

AN EXAMINATION OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS'
EARLY SCHOOL-LEAVING TRENDS

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PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF EDUCATION

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THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

August, 2002

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ABSTRACT

Students of First Nation and Aboriginal ancestry consistently drop out of high school at rates far higher than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. This is a qualitative study of the problem designed to obtain a clearer understanding of the personal experiences of Aboriginal dropouts in the school system. In this study I conducted in-depth interviews with three Aboriginal participants in their early to middle twenties who had dropped out of high school. A number of the themes that emerged from the interviews were consistent with the findings of previous dropout studies. However, there were other themes that emerged from the commonalities of experiences of these participants. The results suggest we should not continue to address the Aboriginal student dropout problem using traditional approaches.

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Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to Keith Spencer, Principal, Aboriginal Education, School District 28, and Professor Colin Chasteauneuf, The University of Northern British Columbia, for their guidance and many helpful suggestions in helping me formulate this project and in assisting me in seeing it to completion. Many thanks as well go out to the participants in the study who gave their time. I found their honest expressions to be a humbling experience.

Introduction

I have worked for many years in an alternate school that enrolls students who have dropped out of the secondary school system. Students identified by high school counsellors as being at risk of dropping out are also referred to the alternate school. A typical student profile would reflect the following characteristics either alone or in combination with other characteristics: social, emotional, behavioural or psychological problems, and the resultant problems associated with low academic performance and attendance. A high proportion of students enrolled in the alternate school are of Aboriginal ancestry. The Aboriginal students frequently exhibit attendance problems and some behavioural issues, but in most respects they are no different than the non-Aboriginal students in the secondary school.

It is apparent that many of these students have strengths such as good reading comprehension that should enable them to function successfully within the school system and yet they drop out in numbers disproportionate to their representation in the population. Reyhner (1992) states that American Indian students leave high school without graduating at over twice the rate of Euro-American students. Brandt (1992), in reviewing the literature on Aboriginal dropouts, states that estimates of the dropout rate range from 28% to 95%. In British Columbia, however, the provincial average for First Nations high school completion is 38%, whereas 77% of non-Aboriginal students graduate from Grade 12 (Government of British Columbia, 2001). Eighty-eight percent of Aboriginal students progress to Grade 9, as opposed to 96% of non-Aboriginal students. British Columbia Ministry of Education (1999) data reports varying graduation

rates around the province for Aboriginal students, from a high of 66% in Richmond to 5% in Stikine. In the school district under study, only 23% of Aboriginal students in the cohort year beginning in Grade 8 in 1994 graduated within six years with a Dogwood certificate (see appendix F). The Dogwood certificate leads to University entrance, while a school leaving certificate does not. The purpose of this study is to determine some of the reasons why some Aboriginal students in this school district drop out of secondary school.

The issue of disparate figures for Aboriginal student dropout rates has been addressed in the literature. Brandt suggests the wide variance could be related to factors such as lack of a uniform definition of dropout, the methodology used in obtaining data, and the accuracy of data supplied by schools, as well as how the term "Aboriginal" is defined. Reyhner (1992) elaborates on this issue by observing that dropout statistics may vary between sites, differing towns or cities, and reservations. Reyhner suggests that there is insufficient actual research, other than reports and commission papers, which adequately address the dropout problem. Brandt (1992) clarifies this issue by discussing the varying methodologies together with their inherent problems used to define and list dropouts that exist across school districts. Clearly a standardized procedure for obtaining accurate dropout data would facilitate accurate data collection. Until such time it is likely that problems in analysis and interpretation of the dropout data will persist.

The definition of what constitutes a dropout varies considerably. The following definition of a dropout will provide a focus for this study. Brandt (1992) defined a dropout as someone not currently attending school, who did not graduate, did not submit a request for transfer and was still alive. Eberhard (1989) noted that all dropouts are

withdrawals, but not all withdrawals are dropouts because many students withdraw temporarily, then return to school to complete graduation requirements. Eberhard offered the following circumstances leading to dropout in one district: pregnancy, marriage, dropout, employment, expulsion, mutual consent, runaway and other causes. In order to be defined as dropout, there must be no enrolment at another school. Transitory students can be difficult to track, leading to inaccuracies in dropout figures. These factors indicate there may be many early school leaving reasons extraneous to dropping out. This definition is neither all-inclusive nor parsimonious, and it tends to obfuscate the issue. Brady (1996) notes that much research has focused on the dropout phenomenon, but there still remains little consensus as to what should constitute a standardized definition of a dropout. For the purposes of this study the definition of a dropout given by Sullivan (1998) will be used. This includes “any person who has left secondary school for whatever reason prior to graduating” (Brady, 1996, p.12). This definition, while similar to that of Brandt (1992), offers a convenient succinctness, yet allows for the inclusion of all causes for dropping out, as varying and divergent as they may be. However, this definition does not account for those who leave temporarily and then come back. Regardless of the source of the data or the definition, it is clear that the problem is complex and severe (Brandt, 1992).

The inconsistency between methodologies results in widely differing explanations for the dropout problem. Brady (1996) and Ledlow (1992), among others, question whether such explanations as *cultural discontinuity* offer explanations for why First Nations students drop out of school. Ledlow defines cultural discontinuity as “culturally based differences in the communication styles of the minority students’ home and the

Anglo culture of the school” which leads to “conflicts, misunderstandings, and, ultimately, failure for those students.” (p. 2) Ledlow discusses the trend to make curriculum more culturally relevant, but stresses that there is little empirical evidence to suggest that this would alleviate the problem. Nor is there, Ledlow states, any set definition of what constitutes a culturally-relevant curriculum. Reyhner (1992) disparages the widely held notion that the reasons for failure are found in students and their homes, a tendency to “blame the victims” (p. 2). Reyhner dismisses this viewpoint as reflecting ethnocentrism in that it characterizes Native students as culturally disadvantaged or culturally deprived. Traditional Indian orientation is not a handicap in achieving school success (Reyhner, 1992). It is clear then that the lack of comparable data across schools and districts (Brandt, 1992) as well as ideological or theoretical differences in interpretation, makes arriving at accurate dropout rates and causes very difficult.

The consequences of dropping out of school are severe. Brady (1996) states that “the long term economic prospects for native peoples in general and for urban native people in particular will be severely diminished as long as the current dropout levels persist” (p. 1). In view of the fact that the workforce trend is towards more technical training and generally higher education, the problem cannot be overemphasized. Anisef and Johnson (1993; cited in Brady, 1996) state: “These adolescents are growing up without a hope of achieving the advantages that go with adulthood. They are not learning the skills necessary to participate in the educational system or make the transition to the labor force” (p. 10).

The percentage of students of Aboriginal ancestry in the school district under study is nearly 20%. In the school year 1998/1999, there were over 250 graduates overall

in this particular school district of which approximately 10 were Aboriginal students. This is about 4% of the graduating student body. The school year 1999/2000 saw about 10 Aboriginal students in a graduating population of over 290, a rate of just over 3%. This represents a significant percentage decrease of Aboriginal students as part of the general student population as the grade level approached Grade 12. Data for the current year, 2001/2002, show a general district wide population of nearly 5000 students, of whom over 775 are Aboriginal.

stats

The British Columbia Ministry of Education compiled data that tracked the secondary school progress of the group of Grade 8 students, beginning in 1993, through to the end of Grade 12 (see Appendix A). According to the Ministry, 23% of non-Aboriginal students did not graduate with a Dogwood certificate within six years, whereas 61% of Aboriginal students did not graduate within six years with a Dogwood certificate (see Appendix F, table 1). It is interesting to note that although Aboriginal student dropout rates do not differ greatly from those of non-Aboriginal students until Grade 10, in Grade 11 Aboriginal students begin leaving school in large numbers.

Females complete high school at a greater rate than do males for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (see Appendix F, Table 2). For both populations there is a noticeable drop-off in numbers leaving high school in Grade 11, but the trend is more pronounced for Aboriginal students. Interestingly, gender differences in Dogwood completion rates are somewhat larger for non-Aboriginal students than they are for Aboriginal students. The difference between female and male graduation rate percentages is smaller for Aboriginal students. In both cases, females graduate at a higher rate. Provincially (table 2), the difference between non-Aboriginal females and

males is 9%, while for Aboriginal males and females it is 6 %. In the district under study the difference between non-Aboriginal females and males is 20%, while for Aboriginal females and males it is 3% (see table 4).

Figures for the School District in which the study was completed are shown in Appendix F, Table 3. Dogwood achievement rates within six years in this district are significantly lower for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The figures show a 52% dropout rate for Aboriginal students by Grade 12, while fully 77% fail to attain a Dogwood certificate within six years. The numbers of students attaining a School Leaving Certificate are not given. The literature review shows significantly more numbers of Aboriginal students tracked into less academic classes or into Alternative programs than non-Aboriginal students.

The school District percentages for the cohort by gender are shown in Appendix F, table 4. Eighty percent of non-Aboriginal females graduate with a Dogwood within six years, while only 24 % of Aboriginal females do so. Of non-Aboriginal males, 60% attain a Dogwood diploma within six years, while only 21% of Aboriginal males achieve a Dogwood within six years of entering Grade 8. Although gender differences are not the focus of this study, the numbers indicate that this topic is deserving of further study.

Literature Review

A review of the literature identifies many reasons for Aboriginal students dropping out of high school. The inconsistency between definitions of the term “dropout” is a problem when comparing research. Regional variations in dropout rates, for example, could be attributed to many of the factors related to dropping out identified

in the literature. Due to variations in the definition of the term dropout, however, regional variances could be attributed to differing dropout criteria. Few researchers ranked the reasons for leaving school in the same order, though most causes were identified across various studies. Another problem in arriving at a clear understanding of the dropout issue is the variation between regions in data collection methods. Some school districts have been more thorough in tracking dropouts, and may have done so more consistently across time.

A number of significant factors identified as causes of early school leaving appear throughout the literature. It was not the intent or scope of this study to identify and discuss all causes of dropping out. However, I examine a number of the more important factors. The theory of *cultural discontinuity* is frequently identified as an important variable in the dropout phenomena. Another identified factor in Aboriginal withdrawal that is closely related to this is the issue of mainstream-dominated school cultures, which in turn helps fashion teacher and administrator attitudes towards minority cultures. Academic problems, level of parental involvement and family dysfunction are also discussed. Further school-related concerns influencing drop out rates are absenteeism/lateness, tracking, retention and distance travelled to and from school by students.

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Cultural discontinuity

Ledlow (1992) states "the cultural discontinuity hypothesis assumes that culturally based differences in the communication styles of the minority students' home and the Anglo culture of the school" (p. 2) creates misunderstanding and conflict, if not outright failure, for those students. A number of researchers discuss the clash of cultures

both inside and outside the school as being an important factor in the Aboriginal student dropout problem or negating this as not being a significant factor. To accept the cultural discontinuity hypothesis unquestioningly, states Ledlow, ignores two important points: most research does not support this hypothesis, and adhering to this viewpoint fails to consider macrostructural variables. Macrostructural explanations derive principally from the works of John Ogbu (1985, 1987; in Ledlow, 1992). This Marxist perspective (Ledlow, 1992) finds structured inequalities in American society to be responsible for minority students' failure in school. Discrimination, racism, and the circumstances of poverty contradict the notion of hard work and achievement leading to economic success. Ogbu (1985; in Ledlow, 1992) states that minority students' school problems are derived from "historical and structural forces beyond their control" (p. 868).

Hurlburt, Krockner, and Gade (1991) noted that native students cited lack of content about American Indian culture in school curriculum as a cause of dropping out. Reyhner (1992) emphasizes the positive identity formation that begins in the home with a trusting relationship between mother and child. This is built upon the cultural values to which the child has previously been exposed. Reyhner does not support the contention by some researchers that a traditional native upbringing will deter progress in school. A traditional upbringing provides for a secure sense of self, which in turn aids the student in facing problems at school. Wilson and Martin (1997) mention that for many Aboriginal students their culture as it exists outside of school must remain strong. Otherwise, they maintain, a sense of alienation develops in First Nations students, together with a sense of loss of value and strength. It is this value and strength that forms the foundation for

people to relate to each other in a positive way. Reyhner (1992) finds that a traditional native upbringing is not a hindrance in terms of success in school.

Brady (1996) finds the cultural discontinuity hypothesis to have more validity if viewed from a socio-economic perspective. Students of low socio-economic status, whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, face similarities of treatment by school staff and by peers. Brady suggests that these students are excluded from mainstream school culture. The hypothesis is therefore more a matter of economics. Deyhle (1989; in Ledlow, 1992) studied students who came from the most traditional Navajo homes, immersed in cultural traditions such as language, religion and social customs. These students did not report that the lack of native culture in the school curriculum hindered their school progress.

Other research supports Brady's (1996) contention that school culture excludes certain minorities. According to Wilson and Martin (1997), schools as organizations reflect the values of the dominant society. As a result of these organizations, the authors suggest, the key to understanding some of the conflicts inherent in young First Nations children is the culture of the school itself. Public schools reflect and are part of the dominant culture of a particular society, its values, history and perceptions.

Mainstream dominated school culture

Wilson and Martin, (1997) suggest that school cultures dominated by mainstream society reflect mainstream behaviour, values, and beliefs. Therefore it is understandable that teachers, most of whom are members of the mainstream culture, do not incorporate the values of minority groups into school culture. The public education system reflects a dominant value system, typically that of suburban middle class (Brady, 1996), which may

cause minority group alienation and withdrawal. The cultures of schools are based on these values, having been transmitted to the students by administrators and teachers. Brady argues further that students of minority cultures who are excluded from this peer culture typically elect to exit the school system prior to graduation. This problem is exacerbated by the trend of teacher education programs to exclude people of minorities (Reyhner, 1992). Teacher education programs tend to select candidates from middle-class, Western-European cultural orientation. Charleston (1992) suggests that teacher education, certification and unionization create conformity and resistance to change amongst teachers. Typically, Reyhner (1992) states, these graduating teachers are unfamiliar with First Nations cultures. The result is that many native and non-native students alike are excluded from the mainstream, middle-class ethos. In many cases the response is to drop out of school.

Brandt (1992) argues that students who tended to exit school early used a strategy of withdrawal by leaving current school placement in attempt to find a school environment more conducive to their continued persistence in school. The author suggests that this may reflect a cultural trait of withdrawal from negative situations. Brandt terms this phenomenon "floating" (p. 6). Students may transfer to another school in favour of a more comfortable, tolerant, or challenging educational experience. Hurlburt, et al. (1991), identify lack of focus on personal and cultural relevance as a factor in native student school withdrawal statistics. The authors suggest that if students' needs are not recognized in modern schools, their attitude towards schoolwork will be negative. Brandt (1992) identifies causes related to these poor attitudes in a study of administrators' perceived beliefs as to why native students drop out of school. "Lack of

interest in education", "academic problems and performance", followed thirdly by "no incentive to finish school" were identified as the top three reasons Navajo students drop out. Conversely, the most frequent reason given by the students themselves was that they found school boring. This points out a flaw in the administrator's understanding of student concerns and needs. Wilson and Martin (1997) clarify this problem: "When schools and other social institutions do not recognize and understand the significance of culture, children can come to see this as a fundamental denial of their worth as human beings" (p. 14). This observation on the negative effect of lack of cultural understanding is noted elsewhere. (Hurlburt et al., 1991) observe that feelings of rejection, depression and anxiety are prevalent among native youth. They also state that native students begin school as happy, productive children but by the onset of puberty have become resistant towards teachers, indolent towards schoolwork and generally sullen in school settings. Finally, Reyhner (1992) identifies lack of appropriate curriculum as a leading cause of school withdrawal for native students.

Administrator/teacher attitudes towards Aboriginal students

Another cause of Aboriginal student withdrawal is faulty perceptions on the part of school administrators toward native students and their needs. Ledlow (1992) raises the question as to how a dominant-culture teacher's perceptions of Aboriginal students' abilities influence their interactions with the students, and how this in turn affects the students' perceptions of their educational experience. Hurlburt et al. (1991), found that teachers frequently characterized native students as having poor motivation, negative attitudes, low performance desire and few, if any, career aspirations. Wilson and Martin (1997) suggest that as a response to this type of characterization many Aboriginal

students felt little of value occurred in school and perceived a lack of caring and connectedness with teachers. Reyhner (1992) observed that students often become discouraged by the lack of care they perceived on the part of teachers, and by the lack of individual attention they received (see also Ledlow, 1992). They perceived this as an indicator of rejection and dislike by (Deyhle, 1989). Hurlburt, et al., (1991) found that Aboriginal students felt that teachers did not care about them and that this resulted in disciplinary problems with the teacher. Native students frequently reported less positive opinions of teachers and classroom behavior and methods than those reported by their non-Aboriginal peers (Hurlburt, et al., 1991). Brandt (1992) found that many problems described by native students arose over personality conflicts with teachers and administrators.

Academic problems

Administrators perceived academic problems as a cause of native student withdrawal, but several studies (Eberhard, 1989; and Brandt, 1992) have indicated that academic problems were not a significant factor in native student school withdrawal figures. Eberhard (1989) found American Indian "stayers" were the academic equivalent of other school "stayers" in the district. Ledlow (1992) offers a tentative explanation for the dropout trend. She raises the question that some native students may consciously avoid doing well academically because they may encounter peer resentment for striving to appear "white." Brandt (1992) suggests that a reason for Navajo students dropping out is that schools do not engage them intellectually or socially. Brandt noted that students frequently state that school is boring.

Parental involvement

The degree of parental involvement in school has been identified as a factor in students' attitudes towards school and therefore influential in dropout rates. Eberhard (1989) states that if parents approach urban school staff to become involved in their child's educational process it helps the student to remain positive about school. If parents take the time to support their children in school this could be influential in the student remaining in school (Brandt, 1992). Brandt cites figures that show that 82% of native students who remained in school had parents who actively encouraged them to attend school. Only 56.7 % of dropouts responded by saying they felt supported by their parents. The author noted a similar effect for students whose parents became actively involved in school activities. These parents had children who tended to remain in school more. Reyhner (1992) identified lack of parental involvement in school as a significant factor in students dropping out of school. Eberhard (1989), however, found no statistical proof that parental status had an effect on dropping out. Two-parent families, however, had children who tended to remain in school more.

Family dysfunction

Family dysfunction is also an influence on early school leaving patterns. Wilson and Martin (1997) discuss how native students deal with issues surrounding sexual and physical abuse, and the resultant poor family and community relationships. Poor family and community dynamics results in fear of failure or failure itself. The notion of success becomes difficult to entertain. Wilson & Martin (1997) citing York (1990) note that self-destructive behaviour in First Nations children, young people and adults reflects the conflict between the two cultures that make up their lives. The pain and anger resulting

from this strife causes people to turn to substance abuse (Wilson & Napoleon, 1998).

The alienation that children from such homes feel, accentuates the lack of connectedness to schools. They begin to perceive both schools and homes as indifferent to their needs.

Brandt (1992) argues that alcohol and substance abuse are related to dropping out.

Reyhner (1992) however, disputes engaging in self-destructive behavior as a reason for dropping out. Reyhner does not support the hypothesis that substance abuse and dysfunctional native family dynamics can be implicated in the dropout problem.

Conversely, Wilson and Martin (1997) find that the parents of children who leave school early may be facing serious issues, challenges and stress on a routine basis centred around issues of substance abuse and poor inter-familial relationships.

School policies

A number of school policies, including streaming (or tracking), and retention have been implicated in dropout rates. Reyhner (1992) identifies tracked classes as a school-based reason for students exiting school prior to graduation. Further to this, many native students are placed in non-academic course streams by school systems. Brady (1996) and Reyhner (1992) identify the passive, rote learning styles typical of tracked classes, especially remedial classes, as a factor in dropping out. Frequently the type of low expectations placed on students in classes such as these leads to a sub-standard education (Reyhner, 1992). This frequently results in students dropping out.

In addition to streaming, grade retention has been identified as a school policy that adversely affects the dropout rate. Retention due either to absenteeism or failure to achieve academic standards has been put forth as a cause of native student school withdrawal. Brandt (1992) lists retention in grade due to absenteeism as a leading cause

of withdrawal, after boredom with school and problems with other students. The use of standardized tests to measure student success leads to many native students being retained in grade. This, in turn, leads to older students dropping out of school (Reyhner, 1992).

Radwinski (1996, in Brady, 1997) found that 80% of dropouts reported failing at least one subject in high school. Additional statistics showed that 30% of dropouts but only 7% of non-dropouts were held back a grade in elementary or junior high school. Eberhard (1998), in examining the progress of cohort years 1981-1985, noted that of 12 native pupils retained in grade, none was able to remain in school and graduate. In the entire school population only six of 51 students, (12%), succeeded in graduating. Reyhner (1992) identified inappropriate testing/student retention as one of seven school-based reasons for students dropping out.

Studies that show no connection between grade retention and dropping out highlight a further need for consistency of methodologies in researching the dropout problem. Brandt (1992) found no significant difference in grade retentions between students who withdrew prematurely from school and those who remained in school. Plateno, Brandt, Witherspoon, and Wong (1986) found no significant difference in grade or retention rates between dropouts and school "stayers".

Absenteeism and tardiness

Wilson and Napoleon (1998) examined figures on attendance and tardiness in the Prince Rupert School District of British Columbia. These characteristics were identified by most First Nations and non-First Nations educators as leading to academic problems. In secondary grades, students with a poor attendance record may be asked to leave the

system. Brandt (1992) found a positive relationship between absenteeism and leaving school early. Brandt clarifies, however, that absenteeism can be a symptom of early school leaving, as well as a contributing factor. He notes, as do Wilson and Napoleon (1998) that students with frequent absences may be forced out of school. Wilson and Napoleon (1998) conclude that, based upon interviews with teachers and administrators, even tardiness can be an influential factor in academic problems.

Distance travelled to school

Several researchers have found a connection between distance travelled to and from school and dropout trends. Reyhner (1992) mentions a school in San Diego, California where some students would get up at 5:00 a.m. to catch the bus at 6:30 a.m. so they could start school classes at 8:50 a.m. These students had a higher tendency to be absent or to exit school prior to graduation. Ledlow (1992) reports that students who commuted long distances to school withdrew at higher rates. Average travel distance to and from school influences dropout tendencies (Brandt, 1992). An interesting observation by Brandt is that students who live within walking distance from school or who have someone willing to drive them to school if they miss the bus stayed in school more. In interviewing the parents of First Nations students Wilson and Martin (1997) found many spoke of the great distances between villages and the town as a real problem. Travel distance to school is a major consideration in examining Aboriginal student early school leaving trends in the community where my study takes place. Many students living on an isolated Reserve have to arise at 5:00 a.m. in order to be at school by 8:30 (Band Council, 2002).

Racism and discrimination

The persistent and widespread issue of racism is reflected in literature dealing with issues confronting Aboriginal students. Turner (1998) states, "A well established attitude rooted in society is hard to change. Regrettably, the research shows that most of the usual culture and racism sensitivity programs have not been effective" (p. 9).

Turner's belief is that solutions such as that put forth by the British Columbia Human Rights Commission Report (2001) are not effective. This report identified a number of challenges that are central if equity and social justice in the public school system are to be achieved. The report identified a number of needs, one of which is "Cross Cultural and Anti-Discriminatory Education for all staff and students: The literature and consultation suggests the need to explore the issue of cross cultural and anti-discriminatory education for all staff and students" (p. 58). Turner (1998) appears to be suggesting that conventional approaches such as the above become academic exercises that fail to address the underlying attitudes of racism and discrimination. Jeffrey (1999; in British Columbia Human Rights Commission Report, 2001) observes that in the works reviewed by her there is the "repeated reference students and parents make to racism and discrimination in schools" (p. 6). Turner (1998) writes, "the students tell of the discomfort they feel as a minority in a majority culture, knowing that others might hold racist and cultural views of them" (p. 4). Siwallace (1998) identified a number of problems at an elementary school, one of which was that "Native students are being exposed to racism at (this school). This is being constantly denied and covered up by all concerned" (p. 8). Another problem identified by Siwallace is that of "double standards concerning rules for native and non-native students. As a consequence, professional

teachers tend to believe white children (students) over native students” (p. 8). The British Columbia Human Rights Commission Report (2001) recognizes issues of racism and discrimination facing Aboriginal students in today’s schooling system. In this report’s Analysis and Recommendations section, recommendation six, referring to the Cross Cultural and Anti-Discriminatory Education For All Staff And Students, an issue identified as needing attention is “the role of education in examining how structures perpetuate racism and discrimination” (p. 58). These are sensitive issues which much of the literature fails to discuss. As Siwallace (1998) notes, the issue is perhaps denied, but it is one that society and the education system must confront.

This literature review has revealed that there are gaps in our knowledge of the Aboriginal dropout phenomenon, as well as inconsistencies in methodology. Most studies have been quantitative in nature. Few studies have used the interview approach as a method of data collection. The literature review clearly indicates the need for more in-depth key informant interviews as a means of expanding our knowledge in this area.

Methodology

Rationale for selection of qualitative methodology

Although some research has utilized the interview method as a means of investigating the Aboriginal student dropout problem, a preponderance of research has focused on quantitative measures (see British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2000, 2001). The data from the ministry of Education presents statistics for the district under study and for the province as a whole. The information given reviews statistical dropout

data but does not address the underlying causes for the discrepancy in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal high school completion rates.

The literature reviewed in this study was either a review or discussion of the problem or presented findings based on quantitative measures. Hurlburt, et al., (1991) used a Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes. Eberhard (1989) presented data based on Proficiency and Review Tests and on grade point averages. Brandt (1992) utilized a School Characteristic Survey Questionnaire. Other researchers cited presented theoretical rather than empirical analyses. Reyhner (1992) examined seven cited school-based reasons for native students leaving school, while Ledlow (1992) examined the cultural discontinuity hypothesis. Brady (1996) looked at the problem in terms of the conflict of cultures. Although these studies provide valuable insight into the problem of Aboriginal students dropping out of school, they do not describe individual experiences. McMillan and Schumacher (1997) state that the control that is a characteristic of sound experimental research becomes a liability in the area of education. Research may be conducted in an artificial setting, where human participants act differently than they would in natural settings. The generalizability of the results is therefore limited. In this study as the researcher I examined the personal experiences reported by three participants in a multiple-participant case study. These descriptive data of individuals' experiences are not intended to be generalized to the population of Aboriginal students as a whole, but rather to provide a means of deepening our understanding of the problem of dropouts. As traditional experimental designs are not well suited for dealing with ethnographic phenomena (McMillan & Shumacher, 1997) the need is evident for in-depth ethnographic interviewing as a complementary methodology.

In one study that I discussed above (Wilson & Martin, 1997) the researchers spoke with children, youth, parents, educators, community support people and community members. Interviews were one hour in duration, and of these interviews, 49 involved children and young people. However, the design for Wilson and Martin's interview questionnaire is unknown as this information was not provided in their research report. The methodology for my project utilized a carefully constructed questionnaire guide (see Appendix B). My intent was to arrive at a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the unique school experiences of each participant. By limiting participants to three in my study, I was able to analyze and identify cultural themes in their experiences with a thoroughness that would not be feasible in a larger scale study like that reported by Wilson and Martin (1997). The broad scope of the study by Wilson and Martin (1997) would prohibit the type of in-depth methodological consideration and analysis I used.

Since this study is qualitative in nature, the development of a rapport and a suitable researcher-participant relationship was essential. Traditional positivistic, quantitative research designs have emphasized the external researcher looking objectively at a subject as if the subject were a laboratory specimen. In contrast the relationship in this study between myself as the researcher and the participants was a "relationship between equals, built on mutual respect, dignity and trust" (Lincoln & Guba, p. 26). Lincoln and Guba recommend that research "ought to move toward consideration of the respondent as an active participant in the research process" (p. 7).

Consistent with reporting styles in qualitative research, the term "participant" is used in place of the conventional scientific research term "subject" to imply a more

human interaction between researcher and participant, and to suggest more involvement in the research process on the part of the participant. In this approach the participant is treated with a caring approach recognizing his/her human dignity. As much as was possible in the relatively brief time span of this study a relationship such as this was sought. The establishment of trust was necessary for the participants to feel the comfort level necessary for them to reveal intensely personal and perhaps painful experiences.

This methodology was especially relevant because I was dealing with First Nations participants. Some participants may harbour legitimate resentment towards school bureaucracies and their staff. This could be due to historical injustices on the part of governments and school institutions towards the education of First Nations peoples. It may be more directly related to recent school experiences.

To employ a methodology based on positivist science in a research inquiry into issues surrounding Aboriginal issues may arouse further mistrust and resentment towards mainstream society and its institutions. Many Aboriginal peoples would view a quantitative analysis, as well as a qualitative approach if handled without cultural or personal sensitivity, as a further imposition of a dominant society "Eurocentric" method of interpreting their lives. The consequence might serve to alienate the very peoples the project was designed to benefit. A possible error in the selection of research methods would be loss of community support for the research project (Lincoln & Guba, 1987). The Aboriginal community could possibly reject the results. This would be consistent with Hillock's (in Beach, et al., 1992) proposition that "because everything must be examined through the human mind and because knowledge is a product of human minds, any separation of the investigation from that which is investigated is impossible." (p. 57)

The individual with his/her personal constructs and self-mediated views of the world must of necessity be the main focus in the search for new knowledge. As Cohen and Manion (1994) suggest:

if one favours the alternative view of social reality which stresses the importance of the subjective experience of individuals in the creation of the social world ... the principal concern is with an understanding of the way in which the individual creates, modifies and interprets the world in which he or she finds himself or herself. (p. 361)

These constructions are intensely personal and idiosyncratic social constructs "selected, built and embellished by individuals from among situations, stimuli and events available to them" (Lincoln & Guba, 1987, p. 25). They represent "meanings attached to events, situations, and persons by human beings in their effort to impose order on social phenomenon" (p. 25).

I recognized and attempted to adjust for the unique situation of First Nations participants. The significance they attach to their own social phenomena is perhaps quite different from the types of understandings individuals in mainstream society would typically utilize in understanding their own social constructs. The naturalistic approach to research involving First Nations participants is therefore more suitable than the use of positivistic science with its quantitative methodology. The training that educators receive in this absolutist perspective (Charleston, 1992) is that information derived from a non-Western cultural world view on non-Western technologies is immediately deficient and therefore subject to derision.

Confidentiality/anonymity concerns

In a research project where individuals are relating information that may contain sensitive or damaging information regarding some school bureaucracies, confidentiality was emphasized according to the risks. This study was undertaken in an area where some local individuals may be aware of the project. The possibility therefore existed that participant's names might be revealed despite the best intentions of the researcher. Theoretically this could place respondents in a position where they may be subject to recriminating remarks or actions. Selection of older candidates who have no current involvement with local school bureaucracies was one way of shielding the participants from the above risks. Another safeguard was to have individuals having direct knowledge of the participants' identities sign a written declaration that they would not divulge the identities of the participants. A third precaution was to keep the number of those possessing knowledge of the participants to a minimum.

As an interviewer doing in-depth questioning I was in a position of trust in that I had knowledge of information revealed by the participants that is very personal and private. Therefore I carefully safeguarded such knowledge, and omitted incidents involving personal trauma to respondents from the data. I used the information gained through the interviews to construct a broader understanding based on experiences of the participants. There was thus no incentive for me to disclose the identity of the individuals who participated in the study. Those individuals involved in the selection of participants for the study were familiarized with the principles of confidentiality and anonymity. This explanation occurred at the initial meeting with the involved individuals to introduce the project and elicit their assistance. This pre-empted the inadvertent

disclosure by these individuals of potential participants' identities. The support workers signed a form stating that they would adhere to the principles of confidentiality and anonymity for the participants.

Participants

The participants provided an understanding of their particular cases, generating no need or compulsion to generalize to cases of a similar nature (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). The rationale for purposeful sampling such as this is that a few cases studied in depth will provide valued insights about the area of knowledge under study (Borg & Gall, 1989). This method requires only a small sample size.

James, Frank, and Rueben (their names have been changed to protect their anonymity) were identified by First Nations Support Workers from the secondary schools in the city in a purposeful sampling selection procedure (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). Potential interviewees were to have dropped out of school prior to graduation and not re-entered any educational program. These workers were familiar with district Aboriginal students who had withdrawn from the local secondary schools prior to graduation. These workers initiated contact with possible participants to determine whether they were interested in being a part of the study. These three individuals were be selected from a remote Reserve within the School District, but who may now reside in the small community adjacent to the Reserve, or within the mid-sized city serving as the location for the study. I conducted an interview with a former Band Chief and current Band Councillor in order to compile a description of the community background from which the participants originated. There is no literature currently available offering this information. The reserve and nearby city both suffer from chronic unemployment,

poverty, and drug and alcohol abuse. Many families could be characterized as either broken homes or dysfunctional. Aboriginal students from this area are typically from low socio-economic status homes (Band Council, 2002).

The remote Reserve manages a logging operation that generates some employment. This in turn creates some seasonal employment in related forestry enterprises such as tree planting and spacing. The mid-sized city is characterized by high unemployment, offering little in the way of job opportunities for Aboriginal youth who have not graduated from high school. Employment opportunities for Aboriginal high school graduates is marginally better, with a number of graduates employed. Previously there were no role models provided by employed high school graduates. However, the hopeless view of the future in terms of employment, which has characterized local Aboriginal youth, is beginning to improve due to these employed individuals (Band Council, 2002).

The participants were selected from people between the ages of eighteen and mid-twenties. Key informants were chosen because of their special knowledge or perceptions that they would be able to reveal due to good communication skills. They were reflective individuals who may help the researcher achieve insights into their social phenomena and to better realize the implications of the findings (Borg & Gall, 1989).

Data collection

The qualitative interview method selected for this study is that of the standardized open-ended interview (Patton, 1987). A questionnaire guide (see appendix B) was prepared beforehand. This included a carefully chosen set of questions to be asked of each participant. Feedback on the questionnaire was obtained from the professor

overseeing my project. The questions are the same for each participant and the questions were asked in the same sequence during each interview. This method was chosen because of the need to arrive at the salient features of the participant's school experiences, enabling the researcher to arrive at knowledge of each participant's experiences in school that led her/him to drop out prior to graduation. The questions were worded in such a way as to allow the participants to reveal their own unique individual experiences with and perceptions of his/her school experiences.

The interviews began as a friendly, personal conversation to set a comfortable interviewer/participant relationship. The questions intended to gain the information sought were introduced gradually. The researcher attempted to direct the interview process along channels that elicited the relevant knowledge of each participant. The interview questions were framed in language that the participant were familiar with. This was similar to the everyday conversational style of the participants. The object of this approach was to facilitate an empathic, understanding, and trusting atmosphere together with a relaxed tone. The participants thus needed to feel comfortable within the language the process is framed.

I pilot tested the questions with an Aboriginal Student Support Worker to ensure that I was thoroughly familiar and comfortable with the process and the interview questions. This individual was thoroughly familiar with the communication styles of Aboriginal students and the differences that exist between Aboriginal students' communication styles and those of non-Aboriginal students. The individual understood how Aboriginal students feel about school experiences and how Aboriginal students may

react to talking about these issues. This step aided me in identifying the kinds of probing questions that were helpful in the actual participant interviews.

The support workers arranged a meeting at a location both convenient and agreeable to participants. The participants had a choice of sites for the pre-interview contact and the actual interview. This option existed as there may have been reasons why a particular site was not acceptable to certain participants. The local Band office had been arranged as an interview location. James, Frank, and Rueben all chose to be interviewed in their own homes.

I met with the participants at least one week in advance of the actual interview date. The pre-interview contacts served dual purposes. The pre-interview contact with participants was useful in establishing a personal relationship with the participants. The limited time afforded the researcher to interact on a personal level with the participants during a single interview made difficult the establishment of a deep level of trust. Therefore, this opportunity was used to make the participants comfortable with the process and with discussing school experiences. I hoped that the participants would feel a valued part of the process, rather than as subjects viewed through some objective lense. This meeting also provided sufficient time for each participant to give careful consideration to his participation in the project prior to signing the letter of informed consent (see appendix D). The information related to the research (appendix E) was discussed at the initial meeting with each candidate.

The research interviews occurred over a period of two weeks. Each residence provided a quiet room where the interviews took place with no interruption and where the interviews were not overheard. There was no possibility of the interviews being

overheard by uninvolved persons. The residences provided ample space for the researcher and participant to communicate in comfort. The option of the participants' home residences was intended to make the interview process more reassuring and comfortable to the participants. The sites allowed for the interviews to be taped without background noise interfering with sound quality. The interview sessions were tape recorded, allowing me to subsequently produce a verbatim transcription of each interview. This verbatim record led to greater accuracy in interpreting the verbal messages of the participants. Also, as I did not have to take notes, I therefore was able to concentrate more fully on the questioning process. This facilitated the formulation of effective probes.

I conducted a complete review of the transcript occurred soon after the interviews to check the quality of the content for accuracy and usefulness. Some useful analysis and evaluation occurred at this point while the interview was still fresh in my mind.

Qualitative data analysis for this research required careful consideration. Patton (1987) provided useful guidelines for analyzing and interpreting qualitative data. The first step was *analysis*;

the process of bringing order to the data, organizing what is there into patterns, categories and basic descriptive units. *Interpretation* involves attaching meaning and significance to the analysis, explaining descriptive patterns, and looking for relationships and linkages among descriptive dimensions (p. 144).

I utilized the evaluation questions generated in the methodology as well as insights and interpretations that emerged during collection of the data. I coded chunks of text in the

transcripts, giving thematic labels to each segment. I then compared similarly labelled themes between transcripts. This formed the basis for the evaluation of the school experiences of the participants. It is important to note that the questions generated during the planning process provide the focus in analyzing and interpreting the qualitative data (Patton, 1987).

Findings of the Study

Analysis approach

James,' Frank's, and Rueben's experiences were similar in terms of content, but the interpretations of and response to these experiences were at times similar and at times diverse. Each of these "information rich cases" (Patton, 1987, p. 52) provided insights that expanded on my existing understanding based on my own experiences and on the literature review. The analysis and interpretation involved "disciplined study, creative insight, and careful attention to the purposes of the evaluation" (p. 144). In using the case study method, my first step was to "pull together the data relevant to each case and write a discrete, holistic case study" (p. 148). My analysis then moved on "to looking for patterns across cases" (p. 148). Analysis involved "the process of bringing order to the data, organizing what is there into patterns, categories, and basic descriptive units" (p. 144). Interpretation meant "attaching meaning and significance to the analysis, explaining descriptive patterns, and looking for relationships and linkages among descriptive dimensions" (p. 144).

While "there is no one right way to go about organizing, analyzing, and interpreting qualitative data" (Patton, p. 187, p. 146), the methodology suggested by

Patton facilitates an effective means of organizing data and “identifying coherent and important examples, themes, and patterns in the data” (p. 149). The theory that emerged is derived “from the data; it is not imposed on the data” (p.158). No attempt was made to generalize the findings “to other situations, other time periods, and other people” (p. 162). The conclusions apply only “to those situations, time periods, persons, and contexts for which the data were applicable” (p. 162).

Participant profiles

Transcripts from each of the participant interviews were summarized as individual participant profiles (see Appendix B for an example). I omitted comments that I judged to be irrelevant to the research purpose as well as redundancies in order to give a readable account for the purpose of data analysis. In the analysis I looked at individual experiences, beliefs, opinions and attitudes based on school experiences. For example, the information that Rueben, Frank and James provided in response to the introductory question set “Establishing rapport” was summarized as follows. (Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of the participants. School, individual, and place names have also been omitted. The profiles provide a sense of the persona of each participant, keeping in mind that the study deals with unique individuals whose emerging personalities become part of the research process).

James

James has a fairly busy schedule. After work each day he likes to “relax, visit, socialize, go see my baby and my girlfriend.” He’s very involved in sports, playing baseball in the summer and “boxing when it’s open season.” He finds most days “fulfilling,” but sometimes “long.” He “always ends up doing something,” managing “to

accomplish something every day.” When asked he stated he was “happy with things generally.” He feels that if he weren’t working he would spend time “hanging around,” and stated, “I imagine I’d be pretty lazy.” He feels he’d have “more free time to get out more, do some more free time activities like running, swimming, working out.” He’d probably “work out a lot more, go to the gym and stuff, go to the pool.” A day like that would be fun. Although James values free time, he is grateful to be working: “Fun doesn’t give you money. You don’t get paid unless you’re working.” Despite his activity-filled life he occasionally likes to find time for “laying around, watching T.V., playing games, Nintendo or something.” James quit school for the second time when he was 19. He had dropped out earlier when he was in Grade 10, and then returned to an alternate school, where he completed the grade. Despite his generally fulfilling life James regrets not finishing high school; “I could be in college ... I would probably be graduating college now. I would have majored in English ... took some theatre.” When asked how that would make his life different, he responded, “I wouldn’t be working in a sawmill. Opportunities would be a little bigger.” The fact he didn’t go to college “sucks.” He “thinks about it quite a bit now.” James feels “like I’m missing out on something. Working nine hours in a mill, nobody knows your name. You’re a number.” He hopes to complete his high schooling and go to college. He’s talked about this with his girlfriend, but for now it’s work. He would prefer a situation where he could focus purely on his “academic goals,” with minimum distraction. During the interview it became clear James has a very quick mind. He was very well spoken and expressive, possibly the result of his considerable drama experience.

Rueben

For Rueben, a typical day is to “get up in the morning, 6:30 or 7:00, get ready for work, then leave about 7:30, walk to work, stay there all day, get off at five.” This would be a “good day,” sometimes bordering on “so so.” He said, “If things were different, I’d probably still be in school or college.” In high school he had plans to go to college. He wanted to be a carpenter, and “probably would have a better job.” Possibly he may even have “had a business.” For the time being he is unable to pursue his dream of furthering his education. “I have a family to take care of now” so he is reluctant to give up a situation where he works “pretty steady.” I asked if he’d thought of ways of completing his education, to which he responded, “We thought about it a lot of times, we’ve talked about it, and I’ve really done nothing about it.” Rueben would like a “bigger house” for his growing family. Rueben dropped out of school seven years ago. At the time he left he was “in different grades.” He was taking “a couple Grade 10 classes, couple Grade 12, mostly Grade 11 classes.” He was 18 at the time he dropped out. Thinking back on that event, Rueben stated, “I feel disappointment. Wish I didn’t drop out.” His idea of a good school is one where he would get “more help.” He would also try for a “more open” communication style between himself and the teachers, because in thinking back “I just sometimes sit there, not ask for it [help], or ask other students.” He would like “people that I could talk to that can help other students. He would like “a certain kind of a teacher,” a teacher who “would help everybody, like all the students.” Rueben is involved with his son in sports, taking him to T-ball. He enjoys being in a family situation. Rueben has thought deeply about his school experiences and how they have affected his life.

Frank

Frank gave well thought out and carefully considered responses to the questions I asked him. He saw this research project as a valuable opportunity to offer information and insights that would help Aboriginal students experience greater academic success. Frank clearly has an interest in the advancement of Aboriginal school interests. A typical day in Frank's life is to "get up and work, come back and mechanic." I asked him what he worked on and he replied that he had his own commercial vehicle. He is also busy working in a mill, where he sometimes "pulls a double-shift". Often he finds a typical day "boring," to which response he added a chuckle. He could be going "fishing" for relaxation." It "would put my mind at ease." He is experiencing considerable stress in his life. Frank has a family, but he is living apart from them at the time. Frank did extremely well in Art in high school and he had plans to go on to become an Art teacher. About this dream, he responded, "It's not lost yet." As far as continuing his education, at one point he said he tried "to get in correspondence and finish my Dogwood." If Frank were to return to school he would look for better "teachers' attitudes" and for an improvement in "my attitude." He would like a school that is "relaxed" with a good "mood." Frank looked into college at one point but, "just wasn't into it at the time." He said he was "still discouraged by [his] high school experiences."

The research focus

Why did Frank, James and Rueben drop out of secondary school? The interviews were designed to identify factors from each participant's school experiences that could be organized into strands or themes connecting similarities in participant's experiences. These related themes, together with the unique experiences of each individual participant

were analyzed and interpreted with a goal of understanding some of the factors related to dropping out. Their experiences illuminate some of the issues that may confront other Aboriginal students at risk of dropping out of school. The results are then considered in discussing pedagogical implications and suggestions for further research.

Data Analysis

Typical days. A typical day for Frank in high school when living on a remote reserve would be “waking up at 6:00, jump on the bus, get to town by eight. Start going to classes by 8:30.” I asked if it was difficult getting up at 6:00 and going all the way to town for school. He responded, “Ya. Tired when you get to school.” He found it hard to concentrate. A typical day for James during his second attempt at completing high school would be “to show up a little late, do lots of drama, hang around the theatre a lot.” When asked if he was often late, he responded, “Yes, I wasn’t very punctual at all.” This was not for specific classes, but “pretty much all the time.” When questioned further about a normal school day, Frank responded, “Umm, it depended what blocks we had, like some blocks I would skip out.” He found some days where “if it was Socials and English and stuff it would be tiring. But if I had electives, Art and stuff, it would be all right.” Rueben’s response to the same question was “Oh, I didn’t skip out that much. I usually went to all my classes. There was this, you had to be in school most of the day. There were some classes I didn’t like. I would skip out once in a while.” I asked Rueben if his attendance was noticed. He said “not really.” He wasn’t asked why he was missing time by anyone, “just the teachers.” Rueben said no counsellors brought up this matter. Later in the interview Rueben mentioned skipping out with more frequency as his school problems increased.

Themes addressed in the literature

The following five sections reflect themes discussed by the participants which were addressed in the literature review.

Classroom experiences-teachers. In speaking of his earlier elementary years, James recalled an experience concerning his relationship with a teacher that was not positive. This experience deeply affected his attitude towards school. James talked of a school where he began Grade 4 where “everything was fine and good. I lived there with my mom. It was kind of an interracial place so you got all sorts of people there so nobody really took notice or put you down or anything. But I moved to [name of town] for not even half a year, and my Grade 4 teacher really had an impact on me, and not good.” He described how “I never seen the outside at recess, I never got lunch.” He had continual detentions for not being able to do the work; “I left from my old school and we were still doing multiplication.” At the new school, “they were already into division, and I still hadn’t learned multiplication. Multiplication comes before division, right? So when she brought me up [to the blackboard] she really made a big scene about it.” James described how this teacher took his hand and said to the class, “Who can’t do multiplication? And she raised my hand in the air. Who can’t do division? And she raised my hand for me. Who can’t do spelling? And she raised my hand again for me. That pretty much was what stuck in my mind and I went back to my chair.” He had much lower grades after that, despite having no previous learning problems in school. “I began to hate it, hate being there. I wouldn’t do my homework.”

Rueben's earlier school experiences were positive. He recalled, "Oh, elementary school, it was fun for me." He passed all his grades, and "skipped Grade 6 to 7" halfway through the year.

Frank said it would make a typical day at school better if "teacher's attitudes, or some teacher's attitudes" changed. He recalls incidents where comments were made that were "not appropriate." I asked him if he could give examples. He replied, "smart remarks like when you walk in late or something," where the teacher said "What have you been doing, hitting the pow wow trail all weekend?" These sorts of remarks, Frank said, didn't happen regularly, "just some teachers."

I asked James in looking back if he could explain the treatment given him by his Grade 4 teacher. "I'm not saying she was racist, maybe she wasn't but there was only two East Indian kids and there was four, tops five natives in the whole school. It was a pretty rich school, pretty rich people who've got their students in there. At the time I couldn't understand it." Later on in the interview James mentioned this incident again; "I don't think she ever called me anything racist, she was just very biased, really picked on me. I don't know if it was because I was native or just because she didn't like me altogether." He said his attitude towards teachers changed. The next year in Grade 5, "I picked on the teacher because he was a teacher, and every time he tried to discipline me or something I would get lippy, tell him off and then go see the principal." James said he began to "really push my boundaries." When I told him I'd like to hear more of what he thought about this, he responded, "I think it gave me a higher social status in a way."

I asked Rueben if he could think of any times when there were problems in the class. He said, "There was unfairness, I think." It didn't happen that often, but "there

was sometimes when the teacher wasn't fair to some student." This involved "certain groups." When I invited Rueben to speak more about this, he said, "I guess the bad asses. I don't know what you'd call them." In talking further about problems in class, he mentioned "my English nine class. I think the teacher really didn't like me." Rueben went on to say, "she really didn't help me. She was always getting mad at me. Once I forgot my binder and she just gave me heck. I ended up getting suspended because I swore at her ... I just sat there and I was getting mad. She just kept reaming me out. I got mad at her and said f___ you." I asked Rueben how long she went on for before he swore and he said "a couple of minutes." Rueben said he tried to explain to the teacher; "I said I spent the weekend at my uncle's. I had my bag on the couch downstairs and my binder fell out and went under the cushions and I couldn't find it. I just went home without it. Then I went to class and I didn't have my binder or my novel and then she just gave me shit." In the office he said he "told them what happened. Told them why I swore at her. Got suspended for one day." Rueben thinks this was unfair, though "right now, I just look back and laugh." Rueben said, "She ended up failing me. After that I never got along with her. I had to go and apologize to her in front of the class." Rueben said the teacher did not say anything to him about the way she had spoken to him.

Violence/racism. I asked James to think back on his "problem" years in junior high school, and to describe some of his experiences from that stage of his schooling. He said that the first time he dropped out "it was almost as though I was afraid to walk the halls sometimes because, I don't know, it seemed to me like I was the kind of person some people would like to beat up." He said he was bullied frequently, "mostly verbal, sometimes it would get physical." When asked if he could give specific examples of

remarks directed at him, he answered “geek, loser, loner.” It would get physical, he explained, “if I decided to stick up for myself.” He described an incident where he accidentally tripped a boy in Physical Education. The student asked him to fight at noon, but James went to the First Nation’s Support Worker’s office instead. “Two other boys came in and said they would back him,” so he went outside to meet the “other guy,” and the two stood with the other guy. “So there’s me by myself in a big crowd of kids.” They fought, and James said “I never went back to school after that.”

Frank recalls having to defend himself often. “I remember the first two years of school we got suspended for fighting lots.” When I probed further about who was fighting, he said “We were. Like, whoever I hung out with that year. We had our own little group. He fought with “whoever said anything wrong to us or whatever.” I asked him for an example of something he would consider wrong. “Whatever stereotype,” he said. “You know, like ‘There goes a wooden Indian.’” That sort of remark got them into fights “most of the time.” The fights happened “mostly” at school. They were suspended “when we got caught.” I inquired if he felt the situations were resolved fairly. Frank said, “Not really...because half of the time I got suspended I was the only one suspended in the incident. The other guy got a warning or whatever ... we had fights with other Aboriginals ... we fought them and we both got suspended.” He can recall incidents where non-Aboriginal students were not suspended “several times.” I asked if administration would sit both parties down to resolve the issue; “No. Usually after I found out the other guy didn’t get suspended I just got mad and went to the vice-principal’s office and approached him about the unfairness of the situation ... but we’d just get in a hollering match and then I’d leave.” I asked him how many times he was

suspended for fighting and he said “five,” because of “slurs.” as “That’s the only thing,” he said, “that got us mad. The rest of the time it was o.k. Certain slurs made us mad.” Frank recalls incidents where Aboriginal students other than himself got into fights because of racist slurs “lots of times.” “This was I guess what they call ‘skaters,’” he went on. “They were the worst. They were the ones that always got in your face ... They’d just pick one guy and go and do it, and it would be someone different ... it wasn’t different people, it was basically natives. They picked on the ones that didn’t fight back, and I guess that’s why we fought back ... most of the students were good.” Later in the interview Frank returned to this theme of violence. “I guess later on in school cause of the earlier fights no one wanted to fight with us anymore. Basically they knew we weren’t going to take any shit.” In discussing his school experiences during a brief stay in another town, Frank commented, “We didn’t have any friends down there either but we didn’t get called names and all that other stuff.”

Rueben had similar experiences. He said he “began to hang out at my cousins. Before that I had white friends. I used to hang around with them. I found it better just to hang out with my cousins.” I told Rueben I would like to hear more of his thoughts on this. “Some of them,” he said, “just kind of drifted away and then I just found out they weren’t really friends ... some of them kind of got racist ... they didn’t really like me anymore. They called us down.” I asked Rueben what he meant by this. “Oh, they just made jokes about us, about natives.” Rueben felt they took on the attitudes of other students and “after Grade 10 it just got worse.” I asked him to describe a typical day in school at this time. “I guess it was hard,” he responded. “It was hard for me ... I’d just try to ignore all the racism and just try to have as much fun as I can, I guess.” “After a

while,” he said, “they would talk behind our backs. Like all the time we were there they were scared of us.” “I guess there were lots of fights,” he said, as they were “just sticking up for ourselves.”

The violence experienced by James went beyond student interactions. During a class an incident happened with a teacher “which was weird. I don’t even know what provoked it. I could have been lippy, but he grabbed me, slammed me up against the wall by my throat, and called me a ‘stupid Indian’.” James thought back on how he “didn’t appreciate it at all. He made me cry ... he embarrassed me in front of my whole class.” That experience had a deep impact on James schooling; “It put it to a good halt.” The teacher had to apologize, but “it didn’t matter to me.” In looking back on his experiences of being physically contacted by teachers, the belief James holds is that it is “shocking. You never expect it. They’re supposed to be teachers ... supposed to be respectable”, especially as, “I didn’t lay my hands on anybody and I didn’t call anybody names.”

Frank had a physical confrontation with a teacher as well. I had asked him to think back to a time when there was a problem in the class. He answered, “I remember one where me and the teacher actually got into a pushing match ... I came in late and he had some smart remark so I got mad and started swearing at him.” The remark, he said, “was sarcastic. But he was like one of those old school teachers who have been around forever, and they had their own way.” Frank recalls getting into fights in P.E. “playing floor hockey and it gets rough ... and they start whacking our hand with sticks and get mad and start fighting ... I remember fighting for some non-Native guys too during rough sports ... like the ones that got picked on too much.” This would happen “when the teacher was taking attendance or whatever ... like taking the attendance to the office.”

James recalls another incident where he was subjected to remarks that led to a fight. He was on a Band field trip. Another student yelled something from the back of the bus about his being “native.” James said he had felt “comfortable” on the trip until that point. He “ended up fighting with him after that.”

Classroom experiences – academic. Describing his earlier experiences in junior high, James had the attitude “I didn’t feel smart enough in some classes when you’re young. Some people are so smart and outspoken they just eat up all the time ... I never really had the time to catch up on things fast enough.” Rueben, in looking back, said, “I think it was worth it. I wish I’d finished,” but he had the same feelings of frustration expressed by James. Though there were classes like “Social Studies, Woodwork and P.E.,” that he liked, saying they “were easy for me,” he also said “Some classes I didn’t understand. It was hard, and I didn’t have no help.” It “just couldn’t sink in, I guess,” though he did get some help, but “not enough.” They gave “more to other students.” Rueben couldn’t really describe which students the teachers gave more help to, “Just students from the top of the class, more popular students.” Frank felt there was different treatment given to some students, saying teachers “had their favourites ... whoever got the desks by the front got more attention paid to them. They’d have good grades all the time,” he said.

James explained in more depth his feelings about junior high. “I don’t know if it was the pressure ... on the spot kind of pressure kind of feeling, I don’t know what it was.” James felt that at that time he still had the “not taking no shit” attitude he developed after his negative experiences with his Grade 4 teacher.

I asked Frank if there were other problems he may have had in school, to which he replied, "You get all this homework and you don't remember what's what cause you went through so much every day." He was on the eight-block rotation at the time. "The time periods were so short between classes. You get home, you've got all this homework, you forget what you're supposed to do from the first block. You do that a couple of times and your marks start going down. Just from a couple of papers or whatever, and it's hard to catch back up again. You give up hope to catch back up." At one point he had a First Nations Support Worker who "was really good at keeping track of you and making sure you get to class and all this other stuff." Rueben responded, when asked if a tutor would have helped when he experienced academic difficulties "Yes, I think so. Yeah." He feels he might have passed science nine with some extra help. "I think so, because it started off easy. The first term I was passing with a C and after that it just got harder. I failed."

Rueben developed a growing sense of frustration in one class; "I just couldn't understand. I couldn't understand. It was hard for me. I just couldn't understand everything I guess, then, I started skipping out. Went downhill from there and just failed." He responded to another class in the same manner, "So I kept skipping out, failed a lot of tests, didn't complete my work or homework ... in Grade 10 it just got harder and they just put me in communications," he reflected. I asked him if he was disappointed. "Yes, in myself, I think" Rueben stated, especially as in this subject in the previous year he "had no problems."

Frank, in speaking about school, talked about his experience in a different school. He said, "I went to school in another town, for a semester, and I passed all the classes. It

was like totally different, easier.” By easier I asked if the standards were not high, to which he replied, “Meaning they were as high. Everything was there, just like the teachers, everything was easier.” I asked Frank what differences made this so. He said, “I don’t know. It had all the same books; just the attitude of the school was way different. It was like they made us, or I, easier taught.”

Curriculum cultural relevancy. In discussing school leaving further, Frank related how he felt “the irrelevancy of stuff, you know. I didn’t think I needed to learn about the holocaust because we had a bigger one with smallpox. I started realizing stuff like that in the classes. You know the whole world’s view of the holocaust is in the history books and smallpox killed just about as many by a horrible death ... just as important.” When asked what his opinion of his time in school was now, Frank replied, “not very productive.” He went on, “Like for example when we went to history we learned about Alexander MacKenzie. That’s who the trail is named after. That’s where it stops in history. At him. Or it begins with him. But in reality it begins way before him ... It’s like history started when they came but my people were here before them.” Frank felt that the history he was taught in school did not recognize his own cultural history. “It’s probably why I skipped out of Socials lots ... they had a little chunk of native history but it was like prairie and different cultures ... Ojibway and others, not centred towards our location or our culture.” Rueben was somewhat more satisfied with the cultural content of Social Studies, but only remembered that “in Grade 8 we did native studies for one term, I think it was.”

James feels that more native cultural activities in school would have helped him. He mentions how “sometimes they’d do some drum making, dream catchers, stuff like

that.” He answered my query about how he felt about these activities with the reply, “Being Indian, it was good, it was fun.” He is of the opinion that he would have liked more of these activities, “go to see more pow wows, sweat lodges, more opportunities to see stuff like that.” Frank found the lack of cultural content made classes such as English and Social studies “tiring. But if we had electives it would be better.”

Family support. James had mentioned earlier that a big brother would perhaps have helped him. Frank stated that, “I guess family too is a big thing for us. Like when I had to stay in town I didn’t have my mom and everything else. The person I stayed with I felt like I didn’t have to listen to. We had a curfew and stuff but in our mind it wasn’t an authority figure that can punish you.” I asked Frank if he had been able to live with his immediate family if it would have made a difference. “Probably a big difference” he replied. Rueben did not talk at length on this topic, stating, “Yes, it would have,” if asked if living with his family would have made a difference to his attendance. However, elsewhere in the interview the importance of family to Rueben was very evident. He “got involved with drugs” because, as he said, “I guess I was getting depressed. Because after Grade 9 I lost my Grandma because she passed away. I was raised by her ... after my mother died. Then everything went downhill from there.” “I think so,” Rueben replied when I asked if a family support might have helped him deal with his problems. Not being with an immediate family “was a problem for me, anyways,” and “actually a few” other Native students facing similar problems living in town. A high school in his home community would “be a lot better,” Rueben stated. I asked him if he believed it might have made a difference to his staying in school and he responded, “Yes, it would.”

Themes not addressed in the literature

The following sections discuss common themes found in the experiences of the participants that were not addressed in the literature review.

Extra-curricular activities. James participated in sports in the early years of high school. He said, "We did the volleyball thing in Grade 8, but I kind of lost touch with all that stuff after Grade 8." Rueben "tried out for the basketball team one year," in high school, but he didn't make the team. He first played in elementary school, but didn't try out for the Grade 8 team. I asked how his participation on the team would have affected his attitude towards school. Rueben responded, he would "probably be having fun, be travelling around, meet different friends." When asked if he felt sports were important he replied "Yes, oh yeah. All the people that were on the team, they didn't do no drugs, they didn't skip out." I asked if he was involved in any other clubs or teams. "Yes," he said, "I was in high school rodeo." He found it was "good, we had lots of fun." I asked if he was involved the year he dropped out, and Rueben responded "No. The year before." He dropped out because he said "I just had it too rough. I was bull riding, started hurting all the time." Rueben felt he would have attended better and felt more comfortable in school if he had been more involved in sports and extra-curricular activities.

Frank believed extra-curricular activities would have been beneficial. "The way I see it," he said, "we didn't have the opportunity to get in after-school activities. Like say baseball or hockey because of the financial burden. I think now the band would pay for it but before they wouldn't. We didn't know about all this stuff or how to get signed up ... Because when we went to high school rodeo all of us that went, all our grades were pretty good, because you had to have a certain grade average to go to high school rodeo. We put

more effort into it ... It had a very positive influence on my part. To want to go to school just so I can keep doing it." I asked Frank about his beliefs about sports in general being helpful. "I think it would help," he responded, "because many sports need a certain grade point average to participate."

James found drama to be a strong attraction for him in high school. He became very involved in drama in his Grade 11 and 12 years. His school activities then involved "pretty much just the drama. I did some Choir." This kept him very busy after class hours; "I did lots of rehearsing, a lot of memorizing scripts, studying."

Frank found "usually field trips were all right. Skiing. Laugh. Have fun." Sometimes, though, "It felt awkward. Often you were the only Native going on that particular field trip," though in speaking of his classmates, "they'd usually talk to you ... but if I had a couple of friends it was all right." Rueben felt, when I asked him to think back on experiences outside of class in which the whole class took part, most field trips went well. "I went skiing ... short trips to the mills with my woodworking class." He said that he felt comfortable on these trips. He felt the outings were good experiences, when asked, and he said, "It was pretty good. I liked them. I don't think it could have been any better. I had fun."

Social isolation. Most of James problems in school occurred when he was "younger, like fifteen, sixteen years old." "When I went back to school when I was eighteen," James stated, "it was a lot easier, a lot better. School was better, I didn't mind being there. Before that [in junior high school] it was a big problem." When asked to clarify what some problems were, James responded, "It was kind of weird. I was a loner, didn't really hang out with anybody. I didn't do much. I had some problems with

teachers and some problems with students.” He “just didn’t gel with anybody.” James went on to say, “I used to hang out with all sorts of different groups, a few weeks at a time, sometimes months, sometimes maybe just a couple of guys, a couple of girls. I’d always end up by myself.” When James returned as an older student, he felt he “had a different social status so somehow I ended up passing all my classes.” When asked what could have happened to make his situation better he replied “If I had an older brother maybe I would have had somebody to look up to and see what you are supposed to do and where you are supposed to be at.” At this time he “felt lost. Around in a circle.” He believed at the time that “nobody knew me, I was a big loser.” He felt depressed in school because he “didn’t feel wanted.” As an older student involved in a school drama production, he said, “people look at you in a different way ... you get a different sort of presence.” He answered my request to clarify this by saying he “felt more accepted.”

Rueben experienced a similar isolation in the classroom. “In English I had trouble because I didn’t really understand, didn’t know what to do after a teacher explained it and everything. Then after a while I was getting people that didn’t really want me in their groups ... I just didn’t give any opinions ... I couldn’t think of nothing to put in.” Rueben felt “there were some social problems. Couldn’t really talk to people. Yeah, I was pretty shy.” He stated, “Friends in classes really helped me. Some classes I didn’t really have any friends ... like when I failed in Grade 10 and I had to repeat another class. Then I didn’t know anybody from the grade below me ... I was really uncomfortable. I don’t think I had no friends in my Grade 9 classes. In science, I had a lot of trouble. I failed Grade 9 Science twice.”

Teaching styles. Aside from drama, James liked English, due to the drama content, and mentioned “Shakespeare, the open readings, the assignments.” He enjoyed the tone, the “calm atmosphere of English, where, coming from the hallways, where everything was crazy,” it would kind of “bring you down a level.” The assignments would “definitely open up your mind.” The structure of Drama fit James’ learning style. He described how, “We’d start off with a bit of a warm up. Do some stretches, bust into groups to do some on-the-spot improvisation work. The teacher would give you ideas, characters, situations, scenes, and then you would kind of roll with it. You’re told to do one thing and you have about five minutes to figure out how you are going to do it and then do it. It’s kind of a half and half thing. They give you the instruction and then you get your free time to do it.”

Frank preferred Math and Art. He was “fairly” good at math, but liked “the teachers. They were more helpful.” Frank elaborated, “... but like my Art teacher. I could approach him and ask, and in math I could approach and ask and they would explain it in the way I thought it had to be explained. The other teachers were like ‘No, it has to be done this way,’ like right by the book. It was hard to associate it with anything you understand.” I asked Frank if it was important for him for teachers to recognize his unique learning style. He replied, “Probably, yes. That’s the best way to describe it.” I asked Frank to explain what it was about Science he didn’t like. He replied, “The teacher we had at the time.” He continued, “If they [the teachers] spend time with you then you will like them. Some teachers didn’t open up. They couldn’t have a conversation with you ... they have a formula, whatever’s in the book, and they don’t put it into different wording ... in something that might be familiar. Like we come from a small community

and we go there and your world gets flipped upside down. Like those formulas, say those pie charts they use ... they could have used something different we could relate to.” I asked Frank if this meant he often had to figure things out on his own. He responded, “Ya. I got tired of that after a while. I just quit going ... the next year we got a good teacher ... then the next year I’d get all good grades. The teacher put in that extra little bit.” Frank responded, when asked to clarify what he meant by a good teacher, “One that takes time with each kid. Mostly in class ... like the teachers that help you right there on the spot and make the time to help everyone else.” Frank mentioned that, “some teachers would come back at lunch, but most students didn’t want to do that.”

Teacher expectations. Frank said that “in Art, I guess I was good at it and I had higher expectations placed on me ... right from the beginning of the year he told us you have an A. Your job is to hold onto that. That’s what I did I guess. Instead of going from zero up we were at the top already ... it was just a different teaching style.” I asked Frank if there were any other aspects of this person’s teaching style that made him successful in the class. Frank suggested “his expectations of me. When I came to class I’d help him watch it. Or if he was helping someone else I would help other students ... it made me feel good, so I kept going to that class ... I did fairly well when I got that placed on me.” Frank expressed the opinion that this only happened in “certain classes and different teachers.” Frank felt the expectations placed on him varied between classes. “Some classes, like I’d write down whatever and still get a passing grade and in other classes I’d do that and fail big time.” He said. “The ones that didn’t care passed me ... it felt like I was the only one where that happened. Cause I know some friends of mine tried it and they got failing marks.” Upon further probing, Frank felt this didn’t happen

with his non-Aboriginal friends. "Some of them [teachers] didn't have the same expectations, because I was native." Further on in the interview I asked Frank if anyone offered to help him catch up. He felt "they gave up hope too. Some of them did. Some gave us sheets and said 'You can do this and then pass the course', and other ones said, I don't know, 'There's no hope I guess'. They didn't say no hope but the way they explained it sounded like we didn't have any, or I didn't have any." I asked Frank how he felt about that now. He said "I regret it, not having my Grade 12."

James believes he began "playing stupid or just being plain stupid" as a coping mechanism. He was placed in Independent learning class; "I think they gave me that because I don't think I was doing so well." He had begun to notice in regular classes "you wouldn't be asked questions so often." James believes the expectations placed on him lessened; "You'd get your homework, but if you failed it or whatever you wouldn't be told about it, you'd just get your grade when the grade was ready. No chance at catching up."

Frank felt similar frustration. "The classes I liked to go to were taught the way I thought I needed to be taught. The other ones were by the book. Nothing else mattered." When I questioned Frank about this, he said "I hear the same story all the time about natives. We don't put forth the effort. I didn't hear the teachers say that but that was the feeling I got." I asked Frank if this was a personal belief and he responded, "Other native kids at that time felt that way too. He went on to say, "It was like we shouldn't be there, or something ... and that we were lazy. The stereotype."

Substance abuse issues. At the time James was experiencing serious difficulties in junior high school, he had some relatives arrive in town to stay, "already experienced

in drugs and alcohol, which was new to me.” James said, “they got into my head” when all this [school problems] was going on,” so “it was kind of a place to go. I could hang out ... drink some beer, smoke some pot, have some fun ... it just fit right in.” James went on to say, “I wasn’t living anywhere. I just bounced around ... got mixed up with the wrong people and what they were doing ... I got into trouble and spent a week in jail. It was only a week but that’s all it needed.” James realized the course his life was taking, and he learned from the experience. “I got in trouble early and learned fast. I didn’t need to do that anymore. And I think that’s where I started to turn around.” In reflecting back on his experiences with the legal system, James feels it never would have occurred if he “had been able to remain in school. I wouldn’t have been in that position.” “It was good,” he continued, “to go through these experiences, in a way,” in that they encouraged him to return to school.

James feels his social status improved when he returned to school at eighteen, being “a little more mature.” Prior to that, he felt depressed in school, because he “didn’t feel wanted.” As an older student involved in a school drama production “people look at you in a different way ... you get a different sort of presence.” He answered my request to clarify this by saying he felt “more accepted.”

When I asked Frank to describe his first few years in high school, he answered “Culture shock, basically ... Out here our whole school was like thirty people. When we moved to town that’s what your class is ... I don’t know, just the town life is totally different from out here. Out here it’s like you go to whoever’s house, and when you get to town it’s like a lot of people you know are all drinking and whatever, and you go and join them, and after a while school just isn’t that important.” When I asked Frank to talk

more about this issue, he said he got caught up in partying “for the first two years. Most of us that came from here were a little group of partiers.” Eventually he ended up “Getting in trouble outside of school ... ending up in the drunk tank.” I asked Frank if this led to any legal problems and he responded, “Ya. We were charged for fighting.”

When Rueben began having more serious problems later in school, he said, “I started doing drugs, skipped out a lot, and then I just got fed up. I was broke, I just dropped out.” Rueben felt that he “could have had more support at home. If I didn’t get involved with drugs I would have went to classes.” When asked what could have happened to make his situation better he replied, “If I had an older brother maybe I would have had somebody to look up to and see what you are supposed to do and where you are supposed to be at.” At this time he “felt lost. Around in a circle.” He believed “nobody knew me, I was a big loser.”

School withdrawal. The participants commented briefly on what was happening in school at the time they dropped out. Nearing the end of the interview, James stated, in response to my question as to how he would describe his school experience the day he first dropped out, that he was “pretty nervous pretty much most of the time.” As we talked about these issues I could feel the relived feeling of resentment. James went on to say, “It was like getting fed up, tired. Tired of putting up with it. Yeah, sick and tired of taking the back hallway, walking the halls by yourself, feeling like everybody is looking at you like you’re stupid, a dork, you don’t fit the standard.” Frank used similar terminology when we talked about school withdrawal and what was happening the day he dropped out; “it was so long of being in school, I don’t know. I got tired of it. Or I just didn’t want to put forth the effort anymore.”

First Nations Support Worker roles. James found the First Nations Support Worker to be a valuable resource in school, saying “she was there, she was there when I came back.” Frank found the native worker to be “pretty good.” “She put her time into you,” he stated, “but it depends on which school you go to ... she didn’t want to see you fail.” Frank said she “genuinely cared.” The worker would do “everything, from school to just talking. Like, the relationship stuff ... when we were in trouble, she would try to fix it.” Rueben recalls First Nations Support Workers in high school as being helpful, “she was really helpful to us ... asking us questions, how we were doing in class and everything, trying to help us. She was really nice to us.” Rueben felt it is important to have someone show genuine interest and caring, “especially another native.” He said he “felt awkward trying to talk to a white person who was trying to help me. Some were sincere, but other ones I think they were just doing their jobs. There were some teachers that really tried to help ... they were concerned I was failing and not doing well.”

Summary

The quality of classroom interactions with teachers is important, with negative interactions with teachers negatively impacting the degree of academic success of the participants, as well as helping create negative attitudes towards school. Violence and perceived racism, and stereotyping directed at the participants by both staff and students were crucial factors limiting the school success of each participant. Academic problems confronted the participants, with two of them being placed in remedial classes. The degree of culturally relevant curriculum content proved to be important in how much the participants valued their school experience, and how valued they felt as members of a cultural minority. The participants all expressed the view that adequate family support

would have increased their school success. The participants all identified extracurricular activities as playing an important role in school. Social isolation was a problem experienced by all three participants, having a negative effect on their attitudes towards school. Teaching styles were important as a determinant of the participants' school success. The level of teacher expectations placed on the participants emerged as a critical factor in engaging the participants in the learning process. Each of the participants became involved in substance abuse as their school experiences proved unsuccessful, and their misuse of substances was greater due to the lack of adequate supervision at home. At the time of school withdrawal all participants reported feeling discouraged and tired of the many problems they confronted in school. Adequate First Nations Support Worker support had a positive influence in helping the participants cope with the many personal and school problems they faced. The transition from the small community to a city high school was difficult in terms of class changes and student numbers. Social alienation occurred with all three participants. The loss of community and family support was identified by participants as having a negative effect on their school experiences.

Discussion

My original purpose in this study was to investigate why Aboriginal students dropping out of secondary school in numbers disproportionate to their representation in the population. I examined the experiences of three Aboriginal dropouts to determine the attitudes and circumstances that led each to leave school. Although some factors identified by the participants that led them to drop out of school have been reported in previous research on Aboriginal dropout, contributing factors emerged from the interview process. The experiences of the participants reveal a complex of problems they faced in

the school system which led them to develop negative attitudes towards the school system and then to subsequent attrition. Factors extraneous to their school experiences emerged, but it appears that the school system generally lacks the flexibility to address these issues. Many of the issues raised by Rueben, James and Frank were consistent with previous research findings. A cascading series of factors such as long travel times to school, loss of a supportive community, racist slurs and bullying, and lack of appropriate instruction can be directly implicated in the degree of school success experienced by each of the participants in this study.

Typical days. One of the participants mentioned travelling to school in the city from his small community. This meant arising several hours before school began in order to be there by 8:30 for classes. He commented that he was often tired and found it hard to concentrate. This is an issue for any students confronted with long bus rides to school (Reyhner, 1992; Brandt, 1992).

Classroom experiences and teachers. The participants in this study found many teachers to be caring and helpful. One participant's successful experience in a school with a "different attitude" in another town illustrates that with many teachers, and in some cases whole schools, racism and discrimination were not evident. Each of the three participants was subjected to verbal harassment and shouting, and in some cases with what were perceived as racist remarks. In two of the participants' experiences, physical contact occurred with teaching staff. There appears to be validity to Siwallace's (1998) assertion that programs designed to eliminate discrimination and racism from the school have not yet achieved their goals. However, the observations Siwallace (1998) made concerning inequitable treatment of Aboriginal students by some non-Aboriginal staff

bear close similarity to experiences related by all of the participants in this study. This leads me to question the process by which white middle class society, the predominant resource pool for teacher recruitment, imposes its attitudes on people of difference or minorities, and to speculate about how we can begin to change unfair and racist practices.

Violence/racism. Perceived racism, bullying and violence negatively affected the school experience of each participant. One participant mentions how white friends from his small community began to display racist behaviour to native students after moving to town. Although the participants noted that most students did not exhibit racism, all the participants reported being frequently subjected to remarks that gave a negative portrayal of them as individuals or as members of the Aboriginal community. All were subjected to violence from other students during their school years. There is a sense in listening to their stories that this was difficult to tolerate. All resorted to fighting as a means of defending themselves, and this happened with great frequency. The treatment at the hands of fellow students determined that they socialize along racial barriers for their own protection.

With respect to the violence they experienced at school, further probing revealed that the participants perceived that application of school disciplinary procedures were inconsistent, and, at times, inequitable. Attempts to discuss the matter with administration were unproductive, leading to further confrontations. The penalties for fighting were applied more consistently to Aboriginal students, whether they fought with non-Aboriginals or with other Aboriginal cultural minorities. It was reported that if fights arose between whites and natives, the natives were more often suspended. The British Columbia Human Rights Commission Report (2001) addresses this issue of social

justice. This report notes that disciplinary decisions often favour non-Aboriginal students. The school culture may be responsible for having encouraged the development of these attitudes, and is doing little to rectify the situation (Siwallace, 1998). Although the above anecdotal records are perceptions only, and cannot be determined as fact, they nevertheless do portray how each participant perceived the experiences. These were the lived experiences of the participants, and therefore for them it was a reality. The effect either way is to create on the part of students the same negative attitudes towards school. We therefore cannot ignore these experiences, and we must include them in the data. These issues need to be recognized as a possibility in the experiences of many Aboriginal students.

Academics experiences. The participants experienced difficulties with academic studies. One commented on the difficulty of keeping track of the great amount of homework assigned over the course of an eight-block schedule. Turner (1998) completed a student survey in which it was concluded that there was an "inability of the majority of the First Nations students to cope with the barrage of homework tasks" (p. 9). There are a number of reasons homework isn't getting done at home. Turner (1998) states further: "The resulting burden, guilt and frustration they feel, needs the attention of teachers and schools, particularly secondary schools" (p. 9). Academic problems were mentioned as a reason for two of the participants being placed in remedial classes. This issue has been raised by Brandt (1992), who points out that remedial placement is a standard response with Aboriginal students experiencing academic difficulties. Yet some research suggests that this intervention might be very effective. Brandt's research identified a problem with

Aboriginal students who move frequently and find it difficult to adapt to the curriculum at their new school. This was the experience of one of the participants.

Curriculum cultural relevance. The lack of cultural relevance in the curriculum was mentioned by each participant as a problem. The cultural discontinuity hypothesis as an explanation for decreased Aboriginal student school success is supported by the experiences of the participants. In each case the lack of strong cultural ties appears to have negatively impacted on the participants' school success. For each participant, the relevance of the education they were receiving was called into doubt during the interviews. Each participant clearly expressed his belief that more curriculum content exploring and validating his cultural heritage would have made his public school experience more meaningful. They each identified cultural awareness programs as being helpful, and each expressed the belief that increased cultural content and activities in school would likely have improved their success in school. This point is apparent in the testimony of one participant who attributed a large part of his school withdrawal to his increasing awareness of the imposition of a dominant cultural view of history in place of his own, thereby ignoring significant aspects of his cultural background.

Wilson and Martin (1998) in their research noted, "there is a great deal of discontinuity between the world views of First Nations families and public schools" (p. 2). Wilson and Martin (1997) recommend that teachers must "move beyond the walls of the school. Incorporate field trips and real experiences. Immerse children in cultural experiences in which learning becomes a natural part of living" (p. 53). Reyhner (1992) comments that "attempts to replace Indian identity with a dominant cultural identity can confuse and repel Indian students and force them to make a choice between their Indian

values or their school's values" (p. 10). The comment by one participant that he found moving to town a "culture shock," where there were as many students in one class as he previously had in his whole school supports the findings of previous research. Wilson and Napoleon (1998) comment:

In this and other districts, students from remote villages face challenges when they transfer to a larger centre to complete secondary school. They are in larger classes with teachers who do not know them personally. The pace is quick and does not allow for individual flexibility. (p. 38)

Family support. All of the participants in the study identified family issues as influencing their degree of success in school. They each voiced the problems that arise from boarding in town, or from the lack of a two-parent family. The participants voiced their beliefs that more support at home would have improved school success and perhaps helped them to resist the temptation offered by substance abuse. Brandt (1992) notes that, "parental support and encouragement, communication with and involvement in school activities, parental employment, and a two parent home all encourage school persistence" (p. 8). The importance of parental support is also noted by Reyhner (1992). All of these factors, to varying degrees, were lacking from the experiences of the participants. Brandt (1992) states "children in environments where substance abuse is not a problem are likely to persist in school" (p. 11). There are many reasons why parents do not participate in the educational process. It should be noted that "the Aboriginal parenting community has been and continues to be, marginalized in the public education system" (British Columbia Human Rights Commission Report, 2001, p. 56). The experiences of the participants lack evidence of parental involvement in the

participant's schooling experience. The reality of the socio-economic backgrounds of the participants due to historical injustices and the social fallout are only too clear in their comments.

Extra-curricular activities. Socio-economic status and degree of parental involvement encouraged in the schooling process affect student's participation in school sports programs and in sports outside of school. The participants all experienced some degree of involvement in sports, and noted that it contributed to their degree of engagement in school and in an increased academic standing. They reported the activities as being fun, and one participant commented that he would have travelled, socialized more, and likely not have become involved in drugs and alcohol had he continued to be involved in school sports. However, the opportunities afforded them both inside and outside school were limited. One participant in this study related how even the process by which registration took place was unfamiliar and therefore prohibitive. Class field trips outside of school were regarded as worthwhile, and "fun." Wilson and Napoleon (1998) state that "First Nations students are greatly underrepresented in sports and extra-curricular activities" (p. 29). They go on to say that "students have a desire to participate in many extra-curricular activities and out of school sports but couldn't meet the requirements or the costs of out of school sports registration" (p. 29). The strong beliefs the participants expressed in the value of such activities suggest that efforts be made in the school system to facilitate participation in extra-curricular activities by all students. If the participants were able to maintain an acceptable grade point average in order to remain in the activities, the school system must

move beyond a primary focus on academic standing to look at other ways of increasing student engagement in school and thereby boosting student achievement.

Social isolation. The participant's experiences of alienation and of social isolation, either alone or in small groups reflects issues around the personal self-esteem of the participants and how it was diminished by their experiences. Each had stories to relate which portrayed remarks and slurs denigrating them as individuals and as members of a specific cultural minority. Both their personal sense of self-worth and the value each placed on his culture suffered, a similar finding to that reported by Siwallace (1998) and Turner (1998).

Teaching styles. One participant commented that with some teachers it was difficult to communicate, or to carry on a conversation. Another commented that it was the students who sat in the front of the class who got all the attention. Wilson, (in Brady, 1996) notes that, "teachers seldom, if ever, made contact with Indian students in their classrooms" (p. 7). Participants reported, however, that some teachers made the effort to communicate with all students, and seemed to care, whereas others were "just doing their job." When asked what his idea of a good teacher was, Frank replied that it was a teacher who took the time for all the students in the class, as they needed help. Teachers need to make the time to assist all students in their classes. Teachers who took the time to explain concepts in creative ways rather than just repeating the textbook were mentioned as being effective. Mainstream school cultures may need to adopt a more flexible approach in addressing the learning styles of Aboriginal students.

Teacher expectations. The level of teacher expectations experienced by the participants influenced the success of the participants in individual courses. Participants

identified courses where the teacher clearly placed high expectations on them, as leading to increased student involvement in the course as well as academic success. One participant related how he began to act stupid as a coping mechanism in the face of perceived low expectations on the part of teachers. In order to achieve some social status he began to engage in disruptive behaviours. Turner (1998) comments that teachers are aware of the connection between the degree of teacher expectation and achievement levels. The rise in self-esteem "is not an independent variable but is a reflection of how competent an Indian child feels" (Reyhner, 1992, p. 10). The experiences of the participants reveal the diminished self-esteem they experienced through lowered teacher expectations. The data suggests Aboriginal students need to sense that teachers place high expectations on them for course requirements. The degree of positive self-image students develop in relation to their courses appears to be a determinant of success.

Substance abuse issues. Substance abuse was a factor in the experience of each of the participants. As each participant experienced more difficulty in school, the tendency to become involved in drugs and alcohol increased. Lack of supervision at home and living in town away from family seemed to make the participants more susceptible.

School withdrawal. At the time each participant finally chose to leave school, there is a common theme of being no longer able to cope with the racism and stereotyping, or the same old routines of school, of problems with teachers and with difficulties with the work. Ledlow (1992) observes how this can lead, ultimately, to failure. There is a sense that each had grown frustrated to the point that school was no longer bearable.

First Nations Support Worker roles. The participants identified First Nations Support Workers as being a valuable resource in school. They provided a safe meeting area and someone for students to discuss their school or personal difficulties with. One participant stated that it was important to have a native to talk to so that he felt comfortable in discussing problems. Siwallace (1998) and Turner (1998) reiterate this theme. There is an evident need based on this and some of the above discussion for more Aboriginal representation on the staffs of schools.

Conclusion

The problem of why Aboriginal students drop out of school is very complex. The results of this study reveal many commonalities in the experiences of the participants, and yet individual differences as well. Therefore we have to be cautious in using pre-determined categories to interpret why Aboriginal students leave school prior to graduation due to the wide range of problems revealed in school experiences in this study. In order to arrive at a complete understanding of why Aboriginal students drop out it would be necessary to interview all students who do drop out. The causes of dropping out may go beyond our traditional understanding of why Aboriginal students leave school without having graduated. All three participants expressed their disappointment at not having been able to go on to college or university. The specific career aspirations of each participant were eliminated by their failure to succeed in school. The long-term consequences are sporadic employment and a sense of frustration at not being able to achieve personal aspirations or potential.

Weaknesses of the study

Borg and Gall (1989) mention the risk of emotional involvement when the researcher takes an active role in the study, which may create conflict in roles. However, in qualitative research, the research is the research instrument and therefore, this report is a co-construction. Frank, Rueben and James contributed their recollections, but I framed the questions, selected and sequenced the compilation in the report, and added interpretations.

Patton (1987) cites the risk in standardized open-ended interviews of not being able to follow potentially informative lines of questioning due to the rigid structure of the interview guide. Patton (1987) also mentions the interview guide may curtail pursuing alternate approaches in questioning different participants in order to investigate their own unique experiences. This in turn will “reduce the extent to which individual differences and circumstances can be taken into account” (Patton, 1987, p. 114). In reviewing the data, I determined in retrospect that some questions were biased or leading, and they were omitted from the data. This represents a potential loss of information. An example of a question that could be interpreted as leading that was left in the data was when I asked Frank if it was difficult getting up several hours before school began to catch the bus. Although it was a closed question, I used it for the purpose of confirming implied information. Another possible weakness is that I contacted the participants to determine if they would like to audit the analysis, but each declined, waiting to see the completed project.

Recommendations for further research

Further research of a qualitative nature should examine the causes of the oppositional nature and seeming disinterest exhibited by many Aboriginal students in the

classroom setting. Research should also address the gender difference in graduation rates in Aboriginal students. This might help clarify possible systemic differences in expectations between male and female students, and in the process reveal possible inconsistencies in treatment between genders. Research that examines post-secondary teacher training programs should be undertaken. This would look at the issues of professional development of teachers in terms of internal value systems, and examine the intellectual aspect of teacher preparation. Research that provides an examination of the process by which the dominant, white, middle class society, the predominant recruitment pool or teachers, derives its attitudes towards ethnic minorities would prove useful. This could be incorporated into a study of the intellectual preparation of teachers.

Further qualitative research into the cultural discontinuity theory as a factor in Aboriginal student attrition should be undertaken. The results of my study support the cultural discontinuity theory. It is possible that future research may reveal that Aboriginal students identified with the most at-risk factors for dropping out could be more susceptible to the lack of a clearly defined cultural support system. Or, it could be that Aboriginal students enrolled in particularly intractable and non-inclusive schools show greater evidence of alienation and eventual drop out.

Interviews of those Aboriginal students who stay in school would allow for comparison of their experiences with those who quit to determine commonalities and dissimilarities. An example would be a look at parental influences to determine if those who stay have parental involvement in their schooling while those who do not stay lack community or family support.

Pedagogical implications

Teaching staff should invest effort into understanding the experiences and perspectives of Aboriginal students, as well as promoting open communications. This may take time and effort, but the result will be increased comfort and participation in classroom settings by Aboriginal students. Students who seem unwilling to participate, seem quiet, or appear to be oppositional may respond to teachers with a caring, respectful, inclusive approach. This approach would place high value on participation and convey high expectations on Aboriginal students. They must be viewed as equals both from a cultural perspective and as human beings, and this perspective must be translated into equitable practices, for example, in decisions about discipline.

Including curriculum content that reflects Aboriginal culture in a sincere, relevant way will encourage the participation of Aboriginal students in the learning process. Aboriginal students must feel that their cultural history is validated in the curriculum. This will increase their sense of belonging and connectedness within the school system, as well as increasing their self-esteem and pride in their cultural heritage. An added benefit is that non-Aboriginal students will have an opportunity to learn about Aboriginal cultures and epistemologies, with a possible outcome of increasing their tolerance of others.

While many Aboriginal students may perceive themselves as being academically competent and capable of succeeding in traditional methodologies, there is a need for pedagogical methods suited to the learning of the types of students that were interviewed. This must include teaching approaches that provide for the unique and different learning styles and processes of Aboriginal students and, indeed, for all of our students. This may mean dispensing with traditional or "textbook" routines to make knowledge relevant and

accessible to the experiences of Aboriginal students. If one approach to conveying content doesn't work, then an approach First Nations students can incorporate into their cultural learning style is needed.

Alternative methods of assigning work will increase the academic success of First Nations students who may miss class sessions due to cultural or family reasons.

Homework assignments need to be coordinated between classes to avoid confusion resulting from excessive homework demands across courses. The excessive travel time sometimes faced by many students makes completing homework in the evenings difficult, especially if there are numerous assignments they may have difficulty in organizing.

Summary

I found my conversations with Rueben, Frank and James to be both humbling and fascinating. Their comments were brief, but full of import. I was struck by the resiliency and determination of these individuals in remaining in school for as long as each did. I was left with an overwhelming realization of the challenges faced by many Aboriginal students in the regular school system. Equally as strong is my conviction that change must happen immediately to begin ensuring equality of opportunity for Aboriginal students in the school system, and consequently in society.

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APPENDIX A

Tables

Table 1: Secondary School Progress: Students in Grade 8 in 1994

Provincial percentages	Gr 8	Gr9	Gr 10	Gr 11	Gr12	Dogwood
Non-Aboriginal	100%	99%	98%	96%	89%	77%
Aboriginal	100%	93%	87%	75%	60%	39%

Table 2: Secondary School Progress: Students in Grade 8 in 1994 by Gender

Provincial percentages	Gr 8	Gr 9	Gr 10	Gr 11	Gr 12	Dogwood
Non-Aboriginal Females	100%	100%	99%	97%	91%	83%
Non-Aboriginal Males	100%	99%	98%	95%	87%	74%
Aboriginal Females	100%	93%	88%	76%	62%	42%
Aboriginal Males	100%	93%	86%	74%	58%	36%

In comparison, the following table shows figures for the school district in which the study took place:

Table 3: Secondary School Progress: Students in Grade 8 in 1994

District Percentages	Gr 8	Gr 9	Gr 10	Gr 11	Gr 12	Dogwood
Non-Aboriginal	100%	98%	98%	96%	85%	69%
Aboriginal	100%	96%	90%	70%	48%	23%

Table 4: Secondary School Progress: Students in 1994 by Gender

District Percentages	Gr 8	Gr 9	Gr 10	Gr 11	Gr 12	Dogwood
Non-Aboriginal Females	100%	98%	99%	99%	90%	80%
Non-Aboriginal Males	100%	98%	98%	94%	81%	60%
Aboriginal Females	100%	98%	98%	69%	51%	24%
Aboriginal Males	100%	100%	92%	72%	45%	21%

APPENDIX B.

James : Sample case study narrative

Respondent background

James has a fairly busy schedule. After work at the mill each day he likes to “relax, visit, socialize, go see my baby and my girlfriend.” He’s very involved in sports, playing baseball in the summer and “boxing when it’s open season.” He finds most days “fulfilling,” but sometimes “long.” He “always ends up doing something,” managing to “accomplish something every day.” When asked, he stated he was happy with things generally.” He feels that if he weren’t working he would spend time “hanging around,” and stated “I imagine I’d be pretty lazy.” This belies his obvious enjoyment in sports activities. James feels he’d have “more free time for activities like running, swimming, working out.” He’d probably “work out a lot more, go to the gym and stuff, go to the pool.” A day like that “would be fun.” Although James values free time, he is grateful to be working: “fun doesn’t give you money. You don’t get paid unless you’re working.” Despite his activity filled life he occasionally finds time for “laying around, watching T.V., playing games, Nintendo or something.”

James quit school for the second time when he was 19. He had dropped out earlier when he was in Grade 10, and then returned to an alternate school, where he completed Grade 10. Despite what he feels is a generally fulfilling life James regrets not finishing high school: “I could be in college ... I would probably be graduating college now. I would have majored in English ... took some theatre.” James was actively involved in Drama in high school. When asked how college would have made his life

different, he responded "I wouldn't be working in a sawmill. Opportunities would be a little bigger." The fact that he didn't go to college "sucks." He "thinks about it quite a bit now." James feels "like I'm missing out on something. Working 9 hours in a mill, nobody knows your name. You're a number." He still hopes to complete his high school and go to college. James needs only English twelve, and math and Social Studies 11 to graduate. He's talked about this with his girlfriend, but for now "it's work."

If he returned to complete his education he would prefer to focus purely on his "academic goals," with minimum "distraction." He answered "pretty much" independent learning, when asked about the style of learning he would prefer, with an "instructor on hand if you have any questions." He is very well spoken and expressive, possibly the result of his considerable drama experience.

Experiences

A typical experience for James during his second attempt at completing high school would be "to show up a little late, do lots of drama, hang around the theatre a lot." When asked if he was late often he responded, "Yes, I wasn't very punctual at all." This was not particular classes, but "pretty much all the time." He participated in some sports earlier in school: "we did the volleyball thing in Grade 8" but I kind of lost touch with all that stuff after Grade 8. He became very involved in extra-curricular activities in his Grade 11/12 years. His school activities then involved "pretty much just the drama. I did some Choir." This kept him very busy after class hours; "I did lots of rehearsing, a lot of memorizing scripts, studying." Most of his problems in school occurred when he was younger, "like 15, 16 years old." "When I went back to school when I was 18 it was a lot easier, a lot better, school was better, I didn't mind being there. Before that it was a big

problem.” When asked about specific problems, James responded, “It was kind of weird. I was a loner, didn’t really hang out with anybody. I didn’t do much. I had some problems with teachers and some problems with students. He “just didn’t jell with anybody.” He stated “I use to hang out with all sorts of different groups, a few weeks at a time, sometimes months, sometimes maybe just a couple of guys, a couple of girls. I’d always end up by myself.” Aside from Drama, James liked English, due to the drama content, mentioning “Shakespeare, the open readings, the assignments.” He enjoyed the tone, the “calm” atmosphere of English. He remarked that coming in from the hallways, where “everything was crazy” it would kind of “bring you down a level.” The assignments would “definitely open your mind up a little bit.” The structure of Drama fit James’ learning style. He described how “we’d start off with a bit of a warm up, do some stretches, bust into groups to do some on the spot improvisation work. The teacher would give you ideas, character, situations, scenes, and then you would kind of roll with it. You’re told to do one thing and you have about five minutes to figure out how you are going to do it and then do it. It’s kind of a half and half thing, they give you the instruction and then you get your free time to do it.”

Of his earlier elementary years, James recalled an experience that profoundly affected his attitude toward school. He described a school where he began Grade 4 where “everything was fine and good. I lived there with my mom. It was kind of an interracial place so you got all sorts of people there so nobody really took notice or put you down or anything. But I moved to [community] for not even half a year and [name] my Grade 4 teacher, really had an impact on me and not good.” He describes how “I never seen the outside at recess, I never got lunch.” He had continual detentions for not being able to do

the work. "I left from [community] and we were still doing multiplication. At my new school they were already into division ... and I still hadn't learned multiplication ... multiplication comes before division, right? So when she brought me up (to the blackboard) she really made a big scene about it and I never could do it all year." He had D's after that, despite having no previous learning problems in school. James describes how this teacher took his hand and said to the class "Who can't do multiplication? And she raised my hand in the air. Who can't do division? And she raised my hand for me. Who can't do spelling? And she raised my hand again for me. That's pretty much what stuck in my mind and I went back to my chair." When asked how that affected his attitude towards this class, he responded, "I began to hate it, hate being there. I wouldn't do my homework." The teacher gave him detentions for not being able to do the work.

I asked James if he could explain this treatment in looking back. He was eloquent in his response. "I'm not saying she was racist, maybe she wasn't but there was only two East Indian kids and there was four, tops five natives in the whole school. It was a pretty rich school, pretty rich people who've got their students in there. At the time I couldn't understand it." Later on in the interview James mentioned this incident again, ruminating "I don't think she ever called me anything racist. She was just very biased, really picked on me. I don't know if it was because I was native or just because she didn't like me altogether. His attitude towards teachers changed. The next year in Grade 5 "I picked on him because he was a teacher and every time he tried to discipline me or something I would get lippy, tell him off and then go see the principal. James began to "really push my boundaries." When asked to explain he responded "I think it kind of gave me a higher social status in a way."

I asked James to think back on his “problem” years in junior high school, and to describe some of his experiences from that stage of his schooling. He said that the first time he dropped out “it was almost as though I was afraid to walk the halls sometimes because, I don’t know, it seemed to me like I was the kind of person that some people would like to beat up.” He was bullied frequently, “mostly verbal, sometimes it would get physical.” When asked to give specific examples of the remarks directed at him, he answered “geek, loser, ...loner.” It would get physical, he explained, “if I decided to stick up for myself.” He described a situation where he accidentally tripped a boy in P.E. The boy asked him to fight at noon, but James chose to go to the First Nation Support Worker (FNSW) office. If there was a problem James would go there, saying “I’d let the FNSW know about it. She was always pretty much there. Two other boys came in and said they would back him, so he went outside to meet the “other guy,” and the two “stood with the other guy. So there’s me by myself in a big crowd of kids. He fought. James stated “I never went back to [that school] after that.”

He recalls another experience. During a certain class an incident happened with a teacher “which was weird. I don’t even know what provoked it. I could have been lippy but he grabbed me, slammed me up against the wall by my throat, and called me a stupid Indian.” James thought back on how he “didn’t appreciate it at all. He made me cry ... He embarrassed me in front of my whole class. This experience had a deep impact on James’ schooling; “It put it to a good halt.” The teacher was forced to apologize, but it “didn’t matter to me.”

James relates another incident where he was subjected to racist taunts. He was on a field trip. Another student yelled something from the back of the bus about his being

“native.” He had felt “comfortable” on the trip until that point. He “ended up fighting with him after that.”

At the time James was experiencing serious difficulties in junior high he has some relatives come to town to stay, “[they had] already experienced...drugs and alcohol, which was new to me. They “got into my head” when “all this was going on” (school problems), so it “was a kind of a place to go. I could hang out drink some beer, smoke some pot, have some fun ... It just fit right in.” James went on to say “I wasn’t living anywhere. I just bounced around ... got mixed up with the wrong people and what they were doing ... I got into trouble and spent a week in jail in [community c] It was only a week but that’s all it needed.” James said he realized the course his life was taking, and learned from this experience. “.I got in trouble early and learned fast. I didn’t need to do that anymore. And I think that’s where I started to turn around.”

Beliefs, opinions, attitudes

James feels this incident would never have occurred if he had been able to remain in school; “I ... wouldn’t have been in that position.” “It was good ... to go through these experiences, in a way,” he answered, as it encouraged him to return to school. Looking back on school, he feels he should have done “more mathematics...algebra...sciences” because working in the mill he realizes the need for these skills. When asked what might have made his situation better he said, “If I had an older brother maybe I would have had somebody to look up to and see what you are supposed to do and where you are supposed to be at.” He felt lost, “around in a circle.” He felt like “nobody knew me, I was a big loser.” James feels his social status improved when he returned at eighteen, being “a little more mature.” Prior to that, he felt depressed in school, because “I didn’t feel

wanted.” As an older student involved in Drama, “people look at you in a different way ... you get a different sort of presence.” He answered my question to clarify this by saying he felt more accepted. Describing his earlier experiences in junior high, James had the attitude “I didn’t feel smart enough in some classes when you’re young. Some people are so smart and outspoken they just eat up all the time. I never really had the time to catch up on things fast enough.” He elaborated further, “I don’t know if it was the pressure, on-the-spot pressure kind of feeling, I don’t know what it was.” James feels he still retained the “not taking no shit” attitude he developed after his negative experiences with the Grade 4 teacher. James feels he began ‘playing stupid or just being plain stupid’ as a coping mechanism. He was placed in an Independent Learning class; “I think they gave me that because I don’t think I was doing so well.” He began to notice “you wouldn’t be asked questions so often.” James believes the expectations placed on him lessened; “You’d get your homework, but if you failed it or whatever you wouldn’t be told about it, you’d just get your grade when the grade was ready. No chance at catching up.” This last remark reflects his frustration at his increasingly negative school experience.

Nearing the end of the interview, James stated in response to my question about how he would describe his school experience at this time that he was “pretty nervous, pretty much most of the time.” As we talked about these issues the interviewer could feel the relived feeling of resentment. He went on to say, “It was like getting fed up, tired. Tired of putting up with it. Yeah, sick and tired of taking the back hallway, walking the halls by yourself, feeling like everybody is looking at you like you’re stupid, a dork, you don’t fit the standard.”

When James returned as an older student, he feel that he “had a different sort of social status so somehow I ended up passing all my classes” even though his attendance still wasn’t acceptable. He is of the opinion that he “could have done really well if I had stayed in.” James looks back on his experience of being physically manhandled by teachers. The belief he holds is that it is “shocking. You never expect it. They’re supposed to be teachers ... supposed to be a school ... respectable ... especially as “I didn’t lay my hands on anybody and I didn’t call anybody names.”

James’ feeling is that more native cultural activities in school would have helped him. He mentioned how “sometimes they’d do some drum making, dream catchers, stuff like that.” He answered my question about how he felt about these activities with “Being Indian it was good, it was fun.” He would like to have seen more of such activities;” go to see more pow-wows, sweat lodges, ... more opportunities to see stuff like that.” The FNSW acted as a valuable resource for James in school; “she was there, she was there when I came back.”

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDELINE

For

ABORIGINAL STUDENT'S EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING TRENDS

PART A: Establishing rapport

Q 1 I'd like you to describe a typical day in your life. If I were you on a typical day, what would I see you doing?

What experiences would I see you having?

Q 2 What's your opinion of this typical day? What word would you use to describe this typical day?

Q 3 How do you feel about this typical day?

Please continue. I'd like to hear more about how you feel.

Q 4 You say your day is _____. What do you think you could be doing on a typical day in your life?

What changes would you make?

Q 5 What word would you use to describe a day like that?

What makes you believe these changes would make things better?

Q 6 What could you do to make these changes come about? What's preventing you from making these changes?

Q 7 What would you be able to do that you aren't doing today if these changes came about? Describe a day in your life if these changes came about.

Q 8 How would you feel if those changes came about? Please continue. I'd like to hear more about how you would feel.

PART B: School Experiences

How do you feel about the session so far? Do you have any concerns or questions about what we are doing? Any concerns about the questions?

If not, I'd like you to take me back to your school experiences.

Q 1 How long has it been since you quit school? What grade were you in when you left?

How old were you when you left school?

Q 2 I'd like you to describe a typical school day. If I were with you on a typical school day, what would I see you doing?

What experiences would I see you having?

Q 3 While you were in school, what was your opinion of a school day like the one you have described? What word would you have used to describe this typical school day?

Q 4 How did you feel about this typical day? How did you feel about the experiences you had?

Q 5 You say your day was _____. As you look back on it, what do you think you could have been doing on a typical day?

What changes could other people have made?

Q 6 What word would you use to describe a day like that?

Q 7 As you look back on those days, what is your opinion now of your time in school?

What word or words would you now use to describe those days?

Q 8 While you were in school, what were your favorite classes? What was it about

these classes that you liked? Describe what happened in one of these classes:

What the teachers did, what you did.

Q 9 Which classes didn't you like?

Describe what happened in one of these classes.

Q 10 Could you describe your first few years in school?

Did you have problems at any time in these early years?

Describe these problems. What happened as a result of these problems?

Q 11 If I could go with you through a typical day at school what experiences outside of class would I see you having?

What would the other students in the school be doing outside of class?

I want you to think of a time or an activity in which the entire class took part.

Q 12 If I were there, what would I see the other students doing?

What would I see you doing? The teacher doing?

Q 13 What's your opinion of this?

What do you think would have made it better?

Q 14 Describe the activities that took place during your classes.

What is your opinion of the work you were assigned to do?

PART C: School withdrawal

Think back to the time you decided to quit school. What was happening that day?

Q 1 If I had been in your class, what would I have seen happening?

Q 2 What do you think might have been done differently?

Q 3 Describe your attendance during your final year of high school.

How important was this to your decision to leave school?

How do you feel about this now?

Q 4 Describe some of the things that could have done differently that might have helped to improve your attendance.

Q 5 Think back to a time when the students had a problem with what was going on in the class. If I were there, what would I have seen happening?

What would the other students in the class have been doing?

What would I have seen you doing?

Q 6 As you look back, how do you feel about the way these problems were handled? What could have been done differently?

Q 7 While you were in school, can you think of a time when the other students had problems? What sorts of problems did they have?

How do you feel about this now?

Q 8 You talked about school problems. As you look back, can you think of any other problems you had in your life outside of school that influenced your decision to drop out?

How did these problems affect your schooling?

How do you feel about this now?

Q 9 While you were in school, were you aware of any in-school or district programs to help students who were having problems? Did you take part in these activities?

How do you feel now about these activities?

Q 10 What would you be able to do now if you had completed high school?

How would your life be different? How do you feel about that now?

Q 11 Do you have any plans to complete your education?

If you were able to return to regular school, what would make it better?

Q 12 What will you look for in the place you return to school?

APPENDIX D

LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

1. I have discussed the purposes of the research with the researcher.
2. I understand my participation is completely voluntary and that I may withdraw from the process at any time.
3. I understand that the interviews are confidential and nothing of a personal nature will be discussed between the researcher or any other person.
4. I understand that I will remain anonymous and that my name will not be connected with the written report.
5. I agree to having the interview recorded on a tape recorder. I understand that any recording which could be used to identify me will be erased following completion of the research.
6. My questions and concerns regarding the research have been satisfactorily answered by the researcher.

(Name of interviewee)

(Signature)

(Date)

(Name of researcher)

(Signature)

APPENDIX E

The following information will be included in a letter to each participant in the study:

My name is Wally McCappin and I am carrying out a research project as partial fulfillment of my Master's of Education degree from the University of Northern British Columbia. I work in School District # 28 as a teacher. My project focuses on dropout rates for Aboriginal students. I hope my research will help clarify the reasons why so many Aboriginal students leave the regular school system prior to graduation. Although the research may not benefit you personally, it is hoped the results will assist the school system in enabling current and future Aboriginal students to complete their education.

You were selected as an interview candidate by a First Nation's Student Support Worker from one of the local high schools.

The interview will be approximately one hour long. The interview will occur in a neutral location of your choosing. If you wish you may invite a support person to the interview. This person together with myself will make every effort to ensure your comfort. You will have the right to stop the interview process at any time and not continue.

I will be asking questions based on your experience as a student during your school years. Prior to my beginning the interview sessions, you can ask questions about concerns.

After explaining the purpose of the research, I will ask you to sign a consent form stating that you understand the purposes of the study. The form will serve as a signed acknowledgement of your participation in and understanding of the process.

I will expect all people in the study to adhere to the principles of anonymity and confidentiality.

The study site will be referred to as having taken place in a mid-sized city in the interior of British Columbia. No participant's names will be associated with this project. No names will be associated with audiotaped or written transcripts of the interviews. These tapes will be kept locked in a secure vault in the residence of the researcher. The tapes will be erased once the transcriptions are complete. You will be given the opportunity to verify statements for accuracy and relevance once a written draft of the transcripts is completed. You will be given the opportunity to check what was said for accuracy, or to ask that certain comments not be reported.

Written excerpts from the interview may be included in the written project. Should the issue of further publication arise, your consent to use any direct quotations or transcribed excerpts from interviews will be obtained. You will receive a copy of the final report from the researcher if you want it.

Should I decide to submit the study for further publication beyond the requirements of the University, your permission to do so will be requested. Should you have any questions or concerns, or if you would like a copy of the study following its completion, you can telephone me at 991-5577 (school) or 747-4617 (home).

Complaints you may have about the project should be directed to the Office of Research, University of Northern British Columbia, 3333 University Way, Prince George, BC, V2N 4Z9, or telephone (250) 960-5820.

Thank you.

APPENDIX F

_____ Band Council

My name is Wally McCappin and I am carrying out a research project as partial fulfillment of my Master's of Education degree from the University of Northern British Columbia.

I have worked for many years as a teacher in School District # ___. I have spent many years working with students who have dropped out of the regular school system, or who are at risk of doing so. A disproportionately large number of these students have been Aboriginal. It is my concern as a teacher why the dropout figures are so high for First Nations' students. I have chosen this issue as the topic for my research project.

I am requesting the approval of the _____ Band Council to interview several students who are members of the _____ Band and who have failed to continue high school to the point of graduation. I will be working closely with _____, Principal, Aboriginal Education and with _____. _____ would be present at the interviews with the participants.

It is hoped my research will help clarify the reasons for so many Aboriginal students leaving the regular school system prior to graduation. In addition I hope to provide information and recommendations to the local Aboriginal community and to the school district that would help in formulating and implementing policies designed to improve school success rates for Aboriginal students.

I am grateful for your consideration of this request.

Wally McCappin, Teacher

_____ School.

_____ Band Approval.