or Cree). It is also different because of the emphasis on Aboriginal traditions and culture. Languages and culture are integrated into and underpin everything that happens. (Clarke Personal Interview: January 15, 2007)

Ms. Clarke continued:

One other thing that we haven't been able to do concerns the Aboriginal languages. We've been asking the Province for many years to develop a framework for teaching Cree, teaching Ojibway, and Michif, the Métis language, and Oji, because the Province is responsible for curriculum and program guides. Many of our inner city schools offer Aboriginal languages. About 10 years ago 3 of our elementary schools started teaching Ojibway, but we were constructing the program ourselves because the Province didn't have the curriculum for it. We couldn't find people to hire who knew how to teach the language. We have been struggling. Children of the Earth and Niji Mahkwa have developed their own language programs and they have very strong programming in place. We are still

hoping that the Province will develop a framework that would help some of our other schools to be able to teach languages. That is still something that needs to happen. (Clarke Personal Interview: January 15, 2007)

Lorne Belmore furthered this discussion by explaining the following challenges from his perspective:

Probably the biggest challenge is the issue of funding. A lot of the programs that we do here, the value and worth of it is seen by everybody. They say that's a very valid program, that's a great program but it's a matter of securing the funding in which to do it. In Winnipeg School Division when Children of the Earth was formed was supposedly formed in a partnership with a different Aboriginal group called the Thunder Eagle Society, which I don't know any members of, but back then that's what it was. The Thunder Eagle Society had pulled out, but the Thunder Eagle Society said they would be responsible for funding the cultural components of the school and the Winnipeg School Division would provide the building and the academic content. After the Thunder Eagle Society had pulled out the Winnipeg School Division really didn't have any responsibility to continue with the program. But they saw the value of it, and so they continued it on their own. So any staffing that I get works with the formulation that every other high school gets. There is one concession, and that's for a cultural adviser. But other than that, the staffing I get here is exactly the same as any you would get at any comparable size school but we have been mandated in two different ways. One is to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives, and that's where the cultural advisers come in and do the majority of their job, and also the preservation of heritage languages.

Now Manitoba as a demographic is split between Cree and Ojibway and so that means...there's eleven dialects in Manitoba, but those are the primary ones we deal with. And so I have to have two language teachers. I have to have one for Cree and one for Ojibwa and that affects the overall staffing numbers, because if I have to have two language teachers, that's one less teacher I can have in other places. So we tend to shift, to multi-task. Our teachers are very well-versed in the fact that this is a very small community. That they all have to pitch in, and so they don't mind doing things that would normally be out of the realm of their expertise just to make sure that the things we do here we are successful with.

One of our best programs, well they're all good - is a grade 9 all-girls program. This grade nine all girls program has its own teacher and its own cultural adviser in a group of 25 girls, young ladies at... the grade 9 level and the classroom teacher takes them through their academic journey for the entire grade 9 curriculum, which in itself is a task. The cultural adviser is there to lead them spiritually together. It has a great impact on our girls, because the majority of our grade 12 girls that we have now have come from that program. They stayed in school, and so what they get is they get the experience of being in a classroom discussing issues that are pertinent and relevant to young Aboriginal females, who are the most highly victimized group in North America, and so it gives them a

whole new look at their lives and their skill sets. And it also serves the purpose of, if you have an all-female class, they tend to do better in their math and science marks. Not having to compete with males. Not that some females have a problem competing with males, but a lot of them shy away from giving answers and being perceived as “brainy” in co-ed classes.

So, that is a funded program that is above and beyond the funding we get from the school district, that's actually funded by Heritage Canada, the Federal Government. They have funded it for 7 years now, full-time. This last year they had some budget cuts, so we had to make some changes, but the integrity of the program was not changed, its stayed the same, so the girls program still exists. That's sort of the struggles we have to deal with because funding dropped in one area we had to increase the amount of students we had.

But we generally try to stay within a target population of 200. For the last two years previous to this one, we have had to turn away over a hundred new kids each year. When we turn them away that doesn't mean they don't go to school, there are two other high schools here; we are in the middle of two high schools. So we have another hundred kids, for one reason or another, be it when their applications are handed in, and the fact that we have to be an academic high school. We have cut back on staffing because of the language teacher, etc. the supports that are in big high schools such as low enrolment classes and resource teachers all over the place. We don't have that here, so the kids have to be within a certain sphere. So we tend to take kids that are up to three grade levels behind for certain amounts. Those are the ones we can work with; if we take anymore then that's taxing the system far too much. And there are other supports out there that can help these kids that have come here and we sent them off to larger high schools. They've worked hard and have come back, and they are now with us.

But in terms of popularity or kids wanting to come to the school, when I first arrived it was hard to reach probably 170. For the past two years we've turned away over one hundred each year and so, I mean, that shows you the interest and the need for schools like this. I'm sure if they put another floor on here, we could probably run the school at 500 right now. It's taken awhile but the kids realize the value and the worth of what we do here. There have been many visitors that have walked into the school and said there's just a really good calm vibe in the school, you don't hear yelling. Everybody is respectful. They are nice to each other, and we've had kids that come here that have been level 3 behavioural. That's as high as they get here with TAs that have gotten registered. When their files arrive, we find they were level 3 and had TAs attached to them. But for some reason or another, no one had told us that. But these kids, I'm thinking of two young men in particular, one was in grade 11, and he was on the honour roll, was performing extremely well, the other one was just a rambunctious grade 9 kid and he was very respectful of us. According to what was in the file, these kids had to be with somebody all the time, but here they fit right into our population, and we find that kids come here tend to be a lot happier, they tend to realize that they're not in the minority, they look around and they see brown faces everywhere and they realize that this is a really good place.

Our population is primarily Aboriginal; we are about 95% Aboriginal and 5% of our kids are not Aboriginal. What really makes me proud is these kids have not ever taken the opportunity to reverse that discrimination they felt in big schools, being the Aboriginals to the non-Aboriginals. They've never done that to the other kids. They welcome them to embrace them and I think they're really happy that these kids are here and experiencing the education that we offer. I think that that's really neat, this non-Aboriginal person is here, and wanting to learn about the culture and tradition and the languages and so they accept them as anybody is accepted in our school.

The school itself is such a good positive experience, a positive place. There are days I mean, we have our days, I worked at a Class five high school before this, a much larger school than this, as a Vice-Principal and on the first day of school you would be looking at kids waiting to get in because (of) what they were doing on that first day. When I first came here - October 23rd sticks out in my mind because it's the first time a student came to me about a concern about misbehaving, about getting into a fight, you know, that is a heck of a long time ago. And this person just turned himself in he said, "Okay I went outside I saw Tom and I just went and punched him because he said this about me on the weekend, and we had a fight on the weekend. I just saw him and lost it, so I'm here now." So it was about a month and a half into the school year before anybody was sent to me for a concern. I said to myself, something is missing, and I couldn't put my finger on it till finally this kid showed up. Yah, that's what's missing. This is all part of the positive vibe that everybody in this place has and that includes the staff and our staff here is 70% Aboriginal. These people are out there as role models, and it's a matter of finding, if I could get really effective teachers in every subject area, I'd strive for 100%. But you know it's a matter of the skill sets that the teachers come with. Some of our people are just not (skilled), or there's not enough of our people... But when I see an opportunity I will take it.

The school itself...well Children of the Earth it is a school of choice. You can live across the street from us and not have to come to our school. So every person that's coming here has chosen to come here. And they have chosen to come here from everywhere in the Winnipeg School Division and outside of the suburban areas. We have kids that live in government subsidized projects, and we also have kids that will be dropped off at school by their affluent parents and who are coming in from suburbia to drop their kids off because they feel that the education that we offer here is very valid for our people and they're not getting it from the suburban schools. So we have quite an eclectic mix here, socio-economic strength, and there is never, if you walk around, you can see some of the haves and some of the have-nots. You can see that. But you know, it's never been an issue for the kids here. Some kids are saying "Wow you live in Charles," which is in the suburbs and the same kid will go, "While you live on (*inaudible*)," you know they can't imagine their world, but they sit together and they're getting a choice education, and they both do well. And I think that's a really positive example, it's an interesting mixing pot we have going here. I think the support of the school division, the support of the staff, they're all concerned about what's

happening with our kids. (Belmore Personal Interview: January 15, 2007)

### **Blue and White: Philosophical “Colours”**

As Children of the Earth is representative of a school overcoming various challenges, the school itself operates within a mandate that is unique with its concern for honouring Aboriginal tradition and culture. Like the colours blue and white of the Métis flag that represent the Métis people, my fourth question for Pauline Clarke and Lorne Belmore is related to the philosophy of the school itself and what that embodies. These answers therefore are aligned with the colours blue and white within the Métis Sash as this part of the Sash represents the “colours” of the people and my interviewees answers represent the values of Children of the Earth.

When asked, “What factors do you consider to be integral in providing an environment where Aboriginal learners are delivered an education immersed in Aboriginal philosophy?” Pauline Clarke replied:

For that question, I think that one of the key things is that the people who choose to work in the schools really want to be there and really respect the children who come to the school. That's true for any school, but for these schools in particular, ...one of the things that was the most important is that relationship that's built between the students of the children coming to the school and the people, whoever they are teachers...secretaries, whoever the people are in that building. That relationship has to be one of understanding and respect that then helps the students want to be there, and then want to learn. Many of the children who came to the school, originally, were often children who were struggling in school, were in danger of dropping out or didn't want to come in the first place. They also come from some of the northern communities into the City. It is important to make a personal connection with somebody, that makes the student feel, “Oh I want to be here, I think I'll try again tomorrow, I'll come back another day and see what it's like.” It doesn't matter how wonderful the actual education program is - if you can't get the youngsters in the door and tell them, “We want you here – you're important to us,” the students are not going to come back.

Once the students are in and they see that the program actually has something to offer and is interesting and meaningful and helping them, you know, sometimes they're struggling with, “Who am I?” and “What am I doing here?” and all those big questions...Once they're in a school and see that there are people

there to help them find out who they are, then they will come back for that. One of the first things is providing that welcoming warm, but also with respectful atmosphere of “we want you here, and we want to work with you”, “you don't just come here and do what you want”, and then ... following up with a youngster, “Was she at school today? We want you to come even if you can't come till 10 in the morning, come in at 10 in the morning, we still want to work with you.”

I think that the second thing that's really important is getting people on the staff who truly understand what Aboriginal culture is about. We found in this process there's lots of people out there who tell you that they know what's important in Aboriginal culture. We've gone through a lot of discussion over many years in the Division about who do we listen to, because different people tell you different things matter...it's hard to know where to go, but we're very fortunate on our staff having some Aboriginal (people) already working for us, who help guide us through that process. So we relied on people we had known, we relied on people in the community, like Rev. Stan McKay, who was an Aboriginal leader in the Province, we went to people who knew our system that we trusted and respected to help guide us through how this should look and what things mattered. And then that evolved. Now, at Children of the Earth, we have male and female cultural advisors in the building. At Niji Mahkwa it is similar. The principal of Niji Mahkwa, Myra Laramee, is an elder in her own right, and then we have Phillip Paynter, who's on the staff there, is a cultural adviser. In both schools we've brought people in who help on a day-to-day basis with how to teach and respect Aboriginal traditions. It's an ongoing challenge because there's lots of advice being given by the School Division, but as long as you feel that you've got people that you can respect that are giving the right guidance, then that's a key role.

It's got to be done in a very respectful way, and proper way. The ability to hire the right staff is a critical piece. Another key point is the support of the Board of Trustees. If our Board of Trustees hadn't really wanted to go down this path as willingly as they did, it wouldn't have been so smooth. The Board of Trustees were prepared to take a risk - going into something completely new. The Province didn't come into the picture at all. (Clarke Personal Interview: January 15, 2007)

To answer “how is an Aboriginal School reflective of this (Aboriginal Philosophy)?”

Pauline Clarke continued:

I can only talk about our two schools, Children of the Earth and Niji Mahkwa, and I think in both schools just the programs offered, the staff that they have in place (I have mentioned already the cultural advisors), and the language and culture programs we have in place. So for example, in Children of the Earth we have the All Girls Program and that's reflective of trying to help some of the young women gain more confidence in their voice and who they are - the All Girl's Program does that. They work together and they go through some of the teachings about women and it makes a huge difference for them in being able to



hold their heads up. Unfortunately in this City, there are many Aboriginal young women, very young girls often who end up on the street - that's not what we want to see, so anything we can do to help them and build their self-esteem is an important thing. We have different programming going on in Niji Mahkwa, with the "Girls Sitting Together" Program, it's a similar sort of idea for the younger girl students. We have programs looking at what we should do for the boys to give them help and guidance as well, so there's that kind of thing putting programming in place. That reflects the needs of the students within the building.

I mentioned already the cultural support and advisers and linking to the workplace. For example, one of the main things we put the school in place to address dropouts, we want to have students continue through to grade 12 and graduate. But then we have to be thinking, if they finish grade 12, how can we help them to wherever they go next. At Children of the Earth we have a University Transition Program. Once students have completed grade 12 they can come back to Children of the Earth to do some university courses still in that warm setting and that helps begin their integration to university. We have just established the Health Care Professions Program in partnership with a local medical clinic and hospital to encourage the students to enter this area of work. We are trying to give the students an education, the languages, the culture and support, the traditions, and high expectations for their academic program, as well as take care of them. I think it's ever-changing. There isn't just one thing that's going on at the school. There are lots of things going on to help with self-esteem and academic success, so we have great grads where the students are, many of them, bringing their own children already. They've got one or two youngsters of their own. Some of the things that students say at grad, they all speak about their own life journey and, well, you can imagine it's so moving. But you see there, how the school has made a difference. (Clarke Personal Interview: January 15, 2007)

Lorne Belmore explained his interpretation of the factors that he considers integral in providing an environment where Aboriginal learners are delivered in education immersed in Aboriginal philosophy as follows:

I think the big thing is that Aboriginal learners in mainstream schools, a lot of them tend to walk in two worlds. You have those who have their home life and everything they've been taught up until this point. And then they walked into mainstream school, and they're getting a whole other message about what the school perceives as education, and basically what the schools are telling them is "Everything you learned at home is not valid." They don't do it directly but through their actions and this is the way things are. Aboriginal students tend to get a mixed message and that's where you get a lot of acting out occurring too because they are walking two worlds. A lot of people can't appreciate the fact that these kids are walking two worlds...they value what they believe in the messages they're getting from their home and at the same time, they're also

getting the values and beliefs from a different society, a different culture. I think what's important to Aboriginal education is that mainstream has to recognize the fact that these young people are walking in two worlds and that they have to respect what the messages are coming from home, without that respect then you are just throwing the Aboriginal learner into a state of confusion as to "What's right, what do I believe?" Some kids can't handle it and they'll opt right out and they end up going back to what they have been taught and not pursuing anything very productive in our society.

I think that Aboriginal learners deserve respect and respect for traditional knowledges. When you say traditional knowledges they don't necessarily have to be historical, because these kids are being taught values at home right now today, and it's not a matter of your Jingle Dress, or...which way you're tipi pole points and stuff like that. I mean, there are all sorts of messages kids are getting and you have to incorporate these sorts of views and perspectives into curricula. So show that the fact that in geometry, just for an example, that circumference, that Aboriginals built with the concept of circumference, in terms of establishing tipi poles or lodges etc. there are all dealing with the concept of geometry and that all learning did not come from men in white coats from Europe. A lot of the Aboriginal views of life are very current, are very correct...People have to realize that...

Particularly in Winnipeg, and I'm sure eventually across the country that the majority of growth in Manitoba - Manitoba's future depends on how well the Aboriginal students do because they form such a large proportion of the upcoming population. So, I mean it's got to be a collaborative effort between all levels of government to ensure that Aboriginal youth become attuned to the fact that this is their country. Right now, they sort of sit at arms length, this is Canada, this is where I live, but it's not really my country. There's not a lot of ownership involved. I think these levels, governments have to make the students realize that what they think, what they do, what they say, it does matter. And the country's growth is based upon how well they do. (Belmore Personal Interview: January 15, 2007)

Mr. Belmore then answered "How is an Aboriginal school reflective of this, delivering an education immersed in Aboriginal philosophy?" by saying:

I think what you tend to do in terms of being an Aboriginal school, you get the kids that are interested, you get the parents that are interested. You get the people who want their kids to be in school, who want to be successful. And I mean some of our kids will be successful in any school they go to, but a lot of our kids would have dropped out by now. I mean, they're here and they're here because they're comfortable. They're here because they're validated, the feelings they have, the previous learnings they've had are all validated, and they feel that they are an integral part of the school whereas in other schools in larger schools, they're a minority, and not a very popular minority because of the systemic racism that occurs in a lot of schools. You know, the hierarchy and Aboriginal

kids tend to - being naturally shy or quieter, tend to bear the brunt of it from everybody. Here they can actually speak their minds and realize they're important so the changes that kids do see is that.

I mean the positive changes of being here is that they feel validated and they know that they can make a difference and that there are expectations on them. If you come to Children of the Earth there's an expectation, it is right from grade 9 that you are going on from this point on. They don't all go on from this point, but there is an expectation. A lot of them work into that, they look beyond what we have here. They look at the fact that, "Okay I've got my high school diploma and now what? Now what am I going to do?" And that's the message we keep delivering to them, what are you going to do? There's so much out there for you, and there's never been a better time to be Aboriginal in terms of, I've never seen so many recruiters lined up at the doors for our graduates and for our kids, and kids wanting to be part of our program. I mean, it's phenomenal now! Back when...I went to school, there was absolutely nothing, absolutely nothing. In fact, it was a hindrance to be Aboriginal, because people didn't want to hire you, people didn't want this sort of stuff and so that's a lot of that intergenerational stuff that we're dealing with now.

I think Canadian society has realized the point of doing well by our Aboriginal population...to get away from the stereotype. I mean they talk about drunken Indians, okay, let's go outside and we'll find some drunken white people, you know, am I going to judge your entire race based on these poor souls? No. Don't judge us based on those individuals. Those are people that all races have been for whichever reasons, tragic reasons, they find themselves in that situation, but it's very convenient just to judge the whole race based upon the actions of a few. Then of course they don't also realize that it was their initial actions that caused those individuals to fall into those sort of ways. The population is healing from what happened before (Residential Schools) but we are still seeing the effects of it big-time. Having an Aboriginal school is part of the whole, part of the way (of healing). (Belmore Personal Interview: January 15, 2007)

### **Green: Benefit to Community**

Within the framework for the interviews regarding the experience at Children of the Earth, my final question related to the colour green of the Métis Sash. The colour green represents growth and prosperity for the Métis people and my interview question was as follows: How do you see Provincial Aboriginal Schools creating positive change for Aboriginal people and their communities? Pauline Clarke stated the following:

Well, I think as I said, for us it's providing a choice, which is a good thing. Everybody needs to feel that the education system has something to offer for their own children. And here's a choice that many of our Aboriginal families obviously

want to make for their own children. So that's a good thing that should be there. I think the fact that it's in the mainstream of the school system, it's not just an add-on over on the side is positive. It's a respected, valued part of the regular school system, it helps people to say, "Well we're just as good". Before this I think many of our Aboriginal families felt that they were in a system that didn't respect and value them equally. I think now it shows that we do, I think the fact that the schools are in place has helped other schools, regular schools do a lot more to support Aboriginal students as well. So it's not just that, there's Aboriginal culture and traditions going on in these schools, but in all of our other inner-city schools we are using seven teachings with all of our students, not just Aboriginal, trying to help them understand Aboriginal students better and Aboriginal students understand who the other children are as well. So we have used our Aboriginal teachings, the seven teachings as a basis for work and all of the other schools as well.

So there's quite a spinoff, and so we all work together; the principals of these schools and the principals of other schools in the district. On Thursday we're doing a full day session on Aboriginal education and we are working altogether. We learn from each other as well. I think for the students themselves, there is no doubt that they are very proud of what they're doing and how they are accomplishing things. I have talked to so many students over the years, and so many of them say, "If it hadn't been for Children of the Earth, I wouldn't have been in school, I wouldn't have continued in school." So on a person by person, student by student basis for many of the students it has truly changed their life. For some it doesn't work as well. Some of them - for all that's there - they still can't manage to get to school or stay consistently in school. You know, they will leave, some of them will come back, and some of them just never, never come back.

I was at a meeting the other day at the Pan Am Clinic, which is one of our medical clinics in town, and we were talking about a program that we want to put in place for Children of the Earth students re: health professions. The gentleman sitting at the table, from the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority as their representative, is a man who, in the first year when Children of the Earth opened, enrolled as a student at Children of the Earth. He was telling me at this meeting exactly what I just said - if it hadn't been for Children of the Earth, he wouldn't have the job he has now. It reinforced that students from Children of the Earth have become role models and their voices are heard through the community at large and for their own children. I just think it brings a very positive support.

Now there are still people in the community that are critical of the school. Even today, they say the school is not Aboriginal enough. Or they say, it should be run by the Aboriginal community on its own, and what we say to them is "We're not stopping anybody in the Aboriginal community having their own schools." In this Province people can set up their own private schools, for example, there's private schools that serve the Islamic community, private schools that serve the Catholic community, etc. So we are not stopping them - if they want to do something, they can do it. We are not in competition with anybody, but for us this is what we have done, this is what seems to work. Children of the Earth

has 220 students, and Niji Mahkwa, it's about 300. So this is what works for 500 of our students, and that's good for us. So there is still criticism, and every once in awhile it's picked up by the media and then it kind of dies down, and about five years later comes back. Something triggers it off and so on, but I think it is creating positive change, I don't think anywhere else in the Province has done quite what we've done, but it has certainly had an impact and the fact that we have talked about Aboriginal education in all of our schools...(Clarke Personal Interview: January 15, 2007)

Lorne Belmore related the following to the question surrounding growth and prosperity within an Aboriginal School:

I see them (Aboriginal Schools) as ways that prepare Aboriginal kids to take over this country, to get over the past but never to forget it. I mean, we don't dwell on Residential Schools. We don't dwell upon the atrocities of the past, we acknowledge them. We make sure that the kids know them. We make sure that they know the rationale as to why the Canadian government did what it did and why they didn't stop the Residential Schools. They went to the Scoop after that, they just continued on... We acknowledge it existed, but we don't dwell on it. I mean it happened and there has to be reparations... And these individuals that we are teaching now may be the ones to get it. So they have to be well versed in what happened in the past, but we don't have a "poor us" attitude. Uh, you know "poor us"... Residential Schools, the Scoop, the attempted cultural genocide by the Canadian government. We say this is what happened and now reparations will be made, how will they be made? By educating our young as to what happened and giving them education to just have them sit at tables to best represent their people. And so that's the sort of philosophy we have. That we acknowledge it happened, but we move on and we just don't dwell on it, but never forget it, that kind of thing, just don't let it rule your life. That's the value of Aboriginal schools it gives the Aboriginal students, a high sense of self-esteem and it helps them see that they're a very important part of our society, very important part of our country. And yes they can make a difference out there.

I think one of the mandates of the school, or what's really brought the school out was that groups of parents, Aboriginal parents saw that their ways of life were being eradicated. Even back in 1991 they saw that the only people that were speaking the language were older people on treaty land and culture was down to a pow wow here and there. So that's what really stirred the pot in terms of getting things back to the education of young people, because a lot of the people that we teach that were taken away from that, so we have that intergenerational gap where the kids are taken away from the parents, and that went on for "X" amount of generations. So a lot of this material was being lost, and they saw that it wasn't going to get any better until the actual school system stepped in to see that. So that's what actually got the school concept going and the benefit of coming to schools like this is that kids are aware of their traditions, of their culture and languages. We have kids here that have never heard a word of

Cree or Ojibwa, they come in at that exposure level and they sit in a classroom with someone who is fluent. At least we know the language is being served, at least we know that it is continuing on and one of the new initiatives we have is that we realized that we see this great service we provide to our school population, we can provide it to our community also. So what we do is we offer linguistic programs, we offer cultural programs to our parents and linguistics is open and every year we have levels of Cree and Ojibwa classes and they're constantly full, on the weekends...we are servicing the students but there is also a great population out there that don't come to our school that are the parents, that are older individuals and by opening up the school to the community we're sending the message that we are giving our students.

The community is very appreciative coming in and learning how to do certain cultural activities and getting some teachings. We have offered programs, where students will sit with their parents, and we have a university professor from the University of Winnipeg and he delivers a "walking the red road" concept, the concept of spirituality, these parents and children sit together one day a week for three hours for six weeks. They take the cultural journey together with their parents, and the parents probably know less than the kids do, because the kids come here. So they have exposure to it already, and the parents start from there, and have no exposure. They were never given that opportunity. So it's a matter of the growth of the school indicated that there is a deficit in terms of servicing those that sent their kids to us and our community as a whole. So there's just a lot of positive movement in that. That's also part of the initiative from outside of our school, maybe without the funds like that then I don't think we'd be able to do that. We have to pay the instructors to do this or you won't get help. It's always worked out very positively for us in terms of funding, there's a lot of people out there that realize the importance of the initiative. It's a new direction for schools like ours. It's nice that we service 200 to 225 kids. But to actually say now, let's take it out into the community and have the community come in and offer basically, not so much the English, Science, but the other components that we do here. They think it's great, it's a way for them to get in touch with themselves also and with their children and know what their children are doing, hopefully they want their children coming here to get that sort of thing. It's something that they had been denied themselves, but they see the importance. Actually offering it for them, they do step up and take it, which is really good. And I mean, that could be a future direction for an Aboriginal school in Prince George. (Belmore Personal Interview: January 15, 2007)

For Aboriginal people and their communities, the growth and prosperity that can be attained through an enhancement of education cannot be underestimated. Both Pauline Clarke and Lorne Belmore show through this interview process their faith and belief in

this approach to relating to the Indigenous learner and that it is indeed an ever evolving and growing experience.

### **The Métis Sash – The Final Threads**

The last question I asked my interviewees was “Do you have anything else you would like to add that I have not asked in the previous questions?” In closing my experience with Children of the Earth High School, I would like to add some of what was provided to me in that response to that question.

Pauline Clarke said that Children of the Earth “has helped all of us working in the schools to understand more and realize that what goes on in all of our schools is about integrating Aboriginal cultures and teachings and language into everyday” (Personal Interview: January 15, 2007). She believes that

I have heard that schools, when they talk about Aboriginal education, they indicate that they have beading classes going on, etc. We have, through our Principles of Aboriginal Education (Seven Teachings) tried to change the way the schools do business, to reflect in a more fundamental way what's respectful to **all** the children. Having Children of the Earth and Niji Mahkwa schools has helped the Inner City District schools to understand the full meaning of Aboriginal Education. (Clarke Personal Interview: January 15, 2007)

Lorne Belmore added to this by explaining:

The school itself looks at the individual as a whole, the cultural and spiritual connection, and we also move into the area of the physical to deal with health issues that our Aboriginal population faces in terms of diabetes, etc. I think that was something that came over time, and too, I mean, there's just so much there in developing the individual that if you want to start an Aboriginal school you have to focus on what's important, and the first thing is to ensure that there is a connection between what is being taught in the classroom and traditional beliefs and values. That's probably the first step, and then from there you can move into more of the spiritual aspects, and linguistics and support, and then work to the development of the physical realm and address these issues. (Belmore Personal Interview: January 15, 2007)

Essentially, Mr. Belmore believes that “It takes a lot of input from a lot of different sources to make sure that all aspects are well funded and all aspects are well thought out before you can run an effective school” (Belmore Personal Interview: January 15, 2007). Undoubtedly, Children of the Earth is striving for excellence and quality in their delivery of effective programming for Aboriginal youth who choose to complete their education within this particular environment.

Through using the Métis Sash, my interviewees own stories and experiences with Children of the Earth High School become interwoven as threads of the Sash that is powerful in addressing issues and concerns in regards to implementing an Aboriginal Choice School.

#### **Amiskwaciy Academy – Edmonton, Alberta**

Amiskwaciy Academy is a system of schooling that follows a similar approach as Children of the Earth High School in providing an alternative opportunity for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students to complete their secondary education. I visited Edmonton, Alberta in October 27, 2006 and completed all three of my interviews within the same day. As with Children of the Earth, I was able to interview one person at the Administrative level of the school, Theresa Cardinal, who is Cree from the Saddle Lake First Nation and the Department Head of Cultural Services, and one person from the Board office of Edmonton Public Schools, Gloria Chalmers, the Director of Programs for Edmonton Public Schools. However, in Edmonton I had the opportunity to also interview an additional Aboriginal Educator from Edmonton, Mary Stevens, who was also able to provide me with invaluable insight into the establishment of Edmonton



Public School's more recent implementation of an Aboriginal Choice School within an urban center in Canada.

The name Amiskwaciy Academy is a shortened form of *Amiskwaciy Waskahegan* (Beaver Hills House), which is the Cree word for early Edmonton, Alberta (Mahaffy 2003: 14). A pamphlet available from Edmonton Public Schools explains that:

Amiskwaciy Academy is an innovative high school that approaches the curriculum from an Aboriginal perspective. Amiskwaciy, which began operating in September 2000, is open to any student with an interest in understanding the values and traditions of Aboriginal culture. The Academy's unique mix of programming, options, activities, events and personal guidance is designed to give students an opportunity to understand and appreciate the past, while preparing them for the challenges of the future. (Edmonton Public Schools: March 2002)

Edmonton Public Schools created Amiskwaciy Academy as a way of honouring Aboriginal traditions and the values, customs, knowledges and experiences that are encapsulated within those traditions. In the article written by Cheryl Mahaffy, Phyllis Cardinal (Amiskwaciy Academy's first Principal) explains that, "Historically, our people helped the European Canadians survive on this land...with the workforce dwindling, we need to look at our young people as taking key positions – and rightfully so" (Mahaffy 2003: 15). Cardinal continues to explain that she "credits the elders for inspiring a curriculum that combines ancient wisdoms about Mother Earth with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills...they offered three guiding principals – collaboration, vision and no blame – that unite the school in a deep sense of accountability" (Mahaffy 2003: 15). Angus MacBeth, Superintendent of Edmonton Public Schools, recalls:

It was painstakingly put together,... recalling the barriers met along the journey – moulding philosophy, reeling in dollars, finding and fitting the right site. "We wanted to challenge the stereotypes. We didn't want just a school where you felt good, but a school with rigorous expectations, where students would achieve a high-school diploma with a view of going on to further learning. (Mahaffy 2003: 13)

I am enriched by my experience of having the opportunity to interview three people who were knowledgeable about the establishment of Amiskwaciy and being able to personally visit the school.

Again, the answers to my questions will be delivered utilizing the framework of the Métis Sash. Red is associated with history, black with challenges, blue and white with the “colours” of the school, and green with the focus of growth and prosperity. Each participant’s answers will be woven into the colours of the Sash right after each other.

I begin my integration of the interviews with Theresa Cardinal, who played a large part in the initial creation of Amiskwaciy. Theresa Cardinal’s role is to ensure the cultural component of Amiskwaciy Academy is not forgotten through cultural events and activities (Cardinal Personal Interview: October 27, 2006). This interview undoubtedly had the most profound impact on me as it took place at Amiskwaciy where I was able to meet some of the staff and see the students as they filtered in for their morning classes.

My second interview participant was Gloria Chalmers. Ms. Chalmers is the Director of Programs. She develops, implements and monitors all the alternative programs in Edmonton Public Schools. Gloria Chalmers explains “we [Edmonton Public Schools] have over 30 [alternative programs] and two of them that are Aboriginal culturally based: Prince Charles, the Awasis Program, and Amiskwaciy” (Chalmers Personal Interview October 27, 2006). Gloria Chalmers also does interagency work and other policy development among other things (Chalmers Personal Interview October 27, 2006). This interview took place at the School Board office of Edmonton Public Schools and I was fascinated to be able to experience visiting such a large Board Office where there were such a large number of people working for the educational opportunities that

are available to the children and youth in Edmonton.

Finally, my third interview took place with Mary Stevens, an Aboriginal Educator from Edmonton. Due to the fact that Mary preferred to remain anonymous, I will not go into any detail about the location or duration of my time with this interviewee, but I will emphasize how valuable I feel this interview was for my research. Once again, I hope the readers of this thesis will take what is valuable to them from the answers each of my interviewees provided during the interview.

### **Red: History of Amiskwaciy**

Theresa Cardinal provided a clear and thorough explanation to the question regarding the role she played in the creation of Amiskwaciy. She explained this history as follows:

I was right in at the beginning of Amiskwaciy Academy, my sister-in-law (Phyllis Cardinal) was offered the position of, I can't remember the exact title, but she was the coordinator I guess, coordinating the whole plan of setting up the school, right from the beginning. So she felt at that time she didn't want to do it alone so she asked me if I would be interested in coming over from Saddle Lake (Alberta). And at that time I was quite reluctant, I said yes at first but then I thought, "Now why do I want to do that? I'm quite comfortable where I am, I am at home and you know all of that." And then when it came time she really pushed, and I said "Okay I'll go just for eight or nine months and then I'll come home again." And I'm still here, let's see, we opened September 2000 so yeah this is the sixth year. So I am still here.

The development was very trying at times but I think without the group that was there to make sure that it went accordingly - If one person does it it's not a good idea, it's best to have a group of people that are going to have their part to play in what it is that needs to be developed in the school. So yes I did play a major role, because my idea of a dream school is, at that time I thought, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could have a school where, sweat lodge ceremonies are an everyday thing, pipe ceremonies are expected, we have morning prayer through song every morning, we have elders here on a daily basis, we could also have other cultural technicians or leaders with certain skills, that they can come here to make sure our kids are aware of it and understand what it is." At the same time to make sure that there is time to make sure that these kids are achieving successes in their academic schoolwork. So that was my vision of a dream school at that time. The only difficulty I had at that time was coming from

a community such as Saddle Lake, I was very much aware of the politics that are involved in local First Nations community and so I thought okay if that kind of politics exists in a small community such as Saddle Lake, what am I up against here in this big community? So I thought that I would definitely have some difficulty there. I came in with that kind of trepidation because I wasn't sure what was here, and I had not had the opportunity to work in a provincial school system outside of Saddle Lake.

So I come here and after a few months of setting up whatever papers, guidelines, regulations different things about what needs to be done for the school. Then it was time to start the PR process of "Okay we need to get kids, how to get them? How do we let them know that this is going to happen?" So one of the things I remember one day sitting down at the computer - well I better make a poster, I need to make a poster to go to the schools and let them know we're going to set up the school and it's going to start in September 2000. I remember attempting to do that on my computer and at that time Mr. Angus Macbeth who was one of the assistants to the Superintendent Emery Dosdale, who is in British Columbia now with education, actually he's the Minister of Education, or something like that. Anyway Angus Macbeth was one of the people who made sure that this school became a reality. He walks into our office and he asks me, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well I'm making a poster that needs to go to the school". He rolls his eyes- you have to see this guy roll his eyes - and asks, "Why are you doing that?" and I said, "Well I have to make sure that the kids know about this". He says "Theresa you know that we have this big huge public relations department that can make all these things for you, you don't have to do that." And I said, "Oh that's nice!" So that was kind of my first story into it, because you know in First Nations communities you get used to doing things for yourself because you don't have all of the kind of stuff that these people have here. Anyway they got all these things for us to, you know, and it was a far cry from the little poster that I was going to make. But that's...some of the experiences I had.

When we started this up at the beginning Angus asked me an important question: "What is your idea of a dream school?" and at that time I didn't answer him simply because I wasn't sure again of what kind of politics existed, I didn't want to shorten my welcome there for one. So I just told him at that time "I'm not quite sure yet, I just want to see how this goes and maybe as it goes and as it develops accordingly then I will be able to let you know." So I think about a year later there was a big to-do up here with parents and Phyllis (Cardinal) wasn't here so I had to step in to make a presentation, a speech to the people there...and it was full up there and Angus and I developed a good relationship, fun kind of relationship. Just before I went up there he says to me, "Let's see if you're as good as Phyllis." Oh I was so mad (laughing), I couldn't do nothing because I had to go up there, but anyway while I was up there I talked about that - somebody had asked me my vision of an Aboriginal school or what I envision the school to be, so I talked to that because I had already decided what I was going to talk about anyway and that was one of them. So my dream school was to, it was further developed at that time already. We had the ceremonies, the different Aboriginal

people coming in to further validate our culture, our spiritual culture, but at the same time I wanted to make sure that the kids of ours here had the opportunity and received the opportunity to get their spirit back. For me, that is what it has been all about - to offer these kids the opportunity to get their spirit back. Be it through cultural or spiritual means or just to meet them in the hallway or visit them in the classroom to give them a hug, and sometimes that's all they need you know and to walk with them, to cry with them. That's what it's all about, bringing the spirit back. For me that has been very, very key in developing and maintaining relationships with these kids here.

One of the other things that we were very adamant about simply because I am also a Boarding school prodigy or what ever you want to call it, I went to Boarding school and what I noticed and I'm still seeing and observing is that some of the Boarding school victims blame that process on the way that they are today. One of the things that Dr. Cardinal and I are very adamant about that we talk to the kids about till we are blue in the face is, "When you come through that door, you're only job here is to go to the classroom and learn, that is your only job. If you come in with problems, yes we will try to help you, but you're not going to blame people or others for whatever difficulties you may encounter. Blaming is one of the things you leave at the door. Because it has not been a positive factor in the development of our Aboriginal people, it's so easy to blame and you have to stop doing that. You have to become more accountable for what you say, and do." And I think one major factor of that being a success is that Phyllis and I walked our talk. Phyllis being the first Aboriginal Principal here, they were able to know, yes she's like us and yes I can be like that and hearing the continual talk about stop blaming stop saying that you have a rough life yes we have all had a rough life but you've gone to the doors here you're only job is to go in there and learn.

Then as soon as they begin to experience success you should see the blossoming that happens in these kids you know because they have that opportunity here. And you know we just had an awards night last week and we had three grades 10, 11, and 12 top students who were recognized in the district, I went because my nephew is one and I was proud as punch, and I was going every year because they need you there and they need to see you there and need to see you to walk your talk plain and simple. So that has been I guess my major role aside from the title to make sure these kids are accountable for what they say and do, and because that's how it is in the real world. You need to know, you need to understand that blaming will not get you anywhere. You need to put that at the door. (Cardinal Personal Interview: October 27, 2006)

Under this same area concerning my interviewees history with the development of

Amiskwaciy, Gloria Chalmers said the following:

Well, we had the thought actually of developing a school that would be a joint initiative between Edmonton Catholic and Edmonton Public. At that time, I had a close relationship with a staff member at Edmonton Catholic that did

similar work to the work that I did here and we did a lot of work together. We know that our young Aboriginal students have a tendency to go back and forth and transiency is an issue. We thought that maybe we should try a strategy where we work collaboratively and that might, you know, be effective. So, we did start off on that journey together. We had support from our then Superintendents and we went as far as putting in an ad with both of our logos and doing the interview together to hire the first principal that we hired prior to the year of the school opening so that we had aboriginal leadership in the school development. Then there was a change in personnel at Edmonton Catholic and they decided that they would prefer not to partner with us and we made the decision at that time to go ahead on our own. (Chalmers Personal Interview: October 27, 2006)

Lastly, Mary Stevens responded with the following in regards to the role she played in developing an Aboriginal School:

It goes back actually to when I initially began with my Edmonton School Board employer and there already was an appetite among the community members for an Aboriginal school and it was really a direct result of an Aboriginal symposium that was hosted by the district and that was one of the recommendations that came out of it. So it was really from that point on that things began to move quite quickly and so I was one of the ones involved from central office in coordinating all the focus groups in the hiring of an administrator, recruiting, advertising, interviewing etc. and then we played a role as well in choosing the location of the school. That in and of itself was a huge task, we looked at a lot of places and then from that point on, really provided a resource role kind of capacity for the incoming administration and trying to plan things, get things set up, provided liaison staff to go out in the community in the summer in particular and recruit students and families for the school.

So really from the ground up, involved like I said in the focus groups but also in the elder sessions, when the elders were asked what they wanted to see, because part of the school, even to the name of the school that was an elder's choice actually, a group of elders chose the name and it went right back to the history of Edmonton and the Cree peoples' place in the history of Edmonton because it used to be called Beaver Hills House in Cree. Which I cannot say. But it was shortened to Beaver Hills which is what Amiskwaciy means. So that kind of role, and actually have some part in redirecting teacher applicants, they would sometimes call central office, so have a hand in as well. Also had a hand in assisting the school in getting some grant funding from some of the provincial and federal authorities. In particular in terms of guidance counsellor type roles, those kinds of things. (Stevens Personal Interview: October 27, 2006)

Each of my interviewees' roles undoubtedly influences their perspective of an Aboriginal Choice School while contributing to each of their unique histories within their capacities involved with the creation of Amiskwaciy Academy.

### **Black: Challenges for Edmonton**

The next topic to be discussed within this framework is the challenges associated with the implementation of Amiskwaciy Academy. It will become evident to the reader that there is some repetition in regards to the challenges of having this unique, culturally sensitive form of education within a public system. I hope readers will gain informative insight as to the challenges of the implementation for Amiskwaciy Academy. Theresa Cardinal began:

The major challenges were from non-Aboriginal people who felt that we were segregating ourselves. So that word segregation of course started from discussion, sometimes heated discussions with Dr. Cardinal because she had to answer to these questions and we were always of the opinion that segregation began before we even got here. Segregation is when our kids are in regular schools and they're placed in special education just because they may misbehave in class and then they're segregated and become labeled. That to us is segregation. Here it's not segregation because this is a school of choice. That's what we said so we've had all kinds of, we even have non-Aboriginal...in the past we've had handfuls of non-Aboriginal students that have chosen to come here, we even had an Asian student fellow that graduated from here, we've had some black students come, and non-Aboriginal students, I think you may have seen one on that videotape and she is I think now probably finishing up her teaching degree at the University of Lethbridge. So that was probably our major challenge.

The second one was finding a building. We were taken to old Safeway buildings to old schools, and we were getting very discouraged because we knew what we wanted and we couldn't see it happening in those places that we were taken to you know because we wanted the best for our kids and that meant a new building if possible or a building that was going to a new and would be a home for these kids because that's what it becomes. So that was our second challenge to find a building, and I think we were getting really discouraged and one day Angus (Macbeth) comes and says, "Let's go see this place," and I said, "Oh okay" so we came here and we were upstairs Phyllis and I, we were thinking "Can you see it? Can you see it?" Even though this was an airport and it was not near anything that looks like this but we saw it, we saw the promise, we saw what it could look like and she was like "Yes. Yes." And I said, "Okay let's do it". So we said, "This

is the place we wanted,” and the province was able to give us some money to make it look like this and what we weren't able to - it wasn't ready September 2000 - we had to go downtown to a smaller building for about a year and a half, just south of Grant McEwan downtown. So we're over there in a little boxed in building for a few years and that was a challenge in itself too.

But when you are able to set down guidelines for kids, regulations and stick to them and make them understand “Just because you're Aboriginal here this is an Aboriginal school, you're not going to be running around in the hallways.” That was one of the most important things we started downtown, Phyllis and I, and every day in the mornings she would take one end and I would go to the other end of the hall and if we saw kids, or you know if they saw us coming they would scoot but we knew where to find them we would even go down the street and we would catch some doing things like smoking marijuana and we would call them back in and we would deal with them. They knew that we would find them wherever they were so it took us awhile a couple years to have these kids be in their classroom learning to be able to know that we meant what we said. You're not going to run around in the hallways just because you're Aboriginal and maybe that's what you did before, but you're not going to do it here and so if you see now when I take you for a little tour if we have time later, you're not going to see kids running around in the hallways, that's one of the things I was also adamant about. But I think I'm straying from the question here. Okay, I think those were the main ones that I can remember at this time. (Cardinal Personal Interview: October 27, 2006)

Gloria Chalmers explained her experiences with the challenges of creating Amiskwaciy Academy as follows:

Well I think we overcame a number of the initial challenges by hiring a year in advance and having an Aboriginal person who was an educator and quite knowledgeable, not quite, very knowledgeable and therefore we had leadership right from the start. I think it's more in the implementation that the challenges come and, because when we opened new programs, we typically have found that in the first instance you sometimes attract students who are going there for inappropriate reasons. They're not going for a positive reason because “that's what I would like,” they go there because they're unhappy where they are. That might not be the solution and that's true across the alternatives. We opened an all girls junior high. Well, families that felt unhappy about their daughters education or girls that were feeling unhappy, thought, “well maybe this was the answer,” and it wasn't that they had thought that, “I would really like to be in an all girls school or an all Aboriginal school, it's because I don't like what I have and I'm going to try that” - we have that across-the-Board. But eventually that plays itself out and people choose it because they feel it's a good match for them. So that is a challenge...

I think in a place like Edmonton one of the challenges is simply distance. Are you going to make a choice that's going to put you on a bus for an hour? So I



think that's a continuing challenge, and it's true again of all of our programs. I don't know if you are aware we have just over 7000 self-identified aboriginal students in Edmonton public schools, and 90% of them go to their neighborhood school or other alternative programs. So you'll find them at the Victoria High School for Fine and Performing Arts or that kind of thing and so it's a relatively small percentage of our students who are choosing a congregated setting. We have many of our schools that have a significant percentage of Aboriginal students but it's not at what we would consider a congregated or alternative site, but that's just a bit of context. What we have found talking to students and parents, for instance we were at Westmount which serves a fair number of Aboriginal students and we asked why they chose that school, they said they like the mix of students and they felt their culture was respected there, and that they had friends that were Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal - those were some comments that they gave me. So that's what their choice was and we asked for example, at Prince Charles which is a congregated setting, 15 of the young people from Prince Charles in grade 6 went to Westmount and I believe probably the other significant number or an equal number went to Amiskwaciy and then some went back closer to home because they've been going some distance to go to the site. So I think distance is a challenge for us. What we always say is we want to have choice and allow the student to make the decision about what is good for him or her. That may be a challenge at the school site where they might like more of the students to choose them, but we have always been a district of choice and people have to decide for themselves. (Chalmers Personal Interview: October 27, 2006)

Mary Stevens noted the following as the major challenges in terms of implementing

Amiskwaciy:

Time, just the pressures of time. Trying to make sure that you had in fact covered everything because the details are endless. How do you choose what you do first... and what you are going to do after that - so those kinds of challenges. Really trying to promote it as well, but really that wasn't as much of a challenge because I think there was the appetite there in the community having such a school. Yeah I would say that was a challenge - just the recruitment of students and staff and in terms of staff of course trying to strike that fine balance. The group of us - a team really, when we got asked. "How did you choose?" You have some Aboriginal and some non-Aboriginal, well we chose the best staff. So you know those kind of things and trying to decide even what kind of timetable, but that was really more at the school level - we weren't really involved in that, they had to consider all of those things of course. They had to go by the students they had recruited and the staff that they had, they had to assess the need. They wanted to provide a typical high school program but also want to provide the cultural piece as well.

I think one of the challenges as well was coordinating or helping to coordinate, helping to identify all the different agencies that could be represented that could actually be housed in the school, at least intermittently to provide

various kinds of supports to the students. Like Western economic diversification and Aboriginal Affairs and Alberta Education at some level working together to provide the best possible supports for the students. Alberta Human Resources and Employment as well and that was really to provide that career counseling and career exploration piece to the puzzle...

So going back to question three, really what kind of challenges do you have in the opening of an Aboriginal school? Probably I should back up, probably the very first thing you'll have to deal with is the political will within the district. And that goes at all levels from trustees, to senior administrators, to principals, to consultants, to managers downtown, or at the central office, there has to be that political will there. That they are willing to push this forward and until you have that even the community desire for it is not enough to make it happen so I see a couple things almost being concurrent and sometimes overlapping where the community is being very articulate about what they want to see happen. And then getting the support perhaps within the central office and within trustees and senior administrators, getting them on Board probably in relation to this in part but also their managers. So all those groups of people have this will, that "Yes this is something worth pursuing." Then of course, at least in Edmonton's case I know that that also meant going after some relationships with the province and also with the feds in terms of who could contribute what to the initiative. There really has to be an element of advocacy there and again it's not the consultants who are going to get that happening with other levels of government, so it has to be people at the Superintendent's level and people at the trustee level who actually go to do the advocating. And so that I think is something that has to happen as well, so the community and then the powers that be, connected with the school district really have to be in step, working together on it.

You really have to have a long vision, and really have to have a high level of commitment and I don't want to say a "take no prisoners" attitude, but you know, like we're not going to give up! You've got to make sure everybody has their script in a way, what is our vision? Why is this so important? How do we think we can make it happen? What's going to be the payoff? And it's in that piece that's going to take time. It is, it is. I don't think I've seen any Aboriginal school in the country be able to go from here to here in one or three years, it can take up to ten years for that to happen. Just because everything is so complex in order for there to be success. Success builds success. But again just that determination has to be there, yes there's going to be some lows along the way here, but that doesn't mean we give up. It might mean that we sit back and ask ourselves, is there a better way they can do this still within the confines of the school, but you must be willing to adjust or adapt what and how you do with your goal still being the same to get these kids through grade 12 with whatever they need to go on to what ever kind of postsecondary training they may wish to go through whether its University, whether it's College, whether its Technology school, whether it's an apprenticeship program, it doesn't matter what kids need to leave with something that they can use to go out and build a career. (Stevens Personal Interview: October 27, 2006)

As with Children of the Earth, the answers provided by my interviewees indicated that there are major challenges associated with a new venture such as an Aboriginal Choice School. In her article Cheryl Mahaffy also describes:

For Phyllis Cardinal, becoming principal of this fledgling school within a mammoth of 80,000 student system was a leap of faith – or as she terms it, “a bit of madness.” Would the system be flexible enough to avoid squeezing the academy into existing structures? “I knew it was a challenge,” recalls the Saddle Lake First Nation member, who holds multiple degrees and has consulted with numerous reserves. “A challenge for them more than for me, because my thoughts are certainly unorthodox, out of the box” (Mahaffy 2003: 15)

Phyllis Cardinal was unrelenting (as were my interviewees) in the face of these challenges as Amiskwaciy Academy was created to continue confronting the problems associated with Aboriginal students’ experiences within the public education system and to provide another avenue to create success for Aboriginal youth.

### **Blue and White: Philosophical “Colours”**

My interviewees provide answers to what their vision of the school is in terms of successfully delivering an education where the learners at Amiskwaciy are receiving an education embedded in an Aboriginal philosophy. Based on my experience visiting Amiskwaciy Academy I observed that the school does offer students a unique experience from the moment they walk through the front doors. Symbolically, this is represented through the colours blue and white.

Walking through the front doors of Amiskwaciy, I noted that every student has the opportunity to smudge before they enter into the building. Smudging is an important element of for many Aboriginals within Aboriginal ceremony where people are offered an opportunity to cleanse their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual beings. For the young people entering a place of learning, I think that this is a significant opportunity for

them to have so they are in a better place to receive instruction and be an active participant in their own education.

Since Amiskwaciy Academy is the transformed location of the old airport terminal building in downtown Edmonton, Cheryl Mahaffy explains “Architects took advantage of such givens as a fatter-than-normal floor plate and massive windows to create whimsically shaped classrooms and a light-filled ceremonial space” (Mahaffy 2003: 14). An entire spectrum of Aboriginal cultures is reflected through rich colours within the building and through a mural, painted by Dale Auger, which is titled *The Gift of New Knowledge*. In a brochure, Edmonton Public Schools describes, “the mural now hangs in the lobby of the Amiskwaciy Academy and now serves as a focal point upon which students can reflect every day and in which they can see strong positive images of themselves and their people” (Edmonton Public Schools 2002: 2). It explains that “*The Gift of New Knowledge* mural represents a sacred time – the creation of whole knowledge” (Edmonton Public Schools 2002: 2). This “whole knowledge” is representative of incorporating old knowledge (Elders) with new knowledge (children).

It is in front of this same mural in the front lobby of Amiskwaciy that my husband and I had the opportunity to be a part of the “Morning Circle” that happens every day at Amiskwaciy.<sup>12</sup> All students and staff gather together to sing and drum and welcome everyone into the building. As this powerful way of beginning the day ends, it is as if a bell has sounded and the students disperse to their classes. Needless to say, once this song was over, my husband and I were speechless. After a few moments my husband

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<sup>12</sup> My husband, Andrew Robinson, accompanied me into Amiskwaciy Academy before my interview with Theresa Cardinal began. Coming from a traditional Nisga’a community and from a family of educators, my husband was intrigued by what the school looked like. Although he also accompanied me on a tour of Amiskwaciy Academy (by invitation of Theresa Cardinal), he did not participate in the interview.

leaned over and whispered to me with an obvious appreciation for what he had just experienced (coming from a traditional Nisga'a community), "What a way to start off your day!" Soon after this experience, I began my interview with Theresa Cardinal and then had a tour of the magnificent building which boasts a Sweat Lodge built within its center and classrooms filled with Aboriginal art and tradition. So coupled with my own experience of how Amiskwaciy is honouring Aboriginal people within its very structure and routine, my interviewees answers reflect the necessity of having this philosophy and ambiance which create the blue and white "colours" of this astounding Aboriginal-based public schooling institution.

Theresa Cardinal began her answer to the question about what factors she considers to be integral in providing an environment where Aboriginal learners are delivered an education immersed in Aboriginal philosophy and how Amiskwaciy is reflective of this by explaining:

Okay, I looked at that question and I was reading the other day, and I thought three main factors. One of them is to make absolutely sure that there is an Aboriginal principal in place. Simply for the fact of the kids being able to recognize that this person is one of them and they're not going to be able to play games with this person because they know that is so key, so very important. Because it's just different when that happens here, and right now we're going through a transition also, we're looking for an Aboriginal principal also, but in the meantime different things are happening so we noticed the difference and I think the kids do too. They will sometimes push boundaries and it's not a good thing, so an Aboriginal principal to be part of any Aboriginal school is key. But how you choose and how you decide who that Principal is going to be is also key and you need the help of Elders also to do that.

When we were planning the school that is one of the key things that we made sure that happened all along during the implementation. I showed you the picture of the founding Elders - they are right from the beginning. They're in on the meetings and developed the vision and mission statement for our school. And so that, without Elders help it's going to be difficult to have any Aboriginal school accepted by the community and other Aboriginal people, that's my opinion because they are the ones that may help you to decide what kind of principal you should have in the school, and help you with the vision and mission statement.

Actually it was parents also who helped with the mission and vision statement but the Elders validated the vision and mission statement. The other factor is teachers of course. I think we only have a handful of Aboriginal teachers. I think it would be great if we did have all Aboriginal teachers, because of course there's a different understanding that goes on between an Aboriginal as teacher and an Aboriginal student. It's always been there, but we decided that we would choose the best teacher possible because we also we're up against those teachers who are in the First Nations communities who become very comfortable because of the tax free dollars they receive. Up here they have to pay income tax and for some that's a major transition. So we then decided then okay, we will choose the best teachers possible. So with the cultural and spiritual components of our program here, teachers have to become aware of what we're doing and you saw most of our teachers out there in the circle this morning so that's a good thing and they have been encouraged to become a part of our morning circle. Our Staff Sweat is another area where they become more familiar with the spiritual component. We also have some PD (Professional Development) days that are just that - the cultural and spiritual awareness we teach that - more about spiritual protocols and stuff like that for certain professional development days. (Cardinal Personal Interview: October 27, 2006)

Gloria Chalmers furthered this explanation in regards to creating an educational environment immersed in Aboriginal philosophy, by stating:

Well one is getting appropriate staff and that's a challenge. I will go off on a bit of a tangent because we met with parents last night at Westmount and they were saying they don't have to have all Aboriginal teachers; it's not so much an issue for them that the children only have Aboriginal staff, but that they have quality staff and their cultural aspects are respected. So I think even in a congregated site parents accept a mix of staff. They're not trying to be exclusive but they want significant role models because that's one of the issues and of course people who are knowledgeable about their customs and practices so that they can teach them effectively or incorporate them effectively. So staffing definitely is a very important consideration. We still have challenges in getting Aboriginal people in an urban setting while more Aboriginal people are going into education, many of them want to go back to their reserves. So staying in the city, we're hoping to have an Aboriginal teacher education program that Noëlla (Steinhauer) has gone to do that will attract urban Aboriginal people who will then want to stay in the city.

Another challenge for us, or that's important for us, is to recognize in our school environment that there is not only one Aboriginal culture. That there's a broad range of Aboriginal cultures, so not everyone is a Cree speaker, not everyone will Smudge in the same way, and we have to be respectful of that and find ways of dealing with that. You know, acknowledging that we are doing it this way and it may not meet all peoples' needs so it's trying to find that balance where we're respectful of the range and, yet can move forward and do some

things. So that I think is important that we don't make it exclusively First Nations and then within First Nations, Blackfoot, Ojibwa or Cree, and that we recognize that and that under the Aboriginal setting we also have a Métis population in our city. We want to make them feel welcome as well. So I think certainly role models in staffing, knowledge of the populations we serve, involvement of Elders would be significant for me. Also, getting a range of resources that reflect Aboriginal cultures such as books written by Aboriginal authors or about Aboriginal people, certainly having Aboriginal Studies or some way of looking at Aboriginal issues, contemporary Aboriginal issues are all important. I think it would be important and I guess fundamentally for me is that I believe the community has to be involved in the creation. So while you have these ideas, you have to work with people, and that's of course what we tried to do by having an Aboriginal principal selected ahead of time and working and meeting with community groups and developing the concept more collaboratively then we sometimes do things.

Well I think you (should) know the setting too, when you walk in and you should see Aboriginal, that it's different from another school. We try to celebrate those differences. One of the challenges we have just generally is saying it's not better it's different. You know we're not trying to have hierarchies that you go to this program is better than a regular program or if you go to this program it's better this other alternative. Because our intent is always to make whatever the program is the best that it can be and we're saying it's all right to be different it's not about then trying to say, "Well because I'm here it's better" and you know then we just create a whole bunch of other problems. But just celebrating those differences we're saying it's great that we have these differences and we can learn from them and we should rejoice and so make them visible so that would definitely be another aspect. (Chalmers Personal Interview: October 27, 2006)

Finally, Mary Stevens furthers this vision for Amiskwaciy and related the following:

Well there's a lot of different factors but I think one of the premier ones is to be able to strike that balance between content and culture because on the one hand we know that many of our students are very desirous of having that cultural piece be a part of their school program at the same time we don't want to compromise the work that needs to be done in the classroom in terms of a course completion and graduation and those kinds of things. We didn't want a compromise, one in place of the other. I don't think you need to but I think it's a real challenge to figure out that magic mix where you're going to do both and do it well and do them both really well - that is really one of the main factors I think. Also attracting the very best staff who all have a shared vision of what needs to be done and how they're going to get it done.

I think that is key as well but also I think there needs to be Aboriginal community involvement as well so that there is a shared vision between the community and the school staff so that everyone's comfortable that the very best education is being provided within an Aboriginal context and with an Aboriginal philosophy... it seems like an artificial thing but I think right from the color and

designs in the facility itself as soon as you walk in that door you know that you're in an Aboriginal community. Certainly as an Aboriginal educator, I walk in there and the heart quickens a little bit because it's so beautiful and it's so inviting and it's so warm. So right from that I think the staff have an integral role to play here in ensuring that it is that kind of atmosphere, lots of important work that is getting done. Community involvement that cannot be just on an occasional basis and I think Amiskwaciy has worked very hard to make sure that there is community involvement so there are elders here, they have someone there doing cultural teaching. Sometimes I know there is dance and music as well. I think just the welcoming atmosphere that there is in Amiskwaciy for Aboriginal students and their families. Certainly as has been the case with other Aboriginal schools across the country in the past, often these goals are like a beacon so lots of kids want to attend there, and sometimes they come with some learning gaps and maybe some particular challenges of their own. So having an atmosphere where their needs are very clearly going to be addressed, and also there's this welcoming atmosphere I think is really key and I think that the Amiskwaciy has done a really good job in that way. I know they continue to get students from all over Western Canada at least. (Stevens Personal Interview: October 27, 2006)

### **Green: Benefit to Community**

Under the concept represented by green, my interviewees provide insightful answers to the question of how Aboriginal schools are creating positive change for Aboriginal people and their communities. When addressing problems such as drugs and gangs Theresa Cardinal believes:

Well you know, Aboriginal people are a funny lot, by that I mean sometimes they feel left out, sometimes they feel that because they're not a part of the program here that it's not an Aboriginal school. We've gone through our ups and downs we've had our school labeled as a gang school, we set a school labeled as, oh I don't know what ever, again that's kids sometimes out there you know because we've asked them to leave for certain reasons because we will not put up with gangs, we will not put up with drugs, we will not put up with violence. They will go out there if they've been expelled or if they've been asked to leave they will go out there and bad mouth us so that kind of carries its own flow you know after a while and we've done a lot of making these kids accountable. If you come to this school you are not going to belong to the gangs, so you need to choose and live accordingly. We're lucky that we have a School Resource Officer, a member of the Edmonton Police unit, with us so we always know what's going on with the kids and he is out there to help these kids if they're caught in some difficulties or if they're deciding their going to vandalize something out there, he's there. So these kids now know that we're serious about what it is we do here and how you as a student are to conduct yourself. So it's becoming better but now, you know,



we're, it's going to take us some time, you know we're settling the kids down now, now. Now the academic achievement is where we're putting our focus on. And when we got these kids they were all different levels of learning, different levels of achievement and it's taken us six years, were slowly climbing up, our achievement levels, are slowly going up.

We're a new school, we're still a baby school in this new district so it's going to take us awhile to be able to be there with the regular Junior, Senior High Schools. But we have that dream that our kids will get there because they are smart, it's just that we need to get all of them to believe in that. They come in here with all kinds of stuff, well any school. The positive change I think is to let the Province know that when done properly, appropriately, however you want to look at it, a school like this can begin to show that, yes we can do the job of correcting the learning difficulties that our students have experienced and that yes our kids can be whatever it is they want to be when they complete school. And so you need to know that we need to fix our own problems that's just plain and simple. And so when you put people, Aboriginal people in charge of doing just that, I think that they can prove that happens. (Cardinal Personal Interview: October 27, 2006)

Gloria Chalmers elaborated:

Well I can't speak for them (Aboriginal people), or I'd be really reluctant to speak for what people would feel is good for them or their community. I think in our community we wanted our Aboriginal people to have a cultural option. That they, you know, that they if they wanted to select a sports option or a fine arts option or go to their neighborhood school, and they feel that that's positive for them, that we're good with that but, that having been said, we wanted to ensure that they also had an option of kindergarten to grade 12 where they could be immersed in an Aboriginal environment. I think when people have that choice and they make the choice to be in there it has a positive impact. What my experience is that when people can decide what's good for themselves, the synergy is so much better. You know if you align what parents believe, kids believe and what schools believe you get some really good energy and everybody I think benefits from that. So I think for me it's always important that it's always a choice, people are involved and that it has to evolve all the time; it's never finished and you have to keep improving or changing depending on the students you are receiving and what they need. I would hope that if these things were in place there would be obviously positive change, positive benefits. (Chalmers Personal Interview: October 27, 2006)

Finally, Mary Stevens added:

I am a very firm believer in School Districts as much as possible providing choice. I think Aboriginal parents want for their children what other parents want for their children - they want them to be safe, they want them to be happy, and they want them to be successful. So I think provincial schools need to be really

mindful that this is a choice that maybe they need to entertain. Especially in areas where there is a significant Aboriginal population. For example in Edmonton, and that's one of the reasons Edmonton public moved on us, because we looked at the population projections in terms of Aboriginal population. My office isn't there anymore so I'm not sure what this year's data has shown the end of September data, because they count data September 30<sup>th</sup>. The original student population has grown significantly every year at least since I have been involved and Edmonton is projected to have the largest urban Aboriginal population by 2016, the largest urban Aboriginal population in the country. So I think it's in the School District's best interest to endeavor to provide an Aboriginal school where possible.

Should (an Aboriginal School) only be in a place like Edmonton? I know in Calgary they are reinventing the Plains Indians Cultural Survival School, and they found some way to do that. I believe now it's a K to nine school and they have done significant work there and of course you know Children of The Earth High School in Winnipeg. I know that there's also "Chief Jimmy Bruno school" I believe in the North West Territories. So there have been a number of these attempts over the years. I think that this is an endeavor that school districts really need to continue to support. It's hard work, in the work that I've done it looks like most Aboriginal schools take about ten years in terms of going from the initial step, to being everything people want it to be, and I don't mean that to discourage anybody but people need to understand going in it is in fact a long-term process. There is so much at stake, the needs are very complex and the history has made those things even more complex than they might otherwise be. So the building takes a significant amount of time. It is a long process to get these kinds of schools, Aboriginal schools running and humming.

I know that Children of the Earth High School has gone through a significant period of growth from inception, they've had their ups and downs and it's just taken quite a long time... We went down there when I, Edmonton public people went down there in the spring of 05 and visited with her but also with some other inner-city principles who belong to Winnipeg School District number one. You may want to look at a couple of band schools actually to get a model, one that I would recommend highly would be the Peguis Band school on the Peguis Reserve (in Manitoba) - over 80% of their students graduate, in terms of passing their provincial exams at the grade 12 level. A graduation rate of over 80% is probably one of the highest graduation rates, they have done incredible work there. And yes it is a Band school so they have some things quite different... And there are some characteristics I think in that school that we all would be well advised to have a look at, that's the reason a group of people from Edmonton public went down there, because we had heard about them, and that they had come to visit us. We said, "You're doing really good stuff so we are coming to visit you." A couple things really struck me when we went to visit that school, chief and council are 100% behind the school and they show it in all kinds of ways right down to direct involvement in the school in a good way. They have an incredible number of teaching assistants to ensure the kids don't get left behind

at any level. When we heard how many TA's they had we thought "Wow, we will never get that!"

But they also have a program whereby they encourage their TA's most of whom are reserve members, and live on reserve they encourage them that if it's their want, they go into teaching and get a degree. So they are already building succession into the school plans, high expectations of their students. When we were there, there was lots happening, the pre-k's and the k's were having their graduation so there were lots of people in the school, but it was very striking on how totally focused they are on the needs of the community, the needs of the kids and goals, what job did the school need to do? I'm telling you that because I think that has to be part of the answers to those previous questions as well, and I think I've kind of alluded to that.

I guess if I were to give any advice to anyone dreaming of a school such as this, it is be ready for anything. Because the kids are not all going to come looking the same, they are not all going to come with the same needs, they're not all going to come with the same learning, and they're not necessarily all going to come with the same learning gaps, or with the same learning challenges so the school has to be prepared to provide a whole host of supports for the students depending on what their particular needs, learning gaps or learning challenges are. And when I say the school needs to be ready for it, it's not just administration it's not just the teachers and it's not just the counsellors, everybody needs to be in on it, everybody. And I think really strong community involvement, parents, grandparents, business owners - everybody needs to have a contribution to make. Schools can't do it all themselves, principals and teachers can't do it all themselves. Because schools have these kids for "X" number of hours a day, and we have to be raised to handle anything in those six hours, we don't know what's happening in the other eighteen (hours a day), and we don't know sometimes all the different things that the kids are going to be coming to school with so we really need to be realistic and we need to be ready and we need to be I think organized and creative in providing the necessary supports. Even at the high school level, for example, if someone's absent one day, a phone call needs to be made. I know just from my own experience at the high school level things tend to get left a little longer because after all they are in high school. They are young adults, they are supposed to know their education is their responsibility. To me that kind of approach doesn't serve anyone too terribly well, not even the teacher. (Stevens Personal Interview: October 27, 2006)

It is obvious from my interviewees' experiences and their words, that the implementation of Amiskwaciy is an ever-evolving process. My intention is that by incorporating their responses through the colours of the Métis Sash, I bring these words together in a uniformed and cohesive way where the different stories and roles of everyone involved in this institution is given respect and honour.

### **Métis Sash – The Final Threads**

In regards to the final question for my participants (if they had anything else that they would like to tell me), it is necessary to provide their responses in a fashion that brings the final colours that weave the Sash together. The additional information provided by Theresa Cardinal, Gloria Chalmers and Mary Stevens is important.

Theresa Cardinal added:

I just wanted to say the Edmonton Public School Board has been nothing but supportive, it turned out that all my initial concerns about the politics involved, we have none of that here. It's just great, when we deal with these kids you know when we make them accountable for what they do and angry parents come here, and if they try to go to the Board it's stopped. There's nothing that, well maybe one or two, but it's not like the whole Board. They say, they can take care of it, the school is more than ready to take care of whatever problems arise, so they're going to do (that) and they don't get involved. That's what I want too - that's one of the key things to have a Board that is going to be supportive like that and not fall in, if the parent comes to counsellor or trustee and says so and so did this, that trustee needs to make sure that he or she knows his role and is supportive of the school rather than get caught up in petty politics. So that's the other very key thing that has worked for us here and so it's been nothing but positive and I have nothing but praise for the Edmonton Public School Board because they've just been behind us 100% and if I could I would certainly thank each one of them. When I see one of them I do that. That's how it works here and that's just great. (Cardinal Personal Interview: October 27, 2006)

For the final question, Gloria answered by adding how Edmonton Public Schools are striving for inclusion with the Aboriginal community at a broad level within their district:

I would like to say that certainly in the city I think one of our, where we need to evolve next, is working more broadly with a range of agencies in our city and having options in different parts of our city where there may be support services or so forth that are school linked. We have a number of them, for example, with Métis Child and Family Services that we work with them and they provided us five Aboriginal social workers. They wanted to work in junior highs, so we found five junior highs that have significant Aboriginal students and they work at the school. They have an office at the school. They're there five days a week and get to know the students and the families and can provide a link. So Westmount, where I was yesterday, we met with parents and they spoke about how helpful that was and how the students have someone to talk to if they needed to and they also work with another Aboriginal youth group that does tutoring and

they work with the YMCA, a non-aboriginal group, that do leadership groups and they're doing leadership groups there and that's working well. And the big thing that came out yesterday was having support staff in the office - the person that welcomes people to the school is Aboriginal. The parents said if they know they have some one they can talk to and they mention her by name, that made them feel welcome there. So there are things you can do - students chose to go there. We actually asked some of them, "Why did you come here?" and some said, "I didn't want to go to Amiskwaciy." You know they were quite definite... Well they had their reasons and they wanted to go there but having done that you want them to feel comfortable, welcome, supported, in that environment. So there are ways of supporting Aboriginal students in other environments and I think what we're trying to do now is we have congregated sites and then also how do we have other settings that are supportive and welcoming if people select them. It supports people in other parts of the city; they don't have to go right across town they might have an option that works well for them. So it's a bit different in a big city.

We have found that working with our community groups has a number of advantages. One, they live in the community and they can bring knowledge that we don't have; they also have support services in their agencies that they can bring to their area if they are needed. For example, Metis' Child teaches fiddling and dancing so they can let people know and they can come to their programs; things of that nature that enriches life. And with the Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society, we have an Aboriginal Head Start located in one of our schools that is run by an Aboriginal agency which is wonderful because they can do, can bring that Aboriginal family atmosphere, that we couldn't do effectively but they're in a school so the children have a comfortable start coming to the school, the parents coming to the building and then they make a choice where they want to go. But for some just moving into the kindergarten area is a comfortable thing to do. So we would like to see more of that. We run a junior high program called "Rites of Passage" and it's for junior high young people who have not been successful in school. And that's a partnership with Bent Arrow. So we provide teachers; they provide a cultural component as well as support services that they can bring because of their agency.

Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society is an Aboriginal agency in the city. So there are lots of opportunities; so I think we're trying to have a number of excellent options and working out from that base, I think, with Amiskwaciy we have a lot of native students and that for me is a challenge, to congregate. But they go there by choice so I think that's a positive thing, we start with them from where they are to where they ought to go. We've just been talking to "NAIT," Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, and they would like to have a partnership with Amiskwaciy and they've had some challenges because of the changes in Principals so we said we would work as a broker because we're more stable in the way and we were talking about having, for example, students come and visit NAIT and they would give them a tour, show them different options for students who have grade ten, grade eleven, grade 12. We thought that might be encouraging because if you're 17 years old and you are only working at a great 10 level, and if you feel you cannot get your high school then you may just give up

but the issue is, there's a lot of things you can do and NAIT has some good apprenticeship programs that they can get into. So the idea was that that might encourage students to complete that and then they would see a next step, a place they could go. They also suggested to make them feel welcome they have a swimming pool, and they would give them swimming pool privileges. So we are just starting to investigate that, and to talk about transitions to other places and what you can do with different levels of education and how you can then build on that, and where you can go next. So I think that's the important piece. So I'm excited about that!

What we do in our district is we actually enabled self identification of students since 1992 – 1993; our province has now mandated that, not that they have to identify, but that the opportunity to identify must now be offered to all students in Alberta. But we did that prior to the province mandating that, which, was just a few years ago. We did that because of our meetings with the community. We would meet a couple of times a year with representatives from the community and they got tired of us saying “We don't know how your Aboriginal students are doing because we don't track by ethnicity,” and so they said “Well, we're tired of hearing that and we'd like you to enable students to identify and you can tell us then how they're doing.” But we don't want you to use it just as publicity; we want it to be kept within the district and used for programming purposes. So we did agree to that and that has been very helpful because we've been tracking Aboriginal student achievement since 1992, on our provincial exams and on our highest level of achievement tests, and there has been steady growth. So we are seeing that. But we still know that we have some ways to go, but we do have some markers; we do have some data; we're finding that helpful. Then when we find in some settings they are getting really good results we try to find out “What are you doing?” And then trying to replicate that in some cases. So we are getting some good results at Westmount, and we look and see the things they're doing and we've been talking to others, to find out how we can do some of those things in other places. So it's a work in progress, and a constant work in progress, but worthwhile work and nice work to do, and people are really helpful. We have found the community really willing to work with us and we're considering doing a visual narrative with some researchers that would enable the young people to express what they feel and how they feel through photographs and other ways. Because we are thinking we need more of a student voice, we're not getting it; we do not yet have a strong enough student voice - Aboriginal student voice; we're just starting to look at this, this Fall - would this be a possible way of getting a student voice and finding out more about how they feel, what's working for them, and what are barriers for them so to help us figure out what we have to do, next? (Chalmers Personal Interview: October 27, 2006)

Finally, Mary Stevens left us with this:

Underlying all of this, I know the Amiskwaciy has worked really hard at this and trying to build a really good library where there are significant Aboriginal

resources. In some of the research that I've read Aboriginal youth have certainly told people over the years that for them to feel like school has something for them they need to see themselves reflected, and not just in the superficial way, you know in terms of art or the occasional Celebration Day, or whatever. But they really need to see themselves reflected in the resources that are used in the classroom, and I know there's been quite a bit of work done in that regard. Edmonton Public in particular has an Aboriginal collection online which schools and school districts can purchase an on-site license to every year. And it is a collection of reviews about all kinds of resources k to 12 all subject areas, and it either recommends or it doesn't recommend resources across all curricular areas. Significant work, well over 1200 items have been reviewed. So there's a scale: not recommended, recommended with caution, recommended, highly recommend. The critical commentary includes ideas about how the teacher can use that particular resource in the classroom so it goes well beyond most bibliographies, most provinces put out a "*inaudible*" Or a list of Aboriginal resources. A lot of them really just have author title publisher and ISBN number and a really short description of the story. But this goes well beyond that in providing a critical commentary, and I know that there's been considerable success in that. It certainly to me has always addressed this need for Aboriginal kids to see themselves reflected in the curriculum. In a very real way, in ways that are inherently tied to curriculum and curricular outcome rather than just being the occasional celebration for outer manifestations if you will.

She continued:

There has been a project...because Edmonton Public did have that contract with Alberta education to facilitate the infusion of Aboriginal concept and perception across the curriculum k to 12-except for social studies because that had already been done in social studies. So that work exists as well and now it's back with the province, and now the province needs to do certain things to move on it. But I certainly hear a lot of chatter about the need for infusion and you could maybe talk about that in a more general fashion in that infusing Aboriginal content and perspectives will not only validate for our children and youth who they are, what their histories are, what their cultures are, but it will also give one more reason why they fit, why they belong in the school and how they belong. Of course we have to make sure that the resources don't just speak to the unfortunate romantic image of the noble savage. Because that does no one any service, and in fact if that's the only kind of materials that are used, youth may be dealing with some of life's challenges may think to themselves, "Well this is who I am, so I must be very bad if they're not meant include things that are real to me." But of course that's only one part of the story.

One of the other things that's critical I think...that we must help teachers and educators become skillful at using approaches and teaching strategies that are more conducive to learning for the Aboriginal student. Very often these kinds of approaches include everything right from a shared leadership model, so that's not the teacher up in front of the room being the ruler of all, but rather the teacher in

the classroom saying, "OK I'm the teacher but we are a learning community." And that's not all that difficult to do, I know some teachers sometimes are a little uncomfortable with it, but they might be uncomfortable more because they haven't used it before. I think lots of teachers and I know for a fact lots of teachers are very keen to be taught how to work with Aboriginal students differently so they can be more successful in helping the students learn what they need to learn. But even everything from how you present the information, how much time do you allow for introduction of the topic, how much time you allow for quiet reflection; how much time you give for students to answer a question verbally, when the students are working on a major assignment, are steps one to three and four post scripted tightly? Or is there more ebb and flow so that the student can move among the different steps to the completion of the project. All those things I think are eminently doable and not that hard but it takes helping a teacher to see maybe a different way of doing things and maybe not even a drastically different way but maybe just incorporating just a few more things in their repertoire that might appeal more to Aboriginal students... (Stevens Personal Interview: October 27, 2006)

I believe that my interview experiences at Children of the Earth High School in Winnipeg and at Amiskwaciy Academy in Edmonton have deep significance when discussing the contemporary situation of Aboriginal Education within Canada. Not only did I want to address the issues for implementation of these schools, but I hope to capture the profound significance these schools are having on the young Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population that are in attendance. Validation of knowledge, traditions and culture is acknowledged within these two schools and I feel fortunate that I had the opportunity to go to these schools and further my own understanding and appreciation for the potential that Aboriginal Choice Schools have to offer a public education system and the society it serves.

Chapter Five will turn to the experience that Prince George had during its attempt to implement a Choice School within the community. It is important to remember Stevens words about the length of time it takes to establish such a school. Chapter Five



explains the experience in attempting to establish an Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Envisioning New Possibilities: The Prince George Experience**

My initial experiences with the creation of an Aboriginal Choice School within the Prince George School District occurred when I was working for the Prince George School District as an Aboriginal Education Worker. As I stated in my Introduction, it was while working in this supportive capacity that I realized that there are many students within School District No. 57 that would benefit from having a school setting where their culture and traditions would be honoured and respected. Also, the inclusion of Aboriginal content in the form of activities, literature and course offerings on a daily basis is something that I feel needs further expansion for the whole school population. I feel strongly about this because I know that within my own experience as an Aboriginal person growing up outside my culture that the understanding of my own history through education was crucial in allowing me to feel proud of who I am and where my family comes from. Also, non-Native students benefit from learning about the history of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal experiences and from learning about Aboriginal culture, worldview and values.

My interviews for this section of my thesis took place in two different places within British Columbia, Prince George and Victoria. Initially, I interviewed Ben Berland, the Aboriginal Liaison for School District No. 57 and Paul Michel, Director of the First Nations Centre at UNBC in Prince George. Both were involved in the discussion about creating an Aboriginal Choice School within our community from the outset. Then I traveled to Victoria and interviewed Trish Rosborough, Director of the Aboriginal Education Enhancement Branch; and Dr. Lorna Williams, Assistant Professor

and Director of Aboriginal Teacher Education at the University of Victoria where she holds a Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Knowledge and Learning. Dr. Lorna Williams' role with the School District in Prince George began when she was the Director of Aboriginal Education for the Province and Prince George was one of the districts she worked with.

Once again, I present the responses to my interview questions using the framework of the colours in the Métis Sash and the interviewees' answers follow each other consecutively. The stories surrounding the implementation of an Aboriginal School in Prince George will be compared to those of Children of the Earth and Amiskwaciy Academy in Chapter Six so that one will be able to see the similarities and differences between these three urban centers that encapsulate a large Aboriginal population.

The colour Red depicts my interviewees history with the potential implementation of an Aboriginal Choice School; Black represents the challenges my interviewees experienced; Blue and White represent the elements of my interviewees views regarding the philosophical foundation these schools represent. Green is correlated with the growth and prosperity these schools can bring to Aboriginal people and their communities.

### **Red: History**

Ben Berland has been working in the role of Aboriginal Education Liaison Officer for School District No. 57 since August 1, 1997. He explained that Prince George is unique in the province because "we have the Aboriginal Education Board that provides direction to the School District and my main role is to liaise between the Board and the school district itself" (Berland Personal Interview: 8 June 2006). Mr. Berland must ensure that any initiatives the Aboriginal Education Board takes in the District fits within

district policy and/or the School Act (Berland Personal Interview: 8 June 2006). Ben Berland was the first person I interviewed for this thesis and he has provided me with ongoing support for the duration of this project. Below Ben recounted the “history” of his role with the potential implementation of a Provincial Aboriginal School:

I've actually had a couple roles... I guess the first one is when this idea first came up in terms of the Province, the Ministry of Education and the Aboriginal Education Branch. Lorna (Williams) gathered about 20 of us together, or even more, and we had one meeting in October of 2003, and then we had another follow-up meeting in March 2004. We had some wonderful folks at these meetings... what we were doing in that meeting was wondering what an Aboriginal Choice School should look like. There was no discussion on where it would be, what the configuration should be and certainly we had no idea what it would look like. All we knew is that we wanted to have a school... And my role in that little committee was merely to provide my input. It was really interesting to me, coming at it from a view of a person who's been involved in the education field, but not really an educator per se - my background's more in physical education and recreation. One of the statements I made and I know Lorna certainly loved the phrase, and it's actually been passed around, is that, well we have to understand that our people, my family, we've gone in my lifetime, we've gone from “the trap line to online.” That's a big jump in the space of two generations, but somehow we have to make that work because that's literally one of the things that we will be doing with a Choice School is doing that sort of thing.

The second role I play of course has been with the local Aboriginal Education Board. We've had members on our Board, who have been there for ten years, and one of their goals for the last ten years has been to have a Choice School. One of our original Board members said “No matter how busy I get, I'm not quitting his Board until we get a school” - that's his entire goal. We had another Board member, due to health reasons he had to drop out, but that was his goal as well. The goal is we want to have our own school! So my role in this Board has been to facilitate getting this report made... Written by Paul Michel, Mavis Erickson and Paul Madak. That's been my role to sort of facilitate that and keep members of the Board informed as to what's going on.

I do receive a call every once in a while from Trish Rosborough, and Emery Dosdale, wanting an update. I'm sort of the media person as well I guess. I get calls weekly from radio or TV people here in Prince George all the time wanting to know the progress. Being the PR person, it's not easy. I mean I have had training on how to do it. But I think that speaks volumes, I think we are at the point now. One moment, a highlight I guess, is when we had school closures and we had this huge backlog, because we thought we were going to shut down Lakewood and turn it into an Aboriginal school. I had the opportunity to speak at the trustee meeting - I wrote a speech and delivered it and I just said that we need

to do something for Aboriginal students, we need to stop what we're doing now, because we all face huge social costs when we're not putting money into academics. You can pay a dollar now or you can pay five, ten dollars in social costs later on. That night at the meeting at Vanier Hall, Cheryl Jan was there, one of the reporters from PGTV and somehow she thought I sounded quite well in my speeches, and I ended up going on the radio with Mike Woodward. I think it was a really good chance to sort of broadcast to people out there what exactly our Choice School is about. Because there is a lot of fear and a lot of people didn't know about it. This is even before we wrote the report so up to that point we didn't have a clear document as to what we wanted. Now the report we did, that's the foundation we laid. And sort of informally, since my name has been on TV, radio and in the newspaper, I get asked quite a bit about the Choice School wherever I go... trying to belay people's fears about this idea... (Berland Personal Interview: 8 June 2006)

Paul Michel was the second person I interviewed. As the Director of the First Nations Centre and an Adjunct Professor within the First Nations Studies Program at UNBC, Paul Michel is able to make large contributions within the field of Aboriginal Education within our community as an advocate and a community leader. He explained how his role is connected with the School District:

The School District does invite me to do a variety of things, workshops for example, and they invite me to share information on Aboriginal education matters. The second is more directly connected with the Aboriginal Education Board. I have also done reports for them around the issues of Aboriginal Choice Schools. (Michel Personal Interview: 19 June 2006)

As an advocate for Aboriginal Education, Paul Michel related his role in the potential establishment of an Aboriginal Choice School is as follows:

Specifically the role would be more centered around a report that the Aboriginal Education Board asked me to write, which I co-authored with Mavis Erickson who is a Harvard trained lawyer with a Masters degree, and also co-authored with Dr. Paul Madak, who is - at the time he was the Chair of Education but now he's our Dean of Enrolment Management.<sup>13</sup> The role I played with the Provincial Aboriginal School was that we generated a report that talked about the philosophy behind an Aboriginal Choice School and within that philosophy, the important aspect of it is that this type of initiative is no different than that of a Montessori Choice School, French Immersion Choice school and when you look at an Aboriginal Choice School, it is a high school, or junior high school or an

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Madak is now the Dean of Student Success and Enrolment Management at UNBC.

elementary school plan that will satisfy and arguably exceed the provincial standards but it will do it by having a curriculum that is based within an Aboriginal philosophy. I have also been involved with this initiative through working with Dr. Lorna Williams, who was part of an initiative looking at two major sites in British Columbia, and possibly ten other sites for Aboriginal Choice Schools. She called upon 22 educators from around the province to develop the plan and the philosophy because initially the plan was to go outside of the school district plan and make a provincial type school initiative. So they're to go outside the districts and make a provincial choice school initiative. We got together in Victoria and we created a plan and philosophy of what that school would look like. So I've been involved with the Aboriginal Choice School Report, and the initial planning around the initial concept of Aboriginal Choice Schools for a provincial wide initiative, so both locally and provincially I've been involved. (Michel Personal Interview: 19 June 2006)

Trish Rosborough explained her role in the history concerning the implementation of an Aboriginal Choice School:

So as you know at this point we don't have an Aboriginal School yet in British Columbia. But before I took the position as Director (Ministry of Education - Aboriginal Education Enhancement Branch) two years ago, I was Provincial Coordinator in the same branch, and so I worked with the previous director, preparing/building plans with the hopes that we would develop an Aboriginal School. So in those early stages through the Ministry we gathered educators and elders and knowledgeable Aboriginal people and we did some focus groups and we started looking at what they thought an Aboriginal School would be, and we began to define the intentions, and to put a proposal forward to government at that time. (Rosborough Personal Interview: 24 July 2006)

Finally, Dr. Lorna Williams provided the following insight concerning her history with establishing a Provincial Aboriginal School in Prince George, B.C.:

My role was during the time that I was the Director of Aboriginal Education for the Province. There was a concern that the education of Aboriginal students in the entire province was being compromised by the current education system. And so we were developing a number of strategies to be able to change the current patterns, which is the low graduation rates and high incidence of high enrollment in special education programs, the racism students talk about that they experience in schools. So there were a number of initiatives we wanted to develop to change that pattern and one of the initiatives was developing provincial schools for Aboriginal students. They weren't only for Aboriginal students - they were going to be provincial schools that would be designed around the worldview and philosophies of Indigenous people. Our target population would be largely Aboriginal students. But the schools would be open to any students who wanted

to learn Indigenous knowledge. And so my role then was to conceptualize how the schools could be developed in the province. My role was to select the locations and the possible sites to develop the proposal that would be taken to cabinet. My role was to develop a business plan that would cause it to happen, to look at all of the policies to make sure that all the policies and laws, the legislation would allow these schools to be created. My role was to discuss the concept with ministers with government officials, with school district officials, with community members, with the Aboriginal community, I guess any and all of the stakeholders that would be impacted by schools such as the ones that we were planning. (Personal Interview: 29 July 2006)

In regards to the history of the interviewees' roles in the establishment of an Aboriginal Choice School, it becomes obvious that there were people both within our community as well as outside the community of Prince George that saw an opportunity for the further advancement of Aboriginal Education within our city. However, due to the fact that Prince George does not yet have an Aboriginal School, my incorporation of the interviews will now move to discussing the challenges associated with developing this initiative, categorized under the "black" colour of the Métis Sash.

### **Black: Challenges for Prince George**

Ben Berland related the following in regards to discussing the challenges of the Prince George experience:

I think there's a lot of challenges. I guess to me, one of the biggest challenges that we have read now is the general public's perception of what we want. And that's not just from non-Aboriginal people that comes from the Aboriginal people as well. We've been accused of being segregationists, we've been accused of trying to resurrect Residential Schools, we've been accused of where are we going to find staffing for the school? Who is going to work in the school? What culture are we going to teach? There is just so much misinformation out there right now, and that I think is the biggest challenge we face. Even to this day people bring up this question of segregation. It sort of raises my hackles a little because segregation is not the goal that we're after. I mean this process is going to be led by Aboriginal people, we are following the National Indian Brotherhood's paper. I mean, it's a landmark document! Indian control of Indian education, Aboriginal control of Aboriginal education, Aboriginal Choice School and that process is going to be led by Aboriginal people - there's no other way to put it you know, and it means, Indian control of

Indian education. People ask me about that document I tell them to me it's as important as the court ruling in the United States in 1954-55, Brown vs. the Board of Education, that basically desegregated schools in the old south, where you had black and white and "never shall the two mix." I keep telling people over and over again it's a Choice School - if people want to attend, they can, if they don't, fine and we're not going to turn aside kids because they're not Aboriginal, not at all.

Another challenge that we've had to overcome is political will. There's not a great deal of political will right now either at the local level, provincial level, or federal level to have the school. Locally I think our trustees want to see it, I know they've contributed a lot... However they are in a tough position - they're in a tough position where within the last five years we've closed 14 or 15 schools. How does the public perceive opening a school that many in the public just look at as a school for Aboriginal kids and why are we serving Aboriginal kids, when there's a million other kids out there that could use the help. Provincially, I think things are turning, I think Premier Campbell's statement in the Legislature about trying to reconcile old things and forge new relations with First Nations people in this province is helpful. I think they're interested in that as well, but of course they hold the court of public opinion as well they have a tough time I would imagine in the education field, opening an Aboriginal school when they are having to lay off teachers year after year after year. However, I sometimes think they miss the big picture; when they look at the Aboriginal population in this province which is growing, our district is indicative of a population that is growing. And ten years ago our kids made up 10 percent of the population and now it's 20 percent. And we are the only population group in the provincial education system that is growing, in this area the North, Prince George. So we need to highlight on that, you know.

Federally, there's always talk and there has sort of been rumors and talk of federal money to fund this school. If an MP came to me tomorrow and said "Here is \$10 million to build the building and get your school up and running," I wouldn't turn it down. However, I really don't think it's going to happen particularly under the current government who sort of backed away from the Kelowna Accord. Also I think if they were to build an Aboriginal school or if they were to set a bit of a dangerous precedent.

As you know, as the majority Aboriginal people live off reserve, they are urban and Prince George is certainly representative of that fact. So if they were to build a school here, well then you need to build one for Vancouver. Well they already have one in Edmonton but you know maybe you need to build one in Calgary and Regina and Saskatoon and on and on amount and then of course we get into that whole debate over on-reserve, off-reserve services. And I don't think that's something the federal government would like to get into. But having said that I know we have funding available, we've got funding for needs assessment on the entire school district through Western Diversification and the Urban Aboriginal Strategy. So that's a challenge, the political will.

Of course the next one I think, would be the building, we currently don't have a building. I guess I look at some of the areas in Prince George. Lakewood



has said quite loudly and clearly that they don't want it. I don't know whether we will go down that route and personally myself I couldn't care less where we have it, a building is a building. If we had to start in the warehouse somewhere I would do that, just start it somewhere!

Amiskwaciy started out like that as well, they had some business, I think it was an old Alberta government telephone building, or a GTE building or some building that was right downtown. So they had to struggle in that building for two years. I mean it had no gymnasium, they didn't have a shop they didn't have a home economics class. I mean in some ways it was probably pretty good for them, I know they probably didn't attract a whole lot of students but the students that went there, well the focus was definitely on academics because there was really just no room to do anything else. Now they have this new building that's absolutely wonderful. I mean it's great. I think part of the lure of Amiskwaciy is their building. But, if you speak with Dr. Phyllis Cardinal from Amiskwaciy, she was a principal there, she'll tell you of the same struggles. The building there is the old Edmonton municipal airport, it's one of the old hangers - they've transformed it. But it's near this hotel and when they were doing this they were having public meetings, and there were people saying "Well you know you'll get all of these Indian kids going to that bar and drinking and running down the middle of the runway," and that's sort of what they had to say. So when I hear conversation like that in Prince George about the school, they don't discourage me, because I know other people have faced that before and it's been done before. What we're doing here other people have done already.

I guess one of the other challenges is trying to sell the idea to people. To what this costs, it is expensive, I mean were talking if we were to build a building it would be the heck of a lot of money. However I heard someone say, I'm not sure who said it, but I use the question, "People think education is expensive, try seeing the cost of ignorance and that is quite a bit more expensive." And we talked earlier about one of our Board members who wants the school badly and his reasoning is, he's a corporal with the RCMP, he's been a cop for 25-26 years and he works here in Prince George and he said, "I see the cost every single day I go out on my job. I see the cost of kids dropping out. I deal with that every day. I'm not in the education field but I deal with kids everyday." And he said "I tell you, I could write a book on the things I've seen." He says, "It breaks my heart that we can't create a place for kids to belong and we can't create a place for them to be successful." So that is one of the huge challenges we face is changing public opinion, swaying public opinion in our favour.

But it's not only non-Aboriginal people it's Aboriginal people as well. There are a lot of Aboriginal people out there saying we're being segregationists, "How are our kids going to mix in with other kids." I always said, "Well your kids only spend five hours a day at school, where do they spend the rest of the time if they live in Prince George?" Where I'm from in Fort St. James we have a Band School and there are people who say that all the time - "Well I don't want my kids going to the Band School. They're not going to learn how to mix in with the white people - they do not learn the social skills in dealing with others." Well I think that will be true if you took all the Aboriginal kids and you know like in

the case of the Residential Schools, move them to live in the middle of nowhere with nothing around for miles. I always compare Residential Schools to internment camps for Jewish people in World War II - in the middle of nowhere. It's a control thing. But you have a school in Prince George in the middle of the city. Are you going to walk straight home from school? And not talk to a white person or see a non-Aboriginal person? If you play club sports in the community, chances are you're going to meet non-Aboriginal people. I think that type of thinking is very myopic...

Even in my job the majority of people are non-Aboriginal, and my specialty is supposed to be Aboriginal education. When I go home or when I go to the gas station to fill up, there are not a whole lot of Aboriginal people. You know, I actually shop at businesses in the city where I see Aboriginal people working there is one business in particular - I won't say which one it is - but they have a lot of Aboriginal people working as cashiers, and I like that. I don't buy that argument that we are segregating kids and they aren't going to learn how to mix in with the other culture. When you live in a city like this, then you have no choice. We don't have a section of town where Aboriginal people live, exclusively, and I don't think I've seen any gated Aboriginal communities in Prince George, in all the years I've lived here. You do learn that that's just a given.

I think that's about it for challenges. They are quite numerous and I could probably go on and on and on. The main things I would say is political will, not having a building, and looking at public opinion; and I don't want to even get into funding, but funding is one as well. If you don't have that you don't have it, you don't have it and this will be driven on funding. (Berland Personal Interview: 8 June 2006)

Paul Michel noted many of the same challenges faced in the implementation process:

Well at the onset the challenges are very similar to what happened here in Prince George. When the educators and the Aboriginal Education Board started to toss around the creation of Aboriginal Choice School, even the school Board and the teachers in the communities, and even the Aboriginal communities for that matter, they took many different reactions to this concept. On the extreme viewpoints you would have educators and community members arguing that this is not a good way to segregate. There was the myth that the Choice School was segregation and it's not a wise way to use taxpayers money. What they initially and erroneously thought is that the creation of the Choice School would be for Aboriginals only, First Nations, Inuit and Métis, that the creation of the school was going to be an original curriculum and solely for Aboriginals only. Now this is wrong in so many aspects. Right from the beginning, the talk of an Aboriginal Choice School is not about segregation. It's very much integration, very much inclusive. What it is the creation of the school that follows an Aboriginal philosophy which has its strengths, as a French immersion philosophy would, or a Montessori would, which are already Choice School options in the Prince George area. It was just creating another option and a route. Now the major challenge

has been articulated in the initial reaction from the community.

Also there have been some Aboriginal community members who have said that they do not want the creation of a Residential type school. And they are also wrong too. They are not quite understanding the philosophy that this school would be founded on. It is a provincial school satisfying and exceeding the provincial standards, and you just base your school on the foundation of an Aboriginal philosophy. And that means it would be inclusive to all students. All students would have an opportunity and a chance to go to that school.

Now I have also had a chance to talk to the previous Superintendent in the School District, and now they're going through some transition right now looking for a new superintendent or they may have one already by now.<sup>14</sup> But he talked about the challenges as being: location, funding, and political will. Which is quite shocking to me as an Aboriginal educator when you look at the School Districts, the highest rising population is Aboriginals: approximately 20 percent of the current Prince George School District is Aboriginal, and when you're looking at location where many schools that they have available that they've closed down, I know there's a cost to revamping or revitalizing old schools, but it's entirely possible.

The other one is financial; this is a commitment. When you look at what is 20 percent of the School Districts current budget you do have enough money to do an Aboriginal Choice School. So that's a moot point given the high Aboriginal population. And possibly for others interested in going to the school you would be exceeding 20 percent.

The third one is the political will,. This once again is almost like saying the School District won't plan for something unless it can be proven politically that is in their best interest and that's a very poor stance to make. What happened to the educational leadership? It should be visionary, creative and dynamic.

It was a mystery to me to hear that those were the three concerns. I think the Report on Aboriginal Choice Schools addresses all of these issues that if there is political will it will be beneficial to all students. There are locations available and the finance is a real question but if you commit even portions of 20 percent of a School District budget towards this you have enough finances. (Michel Personal Interview: 19 June 2006)

Trish Rosborough, representative of the Provincial Government, explained her

interpretation of the challenges to an Aboriginal Choice School by saying:

Well because we don't actually have one it's clear that we have had some challenges. I guess at the original conception point, it wasn't my idea, it was the previous director's. Of course people have had his idea for a longtime but she really led the idea, and I understand you'll be interviewing her. Her thought at the time, and I was really new here was that for an Aboriginal School to work, the provincial government should really step in and say "Okay we are going to do this, we are going to manage it and take the risk." Because as you mentioned in

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<sup>14</sup> In 2007 the Superintendent of School District No. 57 is Brian Pepper

some other materials, it is not without controversy. And we knew that there would be some risk-taking involved to do some things that are really different. And so her original hope was that the school would be a provincial school, so under the Ministry. But as we went down the road it seemed that that created some tension for the politicians, because BC has a model of delivering education where school districts have a lot of autonomy. The politicians wanted to respect that process and not to step into an area in Prince George. You know we had also considered other places, to come in and create a school, that we would respect the autonomy of school districts and would partner with the school districts. So that is where we stumbled, in my thought. That's where we stumbled and school districts might see that a different way. But I think that what happened was that the school district then also experienced challenges and the challenges were politicians not wanting to take such a risk because although there were people in favour of such a school, there were also people saying, "This is segregation. We're having to close down schools and if you take our Aboriginal kids and put them into the separate school, it's going to have a negative impact on enrollment in other schools." So issues like that were raised. And I think people lost their courage to do something that was really different. I think in terms of a challenge, that and I look back on the philosophy that we had to take a big risk and do something different. The less we and the politicians were willing to take a risk the more the idea shrunk to look like not something big and different, but more like an alternate program. People were really clear from the beginning that we didn't want just another alternate program. (Rosborough Personal Interview: 24 July 2006)

Lorna Williams provided her viewpoint on the challenges saying:

It was interesting because at the conceptual stage there were actually very few challenges or barriers that I could see. Probably the biggest challenge was the perception by individuals, and this would be at every level, the perception by both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people by government and by non-government. This perception that I'm going to talk about then ran through every group. And that perception was that an Aboriginal focused school would be a segregated school. And that some people were afraid that we were proposing another Residential School model. And that an Aboriginal focused school would not prepare Aboriginal students for life in a modern world. So I would say that the challenge was fear and the challenge really was a hesitation to do something that might be different from what people were doing already.

I think there might have been a feeling that what we were proposing was giving a message that public schools were not good enough, and that we were favoring one population by focusing on Aboriginal students. I think everything in our history that brought us in a sense to where we are today was present and that was probably the biggest challenge. There was no challenge legislation-wise so these are possible. There wasn't a challenge financially; the business plan showed that it was viable. When people could understand and leave that place of fear and think about the possibility for the schools, once people could bring themselves to

that point, it was exciting, that people would get really excited about it. There was a lot of work that needed to be done but it was entirely possible. (Williams Personal Interview: 29 July 2006)

Lorna continued:

I would say that the biggest challenge is the fact that there has been so little knowledge in this area. If you go to the literature, you wouldn't find very much that would describe an Aboriginal Educational Philosophy. So all of that would have to be developed. The second is that even if there was one (an Aboriginal Education Philosophy), the First Nations are a very diverse group, a group of nations and each one has its own worldview. And so the challenge would be then, how do you reconcile that diversity within one school?

I was really excited about the possibility of Prince George being one of the first sites. We had a number of sites that we're looking at throughout the province, and I chose Prince George for a number of reasons to be the first site. And one of those reasons was the people who use Prince George as a base, are people who I believe anyway, are still close to living their philosophy, more than anywhere else.

So I thought that, yes we don't have anything in written form right now that would guide us, but we have the people who would be able to do that. We would be able to find the people who still have that connection to the land, the people who have a connection to their traditional governance models, people who live the life of their heritage. So the wisdom is still there, and even though people think we don't have it, but I know that it is still there.

So I thought in Prince George it will be easy to access all of that wisdom. But in order to be able to design a school, where people live and practice guided by the Indigenous wisdom, you need leaders that have the ability to draw that out. Because people I think often, in my experience anyway, people that have that wisdom sometimes think that it's not good enough, they believe that when you try to take that into a school setting, then what often happens is, I think that they have to behave in their conception of "school," and not their conception of their worldview. And so that's a real challenge and I have experienced this a number of times, where I've asked Indigenous wisdom keepers and knowledge holders to come in and work with young people. They revert back to their concept of school rather than being guided by their own wisdom. Because they think they have to modify that because they're in a school now. So it's a point to realize that that happens and to build that (transformation) into the planning.

A challenge would have been that every course the students take would have to be rewritten. The good thing is - and I know that often times people don't really understand this - the good thing is that the B.C. curriculum is broadly enough stated that you can look at it and in a sense reinterpret it according to an Indigenous worldview. You have to do a lot more work but it is possible to deliver that curriculum from another worldview. And so that would not have been a problem. The problem would have been that every course would have to be designed that way. And then the teacher is prepared to be able to teach in that

way, so there was a lot of work ahead but I couldn't really see a problem.

The factors that we need to consider then are; I talked about the curriculum, I talked about the Indigenous knowledge and the school trying to get those two ideas to coexist. But I think the biggest one is that in Indigenous life there's attention paid to the spirit, so in order to be able to provide an environment where Aboriginal learners are delivered an education system immersed in Aboriginal philosophy you must pay attention to, the emotional life of the child, the cognitive life of the child, the physical development in the life of the child, and the spirit development in the life of the child. And those four have to be interwoven and they have to exist then in the social world that is being created. The public school system does not focus on the spirit development and well-being of an individual, because that gets equated with religion and spiritual development from a Western philosophy and has been removed from the public school system. So how do you weave that back into a public education system that actually has a law that says you can't have it? So that would have been a challenge but not an insurmountable one.

I would say in an Aboriginal focused school, even though I was saying before there is great diversity, I think that one of the areas where all Indigenous people in the world and what they have in common is that those four elements are woven together. I think the other thing is that Aboriginal or Indigenous people learn in a much more context based, or context dependent way, but in the Western world the learning is decontextualized. It's separate, you learn in an abstract way that separates you from the world. And that's not the way our world is.

So another challenge would have been to be able to create those experiences where students really could learn in a context rich environment, and yet learn in highly abstract ways. Those are not exclusive. Indigenous people thought very abstractly in very complex, cognitively complex ways. But their way of arriving there is different from the way that the education system is constructed, so the way you are going to learn how to be a teacher is not the way in which traditionally our people learned and taught to be able to become autonomous, independent creative thinkers.

So we would have really had to work hard for that environment to make sure we put the right principles in place that would guide people to be able to teach in an Indigenous way. I guess the other challenge that we have, or the other factor that we would really have to consider is, Indigenous philosophy. In a sense the school would have to pay attention to three areas: Indigenous philosophy and ways of being in the world, and a lot of that is tied to the land, tied to the elements, and it's tied to a very different orientation and sense of time. So then we have to then look at that world and then look at the world of the Western education schooling model. So how do you reconcile those two worlds together? You must consider those two.

Then you have to consider the third thing which is; we have now been colonized for more than 500 years and all of our elders have experience today, they probably have experienced Residential School or some kind of federal school system that I think was really damaging. The knowledge that they gained, that data acquired from their language has been compromised, their way of living has

been compromised by colonization. That exists and we have to take that into consideration, so you have to take those three things into consideration, all the time, and not get lost in anyone of those three things. So you have to take the two being the schooling system that children are now experiencing, you know the way school is constructed and the colonization, you have to take the Indigenous philosophy as a way of dealing with those two things. All the time. (Williams Personal Interview: 29 July 2006)

Obviously, Prince George experienced a considerable amount of challenges to implementing an Aboriginal Choice School. However, even with the challenges that presented themselves, the interviewees still speak of the great dreams and aspirations about what an Aboriginal School could potentially represent and portray to the students as well as to the larger community. The next component, representing the “Blue and White” colours speaks to some of the strengths of an Aboriginal philosophy in an Aboriginal Choice School.

### **Blue and White: Philosophical “Colours”**

Ben Berland explained his perceptions of the philosophical foundation of the school through the colours of “Blue and White” (the colours of the Métis flag in the Métis Sash):

If I could be really greedy in my thinking, I think I would like to see a school that is immersed in the philosophy of Martin Brokenleg based on his model of what they call the “circle of courage,” where you look at four areas: sense of belonging, mastery, independence and giving. I think that's what we need to do in our school. This is far and away the biggest thing we need to provide for Aboriginal students and their families - because families need to be included in the education process of Aboriginal kids in my opinion. Other cultures may make it without parents, ours you need the family there. I'm sorry, I just can't get away from that thinking in my head. We need to have a school where we have that type of belonging for kids. And we need to have that sense of belonging, so we can provide what I call education equity. And that means equity with the results - Aboriginal students can do just as well as anybody else on foundation skills assessments and on all these curriculum based measurements. We need to have our kids up there. We need equity of input. We need to create an environment where Aboriginal people feel that their opinion matters and that their input is welcomed. And you look around and there's not a whole lot of

Aboriginal people on parent advisory committees, there's not a whole bunch of Aboriginal people that are involved in school planning councils.

If we're looking at the BC public education model, those are two very key ingredients in developing successful schools. And of course we want equity of treatment. I don't want to use the big "R" word in terms of racism, but our kids need to be treated as equals to others and feel like they are being treated as equals. I think because of the cultural differences of a lot of our students, that people don't understand that when it comes to discipline and a lot of other issues. They just have no clue. That's one of the things we need to teach the kids.

And the second part is mastery, I look at my upbringing being raised very traditionally with which my grandparents and just the teaching styles are incredibly different and it wasn't that my grandparents taught me something just to be the best at it. "Well you know I'm going to be teaching them how to skin a caribou just so they can be the best caribou skinner in the world," Their philosophy was "know," - "I'm going to teach you how to skin a caribou so when I'm gone you can do it for yourself and you can look after yourself." You see I think a lot of our teaching now is competition and it doesn't seem to work with our kids.

If you talk to Aboriginal people who have gone into the field of medicine I remember talking to one fellow who is a doctor and he said one of the hardest things for him to deal with going to MED school was the fierce competition, who could be the best? His whole idea was "When we help each other through this tough time." So we need to have that, we need to be able to teach mastery skills. Not so kids can be on the honor roll or other principals list. I think that's wonderful, I think that's a wonderful goal to shoot for, however we shouldn't teach that just because their kids they're not at the top of their class they're not somebody. We need to teach mastery and kids need to learn those skills and learn those skills that are to help them get through life because you and I are not going to be here forever. It's up to us to teach the next generation and, if I ever had children I sure hope I can teach them how to do math a lot better than I ever learned to. I want them to learn the skills, not be the best at it, I want them to enjoy themselves...

When you know growing up in an Aboriginal community, with kids there's a lot you have to do to hold up your name whether you belong to a clan system, I'm representative of the *Lhtseh yoo* Clan the Frog Clan. And I know that - I take that very seriously, the way I go out to the public, even in this job. As my great-grandmother says you have to live honorably so you don't have to apologize for your life later on. And we need to be able to have an environment where we teach kids that where they learn the responsibility for themselves and how to take care of themselves as well. It's sort of an independent choice. We have learned to give kids the choice. We can't just become telling them what to do all the time. They have to eventually be able to do that on their own.

The last part is giving, to me giving is, it's such a good feeling I think I get a kick out of it. I got a kick from when I went to a potlatch as a kid and had to serve elders, those elders appreciated it and you know if you have potlatch and you have to serve elders, well generally, guess what? You're going to be the last



person to eat and you're probably not going to get the best food so the real giving to me, costs you something. And I don't think we teach kids that. I'd like to see a school, if we had a Choice School where our kids are involved in the community, getting out there volunteering their time – they're getting out there, maybe helping with elders, maybe helping with senior citizens in the community of Prince George, maybe getting involved and mentoring younger kids or even coaching or being involved in something. There is countless studies out there that show kids who are involved in pro-social activities, which are such things as going to church, volunteering and doing things like that, they show less inclination towards risky behaviors. I mean the positives just far outweigh the negatives. I think getting out there and doing stuff for people builds the character of a person...

I think that not only helps build self esteem, I think it would show the community something positive, that would go a long way because I know it all the years I volunteered coaching minor hockey and giving tons of time and countless hours, I can't even begin to imagine how much time. It builds a better image of Aboriginal people. It helps people realize and get over the stereotypical images that we see so often. It helps people to realize that "Hey I'm just like others in the town, there's not too much difference," but I think that we're the same. I think those are the goals we need to set. Aboriginal and all the other schools have not really had to adapt their curriculum when provided the proper environment I think that's essential to provide that environment. (Berland Personal Interview: 8 June 2006)

Ben Berland continued to describe how an Aboriginal school is reflective of Aboriginal philosophy:

I think it all boils down to good leadership. So when we get the school, we have to hire one heck of an individual to be the principal. I know I get in trouble saying this, but that person has to be Aboriginal. They really do. And of course they have to be very strong in their approach because it's going to be a very unique role. Having seen and met Dr. Cardinal at the Amiskwaciy, she's an incredible woman...that is the kind of person we are going to need to run the school...For the sake of what we're doing ideally, if we could get an Aboriginal staff that would be great. But on the other hand, you can get Aboriginal staff who may not be committed to those goals as well. My biggest wish is that everybody from the Principal right down to the custodians - are all working towards those goals for these kids. Understanding that in order to build what we want in the school you have to have a certain understanding of those goals.

I went out to Amiskwaciy. Randy Henderson and I went and we interviewed everybody. We would just haul people in and say, "Can we talk to you?" We had free run of the school for three days and we interviewed the custodian and we asked her, "How do you like working here?" That's basically one of the questions I asked all the staff, and she said, "I love it here." And I asked, "Oh, why is that?" And she was a non-Aboriginal woman and she says, "I

love the school because these kids take pride in the school.” She goes, “I don't have to worry about scrubbing scribble marks on the desks I don't worry about vandalism in the washrooms. The kids keep the place clean - there's very little garbage on the floor. Every other janitor in the system wants into the school.” She was one of the more senior employees and she got her choice of anywhere to go. She said, “I'm not leaving. I will retire in the school.” That is the kind of environment we want to build. We want a place where the teachers want to teach, the administrators fighting over the vice principal job and where students want to go.

I want to see excellent academic programs. I mean I would like to see post-secondary preparatory school...Of course me, being the old jock, I want to see a very strong athletics program and not just basketball and volleyball or soccer... I already have a guy lined up to teach hockey at the school. Hockey is a big game in Northern B. C. and a big game in the Aboriginal community. We want to see that, we want more extracurricular activities. I mean our kids are not strong in extracurricular activities. I would garner a guess and make an estimate that - I cannot recall hearing of any Aboriginal kids in any extracurricular sports, or school sports in this district at the high school level. I can think of one girl who played basketball and that was about it. You know there's just very few out there. I go out and I see club sports and I see the fields or the rinks filled with Aboriginal kids, and I go, “Well how come they're not competing in school sports?” I'd like to be, well heck I'd like to be the athletic director, if I had my way.... You want a school that people want to go, to create that environment. You have to insist on that. If you are the principal you have to be able to insist on your staff doing that, creating that environment. And give the person - whoever it is - enough authority (that) if they have a staff member who is not so inclined to say, “I'm sorry priority transfer.” And I know that statement is not going to sit well with a lot of people, but we're in a crisis situation in this district. We have to start creating that environment, in any and all of our schools but particularly with a Choice School. I think with a Choice School... bang...it's there. You know any staff member knows that there's going to be a lot expected of them. And rightfully so if we want to improve what were doing we have to insist upon it. There's no way around it and we have to work. (Berland Personal Interview: 8 June 2006)

Paul Michel also explained what he envisions the proponents of an Aboriginal School embedded in Aboriginal Philosophy:

Well, really the crucial factor - and this has been seen in other initiatives - you need visionary leaders in teachers. When you plan to curriculum, when you plan your administration policies, plan the school environment, you really need a strong sense of not only the traditional but also experience within the academic environment. So when you approach it, you have to think of it as learners approaching the learning environment where it is Aboriginal and very traditional and very cultural. Within that and all aspects of their learning: their English, their

Mathematics, their Social Studies and Sciences, Physical Education, and their personal learning type courses, all have a respect and integrated approaches that are very much Aboriginal within its viewpoint.

For example, when you do your sciences you can learn how to do traditional medicines within the forest in the bush, but also you can learn how to do it and laboratory, for example how to make things like aspirin... So the challenging factor will be having trained teachers. But do you have trained teachers in a bicultural way? Do they know how to approach curriculum in a bicultural way, First Nations and Western? If you're talking about those two as big "Meta" theories of knowledge, how can you ensure that they (the teachers) are (teaching bi-culturally)? And the way you can ensure that is that the Principal and the Aboriginal community and the Aboriginal Education Board, when they're hiring, they need to hire these qualified bicultural instructors and teachers that are going to make an impact. And you need a visionary leader and leaders that can make sure that these (visions) are fulfilled. That is what is learned from other successful initiatives worldwide. We find when you look at all aspects - your school needs to be honoring those types of traditions. (Michel Personal Interview: 19 June 2006)

He continued to explain how an Aboriginal School is reflective of this:

An Aboriginal School...you can give it a traditional name "Spirit of the Eagle School" and put it in a traditional language. And what you do, is you move from identifying this as an average of school, to identifying it as a philosophy that's respecting an Aboriginal philosophy. That will attract more. The problem initially is semantic; people tend to go "If it's an Aboriginal school, it's only for Aboriginal students." I realize that too, working at the University. We are called the First Nations Centre. Hindsight being 2020, we're in the process of changing that because people, when they see First Nations Centre think it's only for First Nations...

Really one of the first recommendations is how you identify this initiative. You can call it a First Nations type of school - one that is very inclusive with its philosophy. That must be very upfront. When you look at an Aboriginal type school - say we called it the Spirit of the Eagle High School, then people know they are going to get a quality education that is going to be integrated with Aboriginal philosophy but will satisfy and/or exceed the provincial curriculum. So you're going to get high school graduates that are more ready for post-secondary. The crafting of this type of school works well to what we do here at the University within First Nations Studies, within our Geography, within our Social Work, within our Nursing program, within a variety of other postsecondary degrees, business degrees, natural resource planning. And what they're finding is because of the large Aboriginal population in the North, if somebody goes to a high school that does an Aboriginal Choice type school, then they can be successful within a large number of university programs that reflect that too. So these learners are going from success in school, to success in a post secondary degree, that's going to make sure that they're successful within the working

environment...

I like your title "education transformation" because it is transforming the curricular landscape. The landscape, I would arguably say it needs to move from a Western ideological stance to bringing in the voices of the Aboriginals. And when you look at that (you need to ask), what is the knowledge, where did the Aboriginal people get their knowledge from? Really what you'll bring forth is orality. You'll bring forth the oral histories... it's orality the oral histories and the oral wisdom and that is a unique way to know and understand the world. You can understand the world through literacy - reading books and textbooks - but you can also learn through practical oral wisdom too. It is important as an education system to recognize and respect that.

So you're going to need to bring your Elders in. High Elders are Ph.D.'s with 20 years experience - its equivalent to someone who was born and raised and knows their environment traditionally. They are just as equivalent as a person with a doctorate degree. Also we can connect within the curricula - the literacy and the orality. For example, going back to this learning how to make aspirin in the laboratory, science laboratory and also within the bush. You can have interesting analysis and comparative essays written about this and you can have your learners learning in a Western way or in a traditional way and one does not supersede the other, but they sure will enhance each other.

The other, and the fourth part of it, it will move to this transformation part - there is a healing and spiritual essence when you're talking about pedagogy towards this type of school. Educators like to talk about it as transforming your base of knowledge and also transforming your quality of life. It gets educators uneasy talking about the spiritual essence, and that's what they mean when they talk about healing and spiritual essence for Aboriginal educators...

And the last bit about this initiative, this type of Choice School initiative, is the average will. Communities are very strong within their orality still. They've been marginalized in society, however, their oral wisdoms are still there and still vital. So they will be able to challenge the written texts to speak because there's weaknesses within the School District curriculum right now... It's because they're not really allowing the Aboriginal voice to be integrated. And these types of initiatives will succeed in integrating a diverse type of knowledge system. (Michel Personal Interview: 19 June 2006)

Trish Rosborough told me the following in regards to providing an environment immersed in Aboriginal philosophy:

Let's start with the point about it not being an alternate program... that's something we heard loud and clear from the people that we started to consult with - we wanted to create an opportunity for education that valued who Aboriginal people are and that brought in Aboriginal philosophy and be based on pedagogy that looked at Aboriginal philosophy. We wanted to avoid being an alternate school, which are often seen as holding grounds for kids that are not making it in the greater system. I think really important too, is that we would have high

expectations for Aboriginal kids. That the kids that would access the school (and) wouldn't get an easy way out - that it would be a different way to go through education.

We thought that such a school would be Aboriginal not just because of the people that worked there or the people who enrolled there, but because of the philosophy and that it would be open to anybody that wanted that type of educational experience. So not just Aboriginal kids, but also non-Aboriginal students. Within that... we really believed in a holistic approach so educating the whole child. And also the Aboriginal Education Centre, which was how we talked about it, would be a place where you could connect to other services. Those might be health services, they might be an adult education services, and daycare, but that there would be outreach and integration of those types of services. So really looking at all the needs that somebody has. (Rosborough Personal Interview: 24 July 2006)

She further explained:

A holistic approach is what I think people talk about. The inclusion of a community and elders and others within the school environment. Not just chunking off education in terms of academic learning, but really using life's experience as part of the educational program. Some of the schools that we looked at, like Amiskwaciy, we were quite attracted to things like the inclusion of spirituality, and ritual. I don't really know how to describe it, other than that holistic approach really needing a wide variety of needs and beings. I think we also talked about the inclusion of Aboriginal knowledge, content, history, throughout the curriculum. And certainly that's something that's one of my goals for mainstream education - is that we would see more Aboriginal content integrated into the curriculum. But we really saw this as a place where it could happen. We also saw those intergenerational connections being a possibility. I mentioned with a daycare but also we have thought that it would be a great possibility for linking with post-secondary institutions. So that people like yourself who are at the Masters level or the doctorate level could also be working within the school, learning about the application of new philosophy, perhaps not new philosophy, but bringing that philosophy into a school setting with the application of this Aboriginal pedagogy.

We really haven't integrated the education system very well with Aboriginal philosophy. I think if I refer back to the focus groups that we did early on.... We held our focus groups and brought people together. But it was very interesting how people didn't define education just in terms of reading, writing and arithmetic, but it was very broad. We started with exercises that purposely had people look at what is the meaning of education. They really looked at education as being... the tool to live the good life. So reading, writing, and arithmetic were part of that. So was traditional knowledge. So was connecting with community, knowing our own history, and a place for language learning. The other thing that they looked at was there seems to be a real strong desire to integrate nature for instance, a connection and relationship with nature... I'd say

relationship was one of those keys, so relationship with nature, also relationship with intergenerations, with the community, was another thread that really ran through the philosophy that people spoke of. (Rosborough Personal Interview: 24 July 2006)

Lorna Williams completed this section of the interviews by telling me the following in regards to factors integral in the inclusion of Aboriginal philosophy:

One is that more education in Indigenous philosophy, as I said there is a very different orientation to time, and a very different orientation to space. We are much more community oriented and family-oriented. So the school would have had to take that into consideration. So you have go out and find out who is involved in the school so in an Aboriginal school that's run on an Aboriginal philosophy, has to involve the entire community, and the entire family. That's the first one.

The other as I said, the learning has to be a lot more experiential, a lot more context based, so then the school in a sense becomes a setting that is open to the world. The learning needs to be very grounded in Aboriginal philosophy. One of the features of Indigenous teaching and learning for example, is that the adults are responsible for ensuring that they can recognize the moment in time when the child is ready in a sense, to learn something. And they have to grab that and prepare for that and cause it to happen. And so the way that lessons are designed and delivered would have to be very different. They would have to spend a lot more time on the land. A lot more use of stories. Using deductive and inductive reasoning a lot more than is usually delivered in schools. Ceremony and sacredness and Thanksgiving would have to be woven into everything. (Williams Personal Interview: 29 July 2006)

### **Green: Benefit to Community**

The final section represents how Aboriginal Schools can create positive change for Aboriginal people and their communities. The colour "Green" on the Métis Sash represents growth and prosperity and can also include Aboriginal people and their perception of the environment - as care takers within a role of stewardship. Ben Berland described the following when asked how he sees Aboriginal Choice Schools creating positive change for Aboriginal people and their communities:

Ben Berland said:

I think I spoke about earlier I think one of the things that Lorna (Williams)

and Emery (Dosdale) would like to see is, particularly Emery, would be a bunch of schools like this in all the major cities. We can have one in the North, maybe one in Rupert could have one because they're out West and a lot of people come from that coast. Of course you have one in the Lower Mainland and maybe the Kootenays. We can run them like the Francophone school authority does. You know, there's separate district that covers the entire province. I think that's a very positive change for the province. We need to be able to allow that input and right now it is (allowed) but it isn't (allowed).

The biggest frustration I hear... is that Aboriginal people do not get involved in school. I attend meetings and am I disappointed in the numbers of people that show up? You bet that I am. But, and I know that's a big but... I know in the back of my mind that a lot of our people are treated absolutely horribly by the education system. And there's talk where they talk about a pedagogy of oppression. What was the purpose of the education around here? History is certainly shown... schools meant to colonize Aboriginal people and unfortunately that... process still exists with a lot of people in the educational system. And it's a very scary thing. I don't think a lot of people that are involved are aware of - that they have no inkling of what they're doing. And we need to look at having our own school system in the province of British Columbia.

I think this is the province that it can be done in. I look at other provinces in this country and it frightens me the way they look at Aboriginal education. But I think that if the province of British Columbia were to do that, well than we have our own district with this province wide - well than you can look at collecting school trustees, Aboriginal trustees, you can look at hiring a Superintendent of that overall district who is going to be Aboriginal. Much like the Francophone school authority has done. They've kept French very vibrant language and a very vibrant culture... I hope people begin to see that what we're trying to do is similar to the goals of the Francophone authority is trying to do with their schooling. They are trying to preserve culture, they are trying to preserve language, they're trying to preserve something that is very precious to them, near and dear to their hearts. I always use the French immersion argument when people say, "Well is this just a school for Aboriginal kids? No! It's a Choice School." I don't think just straight French kids go to French immersion and I know French Immersion accepts anybody they don't look at you and say your last name is not French, you're not French so you're not going to our school. I mean if they did that, that would just be ridiculous and that's a sort of thing that we've been accused of.

I think looking at a school like this it would change a lot of communities. Especially the urban ones. By and large, urban centers are very under resourced for Aboriginal people. Unfortunately a lot of Aboriginal people leave the reserve or their village to come to the urban centers and it's not the land of milk and honey, it's just so far away from what they want you know, it's tragic. I think having a school would cause great change in this province. I have a video of Amiskwaciy and it's wonderful to see kids with what they want to do with their lives, when they talk about what they want to do. I see kids like that here everyday. Do we have the kids here that can be provided with a place where they feel like they belong and where they can be successful? I sure hope so. (Berland

Personal Interview: 8 June 2006)

Paul Michel added to this discussion by explaining:

I guess I see it in so many ways as what I've said already that this by its onset would create positive changes. When you look historically with such initiatives such as the National Indian Brotherhood's 1972 report "Indian Control of Indian Education" now when you're looking back they're two main points that come forward in that report. One, they wanted the Aboriginal students to be proud of who they are, and the other larger goal of that report is they wanted non-Aboriginals to respect Aboriginal students within the public school system. I would say we're still struggling in 2006 to reach those two overwhelming main goals. It is straightforward and practical but we haven't succeeded in that. 1972 was what, 34 years ago? And we're looking at the Prince George School District still trying to achieve that. If I interview all the Aboriginal students within the Prince George School District, are they proud of who they are? And do non-Aboriginals respect who they are?

Now the thoughts are many with that. How do you reflect and respond to that? And I would say that there would be a very loud "no." Both of those have not been achieved in 34 years within the Prince George School District knowing about this report. And the education leaders have not had a strong enough impact. So this initiative is going to encourage and by its pedagogy it will respect the Aboriginals and they will start to believe in themselves, which is very empowering. But because of its inclusiveness... the non-Aboriginals will start to respect how powerful and how dynamic and how innovative Aboriginal pedagogy is. So I think it's not only for the Aboriginal people, but the communities they live in is largely Western people dominating that and I think there's changes within the Aboriginal community and the non Aboriginal community. I see it having a two fold dynamic impact. (Michel Personal Interview: 19 June 2006)

Trish Rosborough noted:

Well I think you know, that we all know that the school system has not served Aboriginal people very well and that there's a very negative history around education. But that just doesn't exist in the past it continues. Although through my work with the Ministry our goal really is that Aboriginal students could be successful in their education without losing their sense of identity. That they wouldn't have to choose one or the other. I still don't think our system meets those needs very well. I really believe an Aboriginal School could be a place where we could learn for the greater system. I think it would have an impact directly on those kids that enroll there and their families and their communities. But the long-term impact I think it could have for the system is probably equally as important because we could start to learn from that kind of setting so it could have long-term positive change. I also think for the non-Aboriginal community to see and witness what could take place in a setting where we offer learning integrated with a sense of who we are as people could create positive change for



others. Seeing positive outcomes, seeing academic success and to witness those things could create change, definitely. (Rosborough Personal Interview: 24 July 2006)

Lastly, Dr. Lorna Williams sees the positive change as the following:

Schools in all of the ways that we've experienced them, the Residential Schools, the federal schools the public schools, universities, colleges. In order for us to be successful in those schools often times what it has meant is that we've had to give up who we are. So the question is, is it possible to create schools where Indigenous children can learn a challenging, demanding, life-giving, soul enriching ways, where they can have choices about how they want to live their lives without giving up their identity. And that's what we were going to strive to do. And that can only be really positive to be able to have access to schools where you celebrate who you are rather than deny and hide and be ashamed of your identity, because that's what many of our children today experience. (Williams Personal Interview: 29 July 2006)

For the final part of this chapter, I provide the interviewees' responses in relation to their experiences with the envisioning of new possibilities for Prince George. I include these responses under the umbrella of the Métis Sash where the interviewees final words tie the colours and their meanings together in a meaningful and poignant way.

### **Métis Sash – The Final Threads**

Ben Berland delivered the following for his final question during the interview process:

I guess just to say that we are working and we're trying our best to move this process forward. We would love to see it - there's no doubt in my mind, our Aboriginal Education Board and I think our district would love to see it. And that's the legacy that I want to leave behind, and I think our Board wants to leave behind. It's funny you know, because I work in this office and I see a lot of people retire and leave a great legacy behind. They really do. But I guess when I look at it through my worldview I think "that's great" but what legacy is left to the Aboriginal community? And you know senior leadership in this district needs to look at that one legacy left for the Aboriginal people. And if they don't understand that question they're really missing the boat... I sound like an old man, but this will be the third Superintendent I have worked under next year. So what legacy is he going to leave? That's the way I look at it... I guess being Aboriginal what legacy am I going to leave for the Aboriginal community when I'm gone? When I look back... did I do all right or could I have done more? I sure hope I can look back at it and go "Okay, I tried my hardest." And I hope that

legacy is a Choice School. That's what I want. (Berland Personal Interview: 8 June 2006)

Paul Michel added this regarding the question:

I would just like to add... it's embracing a pedagogy. That when you're looking at these issues of an Aboriginal school it goes beyond that. I'm actually saying they will improve the quality of education for the Prince George School District for public school right from nursery to the high school because what I would really argue - that many other educators in North America - I will go wide scope to specific, there have been initiatives examining public school systems. And they see its concentration within English and Mathematics, they look at the linguistics and the logical mathematical abilities of the students and our whole system seems to honor those two streams for example, Howard Gardner, within multiple intelligence theory, says really when you look at it over 80 percent, perhaps 90 percent of the whole curricula is rewarding people that are very much, can write really well, or else they have a good scientific mathematical score. This type of initiative, as he would argue it really sort of doesn't value some of the other knowledge such as respect for the environment, or the ability to work with others, or within groups, or external groups, or social abilities, social intelligences. How about the students that are physically and kinesthetically also superior? And how about the ones that are respecting their environment? Or else have a strong sense of spiritual intelligence? There are lots of questions, I really think the school system is in a crisis and this type of initiative will be very successful in integrating. So it has larger implication and this will be the type of school; I mean even in your title "Education Transformation," what's it transforming to? And I really think very clearly this initiative is expanding this reliance on English and mathematics and science to honoring other types of intelligence. For example, I would argue that you bring in the essence of the Aboriginal philosophy and spiritual connections to the land and to the mountains and to the rivers and you're going to connect to orality, and orality is the oral wisdoms... I think we're ready and we're definitely ready to embrace that within the School District. So the only thing I would add is that - it is such a challenge to the current pedagogy. (Michel Personal Interview: 19 June 2006)

Trish Rosborough provided these final words:

Perhaps I'll speak just a little bit more about how I see the system not meeting the needs of our kids very well. There's a number of reasons our system doesn't meet the needs of kids, and some of it is historical, some of it is in the curriculum. The curriculum is all built on western tradition and western thinking and so certainly people, Aboriginal kids are having to leave something at the door when they come in the door to school in order to be successful. So those are changes that would need to take place... I think for the most part people who are educated in Canada (are educated) without having a sense of who Aboriginal people are in Canada, what the foundations of this country are. There's a very

poor awareness of our history, of our traditions, and our territories. Things that are very fundamental to Aboriginal people. So people go through the education system never learning those things and they become the teachers of our children. And I think because of that, we have people who are leading our kids who sometimes have misunderstandings, or have a negative attitude about our children. And our focus group really talked about if we were to do this school and do it right, we needed to have a lot of freedom around hiring the right people. And that doesn't necessarily mean that they would have to be Aboriginal or have Aboriginal ancestry but it would mean we would need people who had a good understanding of who Aboriginal people are. And our kids would not continue to be led by negative attitudes and misunderstandings. And that was one piece – you know I spoke about having to look to the autonomy of the school district to do this - when we moved from the province doing this, and it being school that belonged to the minister, to a school that belonged to the school district, there was a real concern that we would fall under collective agreements and there wouldn't be a choice around who we would hire. That could really change the flavour of the school. It's a difficult thing to speak about... (Rosborough Personal Interview: 27 July 2006)

Dr. Lorna Williams eloquently left me with these closing words:

The only other thing that I would like to say is the fact that the school didn't go, has not developed, has not evolved, is because generally people like to keep us where we are. That's the only conclusion I can draw. (Williams Personal Interview: 29 July 2006)

In the report prepared by Paul Michel, Mavis Erickson and Paul Madak, it is recognized that “the Prince George School District No. 57 wants to make positive changes for First Nations students in the District” (Michel, Erickson & Madak 2005: 6). Through this report, the researchers compiled the following recommendations to School District No. 57:

1. A school with an Aboriginal philosophy in Prince George School District be created.
2. That the Aboriginal Education Board (AEB), school district administrators and Aboriginal parents in Prince George work in collaboration to develop the school philosophy, curriculum and staffing.
3. That the school be firmly grounded in Aboriginal ways, traditions and language.
4. That the school establish high expectations for students in terms of intellectual, social, physical and spiritual growth.

5. That the school provide a wide range of academic and extracurricular programs, and to provide support for community members to teach traditional ways.
6. That the elders be given an integral part in the school teachings.
7. That the school support and promote the hiring of Aboriginal staff including teachers and support staff.
8. That the school be open to any students who want to attend if there is adequate space.
9. That the AEB in collaboration with School District develop, establish and implement a successful management plan.
10. That the school be welcoming and respectful of all who attend.
11. That the Aboriginal Education Board, along with other Prince George School District Administrators and teachers visit two or more of the Aboriginal schools documented in this report.

(Michel, Erickson & Madak 2005: 31)

Although an Aboriginal Choice School has not been established in Prince George, B.C., the interview responses provide support to an analysis of the issues influencing the implementation of an Aboriginal School in our community. The final chapter of this thesis (Chapter Six) represents an analysis of all the issues related to the implementation of an Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George, B.C. and provides my recommendations and conclusion on the topic.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Weaving the Sash Together: Conclusion and Recommendations for Pedagogical Progression - *Bridging the Divide Within a Contemporary Canadian Community***

I feel a profound sense of dissatisfaction working with Aboriginal learners who all face an education system that continues to fail them. One only needs to look at current statistics to realize that Aboriginal students are not prospering at the same rate as non-Aboriginal learners. In writing this thesis, I needed to understand why our community would not embrace an educational opportunity that might benefit the experience of Aboriginal youth in Prince George. I needed to know what, if anything, could be done so that an Aboriginal Choice School could become a reality in our city. For answers I turned to: the history of Aboriginal Education in Canada (Chapter Two); alternative and Aboriginal theoretical models of learning and intellect (Chapter Three); and the experiences of other Province's School Districts with Aboriginal Choice Schools (Chapter Four), and then to a discussion of an Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George, B.C. (in Chapter Five), using the Métis Sash as a framework to categorize my findings and adding cultural meaning to my research.

This conclusion represents how my research provided guidance to create a Sash that represents all that I have learned. There have been many moments during this process where I have questioned my reasons for choosing this topic for my Masters thesis that is current, political and comes with a great deal of controversy. But for me, completing this research was about one thing – finding out why Prince George has not yet succeeded in its endeavors to implement an Aboriginal Choice School; an educational opportunity that could create a learning environment advantageous for Aboriginal youth.

In my use of the Métis Sash, the “red” threads represent history. The “black” threads within the Sash have been created by how the educational experience of Aboriginal people in Canada has been a strategy for assimilation. For me, this is the first major issue that impacts the implementation of an Aboriginal Choice School. As Paulo Friere says, “it is only by unveiling the truth about reality that one can come to a critical understanding of the present and learn what needs to be done for the future” (Friere *in* Nicholas 2001: 10). The effects of Mission Schools and Residential Schools cannot be understated. This was a very dark, “black” period of history in Canada that still affects what is happening to Aboriginal children inside and outside the classrooms today. Elements of this history, such as the Indian Act, permeate the lives of First Nations youth and the racism that exists because of this legislation is something Aboriginal learners face daily. Some of my interviewees noted that neglecting to acknowledge this past is harmful.

However, the Aboriginal Choice Schools in Edmonton and Winnipeg are not environments that facilitate “blame” for what has happened to Aboriginal people historically. Instead, the schools are intended to be an environment that facilitates recognition of the “black” history that belongs to Indigenous cultures. As noted in Chapter Four, Theresa Cardinal explained that Amiskwaciy Academy handles the issue of “blame” as follows:

When you come through that door, your only job here is to go to the classroom and learn, that is your only job. If you come in with problems, yes we will try to help you, but you're not going to blame people or others for whatever difficulties you may encounter. Blaming is one of the things you leave at the door. Because it has not been a positive factor in the development of our Aboriginal people, it's so easy to blame and you have to stop doing that. You have to become more accountable for what you say, and do. (Cardinal Personal Interview: October 27, 2006)

Likewise, Lorne Belmore also explained in Chapter Four:

I see them (Aboriginal Schools) as ways that prepare Aboriginal kids to take over this country, to get over the past but never to forget it. I mean, we don't dwell on Residential Schools. We don't dwell upon the atrocities of the past, we acknowledge them. We make sure that the kids know them. We make sure that they know the rationale as to why the Canadian government did what it did and why they didn't stop the Residential Schools. They went to the Scoop after that, they just continued on... We acknowledge it existed, but we don't dwell on it. I mean it happened and there has to be reparations... And these individuals that we are teaching now may be the ones to get it. So they have to be well versed in what happened in the past, but we don't have a "poor us" attitude. (Belmore Personal Interview: January 15, 2007)

While acknowledging and educating students about the effects of historical catastrophes such as Residential Schools, Aboriginal Choice Schools are helping guide students towards success by integrating Aboriginal tradition and culture.

Bringing forward ideas of new ways of evaluating intellect, learning strategies and Indigenous educational theories are some of the brighter, more positive colours - blue, white and green in the Sash. I turned to scholars such as Howard Gardner, Eber Hampton and Gregory Cajete because they gave credibility to discussing alternative ways of learning in the world in which we live. Their theoretical approaches speak to the importance of the implementation of an Aboriginal Choice School. Until the larger society acknowledges, understands and accepts that Aboriginal people come from a different knowledge structure and worldview, the true integration of Aboriginal students will never be fully realized.

School systems must understand that cultural knowledge is real and valid for Indigenous youth and it is imperative that this becomes embraced. Dr. Leroy Little Bear explains:

If science is a search for reality and if science is a search for knowledge at the leading edges of the humanly knowable, then there are “sciences” other than the Western science of measurement. One of these sciences is Native American science...It is a science that is many centuries old and continues to be the basis of Native American reality. (Little Bear *in* Cajete 2000: x, xii)

Eber Hampton quotes Cheek in “Redefinition of Indian Education”:

If Native nations are to have engineers, managers, business people, natural resource specialists, and all the other experts we need to meet non-Indians on equal terms, then we must have educational leadership that makes mathematics, science and computers accessible [and relevant] to our students. We need to train our educators so that the next generation of students is more comfortable with these tools than the previous generation has been. (Cheek 1984 *in* Hampton 1995: 7)

Incorporating and learning Indigenous knowledge in an Aboriginal Choice School strengthens and validates the existence and culture of Aboriginal people and can assist non-Natives in their ways of understanding as well.

Gregory Cajete says schooling is “necessary for teaching such essential skills as reading, writing and arithmetic, but that once greatly modified, schooling holds much promise as a tool for liberation of Aboriginal people” (Nicholas 2001: 26). This “liberation” can begin within public schools, and particularly in the learning opportunities found at institutions such as Joe Duquette, Children of the Earth, or Amiskwaciy Academy, all of which provide a learning environment that exists outside the Eurocentric school structure - therefore assisting in this liberation process. Adopting an Aboriginal philosophy towards education is innovative and visionary and contributes to forward-thinking initiatives that could better the experience of Aboriginal learners in a public school system today.

Other threads are woven into this Sash with more words of my interview participants. Threads of “red” within the Sash are strengthened by my interviewees’



experiences in establishing Children of the Earth High School and Amiskwaciy Academy. All three communities (including Prince George) share similarities in their history of initial discussion of Aboriginal Choice Schools by involving the Province, Superintendent, Trustees, Educators, community and some people of the local Aboriginal community. Regarding Prince George, Trish Rosborough explained in her interview found in Chapter Five:

So in those early stages through the Ministry we gathered educators and elders and knowledgeable Aboriginal people and we did some focus groups and we started looking at what they thought an Aboriginal School would be, and we began to define the intentions, and to put a proposal forward to government at that time. (Rosborough Personal Interview: 24 July 2006)

Winnipeg and Edmonton also had a strong relationship with a community organization in the initial discussions of creating an Aboriginal Choice School. Winnipeg had initiated a partnership with the Thunder Eagle Society (a local non-profit Aboriginal organization); Edmonton initially had involvement with Edmonton Catholic Schools for a potential partnership, and continues to have a long-standing relationship with many Elders.

In Edmonton, it is very apparent that the Aboriginal communities, and particularly the Elders, were absolutely essential in establishing an Aboriginal institution. As already noted in Chapter Four, Mary Stevens reinforced the issue of Elder inclusion:

So really from the ground up... the elder sessions, when the elders were asked what they wanted to see, because part of the school, even to the name of the school that was an elder's choice actually, a group of elders chose the name and it went right back to the history of Edmonton and the Cree peoples' place in the history of Edmonton because it used to be called Beaver Hills House in Cree. Which I cannot say. But it was shortened to Beaver Hills which is what Amiskwaciy means. (Stevens Personal Interview: October 27, 2006)

The reverence for the founding Elders is profound as one walks into Amiskwaciy Academy; their pictures hang in a prominent place within the front entrance of the

building. Coupled with community and Elder support, Edmonton Public Schools, abiding by their mandate of ensuring “quality and choice” within public education, have given unrelenting support for implementing an Aboriginal Choice School. In Prince George, the inclusion of the Aboriginal Education Board, a local community component of School District No. 57, was important in supporting an Aboriginal Choice School from the beginning discussions.

All three communities, districts and provinces brought this initiative forward because of concern over achievement and opportunity for Aboriginal students. All three communities initiated the idea of an Aboriginal School by having meetings, hearings, focus groups and reports. Winnipeg began with a Task Force that created the Urban Aboriginal Education Council who set up a “Survival School” that turned into the “Aboriginal Choice School.” The idea for a Choice school in Edmonton was the result of an Aboriginal Symposium held in that city. Prince George’s experience brought a wide group of stakeholders together and initially held focus groups.

The Edmonton, Winnipeg and Prince George school districts had to work out budgets, select a location for the school and deal with curriculum development. Paul Michel identified these challenges as: location, funding, and political will (Michel Personal Interview 19 June 2006). It was important to all three communities that there was a strong cultural component to the school and that the local community was involved. Strong academic programming along with cultural inclusion is a necessary part of the school while maintaining the standards and regulations of the School District. During her interview found in Chapter Five, Dr. Lorna Williams explained:

The good thing is - and I know that often times people don't really understand this - the good thing is that the B.C. curriculum is broadly enough stated that you can

look at it and in a sense reinterpret it according to an Indigenous worldview. You have to do a lot more work but it is possible to deliver that curriculum from another worldview. And so that would not have been a problem. The problem would have been that every course would have to be designed that way. And then the teacher is prepared to be able to teach in that way, so there was a lot of work ahead but I couldn't really see a problem. (Williams Personal Interview: 29 July 2006)

Due to the fact that both Winnipeg and Edmonton have established Aboriginal Choice schools, received budgetary approval and found locations indicates they were successful in implementing their vision. Children of the Earth High School and Amiskwaciy Academy draw on the traditions and knowledge of Indigenous people in their pedagogical approach to integrating Aboriginal curriculum. Reflective of some of the educational approaches described in Chapter Three, Winnipeg and Edmonton are “model” learning examples of incorporating Aboriginal history and philosophy by making it a part of the students’ lives everyday in their education.

Nevertheless, although Winnipeg and Edmonton were successful in establishing Aboriginal Choice Schools, there are challenges that each district faced. The colour “black” on my Sash represents the summary of the challenges experienced by each community. All interviewees discussed that the challenges included issues of time, money and space so that an Aboriginal School could begin operation in their community. Most important however, was securing political will for such a unique, “risk taking” educational venture. Undoubtedly, once political will is secured, then the necessary means for going out and educating the community can be realized.

A dominant challenge to establishing an Aboriginal Choice school is the concept that they represent segregation and promote isolation. People from all three communities faced criticism for returning to what was perceived as a “Residential School” style

education rather than promoting inclusion and integration. As noted earlier in the this thesis, in reference to the Prince George experience, Dr. Lorna Williams described:

It was interesting because at the conceptual stage there were actually very few challenges or barriers that I could see. Probably the biggest challenge was the perception by individuals, and this would be at every level, the perception by both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people by government and by non-government. This perception that I'm going to talk about then ran through every group. And that perception was that an Aboriginal focused school would be a segregated school. And that some people were afraid that we were proposing another Residential School model. And that an Aboriginal focused school would not prepare Aboriginal students for life in a modern world. So I would say that the challenge was fear and the challenge really was a hesitation to do something that might be different from what people were doing already. (Williams Personal Interview: 29 July 2006)

Also, as the concept of implementing an Aboriginal Choice School was initiated during a time when schools were being closed due to low enrolment, this became an issue of race and "favouritism." However, as Eber Hampton states, "The nurturing effect of a place for Natives is not an isolating or segregating process, instead it frees people to be themselves and to make their contribution to non-Native society" (Hampton 1995: 40). Although the notion of "segregation" is one that may not be easily overcome, continued education and demonstration of positive results for community will eventually contribute to the dissipation of this concern. Non-native students would also benefit from the practice of an Aboriginal Choice School.

Another of the "black" threads is the issue of funding. In the case of Winnipeg School Division No. 1, the initial partnership that had been established with the Thunder Eagle Society fell through and budgeting above and beyond what any "regular" school would get could not be obtained. This posed serious problems as Children of the Earth includes staff members such as Cultural Advisors and two language programs (rather

than one), which are not normally included. Pauline Clarke noted during her interview found in Chapter Four that:

One of the challenges was funding. We agreed upfront that we would give all the funding that we would normally give to any school to this school. So that they could, right off at the beginning, rely on the money for staff, money for materials, and all the rest of it. What we wanted and what the community had agreed to, was that they would provide funding for all the other things that wouldn't normally be funded. So anything to do with bringing people in to speak on Aboriginal tradition, culture - additional staff to work on community outreach. All those other things that we wanted, they indicated they would bring to the table, the fact is that that never actually happened. So that was a real challenge where we kept thinking and expecting because it was outlined in writing that's what their part of the agreement would be. It didn't work that way. So that's been a bit of a difficulty. (Clarke Personal Interview: January 15, 2007)

Amiskwaciy's funding issues also began when an initial partnership with Edmonton

Catholic Schools fell apart. Gloria Chalmers also explained in Chapter Four:

Well, we had the thought actually of developing a school that would be a joint initiative between Edmonton Catholic and Edmonton Public... We thought that maybe we should try a strategy where we work collaboratively and that might, you know, be effective. So, we did start off on that journey together. We had support from our then Superintendents and we went as far as putting in an ad with both of our logos and doing the interview together to hire the first principal that we hired prior to the year of the school opening so that we had aboriginal leadership in the school development. Then there was a change in personnel at Edmonton Catholic and they decided that they would prefer not to partner with us and we made the decision at that time to go ahead on our own. (Chalmers Personal Interview: October 27, 2006)

But both districts were determined to follow through with implementation, so this budgetary set back was overcome. For Prince George, although there were also issues of funding, Lorna Williams explains in her interview that the Business Plan proved that, like Children of the Earth and Amiskwaciy Academy, there is enough money to follow through with the initiative. Funding was not the sole reason our community has not seen such a development.

Other black threads in the Sash relate to location selection. Children of the Earth had to actually move one school into another to have this Choice School set up. Amiskwaciy Academy, whose founders were determined to have a building they could recreate, had to wait for renovations of the old airport terminal in Edmonton and was initially housed in a small location downtown. I know from the interviews in Prince George and Victoria as well as my own experience, that the issue of location was a prominent one in our community. At the time, there were many schools being closed due to funding cuts and low enrolment and the community reacted negatively to the concept of establishing an Aboriginal School in one of the abandoned schools where it was perceived that Native children would be getting “special” attention.

Other “black” threads relate to the challenges for all communities to deal with curriculum development, staffing, recruiting students, and establishing a reputation focusing on academic excellence and not just an “alternate” program. Trish Rosborough points out that “People were really clear from the beginning that we didn’t want just another alternate program” (Rosborough Personal Interview: 24 July 2006). For instance, ensuring that there would be appropriate language courses being taught that accommodate the Dakelh, Cree, Métis and other ancestral population would be important to consider. Also, it is necessary that all schools honour the autonomy and standards of the local School District/Division while at the same time recognize the diversity of the Aboriginal community in implementing Indigenous philosophy.

The political and community will needed for the establishment of the schools is undoubtedly a paramount challenge. I believe that in Prince George the political and community will were not sufficiently focused. Ben Berland stated in Chapter Five:

Another challenge that we've had to overcome is political will. There's not a great deal of political will right now either at the local level, provincial level, or federal level to have the school. Locally I think our trustees want to see it, I know they've contributed a lot...However they are in a tough position - they're in a tough position where within the last five years we've closed 14 or 15 schools . (Berland Personal Interview: 8 June 2006)

There must be a long-term vision and an element of “risk-taking” to establish these schools and counter misunderstanding. An uneducated perception of what an Indigenous philosophy is proves to be challenging. Also, a major difference between Prince George and Edmonton and Winnipeg is that our School District sits on traditional land that has not been settled through treaty (as it has been long ago in Alberta and Manitoba).

Whether this could be considered to have impacted strong political movement towards an Aboriginal School initiative is unclear, but nevertheless it is an important consideration.

In discussing these challenges all interview participants displayed strong views as to what is needed for an Aboriginal philosophy to be incorporated and what it looks like (or could look) within these Aboriginal Schools within public school systems.

The threads of “blue” and “white” focus on the strengths of the philosophy of Aboriginal Choice Schools. All interviewees realize the importance of the relationship between staff and students, and that honouring a culturally sensitive approach to learning is vital. A holistic and Aboriginal approach to learning comes through as a major objective and I believe this to be profound from the responses I received from the interviews. As Paul Michel described in Chapter Five:

The landscape, I would arguably say it needs to move from a Western ideological stance to bringing in the voices of the Aboriginals. And when you look at that (you need to ask), what is the knowledge, where did the Aboriginal people get their knowledge from? Really what you'll bring forth is orality. You'll bring forth the oral histories... it's orality the oral histories and the oral wisdom and that is a unique way to know and understand the world. You can understand the world through literacy - reading books and textbooks - but you can also learn through

practical oral wisdom too. It is important as an education system to recognize and respect that. (Michel Personal Interview: 19 June 2006)

Having Aboriginal staff and staff that understands and respects Aboriginal culture came through the responses as essential and for this strong leadership is required. Suitable programming and funding are also necessary for an integration of an Aboriginal philosophy so that Aboriginal students are able to nourish their physical, spiritual, emotional and cognitive beings while having high expectations of success.

Interviewees discussed inclusiveness and creating a sense of belonging as being key to their success. The schools have a welcoming environment. One interviewee commented that Aboriginal Choice Schools should look like an Aboriginal school. The aesthetics of Children of the Earth and Amiskwaciy Academy make it very evident that you are walking into an Aboriginal school based on the school's arrangement. Children of the Earth encompasses the structure of the Thunderbird and the colours of the four directions. Amiskwaciy Academy embraces smudging, morning circle and the sweat lodge to provide an empowering environment for students and their families, thus creating and validating Aboriginal knowledge, history, orality and tradition without dwelling on past atrocities. Aboriginal schools can become part of a healing process for students and families. Further, post-secondary transition programs at the school enable students to see their future beyond a secondary classroom.

Curriculum must incorporate diversity, but elements of ceremony and sacredness contribute to the balance between academics and culture without jeopardizing the integrity of either. It became obvious that all participants saw a pragmatic, long-term vision for an Aboriginal Choice School while acknowledging that the schools must be prepared for unpredictability. These schools demonstrate how they can help the students,



and how can they also create positive change for Aboriginal people and their communities. This leads to the final threads of the colour “green” representing the growth and prosperity that can occur.

The participants talked about how Aboriginal Choice Schools are essential in empowering Aboriginal people by offering an educational “choice.” They are an opportunity to have an educational setting where the school system is working towards the preservation and transmission of traditional knowledge while honouring and respecting Aboriginal people and communities for their culture and contributions to society. Parents and families become involved and feel proud of being a part of their child’s education and gain respect for Aboriginal pedagogy and knowledge.

The Aboriginal population attending public schools is growing rapidly and the schools bring benefits to the entire community. As noted in a report recently issued by the Ministry of Advanced Education, there is a “demographic reality that the Aboriginal population is growing at a faster pace than the non-Aboriginal population” (MAVED 2007: 36). Aboriginal Choice Schools, along with increasing self-awareness and self-respect provide an avenue for Aboriginal people to celebrate themselves and become successful role models for other members of the community as students see success within their secondary school experience. This has a long-term impact on community and building strength and empowerment will only make for greater good within the larger society.

My research demonstrates that we need to move beyond the difficult history of past Aboriginal Education while we try to educate young minds that belong to cultures that have for too long been excluded from becoming active participants in the

advancement of their own education. Moreover, it demonstrates that Children of the Earth High School, the Aboriginal Choice School in Winnipeg, and Amiskwaciy Academy, the Aboriginal Choice School in Edmonton, are effective and successful schools that counter the “black” history of Aboriginal education.

So why was Prince George not yet successful in establishing an Aboriginal Choice School? One challenge that faces our school district for the justification of embarking on an infrastructure like an Aboriginal Choice School lies in the fact that our community has a much smaller population than the larger, urban centres of Edmonton and Winnipeg. However, although the city population is much smaller in Prince George, our community does serve a large percentage of Aboriginal students within the district. This makes an Aboriginal Choice School a relevant consideration for our students as School District No. 57 has a similar percentage of an Aboriginal student population to Winnipeg School Division No. 1 (See Figure 5).

Figure 5

	Total # of Students in District/Division	Total # of Aboriginal Students (self-identified)	% Aboriginal students in District/Division
Edmonton Public Schools (May 2007 numbers)	80,263	7,144	9%
Winnipeg School Division No. 1 (2005/06 numbers)	33,863	8,127	24%
Prince George School District No. 57 (May 2007 numbers)	15,930	3,610	23%

(Berland 2007, Chalmers 2007: E-mail, Online May 2007: [www.wsd1.org/board/documents/annualreportfall2006.pdf](http://www.wsd1.org/board/documents/annualreportfall2006.pdf))

In a public school district where 23% of its student population is Aboriginal, offering an educational opportunity of attending an Aboriginal Choice School could be advantageous to improving the success of the Aboriginal students in this district.

Also in this community, although there was involvement on many government and community levels during discussions of such an educational centre, I feel many Aboriginal people within this city felt left out of the process and were therefore misinformed about what constitutes an Aboriginal Choice School. It is essential that the Prince George School District hold multiple focus groups and community consultations to ensure that Aboriginal people feel as though they are an inherent, essential element of this development. This may mean that these focus groups be brought to the local First Nations communities and/or to locations where attendance to such a meeting is accessible. With greater support from the Aboriginal community, Aboriginal Education leaders in Prince George and Victoria could be given more of an opportunity to evaluate the advantages of having an Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George.

Ultimately, it is my belief that even though Prince George has been privileged to have some of the most important Aboriginal Educational leaders within this Province involved in the initial discussions of establishing an Aboriginal Choice School, misconceptions within the community, and the lack of political will by the province eventually resulted in the failed attempt to have an Aboriginal School in the Prince George Public School District. As Michel, Ericksen and Madak note, “The Prince George Aboriginal Education Board and the School District Trustees have supported the [Aboriginal Choice School] concept in principle. However, after an extended discussion,

the Aboriginal Choice School proposal did not receive Provincial budget approval” (Michel, Erickson and Madak 2005: 4-5). Not having this budgetary approval was indeed the biggest hindrance to its implementation. Therefore the plan to have Prince George as one of the first communities in the Province to follow in the footsteps of schools like Children of the Earth and Amiskwaciy Academy, faded away.

However, my research shows that there are still prominent people within the Province that would like to the idea of having an Aboriginal Choice School revisited. With this, it is important to note that neither Children of the Earth or Amiskwaciy Academy happened overnight. In fact, the period of time to make them a reality is longer than time period an Aboriginal Choice School has been discussed in Prince George. Mary Stevens commented on the issue of time during her interview found in Chapter Four in regards to Amiskwaciy Academy, which has only been in operation since 2000. She states:

You really have to have a long vision, and really have to have a high level of commitment and I don’t want to say a “take no prisoners” attitude, but you know, like we’re not going to give up! You’ve got to make sure everybody has their script in a way, what is our vision? Why is this so important? How do we think we can make it happen? What’s going to be the payoff? And it’s in that piece that’s going to take time... I don’t think I’ve seen any Aboriginal school in the country be able to go from here to here in one or three years, it can take up to ten years for that to happen. Just because everything is so complex in order for there to be success. Success builds success. But again just that determination has to be there, yes there’s going to be some lows along the way here, but that doesn’t mean we give up. (Stevens Personal Interview: October 27, 2006)

Pauline Clarke and Lorne Belmore prove that such an initiative will go through growing pains as they have done for the last sixteen years. Mr. Belmore’s comments in Chapter Four explain that:

When I came to Children of the Earth High School, five years ago, a lot of the programming was thought out, the groundwork was laid, however issues, in terms

of enrollment numbers, and I perceived what the job had to be for me was to get our enrollment numbers up and further develop existing programs and to implement new programs to further the cause of preparing future leaders to take the schools' mandate and to actually put it into a form that benefited both the students in terms of their cultural and spiritual identities and their future roles as productive citizens of our country. (Belmore Personal Interview: January 15, 2007)

The notions of such a venture being an immediate reality in our community may be idealistic, but I believe whole-heartedly that we have members of our community who are dedicated to improving the quality of education for Aboriginal students and the challenge of time and dedication can be met in order to see an Aboriginal Choice School become established in Prince George and offer the following recommendations to make it possible.

Recommendations to facilitate the implementation of an Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George:

- 1. Because the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community of Prince George were hesitant in establishing an Aboriginal Choice School, further education as to what an Aboriginal Choice School is and the benefits it could offer to the community needs to be provided. This could be accomplished through the establishment of focus groups, providing parents as well as the larger community with information sheets about what an Aboriginal Choice School is, and also by inviting the community to participate in the process of visioning and creating greater opportunity for the youth.**
- 2. Since Children of the Earth High School and Amiskwaciy Academy were initially going to be developed on the grounds of partnerships, although these partnerships were unsuccessful, working on establishing such partnerships may be crucial in bringing forth community awareness and collaboration. Finding one or more Prince George community partners like Prince George Nechako Aboriginal Employment & Training Association (PGNAETA), the Prince George Native Friendship Centre, or the Métis Nation of Prince George and/or the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council and/or Carrier Sekani Family Services may facilitate growth and understanding in regards to establishing an Aboriginal Choice School.**
- 3. I recommend going to the Aboriginal community and talking to them and making them involved at every level of development so that this becomes**

**their school with the assurance of honouring the diversity and cultural differences within the community of Prince George.**

- 4. Include Aboriginal parents, students and the pool of skilled and knowledgeable academics we have right here in our community so their opinions and expertise can be utilized.**
- 5. My research found that there have been key Aboriginal stakeholders already influential in the promotion of an Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George (the Government, School District, Prince George community members and educators). For the implementation of this school to be successful, strategic planning for the establishment of an Aboriginal Choice School Committee with representatives from all sectors in the community needs to occur to develop the political will in order for a Choice School to be realized. Such a committee could carry forward with the work that has already been done for the establishment of an Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George and develop a communications strategy for all stake holders and community members.**
- 6. I recommend having a school that includes both elementary and secondary Aboriginal Choice education. Not only would this address issues concerning Aboriginal student population, but it would be a positive continuation of the successful Aboriginal Headstart programs already being offered in Prince George.**
- 7. Reinforce that this is a school of “choice” and is not exclusively for Aboriginal students. Rather, this school should be promoted on the grounds of being visionary, innovative and a positive element of providing quality and choice to all students within School District No. 57.**

A proposed “OPTIONS” project developed in partnership with the Prince George Urban Aboriginal Justice Society and School District No. 57 is an example where the school district will “use a culturally relevant alternative dispute resolution model to assist with disputes involving Aboriginal students at school” (Miller & Jamieson 2007: 2). The OPTIONS project “demonstrates to Aboriginal students that School District #57 values and respects Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal students” (Miller & Jamieson 2007: 3). An Aboriginal Choice school would be a major extension of an initiative like the

OPTIONS project and is a positive, forward thinking consideration for improving the quality of education of all students, especially those of Aboriginal ancestry.

In the recent “Campus 2020: Thinking Ahead” report issued by the BC Ministry of Advanced Education it is noted that “Aboriginal students, just like any other students, deserve to have a choice of educational opportunities” (BC Ministry of Advanced Education 2007: 39). The report says, “We will not achieve our goals of post-secondary education in BC until Aboriginal people have the same levels of educational achievement as other British Columbians. The Aboriginal education gap that exists today is evidence of a long history of policy failure” (BC Ministry of Advanced Education 2007: 36). Indigenous students walk into schools where they are bombarded with the remnants of colonization that continuously seep through the walls of institutions that are trying to educate people who still struggle against attempts of assimilation. I believe that Aboriginal students deserve a chance, a change, and an opportunity for quality education within contemporary society that offers choices. An Aboriginal Choice School in Prince George is but one of many steps that could be taken immediately to better the experience and success of Indigenous youth in our community.

The Aboriginal Choice Schools in Winnipeg and Edmonton demonstrate the value of Choice schools and such schools weave together the threads of a strong Métis Sash. The difficult history represented by the colour Black on the Sash is overcome by the strength of Indigenous knowledge that has survived since time immemorial, represented by the colour Red. Blue and White embody the philosophy of Aboriginal knowledge and Green stands for the growth and prosperity that occurs when embracing Aboriginal culture. Because Prince George combines Aboriginal people whose origins are 40%

Cree/Métis, 40% Dakeh/Carrier and 20% other First Nations, the Métis Sash serves as a model for bringing the strengths of the legacy together to carry Aboriginal Education forward.<sup>15</sup> The future will see how the Aboriginal Choice School and OPTIONS programs are implemented.

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<sup>15</sup> Aboriginal student origin statistics provided by my Supervisor, Dr. Antonia Mills.



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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

1. Where are you currently employed and how long have you been working here?
2. What role have you played in developing an Aboriginal School?
3. What challenges have you encountered in the development of such a school?
4. How do you see Aboriginal Schools creating positive change for Aboriginal people and their communities?
5. What factors do you consider to be integral in providing an environment where Aboriginal learners are delivered an education immersed in Aboriginal Philosophy?
6. How is an Aboriginal School reflective of this?
7. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me that I have not asked in the previous questions?

## Appendix B

### "Education Transformation: Issues for Implementing an Aboriginal School in Prince George, B.C." Informed Consent Form

Do you understand that you have been asked to participate in research for the purpose of a Masters Thesis? Yes No

Have you read and received an information sheet about the Thesis? Yes No

Do you understand these interviews will be recorded? Yes No

Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in participating in this study? Yes No

Have you had opportunity to ask questions about or discuss the research? Yes No

Do you understand that you are free to remove yourself from the interview and the information collected during the said interview at any point in time? Neither reason nor cause is needed for the to be removed. Have you been made aware of this? Yes No

Has the issue of anonymity been discussed with you in regards to this research? Yes No

Do you want your name to be used? Yes No

Do you want a made-up name to be used? Yes No

This Study has been explained to me by Rheanna Robinson, Graduate Student, University of Northern British Columbia

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature of Research Participant*

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to take part in this study:

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature of Research Participant*

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Print Name of Research Participant*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature of Witness*

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Print Name of Witness*

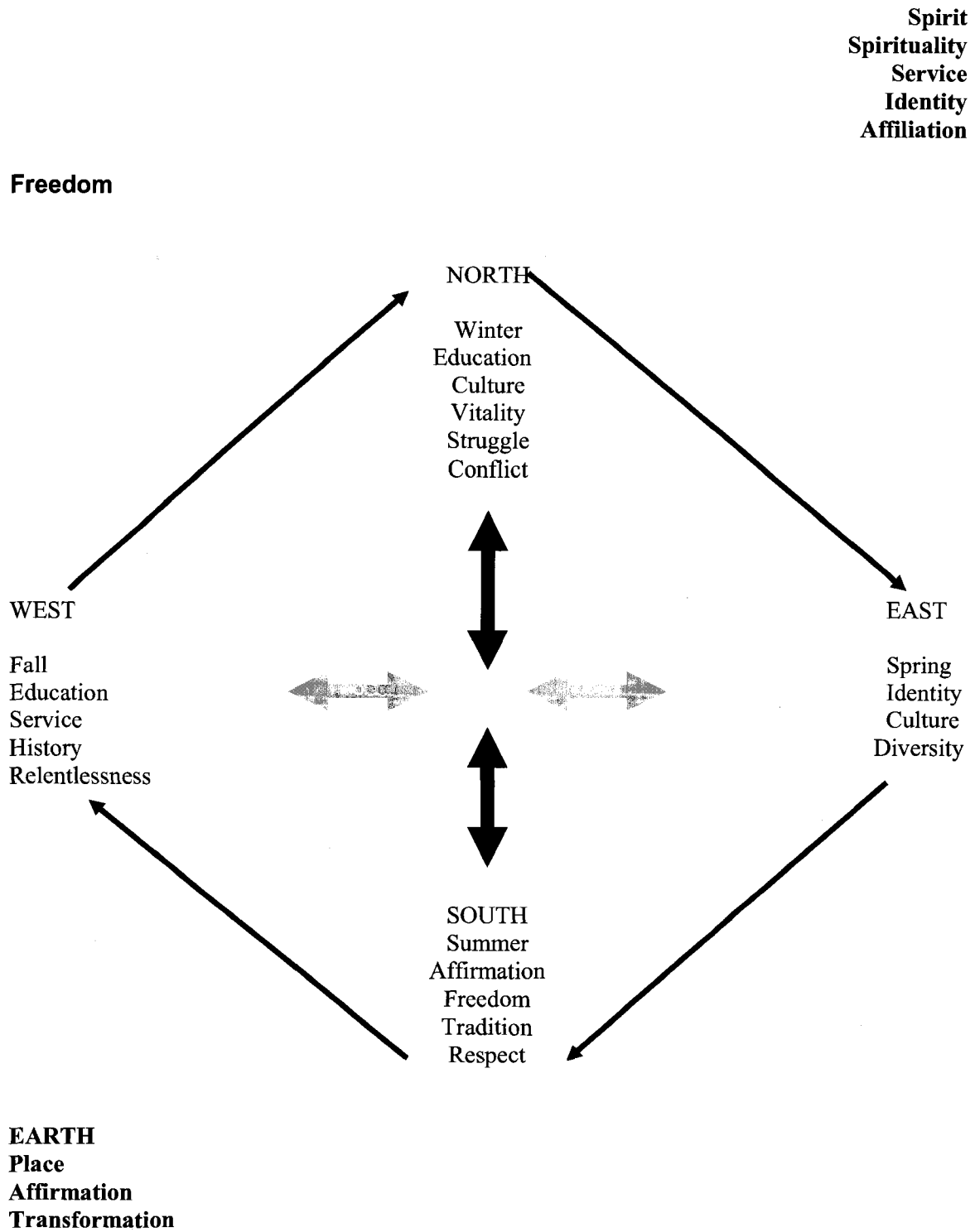
I believe that the person signing this form understands the study and research project I am completing for my Masters Degree in First Nations Studies at the University of Northern British Columbia. They have been provided with all the information, and all there concerns and questions haven been addressed in relation to their voluntary participation in the research project I am conducting.

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature of Researcher*

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### The Six Directions



Hampton 1995: 17