

PARENTAL INCLUSION PLAN FOR ABORIGINAL PARENTS:

CHANGES IN PARENTS' FEELINGS

by

K. Atkinson

B.A., University of Western Ontario, 1974

M.L.S., University of Western Ontario, 1975

Dip. Ed., Simon Fraser University, 1991

PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF EDUCATION

© Kelly Atkinson, 2002

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

July, 2002

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

**UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN
BRITISH COLUMBIA
LIBRARY
Prince George, BC;**

Abstract

The failure of schools to adequately address academic difficulties experienced by First Nation's students is troublesome. Part of the philosophy in the Aboriginal Education Department of the School District in which I work is parental involvement as a factor in improving school performance. In this study, I interviewed three members of a group of Aboriginal parents who meet monthly at the school. I describe and analyze their feelings about school experiences. These parents are the focus of a plan to improve school performance of Aboriginal students. Support for the group comes from the Aboriginal Education Department and the school. Parents were queried about their experiences and feelings as children, as adults before and after attending meetings, and their predictions for the future. I found that parents' feelings about the school had become more positive. This optimism stems from a belief that the staff of the school cares about their children.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Chapter 1	Introduction 1
	General Problem Statement 1
	Purpose of the Study 4
Chapter 2	Review of the Literature 6
	Historical Perspective 6
	Culture 7
	Involvement in Decision-Making 9
	Support of Learning 10
	Solutions 10
	Significance of Proposed Study 12
Chapter 3	Design and Methodology 14
	Site and Social Network Selection 14
	Research Role 14
	Purposeful Sampling Strategies 15

	Data Collection Strategies	17
Chapter 4	Findings and Interpretations	23
	Inductive Data Analysis	23
	Personal Experiences	23
	Children's Experiences at School	26
	Parent Feelings About Children's Experiences	29
	Reasons for Attending Gatherings	29
	Feelings About the Gatherings	30
	Feelings About the Future	32
	Interpretations	33
Chapter 5	Conclusions	36
	The Research Question	36
	Implications for the Future	38
	Implications for Further Research	39
Bibliography		41
Appendix A	Interview Guidelines and Questions	44
Appendix B	Sample Case Study Narrative	49
Appendix C	Letter of Informed Consent	54

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Colin Chasteauneuf and Dr. Paul Madak for their patience and guidance throughout the process of identifying, shaping and writing this proposal. I thank Keith Spencer for his inspiration. I also thank family, friends, and cohort students. My family for enduring it, my best friend Pat Colbourne for helping build it, and friends and fellow students for making it tolerable.

I send my best wishes to the parents and staff involved in the *Gatherings*. What a remarkable experience!

Introduction

General Problem Statement

Academic success is not guaranteed for any student. Students from many minority groups struggle with academic subjects to a greater extent than the dominant society group. Students of First Nationsⁱ ancestry, in numbers disproportionate to the general population, have very low academic skills and fail to thrive in public schools. This general statement holds true for the small urban school district in northern British Columbia in which I work.

The British Columbia Ministry of Education's (hereafter, Ministry of Education) (2001) statistics for the year 2000 for the district in which this study took place show that Aboriginal students are five times more likely to be referred for severe behaviour disorders. Eight percent of Aboriginal students are identified with severe learning disabilities, compared to three percent of the rest of the student population. Aboriginal students scored consistently lower on every Foundation Skills Assessment at every grade. Only 20% of the Aboriginal students (male and female) who entered Grade nine in 1996 graduated from high school in 2001 and this figure has dropped every year for three years, from almost 40% graduating in 1997. Ten percent of Aboriginal students in the district dropped out after grade 8; this is twice the number for non-Aboriginal students. These statistics, which are based on a small sample and subject to distortion, are slightly more pronounced for this city than for the province (Ministry of Education, 2001). In Canada, fifty percent of persons of First Nations ancestry in Canada fail to reach Grade 12 (Assembly of First Nations, 1991, cited in Friedel, 1999).

The principal and teaching staff of the school subject to this study are frustrated by the school's inability to meet the needs and understand the attitudes of the Aboriginal

students and their parents. The failure of the school staff to address both the needs and the attitudes of the Aboriginal students leads to sporadic attendance, tardiness and frequent transfers.

Not all parents in the general population provide support to their children at home and at school, but parents of Aboriginal children seem to school staff to be especially remote from the school environment. Hookimaw-Witt (2000) says, "All the Elders I interviewed agreed that the education presently offered to our children is part of the problem in our communities" (p. 164). She states that the present education system is destructive and damages Native youth. Aboriginal parents, even if they hope for a positive outcome for their children, are perhaps not willing to support a school system which they perceive does not meet the needs of their children. "The majority of Aboriginal youth do not complete high school. They leave the school system without the requisite skills for employment, and without the language and cultural knowledge of their people." (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 434). The Sullivan report (Ministry of Education, 1989) acknowledged that: (a) First Nations parents wish to see their culture reflected in their children's curriculum, (b) they wish to have a significant role in making decisions about their children's education, and (c) they wish to see their children have a good quality of life. Research has demonstrated that parental inclusion is considered important for student success. According to Kaplan (1996, cited in Ruttan, 2000), "currently educators note the increasing focus of parents in ensuring their children are prepared ... for success in today's competitive labour markets" (p. 84). Friedel (1999) has noted there exists a positive relationship between parental involvement and student achievement (p. 139). Students whose parents are involved in the school have higher grades, better attendance, complete

more homework, feel more positive about school, and graduate at higher rates (Henderson & Berla, 1994, cited in Friedel, 1999).

Hookimaw-Witt (2000), in assessing changes to Aboriginal education since the time of the residential schools, indicates that the only change is that children are not removed from the home. Education has improved neither the standard of living nor the well being of Natives. Hookimaw-Witt goes on to say that western education duplicates western society. Because the education system does not acknowledge the fundamental principles of Native societies, it has had a severely negative effect on them. She cites the foundation document of Indian Education, *Indian Control of Education* (hereafter, ICIE):

In the past, it has been the Indian student who was asked to integrate: to give up his identity, to adopt new values and a new way of life Non-Indians must be ready to recognize the value of another way of life: to learn about Indian history, customs and language; and to modify, if necessary, some of their own ideas and practices. (ICIE, cited in Hookimaw-Witt, 2000, p. 165)

The promotion and acceptance of an alternative life view, that is, the Native way, is essential for an Aboriginal child. "Unless the child learns the forces that shape him: the history of his people, their values and customs, their language, he will never really know himself or his potential as a human being" (ICIE, cited in Hookimaw-Witt, 2000, p. 162).

Partly because of the increasing support in the literature for parental involvement, parental inclusion is part of the framework of goals for the district Aboriginal Education Council. The decision was made at the school as well to encourage parent involvement as one approach to an improved learning environment for Aboriginal students. Presently, staff and parents each see each other as a large part of the problem. In response to the school's

failure to develop a program of inclusion, a project has been in place at this school since September 2001, to encourage Aboriginal parents to become both familiar with and involved with the school. The project consists of monthly meetings, called *Gatherings*, which were intended, at the outset, to be social and informative in nature. Several months into the project, discussion topics became parent driven and there are examples of proactive decisions emerging from the group. For example, in order to include working parents and families, the group chose a potluck dinner for one monthly meeting instead of the usual Gathering after school. In addition, the group has received a new transition plan for First Nations students from the neighbouring high school, and the parents have been asked to respond to the plan, communicating their response to the high school principal and counselors. As well, in the fall, the group intends to offer a Mother Goose programme for children ages birth to five years.

This focus on parental inclusion is in addition to two other specific First Nations programmes in the school. There is an instruction-based programme--First Nations Early Literacy Intervention--which has existed for two and one half years. There are also social programmes administered by the First Nations Youth Care Worker and the First Nations Support Worker. These social supports have been in place for many years.

Purpose of the Study

" A large percentage of Aboriginal youth aged 15 to 24 years who left school, 98.5 per cent did not have a diploma." (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 455). First Nations children do not succeed in school. Parental influence is considered a significant factor in school success. The First Nations parents deal not only with academic skills for their children, but also with the relevancy of the education system to their worldview as

persons of Aboriginal, rather than European, descent. They are not from the conquering race, but from among the conquered (Ogbu, 1991). The parents at this school do not, at this time, have a political voice to correct the state of Aboriginal education. In order for families to survive there needs to be a will to survive as a people. This will needs to manifest itself as a plan, a movement and the willingness on the part of Aboriginal parents to help find a solution through mutual support and self-determination. Although the Gatherings have been held from the beginning of the school year, it has not been determined if they have been effective in meeting their objective; that is, to help change parents' attitudes toward the school. The purpose of this study is to understand the effect that the intervention, chosen and designed by interested staff on the Aboriginal Education Committee, has had on Aboriginal parents' feelings about the school.

Review of the Literature

Historical Perspective

Ida Wasacace, Director (in 1980) of the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, suggested that Aboriginal students have learned what she calls "the three F's: Fear, Frustration and Failure" (ICIE, 1980, p. 32). She explains each of the Fs as follows: "fear because we can't compete and be as good as somebody else, frustration, because we do not know how to deal with that system, and as a result we are failures. Yes we are. We have failed ninety-five percent in that system" (p. 32). It is from this perspective that many of the parents involved in the Gatherings approach the educational system in which their children participate.

The British Columbia Report of the Royal Commission on Education (1988) stated: "Using any typical evaluative criteria, it is apparent the province has not achieved its enunciated goal of parity for Native children within the public schools" (p.205). A three-part solution is outlined in the document. The commission recognizes the legitimate desires of First Nations people to reclaim elements of the endangered heritage, to be significantly involved in educational decision-making and to assist their children in fulfilling their parents' dreams that they live productively and with pride, and dignity. The *endangered heritage* is the loss of Native identity both through attrition of their way of life and greater inclusion in white society--the loss of culture. The *parents' involvement in decision-making* allows elements of the Native way of life to filter into the school experience of Aboriginal students. Students will have a chance to *lead productive, dignified lives* only if in their educational needs are met through their schooling.

These three elements--culture, involvement in decision-making, and support of children's learning--are common themes in the literature for Aboriginal parental inclusion.

Culture

Aboriginal students are what Ogbu (1991) calls an "involuntary minority". They are caught up in the "tensions between their understanding of culture implicit within their families and communities, and the dominant culture, which is exemplified within the schools and other institutions" (Wilson, 1994, p. 4). Aboriginal parents "wrestle with the appropriate role of traditional aboriginal knowledge and cultural identity in public education" (Ruttan, 2000, p. 83).

Zimiga (1981) describes three prevalent philosophies about Aboriginal education: (a) traditionalists, (b) progressives, and (c) moderates. Traditionalists often use inflammatory rhetoric and see education as being a war designed to destroy Native Indian culture, that Native students are asked to accept a "foreign education" and that the education of Native children "stops at age 5" (ICIE, 1980, p. 32). The public education system does not, for the most part, accommodate Native history, Native philosophy, or the Native way of being. Aboriginal students must adapt or be lost. Since the statistics show they are lost in large numbers, one solution would be to withdraw into the Native community.

Conversely, progressives "usually ... believe in total assimilation into the dominant society, ... they would replace their ... heritage with that of the dominant society's beliefs" (Zimiga, 1981, p. 78). According to Zimiga "they do accept the fact that they are Indians" (p. 78), but they reject the notion that the racial and cultural differences are significant in education.

The moderates' approach is to accept white dominance in the marketplace and work toward skills to cope in that world while still honouring Native roots. Advocates espouse "bicultural education" (ICIE, 1980, p. 35), and work for acceptance not assimilation, for children to "acquire traditional knowledge ... and to survive in today's society" (Wilson, 1994, p. 11). Hookimaw-Witt (2000) describes this as learning "western skills ... on the basis of the Native perspective" (p. 162).

According to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights Agenda Item 14, Discrimination against Indigenous Peoples, "Indigenous children have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State. All indigenous peoples also have this right and the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. Indigenous children living outside their communities have the right to be provided access to education in their own culture and language. States shall take effective measures to provide appropriate resources for these purposes." (Part IV, Article 15) Whether it is a band operated school on a reserve or a public school with an Aboriginal presence, culturally relevant curriculum that acknowledges Aboriginal heritage helps to promote well being in Aboriginal students. Western curriculum and its underlying assumptions and teaching methods "have typically negated the knowledge of aboriginal peoples and of its importance" (Ruttan, 2000, p. 84). A large number of parents who went through residential or public schools have lost touch with their heritage. Residential schools were a "colonizing educational experience...aimed primarily at assimilation not empowerment" (Ruttan, 2000, p. 84). Disassociated from their homes and communities these adults, as youth, neither learned by experience nor developed any sense that being Native was a source of pride.

Involvement in Decision-Making

Parents have a right to be involved, and are important allies in school based initiatives, in determining school priorities and in planning. Recent provincial legislation decrees that parents will have a greater role in school planning and decision-making.

Under the amended legislation, school planning councils ... made up of three parents, one teacher and the school principal (will) ... develop an annual plan for their school that includes goals and outcomes for improvement. School boards will use these plans to draw up annual accountability contracts that identify district strengths and challenges, and outline strategies to improve performance. (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 30)

First Nations parents may not appear to be as proactive as other parents, and may not hold a large number of seats on these school-planning councils. However, the majority of First Nations parent groups, regardless of their educational environment and lack of success, remain optimistic and desirous of being involved in important educational decisions (Zimiga, 1981; Friedel, 1999). They are also a valuable resource to staff for information on their child (Renihan & Renihan, 1991, cited in Indian and Metis Education, 1993). Peterson (1989) believes that parental involvement is a mutually beneficial relationship for family and school because "children feel that these two institutions--by far the most important in their lives--overlap and are integrated" (para. 5). In addition, "parents who help their children succeed academically gain a sense of pride in their children and themselves" (Peterson, 1989, para. 5). This integration is especially important for Aboriginal children who suffer from a culture gap.

Support of Learning

Parent participation benefits both parents and students. According to Butterfield and Pepper (1991, cited in Leveque, 1994), parent participation improves parent "attitudes and behavior, as well as student achievement, attendance, motivation, self-esteem, and behavior" (p. 1). There are several barriers to Aboriginal parents taking a proactive role with the school in their children's education. The failure of their schooling often led parents to leave school before completing Grade 12. This results in deference to the authority of the teacher or the school and a perceived and real lack of welcoming environment at the school (Poonwassie, 2001).

First Nations parents' encouragement to their children to do well at school is a contradictory message when children see their parents' "low-level jobs, underemployment and unemployment" (Ogbu, 1991, p. 24). The model of a productive, dignified lifestyle (Ministry of Education, 1989) gained by quality education and plentiful career options does not exist in large numbers for First Nations students.

Solutions

There exist schools with successful First Nations parent involvement. The model schools "that were most successful in building trust and understanding provided many formal and informal opportunities for educators, parents, and community members to learn about and respect each other's culture and build understanding" (Wilson, 1994, p. 29). To make parent involvement successful there must be a welcoming climate, a sense of mutual respect and a common cause (Saskatchewan School Trustees Association, 1993). As the parent group becomes more effective, its members move along a continuum from detached observer to guest to member of a team to autonomous control (Indian and Metis Education, 1993). Kirkness

(1994) recommends patience as it will take many years to see the fruits of any changes but she also transmits a sense of urgency to make a start on this important task.

The school-based Aboriginal Education committee that organizes the Gatherings includes three elements at each Gathering: (a) social breaking of bread, (b) giveaways, and (c) parent-led topics and discussions. Aboriginal members (professionals, para-professionals and parents) of the Aboriginal Education Committee of the school are an invaluable resource to guide planning for each Gathering. The goal is to improve understanding between staff and First Nations parents. The two groups are not cohesive in their approach to educating the First Nations child. The Gatherings are in place to encourage parents to become familiar with and involved with the school because parental inclusion is seen to be helpful for school success.

Based on my experience and the literature, several questions emerge around measuring the effectiveness of the Gatherings. How do Aboriginal parents feel about school, how do they feel about their children's experiences at school, and how do they perceive the school after sustained contact in the Gatherings? Have their feelings changed? In what way have the meetings affected their attitudes toward the school system? In what way have the meetings affected their feelings about the future of their children in the school system? To perform a "progress check for program staff and planners" (Henerson et al., Morris, and Fitz-Gibbon, 1978, p. 10) on the effectiveness of the Gatherings, I asked the respondents about their past feelings about their own schooling. For comparison, I also asked about present and future feelings about school. I wanted to see if their attitudes had changed about the school, and in what way, since their involvement in the Gatherings.

Significance of Proposed Study

The two staff members who are most focused on First Nations issues are the Principal of Aboriginal Education for the district and the First Nations Support Worker assigned to the school. Their decision, supported by the School District Aboriginal Education framework, was to work on inclusion of Aboriginal parents.

There are four reasons for this approach. First, parental involvement is considered key to success at school (Renihan & Renihan; Henderson & Berla, 1994 in Friedel, 1999). Second, First Nations culture is an uncomfortable fit with the structure of school (Ruttan, 2000; Friedel, 1999; ICIE, 1980). Third, school is seen as part of the system of repression by the whites. School and school personnel rank with the social workers and police as invasive and threatening (C. Anderson, First Nations Support Worker, personal communication, June 2001). Fourth, because Aboriginal parents do not value a system which does not address their children's needs, they seem to lend little support to their children's education (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991, in Friedel, 1999; Ruttan, 2000).

There are several supportive factors in place. The recently approved accreditation document for the school has a First Nations stream that runs parallel to, but separate from, the rest of the student body. The focus is on language and math skills. There is both an obligation on the part of the school and targeted funding to address First Nations issues.

Other positive factors include district, school staff and parental support. There is concrete assistance available from the Aboriginal Education Department of the School District in terms of skills and budget money. The concept of parental inclusion is one of the department's stated goals for the district. Staff at the school are proactive, solution oriented and collegial. A day of school-based professional development has been designated to begin

addressing this issue. Other parent groups in the school, at the end of the last school year, made a commitment to increasing the number of parents involved in the school and on the Parent Advisory Council in the next year. These supportive factors may assist in finding solutions gleaned from the Gatherings.

Design and Methodology

Site and Social Network Selection

The children of the parents involved in the Gatherings attend the largest elementary school in the district. There are 350 students in this inner city school in a northern British Columbia community. Twenty percent of the school population is comprised of First Nations students. There is a large staff of support workers in addition to classroom teachers. At least five support workers work on site every day. A First Nations Support Worker ministers to many students' health, behavioural and educational issues. The First Nations Youth Care Worker visits the school several times a week.

The school-based Aboriginal Education Committee meets monthly to plan Gatherings for parents, foster parents and other family members of First Nations students. After the initial meeting in June 2001, topics for discussion have been selected by parent interest. The committee includes: the district's Aboriginal Education Department Principal, the school Principal, the First Nations Support Worker, the First Nations district literacy teacher, learning assistance teachers, the researcher and the First Nations Child Care Worker. As well, three months after the first of the Gatherings, two First Nations parents became members of this committee. An average of 12 parents has attended each Gathering.

Research Role

Although I am a staff member of the school, the researcher role was participant-observer. Although not obligatory, my position in the school made it likely for me to be involved in such a school-wide initiative. As the teacher-librarian, I serve all students and staff in the school. I am non-Native and function as a secretary to the group taking notes, reminding members of meetings, and assisting at the Gatherings. I identified the nature of

my interest in the Gatherings to staff members and attendees at the Gatherings, explaining to them that my involvement is in part for a project for a Master of Education programme.

I fit the profile of a good researcher to do this qualitative study. As Taylor and Bogdan (1997) indicate, a good qualitative researcher has three qualities. First, the researcher is caught between two cultures; I am not a member of the Aboriginal culture nor do I work in an Aboriginal education setting exclusively. I am aware, however, of the problems that First Nations students experience. Secondly, the researcher can relate to others on their own terms; I see these parents as caring, optimistic people struggling with educational disadvantages both inherent in their children and in the school organization. I have experienced similar issues with my own child. Thirdly, they have a passion for what they do; I am passionate about First Nations educational issues.

Taylor and Bogdan (1997) quote several studies indicating that qualitative research is never "values free" (Becker, 1966-1967; Gouldner, 1968, 1970; and Mills, 1959, cited in Taylor & Bogdan, 1997, p. 260). For this reason, if we present the point of view of the disadvantaged, "we provide a balance to official versions of reality" (Becker, 1966-1967, cited in Taylor & Bogdan, p. 260). Statistics tell us there is a problem with First Nations educational attainment levels. I choose to give Aboriginal parents a voice to speak to the problem. Becker (1966-67, cited in Taylor & Bogdan, 1990) and a current philosophy of "activism" described in Taylor and Bogdan (1990), indicate that it is acceptable to be an *advocate* for the respondents and their issues.

Purposeful Sampling Strategies

The target group was easily identifiable as Aboriginal parents who have been contacted by the First Nations Support Worker of the school and encouraged to attend the

Gatherings. The procedure in the school is that all First Nations students are identified for and met by the First Nations Support Worker. The First Nations Support Worker contacted the parents to introduce herself and explain her function in the school. Before the first school reporting period, invitations were issued for a First Nations parents' evening get together for This first informal report was also an invitation for all parents to visit the school and speak to teachers. By the end of September, at least three contacts had been made with First Nations parents. The Gatherings have occurred monthly since September.

For this research project, the school-based First Nations Support Worker approached potential respondents in the school about their willingness to be interviewed. The profile for a suitable respondent was a birth or step-parent of First Nations' heritage who had attended several Gatherings. Those who were willing to be interviewed were referred to the researcher.

Interviews were conducted with a "homogeneous sample" of three parents to query them about a "major program evaluation"; that is, how the Gatherings may have affected their feelings about the school (Patton, 1987, p. 54). There was an element of "criterion sampling" since all respondents were required to be both a parent and of Aboriginal descent (Patton, 1987, p. 54). The sample size of three was "large enough to be credible ... and small enough to permit adequate depth and detail for each case" (Patton, 1987, p. 58). Since interviews are time consuming, "selecting a small sample of the total group ... and interviewing only those representative few" (Henerson et al., 1978, p. 27) is appropriate. Each interview provided an "information-rich" case (Patton, 1987, p. 52) in terms of their experiences as Aboriginal parents of school aged children who may or may not be at risk.

Data Collection Strategies

To collect data I decided to use interviews. Henerson et al. (1978) indicate that the choice of an interview in this situation is preferred over traditional forms of data collection, such as a questionnaire, for the following reasons: (a) non-readers will better understand the questions, (b) the response rate is better than mailing out a survey, (c) the interviewer controls the sequence of questions so respondents cannot jump ahead, (d) the interviewer is able to clarify the questions and (e) the interviewer can interpret emotion and strength of feeling of specific responses. In addition, persons of First Nations ancestry are traditionally an oral culture.

I used single interviews rather than a focus group because in a focus group, "the goal is to let people spark off one another" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, cited in Taylor & Bogdan, 1997, p. 114). My goal was to explore personal experiences and feelings unencumbered by influences from other individuals. My choice of an interview study is a good first step for evaluating a programme. This was a formative evaluation, which allows less formal measurement of attitude (Henerson et al., 1978).

The target audience for the information from the interviews is "program staff and planners" (Henerson et al., 1978, p. 10); that is, school and district staff and parent volunteers who are the steering committee for the First Nations Parent Gatherings. This group, "because they are working with the programme themselves, will not demand high instrument validity and reliability" (Henerson et al., 1978, p. 10). The interviews are what Henerson et al. (1978) describe as "progress checks" (p. 10). Henerson et al. (1978) also state "the formative evaluator's strongest contribution to the program may turn out to be the uncovering of attitudes which the program produced but which had not been planned" (p.11). This is an

excellent opportunity for the steering committee of the Gatherings, or even the entire membership, to have a modest evaluation of the effectiveness of the Gatherings. From this information, we may perhaps glean insight as to present effectiveness and future direction.

Using a "standardized open-ended interview" (Patton, 1987, p. 116), I asked the participants a set of questions (see appendix A) about their past experiences and feelings as children, and their children's feelings about school before the Gatherings. I asked questions of a personal nature because the parents have a "particular perspective" (Henerson et al., 1978, p. 71) about their own feelings and those of their own child. It was my belief that the parents would be comfortable answering questions about their personal needs, rather than those of the whole school. The answers were used as commentary on the *programme*, although each respondent was speaking about his or her own experiences and feelings. As Patton (1987) stated, it is necessary to "probe their personal experience and their own wants and needs ... to focus on the critical issue" (p. 96). I wanted to determine if there were changes in their attitudes towards the school after having attending the Gatherings. Changes in attitude could be uncovered by asking about their personal experiences (Patton, 1987). I also asked for their predictions for the future.

It was important to consider the vocabulary used when framing questions. Henerson et al. (1978) warn about the *quality* of language used. The vocabulary used in the questions reflects normal speech; therefore no academic or educational terms were used that might tend to confuse or distance the respondents. The respondents were from three different nations. They all shared the same low educational attainment level.

The interviews were taped and transcribed for analysis. Transcribing recorded

interviews is the "fairest way of reporting information given to you" (Henerson et al., 1978, p. 99). The tape recorder will capture more than human memory and writing speed (Taylor & Bogdan, 1997). I used a small Dictaphone for ease of word for word transcription and a conventional tape recorder as a backup unit. Taylor and Bogdan suggest hiding the tape recorder and using a long play tape, but the tape recorders in this instance were in view. The small Dictaphone tape had to be changed frequently (every 15 minutes), but a second recorder was only changed once in 90 minutes. They picked up sounds easily. Respondents did not need to strain to have their voice recorded, or speak into a microphone. Respondents were patient, but reluctant to stop talking while the small tapes were changed. As Taylor and Bogdan (1997) point out, respondents are not usually "alarmed by the presence of a tape recorder" because they are "acutely aware that the interviewer's agenda is to conduct research" (p. 112). I also kept a journal of notes after all school based planning meetings and Gatherings and during interviews.

Limitations of the Design

Henerson et al. (1978) outline five threats to validity: the weak link between attitudes and subsequent behaviour, response bias, lack of comprehension or self awareness, lack of objectivity of administration and too few items. This study has the potential to lack validity in at least three of the preceding threats.

Response bias. Because members of the First Nations Parent Gatherings know me and I am seen as a willing participant and organizer, respondents may want to please me with optimistic answers about the future and present impact of the Gatherings. Cohen & Manion (1994) call this "sensitization to experimental conditions" (p. 172). Taylor and Bogdan (1997) say that the interviewer has much to gain from this process (e.g. fulfilling requirements for a degree), but parents are less certain how the process will benefit them. To

avoid this bias, I reassured the respondents that I had no expectations and asked that they speak honestly. However, although I am acquainted with the respondents through the Gatherings and other contacts in the school, I do not know them well enough to detect the subject effect of what Taylor and Bogdan (1997) call evasiveness or "putting me on" (p. 109). For that reason, I am uncertain if they did try to give me the answers that they thought I wanted to hear.

Lack of comprehension or self-awareness. The respondents may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable talking about feelings especially because I am a teacher and not a close friend. For this reason, I started with questions about their feelings of school experiences when they were children. Discussing distant feelings also encouraged consciousness and useful vocabulary which they could then use when later describing their feelings for the present and future.

Generally, however, when using interview format "you assume that the people whose attitudes you are assessing have the self-awareness to recognize their own beliefs and feelings and the ability to articulate them" (Henerson et al., 1978, p. 21). In effect, Spradley (1979, cited in Taylor & Bogdan, 1997) says "the interviewer teaches interviewees to be good informants by eliciting details from them continually" (p. 107).

Lack of objectivity of administration. I may have telegraphed, during the interview, the experimenter effect (McMillan, 1996) of what I want to hear as a person who is close to the Gatherings and cares a great deal about the outcome.

Respondents may become worried about why they are being questioned, what they are expected to say, and how their responses will be interpreted by the person asking the questions ... in spite of honest efforts to avoid influencing the respondent. The

interviewer is, in effect, the evaluation instrument. And the more likely it is that he or she will inhibit the respondents or cause them to modify their answers, the less you can depend on the information you receive. (Henerson et al., 1978, p. 27)

Henerson et al. (1978) suggest selecting interviewers carefully and preparing them with both interviewing skills and the context of the research. I am not a skilled research interviewer, (McMillan, 1996) but have used interview skills frequently in my career as a manager of people. To avoid inappropriate persuasion, I followed the question format carefully, used probes judiciously and remained aware of my body language.

Racial background is considered a variable that will influence responses (McMillan, 1996). Because I interviewed Aboriginals, I built in respectful wait time in an attempt to adapt to and respect their culture. Taylor and Bogdan (1997) suggest the use of probes to clarify what "exactly the informant means" and follow up questions to gain a "clear picture in your own mind" of what the respondent was expressing (p. 107). Because I interviewed in a cross-cultural situation, I attempted to clarify respondents' statements even to the point of sounding "naive" (Taylor & Bogdan, p. 107). However, I did not want to sound patronizing by asking too many naïve questions. To further neutralize interviewer inexperience, I chose a highly structured, sequenced interview, as Henerson et al. (1978) suggest. Inter-rater reliability as described by Patton (1987), was not considered in this study. There was only one interviewer and no observer, making inferential data analysis particularly subjective.

Other limitations. It is problematic that this is a single snapshot of feelings and, as Henerson et al. (1978) point out, a "one-time" measurement may not be reliable (p. 13). However, Richardson (1990b, cited in Taylor & Bogdan, 1997) describes qualitative research

as "partial, situated, and subjective" (p. 160). Henerson et al. (1978) suggest collecting "self reports" (p. 24) and then measuring in another way and performing triangulation or some other form of "concurrent validity" (Patton, 1987, p. 143). It is unlikely in this case that there will be a second study with which to compare results.

The threats of instrumentation and selection (Cohen & Manion, 1994) need to be addressed. The model for the questions that comprised the instrument was successful in a previous master's study and is considered acceptable for this situation. I adhered closely to the questions when administering the instrument. In terms of selection, the First Nations Support Worker who selected the respondents could have tainted this process. She is an important part of the Gatherings and sincerely wanted to see them succeed. However, she is adept in her job in judging situations to best serve the students. I believe she understood the spirit of this research and the criteria necessary.

The Gatherings had, at this time, only been held for six months and this may not have been enough time to affect the feelings of the participants. Thus, the emphasis is on process not outcome (Patton, 1987).

Findings and Interpretations

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze and interpret the interview data from the perspective of the research questions. I prepared case study narratives from the interviews with each respondent. The names have been changed to ensure confidentiality. During the interviews, I queried respondents on their feelings about their own schooling, how they feel about their children's experiences in school, their feelings about the Gatherings and about the future. The case study narrative was an effective way to analyze patterns, categories and descriptive units. An example of an individual case study narrative has been included as Appendix B. Implications and conclusions drawn from these interpretations follow in the final chapter.

Inductive Data Analysis

The analysis of the data emerged "from open-ended observations as the evaluator came to understand the existing programme patterns" (Patton, 1987, p. 15). I did not have preconceived notions or any bias about what "patterns, themes and categories of analysis [may] emerge out of the data" (Patton, 1987, p. 150). After assembling the raw data, case studies were prepared. "The case study is a readable, descriptive picture of a person or program that makes accessible ... all the information necessary to understand that person or program" (Patton, 1987, p. 149). The final order of the findings arranged itself around the interview guide (McMillan, 1996).

Personal Experiences

All three respondents had unsatisfactory experiences at school when they were children. Mr. Cathcart "never liked school." Mr. Arnold said "School had just come to the point where you didn't even want to be there." Attendance was one issue. Mr. Cathcart said

"I haven't been to school very much, I skipped out a lot, that's why I failed ... in a month I would do two days of school." Mr. Arnold would miss "probably on average 20 days a month."

None of the parents enjoyed academic subjects or the concept of conventional classes. Mr. Cathcart's favourite school activity was sports. Mrs. Beecher said "I wasn't really interested in any of the classes or anything except Drama." Mr. Arnold "put on a play for the assembly, for the kids It was quite an experience." For Mr. Cathcart, "reading and science" were how he described a *bad* day at school. He adds, "I think it was hard ... I just don't know what to write sometimes, because I skipped out so much school."

All three respondents remember feeling like outcasts at school. For Mr. Arnold the "stigma of the half breed ... made school kind of rough for a lot of people ... and nobody wanted you to be there in the first place, or that's what it felt like." Mr. Cathcart spoke of a serious conflict with a teacher in the school. "Me and the teacher, we didn't get along. I don't want to face that teacher every day, the same one. He gives me a hard time." Mrs. Beecher was caught up in a racial struggle because of her choice of friends. "I had no First Nations friends in high school I was ... more popular with Caucasian. It hurt ... [to hear] the whites tell the natives ... you're just garbage ... go home and take a shower. And when one of the First Nations said something about the white, I'm like 'you don't even try and be their friend. So you don't know what they're like so don't be saying that stuff to me about them'."

Both Mr. Arnold and Mrs. Beecher spoke of the closeness of their extended family. Mr. Arnold said, "We had five kids in our family but we had two others, they were my mom's brother and sister and they had ... seven. We all kind of moved from province to province together ... we hung around as a bunch, our family, because of being ostracized by

the other children." Mrs. Beecher had "lots of cousins in ... the same school, we all grew up together so we're like basically like brothers and sisters, not cousins, that's what we take it as My cousins, they called me their sister, we've all been very close and growing up." Family was important to Mr. Arnold and Mrs. Beecher as children because other students ostracized them. In addition, parents fostered the closeness. Mr. Cathcart described his family life in terms of being alone. "My family was almost always away. My mom was never home, we was home by ourselves in X Reserve. We just grew up by ourselves. It was hard." Mr. Cathcart speaks of his family life in negative terms.

All three respondents mentioned school friends. Mrs. Beecher said, "I more or less went to high school just to see my friends." Both men had friends with whom they skipped out. Mr. Cathcart said "I would do it with my friend. We're bad. Nobody knew what we were doing. We'd jump off the bus and hide in the bushes. Walk all the way back for miles." Mr. Arnold hung around with "the wrong set of friends" at the pool hall when he skipped out. The respondents felt very close to and supported by their friends.

The two male respondents spoke of subsequent successful academic upgrading as adults. Mr. Cathcart has traditional skills and language and helps his son study the Carrier language. Mrs. Beecher did not mention upgrading classes.

As children, the respondents were neither happy nor successful at school, nor were they required either by the school or parents to be there. This unhappiness is attributed to racism, conflicts with teachers or principals and a dislike of academic subjects. The bright spots were friends, close family and certain few subjects or events that they remember in a positive light.

Children's Experiences at School

Each family has an older child who has been compromised by the school system. Mr. Cathcart had concerns for his son in the same reserve school he attended. "The way he treat my kids I found out. That's why I took my kids out of there Keep failing my kids until I moved to town. They still like that, lots of them, out there. That's what our son was ... same thing. The kids would get to fight and would blame our kids there. Anything was missing; they blame my son all the time. I was tired of that. I got to move them out of there." Mrs. Beecher has concerns about the school system: "Our friend's daughter and then our oldest son, ... they passed them on when we know they shouldn't have ... he missed so many assignments he should have at least been held back." Mr. Arnold says his oldest child "is so lost ... it breaks your heart, it really does. I have to say it's the education system's fault ... because ... she has always been a hard kid to learn and they've just pushed her away. To the point where now she's sitting in high school and she's so far pushed that all we're hoping for her is that we get her enough credits to even graduate. And that's probably going to take a semester or two after grade twelve is finished. But we've got her believing that if she puts in the time, and even the extra semester or two, she can still achieve that. She's got pretty lofty ambitions. She wants to be a graphic designer." The early, unsuccessful experience causes the respondents to feel concern over the older child and protective of the younger ones coming up the line.

All three respondents are optimistic about their younger children's chances of school success. Mrs. Beecher says "I think they'll do great. I think they will accomplish lots. I think they'll keep up with their work. And get good grades." She feels really good about that future possibility, and is certain that they will succeed "because I know they can ... if

they put their mind to it they can do anything." Mr. Cathcart is vigilant with his children's schooling. "They do good in school," he says. "I always ask them because I want to know. I don't want them to fail." Mr. Cathcart makes a clear statement about the future he sees for his children. "I want them to learn more than I did. ... Past grade seven. ... I want them to pass school. It'll be much good for them." He believes that will happen, he and his wife are "better than ... our parents. We were bad. When I was a kid [it] was different." He spoke of being alone, "My family was almost always away, My mom was never home, we was home by ourselves in X Reserve. We just grew up by ourselves. It was hard." Mr. Arnold has extremely high expectations for his children. "I believe," said Mr. Arnold, "that if my kids stay in this school and stay directed by all of these different avenues that they have available to them, their level of success won't be graded like on a C average. It'll go more to the B - A average."

All these parents help with their children's learning. For Mr. Cathcart, it is his vigilance in making sure they get to school every day. "When I wake them up, they just get up, dressed and they just go. We would never do that because we'd take off somewhere." Mrs. Beecher and her husband participate in their children's learning. She says, "We do help the boys with their reading and their Math flash cards and stuff, so we're right in there." Mr. Arnold says, "We have always been involved with our kids' education. As soon as we find out something's not right, we're in there trying to fix it." He has a phalanx of strategies that he has used over the years to attempt to ensure a good education for his children. He says "We had Mrs. X send home samples, not only of stuff that she has already done, but things that she hasn't done that she's been taught in that grade. We could kind of self-test at home." He will seek answers at all levels of the school district hierarchy "to access what I need them

to understand. If you won't listen to me then there's the school board. And there's whatever and I'll keep going ... till the end. Because that's my job as their dad." He will change schools. "I've actually pulled my eldest child out of one school on one side of (another city) and ... drove her right across the city because she's done better at a different school with a different teacher". He also has "had to threaten to come and sit in a classroom, because there's something wrong with what (the teacher) is doing. And if it doesn't straighten out then I have to come and I have to find out what it is."

Mr. Cathcart's children do not report bad days at school. Being late or missing school is a bad day for them. Mrs. Beecher is concerned with bullying at school. "It ... upsets him." Mrs. Beecher is concerned for her youngest son on a bad day "because I know he's got a very bad temper, and he can put up with it for so long and ... then he'll get himself in trouble if he lashes out." Mr. Arnold describes a complicated set of responses for his daughter. He describes a child in crisis, "The kids ... start falling over themselves trying to please this particular teacher and find out that they haven't got the skills to do that Well, she tried to cover it up ... they try and please me. They don't want it to be the teacher's fault, they don't want it to be their fault, and they don't want us to be angry so they more or less make up a day ... hiding what's really going on".

On a good day at school, Mr. Arnold's daughter is "absolutely dancing." Mrs. Beecher's youngest son "comes home all happy and tells me what he did in school. If my youngest did really good on a spelling test, or something, or a Math test, then he'd be really proud and he'd take it home and show me."

Mr. Cathcart knows "they do good in school" because he always asks them.

Parent Feelings About Children's Experiences

Mr. Cathcart is pleased for his children. He said, "I was happy for them. In my time I never like going to school. I want them to pass Because I don't want them to fail like me." On a good day, Mrs. Beecher feels "very proud of him. I tell him ... he's such a good boy and he's so smart and I just encourage him, help him with his spelling lists. Help him with his reading. He just sits there and reads to me and his dad. I want him to get a good education. He's a smart boy."

When his daughter was in crisis, Mr. Arnold was "afraid for her. I was afraid that she'd end up like our oldest one and be shuffled along by the education system because nobody wanted to deal with that person." He describes what he felt when he transferred his children the last time. "Apprehension, that was the biggest one I felt when I came here. Now we got to start over. We're already in the toilet, what's going to happen?" In the past, Mr. Arnold felt that he and his wife "always had to be the one to go and push all the right buttons for all the people to react the way we needed them to react." At this school, "it's totally opposite. There's people wanting to help our children instead of us demanding help for them. That's a big difference."

In contrast to their own unhappy school experiences, the respondents are pleased with their younger children's school experiences, partly because the children are capable of learning and partly because support is in place for them from home and from the school.

Reasons for Attending Gatherings

Mrs. Beecher seems happy with the Gatherings because "its good that the teachers seem to care enough for the students to help them out this way." Both Mrs. Beecher and Mr. Cathcart spoke of the social aspects of the Gatherings. Mrs. Beecher said, "I enjoy the

Gatherings" and Mr. Cathcart said he liked them. Mr. Arnold believes "the Gatherings have really benefited my children." He spoke about the broad range of effects. "Things have happened at the high school level and at the lower levels, at the grade one levels." Although this is an elementary school, Mr. Arnold is referring to the neighbouring high school having sent a team of staff to a Gathering to develop a new plan for transition of First Nations students to high school.

Feelings About the Gatherings

None of the parents had any negative comments to offer about the Gatherings. Mr. Arnold was wary at first of the purpose of the Gatherings. "Our experience has been that there's been this and that. But I find that most of the people that are running this and that are there for a job more than they're there ... to care about what my child is doing." But he is pleased with the meetings. He said: "It's been very positive To us they've all been good meetings."

Mr. Cathcart's favourite presentation at the Gathering was a videotape modeling good and bad styles of reading with children. He liked "that time when they did the reading books to those kids. Like the father in the movie there. He was reading fast to the kid there – wasn't the right way. Had a hard book – got to read an easy book to those kids. He done everything wrong, reading too fast. The son didn't understand him. That was a good film." This information was important to Mr. Cathcart because "I never did read books to the kids before. I miss out so much school. I couldn't read that good."

At a good Gathering meeting, Mrs. Beecher says that the presenters show "you can better your child by doing this, or that's quite interesting." Mrs. Beecher and her husband

feel that they already participate in their children's learning "But ... I guess it's just showing us things that we might have missed."

The strongest memory Mr. Arnold has of the Gatherings was "Mr. Principal. The first meeting where he got up ... and talked to us as parents ... and told us ... the definition of what our role and what your guy's role as educators and that kind of thing. It was ... watching somebody have the same philosophy that I have." From the principal's presentation, Mr. Arnold says, "I feel like if this person is heading this operation, then it's got a chance of succeeding, doesn't it? Plus ... I believe that all of the parents, including myself and my wife, ... felt included."

Mrs. Beecher finds the Gatherings satisfying on a personal level. "I get to meet different people and hear their point of view of what you can do to help your child out, or, what you see going on in public schools or whatever. I just ... I enjoy them." Mr. Cathcart was anticipating the next Gathering, a potluck dinner. He said, "My wife is making some bannock." He mentioned enjoying the traditional giveaways, saying, "I won a couple of prizes too." I sensed feelings of comfort and pleasure surrounding the Gatherings from the respondents.

The school and the school system receive praise from two of the respondents. Mrs. Beecher says "I guess there's quite a few people out there that are interested in helping First Nation's children with their education." Mr. Arnold is lavish with his praise. "I've never come across a school like this one where every teacher has time for every kid. There's no shuffling them off because you don't want to deal with them ... I've never seen a teacher here do that. I've always seen them stop and talk to the children, on their level, which is important."

Feelings About the Future

All three respondents had clearly thought through what they feared most for their children. Mrs. Beecher is afraid if her children start "running around with the wrong crowd." Mr. Cathcart's fears for the future are "drugs or alcohol like the way we grew up Smoking, had alcohol a lot, that why we skipped school a lot. ... I just don't want them to do that. Like the way we did." There are no certainties for Mr. Cathcart and Mrs. Beecher. They have fears for their children's future, which have little to do with academics, and more to do with the neighbourhood and peer influence.

In describing a negative scenario in the future, Mr. Arnold says "Your level of dedication from person to person of course is going to change. We're not going to get lucky and live in this world where every educator that comes into this school is going to be like you. Or like Mr. Principal or like Mrs. Q, know what I mean? There's going to be those ones that aren't there for that same purpose. If such a thing took place, the biggest thing I would feel is disappointment in being let down. ... Then the next biggest one is where do my kids go from here? Are we back to where we were when we have to go to school with you every day to make sure that that particular teacher or whatever is doing that particular job, which I hate doing." Mr. Arnold's fear seems to be based on mistrust of the system, that the excellent support his children currently receive may disappear.

When speaking of a positive scenario, Mr. Arnold says "If the school stays the way it is, I see nothing but success for my children. Because they've demonstrated nothing but success since this all has been introduced into their life." Mrs. Beecher is optimistic about her children's future in school. She says "I think they'll do great. I think they will accomplish lots. I think they'll keep up with their work. And get good grades." She feels

really good about that future possibility and certain that they will succeed "because I know they can ... if they put their mind to it they can do anything."

Mr. Cathcart is optimistic about his children's future because "I just read their report cards. They do better in their report cards. They're passing." Mr. Cathcart made sacrifices to move into town. "I had to leave the reserve. I had to give up my trailer too." He describes the changes since the move to town. "Over there, it's just like the same. Just like me, they get in trouble there all the time. So town was a lot better, a lot of difference there. The kids are ... better. Over at the high school in town you get those Native schooling there. Do the Carrier language"

Interpretations

None of the respondents recall a welcoming environment or feelings of success at school. The experience for them was altered, in a negative way, by their being identified as Aboriginals. Mr. Arnold refers to the "stigma of the half-breed", and Mrs. Beecher recounts "There was a lot of racist comments and stuff." They did not graduate; they feel they do not have career choices as adults.

Each respondent is determined that a similar fate will not befall his or her younger children. Mr. Cathcart says "I don't want them to fail like me. I was always a failure." They each feel that they can forestall failure at school for their younger children. Mr. Cathcart believes that he and his wife are "better than ... our parents. We were bad. When I was a kid [it] was different." Mrs. Beecher feels certain they'll succeed. Each respondent has an older child who suffered an almost identical fate as his or her parent. The older child has not succeeded. One difference is that the respondents do not mention racism as an issue for their children presently in the school.

In the literature review, it was evident that the three elements of culture, involvement in decision-making and support of learning were important issues in studies on Aboriginal Education. Support of learning was the clearest result of the Gatherings as seen by the respondents. Mrs. Beecher says: "I guess there's quite a few people out there that are interested in helping First Nation's children with their education." She also says that the presenters show "you can better your child by doing this, ... that's quite interesting." Mr. Cathcart's favourite presentation at the Gathering was a videotape modeling good and bad styles of reading with children. Mr. Arnold appreciated the principal's definition of his own role and that of the school staff. Involvement in decision-making is at an emergent stage. The respondents acknowledged the value of meeting together without mention of the potential power the parents of the Gatherings can have. Mr. Arnold says "I believe that all of the parents ... felt included. And that was ... important because we came to the meetings ... to find a common ground You can ... network ... and ... get answers to some of the experiences you're having. You realize ... you're not the only one having problems with your children and education. There's other people out there looking for answers also. Not just the people you meet in the hallway picking up their kids. They're interested enough to come and sit around a table and talk back and forth and try and find some solutions for all these kids that are having the problems." Mrs. Beecher credits the Gatherings with the knowledge that when speaking of her older, unsuccessful child's transition to high school, "we know we're not the only one out there that is saying, he missed so many assignments he should have at least been held back"

In the realm of culture, Mr. Cathcart's comment, "Over at the high school in town you get those Native schooling there. Do the Carrier language..." and helping his son with

Carrier language were the only references made to culturally relevant curriculum. Promoting cultural identity was not an issue expressed by the other respondents. This may be because I did not ask any questions specific to culture. Mr. Cathcart volunteered this information, it was important to him to include the reference to the language class.

The Gatherings are not the sole reason that the respondents feel optimistic about the future for their younger children. They have a strong belief in the value of education, and work to achieve that end in each their own way. They *appreciate* the Gatherings, are reassured by them, enjoy them and learn from them, but the optimism about their younger children predates the inception of the Gatherings. The *school environment* is identified by the parents as most useful for predicting success. The Gatherings enhance their sense of community and strength of purpose. Mr. Arnold says, "We're not the only ones in these situations. There's lots of other people and ... you can ... network. ... And maybe through other people's experiences ... you can get answers to some of the experiences you're having." The parents feel reassured that in the present school environment, in the company of like minded parents and with continuing support at home, their children will have successful school experiences.

Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to determine the effect of the First Nations Gatherings on the feelings the parents have about school. I investigated the link between the parents' feelings about their past school experiences and those of their children, in contrast to their feelings about the school six months after they have been attending the Gatherings. It was expected that the data would reflect themes found in the literature on this subject (McMillan, 1996). Issues of First Nations' lack of success at school emerged from each case study. Because this is an action research project, and because it focuses on evaluation, the conclusions focus on "problem identification and solution" rather than theory (McMillan, 1996, p. 533).

The Research Question

How do these Aboriginal parents feel about school? How do they feel about their children's experiences at school? All three respondents are scarred with unsatisfactory schooling experiences themselves and a repetition of that bad experience for at least one of their children. All three, however, are optimistic about the future of their younger children.

How do they perceive the school after sustained contact in the Gatherings? Have the feelings of the respondents about school changed since they began coming to the Gatherings? They believe that the many interventions, including the Gatherings, which are in place in this school will help their younger children succeed. The fear that another of their children will repeat the failures sustained by the older child makes them especially vigilant. In contrast to their earlier experiences, the parents talk in glowing terms about *possibilities* for their children, where they see few for themselves and the older, unsuccessful child.

In what way have the meetings affected their attitudes toward the school system?

They are optimistic. Their optimism is fuelled by what they see as caring, proactive teachers and administration in the school. The Gatherings have convinced them that the staff cares, and that there are mechanisms in place to create successful school experiences. The parents were determined before to make school successful for their younger children, now they feel aided and abetted by staff and programmes at the school.

In what way have the meetings affected their feelings about the future of their children in the school system? Mr. Arnold says "If the school stays the way it is, I see nothing but success for my children. Because they've demonstrated nothing but success since this all has been introduced into their life."

There is a range of involvement in schoolwork among the respondents. Mr. Arnold is by far the most proactive of the three respondents, spending time and energy on actively directing the quality of his children's experiences. He is the respondent who will seek answers at all levels of the school district hierarchy "to access what I need to them to understand." He will change schools. He also has "had to threaten to come and sit in a classroom." Mrs. Beecher spends time on "helping the boys with their reading and their Math flash cards and stuff, so we're right in there." Mr. Cathcart monitors school experiences for his children, he says "They do good in school. I always ask them because I want to know. I don't want them to fail." Since the Gatherings, Mr. Arnold feels that he can be less vigilant, he says "There's people wanting to help our children instead of us demanding help for them."

Implications for the Future

The respondents were critical of the school system and its treatment of their *lost* child. Mrs. Beecher has concerns about the school system: "our friend's daughter and then our oldest son, ... they passed them on when we know they shouldn't have." Mr. Cathcart moved into town to leave what he perceived to be an unsatisfactory situation for his children. He says "All my kids in town. Much better." He was avoiding the teacher "from my past." Mr. Arnold blames the school system as well. He says "My eldest child is so lost ... it breaks your heart, it really does. I have to say it's the education system's fault ... because ... she has always been a hard kid to learn and they've just pushed her away."

The Gatherings have altered the feelings Aboriginal parents have about the school. Mrs. Beecher says "I just think it's good that the teachers seem to care enough for the students to help them out this way. I've never seen anything like this before." Mr. Arnold said, "You changed my life. You changed my wife's life If you people could realize the road that we've been down, to where we sit right now and our relief at finally seeing no pitfalls." They are more positive, self-directed and receptive. There is now a successful forum for exchange of information. In addition, one cannot discount the power of casual social contact over a cup of coffee at the Gatherings.

Teachers and administration can build on this impetus, by continuing the Gatherings, by creating a teacher presence at them and by using them for two purposes. The first is to ascertain and understand Aboriginal parent wishes. The second is to use them to transmit the desired information to them. For example, two of the respondents mentioned their satisfaction with the *instructional* element of the Gatherings. Mr. Cathcart liked the video of techniques for reading to children. Mrs. Beecher liked to "meet different people and hear

their point of view of what you can do to help your child out, or, what you see going on in public schools." Parents may wish to learn more about how to help with school.

The increased exposure to the school has helped parents believe that staff cares about their children, something teachers thought they had demonstrated already. Teachers may come to understand the type and frequency of contact they can develop with this parent group, as distinct from other parents.

On Zimiga's (1981) scale, these parents seem to be *progressives*, that is race and world view were not expressed as barriers to their children's successful school experience. Different questions would have to be asked to identify this issue in subsequent research.

Parent attendance, choices for topics at Gatherings and involvement in planning have made the Gatherings successful in the eyes of all three respondents. The numbers of parents attending each Gathering indicate success. Parents' support was an essential element in successes of the Gatherings. Because of their support, for example, changes were made in transitions for Aboriginal children to high school. Because of their planning, the potluck dinner drew a crowd of 100--three times the normal attendance at a Gathering. Perhaps there will arise from the group some Aboriginal control over education.

Implications for Further Research

Since this small sampling of interviews is considered a single snapshot of feelings about the Gatherings, another research project would be useful for triangulation. Another qualitative study based on interviews is desirable. Interviews with Aboriginal parents impart a great deal of rich information about the Aboriginal experience with the education system. Interviews also give a glimpse into the Aboriginal worldview, which is so different from that espoused in the conventional school system. This worldview causes some of the barriers to

success in our education system. The next research may focus on opinions about effectiveness of the Gatherings in terms of their impact on lives of parents and children attending. Research questions could focus more on the three tenets from the Sullivan Commission, culture, support of learning and involvement in decision-making.

This project focussed on elementary school parents. The majority of dropouts leave during high school. Each of these parents has a high school age child who is unsuccessful at school. Perhaps the feelings about the present school experiences would change if the high school situation were studied. An opportunity may arise next fall to explore the feelings of a group of parents at the neighbouring high school. The principal of the high school announced that the high school will start their own Gatherings next fall.

This present research project should be made widely available. The Gatherings seem to have had a profound effect on the respondents. For the minimal amount of work involved in preparing for the Gatherings, the pay off was ten fold in terms of parent satisfaction and improved perception of the school and school system. This is a doable model for parental inclusion.

Bibliography

- British Columbia: Ministry of Education. (2001a). *How are we doing? An overview of Aboriginal education results for District No. 28, Quesnel, 2001*. (2001) Victoria.
- British Columbia: Ministry of Education. (2001b). *How are we doing? An overview of Aboriginal education results for Province of BC, 2001*. Victoria.
- British Columbia: Ministry of Education. (2002). *Changes to school act empower parents, NR 05-02, April 15, 2002*. Retrieved 04, 20, 2002 from <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/whats happening/nr/nr2002/nr-05-02.html>.
- British Columbia Royal Commission on Education. (1988). *A legacy for learners*. Victoria.
- Cohen, L. & Manion, L. (1994). *Research methods in education*. (4th ed.). London, Routledge.
- Friedel, T. L. (1999). The role of Aboriginal parents in public education: Barriers to change in an urban setting. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 23, 139-158.
- Henerson et al., M., Morris, L & Fitz-Gibbon, C. (1978). *How to measure attitudes*. Beverly Hills, Sage.
- Hookimaw-Witt, Jacqueline. (2000). Any changes since residential school? *Canadian Journal of Native Education*. 22, 159-170.
- Kirkness, V. (1994). Our peoples' education: Cut the shackles; cut the crap; cut the mustard. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 22, 10-15.
- Leveque, D. M. (1994, March). *Cultural and parental influences on achievement among Native American students in Barstow Unified School District*. Paper presented at the National Meeting of the Comparative and International Educational Society (pp. 1 - 37), San Diego, CA. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 382 416)
- McMillan, J. H., & Schumaker, S. (1996). *Research in education; a conceptual introduction* (4th ed.). New York: Longman.
- National Indian Brotherhood (1980). Indian control of Indian education. Proceedings of "Indian Control of Indian Education: Practical Applications" Conference, Winnipeg, MA: Author.
- Nichols-Solomon, R. (2001). Barriers to serious parent involvement. *The Education Digest*, January 66:33-37.

- Northwest Regional Educational Lab. *Depiction study of Indian parent/community involvement and support in Northwest Schools*. (1992). Portland, OR: Author. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 361 125)
- Ogbu, J. (1991). Immigrant and involuntary minorities in comparative perspective. In M. Gibson & J. Ogbu (Eds.), *Minority status and schooling: a comparative study of immigrant and involuntary minorities* (pp. 3-33). New York: Garland Reference Library of Social Science.
- Patton, M.Q. (1987). *How to use qualitative methods in evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Peterson, David. (1989). Parent Involvement in the Educational Process. ERIC Digest Series Number EA 43. Eugene OR: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management. ED 312776
- Poonwassie, D. (2001). Parental involvement as adult education: A microstrategy for change. In K.P. Binda & S. Calliou (Eds.). *Aboriginal education in Canada, a study in decolonization* (pp. 155-165). Mississauga, ON: Canadian Educator's Press.
- Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. (1996). Education. In *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal peoples Vol. 3*. _Ottawa, ON: Canada Communication Group.
- Ruttan, Lia (2000). Issues in shared schools in mixed Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal school systems. In *Issues affecting rural communities (II). Proceedings of the International Conference {on} Rural Communities and Identities in the Global Millennium* (pp. 83 – 86) Nanaimo, BC. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 455 055)
- Saskatchewan School Trustees Association. Indian and Metis education: Parents as partners. (1993, Oct.). In *SSTA Forum Report: Report # 93-10*. (pp. 1-59). Regina, SA: Author. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 367 154)
- Taylor, Steven J.& Bogdan, Robert. (1997). Introduction to qualitative research methods. New York, John Wiley and Sons.
- Turner, D. (1998). *Beyond the rhetoric: Improving school success for First Nations students*. (First Nations Education Study). Kamloops, BC: School District No. 73 (Kamloops/Thompson)
- United Nations Commission on Human Rights. (1993). Draft declaration as agreed upon by the members of the working group at its forty-fifth session. In *Discrimination against indigenous peoples*_[On-line]. Available: <http://www.cwis.org/fwdp/drft9329.html>

Wilson, E. & Napoleon, V. (1994). *Enhancing relationships between schools and First Nations families*. Victoria. British Columbia: Ministry of Education.

Zimiga, A. W. (1981). *The influence of traditional Lakota thought in Indian parent group involvement on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation: A case study*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Boston.

ⁱ The terms Native, Aboriginal, Indian and First Nations are used interchangeably to identify persons of First Nations ancestry.

Appendix A: INTERVIEW GUIDELINES FOR FIRST NATION'S PARENTS

FEEELINGS ABOUT SCHOOL

ORDER:

- 1) body of interview, discussing past present and future feelings about school experiences
- 2) introductions, introductory questions and discussion of confidentiality
- 3) wrap-up, expression of appreciation, promise of follow-up with results of interviews

1) Introductions

Introductions

Introductory questions (non-controversial, straightforward questions)

QUESTION: I would like to thank you for coming and ask why did you volunteer to be interviewed?

QUESTION: I would like to know why you felt drawn to attend the parent Gatherings at the school over the past few months?

STATEMENT: In the body of this interview, I will ask you several questions about your feelings about school experiences. I'll work from the past and your personal experiences to the present and your feelings about the Gatherings and move to the future and ask you to predict what the outcome, if any could come from the Gatherings.

I have no preset expectations about what answers you may give. Please speak honestly about how you feel.

I need to speak about confidentiality. I would ask that you acknowledge that what is said in this room is to be kept confidential. This conversation is being taped, for me to transcribe and use in my master's project for UNBC. I will give you a copy of the report when I am finished.

Let us begin. I believe this interview should last about 1 hour. I have a 90-minute tape in each of these two machines. If you are comfortable we can begin

2) Body of interview

1) Your feelings about your own schooling experiences as a child

QUESTIONS:

1) I want you to think back to your school days. I want you to think about a good day in school. If we were best friends, what would we be doing? What would I see or hear?

2) Now, think about that good day school. How did you feel about it?

3) Why did you feel that way?

4) You've described a good day at school. Think back now to a bad day. If we were best friends, what would we be doing? What would I see or hear?

5) Now, think about that bad day school. How did you feel about it?

6) Why did you feel that way?

2) Your child's schooling experience

QUESTION:

- 1) Think back to last year. When your children came home, did they ever tell you about their day? What do they say about what happens in school?
- 2) How do they feel about it?
- 3) Why do they feel that way?
- 4) How do you feel about?
- 5) Why do you feel that way?
- 6) You've described a _____ day for your child at elementary school as. Can you describe now a _____ (opposite) in the same way? Think back to last year. When your children came home, did they ever tell you about their day? What do they say (opposite) about what happens in school?
- 7) How do they feel about it?
- 8) Why do they feel that way?
- 9) How do you feel about?

10) Why do you feel that way?

4) Your feelings after six months these Gatherings

QUESTION:

- 1) Think back to a time when you felt the Gathering was a good meeting. Tell me what happened that made it a good meeting?
- 2) How did you feel?
- 3) Why did you feel that way?
- 4) Think back to a time when you felt the Gathering was not a good meeting. Tell me what happened that made it that way?
- 5) How did you feel?
- 6) Why did you feel that way?

5) Your vision for the future

QUESTION:

- 1) When you think about the future, can you describe for me a scenario that you would like to see during your children's stay at school?

- 2) *How do you feel about that possibility that you describe?*
- 3) *Why do you feel that way?*
- 4) *You've described a desirable scenario for the future, can you describe the opposite? A negative future scenario?*
- 5) *How do you feel about that possibility that you describe*
- 6) *Why do you feel that way?*

3) Wrap-up

STATEMENT: Thank you for your time and your thoughtful responses to these questions.

May I contact you if I have any questions? If you have any questions, please contact me, I am available at the school. This report should be finished by the end of May. I will share the report with you and the Gathering.

Appendix B: Sample case study narrative

Mrs. Beecher

Reasons for Attending Gatherings

Mrs. Beecher's reasons for attending Gatherings are threefold. She says: a) "I just think it's good that the teachers seem to care enough for the students to help them out this way" b) "I've never seen anything like this before" and c) "I enjoy the Gatherings".

Feelings About Personal Experiences at School

In school, a good day for Mrs. Beecher was about being with friends and not in a conventional classroom. She says: "I more or less went to high school just to see my friends. I wasn't really interested in any of the classes or anything except Drama". She was reluctant for the day to end because after school, "... there was really no place to go. Like no friends' houses or anything to hang out at. Everybody basically just went home". She couldn't visit at friends houses "...because, like, my friend, one of my friends her dad was a doctor, and everything was like in perfect order.... Nobody could go and visit her or whatever because they just didn't feel right, because they made us feel like 'why were you here' and stuff".

In school on a bad day, she was afraid of "Running into certain people that were totally against me..." because she was "...hanging out with anybody outside our Nation.... I had no First Nations friends in high school.... I was, like, I don't know, more popular with Caucasian, I guess". She received racist comments because she dated a white boy. "There was just a lot of prejudice on both sides.... It hurt for the whites to tell the natives like you're just garbage... go home and take a shower kind of thing. ...And when one of the First Nations said something about the white, I'm like 'you don't even try and be their friend. So you don't know what they're like so don't be saying that stuff to me about them'".

At her high school, there were segregated entrances. " ...They had the First Nation's doors and then right across there was a hallway and on the other door, they called it the science doors and I hung out there. ...I was the only First Nations that hung out there and I got along great with everybody.... There was a lot of racist comments and stuff. Because I hung out at the wrong doors I guess". There were racist comments at home as well. "...A lot of my family and friends that are First Nations ... look down. Growing up my grandma always told me 'don't you ever date any white boys, don't you ever let me hear you're dating any white boys'". And I've never, ever, ever dated a First Nations. All my life I've always dated whites and I don't know why, I just ... it's not out of disrespect for my grandmother, but I guess it's just my choice".

Mrs. Beecher talked more about her family. She had "...lots of cousins in ...the same school, we all grew up together so we're like basically like brothers and sisters, not cousins, that's what we take it as.... My cousins, they called me their sister, we've all been very close and growing up".

Children's Experiences at School

On a bad day at school, her youngest son "...gets picked on a lot. He'll come home really upset saying well I had a bad day, this person called me whatever and I got in trouble, or somebody took my snack or... somebody pushed me off the slide or somebody pushed me off the monkey bars. I told him, go and talk to Mr. Principal, talk to your teacher. They shouldn't be allowed to push you off the slide. ...The other one doesn't really come home complaining about having a bad day. ...He's easy going, at first he didn't like school but now he like knows a lot of kids and stuff".

The situation at school for her youngest son worries Mrs. Beecher. She said: " It ...upsets him. And then I see that he's sad, he'll go in his room or whatever, or he won't talk or he'll go in Child Two's room and watch TV. Or he'll just keep to himself that makes me upset because I know there's something wrong and he won't talk about it. And then I see that on the news all the time about bullying and it's teenagers but who's to say it's not going to be an elementary student next".

Mrs. Beecher is hopeful that the problem is resolved. " Well, it hasn't happened in quite a while. I'm hoping whoever it was that, will like leave him alone now. And a lot of the time it's from somebody that he doesn't even know. And it's just, they might be rough housing, or just playing tag or whatever, it was an accident, it was on purpose, I don't know. And a lot of the time it's somebody that he doesn't know. "

On a good day, Child 2 enjoys soccer. She said: " Child Two got into playing soccer a lot during lunch hour, and for the longest time I'd come and spend the whole lunch hour outside with them. ...I don't know how long it went on for, but I'd sit in it in Mrs. W's class with them while they eat their lunch and then I'd go outside and keep an eye on them until the bell rang". Playing soccer "... puts him in a better mood. He comes home all happy and tells me what he did in school. "

Academics play a role in positive experiences for this family. "...If Child Two did really good on a spelling test, or something, or a Math test, then he'd be really proud and he'd take it home and show me. I'd put it up on the fridge and be so proud of him".

Parent Feelings About Children's Experiences

On a good day, Mrs. Beecher feels "Very proud of him. I tell him ... he's such a good boy and he's so smart and I just encourage him, help him with his spelling lists. Help

him with his reading, he just sits there and reads to me and his dad. I want him to get a good education. He's a smart boy".

Mrs. Beecher is concerned for her youngest son on a bad day "...because I know he's got a very bad temper, and he can put up with it for so long and then he lashes out. ... It's basically because he's been picked on a lot by his oldest brother and he just I guess he's learned to defend himself. He only puts up with it for so long, and then he'll get himself in trouble if he lashes out".

Parent Feelings About the Gatherings

When asked about a bad day at a Gathering, Mrs. Beecher states that she has not "...seen a bad meeting". At a good Gathering meeting, Mrs. Beecher says: "I guess there's quite a few people out there that are interested in helping First Nation's children with their education". The presenters show "...you can better your child by doing this, or that's quite interesting". Mrs. Beecher and her husband feel that they already participate in their children's learning, "...we do help the boys with their reading and their Math flash cards and stuff, so we're right in there, but ... I guess it's just showing us things that we might have missed". Mrs. Beecher finds the Gatherings satisfying on a personal level. "I get to meet different people and hear their point of view of what you can do to help your child out, or, what you see going on in public schools or whatever. I just ... I enjoy them".

Mrs. Beecher has concerns about the school system: "... our friend's daughter and then our oldest son, ...they passed them on when we know they shouldn't have...". Because of the Gatherings, "...we know we're not the only one out there that is saying, he missed so many assignments he should have at least been held back".

Feelings About the Future

Mrs. Beecher is optimistic about her children's future in school. She says: "I think they'll do great. I think they will accomplish lots. I think they'll keep up with their work. And get good grades". She feels "really good" about that future possibility and certain that they will succeed "...because I know they can ... if they put their mind to it they can do anything".

Mrs. Beecher feels less optimistic if her children start "...running around with the wrong crowd". She is "...not impressed..." with a current friend at present, but, she says, "... I can't tell Child Two well I don't want you hanging around with him no more because he will anyway".

Appendix C:

LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

1. I have discussed the purposes of the research with the researcher.
2. I understand that I am a volunteer and may leave at any time.
3. I understand that this interview will have no effect on my children or me.
4. I understand that the interviews are confidential and nothing of a personal nature will be discussed between the researcher and any other person.
5. I understand that I will remain anonymous and that a different name will be used in the written report.
6. I agree to the interview being taped. I understand that the recording will be erased after completion of the research.
7. The researcher has answered my questions and concerns about the research.

(Name of interviewee)

(Signature)

(Date)

(Name of researcher)

(Signature)