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Creating Belonging for Aboriginal Learners in Elementary Schools

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Creating Belonging for Aboriginal Learners in Elementary Schools

by

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A THESIS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to uncover and to understand perceptions related to belonging and how a sense of belonging is fostered for Aboriginal learners at the elementary school level. It explored the phenomenon of Aboriginal learners' sense of belonging in elementary schools, how it is created, and how leaders can facilitate it. The goal was to garner specific suggestions or ideas for what leaders and educators can do to facilitate spaces of belonging for Aboriginal learners via qualitative instrumental case study (Stake, 2008) which included interviews with those working within a school district and Aboriginal learner family members. The findings of this study found that: Belonging is a holistic term involving the entire school community with particular attention being paid to the child and their world, parents are a part of the school's community and fundamental to the child's success, and that leaders are key in the inclusion of children and families. Flowing from this was, and is, the hope that this information will be used in elementary schools to foster spaces of belonging, specifically in regard to elementary Aboriginal learners, that will translate into greater engagement in and with school and, as such, increase the likelihood of leading a life of their choosing in the future.

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INTRODUCTION

How do we want students to see, interact, and relate to their schools? Should it be viewed as some sort of imposed sentence that they must complete: a hoop to be jumped through until they are set free, or perhaps as a game where the rules are different from the rules they know? If it is desired that students bring their best self to school and be their best self in the school environment, then the space of school must reflect who they are. That is, they need to be able to recognize and see themselves as a part of that space. School should not be an unknown entity for any student.

This study set out to explore the phenomenon of Aboriginal learners' sense of belonging in elementary schools, what creates it, and how leaders can facilitate it. The intention was to use qualitative instrumental case study (Stake, 2008) as a means for identifying what factors create a sense of belonging for Aboriginal learners in elementary schools, inclusive of interviews with Aboriginal learners' family members and those working within a school district. Additionally, it was hoped that specific strategies or ideas for what leaders and educators can do to facilitate spaces of belonging for Aboriginal learners would be identified from the information gathered. Participants included two principals (one of whom was also the coach mentor teacher, also identified as Aboriginal support teacher in this document), a past principal (who was also the past coach mentor), four classroom teachers (two from each of the schools), and two family members. One of the family interviewees was also an Aboriginal Education Advisory Council member. Two people who oversee Aboriginal programs at the school district level were also included as interviewees. An Aboriginal Support Worker from one of the schools declined to be interviewed, however they did share some insights and agreed that they could be included herein.

In the preliminary part of this study, I have used the word “belong”. It is a term that will be used much from this point forward. To be more precise, the term that will be applied and explored in this study is ‘belonging’. It is important to understand what exactly is being referred to here. Belonging, as it is described in this study, is speaking to a feeling that one is a part of the environment they are located in and where one is not an outsider. In the context of this work, the topic of belonging is specifically related to Aboriginal learners and what factors create an environment that they feel a part of rather than one they must try to fit into or adapt to (Noddings, 2007). Voelkl (1997) explained her definition of belonging in this way:

In this study, belongingness was represented by feelings of being a significant member of the school community, being accepted and respected in school, having a sense of inclusion in school, and including school as a part of his or her self-definition. (p. 296)

Stirk (2003) stated, “First Nations parents described the lack of sense of belonging at school for themselves and their children” (para. 41). It has been noted that a foundation for relationships is in the creation of a space that helps Aboriginal learners feel that they belong and that they are a part of the school space (Wilson, 2000). Individuals who can help to create this space of belonging are teachers (Wilson, 2000) and administrators (Frymier Russell, 2008).

One might wonder, “Why does belonging matter?” Not feeling like you belong in an environment plays out in many ways; it is difficult to concentrate when bigger concerns are happening. The result of this can be disengagement and disillusionment with school. With the reduction of motivation, it is easy to foresee a reduction in success. This idea takes us now to the rationale for this study.

The rationale for this study was based on my wish to understand more deeply the experience that Aboriginal learners have within an elementary public school system and to learn ways or factors that positively influence this experience. “A growing body of research demonstrates that Aboriginal students’ self-esteem is a key factor in their school success (e.g., Hilberg & Tharp, 2002; Kanu, 2002; Swanson, 2003)” (Toulouse, 2006, para. 1). Further, “Aboriginal teenagers need a secure sense of self-worth to keep their balance in the storm of conflicting messages and demands” (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, as cited in Ottmann, 2009, p. 9). As such, “An educational environment that honours the culture, language and worldview of the Aboriginal student is critical to this process” (Toulouse, 2006, para. 1). The following excerpt from the work of Williams and Tanaka (2007) helps us to understand the value of this:

Along with hope, the experience of Kamucwkalha offered a place of comfort and well-being. This was a space where many of the class members felt free to allow their true voices to emerge. In this space, the level of trust was high, and students felt free to be themselves, and there was a sense of confidence that their voice was being heard. Engaging in a community this way did not mean a loss of self because each individual was honored within the communal process. (para. 45)

They further noted, “It is not a question of choosing one pedagogical perspective over the other. Rather, it is finding a way to make space for both-and to be enriched by both” (para. 49).

Additionally, through enriched understanding educational leaders can begin to implement strategies and create policies that can lead to fostering a greater sense of belonging by Aboriginal learners. This increased belonging may also translate to greater connection and engagement with

school, and the hope is that this will lead to a life with increased opportunities. Voelkl (1997) stated, “However, those students who disidentify with school are less likely to remain academically engaged and deserve attention since they may be at increased risk for school failure, dropping out, and perhaps even in engage in delinquent behaviour” (p. 298). This latter point provided even greater stimulus for this research.

The British Columbia (BC) Ministry of Education (2008) document “Safe, Caring and Orderly Schools—A Guide” is another source of support for this topic. It is important to note that this research on belonging was not conducted to address the points raised in the Ministry document; rather, the existence of the Ministry document reinforces the need of belonging as a research focus and of its importance to the success of students. In their “Safe, Caring and Orderly Schools—A Guide,” the BC Ministry of Education indicated that the attention being paid to the environment of schools is at least in part due to the following: “It stems, as well, from a recognition that a strong relationship exists between feelings of safety and belonging and a student’s ability to learn” (p. 3). Additionally, it was noted, “Safe, caring and orderly schools don’t just happen: we design, create and maintain them” (p. 5) and that “they are developed by committed people using appropriate and ever-improving policies, procedures and practices—the building blocks of safe, caring and orderly schools” (p. 6). Support for this paradigm can be found in the work of Ottmann (2009), who also emphasized the importance of a “safe and caring school atmosphere” (p. 54) with regard to Aboriginal learners. A further incentive for this study can be found within any Aboriginal enhancement agreement wherein belonging is mentioned.

Student success in school is impacted by students’ connections to their school (Voelkl, 1997). If students do not feel a connection or bond to school lower academic success is more

likely, and this has implications for learners and for their learning (Baumeister & Leary; Faircloth & Hamm; Finn; Ryan & Patrick; Ryan & Deci, as cited in Ozer, Price Wolf, & Kong, 2008; McMurrer, 2012; Voelkl, 1997). One implication of lack of students' success that is of concern is that a lack of academic success can translate into one being unable to attain future goals (Voelkl, 1997). A second implication is higher school dropout rates (Marquez-Zenkov, Harmon, van Lier, & Marquez-Zenkov, 2007; Raham, 2010). The dropout rate for Aboriginal learners has also been noted as being of concern by Michel, Erickson, and Madak (2005). Additionally, for some Aboriginal students' absenteeism can be high (Michel et al., 2005; Stirk, 2003). This, once again, has implications for learners. As Raham (2010) pointed out, "Attendance is strongly associated with school completion" (Slide 17), and "School connectedness is an antidote to dropping out" (Slide 12). The question then becomes: What is it about schools, in general, that makes them places where some students do not want to come, or, turning this around, what makes schools places where students want to be? As Stirk (2003) stated, "All teachers knew it was important for all students to enjoy coming to school, but believed that this factor was critical for success for First Nations students" (para. 32).

This introductory chapter has primarily focused on the rationale for this study, laying the groundwork for the importance of belonging in elementary schools. In the following chapter, I describe the study itself and how it sought to address the research question by describing in detail the problem, the purpose, and the significance of this study so that readers of this research are privy to the intentions that drove this work. Also included, are the research questions, research overview, and information about what brought the researcher herself to this course of study, and finally some term definitions are included to enrich understanding.

CHAPTER ONE

In this chapter, the problem, purpose, and research questions are delineated. Further, there is provision of an overview of the research, an outlining of the potential significance of the study, and term definitions. The intention of this chapter is provide the landscape that is the background for this study.

The Problem

Information regarding Aboriginal learner high school academic success rates shows a gap between Aboriginal learners and their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Ottmann, 2009). Although there are ministry designated funds specifically allocated for Aboriginal learners and various programs to attend to this discrepancy the gap remains. Further exploration into this phenomenon may provide additional information that could potentially mitigate the educational gap.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to uncover and to understand perceptions related to belonging and how a sense of belonging is fostered for Aboriginal learners at the elementary school level. It was hoped that this information could be used in elementary schools to foster spaces of belonging, specifically in regard to elementary Aboriginal learners, that will translate into greater engagement in and with school and, as such, increase the ability of Aboriginal students to lead the life they wish to lead in the future.

Research Questions

The primary research question was: What are the perceptions of belonging for Aboriginal learners in elementary schools?

The sub-questions included:

What creates a sense of belonging at the elementary level for Aboriginal learners?

How do educational leaders use their roles to facilitate spaces of belonging for their Aboriginal learners?

What do Aboriginal students say to their caregivers, teachers, and educational leaders about their school experiences?

Significance of the Study

The potential significance of this study is many-fold. Firstly, if educational institutions apply the research findings, elementary students may feel a greater sense of belonging in their schools. Thus, there is the potential for increasing academic success, increasing attendance, and decreasing future dropout rates for aboriginal elementary school students. This could, in turn, create an enabling condition for students such that they will gain the requisite tools that allow for the leading of a life of their choosing.

A second possibility of significance is that the academic curriculum may become more responsive to others' ways of knowing. Walker (2006) stated:

Thomson (1999) points out that the school curriculum is a political arrangement, a selection from knowledge and a view on whose and what knowledge counts or is excluded or marginalized. "Students", as Thomson (1999, p. 11) argues, "form their understanding of the world and their identities at least in part through knowledges and narratives available to them in the curriculum. (pp. 178-179)

Thirdly, this study could add to the existing body of research on belonging such that it could be applied by school leaders in their creation of educational policy and during discussions about strategic resourcing and implementation. Further, it might also add to the body of research

relative to Aboriginal elementary-aged learners. This is important since, as stated by Stirk (2003), “Parents felt that support given in primary years was crucial and would affect the children in later years where it was felt that intermediate children were so much harder to reach, even when receiving extra support” (para. 24).

This research also contributes to the field of educational leadership because the findings have the potential to help school/district leaders to develop programs and policies with respect to Aboriginal learners through the examination of existing school environments and practices. Through this examination, one can adapt, modify, or create policies and resources in ways that have the potential to increase Aboriginal learner belonging. Further, it has the possibility of increasing the knowledge base about the experiences of Aboriginal learners, thus helping principals and classroom teachers, as educational leaders, to create or to enhance spaces of belonging for Aboriginal learners.

Lastly, while this research was undertaken in public schools in smaller urban centres it is hoped that it will be extrapolated for use in school environments in other geographic settings both larger and smaller.

Research Overview

After successful completion of a Tri-Council ethics review (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada [Tri-Council], 2010) and then after receiving school district permissions, I gathered documents and interviewed participants from a sample drawn from two different schools in the same school district to explore the research question. The methodology for the research was qualitative instrumental case study (Stake, 2008) inclusive

of interviews and document analysis as the primary means of data collection. Interviews were done via the use of snowball sampling from each site; interviews were tape recorded and transcribed via speech to text software and with further post-interview transcription by myself. Participants were asked to review the transcribed documentation for accuracy. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant privacy.

The Researcher

Learner engagement is of prime importance to me and my initial thinking had included some thought on this matter. However while creating my contextual background piece I had to look inward and I realized something long buried.

In retrospect, it became evident that an early junior high school experience had a life-changing impact on me, personally. At the time, it caused me misery. Nowhere did I feel this more than at school, as I did not fit in and dreaded going. It was a lot for a 12-year-old to navigate as it is hard to feel supported when you are getting the message that you could make things different if you just “figured it out”. This experience definitely impacted what I believed about schools and how they should be in terms of culture and environment for both students and their families. As such, I find myself motivated by a belief that schools have to be places of belonging for both students and their families.

An additional layer began to emerge during my work with pre-service teachers. As I worked with teachers-to-be, and then later on, in a different capacity for the university, I became more and more interested in the issues that were coming into my consciousness around the Aboriginal learner experience. This was certainly not a new topic, however, I heard it more clearly now. In thinking back, perhaps my junior high experience was why the issue of

Aboriginal learner experience in schools began to resonate with me. I understand in a different way, and from a different lens, what it is to feel as though you do not belong and the complications that are associated with having that feeling. If one considers or defines school as a home away from home of sorts, then there must be room for all to fit and feel comfortable. In other words, for all students to feel at home.

The more that I learned about Indian Residential Schools and their ongoing impact, the more I began to understand that the effects were not situated in the past but are still very much a part of the present. I began to think about what it would be like to have this type of history, that occurred within the school setting, and what it would be like to be in a context that had a different worldview and pedagogical approaches than what was known and experienced. How would one feel like they belonged? I could also link belonging back to my own personal experience and, from this, I have a sense of the impact that comes from feeling like I did not belong. Moving forward, I wondered about what creates a sense of belonging; I wondered about what theories and philosophies were held with regard to ‘belonging’ and how it could be fostered, specifically with regard to Aboriginal learners. These wonderings led me to the primary research question: What are the perceptions of belonging for Aboriginal learners in elementary schools?

Another aspect that led me to this question, and the sub-questions, and the study itself was the understanding that I am part of the educational experience of Aboriginal learners in elementary schools. Therefore, I felt it was critical to investigate the ways that I could contribute to assuring a positive learning environment in order to help increase graduation rates and subsequent opportunities for leading a valued life.

I do have a worry. I am white and privy to privileges that I am likely very unaware of. I have lived a middle-class life and, for the most part, understood the language of schools. Where my understanding was lacking others could help me. There was no uncertainty about the academic expectations; they were laid out in a way that I understood. I had not been taught another way of approaching learning. I am quite serious, and a little sad, when I say that I have likely had access to privileges without having thought about them. Blackmore (2010) stated, “My whiteness was invisible to me until abruptly confronted with how whiteness accrued privilege for me in the late 1980’s” (p. 45). I wonder: will I come to notice more aptly those moments of privilege? These words by Wise (2011) resonated with me:

We are all experiencing race, because from the beginning of our lives we have been living in a racialized society, in which the color of our skin means something socially, even while it remains largely a matter of biological and genetic irrelevance. (p. xii)

Wise also noted, “Being a member of the majority, the dominant group, allows one to ignore how race shape’s one’s life” (p. 2). I think this is very true. It can be easy to identify oneself as a person who believes in justice and equality, and one can be honest in that assertion. However, one has to be equally aware of how their access to opportunities has been impacted by virtue of ethnicity or culture. It is through this awareness that one can begin to see openings for change, for a chance to unlock doors such that all may enter. This means changing our ways since we often have the access to the keys.

I worry about coming to this issue and about how to be clear in my intention. I am not here to “save” anybody. I am here because I want to learn. I want to learn, from those who have lived the experience, about how I can help shift the existing structure such that more Aboriginal

learners feel a sense of security in the space of school and can bring their best self to it. If one thinks of school as not of use to oneself then school really is of no use. That is a tragedy.

It is a great sadness to me that some students, that any student, feels as though they do not belong and that *their* school does not represent them nor is responsive to them. My experience as a learner may have led to the same conclusion, but I cannot extrapolate the elements of my experience to a more generalized set of rules and, as such, I have embarked on this study.

At the present time, I am an employee of the school district where the research took place. A positive aspect of this for my research approach and topic was an understanding of the context of this particular setting and school district. While it is important to note this piece, it is just as important to state outright that there is complexity inherent in doing research in an environment where one is an employee. To mitigate this, I identified, in advance, my own opinions, biases, and expectations and engaged in dialogue with critical friends. Also included, and explicitly stated, is the theoretical framework that underpins this study so that readers of this work will know the grounding feature of the study.

Definitions of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions will be applied.

Belonging: The sense of an individual that they are a part of a community and see both themselves and their values reflected in that community and of being of value. It is the sense that you are accepted for whom you are and that you have a voice in the environment where you are situated (Noddings, 2007)

Capabilities: “The capability that we are concerned with is our ability to achieve various combinations of functionings that we can compare and judge against each other in terms of what

we have reason to value.* The capability approach focuses on human life, and not just on some detached objects of convenience, such as incomes or commodities that a person may possess, which are often taken, especially in economic analysis, to be the main criteria of human success. Indeed, it proposes a serious departure from concentrating on the *means* of living to the *actual opportunities* of living” (Sen, 2009, p. 233).

Climate versus culture: School climate is a broad term describing the “feel” of a school and how those within that environment respond to that. School culture is a driving force of school climate. It is the makeup of the norms, values, and beliefs that drive “the way things are done” in a particular space (BC Ministry of Education, 2008; Troman, 1996)

Survivor: This term refers to those for whom the impact of residential schooling has had direct impact. Survivors are recipients of the experience of Indian Residential Schools in a first-hand way.

Educational Leader: Those within a school, teacher or school administrator, who have the capability to foster and facilitate change.

School Administrator: A leader who has the capacity to allocate resources and enact, reinforce, support, and enforce policies, structures, and school dynamics.

Elementary School: A school whose makeup comprises kindergarten to grade six or to grade seven.

Aboriginal: A person whose descent is First Nations, Inuit, and/or Metis.

Organization of Dissertation

Chapter One – This chapter includes a description of and rationale for this study.

Chapter Two – This chapter is a review of literature relative to this study.

Chapter Three – This chapter provides the methodology used for this study.

Chapter Four – Included in this chapter are the findings that emerged.

Chapter Five – Chapter five is a discussion of the findings.

Chapter Six – This chapter provides recommendations and the conclusion of this study.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has discussed the research questions to be examined, their significance, and described an initial description of the research approach used in order to situate the research that follows. Chapter three provides an in-depth explanation of the research design for this work. In the next chapter, I provide an examination of literature relating to belonging and educational leadership.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

“Whether in class, in the halls, or on the playground, students absorb the values, see the power relations, and hear the debates of society every day” (Dion, 2009, p. 8).

The Foundation

The conceptual framework for this study was premised on the idea that students’ sense of belonging has a direct correlation to school success, and that we want school success for students because this allows them more freedom to live the life they wish to lead, inclusive of opportunities. It also recognized the key role that is played by educational leadership in supporting students’ achievement and sense of belonging. This chapter examines the notion of belonging and its importance for learners, specifically Aboriginal learners. Further, the necessity of enabling Aboriginal voice and the influence of educational leadership in the process of creating spaces of belonging is also discussed. Lastly, a beginning look at the theoretical basis for this study is included, as well as a brief explanation of its positioning within a strengths-based paradigm.

Literature Streams

Four key literature streams comprise the information examined in this section. The first literature stream examined relates to Aboriginal learners and school inclusive of belonging and the connection between belonging and engagement (Bishop, 2011; Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002; Brokenleg, 2010, 2012a, 2012b; Kirkness, 1999; Parsons & Taylor, 2011; Raham, 2010; Toulouse, 2006; Williams & Tanaka, 2007, Willms, 2003; Willms, Friesen & Milton, 2009). In presenting the second key stream, I focused on the embracing nature of schools via, identification with school/school connectedness (Voelkl, 1997), the influence of culture and

climate (Hyslop, 2006; McMurrer, 2012; Troman, 1996), and an ethic of care (Noddings, 2007). Within the third key stream, I examined the impact of Indian Residential Schools as a potential inhibitor to a positive relationship with school (Elias et al., 2012; Morrissette, 1994; Rand, 2011), and for the fourth key stream, I examined educational leadership and trust (Robinson, 2011). The purpose of the focus on the first literature stream was to explore both the Aboriginal learner experience and the needs of Aboriginal learners. The attention paid to the second literature stream arose from a wish to surface contributing factors to the creation of a welcoming space in schools. The intention behind the third stream was to learn what occurred in the past with regard to Indian Residential Schools and how these experiences have translated into today. The basis for the fourth stream was to consider the role of educational leadership and their influence.

Key Themes

This literature review is divided into three themes: Theme 1: belonging and its make-up; Theme 2: the inclusion of Aboriginal voices, the past that has influenced the present; and Theme 3: educational leadership itself and in regards to the concept of belonging along with the place of trust.

First, belonging, its composition (identification with school, school culture, and learners and an ethic of care) and influence are discussed. Drawing largely on the work of Voelkl (1997), identification with school and the influence of participation were examined. Further to this examination, the culture of schools is discussed, drawing from McMurrer (2012), Troman (1996), and others on the topic. Lastly, I discuss the work of Nel Noddings (2007) on the ethic of care, which explicated it and its place in education. From this, the importance of including the

Aboriginal community in the processes of school is elaborated upon. Aboriginal learners, the voice of the Aboriginal community, and the reality of Indian Residential Schools are considered. This section draws upon a review of literature from various sources, and for Indian Residential Schools more specifically from the work of Morrissette (1994) and Rand (2011). This section includes a look at the past, and yet present, legacy of Indian Residential Schools in the schools of today. Next, drawing largely on the work of Robinson (2011), a discussion of educational leadership, its definition, and capabilities inherent in educational leadership is put forth. Lastly, trust as a grounding feature of educational leadership and relationship is highlighted.

Belonging

What is belonging? Belonging is more than just important, inherent, or deserved; it is a fundamental building block to the support of all learners, including Aboriginal learners. Imagine being in a space where you did not recognize anything, or at least very little, of what you valued. What if the ways of knowing seemed unfamiliar or foreign to you? One can foresee more time being spent on trying to navigate the space than on anything else. If one is busy trying to find a place to fit then how can one focus on what can be gained within that space (i.e., education)? The benefit of belonging is that it frees students up to be able to focus on the learning and opportunities available to them. Students can avail themselves of opportunities because basic fundamental needs/requirements have been met. In other words, students are more able to be present and their best self in an environment that fosters a sense of belonging; therefore, success and motivation are more likely. Following from this, school engagement and completion can be viewed as probable outcomes. As put by Toulouse (2006), “It is crucial that the Aboriginal student feel that they have a meaningful place in our schools. . . [and, of particular interest, is

another point:] Educators can either make or break the school experience of the Aboriginal student” (para. 3). This latter fact was borne out in the following excerpt: “First Nations have had a unique experience with the education system in Canada, an experience that has been both profound and devastating” (Michel et al., 2005, p. 3).

From the moment they enter the school system, students begin to receive messages about what is and what is not acceptable. If the messages diverge from the understanding that they already have regarding the nature of knowing students are apt to feel out of place and as though they do not belong (Thomson, as cited in Walker, 2006). As noted by Michel et al. (2005):

An educational approach based on a white European model of knowing leaves out Indigenous knowledge and leaves [*sic*] creates the feeling among Aboriginal students that their cultures are not as “worthy” or important. In this type of environment children from Indigenous cultures feel like “second class citizens (B.C. Teachers’ Federation, 2003; BC Human Rights Commission, 2001; Demmert, Jr., 2001; Native Hawaiian Council, 2002; etc.).” (p. 5)

Schools must be seen as being inclusive and responsive places (Levin, 2010). It is about the system, instead of the student, modulating itself such that those who enter recognize something of themselves and what they intrinsically value as a part of the environment and as pre-existing conditions in that space, not ones that must be introduced to them. Aboriginal learners, and indeed all learners, have the right to feel at home in the space where they will be spending the next 12 plus years learning. By creating spaces of belonging for Aboriginal learners and their families, there is the potential to make room at the table for all who come to partake in learning.

Belonging is a *feeling*, a sense. It is a comforter blanketing learners with acceptance. Of note is the following point by Schlossberg (1989): “Therefore, the concern over involving students, although expediently related to satisfaction and retention, is the very process that creates community” (p. 1). In essence, by paying attention to what creates belonging the community is already being strengthened and becoming more responsive to those within it.

Belonging can be viewed as a precursor to engagement. Therefore, a look at belonging relative to engagement is described next.

Belonging and engagement. There are many different ways that engagement is defined (Parsons & Taylor, 2011). “That student engagement is integral to student achievement is not argued in the literature, but how we measure and define student engagement remains contentious” (Parsons & Taylor, 2011, p. 17).

Students have expressed a desire for teachers to understand who they are and to have solid relationships with them (Parsons & Taylor, 2011; Willms, Friesen & Milton, 2009). As put by Parsons and Taylor (2011), “Open, caring, respectful relationships between learners and their teachers is essential to develop and support social and psychological engagement in learning” (p. 37). Further, they noted, “[C]hallenging constructivist instruction requires strong respectful relationships and the creation of a safe learning environment” (p. 43). Dunleavy and Milton (2009) affirmed the place of a care ethic, relationship, and respect as positive features of a school climate that “tend to have the most influence in supporting high levels of engagement in the life of school” (p. 8). Noting the work of Gilbert (2007), Parsons and Taylor (2011) pointed out that the current model of schooling while it may have intended to create equal footing for students, instead created sizable disparities between those who achieve and those who do not. They also

stated, “These students become disenfranchised and disengaged when they don’t, for any number of reasons, fit in or achieve (p. 10).

In his work with Maori learners in New Zealand, Bishop (2011) found that learning happens when both relationship and relevant learning tasks are present in the school environment. This is a position supported by Parsons and Taylor (2011), Klem and Connell (2004), McRae (n.d), and by Willms et al. (2009). For numerous students, school is seen as relevant to their future and these students may also feel that they belong in the school environment (Willms, 2003). There are other students, however, for whom belonging is not felt and who do not share the view that school is of relevance to their future (Willms, 2003).

Willms explained that engagement could be seen to be built upon two things. First, engagement includes a psychological piece that includes belonging and the acceptance of school values. The second includes the participation in school life (Willms, 2003). Willms (2003) noted, “The participation component of engagement is characterized by factors such as school and class attendance, being prepared for class, completing homework, attending lessons, and being involved in extra-curricular sports or hobby clubs” (p. 8). Dunleavy and Milton (2009), using the term social engagement, stated, “This concept is commonly measured by indicators such as attendance, punctuality, participation in extra-curricular activities, and emotional attachment to school” (p. 8). McRae (n.d.) framed it in this way:

Engagement: meaning ‘attendance’ in the sense of being physically present at school; meaning ‘participation’ in the sense of consistently taking an active part in school activities and in out of the classroom; and, crucially, meaning ‘belonging’ in the

sense of feeling comfortable and secure as part of larger group and being part of an enterprise which has some personal meaning and value. (n.p.)

He also pointed out that participation needed the “provision of a safe, secure, school environment characterised by good teacher/student relationships, which is welcoming to Indigenous students and free from racism” (n.p.). In his report focusing on belonging and school participation, Willms stated, “Engagement is a disposition towards learning, working with others and functioning in a social institution, which is expressed in students’ feeling that they belong at school, and their participation in school activities” (p. 8).

The school setting impacts student participation and their feelings of belonging (Willms, 2003). This is supported by McRae (n.d.) who stated, “Adequate levels of participation will only be achieved by active encouragement from home and the provision of a welcoming and accepting climate in the institution” (n.p.). Additionally, “Studies show students with caring and supportive inter-personal relationships in school report more positive academic attitudes and values, and more satisfaction with school. These students also are more engaged academically” (Klem & Connell, 2004, p. 262).

In their study *Relationships Matter: Linking Teacher Support to Student Engagement and Achievement*, Klem and Connell (2004) stated:

These results indicate teacher support is important to student engagement in school as reported by students and teachers. Students who perceive teachers as creating a caring, well-structured learning environment in which expectations are high, clear and fair are more likely to report engagement in school. In turn, high levels of engagement are associated

with higher attendance and test scores – variables that strongly predict whether youth will successfully complete school and ultimately pursue post-secondary education and achieve economic self-sufficiency”. (p. 270)

Support for the above finding is evident in the following statement by Willms (2003): “Students are more likely to be engaged at school if they attend schools that have ... a strong disciplinary climate, good student-teacher relations and high expectations for student success” (p. 48). Klem and Connell (2004) also pointed out that “research links higher levels of engagement in school with improved performance” (p. 262) and that “students with low levels of engagement are at risk for a variety of long-term adverse consequences, including disruptive behavior in class, absenteeism, and dropping out of school” (p. 263). Support for this can be found in Willms (2003):

Thus, engagement is probably closely tied to students’ economic success and long-term health and well-being, and as such deserves to be treated alongside academic achievement as an important schooling outcome. Moreover, engagement is not an unalterable trait ... rather, it entails attitudes and behaviours that can be affected by teachers and parents, and shaped by school policy and practice. (pp. 8-9)

Notably, while outlining various factors that influence attendance rates for Aboriginal learners, McRae (n.d.) included the following: “engagement in schooling, teacher student relationships, educational relevance, school atmosphere, and school/teacher expectations (n.p.)”.

In this section belonging and engagement have been discussed. Belonging is also an attribute noted within the Circle of Courage philosophy (Brokenleg, 2012a). Following is a

description of the Circle of Courage with particular attention paid to the aspect of belonging. Its inclusion here is to further highlight that student sense of belonging is essential.

Belonging and the Circle of Courage. “When we connect with a child, we have the power to change that child’s life” (Brokenleg, 2012a, p. 11). The Circle of Courage is a label describing the philosophical basis of a model designed to build resilience in youth that flowed from both “psychological research and exploring Native North American child-care philosophy” (p. 9). Brokenleg, Brendtro, and Bockern (2002) used the medicine wheel design as, an icon to express the fundamental human needs of all youth—to be significant, capable, powerful, and virtuous, and how these needs are met by the experiences of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. Meeting these fundamental human needs generates strong, resilient youth who can meet life’s problems. (Brokenleg, 2012a, p. 9; see also Brokenleg, 2012b)

“The Circle of Courage philosophy makes innate hope a reality” (Brokenleg, 2012a, p. 12) and is made up of four parts. The heart of the model is the underpinning belief that through the including of all four aspects when working with at-risk youth resiliency is built in the child (Brokenleg, 2012a). The four facets are: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity (Brendtro et al., 2002). Brendtro et al. (2002) noted that Stanley Coopersmith (1967) pointed toward four cornerstones that make up self-esteem. These being: “significance, competence, power, and virtue” (Brendtro et al., 2002, p.44). Linking this work of Coopersmith (1967) to the four component parts of the Circle of Courage, Brokenleg (2012b) explained:

1. Significance: Realizing that one matters to others creates enormous strength inside of that person. This describes the spirit of Belonging.

2. Competence: A capable human being can learn, solve problems, and develop talents and abilities. Such is the joy that comes from Mastery.
3. Power: This is not power wielded over others, but the ability to control one's emotions and set the course of one's destiny. This is true Independence.
4. Virtue: Ultimately, one cannot know that he or she is valued unless he or she is of value to others. This is the spirit of Generosity. (p. 12; see also Brendtro et al., 2002, p. 45)

While there are four facets that contribute to 'The Circle of Courage' philosophy, the aspect of belonging is a central theme within this work. As such, belonging as it is described in the context of The Circle of Courage will now be expanded upon.

"When someone cares for us amidst the blizzards of life, we know we are significant. This is not something that can be taught in words but can be communicated to others in how we treat them. Every teacher worth being a teacher knows that his or her students will forget what s/he says to them but they will never forget how she made them feel" (Brokenleg, 2012b, p. 13). Central to belonging is relationship. "Even the most troubled young person has hidden potentials which can be nurtured through positive relationships between adults and youth" (Brendtro, Mitchell & Long, 2010, p. 3). In Aboriginal communities, children were taught to view other people whom they saw with consistency as relatives and these connections were valued (Brendtro et al., 2002). Further, Brendtro et al. (2002) clarify, "Native youth have learned to listen and reflect on advice from concerned adults who approach them in a caring manner" (Brendtro et al., 2002, p. 47). From this one can posit that by creating a sense of belonging a door is opened for greater access to the communication of ideas, goals, and a greater connection

to school. Brokenleg (2012a) noted, “Natural human social connections are powerful assets for youth. Connected adults can guide and clarify youth through periods of uncertainty. Successful youth work relies on social connections” (p. 12). Further support for this can be found in the work of Dunleavy and Milton (2009). They note that resiliency, among other things, is built upon connection with adults who interact with them in caring, generous, and respectful ways.

Brokenleg (2012a) posits that those who work to improve the resiliency of others have a keen understanding of the influence of relationship. This stance is supported in Brendtro et al. (2002) who, referring to the work of Menniger, stated, “The pioneering American psychiatrist Dr. Karl Menniger contended that modern children desperately pursue ‘artificial belongings’ because this need is not fulfilled by families, schools, and neighbourhoods” (p. 48). Given this, there is greater urgency to meet the need of belonging. Should schools fail to do so there is the distinct possibility that, in seeking to meet this need, youth will seek it out in ways or with people that may be less than positive. Brokenleg (2010) noted, “Fundamental human relationships and basic skills in societal interaction create resilient youth” (p. 10). Additionally, noting the work of Neufeld, Brokenleg explained, “His work converges with our saying that the slippage in family relationships in our time requires an increased focus on fundamental human relationships” (p. 10). Brokenleg further stated, “Increasingly more researchers are finding that fundamental human relationships are foundational in creating resiliency” (p. 11). As Brendtro and Mitchell (2012) noted, “An adult who can connect with a young person is able to become a trusted source of support and guidance” (p. 3).

The composition of belonging is complex. The inherent pieces that contribute to belonging as an overall entity are discussed in the next section.

The composition of belonging. Belonging can be seen as having a composition of three parts: school identification, school climate and culture, and an ethic of care present within (Nodding, 2007). This relationship is demonstrated in Figure 1.

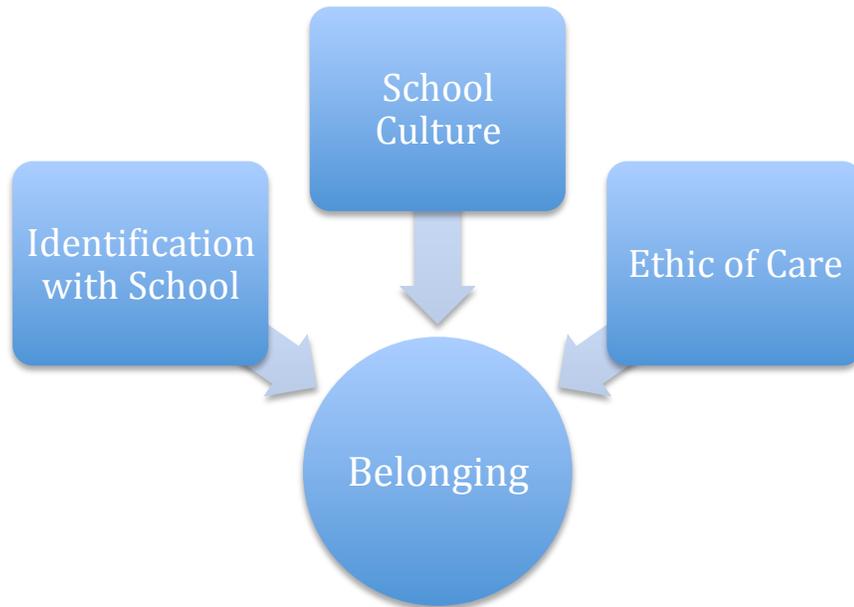


Figure 1. Component Parts of Belonging

The three component parts, when present, provide spaces of belonging that encourage students to bring, and be, their best self in the school environment. When students feel a sense of belonging, engagement levels, persistence, motivation, and interest are impacted (Voelkl, 1997). An examination of each of the above-noted parts is the focus of attention for the next discussion.

Identification with school and its impact. Identification with school emerges from the contacts, exchanges, accomplishments, and failures one experiences over time in school life (Voelkl, 1997). Voelkl (1997) noted:

It is likely that a student does not enter school with well-formulated feelings of identification or disidentification [*sic*]. Rather, this develops over time as a reflection of

school experiences. The accumulation of positive experiences, such as high academic achievement and participation in the classroom leads to feeling that he or she belongs in school and school is valuable in accomplishing desired outcomes. (p. 300)

Identification with school can positively impact student participation in school (Voelkl, 1997). According to Voelkl, identification with school has two parts: the first being student belief that they belong, and second that students find value in the goals of schooling (Finn, as cited in Voelkl, 1997). Ozer et al. (2008) reinforced the positive influence of acceptance and respect in the school setting. Voelkl noted the second piece of identification as a student belief that what is learned in school will help him/her achieve personal goals. In their work with urban youth, Marquez-Zenkov et al. (2007) noted, “In addition to revealing the extent to which urban community members have withdrawn from city schools, these figures suggest a void in the high school curriculum, which youth perceive as largely irrelevant to their present and future lives” (p. 404), which further underscored that this factor remains a threat to student engagement with school.

Voelkl (1997) also discovered that “results . . . involving middle and high school students demonstrated that the psychological sense of school membership was positively related to student motivation, effort, and achievement” (p. 297). This “psychological sense of school membership” (p. 297) is comprised of both the characteristics of the individual and the context of the school (Voelkl, 1997). Adolescent students, who perceive themselves as having solid school relationships, especially with teachers, enjoy better health and academic performance (Ozer et al., 2008). Further, students who consistently participate in the classroom have a greater likelihood of identifying with school and subsequently participate more fully in school events,

which further enhances the probability that they will stay in school (Finn, as cited in Voelkl, 1997, see also Ozer et al., 2008). In general, students who more actively participate in classroom life have a tendency to have higher school identification (Voelkl, 1997).

As noted earlier, when students feel connected to school they are less likely to drop out; however, causes of dropping out can be mitigated (Raham, 2010). In Raham's discussion of Aboriginal learners, she pointed out that barriers to student success include: lack of relationships being built, attendance, behaviour issues, and poor involvement with home. Raham went further to state that attendance has a strong influence on school completion. Stirk (2003) also identified student absenteeism as an issue for Aboriginal learners.

When speaking of students and the need for relationship Brendtro et al. (2002) posited: Hungering for fun and friendship, these children roam the halls of our schools and the streets of our cities in pursuit of meaningful human bonds. The tragedy is that, for many, their only option is to seek out relationships with other outcast and unclaimed youth.

(p. 14)

At the heart of this is the valuing of identity: the feeling that one is understood, important, and cherished for whom they are in spaces where they can connect and identify with the people in that group or environment. For, if one does not feel themselves as valued or heard in a space, one will seek out spaces of familiarity where their voice will be heard as, and for who, they are. Of considerable resonance was this statement by Noddings (2007):

Of course, there should be standards in any enterprise, and students should be encouraged to achieve mastery in their chosen fields of study. But the key here is choice of enterprise. In both the ethic of alterity and the ethic of care, we seek to enhance the other's growth,

but we do not threaten the other's Otherness, and we do not define for another exactly what he or she must do or be. (p. 439)

The following words by Schlossberg (1989) also supports the importance of belonging:

As people tell us their stories, we can listen in ways that connect us. As we listen to students and plan activities with them, we need to hear the common underlying concerns: will they fit in, will they matter? Despite these commonalities, we must acknowledge individuality. However, the most important lesson is that even with our differences, we are connected by the need to matter and the need to belong. (p. 7)

The situation is complex, one that the entire educational system must address. The diversity of the Aboriginal community itself will create distinctions and complexities that cannot be easily extrapolated and applied in a general way. Walker (2006) suggests one way to improve school experiences and outcomes for students is to cultivate student belief in themselves and their capacities. As mentioned earlier, there are future implications for students who cannot find peace in the educational setting. Feelings of comfort and well-being are cultivated and exuded in the climate and culture of schools, and this is what will next be discussed.

School climate, school culture, and student learning. School culture plays a significant part in determining a school's climate (J. Ottmann, personal communication, November, 2012). That is to say that school climate is a sub-set of school culture, in that school culture is a base from which the school climate is built.

The steady growth of achievement by students is influenced by the safe and orderly climate of a school (McMurrer, 2012). As Leech and Miller (2004) stated:

The preponderance of the research on effective schools has identified a safe and orderly learning environment to be a necessary component for maximizing student achievement. Creating such a positive school climate is one of the fundamental roles of school-based leaders. (p. 4)

Thus, schools enable learning by being safe, orderly, comfortable, and showing care (Robinson, 2011; see also BC Ministry of Education, 2008; Osher, Bear, Sprague & Doyle, 2010).

In a document written for the Center on Education Policy, McMurrer (2012) noted that the formation of a school climate with component parts of safety, order, productivity, and collegiality is central to increasing the achievement of students in schools. School climate can impact, and be impacted by, student attendance and behaviour, parental involvement, and morale (McMurrer, 2012).

As noted by McMurrer (2012), the creation of a positive school climate is an involved one: “This process includes developing positive relationships among students and between students and staff, and providing social, emotional, and behavioral supports that foster a safe, clean, collaborative, and productive environment in which students can learn” (p. 4). Hence, for a school climate to be truly positive, there must be a connection to school felt by learners. Further, a positive school climate addresses harassment and bullying (McMurrer, 2012) and can positively impact engagement that, in turn, can motivate and promote academic success (McMurrer, 2012). Support can be found in the following excerpt from *The Globe and Mail*: “Mr. Handscomb, agreeing with Ms. Alvarez, said it’s important to develop relationships with students to build their confidence. ‘In order to get the kids on board, they have to feel happy and comfortable walking into that learning environment,’” (Dhillon, 2012, para. 16-17).

In her discussion of the creation of a positive culture and relationship, Hyslop (2006) noted:

Schools remain one of the best opportunities for connecting with youth and adults in positive ways, giving students the sense that they are valued and cared for, and reinforcing the message that whether they succeed or fail actually matters to someone. . . .

Administrators and counselors were concerned about students who came to school but were not engaged in any activities and were not a part of the school community. They saw that this lack of engagement often led to increased dropout rates and lower student success. (p. 34)

While school climate speaks to the ‘feel’ of a place, school culture is the force bubbling underneath. Without a shift in culture changes to the way things operate are unlikely. As Troman (1996) explained, “As relatively junior members of staff we, of course, had little power with which to attempt to change existing cultures of teaching or organizational arrangements in the school. Without these changes single innovations are likely to have little impact” (pp. 124-125). School culture evolves from those within the school community and the values and attitudes they hold (BC Ministry of Education, 2008). Inherent within this is the addressing of issues that impact the culture, such as bullying or racism (BC Ministry of Education, 2008). It is by addressing these types of issues that the culture of the school is set and communicated. In addition, “Trust is facilitated by a school culture that emphasizes cooperation and caring” (Costa & Garmston, 2012, p. 39).

Troman (1996) describes an embodiment of the embedded pieces of school culture in the following statement:

These formal and informal, individual and collective discussions, gave the staff opportunities to articulate their views on the kind of changes they thought desirable in their school. This largely open process allowed both strategic compliers and radical redefiners to recognize a commonality in their respective positions and values and provided opportunity for alliances to grow and subsequent establishment of common values. (p. 129)

Changes in culture are a re-writing of the values definitions that exist in a space (Troman, 1996). This includes an understanding that culture is impacted both externally and internally (Troman, 1996; Woods as cited in Troman, 1996). External impacts can be parent groups, provincial policies and mandates, as well as school district initiatives.

We have learned that levels of congruency between the culture of the school and the culture of the community served can be an important factor in community support and community attitudes towards the school. Community attitudes and participation of parents in the educational process appear to be critical elements for teachers to be more successful with Native students. Responsibility for and ownership of schools by parents and other community members are also significantly tied to the success of the schools. (Demmert, as cited in Michel et al., 2005, p. 9)

While one could argue that an integral component of culture is the care exhibited and observed, and for the purposes of this paper, the concept of care is set apart as distinct and it is where I will now focus.

An ethic of care. Nel Noddings (2007) informs us about the importance of the ethic of care. Noddings' concept of the ethic of care was based in the theory of human relationships. Noddings pointed out that it may not be a natural response to show care in certain situations (such as when we feel as though we should do something with regard to a circumstance but do not feel the desire to do so), and thus we must remember what it feels like to care and to be cared for and how we visualize or identify ourselves when we are caring. She went on to say that "ethical caring's great contribution is to guide action long enough for natural caring to be restored and for people once again to interact with mutual and spontaneous regard" (p. 417). Further, she stated, "Ethical discussions must be made in caring interactions with those most affected by the discussion. . . . Thus, instead of turning to principle for guidance, a carer turns to the cared-for. What does he or she need?" (p. 418). Noddings also explained, "I think the ethic of care has something in common with the ethics of alterity (otherness) described by Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas. [39] Both call for respect of the other as other" (p. 433). Michel et al. (2005) noted:

All children, regardless of cultural background, colour, religion, or gender need a learning environment that is safe and respectful. **Research has demonstrated that the physical, social, and cultural environment in which learning takes place significantly affects the learning and well-being of Aboriginal children.** (p. 4, bold in original)

In a relationship characterized by an ethic of care the carers and those cared for are in close relation (Noddings, 2007). Not only is this a proximal relation, it is also responsive to differences in culture and those of a personal nature (Noddings, 2007). At its heart, "The suggestion is that the ethic of care is itself an ethic of principle; its fundamental principle might

be: Always act so as to establish, maintain, or enhance caring relations” (pp. 418-419). Given the importance of relationship in both the context of Aboriginal learners and also in educational leadership, this statement presents a core principle upon which to establish an impetus for acting in ways that contribute to the greater good of those within a certain space. As Noddings (2007) stated:

The only universals recognized by care theorists are those describing the human condition: . . . physical and emotional needs, and the longing to be cared for. This last—whether it is manifested as a need for love, physical care, respect, or mere recognition—is the fundamental starting point for the ethic of care. (p. 419)

This “longing to be cared for” (p. 419) can be related to belonging. Inherent within the desire to be cared for is acceptance and understanding: not acceptance in terms of tolerance but rather the understanding that this space would not be the same without one being there and in the mirroring of a space’s complexity that demonstrates itself as inclusive, respectful, and diverse. From this perspective, one can begin to articulate how the notion that seemingly “unfair advantage” being given may really be about being truly responsive to what is needed and perhaps even about righting a wrong.

Noddings (2007) pointed out that an ethic of care involves not only relationship but also the role that is occupied by the cared for. It is embedded in the reciprocal relationship and not solely dependent on the carer, their perspective, and intentions. Actions and reactions work in tandem and in response to the people involved. In this paradigm, it is the forces at work that define the relationship and the obligations within that relation. Brendtro et al. (2002) included this aspect in their delineation of features of strong “reclaiming” environments, as they included

“expecting youth to be caregivers, not just helpless recipients overly dependent on the care of adults [10]” (p. 4) in their list of the four features of these types of environments.

The ethic of care winds its way into education in various ways (Noddings, 2007). Of particular importance to this discussion is the moral education that is at the heart of an ethic of care (Noddings, 2007). The four constituting parts of a moral education in relation to an ethic of caring are: “modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation” (p. 424). “Moral life guided by an ethic of care must attend to the establishment, maintenance, and enhancement of caring relations” (p. 431). Educators model caring through the relationships they have with students (Noddings, 2007). More than what is taught, the embodiment of caring contributes to others’ understandings of how care is defined and enacted. Dialogue encourages educators to examine their practice. Noddings (2007) noted, “It gives us an opportunity to ask why we are doing certain things and with what effect” (p. 426). She went further to state that “*dialogue* is implied by the phenomenology of caring. When we care, we receive the other in an open and genuine way” (p. 427). Practice, in this regard, refers to the creation of a mentality by virtue of one’s experience. Noddings (2007) put it this way: “If we want to produce people who will care for one another, then it makes sense to give students practice in caring and reflecting on that practice” (p. 428).

Confirmation, in a sense, takes us back to identity. It is recognizing where a person is at, what they are determining to aspire to, valuing it, and supporting that desired end’s development (Noddings, 2007). This is not to say that any goal would be advocated, but rather that goals that are seen as commendable by the cared for and the carer are encouraged (Noddings, 2007). This linked to Brendtro et al. (2002), who stated, “In our experience, it is possible and important to

accept the child even while rejecting the behavior [26]” (p. 23). Further support for this can be found in the work of Schlossberg (1989) who, in her discussion of mattering, pointed out the following statement from Rosenberg and McCullough: “To believe that the other person cares about what we want, think, and do, or is concerned with our fate, is to matter” (p. 4). She then went on to explain, “[M]attering does not necessarily mean approval” (p. 4). For confirmation to be present there must also be two elements (Noddings, 2007). According to Noddings (2007), these elements are “trust and continuity [which] are required for confirmation. Continuity is needed because we require knowledge of the other. Trust is required for the carer to be credible and also to sustain the search for an acceptable motive” (p. 431). Motive, as put forth by Noddings, speaks to a goal that “has to be a real, a genuine, possibility” (p. 430). The impact of caring within the school setting is embodied in this statement from the BC Ministry of Education (2008):

Caring schools know that a sense of belonging and connectedness—not just for students, but for everyone in the school community—is a necessary element in the creation and maintenance of a safe learning environment. Caring schools are ones in which members of the school community feel a sense of belonging and have opportunities to relate to one another in positive, supportive ways. All aspects of school life embrace and reflect diversity. (p. 12)

The fusion: How identification, school climate/culture, and an ethic of care coalesce.

So, it is the fusion of identification with school, school culture, and an ethic of caring that contributes to the essence of belonging. An ethic of caring is how we enact reciprocal relationships, model interdependence, and measure our efforts to care. The school culture is the

crux of what is valued and believed and acted upon by those in the space. School identification speaks to the conditions and relationships that embody the valuing of what a person brings, what they believe, and the relevancy of school. It involves the explicit honouring of identity, whereby learners see themselves in a space and that space reveals itself as of value to learners. Thus, it is the integration of these aspects that defines belonging.

Present needs and the lingering past of the Aboriginal learner. Traditional Indigenous methods of teaching and learning include the principles of “mentorship and apprenticeship learning: learning by doing; learning by deeply observing; learning through listening; telling stories and singing songs; learning in a community; and learning by sharing and providing service to the community” (Williams & Tanaka, 2007, para. 7), and it is important that those in education are familiar with this learning approach. Additionally, key to Aboriginal education is “trust, encouragement, confidence...and acceptance” (Wilson, 2000, p. 215). Consider the following:

When an individual is embedded as a member of a dominant culture everything is designed to fit that cultural world. From this position of relative comfort, it is difficult to even notice that there are people who might have a different approach, or a different way of knowing than what is familiarly known and believed. (Williams & Tanaka, 2007, para. 11)

From this, one can begin to see that current structures may cater to one particular viewpoint and that teaching about other cultures is only one part of what has to happen in schools. It is not only the students who must understand but also the adults entrusted with their

education who are required to understand. One way for this to happen is to ensure that all voices are enabled and heard.

The inclusion of voices. The inclusion of the Aboriginal community in the creation and application of educational programs for the school district is essential (Hughes & More, 1997; Kirkness, 1999). As noted by Raham (2010), “Engaging family and local community in [I]ndigenous education is vital if there is to be a significant shift towards equality of educational outcomes (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007)” (Slide 20). Porous boundaries are critical. What this means is that the classroom must expand beyond its walls via going out into the Aboriginal community (Wilson, 2000). Ottmann (2009) used the term boundaryless organizations and defined them in this way: “Boundaryless organizations value people and partnerships are sought. In essence, boundaryless organizations are open systems and they do require strong transformational leadership” (p. 49). Further, she noted, “[B]oundaryless organizations focus on structural and relational change” (p. 48). Relationship with parents is integral to the process (Wilson, 2000). Bishop (2011) framed it in this manner:

Effective leadership that aims to sustain educational reform needs to develop a means to spread the reform so that parents, families and community members are engaged in a manner that addresses their aspirations for the education of their children. Through these actions we would expect to see a re-connection of parents and families with the educational advancement of their children, and an enormous change in the life chances and lifestyles of those people currently underserved by the education system. (pp. 96-97)

Kirkness (1999) noted: “The involvement of Indian people in the education of their children, has resulted in: • greater retention of students • improved attendance • inclusion of relevant

curriculum • better graduation rates” (p. 13). Of note is that topics of controversy relative to curriculum are generally explored by the most vocal on both ends of a topic; however, it is often the case that there is little opinion via the silent majority included (Davis, as cited in Edwards & Kellett, 2012).

It is important to seek input from the Aboriginal community as they can give voice to what Aboriginal education entails (Kirkness, 1999). Parental input is a vital part of the creation of an environment that supports learning (Davis; Desforages & Abouchaar; Wang, as cited in Edwards & Kellett, 2012) since parents want their children to feel that they belong in the school community (Stirk, 2003). Additionally, Stirk reminded, “Kehoe and Echols (1994) stated that First Nations parents would like their own children to achieve as well as non-native students on standardized achievement tests” (para. 23). Further, as put by McCaslin and Good (1992), “To reiterate, responsibility for building this infrastructure is shared-by citizens, parents, teachers, administrators, policymakers, and children” (p. 9). Support can also be found in the following from McRae (n.d.):

First, success is genuinely derived from a partnership of the parties to the educational process – student, family, community, institution. Cultural support, recognition, and acknowledgement can only be achieved by active and effective relationships between Indigenous communities and those who work in schools. Both parties have a role to play. (n.p.)

One cannot hope to make changes for others without consultation, collaboration, and the understanding of perspective. Part of understanding perspective is listening carefully to the

experience of the “Other”. Only then can we begin to navigate and negotiate another world. As put by Hughes and More (1997):

The view of Reynolds and Skilbeck holds true in today’s educational world. The cultural perspectives of the Aboriginal people can contribute in a productive way to our understanding of the nature of schooling and learning experiences. These perspectives are at the heart of contemporary advocacy by Aboriginal people for changes in the education of their children. (para. 47)

On the path to understanding. One cannot ignore the histories of the Aboriginal people (Kirkness, 1999). The adage “the past is the past” rarely ever applies, as the past flowed through the blood of those who came before to those with us today. The past has influenced the present (Kirkness, 1999; Marquez-Zenkov et al.; 2007; Morrissette, 1994; Stirk, 2003). As noted by Elias et al. (2012):

The experiences of [I]ndigenous peoples has been ongoing, and always present, making historical trauma a part of a common experience, subtly shaping the lives and futures of individuals, families and communities (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Fast & Collin-Vezina, 2010; Menzies, 2006; Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). (pp. 1560-1561)

Aboriginal parents do not always feel welcomed by the schools their children attend (Kirkness, 1999); however, changing this may lead to well-being and academic gains by Aboriginal learners.

Residual effects. As noted earlier, the history of Indian Residential Schools has impacts on current relationships between schools and the Aboriginal community (Elias et al., 2012).

Some background with regard to Indian Residential Schools is shared in Appendix I and further information can be gained from visiting the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada website (www.trc.ca). For now, what must be emphasized is that the Indian Residential School experience has had negative intergenerational consequences, and this fact must be included in considerations that are relative to Aboriginal learners and their family. What any individual's and family's particular experience was, we may never fully know; however, there needs to be an awareness of the influence of this sad history.

Of note is this comment by Rand (2011): "It is critical for a parent to provide a child with a mirror reflecting the child's value, importance, and sense of belonging to the family and the community. These essential aspects of parenting were absent from residential schools" (p. 59). Given this, it is easier to see that, inter-generationally, Indian Residential Schools are still present and a factor in the lives of Aboriginal people. The dysfunction of the Indian Residential School system not only impacted the well-being of the children but also the family, community, and generations that followed (Elias et al., 2012). There was a vast difference between the loving care of First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) peoples and how Indian Residential School staff treated FNMI children (Morrissette, 1994). To compound an already untenable situation, FNMI children were taught to be ashamed of their culture in these institutions (Tafoya, as cited in Morrissette, 1994). Not only was loss of identity a casualty of this assault, but also the experience of seeing a model of a functional and caring parenting style (Morrissette, 1994).

Pondering. I am left wondering: How strong do you have to be to overcome a past that includes a traumatic Indian Residential School experience? Talk of the term survivor left me considering what it meant to survive something. I understood the definition of the term and that

pride can be carried forward after having come through such an ordeal; however, it is not a pleasant term. It means that one has come through a life-altering experience that was largely negative and quite probably horrific. To still assert one's identity after having to endure another's compulsion to extinguish it speaks to great strength, and this is a humbling thought for me. This is why the culture of school must be an inviting and embracing one. It is not simply the present that must be addressed but rather what schools have historically taught Aboriginal people about what school is and, more importantly, what it represents.

The role of educational leadership in students' sense of belonging. One might well wonder why leadership is being included as an aspect of the research here. After all, we are talking about belonging, right? What do educational leaders have to do with this? That is exactly the point of one of the research sub-questions. If we do not have an understanding of the critical role that educational leaders play in influencing the spaces of school then our understandings will stay just that—understanding instead of action. The point of this research is to provide further insight into how we, as educators and leaders, can enable and empower the future of Aboriginal learners, and a part of that is bringing to light the active role that educational leaders must take to encourage that to happen. Educational leaders are in a position to enact and facilitate change, both through actions and through the creation of policy, and this is why educational leadership is so important to the creation of spaces of belonging. “Mainstream and [A]boriginal research identify leadership as the most important factor in school effectiveness in raising achievement” (Raham, 2010, Slide 29). Further acknowledging the role of leadership was Troman (1996), who, in his discussion of the role of headteachers, pointed out that “headteachers are instrumental in the creation of secondary school ethos (Rutter et al., 1979) and primary institutional bias

(Pollard, 1985) and in the management of curriculum change (Ball, 1987)” (p. 119), as did Ottmann (2009) in her paper of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit high school completion.

Leadership and its connection to the creation of a changed space. Any discussion of educational leadership must include what comprises educational leadership and how it is enacted. In this section, educational leadership will be defined, explicated via Robinson’s (2011) model and the role of trust and educational leadership will be examined.

Who are educational leaders? For the purposes of this discussion, school leaders are school administrators and teachers since they are in a position to create spaces that are responsive to Aboriginal learners, and, while ultimately school administrators have authority with regard to policy and resource allocation, teachers need to be a part of the dialogue that leads to final decisions. Having said this, those who are in more formal positions (e.g., school administrators, district personnel) are situated in such a way that their influence is often broader in scope, and they are often more easily construed as educational leaders by virtue of their assigned title. Earlier in this work, the following definitions were offered: Educational Leader: Those within a school, teacher or administrator, who have the capability to foster and facilitate change; and School Administrator: A leader who has the capacity to allocate resources and enact, reinforce, support, and enforce policies, structures, and school dynamics. This intertwining is necessary. Should one suppose that only school administrators have the power to enact change then it assumes powerlessness on the rest of the school community. I do not believe that this is the case. One can initiate and enact change in one’s environment. Leadership can come from above or within (Frymier Russell, 2008).

What is educational leadership? Leithwood and Louis (2012) noted that there are four crucial parts to leadership. These components are “setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and improving the instructional programs” (p. 57). Further, they posited that the most powerful enactments of this are “a. Focusing the school on goals and expectations for student achievement b. Keeping track of teachers’ professional development needs and c. Creating structures and opportunities for teachers to collaborate” (p. 57). These are very much in line with Robinson’s (2011) stance on student-centred leadership. Frymier Russell (2008) explained:

Within the educational context, the idea of a supervisory model in which the formal leader (e.g. the principal of a K-12 school) empowers the employees (the teachers and other professionals) has long been advocated through the “instructional leadership” model. This model emphasizes the principal as not just a manager of the building, but serving in the capacity as the primary coach and cheerleader associated with leading instructional improvement and ultimately enhanced learning by students. (pp. 85-86)

Frymier Russell, while noting that it is hard to define leadership, described leadership in this way: “It can refer to the actions and words of the person who is in charge or the subtle nature of interactions between an influential member of a group with others in that same group” (p. 81). Robinson outlined a set of leadership capabilities that will be described in the following section.

Leadership capabilities. Robinson (2011) denoted three capabilities that educational leaders require to enact five dimensions central to educational leadership that is student-centred. One might even view these capabilities as characteristics of educational leadership. The three capabilities are the application of “relevant knowledge, solving complex problems, and building

relational trust” (p. 21). The first capability, that of relevant knowledge application, is comprised of two facets: (a) the leader having a current, research-based understanding of how students learn; and (b) the ways that teaching encourages learning in the multi-faceted context of the classroom and an understanding of how to use this knowledge to drive decision-making in areas such as the evaluation of teachers, grouping of students, and selection of curriculum (Robinson, 2011). The second capability is the solution of complex problems, and this process is composed of two parts: firstly, any solution to a problem must, to the largest extent possible, address the requirements that will fulfill critical scrutiny (Robinson, 2011). “Critical scrutiny involves checking the validity or reasonableness of the proposed requirements” (Robinson, 2011, p. 29). Additionally, there must be cognition that some solution requirements will have more influence than others and that there are interdependent requirements that will need to be considered against the principles of the solution (Robinson, 2011). This second facet of solving complex problems is how the educational leaders lead this process (Robinson, 2011). With regard to this aspect, Robinson noted that collaborative meetings to determine a collective solution with those who will be impacted are necessary. This can be seen as a critical piece in relation to the creation of spaces of belonging for Aboriginal learners given the historical background and its current impacts. This is a complex issue requiring time, dedication, determination, and collaboration. Educational leaders, in collaboration with the Aboriginal community, need to bring forth all their strengths to untangle problems and implement solutions. Corroboration can be found in Redburn’s (2009) examination of relational trust and the consensus process. Lastly, the third capability has to do with the building of relational trust (Robinson, 2011; see also Frymier Russell, 2008; Redburn, 2009; Troman, 1996). There are four

dispositions upon which relational trust is built: (a) respecting others through valuing their ideas, (b) caring about staffs' personal and professional lives, (c) being competent, and (d) displaying integrity (Robinson, 2011, p. 35; see also Redburn, 2009). These characteristics can be extrapolated to working alongside Aboriginal students, parents, and the Aboriginal community at large. Relationships foster student participation (Marquez-Zenkov et al., 2007); therefore, leaders can use the understanding of student lives to build relationships and then apply this understanding to their curricular decisions and pedagogy to help students navigate their personal worlds participation (Marquez-Zenkov et al., 2007). As Marquez-Zenkov et al. (2007) noted:

Urban adolescents' relationships with *teachers* are often synonymous with their relationships to *school*. While many new teachers have been cautioned about being students' friends, urban youths often need us to play exactly this role, if only for a few minutes on a given day. (p. 411)

Further, as stated by Brendtro et al. (2002), "Not surprisingly, students at greatest risk for dropping out of school are those who have never been friends with any teacher" (p. 13).

Knowledge of one's identity is a key aspect for the Aboriginal learner (Wilson, 2000). Included in the facet of identity is relationship with others (Hughes & More, 1997; Wilson, 2000). As such, educators must be cognizant of, and active in, creating positive relationships with students (Wilson, 2000). Positive relationships in this context are relationships where the identity of the Aboriginal learner is honoured and respected. They are relationships that are reciprocal and where the voice of the student is enabled and heard. Titley (1980) noted:

The educational survey of Treaty No. 3 area indicates that Indian identity is the most important factor affecting the success of the Indian child. Indian identity means to have knowledge and understanding of Indian history, culture and language . . . Those students who have a better Indian identity stayed in school longer. They also have higher aspirations in their occupational outlook. (para. 22)

Further, when the identity of Aboriginal learners is not taken into account or ignored shame and failure can be a result (Hughes & More, 1997). The ethic of care can be the counter action to this form of negligence. As Noddings (2007) has noted, “As I have described caring, emphasis is on the relation. A person earns the label “caring” by regularly establishing caring relations, and a caring relation requires that the cared-for recognize the caring” (p. 426).

Shining a light on the importance and impact of trust. Trust is a requirement when vulnerability is present. Further, a readiness to be vulnerable comes from one’s confidence in those whom they are vulnerable to (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, as cited in Redburn, 2009, para. 5). In a trusting environment people feel safe and are more likely to exhibit risk-taking. Risk-taking and the easing of a sense of vulnerability are supported through trust (Kochanek, as cited in Redburn, 2009). Of note is that the amount of trust present in a school can impact how others perceive their ability to attain wanted states (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran; Bandura; Tschannen-Moran as cited in Redburn, 2009, para. 6). Integral to the building of trust is the provision of opportunity for all stakeholders to be heard (Redburn, 2009). This requires active listening. There are three aspects to active listening: firstly the speaker is sent the message that they are the focus, secondly the person listening does summarizing of what has been shared and this summarizing also includes discernments related to feelings, and lastly the speaker is queried for

further thoughts regarding emotions or views (Weger, Castle & Emmett as cited in Vostal, McNaughton, Benedek-Wood & Hoffman, 2015).

Relational trust is based both on what is believed by the trustor and by what they have seen in terms of behaviour of the trusted (Costa & Garmston, 2012). Additionally, this type of trust “requires expectations to be regularly validated by actions . . . [and] includes expanded criteria for making judgments about others: - behavior of others—how people feel about interactions—beliefs about the underlying intentions that motivate behaviours” (p. 38).

Trust and relationship building with students and parents is important (Stirk, 2003). “Genuine education must engage the purposes and energies of those being educated. To secure such engagement, teachers must build relationships of care and trust, and within such relationships, students and teachers construct educational objectives cooperatively” (Noddings, 2007, pp. 438-439). Further, trust is built by helping students to feel safe with taking risks as learners and believing in their abilities to be successful (Alberta Education, 2007).

Of note, there are also multiple definitions that describe leadership (Ahnee-Benham with Napier, 2002), and not only are there multiple definitions, but there are also alternate perspectives (Ahnee-Benham with Napier, 2002). Indigenous descriptions of leadership do not always align with Western descriptions (Ahnee-Benham with Napier, 2002). It is important to understand this if existing educational leaders wish to communicate, develop relationships with, and include Aboriginal families, communities, and perspectives in the space and operation of schools. Schools must acknowledge and be inclusive of Aboriginal leadership if they are to build stronger ties to the Aboriginal community.

School leadership is central and very important. “The principal sets the tone” (Costa & Garmston, 2012, p. 39) and, as such, they must remain cognizant of their power and influence. Leaders are integral to Aboriginal learner achievement (Raham, 2010).

Bringing it Together and Stepping Forward

The words of this last section include more than just my own. I was particularly struck by this statement by Williams and Tanaka (2007):

In today’s complex world where pedagogy is driven by market economy, young teachers can be served by what O’Sullivan (2001) refers to as a politics of hope. He calls for replacing the grand narrative of transnational competition through globalization, with a “formative narrative” that supplants the bottom line of profit with the core value of quality of life. (para. 43)

When one looks at the impact of Indian Residential Schools in today’s Aboriginal communities and realizes how this provides the impetus to closely examine how we can shift the culture of schools from foreign spaces to spaces of belonging, we can begin to see why belonging is not just a problem built by current structures but also by histories: histories that created definitions of the purpose of schools for those in the Aboriginal community. This, coupled with what is observed by Aboriginal students and families in the current school setting (e.g., relevance, seeing oneself in the community of school, and feeling a part of the space), is what allows for either a reinforcing of or a reframing of the definition of school. Extending from this, the role of educational leaders and the trust they engender becomes a critical component. The words they use, the actions they take, and the voices they include become the enactment of the definition of

schools. This definition becomes the basis for the valuing of, and engagement with, school and its provision of access to a future of opportunities and a life of choices rather than circumstance.

The main themes derived from this section (i.e., belonging, Aboriginal inclusion, educational leadership, and trust) bring us to a place depicting a portion of the picture that is the focus of this research endeavour. We have the backdrop, the landscape so to speak, that underpins and undergirds previous work in this area. This is however, only a partial view so another piece of the scene is next to be added: that of the theoretical basis for this work.

Capability Approach

The capability approach is an underlying force in this work and, as such, will be outlined here and will be further discussed in the methodology chapter of this dissertation. At this point it will be discussed *as a foundation* for its inclusion in this study. Walker (2009) explained: “Capabilities asks us as educators how we ought to and can foster our students’ flourishing and well-being, and to recognize that social and educational arrangements might diminish our students’ capabilities to choose and have good lives” (p. 310). From this we can extrapolate the following: schools need to be places where opportunities for growth and flourishing are ever present and kids can begin to become whomever and whatever they wish to be. Further, in order for students to feel empowered they must sustain a belief in themselves and gain abilities that will enable them. Walker (2006) stated, “Achievement, aspiration and voice can be compromised by school” (p. 176); educational goals should include cultivating these qualities and ensuring their presence. Related to this is the ideal that people should be determiners of their own lives and be able to live with dignity (Nussbaum, 1999).

By empowering students through acknowledging who they are and providing necessary learning, we can help them to move forward into the future with confidence and a greater sense of self-worth. It is hoped that this research will help in this regard. As Kemmis (2006) noted:

Some of the consequences of schooling are unforeseen and unpleasantFor even a larger majority of young people, the consequences include a disenchantment of learning itself—when they come to believe that learning is no longer an integral process in their own authentic life projects, but that it is instead a preparation for compliance to the will and purposes of irresistible others and invincible institutions. (p. 463)

Going deeper.

Nussbaum (1999) listed ten “Central Human Functional Capabilities” (p. 235). Walker (2006) applied Nussbaum’s later list in her study of South African girls and their school experience. Walker noted that practical reason, affiliation, senses, imagination and thought, emotions, bodily health, and bodily integrity (p. 177) from Nussbaum’s list can be considered as education capabilities. For the purposes of this proposal, three are of special note. They include: senses, imagination and thought (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 235), followed by practical reason, and affiliation, “[which includes] having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation” (p. 235). These three capabilities have been singled out for this study because of their relationship to the creation of a sense of belonging and will be further explicated in this section. It should be noted that the intention of the list of “Central Human Functional Capabilities” (p. 235) is that it be a flexible document and is meant to be modified according to context.

Senses, imagination and thought (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 235) refers to the application of one’s creativity, thinking, and reasoning to create products and events. Further, it implies the

exercising of one's rights and freedoms (Nussbaum, 1999). In terms of belonging, the cultivation of this capability will acknowledge and validate the ways of knowing and being that the child brings to the classroom.

Practical reason (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 235) is the capability to determine what is good and to be able to critically reflect and plan in order to create the life one wishes (Nussbaum, 1999; Walker, 2006). This capability lends itself to belonging in that it is the application of one's critical analysis to situations and the process that leads to choice related to how one would like to proceed. It is empowering and valuing of one's perspective, dreams, and goals and provides for strategizing how to achieve what one desires.

Central to affiliation (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 235) is the capability to live with and engage with others, to be able to put oneself in the shoes of another, to show compassion, experience justice, and the having of friends. It also has contained within it non-discrimination and non-humiliation of self (Nussbaum, 1999; Walker, 2006). This capability facilitates belonging in that it fosters positive social interactions and navigation of how to live with others. Further, in the context of belonging, it allows for pride in one's self and their identity.

Agency and capabilities theory. When educators foster a sense of belonging and facilitate student self growth, agency is developed. This is important because, as stated by Walker (2006):

Agency is then one's ability to pursue goals that one values and that are important for the life an individual wishes to lead; agency and well-being are deeply connected. Because agency is so central to Sen's ideas of the freedom to make choices, a lack of agency or a constrained agency equates to disadvantage-if an individual (or group, see Robeyns,

2003) faces barriers to genuine choice and a life of reflective choices. It then follows that education ought to contribute to agency freedom, and hence to ask how education and education policy seeks to contribute to human capabilities. (p. 165)

Thus, if agency is not cultivated it not only negatively impacts present freedoms but future opportunities and freedoms will also be diminished (Sen, as cited in Walker, 2006).

Capabilities and the Aboriginal learner.

You will know you have achieved your goal when the majority of children who enter your system graduate and go on to further education or get a job, when they are living happy and fulfilled lives of their own making. (Kirkness, 1999, p. 26)

As noted earlier within the discussion of agency, and in other parts of this work, the quality of education students receive has far-reaching implications for that student. As stated by Walker (2009), “Education affects our continuing journeys through adult life and having a full life. It matters therefore what it is that people are learning, and what they are learning to be in education” (p. 302). The capability approach allows us to consider what parameters need to be put into place such that student success is an antecedent to life success since: “Learning experiences of Aboriginal children, as with all students, are crucial to the educational and life opportunities of the children” (Hughes & More, 1997, para. 5). To influence the present which impacts the future is something that is under the power of schools, and, as such, careful consideration must be given to what is being done with regard to belonging and the individual potential it acknowledges.

Starting from a Position of Strength

The previous preliminary discussion of the capability approach leads me to point out another aspect of my study: that is the position of strength (a strength-based orientation) that was used as a starting point for this study. With a focus on strengths, in this case tenets of belonging that currently exist, one can determine successful practices that support Aboriginal students. In turn, more students will have access to strong and powerful environments that nurture a sense of belonging. Further, one can then begin to have access to numerous practices and strategies that foster belonging, which can be disseminated and used to create new policies, programs, and curricula that is supportive of Aboriginal student academic achievement and overall well-being.

Chapter Summary

Within this chapter there has been an examination of literature relating to belonging, the need for the families of Aboriginal learners to be involved in their child's education, the residual influence of Indian Residential Schools in the lives of Aboriginal people today, and the integral part that educational leaders have in influencing the space of school. I have also provided an outlining of the constituent parts of belonging. In the following chapter I delineate the methodology and design for this study.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Before discussing the research design and methodology, it is important that the purpose and research questions for this research are once again highlighted. As such, they are noted below. Subsequent to this, a description of the theoretical framework is included. Following this, my epistemological stance as the researcher and assumptions are noted. In this chapter, I will also describe the design for this study. Included in this chapter are topics such as: methodology, participants, methods, timeframe, and trustworthiness of the study. Finally, the rationale for the appropriateness of instrumental case study as a means for answering the research questions pursued in this research is elaborated upon.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to uncover and to understand perceptions related to belonging and how a sense of belonging is fostered for Aboriginal learners at the elementary school level. It is hoped that this information will be used in elementary schools to foster spaces of belonging, specifically in regard to elementary Aboriginal learners, that will translate into greater engagement in and with school and, as such, increase the chances of Aboriginal students to lead the life they wish to lead in the future.

Research Questions

The primary research question is: What are the perceptions of belonging for Aboriginal learners in elementary schools?

The sub-questions include:

What creates a sense of belonging at the elementary level for Aboriginal learners?

How do educational leaders use their role to facilitate spaces of belonging for their Aboriginal learners?

What do Aboriginal students say to their care-givers, teachers, and educational leaders about their school experience?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in the relation of capability theory to education. Education is vital to one's welfare (Sen, as cited in Walker, 2006) and, since receiving an education is an issue of social justice, policies and government interventions that address this are appropriate in schools (Walker, 2006). Walker (2006) went on to state, "Put another way, diverse learners should have access to equivalent learning opportunities" (p. 164). Kirkness (1999) wrote:

While the education of Our People has not been entirely one of gloom and doom, at least over the last 25 years, we are still faced with the monumental challenge of creating a meaningful education that will not only give hope, but a promise of better life for our future generations. (p. 17)

In their discussion of school reform and its social context, McCaslin and Good (1992) stated:

Lang came to see that students of poverty needed tutoring, counseling, and people to intervene in their *lives* on their behalf. Hence, Lang's approach is a *structural* one. He is not simply fixing schools; he is fixing the interface between students, schools, and society. (p. 7)

To enable school reform, one must attend to where students may be, as noted in the following:

“By infrastructure we mean the basic support of nutrition, health, safety, and comfort that enables children to see beyond their immediate survival needs, to imagine a future in which they can and want to participate” (McCaslin & Good, 1992, p. 9). Although poverty is not a condition for all Aboriginal people, the incidence of it is still present in the community and in some areas is doubly more likely to occur than for their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Ottmann, 2009). Given this, one way to proceed is to view and value the research from a healing and empowering perspective. The capability approach is one such way that a person or community can begin to do so.

The theory of capability development is based on the premise that for people to live lives that they consider of value, their capabilities for doing so must be cultivated (Nussbaum, 1999; Walker, 2006). Schools, and the leaders within them, have the ability to create an environment that creates conditions for learning capabilities that advance the growth of student capacity. Consider the following statement as a call to action: “Schools might be places both of freedom and unfreedom. . . . Capabilities can be diminished as well as enhanced, and we need to keep checking how well we are doing in schools and education policy implementation” (Walker, 2006, p. 168). We must choose our intention and then move forward. From this stance, schools are places where the empowerment of individuals can, and should, occur. Nussbaum (1999) commented, “We should prefer a cross-cultural normative account that focuses on empowerment and opportunity, leaving people plenty of space to determine their course in life once those opportunities are secured to them” (p. 231). Additionally, it can be said that education is important because “it has an empowering and distributive role in facilitating the ability of the

disadvantaged, marginalized and excluded to organize politically” (Walker, 2006, p. 168). It should be noted that both Walker (2006) and Nussbaum included being treated with dignity in their lists of capabilities, and I believe that this is intimately connected to the creation of spaces of belonging. If one is treating others with dignity, then one is honouring people for who they are. There is not an agenda of changing another but rather of care and recognition.

Capability Approach: Its Essence

Capabilities focus on justice and principles that can be used to discern one’s quality of life (Walker, 2009). For the purpose of this study, capabilities are defined as:

In contrast with the utility-based or resource-based lines of thinking, individual advantage is judged in the capability approach by a person’s capability to do things he or she has reason to value. A person’s advantage in terms of opportunities is judged to be lower than that of another if she has less capability—less real opportunity—to achieve those things that she has reason to value. The focus here is on the freedom that person actually has to do this or be that—things he or she may value doing or being. (Sen, 2009, pp. 231-232)

Central to capability theory is that social arrangements should focus on the expansion of the capabilities one possesses such that one can live the life one wishes, a life full of possibilities and fewer barriers (Walker, 2009). Although capabilities can be related to materials such as items or salary it is what one has the ability to accomplish that is its focus (Walker, 2009).

The capability approach requires a positive mindset and the belief that one can make a difference. The same can be said of appreciative inquiry. In this research the first step of appreciative inquiry is present: discovery (through the data collection and analysis process).

This approach also opens up the possibility of further work post research (thus setting the stage for the dream phase) and, as such, a brief description will follow here.

Appreciative Inquiry

The purpose of appreciative inquiry (AI) is to examine what is happening when optimal performance is occurring in a human system (Cooperrider & Srivastva; Bushe as cited in Ludema & Fry, 2008). Referring to Cooperrider and Srivastva, Ludema and Fry (2008) stated, “Instead of doing a root-cause analysis of failure, they let go of every so-called deficiency and turned full attention to analysis of root causes of success” (Ludema & Fry, 2008, p. 281). Further, they stated, “It is based on the assumption that every living system has a hidden and under-utilized core of strengths – its positive core – which, when revealed and tapped, provides a sustainable source of positive energy for both personal and organizational transformation” (p. 282).

Appreciative inquiry builds upon strengths to institute change;, change that is envisioned by the participants and imagines a better future (Barrett & Fry; Cooperrider as cited by Ludema & Fry, 2008). It is about reaching system potential through the use of dialogue, conversation, story, and metaphor (Bushe & Coetzer; Gergen, et al.; Ludema & DiVirglio; Barrett & Cooperrider, Ludema as cited by Ludema & Fry, 2008). AI uses conversation to explore possibilities for change and ignite the view that change is possible (Ludema & Fry, 2008).

Appreciative inquiry makes use of a “4-D model” (Ludema & Fry, 2008). There are four steps to the cycle: discovery, dream, design, and destiny. The first step, discovery, is the uncovering of what has worked and why. The second step involves creating an image of what the organization could look like and be in the most positive sense. The third step, design, uses

dialogue as a means to articulate what “norms, values, structures, systems, patterns of relationship, ways of doing things” (Ludema & Fry, 2008, p. 283) will bring fruition to the dream. The last step, destiny, “...is an invitation to construct the future through innovation and action” (pp. 283-284). Of note is that these four steps are a delineation of a process that is not static, there are various routes that can be taken once the discovery stage has been completed (Ludema & Fry).

AI is a flexible and responsive process (Ludema & Fry, 2008). As with many things, there are factors that influence its success. Five factors of influence are task agreement, multiple perspectives sought, inquiry and learning as core, commitment to change using a positive approach and ensuring to “support action in service of the whole” (Ludema & Fry, p. 294), the latter is a key aspect.

Appreciative Inquiry is an apt fit when applying capability theory because both are about creating a positive and stronger future. For the purposes of this work, I chose to use a strengths based paradigm to highlight what is already occurring in two schools that is enhancing a belonging space. Spaces of belonging increase student success in school and, in turn, life success. Life success is a cornerstone of capability theory. Both paradigms have inherent within them a focus on a brighter future and, as such, complement each other well for this endeavour.

Epistemological Stance

My epistemological stance is that of both a care and capabilities theorist. Since both capabilities and an ethic of care have been described in detail earlier in this work, I will not further explicate them here except to say that it is within these two vital elements that I find myself grounded. For me, these both speak to the need for a just society whereby the people

within that society have similar access to a good quality of life. A quality of life where there are opportunities, the ability to lead the life that one wishes to lead, and where those that surround one are concerned with one's welfare and life opportunities.

Assumptions

An assumption held by this writer is that educational leaders are not just those charged with the running of a school. Educational leaders can also be teachers and, as educational leaders, they can enact change both within the classroom and the broader structure of the school.

A further assumption I put forward is that belonging and capability theory are intertwined because if an environment of belonging is created then students will be more likely to engage. Next, if students are more engaged then the probability of school success and graduation increases. Finally, if students are successful and graduate then they have further educational opportunities and career options that, in turn will enable them to live the life they wish to lead, and this, *this* is what is not only desired, but deserved.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research provides a means to examine what is happening in a particular situation (Creswell, 2002). It is “an exploration and understanding of a central phenomenon” (p. 50). It is naturalistic and interpretive (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; see also Creswell, 2002). Initially, qualitative research was used within realms outside of education and in areas associated with social sciences (Creswell, 2002). In the last few decades, it has become much more prevalent in the educational arena, as well (Creswell, 2002). Thus, qualitative research can be seen in many different disciplines and traditions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Of qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) used this definition: “*Qualitative research* is a situated

activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p. 3). There are three themes that have been infused throughout this methodology: “philosophical ideas, procedural developments, and participatory and advocacy practices. Current studies today typically exhibit one or more of these themes” (Creswell, 2002, p. 48).

Theme one: Philosophical ideas. During the latter part of the sixties, there was a sentiment expressed that traditional research approaches focused on the researcher rather than on the participant and were not in context (Creswell, 2002). Thus, an alternative was proposed that would tend to this matter (Lincoln & Guba, as cited in Creswell, 2002). Creswell (2002) put it this way: “The central perspective of these new approaches is that educational research should consider the participant’s view, describe it within a setting or context (e.g., a classroom), and explore the meaning people personally hold for educational issues” (p. 49).

Theme two: Procedural developments. The focus then turned to the “how” of conducting qualitative research (Creswell, 2002). During this time, various procedures such as research question development, interview and data processes, and procedures for analysis were at the forefront (Creswell; Tesch, as cited in Creswell, 2002). Also included here were topics such as kinds of design and software that facilitated analysis (Creswell, 2002).

Theme three: Participatory and advocacy practices. The focus on participatory and advocacy practices emerged from a strong desire to address issues of social justice (Creswell, 2002). Support for qualitative research as a highlighter for social justice can also be found in Denzin and Lincoln (2011). Creswell (2002) stated the following to describe this stance:

This theme has advocates in Denzin and Lincoln (2000) who take stock of qualitative inquiry today and report:

- The qualitative researcher is not an objective, authoritative, politically neutral observer standing outside and above the text.
- The qualitative researcher is “historically positioned and locally situated (as) an all-too-human (observer) of the human condition.” (Bruner, 1993, p. 1)
- Meaning is “radically plural, always open, and . . . there is politics in every account.” (Bruner, 1993, p. 1)
- Qualitative inquiry is properly conceptualized as a civic, participatory, collaborative project. This joins the researcher and the researched in an ongoing moral dialogue. (p. 1049). (p. 49)

In this sense, qualitative research is sensitive to who the researcher is, inclusive of bias and values (see also Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), and allows for differing perspectives and points of view (Creswell, 2002). Additionally, the dignity of participants is honoured while also being seen as integral to the process as a partner as opposed to subject (Creswell, 2002). Qualitative research can be seen as enabling and giving voice to the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

These three themes together comprise and underpin the qualitative research of the current day (Creswell, 2002). Qualitative research is, however, sometimes deemed to be soft and lacking scientific quality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Researchers need to ensure the rigor of any research design they create and implement and this is the same with respect to qualitative research.

Additionally, with regard to research, it is important to keep at the forefront the following as quoted from Tuhiwai Smith (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2011): “It is ‘implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism’ (p. 1), with the ways in which ‘knowledge about [I]ndigenous peoples was collected, classified, and then represented back to the West’ (Smith, 1999, p. 1)” (p. 3), thus researchers must be very aware of bias as they do any type of research.

Why qualitative research makes sense in this context. Qualitative research was the chosen methodology for this study due to the nature of what is being explored. While numbers and statistics, such as may be used in a quantitative study, would very likely highlight the need for such work, they would not provide an understanding of what influences spaces of belonging. Rather, they would be best used to help demonstrate the effectiveness of interventions to address belonging once they have been implemented. In the current situation, the questions sought to find out which habits, characteristics, or tenets facilitate such spaces and what, specifically, educational leaders could do to increase the welcoming and inclusive nature of schools. This study viewed what was already being done and may be done in other contexts to transform educational environments. This does not preclude the use of quantitative or mixed methods in future studies to examine the impact of any identified characteristics once implemented as a result of this study. For now, however, it was the voice of the people and the space in which the study was conducted that best addressed the questions at hand.

Case Study

To establish the basis for this trajectory, case study as a methodology is discussed along with an explication of the specific case study type that was applied. Each explanation will be accompanied by a rationale supporting its application to the research questions. Following this, I

describe the data collection methods, data analysis and synthesis format, participant sample description, design overview, issues of trustworthiness, political and ethical considerations, and lastly a concluding summary.

Research approach and rationale. The purpose of this instrumental case study (Stake, 2008) was to uncover and to understand perceptions related to belonging and how a sense of belonging is fostered for Aboriginal learners at the elementary school level. I proposed that belonging was a critical factor in school success for Aboriginal learners and that through delineating the contributing factors and how educational leaders could facilitate the embeddedness of these factors in schools, that the present academic success and future life success of students will show improvement. As such, the overarching question was examined: *What are the perceptions of belonging for Aboriginal learners in elementary schools?*

Before undertaking an explanation and rationale for instrumental case study (Stake, 2008) as an appropriate methodology for this study, it is important to outline what is being referred to by the term case study in general, and then, more specifically, by two leaders in the field: Stake (2008) and Yin (2009).

Case study. Case study is an interesting approach in that it describes both a course of action and the result of that action (Stake, 2008). Case study is concerned with the examination of a phenomenon (Stake, 2008; Yin, 2009). “As a form of research methodology, case study is an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon, social unit, or system bounded by time or place” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 80). Case study has both strengths and limitations (Yin, 2009), and both are examined in this section with my main intention being to delineate case study and its applicability as a research approach for the aforementioned questions.

Case study is the study of a topic or problem “explored through one or more cases within a bounded system (i.e., a setting, a context)” (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). Johnson and Christensen (2000) use the following definition: “We define **case study research** simply as research that provides a detailed account and analysis of one or more cases” (p. 327). Like Creswell, Johnson and Christensen also pointed out, case study is a bounded system and they explained:

Note that a ‘system’ is a set of interrelated elements that form an organized whole. Using the system metaphor, cases are seen as holistic entities that have parts and that act or operate in their environments. “Bounded” is added to emphasize that you should identify the boundaries of the system—you must determine what the case is and what it is not. (p. 327)

Creswell (2007) put forth the following:

I choose to view it as a methodology, a type of design in qualitative research, or an object of study, as well as a product of the inquiry. Case study is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a *case*) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving **multiple sources of information** (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case **description** and case-based themes. For example, several programs (a **multi-site** study) or a single program (a **within-site** study) may be selected for study. (p. 73)

Creswell noted, “In case study research, the single case is typically selected to illustrate an issue, and the researcher compiles a detailed description of the setting for the case” (p. 76).

For Gall et al. (2003), “A good case study brings a phenomenon to life for readers and helps them understand its meaning” (p. 434) as they defined it as “the in-depth study of instances of a phenomenon in its natural context and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon” (p. 436). They also pointed out, “A case study is done to shed light on a phenomenon, which is the processes, events, persons, or things of interest to the researcher” (p. 436). Given that there are several facets to any particular phenomenon, the choosing of a focus for study is a necessary step (Gall et al., 2003). “The focus is the aspect, or aspects, of the case on which data collection and analysis will concentrate” (p. 436).

Creswell (2007) noted that there can be an unwillingness towards generalization in case studies due to contextual differences between cases, however he goes on to say that this can be mitigated through the choosing of cases that are representative in nature. On the topic of generalizability Gall et al. (2003) had this to say: “A research study’s findings are generalizable to the extent that they can be applied to individuals or situations other than those in which the findings were obtained” (p. 465). The issue of generalizability within case study research is a disputed fact; some believe it can be done while others do not (Gall et al., 2003). For those who believe that generalizability is possible, one way is to pick a typical case and another way is to “place the responsibility for generalizing on the ‘consumers’ of the findings rather than on the researchers” (Gall et al., 2003, p. 466). The provision of thick description to enable readers to draw parallels between the study and what their focus is and the choosing of a representative [typical] case will help with generalizability (Gall et al., 2003).

On the topic of reporting, Creswell (2007) stated:

In the final interpretive phase, the researcher reports the meaning of the case, whether that meaning comes from learning about the issue of the case (an instrumental case) or learning about an unusual situation (an intrinsic case). As Lincoln and Guba (1985) mentioned, this phase constitutes the ‘lessons learned’ from the case” (p.75)

Two perspectives. As mentioned, there are multiple perspectives with regard to case study. Gall et al. commented:

Case study researchers do not agree on their assumptions about the nature of reality and scientific inquiry. Their different assumptions lead them to hold different views about how to conceptualize and assess the validity and reliability of case study findings. (p. 460)

Two leaders in the area of case study are Stake (2008) and Yin (2009) whose respective views of case study I turn to now.

Stake. Stake (2008) described case study in the following way: “For a research community, case study optimizes understanding by pursuing scholarly research questions. It gains credibility by thoroughly triangulating the descriptions and interpretations, not just in a single step but continuously throughout the period of study” (p. 120). Further, Stake also noted, “Qualitative case study is characterized by researchers spending extended time on site, personally in contact with activities and operations of the case, reflecting, and revising descriptions and meanings of what is going on” (p. 128). Support for the effectiveness of such a strategy was evidenced by the following: “In getting down to the detail of programs or curricula at the school or local level you have to take into account local situations, practice and community acceptance” (Hughes & More, 1997, para. 41).

For Stake (2008), a driving force in case study is the purpose of the research (see also Baxter & Jack, 2008). Stake denoted three types of case study: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. In intrinsic case study the purpose is to gain understanding of a specific case. Instrumental case study seeks to use a case to gain understanding of a broader issue or to redefine a generalization (Stake, 2008). An extension of instrumental case study involving many cases is categorized as collective (Stake, 2008). Like Yin (2009), Stake posited that data are drawn from many sources.

“I claim that case studies will often be the preferred method of research because they may be epistemologically in harmony with the reader’s experience and thus to that person a natural basis for generalization” (Stake, 1978, p. 5). Stake’s (1978) position is that inquiries prompt learning and that if research is to be used for this purpose by those not only in the field of research, it has to be done in such a way that researchers observe and share information in ways that reflect where the reader is situated. For Stake, “Those people have arrived at their understandings mostly through direct and vicarious experience” (p. 5). Further, Stake noted that ways of learning about human affairs should make the most of the innate power of persons to apply their familiarity and understanding. The experience brought by the reader of research will be an enabler of understanding and thus researchers must bear this in mind (Stake, 1978).

On the topic of generalization, Stake (1978) had this to say: “That knowledge is a form of generalization too, not scientific induction but *naturalistic generalization*, arrived at by recognizing the similarities of objects and issues in and out of context and by sensing the natural covariations of happenings” (p. 6). Further, Stake noted, “What becomes useful understanding is a full and thorough knowledge of the particular, recognizing it also in new and foreign contexts”

(p. 6). He also believed that naturalistic generalizations are formed by a person as a result of their experiences. Stake pointed out that these generalizations are born of the tacit knowledge of in what ways things exist, why things are, people's feelings about things, and "how these things are likely to be later or in other places with which this person is familiar" (Stake, 1978, p. 6). Stake (1978) explained case study's "best use appears to me to be for adding to existing experience and humanistic understanding" (p. 7). Watts pointed out, "The reader can determine the truth as he or she sees it" (Watts, 2007, p. 212).

Yin. The previous section examined Robert E. Stake's perceptions on case study, we will now focus on Robert K. Yin's concepts of case study. Yin's approach to case study is explained by Gall et al. in this way:

Some case study researchers subscribe to a positivist philosophy of scientific inquiry, which claims that objective knowledge about the world is possible. In other words, facts about the world are assumed to exist independently of researchers efforts to know them; if they use the scientific method correctly, they will come to discover those facts...Robert Yin exemplifies this type of case study researcher. (p. 460)

Yin (1981,1999) pointed out that the main characteristic of case study is its examination of a phenomenon in the context where it is situated; this has also been noted by Gall et al (2003). Additionally, in case study it is not always easy to differentiate where the phenomenon ends and the context begins, that is the boundary that divides them may not be obvious (Yin, 1981, 1999; Yin cited in Gall et al., 2003). An additional complexity is that the case and the context may be evolving while the case study is progressing, thus complicating the process by adding dimensions or variables (Yin, 1999).

Yin (1981, 1999) supports the use of a variety of data collection methods during a given study and, additionally, that both qualitative and quantitative data can be sought. Gall et al., (2003) also support the idea of both quantitative and qualitative data as possible data sources. In case study, “an explanation, not a single variable or factor, is what is being tested...In fact, case studies as analytic units should be considered in par with *whole* experiments” (Yin, 1981, p. 62).

In terms of generalizability, Yin (1999) put forth that a case study can be viewed as a unit and that multiple case studies could then be seen in the same vein as multiple experiments. From this he commented:

Under this assumption, the problem of generalizing from case studies is no different from the problem of generalizing from experiments—where hypothesis and theory are the vehicles for generalization. To this extent investigators doing case studies are not “theory driven” (a criticism that has been raised by some), but are “driven to theory”. (p. 1212)

In this manner, individual cases can be seen as sub-inquiries and then generalization can occur through replication logic (Yin cited in Yin, 1999; see also Creswell, 2007; Gall et al., 2003; Johnson & Christensen, 2000). This replication logic must be achieved via theories related to the case (Yin, 1999). Yin elaborated:

In other words, a theory about what is being studied—and about whether a single case is a “critical” exemplar of that theory or about why some multiple cases might be expected to be replications and others might not—is essential to case study design and analysis. (p. 1213)

Yin also put forth that rival explanations must also be examined and disproved to show the strength of the initial hypothesis (1981, 1999).

Yin (1999), as do Gall et al. (2003), supports the gathering of evidence from multiple sources in order to provide support for particular facts, thus leading to triangulation. For Yin, the triangulation happens during the data collection phase and not during the interpretive phase when one is examining the findings with the protocol of such being outlined by the researcher (Yin, 1999).

According to Yin (2009), there have been many attempts to define case study. The definition posited by Yin, comprised of two parts and based upon his earlier work in this domain, is as follows: part one deals with scope, part two deals with process. Both of these are described below. Yin stated:

A case study is an empirical inquiry that,

- investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when
- the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.

In other words, you would use the case study method because you wanted to understand a real-life phenomenon in depth, but such understanding encompassed important contextual conditions-because they were highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study (e.g., Yin & Davis, 2007). (Yin, 2009, p. 18)

Yin then went on to state:

Second, because phenomenon and context are not always distinguishable in real-life situations, other technical characteristics, including data collection and data analysis strategies, now become the second part of our technical definition of case studies:

The case study inquiry:

- copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result
- relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result
- benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data and analysis.

In essence, the twofold definition shows how case study research comprises an all-encompassing method-covering logic of design, data collection techniques, and specific approaches to data analysis. (p. 18)

According to Yin (2009), case study is used in many disciplines and when it helps the researcher to understand various types of phenomena. Additionally, Yin explained, “Again, although case studies and histories can overlap, the case study’s unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence-documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations-beyond what might be available in a conventional historical study” (p. 11), and is based in a wish to comprehend social phenomena that are complex.

Yin (2009) described three varieties of case study: explanatory, descriptive, and exploratory. An explanatory case study's purpose is to “*explain* the presumed causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies” (p. 19). Descriptive case study *describes* either an intervention in the setting in which it happened or exemplifies “certain topics within an evaluation” (p. 20). Lastly, exploratory case study is used for this purpose: “to *enlighten* those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes” (p. 20) (*italics added*)

Stake and Yin. Both Stake and Yin apply case study methodology to examine a phenomenon in context, support the use of multiple sources of data, advocate for flexibility as the study unfolds, and espouse the notion that careful case selection is key. They diverge on the issue of generalization. Stake noted that the issue of generalization is addressed through the application of a naturalistic generalization lens. On the other hand, Yin believes that the issue of generalization is addressed through the doing of multiple case studies. Further, Stake's stance is that of an interpretivist whereby the reader determines the applicability of the research to their circumstance. For Yin, the researcher proves a theoretical proposition to the exclusion of rival explanations thus taking a positivist approach.

In general, case study research is a process by which a researcher immerses himself/herself in a case (or cases) in order to gain a deeper understanding. Having said this, different approaches and final definitions by different researchers are also present. For Stake, a case study creates the base from which readers can learn, grow, and through naturalistic generalizations apply their tacit knowledge in meaningful ways to other contexts and this was the intention of this research. Through the use of instrumental case study I outlined conditions and

features which users of the research, and educational leaders in particular, could use and apply in other contexts to further Aboriginal learner success by creating environments where belonging is fostered.

There are detractors to the use of case study, and those intending to embark on case study research must be aware of the counter arguments that exist.

Another perspective. There are arguments against the use of case study (Yin, 2009). One of the biggest criticisms brought against it is the issue of rigor (Yin, 2009). One of the reasons for this may be a shortage of resources one can access which outline provisions for rigorous case study leading to designs that may be less procedurally sound (Yin, 2009). Case study researchers must be attuned to this possibility and mitigate it as much as possible (Yin, 2009). Another contention is that case study results lack generalizability (Yin, 2009). Three means of addressing this are: firstly, to do multiple case studies, secondly, to keep in mind the goal of extending theory rather than generalizing to populations (Yin, 2009), or, thirdly apply the lens of naturalistic generalization (Stake, 1978). Yet another area of concern is the length of time needed to complete the study and the size of reporting documents (Yin, 2009). To address this, one can keep in mind that there are multiple ways of collecting data and of disseminating information, so the amount and duration may become moot issues (Yin, 2009). Lastly, the concern has been levelled against case study that it does not address causal relationships; however, when answering questions regarding causal relationships, partnered with other methods, it can ascertain the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of a successful intervention (Yin, 2009).

Why case study? As noted above, case study is used when one is trying to understand a phenomenon (Stake, 2008; Yin, 2009). As put eloquently by Stake (2008), “We come to know

what has happened partly in terms of what others reveal as their experience” (p. 134). Support for this was found in the following statement by Kirkness (1999): “Most importantly, in your quest for meaningful education for your school/community, you will have found that the answers you have been seeking can be found within yourselves/within your own communities” (p. 27). In the current study, the phenomenon under study was the concept of belonging, and how elementary leaders and educators can foster a sense of belonging within the Aboriginal learner population. Case study provided a means for investigation into these spaces.

Multiple perspectives need to be sought (Capobianco & Feldman, 2006; Ludema & Fry, 2008; Phillips & Carr, 2009; Stringer, 2008; Winter, 2002). In seeking out multiple perspectives, one can ensure not only that all voices are heard, but also that issues for consideration are raised from the various sources of the system (Ludema & Fry, 2008). Case study is a good choice for this research in that it allows for multiple perspectives and thus reinforces its applicability for this research.

Further, it is important to be attentive to the voices of the participants (Bradbury-Huang, 2010; Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Gergen & Gergen, 2008; Hall, 1992; Kemmis, 2006; McHugh & Kowalski, 2011; Yeich & Levine, 1992), as they have the most knowledge of their circumstance. Case study allows for this as it has, at its heart, the intention of fully describing the case and this would include the voices of various parties within the boundaries of the case. The importance of participant voice was reinforced by Stringer (2008) who posited, “Interviews not only provide a record of their views and perspectives, but also symbolically recognize the legitimacy of their points of view” (p. 56). In

the case of Aboriginal learners, those participants who were of Aboriginal descent provided additional insight for this researcher. As put by Toulouse (2006):

This is a key tenet in our educational goal of ensuring that the Aboriginal learner has success in school. As educators we need to go beyond our realms and ask the ‘Aboriginal experts’ key questions. It is so important that we go to Aboriginal organizations, institutions and members of the communities for direction. (para. 11)

Noddings (2007) also supports the importance of inclusive and meaningful dialogue. She posited:

Dialogue is essential in moral education from the care perspective. It is a means by which we evaluate the effects of our attempts to care. Through dialogue we learn more about the other, and we need this knowledge to act effectively as carers. As we try to care, we are helped in our efforts by the feedback we get from the recipients of our care. (p. 427)

In the case study herein, interviews, which provided crucial data towards analysis and future recommendations, also created the space for voices to be heard. This further substantiates the applicability of case study to the research endeavour.

Moving forward. With regard to qualitative case study, Stake (2008) encouraged, “Place your best intellect into the thick of what is going on” (p. 128). In my eyes, examining the two contexts described later in this chapter allowed me both a bird’s eye view and a down-to-earth exploration of perceptions of what works in these spaces. Case study lends itself to exploring a situation such that greater insight can come to be known about the phenomenon under study. The

specific type of case study chosen for this work was instrumental case study (Stake, 2008), which it is described next.

Rationale for instrumental case study. Depending on the question being asked, the purpose of the research, or the phenomenon to be studied different approaches of case study are applied (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Cousin, 2005; Grandy, 2010; Stake, 2008; Yin, 2009). As noted earlier, Stake noted three distinct models of case study (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Grandy, 2010; Stake, 2008). These models are intrinsic, instrumental, and collective (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 2008). The instrumental case study (Stake, 2008) approach and principles were applied in this study.

Instrumental case study addressed my specific research questions because “it provides insight into an issue . . . The case is of secondary interest; it plays a supportive role, facilitating our understanding of something else” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 549; see also Stake, 2008). This was supported by Brown (2008), who stated, “His vision [Stake] of this role [researcher] was not as discoverer of an external reality, but as the builder of a clearer view of the phenomenon under study through explanation and descriptions . . . and provision of integrated interpretations of situations and contexts” (p. 7). Additionally, Stake (2008) put it this way: “I use the term *instrumental case study* if a particular case is examined mainly to provide insight into an issue, or to redraw a generalization” (p. 123). Further, Cousin (2005) explained:

In instrumental case study research, the researcher explores a case as an instance (a specific geography field trip) of a class (geography field trips) in order to shed light on an issue concerning a class, e.g. what is happening in this geography field trip that can tell us something about geography field trips in general (cf. Fuller *et al.*, 2003)? (p. 422)

Given that instrumental case study applies itself to a case to gain a greater understanding of an issue (Stake, 2008) and that the case in this study was anticipated to help me, as the researcher, gain a greater understanding of what is required for the creation of spaces of belonging for Aboriginal learners and the ways that educational leaders play an active role in the creation of these spaces, instrumental case study was chosen to guide this research. Additionally, instrumental case study fits well with a qualitative approach (Grandy, 2010). Grandy (2010) elaborated, “Qualitative research methods are best aligned with the philosophical underpinnings of the instrumental case, as described by Stake, where researcher, participants, and readers play a role in reconstructing experience” (p. 474). Further, given that belonging has been described earlier in this study as the coalescence of identification with school, school culture and climate, and an ethic of care, instrumental case study allowed for the seeking out of perceptions about how these aspects were seen as cultivating a sense of belonging. Identification with school, school culture and climate, and an ethic of care may not be easily observable and could be better understood through the consideration of the background in which it was seen as taking place. Instrumental case study provided a method from which to do so.

Having discussed case study, and more specifically instrumental case study, the methods and procedures for this study are now delineated.

Instrumental Case Study and an Appreciative Inquiry lens. Instrumental case study was used for this study, and it was also done with an appreciative inquiry (AI) lens. This study fulfilled Ludema and Fry’s (2008) ‘discovery phase’ of appreciative inquiry, whereby things that are perceived as being successful are highlighted in the work. This study was a strengths based examination of successful practices of belonging for Aboriginal learners in two elementary

schools from one school district. The appreciative inquiry aspect of ‘dreaming’ (Ludema & Fry, 2008), which can be seen in both the Professional Development Model and the Belonging Enhancement Model Framework described in chapter six of this document, is also evident in this document. This study gained insight into the concept and practice of belonging through instrumental case study (Stake, 2008) – and this was achieved – and the research investigated ‘what’ worked and ‘why’ it worked (the appreciative inquiry orientation).

Methods/procedure (s)

The study has facets that are integral to the research. In this section, I articulate the boundaries of the study, thick description, the participant sample, interview questions, data collection process, data analysis procedures, research sample description, methods for addressing trustworthiness issues, and considerations designed to attend to political and ethical concerns.

Boundaries in case study refer to the logistical parameters of the case (Cousin, 2005; see also Yin, 2009). Stake (2008) noted, “It is common to recognize that certain features are within the system, within the boundaries of the case, and other features outside” (p. 120). Brown (2008) stated, “[Boundaries] may be the limit on the number of people to be interviewed, a finite time frame for observations, or the instance of some issue, concern, or hypothesis” (p. 3). Cousin (2005) put it in this way: “The case study boundary concerns its physical confines, its activities and the time span of the study” (p. 423).

Physical confines. For this study, the physical confines of the case were two elementary schools from one school district; one in a small city, and the other in a smaller city/town.

Activities. Stake (2008) explained, “What details of life the researchers are unable to see for themselves is obtained by interviewing people who did see them or by finding documents

recording them” (p. 132). The activities were primarily comprised of interviews and document analysis, although some observation occurred in order that material for the provision of “thick description” (Geertz, as cited in Cousin, 2005, p. 424) was present.

Time span. The time span of this study inclusive of data collection, data analysis, and reporting of findings was between fifteen to seventeen months.

Thick description. Denzin (as quoted in prosimian.com.au, 2011) said of thick description: “(1) It gives the context of an act; (2) it states the intentions and meanings that organize the action; (3) it traces the evolution and development of the act; (4) it presents the action as a text that can then be interpreted” (para. 5). Given this, “‘Thick description’ can be said to **provide context and meaning to observed actions**, rather than simply recording the occurrence of an event in isolation; it is more about recording the *story of* a fact, rather than the fact itself” (para. 6, bold and italics in original; see also Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Gall, Gall and Borg (2003) stated, “A good depiction will provide what is called a thick description of the phenomenon, that is, statements that re-create a situation and as much of its context as possible, accompanied by the meanings and intentions inherent in that situation” (p. 439). Further, they noted:

In creating thick description, the researcher looks for constructs that bring order to the descriptive data and that relates this data to other research reported in the literature. A construct is a concept that is inferred from observed phenomena and that can be used to explain those phenomena. (p. 439)

Before the study begins, Gall et al. (2003) also pointed out that researchers should consider how much prominence would be allocated to thick description in relation to other

aspects of the study, such as analysis and findings. Thus, the researcher can pay attention to the creation of detailed notes and to opportunities for the collection of thick description throughout.

Instrumental case study uses the studied case as an opportunity to gather a thick description of what is occurring via immersion in a particular case study. By including thick description, users of the research may be able to begin to see application of the findings to their setting (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). The collection of material for thick description in this study occurred through interviews, the inclusion of multiple perspectives, document analysis, observation, and field notes.

Participants. The educators that participated in this study had approximately four to thirty years of teaching experience. Their age ranged between mid to late twenties and late fifties. All eleven participants were female, with five in senior roles and six in junior roles. Two participants were of Aboriginal descent.

The table below (Table 1) provides participant demographics of the study. The participants in senior roles are more heavily involved in setting and influencing policies or have a significant and larger role in the decision making processes and in the implementation of the decisions. The participants with junior roles could be perceived as the implementers of decisions, while also still having influence. Some of the participants who had a junior role were also non-school district employees.

Participant (pseudonyms)	Role (junior, senior)
Calista	Junior Role

Charlotte	Senior Role
Donalda	Junior Role
Ethel	Senior Role
Gertrude	Junior Role
Leigh	Senior Role
Marian	Senior Role
Ms. Brown	Junior Role
Patty	Junior Role
Sharon	Junior Role
Sonia	Senior Role

Table 1: Participant Roles

The participant sample for this study included the principals from each school site (one of whom was also the coach mentor), classroom teachers (two from each school site), a past principal (who was also the past coach mentor). An Aboriginal support worker declined interview, however she did write some thoughts on the matter that she agreed could be included. In addition, two family members of a student (one of the family member interviewees was an Aboriginal Advisory Council member), the Director of Instruction for Aboriginal Education, the District Vice Principal of Aboriginal Programs,

With regard to the sample of family member participants and classroom teachers, invitations were made via recommendations from the school principal for each site. Additionally, had other key informants arisen during interviews or throughout the case study process further invitations would have been sent out at that time.

To ensure that the data was comprehensive, participants were chosen by “snowball sampling” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 191), which is when “a few known participants who possess certain characteristics are selected, and they are asked to identify and refer others who are known to have the same or similar characteristics” (p. 191). Snowball sampling was chosen to mitigate the potential for researcher bias; I knew some of the participants beforehand from prior interactions, experiences, and/or settings. So, by having classroom teachers and family members referred by others, the researcher is removed from determining the participants for the study.

Sample Description

As mentioned previously, two schools within one school district were the primary sites for the research. Some school district personnel were also included due to being key informants (Yin, 2009). It is important to note that although the schools are within the same district each school is distinct. School A was chosen due to its percentage of Aboriginal learners, which was approximately 65%, and School B was also chosen due its percentage of Aboriginal learners, which was approximately 35%, and its smaller size.

1. School A was a school of approximately 165 students and represented families with a middle and low range of incomes. Personnel assigned to this school included a part-time Aboriginal support worker, part-time social worker, and part-time, on-site coach mentor teacher (also identified as Aboriginal support teacher in this document).
2. School B was located in a smaller community. The school had approximately 61 students and represented the full range of socio-economic incomes, although primarily

the middle class. Personnel assigned to this school included a part-time coach mentor teacher on site.

The sample of participants interviewed provided a variety of perspectives for inclusion within the body of data for analysis.

This case study focused on two schools in the same school district in order to discover what creates spaces of belonging for Aboriginal elementary learners and how educational leaders facilitate these spaces. Therefore, the research sought out:

- multiple localized and district perspectives regarding what creates spaces of belonging in elementary schools: in other words, how is belonging created in these two elementary schools
- multiple localized and district perspectives of how educational leaders help to create spaces of belonging in elementary schools: in other words, what do educational leaders do to enable and foster belonging in their setting?
- access to newsletters, school growth plans, school missions, school visions, as well as various other publications that highlight the contexts of study
- access to documents and the sites themselves
- research supportive of literature review as information was revealed throughout the case study process

Data collection. To increase the robustness and reliability of this case study, two schools were study sites and there was utilization of information from a variety of sources (Yin, 2009).

Interview Questions. The overarching research question was: What are the perceptions of belonging for Aboriginal learners in the selected elementary schools? The participant interview questions are included in Appendix II. The interviews lasted on average thirty to forty-five minutes and were held at locations chosen by the interviewees. In some cases, this was in a school or in offices and, in other instances, at the interviewee's home. At the beginning of each interview, I took some time to have conversation with the interviewee to build their comfort level with the process. I explained the process and asked if there were any questions. Participants also reviewed and signed the required Ethics forms. In my explanation of the research process, I included showing how the speech to text software worked, a description of the process of member checking, and confirmed the best method for them to receive their interview transcript for member checking. We then began the interview. I used the question set that I had brought, however I also asked clarifying questions or follow up questions when needed. After the interview, I asked if any questions had arisen for them and thanked them for their time and insight.

In addition to interviews, document analysis had a place in this study and provides the focus for the next section.

Document analysis. It is not uncommon for researchers to study written works found in contexts (Gall et al., 2003) and, as such, document analysis also had a place in this study. Lincoln and Guba in Gall et al. (2003) pointed out that documents are written pieces that are for personal motives while records have more formal purposes. McMillan (2000) put it this way: "Documents are written records. They can be virtually anything written or printed...Nonprint materials, such as pictures...memorabilia, and films can also be used" (p. 263). Documents that

give firsthand accounts, such as field notes, are primary sources while secondary sources are based on secondhand information (McMillan, 2000). Altheide and Johnson (2011) described document analysis in this way:

Recent work employing *qualitative document analysis* (also referred to as “ethnographic content analysis”) illustrates the application of an ethnographic ethic and tacit knowledge where the emphasis is on discovery and description, including searching for contexts, underlying meanings, patterns, and processes, rather than mere quantity or numerical relationships between two or more variables. (p. 592)

Creswell (2002) made the following point:

Documents represent a good source for text (word) data for a qualitative study. They provide the advantage of being in the language and words of the participant, who have usually given thoughtful attention to them. They are also ready for analysis without the necessary transcription that is required with observational or interview data. On the downside, documents are sometimes difficult to locate or obtain. . . . Further, the documents may be incomplete, inauthentic, or inaccurate. (p. 209)

In speaking of differences between quantitative and qualitative researchers, Gall et al. explained:

In contrast, qualitative researchers believe that the meaning of a text resides in the minds of its writer and its readers. Thus, the meaning of a particular document or record can change from reader to reader and from one historical period to another. (p. 282)

The understanding of the context that documents and records are written in is an integral part of the process (Gall et al., 2003). They noted, “The author’s purpose in writing it, the

author's working conditions, the author's intended and actual audience, and the audience's purpose for reading it" (p. 282) as being in need of consideration. Gall et al. also pointed out that in reading the written communications the researcher is also making their own sense of the writing.

Researchers using a qualitative lens use certain processes that are also used by those who apply a quantitative lens (Gall et al., 2003). First, ascertain the written communications present in the context of study. Then, distinguish those that are germane to the topic at hand. Next, using ethical processes, find out the way materials can be accessed and used (photocopied, borrowed, taking pictures, examined only on site) (Gall et al., 2003). Last, documents must be validated (Gall et al., 1996). It is important to keep in mind that documents are authored by people who also have their own biases and points of view (Stringer, 2008); hence, the importance of validation.

During the document analysis process, one should review what is of relevance to the study (see also Creswell, 2012) and consider what can be made public versus that which is of a confidential nature (Stringer, 2008). Further, Mertler (2012) cautioned:

However, a word of caution is in order: Whenever using existing data, it is critical to make sure you follow your school district's approved procedures for securing access to these various types of data and that you use and report the results of any analyses in an ethical manner (Johnson, 2008). (p. 129)

Gall et al., (2003) explained the qualitative data analysis in this manner:

In qualitative research, analysis procedure is likely to be emergent. The same document or record can be analyzed at different points in the study, with each analysis yielding new

constructs, hypotheses, and insights...Furthermore, the same document or record can be analyzed from different perspectives and for different purposes (Gall et al., 2003, p. 283)

Gall et al. go on to state, “The results of the qualitative researcher’s analysis take the form of interpretations and hypotheses” (p. 283). Citing Hodder, Gall et al. drew attention to the fact that the created hypotheses and interpretations have to be considered against the situation where the documents were produced and the situation within which they are now being examined by a researcher.

Document analysis process. Schools have a great deal of documentation and artifacts that provide insight (Mertler, 2012; Mills, 2011; Stringer, 2008). Documents may include policies, procedures, curriculum, the minutes from meetings, newspapers, school newsletter, or school plan (Stringer, 2008; see also Creswell, 2002; Mertler, 2012). In this study, the procedure for one school replicated itself in the process of the other school. A database of information was created (Creswell, 2002) and field notes were also a part of the process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The data was then categorized as a whole, rather than by individual site, to further ensure confidentiality and to seek emerging patterns, themes, and characteristics (Mills, 2011). Once the categorization was done, it was reviewed with two critical others (separately) with an eye to other possibilities and to consider outlying facts (Mills, 2011).

Having discussed document analysis, attention is now turned to interviews.

Interviews. Stringer (2008) described interviews in this way: “Interviews enable [participants] to describe the situation from their own perspective and to interpret events in their own terms” (p. 56). He further stated, “Interviews not only provide a record of their views and

perspectives, but also symbolically recognize the legitimacy of their points of view” (p. 56).

This last point has already been noted earlier in this work.

Interviews are used to gather information that cannot be obtained from field observations, and to verify observations. Their purpose is to explain the participants’ point of view, how they think and how they interpret and explain their behaviour within a given setting (McMillan, 2000, p. 262)

Some interviews are conducted with persons deemed to have greater insight into the issue at hand; these participants are called key informants (McMillan, 2000). However, a caveat is that key informants are not representative of the group and may have biases of their own that frame their responses (McMillan, 2000). McMillan (2000) explain that one way to address the issue of representation within the key informant sphere is to pick participants who hold diverse perspectives

Interview process. Since Ethics approval was gained from the University of Calgary (included in Appendix IV), a consent form was given to and signed by each of prospective participants and contact information was also collected. These Ethics approval forms were kept separate and apart from the research data and its analysis (Research Services, 2012). The interview process began once consent was obtained. The interview format for this particular study was that of semi-structured interview (Mertler, 2012). Each participant answered a set of questions that were pre-determined; however, I still had the flexibility to pursue further information with subsequent questions as the interview unfolded (Mertler, 2012). Included in the question set were open-ended questions (Mills, 2011).

All of the interviews were audio recorded, and speech-to-text software was also used for transcription purposes. It was important that participants check the data (Reid et al., 2006; Stringer, 2008). Member checking of the collected interview data ensured that the data collected was accurate (Stringer, 2008) and that participants' voices were truly heard. The need for transparency of data collected, which member checking warrants, was also reinforced by Reason (2003) in Capobianco and Feldman (2006). In this study, after the conclusion of the interviews, participants were given access to the text and asked to indicate any changes or clarifications.

As noted earlier, I developed the interview questions, as the researcher, in conjunction with feedback from my supervisor and other critical friends. These critical friends comprised two individuals. One individual had experience within the Aboriginal community and is a non-Aboriginal educator and the other had experience teaching a pre-service teacher module where the focus was on Aboriginal education.

Researchers are encouraged to be reflexive (Blackmore, 2010; Capobianco & Feldman, 2006; Creswell, 2002; Fitzgerald, 2010; Levin, 2008; Reid, Tom, & Frisby, 2006; Stringer, 2008; Winter, 2002) and cognizant of privileges of position they hold (Fitzgerald, 2010). Stringer (2008) noted that when interviewing, the researcher must "be wary of the way this 'dialogue' emerges. When interviewers engage in exchanges of information or experience, as in normal conversation, they unwittingly inscribe their own sets of meanings" (p. 56). Thus, awareness of self is critical to validity. With regard to this, when interviewing, if there was a response that I was unsure of in terms of meaning, I would paraphrase what I thought was being said or meant and ask if that was the intended meaning. The member checking process also helped as participants could then articulate further or clarify when they felt the words on the transcript did

not sufficiently convey their meaning or intent. Additionally, I went into the interview with intention. I operated under the assumptions that interviewees would likely have not had much experience, if any, with this type of research and also that interviews might be stressful for some people. Further, the participants were trusting me with their data. Due to this, I made the time to answer any questions before the interview started, and again when we had finished. I also ensured that the participants chose the time and place for the interview and paid attention to whether they seemed at ease during the interview. When going through the data for analysis, I focused on those things that came from data. I kept in mind the conceptual framework and looked for relationships that flowed from the data. After I categorized my data, I then looked back to my initial framework.

Data analysis and synthesis.

Analysis occurs while data is being collected and after all of the data has been collected (McMillan, 2000; Gall et al., 2003; Stake, 2008). “The goal of the analysis is to discover patterns, ideas, explanations and ‘understandings’. Specific data elements have to be organized and then synthesized to derive patterns and ideas that will form the basis of the conclusions” (McMillan, 2000, p. 264). The initial task of the analysis includes “separating it into workable units, while looking for categories and concepts, topics and themes” (McMillan, 2000, p. 264) these can then form the codes under which data can be grouped (McMillan, 2000). Going over field notes consistently will also help with keeping the created codes at the forefront (McMillan, 2000).

The researcher’s job in summarizing is to examine all the entries that have the same code and write a sentence or two that captures the essence of the information. This is

sometimes referred to as finding *patterned regularities* of the data (McMillan, 2000, p. 265)

In this study, data was coded as a whole, once the interviews had been completed rather than by site, to further protect confidentiality and organized within those codes to see what patterns emerged. I looked not only for themes, but also for triangulation of data to increase reliability. “Triangulation is a process of relating multiple sources of data in order to establish their trustworthiness or verification of the consistency of the facts while trying to account for their inherent biases (Bogdan & Biklen; Glesne)” (Mertler, 2012, p. 12; see also Stringer, 2008). Triangulation can aid the researcher in making sense of the data (Mertler, 2012; Stringer, 2008) and increase confidence in their findings (Mertler, 2012). Triangulation was achieved through the varied documents used for document analysis and a participant sample that included participants with various roles (Grandy, 2010; Mills, 2011; Stake, 2008).

Before the data was collected, a triangulation matrix (Mills, 2011) was created to ensure that each question was being examined through more than one lens. A triangulation matrix is a “simple grid that shows the various data sources that will be used to answer each research question (pp-19-20)” (Sagor, as cited in Mills, 2011, p. 92). Once patterns and themes had been identified (Creswell, 2002), inter-rater reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1994 as cited in Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) was sought and accessed via dialogue with critical friends who were put in the role of rival explanation seeker. Once this was completed, conclusions and recommendations were put forward.

Timeframe

The timeframe for this study was twenty-seven months. This timeframe range allowed me to be flexible and to be able to respond to emerging data sources, as well as to give sufficient time for data analysis and reporting.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection and its analysis will be outlined below. Firstly, the interview process will be discussed and, following this, the analysis process will be detailed. Subsequent to this, the document analysis will be described.

Interview process. This began with the participants being asked for their personal e-mail addresses. Once a confirming e-mail address was sent, the consent form outlining the study was forwarded. Some participants preferred to receive this information on the school district server and their wishes were respected in this regard.

Prior to each interview, the method of transcript delivery with regard to member checking was discussed. After the interview, time was taken to write down general impressions and information received from each of the participants and their responses. I wrote this piece so that I could have a richer understanding of participants' perspectives and to give me more context for their responses.

During the interviews, audio taping was used with the permission of the participants, in addition to speech to text software. While the voice recognition software was not one hundred percent accurate, it provided a place to start transcribing the audio recordings. I listened to the audio recordings so that I could confirm that the text reflected the audio recording. Then, I would go away from the transcript and, after a period of time, re-listen to the recording and

check it against my transcription. As I transcribed and reviewed transcriptions, I paid attention to common words and themes that started to emerge across the various interviews.

After transcription of the interviews, all the participants were sent or given a copy of their interview transcript. The transcript included information regarding the member check process and an offer to meet to review the data for accuracy if they chose to do so. I also recorded interview dates, checked off when permission form copies were sent/given to participants, noted the date that the member check transcript was sent/given to participants, and tracked the member check return.

Interview analysis. Once they had been approved by the participants, I then reviewed the transcripts, and as I did so, I wrote relevant data and emerging themes from the transcripts on post-it notes. These post-it notes were put onto large cardstock that had each of the research sub-questions posted on it. I used my triangulation matrix to guide where to place the post-its during my initial analysis. The triangulation matrix was a tool that I created where each sub-question was a category. Under each sub-question, I noted one or more focal questions from the interview question set for each of the roles (i.e., parent/caregiver, principal, classroom teacher, etc.) interviewed. While some interview questions were placed under more than one sub-question and while answers given by participants to some questions contained information relevant to other sub-questions, the triangulation matrix was created to ensure that each role that was interviewed was represented under each sub-question (e.g., What creates a sense of belonging at the elementary level for Aboriginal learners?), thus ensuring that multiple perspectives were represented within each sub-question (see Appendix III). I placed alpha-numeric codes on each

of the post-its that correlated to individual participants, so if a participant chose to remove themselves from the study their data could be identified and removed.

Once all transcripts had been reviewed and organized on post-it notes under each research sub-question, I typed up each post-it note, again with the alpha-numeric and included links between participants that I had noticed as I went through the initial analysis. This document was then re-saved, but with the links included. Then the document was saved again and the documented links (e.g., that both participant A and B had used the word 'trust') between participants were removed. This document was then organized by research question and by document analysis. Each separated document was printed off and read over. As categories emerged, I highlighted/coloured any portions of text the same colour as the colour block I had assigned to each emergent code. I then re-saved each document and re-organized each document by typing the theme and placing each comment related to it under that heading. Outliers were placed as a category for further analysis and exploration for meaning.

Next, categories were analyzed for possible collapsing or broader theme categories, potentially with sub-themes. This was done by taking like theme categories and grouping them together on poster boards. Sometimes a category would become the theme heading when it became apparent that it encapsulated the other categories as a whole with other categories becoming sub-themes. The poster boards were typed up and reviewed then laid out and again reviewed alongside the conceptual framework.

Document analysis. Submitted documents included: report cards (two samples), weekly memos (two samples), a supervision schedule, newsletters, and policy documents. In most cases the chosen documents were selected by participants although I did give examples of what kinds

of samples might give insight (ie: report cards, newsletters, school growth plans) when asked. These examples were chosen as I felt that these types of documents would convey some information about beliefs, core values, or how information was communicated inclusive of terminology and wording styles used within the documents. Seven of the participants provided and/or suggested documents for inclusion with the total number of documents being seventeen. In many cases the documents were written or co-written by the participant who submitted it, however this was not the case for all submitted documents. The following table delineates the documents:

Document Type	Role of Participant who Submitted Document
Weekly Memo	Senior Role
Weekly Memo	Senior Role
Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement	Two persons both in Senior Role
Circle of Courage	Senior Role
Quote posted in room	Senior Role
Beginning of the year newsletter	Junior Role
Beginning of the year newsletter	Junior Role
Mid-year newsletter	Junior Role
Duty Roster (showing chosen time placement)	Junior Role
Community Event Poster (showing an event would attend outside of school)	Junior Role

School Growth Plan	Senior Role
Goal communication note to home	Senior Role
Goal Tracking Graphic (done with learner)	Senior Role
Goal Tracking Sheet (done with learner)	Senior Role
Newsletter	Senior Role
Report Card	Junior Role
Report Card	Junior Role

Table 2: Participant Documents

Each document was reviewed with the following question in mind: What in this document would increase the likelihood of belonging for the Aboriginal learners in this school? As I read through the documents I typed out my thoughts regarding this question as well as why it was a good example. Then using the pooled data document, I again looked for emerging themes and typed these out with sub-themes underneath each heading.

Arrival at findings. Data analysis was done while data was collected and after the collection had been completed (McMillan, 2000; Gall et al., 2003; Stake, 2008), with the aim of discerning patterns, concepts, and wondering of ‘why’ things are (McMillan, 2000). I used McMillan’s (2000) recommendation to search for “patterned regularities” (p. 265) and then write a brief description that summarized items of data. These descriptions became the basis of the sub-themes and the categories described in Chapter Four. Once the data was analyzed, I asked two critical others for their impressions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

During the data collection process and its analysis, I consistently went back to the data and the constructed categories after what I came to call rest periods. The rest periods would be

time where I would work on another aspect of my study and not look at a particular set of data nor any associated categories. After a brief time away from the data, I would go back and view it with fresh eyes to see if data placed in one category still seemed to fit there or might be better placed in a different or new category. Once the categories had been set, I began to consider what they represented. It was led by the question: what does the existence of these categories tell me as whole? This consideration led to sub-theme and theme creation. It was a very inductive process that started with the insights of the participants and then flowed into categories and from there into the sub-themes and themes that became the findings of this study. After analysis, I met separately with two individuals who were my critical others. I shared my final category sets and my thoughts regarding what they meant and asked for any insights, alternatives, or questions that were raised regarding what was shared.

The findings link back the overall research question: What are the perceptions of belonging for Aboriginal learners in elementary schools? All three findings suggest an interconnectivity and interdependence in school settings with regard to belonging. The perception being that belonging is an integrated unit that relies on multiple aspects for its existence. These aspects being: belonging was perceived holistically, where the child is of central importance for the whole school community; the inclusion of parents; and the role of leaders in the creation of a belonging environment. This study brought to the surface that to meet the need of belonging for Aboriginal learners in elementary schools, students must be seen as more than a learner but as a complex individual, and an integral part of the school community with skills and ideas to offer the school community. The importance of parents and care-givers as essential school community members also emerged. Additionally, it was learned that it was

important for leaders to know and value those within the school community that pro-actively influence the environment of the school itself. It was within the sub-themes and their associated categories that the three sub-questions were addressed.

Given that much of the findings found support in the literature, it would be reasonable to anticipate similar results in further studies. Additionally, as the use of naturalistic generalization by readers of this research is expected, it is foreseen that those who utilize this research will help determine its applicability to their contexts and the success of any subsequent results in that setting.

Trustworthiness and Transparency

Guba and Lincoln (as cited in Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) noted that trustworthiness in qualitative research needs to be measured by means other than that used for quantitative research. They posited that “credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability” (p. 85) can be used for this purpose. In this study, the above were addressed in the following ways:

Credibility. Methodological validity: to increase credibility, I used many sources for document analysis (i.e.: report cards, weekly memos, newsletters, enhancement agreement), multiple perspectives (participants with various roles), and more than one data collection technique (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Data collection techniques included: interviews, member checking of transcripts, document collection and analysis, and an on-site observation at each site. This approach increased triangulation of the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Interpretive validity: To increase credibility, I challenged my findings through dialogues with critical others (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

Dependability. Dependability is analogous to the concept of reliability in quantitative data collection (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 78). In this case, dependability was addressed by maintaining a database and a personal journal of emergent thoughts and themes. Field notes were also kept to increase dependability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

Confirmability. It was important to be reflexive (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Keeping evolving versions of the data analysis also documented my thought process along the way as I had typed thoughts as they emerged into the various data analysis documents that I created. This allowed me to go back and see what my ideas or questions were as I was going through different stages of the analysis process.

Transferability. The provision of “thick, rich description” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 87) provides the readers of this study with a place to begin envisioning how the findings contained herein can be of application in their particular context (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; see also Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

For qualitative research to be considered trustworthy, it must meet certain requirements (Phillips & Carr, 2009). These requirements are: process transparency, multiple perspectives, purposeful data collection, and powerful results (Phillips & Carr, 2009).

Process transparency and multiple perspectives. Process transparency was met through dialogue with the participants and in sharing of data throughout the process with the participants. Not only was participants’ data shared with them, but also my intentions and self-reflexive understandings (Phillips & Carr, 2009). Multiple perspectives were sought (Phillips & Carr, 2009; Stringer, 2008) via seeking to include Aboriginal families, some school district staff,

and staff within the school. After data was collected members were asked to review the data to ensure its accuracy (Philips & Carr, 2009).

Purposeful data collection. Data that were deemed relevant to the study at hand were sought (Stringer, 2008).

Powerful results. The issue of powerful results was noted by Phillips and Carr (2009) as “change in the researcher and in practice; and thus results that matter” (p. 208). In this instance, the result hoped for was: improved spaces of belonging for Aboriginal learners with an eye toward both present and future life success.

Where to Conduct the Research

An integral part of the process was where to conduct the research (Stringer, 2008; Wicks & Reason, 2009; Yin, 2009). It was important for participants to feel comfortable in the environment chosen. It was crucial to me as the researcher to consider what space allowed participants to fully involve themselves in the process; therefore, the participants in this study selected the interview time and place.

Political and Ethical Considerations

A political concern that was present, and that could not be ignored, was that many of the participants, as well as this researcher/writer, are, or were, employees of this school district.

Political and ethical issues were addressed in the following ways:

Political considerations. It was critical that the playing field in this context was a level one. Given that teachers and others worked in this district, as the researcher, I needed to be attentive and attend to issues of power and/or influence. Ensuring the comfort and safety of the participants was a role I took on and kept as a priority throughout the study.

Ethical considerations. The Tri-Council policy regarding ethical research that includes human participants is the result of a combined effort from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Council of Canada, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Tri-Council; 2010) and sets a standard for an ethical approach by researchers in their work with participants. This policy guided my work in this research and is undergirded by three core principles. These principles are respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice (p. 8). Respect for persons honours the person as a human being deserving of respect and autonomy (p. 8). It includes not only the aspect of informed consent, but also the accountability of the researcher to the participant (p. 9). Further to this, the protection of participants and their welfare is inherent in this study (p. 9).

Concern for welfare is attentive to the overall well-being of participants both as an individual and as a member of society (Tri-Council, 2010, p. 10). This principle concerns itself with the mitigation of risk to participants and transparent explication of possible risks and benefits to research participation (p. 9).

With respect to the third core principle, that of justice, the heart of this is the responsibility of fair treatment of persons and with equity (Tri-Council, 2010, p. 10). In this context, “fairness entails treating all people with equal respect and concern” (p. 10). With regard to equity, the tenant here is that the dispersal of potential harm and/or benefits are not seen more by one than by another of the participants after vulnerabilities or other relevant factors have been considered (p. 23). Part of the core principle of justice is that participants whose inclusion is reasonable within the context of the research are not excluded without a just rationale (pp. 10-11). Any issues of power that exist between the participant and the researcher must be at the

forefront of the researcher's mind to ensure that justice is not compromised (p. 11). Stake (2008) noted, "Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict" (p. 140).

Within the context of any study, there are ethical considerations to be respected (Research Services, 2012, see also Tri-Council, 2010; Yin, 2009). These considerations include informed consent, permission to publish, ownership of data, anonymity, and confidentiality (Research Services, 2012; see also Tri-Council, 2010). The parameters of the above-noted considerations will be explicated below.

Informed consent. Informed consent is necessary for a study to be considered ethical and valid (Research Services, 2012). To ensure informed consent, at the beginning of the study, there was disclosure to each participant of the purpose of the study, participant expectations, and the foreseeable risks and benefits of proceeding (Mills, 2011; Research Services, 2012). Participants were able to withdraw from the study during its completion without the data being saved by contacting the researcher whose contact information was on the disclosure (Research Services, 2012; Stringer, 2008).

Permission to publish. I will have the right to present, co-present, publish, and/or co-publish. In all cases, confidentiality of the participants will be protected through pseudonyms unless participants wish to have their name published and, in this case, only if it does not jeopardize the confidentiality of those who wish to remain so (Research Services, 2012). Permission to publish was granted by the participants in the study via the consent form.

Confidentiality. As with most studies, confidentiality of data has a central and vital place here (Research Services, 2012). The collected data and their analysis was kept in secure and locked storage that only the researcher has access to (Research Services, 2012, Stringer, 2008).

In this instance, the confidentiality of participants was a particularly important issue. The participants are colleagues and within the power paradigm of this context. Therefore, I took great effort to ensure that the views shared were protected with confidentiality. To this end, the data were coded with all direct and indirect identifiers removed. This data was kept apart from the contact information and consent (Research Services, 2012).

Ownership of data. The ownership of the data was deemed to be that of the researcher once the study was completed (the data will be destroyed five years after dissertation completion and approval). However, during the course of the study participants had the power to withdraw from the study and have their data removed (Research Services, 2012, Stringer, 2008).

Phases. The data gathering was done in phases. These phases, although explicated in a linear fashion, overlapped or were returned to as the research progressed. In all phases, field notes were taken for further information and/or audit trail purposes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). The phases were: Phase One: Gathering documentation; Phase Two: Conducting interviews; Phase Three: Looking back and seeking out further information and clarification.

Chapter Summary

This chapter sought to provide insight into the procedure used during the course of this study. As such, it includes a deeper explanation of the theoretical framework that buttresses this study along with a description of my epistemological stance and assumptions to enable readers to

have a greater understanding of the perspective of this research. Additionally, there is a delineation of the methodology, the research design, which method was chosen and why, and a description of the data collection and analysis process. Lastly, ethical and political considerations are described.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to uncover and to understand perceptions related to belonging and how a sense of belonging is fostered for Aboriginal learners at the elementary school level. It is hoped that this information can be used in elementary schools to foster spaces of belonging, specifically in regard to elementary Aboriginal learners, that will translate into greater engagement in and with school and, as such, increase the chances for Aboriginal students to lead the life that they wish to lead in the future. In this chapter, I will outline the findings that emerged as a result of eleven interviews, the contribution of a twelfth individual, and an analysis of documents provided by some of the interviewees.

The primary research question was: What are the perceptions of belonging for Aboriginal learners in elementary schools? Three research sub-questions were used to further explore and uncover this concept. The three sub-questions were: What creates a sense of belonging at the elementary level for Aboriginal learners? How do educational leaders use their role to facilitate spaces of belonging for their Aboriginal learners? What do Aboriginal students say to their caregivers, teachers, and educational leaders about their school experience? Following is a delineation of the findings that emerged through the interviews and the document analysis. For this body of work, the document analysis was seen to further explore the concept and practice of belonging. Lastly, there will be a summary of findings.

Three main findings emerged from this study:

1. Belonging is a holistic term involving the entire school community with particular attention being paid to the child and their world.

2. Parents are a part of the school’s community and fundamental to the child’s success.
3. Leaders are key in the inclusion of children and families

Findings

The findings (themes, subthemes and categories) are summarized in the following chart:

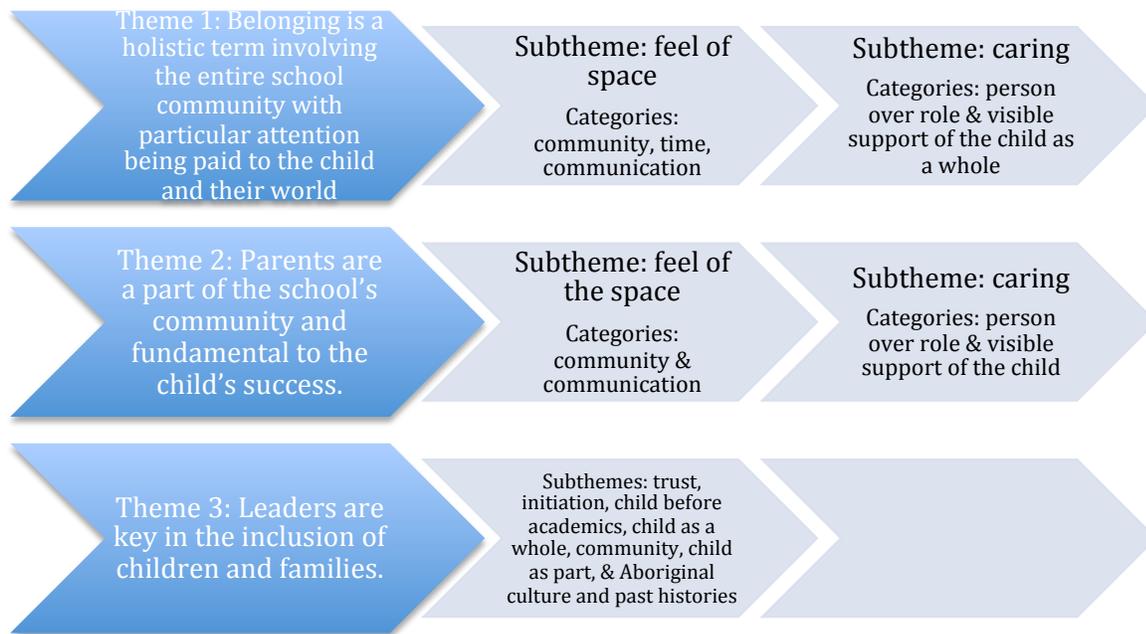


Figure 2: Research Findings

The themes and subthemes will now be elaborated upon in the remaining chapter.

Finding 1: Belonging is a holistic term involving the entire school community with particular attention being paid to the child and their world.

This finding is further separated into two subthemes: the feel of the space and caring. Within the feel of the space sub-theme are three categories: community, time, and communication.

There were only two categories within the caring sub-theme: person over role and visible support of the child as a whole. The term ‘person over role’ carries with it the acknowledgement that in the role of educator, whether administrator or teacher, there is a strong likelihood that a perception of power may be perceived by students and/or parents. Thus, ‘person over role’ is about approaching parents not in the power/positional role of teacher or principal but rather as an equal, a partner who also cares about the student’s success. Spaces of belonging are created in elementary schools through knowing and visibly supporting the child, knowing people as persons and moving beyond roles, and by intentionally creating a space of community, time, and having open communication.

The feel of the space. Most participants spoke in some manner about the fundamental need for the school space to be safe, welcoming, and comfortable. Through these actions, spaces where students wanted to be were created. As put by Patty:

I think it [belonging] is a goal that I’m always striving for and, at the end of each day, at the end of each week, at the end of each school year, I reflect back and think: was my classroom an inviting, safe place for my students?

It was about a space where the support and acceptance of the child was not contingent on behaving in certain ways or on attendance. While participants did not use the term unconditional, the participants who did speak to this point made clear that the child’s behaviour choices were not what determined their receipt of support and care. Ms. Brown elaborated on the concept of belonging, “That you feel safe. That you feel like you can take risks. That you know that you are cared about always not just, you know, when you’re on your best behaviour”.

The belonging space came from the release of roles-based thinking and through the creation of a climate of safety and comfort whereby all those connected to the school were seen first as individuals, as a person. It involved an acknowledgment of positives, issues of concern, and the avoidance of judgement.

Community. All participants noted something allocated to this category indicating that a safe and caring climate was fostered through the creation of community. This feeling of community was developed by checking in with learners, mostly at the start of the day, and with their social, emotional (inclusive of relationship needs) and basic needs as a primary concern and purpose. The purposeful inclusion of community involved the recognition of the child's family as being essential. The inclusion of the family in things such as planning, mission development, and issue resolution contributed to the feeling of community at school. Leigh noted:

Belonging to me, for the whole population at the school would be that everyone feels their voice is honoured and heard in the building and that would be every stakeholder or group in that educational community so that students felt they belong, teachers felt they belonged, parents felt they belonged when they came to the school...[and] any outside agency.

Another chief objective was the development of trust as this was seen as necessary to developing relationships and team building, both of which were viewed as vital. The feeling of community was seen as needed in both the classroom and school, and necessary to the creation of a safe, supportive, and participatory space for the child.

Time. It was noted by some participants that the creation of team and community needed to start at the outset of the year and have a continued focus over the course of the year. It was

also noted that intentionally spending time with the student and with the family was important, and that this was needed over a span of time and not checked off as done and then forgotten.

When discussing an incident Sonia noted:

I just didn't know if it was being successful but I guess it was and so that just highlighted to me how much it's worth taking the extra time to connect with our kids, and with our Aboriginal kids specifically.

Further, Charlotte made the following point:

I know when I taught I made it a personal mission of mine to know a little bit, in some cases a lot, about different students and it really depended upon where I saw students who needed me more, where I would spend more time.

Checking in with the student on a regular and consistent basis was seen as valuable to ensure that care and support was given. In speaking about the importance of building relationships with Aboriginal learners, Calista had this to say:

So that's right at the beginning of the year I try and do that and then, throughout the year, I try to pay attention to things that they're saying in the classroom, things that they're sharing with me, stories that they're sharing, and really just acknowledge what's going on in their life and whether it's good or bad and just support them when listening by listening to them.

Communication. Quality communication was also important in developing spaces of belonging. Most participants shared perspectives on communication: considerations relative to communication included a team perspective, listening, clear and concise language, and the inclusion of the voices of relevant stakeholders. With reference to written communication, many

of the participants believed that it should be clear and/or concise. It is important to note that this stance was taken with the desire to communicate and to be understood. It is reflective of an awareness that not all use the same language and vocabulary, and that it cannot be assumed that the jargon used in the school setting is the vernacular of the home. This awareness is positive and does not come from a place of negative judgment, but rather the acknowledgment that people have different backgrounds and that the purpose of communication to and with the home is to be understood, to inform, to hear, and to communicate. Marian put it in this manner: “I am mindful that my language needs to communicate something and that needs to communicate respect first and foremost and then the message”.

Reciprocity in communication was evidenced through terms such as listening, acknowledging, open communication, and dialogue.

Caring.

All participants noted at least one aspect that fell under the sub-theme of care.

Person over role. Most participants felt that students’ sense of belonging could be cultivated by involving students in opportunities, by giving them a say in, or having them take a lead role in what happens within the school. By having student perspectives considered, they were made to feel a part of the space and what happened there. From this point of view, students were seen as knowledge keepers and as contributors to their success, as opposed to students who were there to be recipients of what the school offered. As Leigh stated, “even just working as a team with the students because often we work as a team with the adults to improve the school and we never ask the students their opinion, and so just working with the students and I guess my a-ha moment was in just asking them their opinion they came up with a plan”. This quote

supports the value of student involvement in decision-making. Involvement in this context included the encouragement of risk-taking and sharing leadership opportunities to develop a sense of ownership. Students that were intentionally included in dialogue with other students or adults in the school were seen as being more involved. Being involved in different kinds of leadership responsibilities that included constructive dialogue was seen as working towards developing a sense of ownership and identification with school.

Some aspects of learning also emerged as being important. Relevancy, challenge, choice, and hands-on activities were noted as things that mattered to students. Learners valued being involved, feeling as though they belonged, and feeling a sense of community. When students were viewed as important and as having ownership of the school, they were more open to learning thus better enabling them to showcase their knowledge, talents, and understandings.

Leigh made the following point:

It [] sounds kind of simple and I don't want it to sound too simplistic but the power it has is amazing – is building a relationship with the student but also stop seeing them as a student – and I'm doing quotation marks right now. But they're a person, they're an individual. Build a relationship with that child and with their family and that has the biggest impact on improving them as a learner.

Visible support of the child as a whole. Visible support of the child emerged strongly as a characteristic as it was commented on by all participants. This consisted of really knowing the student within the school and who they were beyond the school. This category highlights the demonstration of active interest in the student and who they are as person. It was noted that going to invited events allowed not only for the visible support of the child and the building of

relationship with the student, but attending events also built relationships with the student's family members and it showed care and support for the student. Demonstrations of care and support were identified as important as these were seen as base components to building relationships with both learners and their families. Included within this was the avoidance of judgment. Patty put it this way:

I also try to get involved in the community activities so if [] some of my Aboriginal children are singing [] at an event or dancing and they ask me to come I make sure that I make an effort to go so that the family sees the teacher as an encourager not just as an educator.

The benefits of going to invited events extended into learning opportunities and conversations with the student after the event. In this sense, visible support of the child as a whole, beyond the boundaries of school, can be seen as the school's identification with the child. It can also be seen as based in an ethic of care whereby students are accepted for who they are and guided along their personal journeys.

Linked to visible support of the child is knowing the child as a whole. By knowing who the students are as a whole, inclusive of life circumstances, educators can best make decisions about encouraging student participation in a way that makes sense for that child. In this case it is important to keep in the foreground, when making decisions, the student – who the student is and what would encourage their success in a particular situation. Charlotte noted, "I think we really have to sit back and really look at [:] what is it we're asking kids to do and do they have the resources to do it". This contributes to a sense of belonging . Sharon pointed out:

I don't know that I do anything different with Aboriginal learners than I do with the rest of the students in my class. I always try to make a personal connection with my students and kind of understand where they're coming from and what they're dealing with cuz we all have our own issues, right? But, I think just getting to know them on a personal level, showing interest in them is a big part of it.

Noddings (2007) noted that an ethic of care behoves us to behave in caring ways and to encourage goals that are commendable while realizing that not all goals may be commendable. This point by Noddings (2007) was born out by participants who noted that it was important that one does not stop giving or withdrawing support depending on how a child behaves, that one does not make acceptance contingent on best behaviour.

Connected to this is valuing of the child and what they are able to do. Sharon noted that "if they're feeling like that they're valued, their opinion is valued and that [] you care about them then they will have that sense of belonging and they want to be there". Valuing included the celebration of the students' successes, an awareness of the holistic nature of their life, and providing student's with responsibility and leadership opportunities.

Finding 2: Parents are a part of the school's community and fundamental to the child's success.

The basis of relationship, which included acknowledging the importance of parents, created an inclusive space of community where the voice of all mattered and where partnerships between school and home could be developed. This finding also fell into the two main sub-themes of: the feel of the space and caring.

The feel of the space. With regard to parents, most participants spoke in some manner to the importance of parents and caregivers feeling welcomed within the school, that their voice had merit, and there was communication between school and home.

Community. Many participants noted something that was attributed to the category of community. Creating community included developing meaningful partnerships with parents, and making the school a place where parents felt that their voice mattered and that they were a part of what happened in the school. This relationship and connection to the school by parents was seen as key by many of the participants. The participants that were parents/caregivers acknowledged the need to feel that they belonged and were comfortable in the school setting. This was enabled by including parents as stakeholders and team members in decision processes that related to the child's learning. It was expressed, when teachers were in dialogue with parents, when parents were approached as equals, and when they were acknowledged as people who also cared for the child. As Marian noted:

I'm always I was trying to be warm and friendly and with parents I always use my first name. I never refer to myself by my title because I want these parents to know that they can pick up the phone or walk in to see me at any time and that I'm not going to use my position of authority in school. The parents are the experts on their children and that needs to be respected and honoured.

Leigh framed it in this manner:

[] I was always mindful that my first interaction with [parents] was just on a basic human level of two adults interacting and just me genuinely wanting to know how they were. And actually in the beginning I wouldn't, I didn't base

any of the relationship on academics or even from a school model as the [participant's role].

Communication. Most of the participants indicated the importance of person-to-person communication. Components of effective communication included: a team orientation, approaching parents in a welcoming way; clear and concise communication; and/or language conducive to developing and maintaining relationship. Sonia noted:

And so I think you have to work extra hard whenever you're sending home written communication to show them that you have their children's best interests at heart and that you also honour what *they know* [emphasized speech] about their kids and that you value them as partners in their children's education.

Gertrude noted that leaders facilitated belonging in the following way:

They know [the student] on a first name basis to begin with. They know [the student's] parents and [the student's] grandparents which is important. They know where [the student] fits in the community. And there's lots of dialogue between home and the school and I think that makes [the student] feel like [the student] belongs.

Marian described it in this way, "I like that our community is an integration rather than differentiated but I do talk to Aboriginal parents and make contact with them to let them know that I am here and who I am". With regard to written communication, the emphasis was on making sure the language made sense and the statements were clear.

It was indicated by many participants that a safe and caring environment was needed to enhance the relationship and communication with home. Primary to this was the mindset that

parent involvement was a needed part of a child's school experience. Overt measures were taken to include parents (caregivers) and they were sought out for their expertise on their children and to be part of the child's learning and celebration. This can be seen in this comment by Gertrude: "They talk about individual children, they talk about group activities, they send notices home for upcoming events and they invite parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, everybody to participate with the child's activities and accomplishments". This also demonstrates the importance of including and inviting family members to be part of what happens in the life of the school.

Caring. A caring approach is as important relative to care-givers as it is with regard to learners. In this context, caring included approaching parents as equal partners and demonstrating care for the student in ways that conveyed this to their parents/care-givers. Most participants noted something that was attributed to this overall sub-theme.

Person over role. Person over role in this case not only includes the parent as educational partner but also acknowledges them as people of Aboriginal descent whose histories with school may have created a discomfort with the school system itself. Most participants mentioned comments that were attributed to this category. With regard to building a relationship with families of Aboriginal learners Sharon noted: "I think it's important to make connection early in the year and make them feel comfortable with you and with the school setting". With respect to the inclusion of parent as partner, Ethel had this to say:

The most powerful visual is the face-to-face. I [] can't [] express enough how important is to sit down with people face-to-face. I think a lot of written communication doesn't make it home, [] gets misinterpreted but those face-to-face

encounters where we can talk openly and frankly, I think that builds a lot of bridges and a lot of trust. That's extremely time-consuming but if we go back to the first question you asked me about belonging this is a way for parents and community to also have that feeling of belonging and they're partner in their child's learning and they're partner with your child's school and the district in supporting the learning of their kids and their success.

In addition, Sharon made the following point, "I always think when I meet the parents or the families it helps me understand the students a lot better".

Visible support of the child. Another category that emerged from many participants with regard to parental inclusion was the visible support of the child as a whole. While this was also important with regard to belonging in the holistic sense, it was additionally seen within this finding as educators pointed to the importance of conveying to the people in the child's home that the child was valued and supported within the school. Examples were given about parents (home caregivers) seeing educators at events that mattered to the child, and the significance of this. Visible support was additionally shown through activities that celebrated the child's successes, events that acknowledged the positive attributes of the child. This visible support lent itself to parental inclusion because it was seen to build relationships with the parent(s) and could then be translated into teamwork consisting of parents and school staff. The goal of this collaboration was to support student learning and overall wellbeing, this included working together on meeting challenges that students encounter. Calista noted when speaking of going to events:

[S]o that's a time to see them with their families and to let the families know that I'm there to root for their kids and that I really appreciate having their kids in my classroom. So it's not directly with dealing with the families but it is through supporting the students.

Finding 3: Leaders are key in the inclusion of children and families.

Educational leaders used their role to facilitate belonging by being pro-active in their development of relationship, supporting policies and initiatives that support relationship and belonging, and having cultural awareness and understanding.

Trust. Trust as a component of belonging was put forth by some participants including Patty who, when asked what belonging is stated, "Belonging is some words: so words would be acceptance, comfort, rest, [] connection. [] I think ownership and trust". Trust was also noted by Ethel.

Initiation. Most participants made known that leaders put themselves "out there" in situations that are pro-active and supportive of relationship and belonging. They did not wait for the solutions or people to come to them. Leaders used their position to enact/create the circumstances that encourage belonging and relationship (i.e., going to events; connecting/being outside first thing in the morning, coaching and mentoring, inviting parents and students to be a part of the learning team, treating parents and students as valued members of the team).

Charlotte made the following point:

I think to support a belonging environment really is to [] being able to put myself out there, as well as, getting to know the people that I'm with but also having them getting to know me so [] supporting that environment.

Rather than adopting a wait-and-see approach or waiting for others to come to seek them out, leaders were doing the seeking.

Further, leaders in these settings supported initiatives and policies that advocated belonging. Sonia pointed out the following, “We have these various positions in place both to work specifically with our Aboriginal population and help them be successful but also to make sure our teachers are educated on Aboriginal issues and culture.” School district initiatives and programs that facilitated belonging were made focal points with attention paid and time given to them by leaders who supported and built both relationships and belonging by enacting the criterion within initiatives and learning more about the aspects of these initiatives.

Child before academics. Some participants said that leaders put the child’s needs first. When going outside first thing in the morning to mingle with students and parents, leaders deliberately aimed to build connections during this time, while also checking in to see if students were in need of social emotional support and/or basic needs. Leigh noted, “So I would first thing in the morning: out on the playground greeting Aboriginal students off the bus, checking in with them - how was your day, do you need breakfast, meeting their needs [] just on a human level before we even got into the academics”. This was echoed by Calista who stated:

I also have made sure that I’m on morning supervision whenever I’m doing supervision, if I can be, because then I can connect with those kids first thing in the morning. Not just Aboriginal learners but kids that I think might be struggling. I can always connect and see how their morning is going before we even get into the classroom.

Child as a whole. Within this sub-theme, most participants spoke in one way or another about the need to attend to what I have characterized as knowing the child as a whole. Leaders put themselves in situations where interactions could occur such as first thing in the morning, and also by going to invited events, and by inviting the community into the school setting. During these times, the emphasis is on communication, getting to know the students and school community, and having themselves be known. Leaders sought to know the child as a whole. It was important that they understood who the student was and what their world included. There was effort made to show care, support, and interest in as many instances as possible. It was found to be important to get to know the child and the family; this was seen as a key aspect of building relationships with families. Through relationship building initiatives messages were given to children that they were supported and valued, and a connection with the home and those within it was also facilitated. Leigh put it this way:

And I [] didn't put any responsibility on them other than I just want to get to know you and have a good relationship with you so that your interactions at the school are more positive and you [] also think this school is a great place to be and you're happy leaving your child here for the day.

Charlotte mentioned:

I think what I consider is [] what do I know about the person and then how can I be [] it's not even that I want to be sensitive but I don't want, I don't want to find out that I've asked a question that may make somebody uncomfortable so I try to be, I use humor to try to just be kind of light about things.

Charlotte further pointed out, “You know it really was about [] ensuring that I knew a little bit more about [] kids. I guess that’s the biggest thing, it was about relationships.”

Community. Community development is another avenue leaders took to develop spaces of belonging. All participants noted something that contributed to this sub-theme. An emphasis was placed on being welcoming in manner, tone, and language. Fostering relationship and connections were done with intention, and value was placed on trust and the creation of a climate of safety. All those in and connected to the school were perceived to be a part of a team: parents, students, and staff. Leigh put it in this manner:

So when I think of the school environment at every level we have strategic plans in place that students, staff, parents feel connected to the school and feel that they belong there and that their needs are being met and their voices honored and so [] it’s not just hit and miss, it’s is a very strategic process I go through to make sure that at all levels people are included in the plan, mission, design of the building we’re operating and creating.

As Gertrude noted, “They [leaders] stand out to me because they work with the parents. They work with the students. There’s a plan for their education, there’s communication, and we all work together to ensure the success of our students.”

Child as part. Some participants indicated that leaders in these settings focused on the child as part, which meant that students were given the opportunity to be leaders and were given various responsibilities. Donalda commented:

They give [child gender] responsibility. They...put [the student] in that leader role and let [child gender] go and I think when...a child is in a leader role they...feel like they belong rather than just sitting in the back of the class observing.

As Leigh remarked, “ownership increases belonging and again building relationships”.

Aboriginal cultures and past histories. There was recognition by some participants that knowledge of Aboriginal culture and/or Aboriginal histories were of importance in helping to develop spaces of belonging. Some of the participants acknowledged that not all parents felt comfortable in the school setting because of past histories and schooling experiences (this including Indian Residential Schooling experiences). Awareness of Aboriginal histories and cultures were seen as contributing to knowing how to facilitate a welcome and safe environment. Leigh made the following point relative to this: “When you have a huge population [] you’re being culturally sensitive, you’re culturally aware, you’re involving outside groups and parents so that they feel their culture’s being honoured and ... respected”. This was also evident in these words from Patty:

I’ve also taken time over the years to [] try to gain a better understanding [] of the culture, of the Aboriginal culture, so that I am sensitive to those kinds of things [], with my children, with their families, and in [space of work noted here].

Furthermore, Sonia remarked:

So when students and parents are feeling supported and feeling that structures are in place that value them and that honour them they are more likely - students are more likely - to succeed academically, you see their attendance go up or remain

high, and you see parents coming into the building to meet and collaborate with you and talk about learning and the learning environment.

Document Analysis

During the document analysis four major themes emerged; these were also noted in the findings section above: the child as a whole, parental inclusion, the feel of the space (the climate/culture), and communication. A fifth theme also emerged: the influence of leadership. While this fifth theme is closely connected to what was discovered through the interviews, particularly in relation to research sub-question 2, there was a slight deviation in that the document analysis relative to this section showed the following: vision and direction at the forefront.

Child as whole. Many submitted documents demonstrated the value of ‘knowing the child as a whole’ and celebrating their accomplishments within them. In one example (i.e., an invitation to volunteer being extended to family members beyond the parent), adults in the child’s life other than the parents were acknowledged and invited to participate. Leigh explained, “We honoured the fact that there’s more than just a mother and father in their family. They have a huge connected family and then sometimes students are moving around”. The document analysis results indicated the importance of knowing the child, valuing the child, celebrating the child, voice, and meeting the needs of the child. An example that demonstrated the inclusion of students’ voice was seen in a newsletter that was provided by one of the participants: “there is a chart that lays it out in kid-friendly terms. We know they are kid-friendly as it was the kids who wrote it”. Again the message emerges that it is important to create an environment of ‘belonging’ and this begins with having knowledge of the child as a whole. In knowing the child

as a whole, educators can build relationship and respond to the specific strengths and needs of that child.

Parental inclusion. A theme that emerged was the importance of the parental role in helping to develop spaces of belonging in school. The document analysis also found that it was important for parents to be a part of the school community, and for them to be engaged vocally and otherwise. By virtue of communicating with the home in ways that communicated holistic knowledge of the child, educational leaders demonstrated their support of the child. This point is demonstrated by the following newsletter comment to parents: “It is my pleasure to have your child in my classroom...last week the students were...and getting to know each other better”. This has the effect of building relationship with the parent.

Communication. Parent voice was honoured through the inclusion of parent input in some of the submitted documents. A statement noted in a newsletter that exemplifies this was: “Our PAC meetings are scheduled once a month at (time). There will be a short survey at our Open House to see if this time is best for every one”. Parents were encouraged to communicate with the school in various ways (e.g., phone, e-mail, in person). Invitations to parents that were in some of the written documents supported the fostering of a welcoming environment where parents were considered a part of the school community. An example of this is the following newsletter comment referring to the school parent advisory committee (PAC): “Thank you so much to our dedicated team of parents who make this school a better place”. Many included documents that I analyzed were those that were shared with students and/or parents. Overall, the documents tended to be clear and concise with minimal jargon.

Climate and culture. The document analysis revealed the importance of a safe and caring climate and culture. Some examples that the participants provided supported the importance of having knowledge of Aboriginal cultures where belonging was valued, this demonstrated connection and relationship. A welcoming tone was also evidenced in many of the classroom and school newsletter documents. The provided documents indicated that a warm, safe, and caring climate was a desired goal in the schools. One document used the following terms: “positive relationships”, “conflict resolution”, “respect”, and “critical thinking and problem solving”. In some ways, examples in these documents could be seen as being pro-active as they demonstrated leaders’ wish to establish relationships, team, and show acts of care and support.

Vision and direction. A small number school documents provided examples of what was being done to support Aboriginal learners, and an outline of the next steps for coaches and/or mentors where Aboriginal learners were a specific focus. Some examples included: celebrations of success, the provision of ongoing training opportunities (i.e., regarding treaties), and the inclusion of family members as partners (i.e., this was evident in news regarding the Aboriginal Education Advisory Council and details about an evening Aboriginal family event). There was also information about community-building within one of the school’s growth plans, while another indicated the influence that leaders have on school climate. Some of the documents provided vision and direction for leaders (i.e., weekly coach mentor memos, school growth plan, and Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement).

Summary

This chapter has outlined and described the findings. These being the holistic nature of belonging inclusive of the school community and with primary focus on the student, the essential role of parents in developing spaces of belonging, and the key role of leaders in the creation of inclusivity for both students and parents. These findings will now be discussed with a goal to understanding what is at their heart. The question now being turned to is: what do these findings tell us about the phenomenon under study and what do they mean at their core?

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Introduction

As stated, in this chapter the findings noted in the previous chapter will be discussed in detail to further interpret and understand their meaning. Firstly, there will be an examination of what participants said during the interviews regarding the concept and practice of belonging. Following this, there will be a theme by theme discussion, which includes any related sub-themes and categories. The intention is not to only explicate the findings but to also provide description that will allow users of this research to have a greater understanding of this phenomenon and to also make connections to its applicability to their own context. Finally, the chapter will end with a summation of findings.

Belonging

Within the literature review for this work, it was posited that identification with school, school climate and culture, and an ethic of care coalesced to create spaces of belonging in elementary schools. During the interviews, participants were asked to define belonging, and then I conducted an analysis of their responses. The first of the three combined aspects was identification of school. Confirmation of identification with school as a contributor to belonging came through within the following theme: being included in a reciprocal manner. Included here were descriptions that indicated the importance of enabling voice, connection to people at school, ownership of decision making, relationship with others, reciprocity, and the importance of being involved in the school's operation in some manner. The importance of climate and culture as a factor in belonging was evidenced in the following theme: feeling at home and a part of the school. Descriptions here included being comfortable, included and involved, feeling safe,

and the trusting of the adults in the school. There were also comments that linked climate and culture to belonging such as this statement by Ethel, “Belonging I think [] is foundational to a healthy climate and culture”. The last component of the triad, the ethic of care, fell under the following theme: unconditional care. This was demonstrated in comments that expressed the importance of being oneself, being valued, accepted, and being known. This study affirmed the coalescence of identification with school, school climate and culture, and an ethic of care as important contributors to developing spaces of belonging within a school. As such, those who wish to create a context of belonging must attend to multiple variables and seek a multi-pronged approach.

Discussion

Theme One: Belonging is a holistic term involving the entire school community with particular attention being paid to the child and their world.

Sub-question 1: What creates a sense of belonging at the elementary level for Aboriginal learners?

Sub-question 3: What do Aboriginal students say to their care-givers, teachers, and educational leaders about their school experience?

Belonging is made up of many component parts and it is the integration of these parts that creates the whole. Belonging is the result of actions taken and cannot be held as any one thing or as an item. It is, rather, a combination of enactments such as the creation of community, the spending of time, communicating, caring, fostering equal relationships, and supporting the whole student. The relationship that is built as a part of a ‘belonging environment’ lets students know that someone cares for them whether they achieve or not (Hyslop, 2006).

In the context under study all stakeholders especially the learners were valued and a part of what happened in the school. In knowing the child, schools are able to show support, care, and be responsive to the child as an individual. Ms. Brown had this to say about what seemed to make a difference for Aboriginal learners, especially with regard to belonging: “I [] think that most importantly they know that I really care about them”. With the focus on developing relationships, opportunities to get to know the student in a variety of ways and in a variety of settings were presented as being of importance by educators. This then worked in a reciprocal fashion, opening doors for conversation and learning of the successful leadership and ownership opportunities that could be made available to Aboriginal students. Increased opportunities for success, which included expressions of care and support being given by leaders, made school for Aboriginal children safe and caring, a place where they felt they belonged.

Ethel put it in this way:

I think a healthy culture where belonging and relationships are paid attention to are key to support learning and so all those pieces fit together. You can't have one without the other but one, I mean you can, you can try and create an environment of learning but you're not going to create a culture of learning unless you also include the belonging and relationship aspects of that.

Ensuring quality relationships and knowledge of the child are key pieces to developing a sense of belonging; this also leads to children feeling that they are an important and essential part of the learning community. A principal, quoted in the book *Restorative Circles in Schools: Building Community and Enhancing Learning* (Costello, Wachtel & Wachtel, 2010), commented, “I always say, ‘Relationships are stronger than metal detectors’” (p. 78). A sense of

belonging and the creation of spaces of belonging are seen as a community effort and not the job of any one person. All in the community are responsible for the creation of the space. In the words of Charlotte:

I guess what I would like to think is that: how do we make people feel? [] that you can't deny your feelings so if people feel: they're smiling around you, they're willing to take risks, they come. They show up. That tells me a little bit that they feel that they belong. So how do we sort of translate that into the other way, if we're seeing things where people come, and you can read their body language and so on, that maybe they're there because they have to be there, that they don't want to be there, or that they look not overly happy about being there. So taking into those kind of judgments about how do we build a community around so that people want to...be there and together we can move forward. So really again, is, it is about how do we make people feel, how do people feel when they come, how do people feel when they leave, and how I feel after a day.

The feel of the space. Dunleavy and Milton (2009) noted a care ethic, relationship, and respect as having a positive effect on participation at school. McRae (n.d.) also pointed out that acceptance and a welcoming environment were important for student participation to occur. McMurrer (2012) commented that a positive school climate fostered student engagement that, in turn, promoted academic success. She also noted that the creation of a positive climate included developing positive relationships and the provision of social, emotional, and behavioural supports for a safe environment. Blum, quoted by Fletcher in a 2002 Washington Post article, stated, "It doesn't matter whether a teacher has a graduate degree....What matters is the

environment that a student enters when he walks through a classroom door” (p. A03). Further, Michel et al. (2005) pointed to both the social and cultural aspects of the school space as impacting Aboriginal learners. Ottmann (2009) also emphasized the need for safe and caring environments for Aboriginal students. Further, the British Columbia Ministry of Education (2008) and McMurrer (2012) noted that in a positive school culture bullying and racism are addressed.

All members of the school community have a role to play in the culture and the climate of the school. In other words, everyone has a responsibility for how people feel when they enter the school. In order for children to contribute to the school climate and culture they must first feel a sense of belonging. Gertrude commented, “Belonging means participating, having a voice, recognizing where our school would like to go which falls back on participating and having a voice and knowing everybody firsthand”. Without connection to the space and place, without ownership in what happens in the school, without a sense of responsibility there is not this connection, and no identification to the space and place, thus there is no impetus to take part in or to engage with what happens in the school. This is about having a sense of control over what is happening in a school and the power to impact and influence what happens there.

The following were noted in the data as enactments towards a climate and culture of belonging.

Community. Schlossberg (1989) noted that by involving learners in the creation of community, community is built. A true community mindset lends itself to a sense of belonging because community in and of itself is seen as a unit where all within that unit have a place – they belong. Within this is implied valuing and acceptance, no judgment. One is accepted as part and

as a member of that community – they matter. They have voice and are a valued and cared for community member. Acts such as checking in, the prioritization of social emotional needs being met, the inclusion of the child’s family (especially with reference to celebration of successes), the ability to share their perspective, and enactments of support and caring that further build relationship are the norm in this type of environment. Leigh remarked:

And so you know you’ve reached your sense of belonging when students are talking about how much they want to be at school as opposed to how excited they are for holidays.... another example of how we knew that [] we’d reached, you know, our goal to make it a belonging environment was the number of grade 8 students that were coming back to visit on a weekly, monthly basis after they’d left to go to the high school. And just coming back to talk with that network of adults they’d created that cared for them.

While Sonia noted, “[S]o we’re always trying to ensure that [Aboriginal students] feel respected and valued at school and that their culture is incorporated into what we do here”. This importance of inclusion and acceptance of people’s perspectives is supported by Michel et al. (2005), Thomson in Walker (2006), and Williams and Tanaka (2007).

In a community environment trust is built, maintained, and sustained. Trust is vital to Aboriginal education as is being accepted (Wilson, 2000). In a trusting environment a feeling of safety is cultivated. Stirk (2003) also pointed to the building of trust as being important with regard to Aboriginal learners. When the child feels safe and a part of the community risk-taking is promoted. Both Alberta Education (2007) and Redburn (2009) noted that in a space of trust risk-taking is enabled. If a student learns that it is okay to take risks as a member of the school’s

community, the student can translate risk-taking into learning. Charlotte provided the following analogy:

[S]ometimes I don't feel I belong is if I go into a really fancy restaurant. I don't know the etiquette of the restaurant of - I always seem to think I have too many forks. So I wonder, so there's a sense of uncomfortableness about not knowing that the etiquette or the rules or the what goes on there and so but am I uncomfortable enough to leave? Probably not, so to take that sort of analogy and move it to what is it like to belong in a school or in a classroom is that it's to be able to go in and see that you have all these different forks in front of you but it's okay to not know what they're for and to be able to say: "Hey what's this fork for"? And so, to feel that it's okay to do that.

Time. While the concept of time was not explicitly noted in the body of the literature review, it can be seen as accompanying the literature with respect to an ethic of care (Noddings, 2007). Noddings (2007), itemized four aspects to a moral education, one of these being confirmability. Confirmability being comprised of two elements: continuity and trust (Noddings, 2007). Within the element of trust there included the continual introspective seeking out of intentions (Noddings, 2007). Both continuity and continued introspection imply the need for involvement over time. Further, the literature with regard to students' desire to be understood and to have a relationship with their teachers (Klem & Connell, 2004, Parsons & Taylor, 2011; Willms, 2003; Willms et al., 2009) lends support to this finding in that it can be linked to Noddings point regarding continuity with its goal of "knowledge of the other" (p. 431). The acceptance of the reality that the building of community, knowledge, and trust are not overnight

accomplishments, aids in the persistence and rate that people move toward building a community environment. This acknowledgment allows for realistic expectations and goals to be set so that those wishing to create an environment of belonging can effectively plan for its development. Marian commented:

I think the only real way to build a relationship is to spend time together so I want these kids to know who I am and that I'm there for them so I will go and work in their classroom or I will pull a group of them out so we can talk about why it's important that we do [leader task] but the biggest part is spending time together perhaps with a shared activity.

The participants who spoke of the importance of time spent with students intentionally created this time. Whether it was ensuring that they were on morning supervision so they could check in with students, making sure to go outside at the beginning of the day to greet students, or building time into their daily routine to spend time with students, it was all done with purpose.

Communication. Brendtro et al. (2002) and Brendtro and Mitchell (2012), noted that the presence of relationship increased the probability that a student would be attentive to what was being said by their teachers. Additionally, Dunleavy and Milton (2009) put forth that thoughtful and considerate communications build resiliency in students. Given this, one can posit that without relationship and kind exchanges between educator and student, the overall quality of communication would be jeopardized. Educators can become more purposeful and intentional by being cognizant of not only the way things are said but also how they may be heard through dialogue and written communication. The process of cultivating belonging requires forethought

and knowledge of the student and the school community. The forethought noted here is key to ensuring that students are being heard so that problems and issues are meaningfully addressed. With respect to students, when educators and school leaders think ahead and plan opportunities for conversations, if the frame applied considers the learner and applies relevant knowledge, respectful and positive collaborations with the student increases. This intentional approach encourages reciprocity, sending the message that there is a desire to work together. The notion of working together and of ‘welcoming in’ students and their parents and community, once again, aids in the creation of a belonging and community space.

Caring. The importance of developing healthy relationships with students was evident in the literature review (Brendtro, Mitchell, & Long, 2010; Brokenleg, 2012a; Dunleavy and Milton, 2009; Klem and Connell, 2004; Noddings, 2007; Ozer et al., 2008; Parsons and Taylor, 2011; Willms, 2003; Willms et al., 2009). Noddings (2007) emphasized the critical importance of caring and the reciprocal nature of the caring. Reciprocity in this sense refers to intentionally and actively seeking what the cared for needs. The findings from this study support this and highlight the importance of healthy relationships and the ethic of care.

The following were noted as ways in which care was embodied.

Person over role. The notion of ‘person over role’ was not discussed within the literature review, however there were authors that supported this category. Noddings (2007) highlighted the importance of allowing students choice and encouraging children to be authentic to who they are. Further, Schlossberg (1989) expressed the importance of listening to and planning with learners. It was also recognized in the literature that learning occurs when there is relationship and relevance (Bishop, 2011; Klem and Connell, 2004; Marquez-Zenkov et al., 2007; McRae,

n.d.; Willms et al., 2009). By valuing the child and acknowledging the family as part of the child's world, children are seen beyond the singular role of student. Cultivating ownership, providing leadership opportunities, and having students participate in the school's day-to-day operation gives them an opportunity to show themselves in roles beyond narrow definitions of classroom learner. Additionally, it places the child at the centre of the team supporting their success and, as such, also gives them voice. When speaking about Aboriginal learners and belonging, Ethel had this to say, "Try[] to get a glimpse of the experience of what it is to be an Aboriginal student in each of those classrooms in that school and to try and view it from a student perspective". Encouraging students to go beyond the role of learner and one who comes into the school to learn X, Y, and Z provides the opportunity for the student to show themselves in multiple ways and exert power and control within the space of school. As Donalda observed, "They speak to [the student] like [the student's] not a two year old. They talk to [Child's name] like [the student's] an adult and they involve [the student]". Lastly, it helps educators understand not only what students want out of their school and learning, but also what they need.

Visible Support of the Child as a Whole. This category is linked to 'person over role', however it is also distinct and support for this concept can be found in the work of Marquez-Zenkov et al. (2007) and Brendtro et al. (2002) who spoke of stepping into the role of friend, however; the inclusion of supporting students beyond school was also emphasized as essential to developing a sense of belonging. Visible support of the child comes from knowing him/her beyond the boundaries of school. Seeing the child outside of school, while it provided enriched knowledge of the child as whole, communicated to the child that they were supported and cared about and that they mattered. Additionally, it helped to build relationship with the student and

their family. The participants noted that visible support for the child included celebrations of successes, acknowledging the positive aspects of the child, and a collaborative approach (that includes educators, students, and parents) to the resolution of issues. Support of the child was not dependent on “being good”, that is behaving in expected/desired ways. Charlotte pointed out, “So it was important to let kids know that I enjoyed them, that sometimes their behavior was challenging but it wasn’t that: ‘I’m going to write you off’”. This quote highlights the importance of communicating acceptance and care for the students, which would positively influence a sense of belonging and a community environment, and impact the climate and culture of the school as a whole. Knowledge of the child’s culture and how it contributes to who the child is helps educators to be appropriately responsive to the child. Cultural knowledge can also be seen as a stepping-stone to dialogue with the child and their interests. These child-specific conversations can then be linked to problem solving with the child, learning opportunities, and the building of relationship, thus potentially increasing the child’s identification with school. Identification with school and healthy relationships (Marquez-Zenkov et al., 2007) positively impact participation (Voekl, 1997). Wilson (2000) pointed out that the foundation for relationships begins with creating a space of belonging for Aboriginal learners. Flowing from this is Raham’s (2010) contention that connection to school reduces school leaving.

Theme Two: Parents are a part of the school’s community and fundamental to the child’s success.

Sub-question 1: What creates a sense of belonging at the elementary level for Aboriginal learners?

The inclusion of parents as an integral part of the school community was not seen through the lens of “we are doing this and we are letting you come in” rather it was a mindset of “we need to have parents as part of the student advocacy team”. This stance is supported by Kirkness (1999) and Hughes and More (1997) who noted the necessity of including Aboriginal people in the decision-making process in schools. Bishop (2011), Hughes and More (1997), Kirkness (1999), McRae (n.d.), Ottmann (2009), and Raham (2010) also pointed to the importance of parental inclusion and engagement. Parents were seen as essential to gaining an understanding of the child as a whole, and as needed participants in the celebration of the learners’ accomplishments, and to helping solve problems when they arise. As Toulouse noted, “The key is to always include Aboriginal peoples as meaningful participants in any processes regarding Aboriginal children. The education of Aboriginal students and their futures support and build capacity for their Nations” (para. 11). Additionally, this study revealed that there was consideration of how parents/guardians they felt when they left their child at the school, and parental comfort while in the school. Parental inclusion also helps educators to understand the whole child, which would contribute to ways that educators can increase the sense of belonging for the child at school. Further, having parents involved in the school positively impacts school climate. Overall, the voice and partnership of parents is seen as contributing to the success of the child.

As noted, parents cannot be excluded from what is happening with their children without implications, their inclusion helps educators to better know the child and enables them be more responsive to the individual child. The implication of not including the parents as part of the learning team could lead to a reduction of knowledge in ways to support the Aboriginal student.

Further, parental inclusion aids and allows the school to become more responsive to the community outside of the school. By including parents in various ways within the school they may become even more supportive of the school. This may also develop ownership of the school by parents and students, as the space is now being authentically shared between parents and educators. Beyond this, through school engagement, parents can then bring school into the home. The home is in the school and the school is in the home. This paralleling merges two very large parts of the child's life. Intentional inclusion and partnership develops a reciprocal relationship that benefits the student.

The feel of the space. The following were noted as helping to build a climate and culture of belonging. The feel of the space is as important for parents and care-givers as it is for students. In order for parents and care-givers to become collaborators in terms of issue resolution, student celebration, and school directions there must be the provision of an environment that allows for doing so. Schlossberg (1989) noted that when there is action toward building community, it starts the community building process, and Stirk (2003) noted the importance of trust and relationship building with parents throughout this process. While Schlossberg's observation was relative to learners, it can be extrapolated to working in partnership with families. Trust, relationship, and community building fosters an environment of belonging for parents and care-givers, and begins a positive cultural and climate change.

Community. As Kirkness' (1999) indicated, Aboriginal parents do not always feel welcome in the school. This sentiment was echoed in by Stirk (2003). As such community creation for all those connected to the school is imperative, especially if the goal is to create an inclusive environment where parental expertise can be honoured and utilized. A feeling of

community within the school is welcoming and inviting. The inclusion of family recognizes that the family is the extension of the child, and by virtue a part of the school's community. Further, this sense of community can translate into parental comfort and trust with the school via increased relationship. A positive relationship was seen as vital for both students and their families. These relationships are a big part of community and an essential piece to developing positive relationships and quality communication. Patty observed, "First off, a relationship with the families is key... and once the family has learned who I am the connection then comes directly back-and-forth between me and them". While Ethel had this to say:

Being able to share the good news, the bad news, and sometimes the ugly news, about what's happening for Aboriginal students in terms of data. And being very open to say: this is the reality and yes we need to do better and then being able to speak about what we're going to do to do better and walking alongside them as we try to do our very, very best for their children.

Communication. Hughes and More (1997) and Kirkness (1999) emphasized the positive influence of Aboriginal parental involvement in education. Additionally, past experiences with schools, particularly the impact of Indian Residential School (Elias et al., 2012), must be considered as possible obstacles to communication exchanges. By virtue of this, effective and positive communication must be a priority goal. Quality communication sends the message that one values and wants to hear the perspectives of another person. This study also found that honest communication could also be viewed as a step toward the building and sustaining of trust. Communication with relevant stakeholders (this including parents) can also lead to a collaborative, team, partnership approach that considers how to increase student success. It is

important that these partnerships acknowledge the holistic aspects of the child's world. In this context parents, and relevant care-givers, are seen as valuable contributors to the school vision, mission and school plans.

Caring. A finding of this study is that a caring school environment was not only important for students, but for their parents. Stirk (2003) noted that belonging is an issue for First Nations parents and their children. Bishop (2011), Hughes and More (1997), Kirkness (1999), McRae (n.d.), Ottmann (2009), and Raham (2010) all state that it is essential to include Aboriginal voice in school decision-making. The following were noted as ways that care was embodied with regard to parents.

Person over role. Hughes and More (1997) and Kirkness (1999) both spoke to the value that is provided in education by those in the Aboriginal community. The concept of person over role acknowledges this as it encourages the inclusion of parents and care-givers in decisions related to the education of their children, our students. In this work, I have used the term 'person over role' to refer to educators entering into dialogue as a person first (a person part of a community) over their role as teacher or administrator. When an educator is acting primarily from the lens and perspective of their positional role as teacher or leader, it may impact on what they feel they have power to do and accomplish and what they perceive they have control over – they may feel that they have positional authority or expertise over the parent. By approaching family members with a view of equal relationship, educators can focus on the child and their success rather than on the narrow and limited definitions implied by their position. As persons we are more than any one thing and by acknowledgement of person over role, we are valuing that person as a whole. Therefore, more possibilities and perspectives may considered since the

focal point is then on the child rather than role enactment. Leigh had this to say, “I would approach parents just that they’re an important person in this child’s life and I want to get to know them”. Through this lens, the family member is seen as important and vital to the child’s success.

The influence of the past on the present has been noted by Elias et al. (2012), and Kirkness (1999). This includes acknowledging the detrimental impact that Indian Residential schooling and the 60s scoop has had on current generations of Aboriginal students. This acknowledgement helps educators understand how a family member may define school and its role, past and present. With this knowledge, interactions, dialogue and written communication with Aboriginal families may be more respectful, sensitive and constructive.

Visible support of the child as a whole. Hughes and More (1997) and Wilson (2000) spoke to how affiliations impact how one views oneself. In this instance, the visible support of the student conveys to parents and care-givers that we, as educators, understand this truth and work towards the support of students in the creation of a positive sense of identity. When family members see educators showing support and care for the child as a whole, the intention of the educator is made transparent. It is also an enactment of the educator meeting the student where they are at, rather than having the student meet the school’s standards, and makes explicit that the ultimate goal is to be accepting and supportive of the child. This is dependent on building relationships based on trust with students and parents. Hughes and More and Wilson explained that one’s identity is developed in relationship with others, communicating the importance of working as a community to help develop students’ identity and overall health. Marian noted:

Having that relationship, knowing who they are, knowing something about them, knowing perhaps who their siblings are, connecting what I know about them at home or outside of school with what we do in school. I think that's powerful so viewing them not just a[s] school students but as people that I want to get to know.

Theme Three: Leaders are key in the inclusion of children and families.

Leaders use their position to be pro-active and initiating in the development of belonging spaces. Leithwood and Louis (2012) identified that setting directions was a key component of leadership. Leaders are the cornerstone to policy creation and implementation and, through their support and active implementation, help to prioritize and create the conditions of a belonging space. Leaders are integral to the culture and climate of the school. Leech and Miller (2004), remind that leaders have a large role in creating safe environments. Further, with a focus on relationship and building collaborative teams, school leaders spearhead the drawing in of students and parents, as well as staff, as team members whose voices matter.

Sub-question 2: How do educational leaders use their role to facilitate spaces of belonging for their Aboriginal learners?

It is leaders proactive initiative that ensures the inclusion of parents and learners within the school. By supporting programs and initiatives geared to support the success of Aboriginal learners, by gaining knowledge about Aboriginal cultures, by seeking to know the child as a whole, and focusing on having positive day-to-day interactions with students and members of the whole school community, school leaders are able to establish trust and relationship.

Initiation. Ottmann (2009), and Raham (2010) highlight the important influence that school leaders have in the lives of Aboriginal students. Additionally, it is important to remember

that leaders can be teachers (Wilson, 2000), principal (Frymier-Russell, 2008), or influential members of the school no matter what their role (Frymier-Russell, 2008). In essence we are all leaders because we have the potential to influence our lives and the lives of others. As mentioned above, initiation comes from being a proactive impetus and implementer of healthy interactions and a school climate and culture conducive to belonging. Policies, programming, curricula can all support a sense of belonging. Leaders can support a sense of belonging by mingling with students and parents throughout the day by actions such as being outside first thing in the morning to greet all that enter the school grounds. School leaders can also be mindful of overt and transparent communication with students and family members, be inclusive of their voice and opinion that relate to school events, celebrations, and within issue resolution. This open style of communication is welcoming and invites students and family members to be active participants in the school environment.

Initiation is important in that it does not adopt a wait and see approach, nor does it hold the entire responsibility of child success on the shoulders of leaders. A team and community approach is taken to support development of the whole child. This approach distributes the ownership, leadership, and responsibility of problem solving, school life, events, and celebrations with the whole community, thus increasing the engagement with the community. From this perspective, the school leader is a person who has vested interest in the success of the child from a human and moral stance and beyond the responsibilities defined by a role or job requirement.

Child Before Academics. Support for this concept was found in the work of Brokenleg (2012a), Dunleavy and Milton (2009), Raham (2010), and Willms et al.(2009). When school

leaders make a student's emotional, spiritual, physical and intellectual needs the priority over academic achievement, they are sending the message that the child matters – who they are and what they need matters. The presence of the child at school does not imply that they are simply to be filled full of knowledge. Students are valued as people and as a part of the school community. Leigh commented, “So that was my a-ha moment that although our end goal is success in academics and impacting student achievement you have to do other things before you can get to that”. Calista showed support for this in the following statement:

[W]hen the first year that [child's gender pronoun] was here at the school was all, had nothing to do with academics, it was all social and emotional development and just making [child's gender pronoun] feel safe and wanted and that [child's gender pronoun] belonged here. So that's powerful to me.

Community. Speaking with regard to leadership, Robinson (2011) noted the importance of collaboration in solving complex problems, and also the need for respect demonstrated through the valuing and appreciation of the thoughts and capabilities of others. Leaders who collaborate with the school community demonstrate their desire to hear from and include others, this enables a community-minded orientation to be established. Leaders help build community by the example they set and the choices they make. By being respectful, friendly, and approachable, leaders invite others to come in, join, and be a part of the school community. This is akin to being invited to someone's home. A person may have been asked to come over, however one still knocks when they arrive. A person does not just walk into that house and make him/herself at home even though an invitation was extended. A relationship has to be developed. Through the development of relationship, school leaders enable and empower those

entering the school to feel welcomed and at home – to see the school space as having collective ownership. Leaders also do this by collaborating with students, parents, and staff. The relationship and collaborative aspects of community can really be seen as reciprocal, where everyone is supportive of strengthening the whole community. Trust is integral for belonging to be nurtured, for without trust the building of relationship may be impossible. The development of trust extends to the creation of a space and caring environments where voice is valued. Trust also opens the door for the school community solving of complex problems (Robinson, 2011).

Child as Part. Although linked to community, this is being set apart because it acknowledges that in giving the child leadership and responsibility identification with school is further increased. As Fletcher (2002) noted, “Beyond school size, the survey found that teachers who foster strong relationships with students and make them feel like valuable contributors are important in determining how students feel about school” (p. A03). This will also likely increase student engagement and thus academic success. Further, Robinson (2011) denoted three capabilities of leaders: relevant knowledge which encompassed knowing how students learn in today’s complex environments, solving complex problems in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, and having relational trust which includes respecting others by valuing their ideas. These capabilities, when enacted with students, foster both ownership and school and community engagement.

Child as a Whole. Although there is overlap between this category with other categories, I have set it apart due to its importance as distinct. Noddings (2007) acknowledges the importance of getting to know people (i.e., who they are), while Robinson (2011) recognizes the significance of taking an interest in all those who share an environment. By gaining knowledge

of the child's world and the showing of care, support, and interest, leaders facilitate belonging because they have taken the time to see the child as an individual. Their acceptance, care, support, and interest are not contingent upon anything else but the child mattering. This unconditional support may be one of the most vital things that school leaders give because they are modeling their care to students. Many of the participants in this study felt it was important to meet the child where they were at by showing care and support. They also indicated that a feeling of community helped students engage at school and that until physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual needs are met equally, academic achievement is not the top priority.

When students experience care, support and acceptance from the supportive relationship with an educational leader, it begins to develop, and this is important since, according to Marquez et al. (2007), it advances student involvement. Additionally, prior unknown abilities can become known through relationship Brendtro et al.(2010). Also of importance is Raham's (2010) point, that feeling connected to school decreases the potential of students dropping out. When school leaders give Aboriginal learners leadership and ownership of what happens in the school environment, the learners come to see the school as theirs and begin to take pride in that ownership. Much the same can be said of parental inclusion. When school begins to be perceived as not the mantle of another but rather as *ours*, the school dynamic shifts to a space where all are welcome because everyone has a stake in what happens in the school.

Knowledge of Aboriginal Culture. Raham (2010) and Ottmann (2009) stated that leaders are an integral part of the success of Aboriginal learners. As highlighted under finding two, leaders who take the time to learn about Aboriginal cultures position themselves to understand the different perspectives that are present in their school and this is an important

consideration, particularly in light of Ahnee-Benham with Napier's (2002) point that there may be dissimilarities in philosophies and perspectives related to leadership. This enhanced understanding can lead to effective communication, culturally responsive learning opportunities and assessments, positive issue resolution, and identification with Aboriginal learners and their family members.

It is important for school leaders to recognize that Aboriginal family members may not feel comfortable in the school setting either due to past experiences such as Indian Residential School experiences (direct or indirect). The discomfort that family members may feel has been noted by both Kirkness (1999) and Stirk (2003), while the past impact of Indian Residential schools was acknowledged by Elias et al. (2012), and Kirkness (1999). In considering Aboriginal perspectives educators and leaders begin to build a greater knowledge of the culture of the child, thus increasing their knowledge of the child as a whole. Additionally, this information may help educators to provide learning opportunities for students that lead to greater engagement and success. Further, conversations with the home can be more responsive to cultural norms and include an awareness of how Indian Residential School experiences may come into play with regard to parental definitions of school. Overall, school leaders are encouraged to think of perspectives and worldviews beyond their own.

Conclusion

The intent of this chapter was to elaborate on the findings of this study, which include:

1. Belonging is a holistic term involving the entire school community with particular attention being paid to the child and their world.

2. Parents are a part of the school's community and fundamental to the child's success.

3. School leaders are key in the inclusion of children and families.

The findings as elucidated help to describe, from the participants' perspectives, what constituted belonging for Aboriginal learners in elementary schools and how belonging was created and enacted in these schools. In essence belonging constitutes a child's identification with school, a caring school climate and culture, and a place where children feel cared for. Further to this, parts of the creation of belonging in schools are:

1. The importance of understanding the multi-faceted nature of belonging, this including the integration of a welcoming, inclusive, and trusted space where caring is evident;
2. The intentional meaningful engagement and inclusion of parents in decision-making processes and school life, and the acknowledgement that they are needed for student success.
3. The recognition of the critical role that leaders have in the successful creation of spaces of belonging.

Attention is now turned to conclusions and next steps, which answers the 'now what' of this research. The following questions will be answered: What can be concluded as a result of these findings and what steps could be recommended for those wishing to facilitate belonging spaces?

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to uncover and to understand what constituted belonging and how a sense of belonging is fostered for Aboriginal learners at the elementary school level. To do so, the following was asked as the primary research question: What are the perceptions of belonging for Aboriginal learners in elementary schools? Under the primary research question were the following sub-questions: What creates a sense of belonging at the elementary level for Aboriginal learners? How do educational leaders use their role to facilitate spaces of belonging for their Aboriginal learners? What do Aboriginal students say to their care-givers, teachers, and educational leaders about their school experience? The findings were as follows:

1. Belonging is a holistic term involving the entire school community with particular attention being paid to the child and their world.
2. Parents are a part of the school's community and fundamental to the child's success.
3. School leaders are key in the inclusion of children and families.

In the section herein, conclusions and recommendations relative to this purpose will be discussed. It should be noted that the conclusions outlined here are based on the perceptions of 11 participants. Readers will need to determine which aspects of what has been reported here are seen in their particular context and how they may be adapted and applied.

Conclusions

Conclusion 1: Spaces of belonging are created through enactments over time. These enactments have the building of healthy relationships and trust as core values and are embodied

in the creation of a community in the school. The community created includes all those connected to the school. In the school space people are respected for who they are and what they bring inclusive of culture. By virtue of this respect, it is accepted that the voices of all need to be heard, and that the exclusion of voice lessens the strength of the community as a whole and how it is able to successfully progress.

Conclusion one reminds us that the creation of a space of belonging is something that is complex and requires intentionality and the persistence of dedicated and caring leaders. The creation of this type of space must include the voices of all who are impacted by the space and this extends beyond the walls of the school and into the homes where students live. The complexity of the task however brings with it the reward of a community, a place where all can feel significant and valued, enabling people to be their best self in the school environment. This, in turn, increases the possibility that unengaged students will become more engaged and have increased academic success.

Conclusion 2: Parents (care-givers) of Aboriginal learners have crucial information that helps toward the success of the child. Along with this understanding was another attribute that fell under the broader theme of parental inclusion and engagement, and this was that there must be acknowledgement of Aboriginal epistemologies, ontologies, philosophies, cultures and histories in order for communication to be meaningful and effective. While assumptions about how parents feel about the school should be avoided, past experiences with school (namely Indian Residential School experiences) by some Aboriginal people should be considered as a potential barrier to a strong and interdependent relationship between the school and home. A further support to the creation of collaborative teams, trust, meaningful communication, and

comfort with the school space requires leaders to show transparent care of the child by supporting them in visible ways while at school through the avoidance of judgment and not withdrawing support based on behaviour, and beyond the boundaries of school (i.e., going to invited events).

Conclusion two speaks to respecting the care, love, and dreams that parents/care-givers have for their children. It also honours parents/care-givers as having the greatest knowledge of their child and what meets their particular needs. Further, it recognizes the importance of having parents/care-givers as part of the school community as this translates to the parent being comfortable in the school and to being able to be a contributing partner in supporting their child's growth.

Conclusion 3: School leaders provide the connective tissue between home and school and it is their actions as policy implementers and as carers of the child that bridges are built between past practice and future embodiments. With intentional initiation to support the child by being proactive (i.e., building relationship, communicating, supporting a team atmosphere), educators begin to build trust with students and their families. Educators and educational leaders are taking the first step towards developing spaces of belonging by being authentic, caring, and action-oriented in ways that are inclusive.

Conclusion three recognizes the critical role that leaders have in the creation of environments that foster a sense of belonging. This is not a to do list, rather, it is a vision-oriented mindset that encourages leaders and educators to purposefully and intentionally seek to include everyone in the conversation and enactment of the belonging space.

From the Beginning to the End

Within the literature review. Much of the findings that emerged as a result of this study was supported by the literature review and with no noted areas of contradiction. A safe and caring space that was inclusive of a welcoming and comfortable climate was supported by the British Columbia Ministry of Education (2008), Dunleavy and Milton (2009), McMurrer (2012), McRae (n.d.), Michel et al. (2005) and Ottmann (2009). Under the sub-theme of ‘feel of the space’, the importance of community was noted as a category. There is support from Michel et al. (2005), Schlossberg (1989), Thomson in Walker (2006), and Williams and Tanaka (2007) that speaks to community, acceptance and inclusion of perspectives. Further to this, the importance of developing healthy relationships was noted by Brendtro et al (2010), Brokenleg (2012a), Dunleavy and Milton (2009), Klem and Connell (2004), Marquez-Zenkov et al. (2007), Noddings (2007), Ozer et al. (2008), Parsons and Taylor (2011), Willms (2003), Willms et al. (2009), and Wilson (2000). The importance of relationship is noteworthy as it can be seen as essential to support, care, trust, establishing teams, developing community, and enabling voice. The necessity of trust was supported by Alberta Education (2007), Redburn (2009), Stirk (2003), and Wilson (2000), and the importance of relational trust was highlighted by Robinson (2011).

With regard to the inclusion of Aboriginal parents in school decision-making, the literature review contained herein carried support from Bishop (2011), Hughes and More (1997), Kirkness (1999), McRae (n.d.), Ottmann (2009), and Raham (2010).

Under both theme one and two the sub-theme of care was noted. Within this was person over role (inclusive of involvement, ownership, risk-taking, leadership, team and voice) and

visible support of the child (inclusive of knowing the child, support and care, and being valued). Person over role, in the context of this study, involves approaching stakeholders in a manner that honours and values who they are as person rather than through the responsibility of their positional role (teacher, principal, parent, child). Further, it also encompasses that stakeholders have a voice within the space, valued opinions, and responsibility within the school's operations inclusive of problem solving, relevant learning opportunities, the running of programs, and determining what constitutes belonging and how it is enacted in the school.

Within the category of person over role, the study's findings were supported by Voekl (1997) via identification with school. This finding was also supported by Wilson (2000) who posited that it is important for learners to feel like they are accepted at school and by Robinson (2011) who encouraged that a sense of student ownership be cultivated. The risk-taking within this category found support in the work of Alberta Education (2007) and Redburn (2009). The importance of having collaborative teams and enabling voice, also within this category, extended to relationship and relevancy was noted by Bishop (2011), Klem and Connell (2004), Marquez-Zenkov et al. (2007), McRae (n.d.), and Willms et al. (2009). The importance of having parents as part of the learning team was emphasized by Bishop (2011), Hughes and More (1997), Kirkness (1999), and Raham (2010). Robinson (2011) also noted the importance of establishing collaborative environments within schools. Noddings' (2007) work supported the finding of demonstrating care and value to students, and visible support of the child as a whole.

Support for knowledge of Aboriginal histories, ontologies, epistemologies and cultures points to the fundamental need for Aboriginal parental involvement and voice with regard to their child's education (Bishop, 2011; Hughes and More, 1997; Kirkness, 1999; McRae, n.d.;

Ottmann, 2009; and Raham, 2010). Elias et al. (2012) also supported the knowledge of Aboriginal histories in their work.

Leech and Miller (2004), Leithwood and Louis (2012), Ottmann (2009), and Raham (2010) acknowledge the importance for school leaders to take the lead in determining what constitutes belonging and its enactment.

In this study, the sub-theme of child before academics promotes holistic well-being – the meeting of emotional, spiritual, physical and intellectual needs. The value of connection or quality relationship is recognized by Brokenleg (2012a), Dunleavey and Milton (2009), Raham (2010), and Willms et al.(2009). Whether the connection is to others or to school events such as extra-curricular activities, connection fosters belonging in that relevancy is seen by learners in the goals of school and/or significance of the learner is conveyed.

Beyond the literature review. The importance of taking the time to create a belonging environment was a point that came through and was beyond the scope of the literature review. This facet was mentioned specifically by some participants and the setting apart of time to focus on the goal of creating an environment that fosters belonging alongside learners and their caregivers as its own category carries with it the recognition that any model or framework created must include sustained efforts over the course of time.

Although the need for communicating with parents, students, and teachers and the student learning team was identified, some participants felt that communication should be clearer and more concise. This underscores the necessity to consider the most effective, meaningful way to convey ideas and information and highlights the importance of using language that is recognized by each stakeholder.

Findings did emerge that were not mentioned in the literature. Giving the student leadership opportunities and the opportunity to participate in dialogue that impact their learning environment (under category person over role) goes beyond what was noted in the literature with regard to participation (i.e., extra-curricular, doing homework, being ready for class, and punctuality [Willms, 2003; Dunleavey and Milton, 2009]). Another example fell under the sub-theme of care. Knowing the child as a whole (including knowledge of who their care-givers and siblings are) and, more specifically, supporting them in events outside the boundaries of school was seen to be invaluable to both relationship building with the child and their family. It was noted by some participants that it was important to use the knowledge of the child's "outside world" to build upon learning opportunities in the classroom.

Further, while aspects of person over role were noted in the literature review relative to ownership, involvement, and risk-taking, all the participants felt it was important for educators to interact with students, parents, and care-givers on person to person levels to come to know each other as individuals before focusing on matters associated with schooling.

Looking ahead. There are opportunities for both professional development and a framework that enhances belonging to be applied as a result of this study. Following are some professional development possibilities and a potential framework for the enhancement of belonging that could be applied in schools that wish to further extend the belonging environment.

Professional Development. Given the results found within this study, I am proposing professional development opportunities that include seminars on the Aboriginal ontologies, epistemologies and histories that include the intergenerational impacts of Indian Residential Schooling. To gain this important knowledge, it essential that Aboriginal community members

guide this process and that they share authentic knowledge and understanding relative to their particular cultures (their practices, protocols, knowledge acquisition and assessment practices). For this professional development, I would suggest leaving the school site and going out to learn and to experience within the Aboriginal community. Additionally, mini conferences on belonging and Aboriginal learners (that is inclusive of concepts such as safe and caring spaces and meaningful communication) should be considered when planning professional development opportunities.



Figure 3: Professional Development Framework

Belonging Enhancement Framework. Conversation, Collaboration, Implementation with Revision and Feedback Model Framework. This belonging enhancement framework is an open process as all the stakeholders will determine how it unfolds. School leaders will need to be flexible with time and be prepared to meet outside of the school and/or its buildings with

community members. This belonging enhancement implementation model would occur in two phases with the first phase possibly taking up to eight weeks.

Phase One: Invite Aboriginal family members to a series of conversation events which will seek to understand what constitutes belonging from their perspective and, once this is determined, how belonging will unfold in the school. These can be translated to goals. The number of goals should be kept to a minimum and a draft timeline of goal attainment should be created.

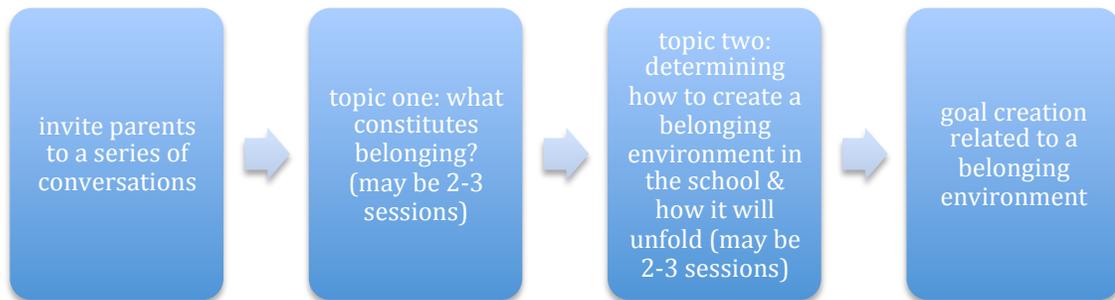


Figure 4: Phase One of the Belonging Enhancement Model Framework

Phase Two: Co-create with staff, parents, and students a plan for approximately a six to eight week time span that would seek to take steps towards attaining goals that came to light as a result of phase one. At the end of the time period, hold meetings to evaluate progress and create next steps and/or new goals. This process should be repeated over the course of the year.

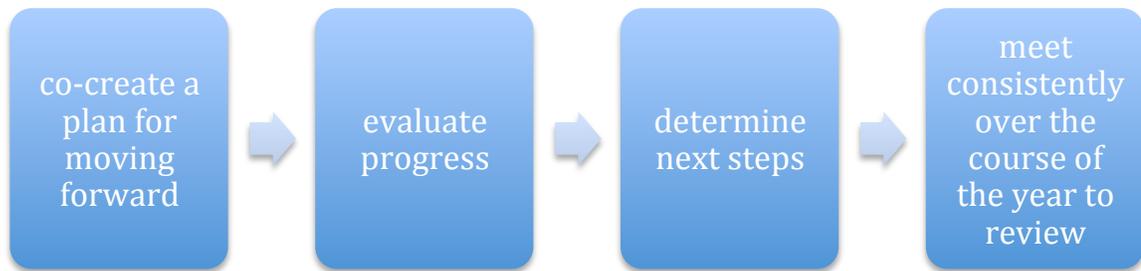


Figure 5: Phase Two Belonging Enhancement Model Framework

I would also recommend that this process be tracked through an action research study, preferably a longitudinal study, as the iterative nature of this framework model lends itself to contexts that include implementation.

Limitations: Challenges of this research with others

The following are limitations of this study:

1. The study provided only the viewpoints of those who wished (or were available) to participate in the study.
2. Only those participants whom Aboriginal students/children spoke to regarding their school experience(s) would be able to respond with examples to the question(s) relating to the research topic.
3. Most participants are believed to have been of non-Aboriginal descent.
4. Two schools within one school district in one province was studied.

Delimitation

The research sought to explore how spaces of belonging are created for Aboriginal learners only and from a strengths-based perspective of what has shown success.

Recommendations

The recommendations that follow fall into three categories: recommendations for further research, recommendations for schools and school districts, and recommendations for school based leaders.

Recommendations for further research. A focus group of the Aboriginal Education Advisory Council members and any Aboriginal parent group should be conducted to further learn what creates spaces of belonging for Aboriginal learners in elementary schools.

- A similar interview and document analysis process be conducted with other schools in the district for the purpose of comparing the findings of each study to see if the findings of this study are experienced more broadly across the district.
- A similar interview and document analysis process be conducted with other districts so the findings from that study can be compared to the findings from this study to see if the findings from this study are seen more broadly across districts.

Recommendations for schools and school districts. Apply the resources of time and personnel with the specific goal of creating a belonging environment.

- Connect with the Aboriginal elementary school parent population present in the district to enlist their support and participation in the design of a framework that can be expanded based upon school specific contexts and that addresses the issue of belonging in elementary schools.

Recommendations for school based leaders. Apply and/or advocate for the resources of time and personnel with the specific goal of creating a belonging environment.

- Connect with the Aboriginal elementary school parent and student population present in the school to enlist their support and participation in the completion of the above noted framework that addresses the issue of belonging in a particular elementary school.
- Wherever possible, include students in decision-making and with responsibility to help run school programs. Increase student ownership, leadership, and opportunities for responsibility. Rather than the bestowing of responsibilities, students should have a say in which extra responsibilities they will take on.

Conclusion

The preceding chapter has noted the conclusions derived from this study. These being: spaces of belonging are created through enactments over time; parents (care-givers) of Aboriginal learners have crucial information that supports the success of the child; and, school leaders provide the connective tissue between home and school, and it is their actions as policy implementers and as carers of the child that builds bridges between past practice and future embodiments. Following this was an examination of the correlations between the research findings and the literature review found in Chapter Two. Next, provision of a professional development model and belonging enhancement framework were included. Limitations, delimitations, and recommendations provided the concluding sections of this chapter.

CONCLUSION

My experience over these past months has been a journey toward greater understanding. It began with wanting to make more of a difference for Aboriginal learners. The divergence between the graduation rates of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal learners concerned me, however, this was not something I had always recognized. Some years ago though, a person helped increase my awareness. This gave me pause and a great deal to think about. Fundamentally I just felt, and still feel, that everybody deserves the chance to live a happy life, one that the person considers to be of value. Education provides an avenue toward this...if you graduate. Thus, my journey began.

I have had more than one person question why I am focusing on Aboriginal learners in particular. For me, the differences in graduation rates are explanation enough. There is no way that on the first day of school, in the first half hour, a person should be able to go into a kindergarten class and point to any demographic of learners and say “Hmmm, you, you, and you have less chance of graduating than the other students in this room”. I find it unacceptable that this could be the case. Others have stated to me that this research is timely since there is a renewed focus being placed on Aboriginal learner success (see Auditor General of British Columbia’s report, 2015), however this was not what motivated me. I am motivated by the simple desire to make a positive difference. I do not want to see children ‘sentenced’ to twelve years of school where they are uncomfortable and with learning opportunities negatively impacted. At the end of the day, this is my incentive – to help students feel that they belong while in school. Further, it is critical to me that it is understood that this goes beyond the

meeting of goals. It is about leading and living the life one wishes, thus having life satisfaction, contentment, and leading the life one values.

In further thinking about my journey of learning over the course of this study, I am also humbled. The participants gave so freely their time and insight. The passion, dedication, and care that came through during the interviews with participants was palpable in our time together. It became evident in certain interviews that it was very important that the participants be known first as a person who cared about the child and their success over and above the particular positional role that they occupied (teacher, administrator) and any implied obligations related to the position. There was such strong commitment and caring.

The beauty of doing a study while in a position to begin to apply what I have learned really is a privilege. As I interviewed, transcribed, collated data, and saw patterns begin to emerge, I found myself making shifts in my professional life. I also recognized that what I was already doing as an educator and leader was congruent with my research findings. I became more aware of the little things. I had always made a point of knowing the students' names and saying hello to them in the hallway, congratulating them on an award or on their figure skating performance, but now I knew just how important that moment was. I now realized that while my study had reaffirmed certain beliefs about belonging, such as the importance of caring, relationship, and a supportive culture and climate, it also made me really consider 'person over role' and understand that it is not just about helping one feel accepted. 'Person over role' is also about going beyond receiving and taking the learner in. It is as equally about meeting the student where they are in their world as it is about inclusion in the world of school. Because of this research process I began to be more conscious of the ways I interacted with students and began

to be more intentional when I made decisions. Instead of doing things in the moment and when an opportunity arose, I now began to deliberately create moments that fostered quality relationship and spaces of belonging. I planned for them as well as responded when the opportunity arose. This was not the only change I noticed in myself as a result of this research on belonging. I think another part of my transformation was coming to really see and view myself as a leader who can consciously make a difference, in a meta-cognitive way. I also began to see myself as a researcher, beyond the role of an educator, who was trying to be their best self in their professional environment. This was an interesting shift because while I knew I often critically analyzed information and sought to understand phenomenon, I was now doing so with stated intention and with a plan that included contributing to a body of knowledge through dissemination of what was learned.

Being an educator is not easy, it has rewards and a tricky side. This being said, I feel both a sense of contentment and one of urgency. I like that I know more about the concept and practice of belonging for Aboriginal students, and that I can use that knowledge and, at the same time, I know that I need to continue to work hard and share what I have learned. Of note to me is that while one of my intentions has stayed the same, that being to make a positive difference, others have also arisen. These being: to deliberately plan for moments and times to build belonging, to know and live the belief that we can all be leaders, and lastly to apply a research framework to continue to build my understanding while also adding to the research base on this topic.

When people ask me what my research is about I usually respond that it is analogous to wearing pants that are too tight. This often causes smiles and, at times, a little confusion. I ask

them if they have ever worn pants that are too tight. The frequent response is yes. I then ask them what then are they thinking about all day? I go on to share that my guess is that they just want to get home to where it is comfortable. I articulate how being distracted through being uncomfortable inhibits a person's ability to be fully present, to be their best self and that such is the case for some Aboriginal learners. By not feeling as though they belong, it is difficult to be engaged. This disruption from engagement then inhibits success. I also point out that when we do not pay attention to belonging we are essentially sentencing a child to twelve years in a space where they are not comfortable. I would not want that for myself or for others. I have come up with an image regarding belonging and its impact. It is a balloon. If a student feels as though they belong then the balloon blows up a bit. This belonging then leads to engagement and the balloon grows. The balloon inflates more as success is built. From there, the opportunity to live a life one values further inflates the balloon. The future of the student is then embodied in the full balloon as this is now their world opportunities.

It is hoped that readers of this research can apply it to their own contexts and in such a way that spaces of belonging are ensured for Aboriginal learners and their families. As I have learned over the period of this study, I have tried to implement what I have learned because at the end of the day schools must be spaces of safety, care, comfort, and joy. If one does not feel valued, how can one bring who they truly are and the best version of who they are to an environment? I am grateful for what I have learned and want to make a difference. I believe I can make a difference, as can others. Those who wish to enact positive change should strive to do everything in their power to do so. It is greatly hoped that readers of this research can use what I was privileged to learn as a place to move forward. I thank those who have been so

generous with their wisdom as, due to their generosity, more is now known about the importance of creating and sustaining spaces of belonging in our schools so that Aboriginal students can move from struggling to not only surviving but thriving. Based on this study, I have come to define belonging as:

The integration of: a child's identification with school, a positive and caring school climate and culture, and a place where children feel significant and valued.

This definition is in keeping with the definition first noted in chapter one of this document, that being: a space where individuals feel that they are a part of a community and see both themselves and their values reflected in that community and of being of value. It is knowing that you are accepted for whom you are and that you have a valued voice in the environment where you are situated (Noddings, 2007). The most significant thing that school educators and leaders can do for Aboriginal students is to involve, listen, care about them without condition, and focus on a strong relationship of significance. The 'so what' that emerged from the study are the professional development considerations and the belonging enhancement model framework described above. These actions build essential knowledge about the Aboriginal community and their children, and behave leaders to go beyond the boundaries of school to seek out understanding and knowledge that they can then bring back to their schools in order to ensure Aboriginal learners feel a sense of belonging. Further, they are about ongoing, participatory acts designed to build collaborative teams, healthy relationships, and strong communities.

This study sought to develop insight into addressing issues of belonging so that all students have the freedom to live the life of their choosing. Through an understanding of what facilitates belonging for Aboriginal elementary school learners within the context of capability

building and the support of strong and caring educational leadership, we can begin to ensure continued development of school environments that support Aboriginal learners and thus have a greater impact on both their present school experience and their future chances to have the life they aspire to.

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Appendix I

Residential Schools

The Path

Residential schools emerged out of a desire to colonialize Aboriginal people (Rand, 2011). According to Rand (2011), the act of colonization is rooted in a worldview that one's culture is better than another. Based on examples set in other countries (Morrissette, 1994; Rand, 2011), Canadian authorities removed Aboriginal people from their traditional land and put policies in place to enact assimilation (Aboriginal Healing Foundation/Legacy of Hope Foundation, 2009; Bull, as cited in Morrissette, 1994; Enns, as cited in Rand, 2011). In order to curb the cost of this endeavor, churches, who also held interest in assimilation but for religious reasons, were put in charge of running residential schools (Morrissette, 1994; Rand, 2011), thus both the Canadian government and churches of the day exerted power over not only Aboriginal adults but their children too (Elias et al., 2012; Rand, 2011). Once within the boundaries of residential schools, children were separated from the adults they had known in their community, friends, and family members (Rand, 2011). Continuing on the path to assimilation, the speaking of any Aboriginal language was forbidden thus further increasing the gap between who the child was, where they came from, and who they were culturally meant to be (Aboriginal Healing Foundation/Legacy of Hope Foundation, 2009; Elias et al., 2012; Morrissette, 1994; Rand, 2011).

Phases of residential school.

Citing the Assembly of First Nations (2004), Rand (2011) articulates three phases that residential schools went through. The first was comprised of a multi-pronged approach:

assimilation, converting to the religion of the church, and the preparation of children as workers but in the lower sectors of economic strata (Rand, 2011). Phase two was focused on an inside-out approach. Students were prepared for going back home along with their training and new language with the idea that this would initiate change from inside of the Aboriginal community (Rand, 2011). The last phase looked towards integration of Aboriginal children into the dominant culture by reflecting the education found in mainstream schools of the day (Rand, 2011).

Another aspect.

Difficult to discuss, but integral to this discussion, is another reality of residential schools. There were incidents of abuse of Aboriginal children within the walls of residential schools (Aboriginal Healing Foundation/Legacy of Hope Foundation, 2009; Rand, 2011; Morrissette, 1994). The forms of abuse were physical, emotional, sexual, and spiritual (Rand, 2011). It was some of those charged with the care of the children that crossed this terrible line (Rand, 2011).

Appendix II

Interview Questions

Parent/Grandparents/Aboriginal Advisory Council Members Interview Questions:

1. Who do you see as the leaders in the school?
2. What makes these people stand out as leaders to you?
3. What does belonging mean to you?
4. What do the leaders in this school do that helps your child feel as though they belong?
5. What do people other than the leaders you've mentioned do to help your child feel like they belong?
6. How does the school's written communication and documentation (such as newsletters, report cards, and notes home) show you that your child belongs?
7. How is your child celebrated at school?
8. What does(do) your child(ren) share with you about their school experience?
9. What does your child enjoy at school? What about that do they enjoy?
10. Can you tell me about a powerful moment that your child experienced at school?

Principal/Past-Principal(s)/Director of Instruction and Vice Principal of Aboriginal Education Interview Questions:

1. What does belonging mean to you?
2. What specifically do you consider when you are supporting a belonging environment?
3. What considerations do you include specific to your Aboriginal population?
4. What structures or policies have you put in place to enable Aboriginal students to feel a part of this school's community?
5. How do you know when you have made the right decision about how to include the Aboriginal population of this school?
6. What do you consider in your written or visual communications?
7. What do Aboriginal students share with you about their school experience?
8. Please share a story of success or a powerful 'a-ha' moment with me.

Coach Mentor Teacher/Classroom Teacher Interview Questions:

1. In what ways do you build a relationship with your Aboriginal learners?
2. In what ways do you build a relationship with the families of your Aboriginal learners?
3. What have you noticed that seems to really make a difference for your Aboriginal learners especially with regard to belonging?
4. What do you think about before you connect with Aboriginal families in writing? In person?
5. What does belonging mean to you?
6. How do you know when you've achieved an example of belonging?
7. What do Aboriginal students share with you about their school experience?
8. Please share a story of success or a powerful a-ha moment with me.

Appendix III

Triangulation Matrix

The primary research question is: What are the perceptions of belonging for Aboriginal learners in elementary schools?

Sub-question: What creates a sense of belonging at the elementary level for Aboriginal learners?

Interviews with Principal/Past-Principal(s)/Director of Instruction and Vice Principal of Aboriginal Education

What specifically do you consider when you are supporting a belonging environment?

What considerations do you include specific to your Aboriginal population?

What structures or policies have you put in place to enable Aboriginal students to feel a part of this school's community?

How do you know when you have made the right decision about how to include the Aboriginal population of this school?

What do you consider in your written or visual communications?

FOCAL QUESTIONS (does not preclude other sources of information from other responses)

Interviews with parents/caregivers/Advisory Council Members:

What do the leaders in this school do that helps your child feel as though they belong?

What do people other than the leaders you've mentioned do to help your child feel like they belong?

How does the school's written communication and documentation (such as newsletters, report cards, and notes home) show you that your child belongs?

How is your child celebrated at school?

FOCAL QUESTIONS (does not preclude other sources of information from other responses)

Interviews with Aboriginal Support and Classroom teachers In what ways do you build a relationship with your Aboriginal learners?

In what ways do you build a relationship with the families of your Aboriginal learners?

What have you noticed that seems to really make a difference for your Aboriginal learners especially with regard to belonging?

What do you think about before you connect with family in writing? In person?

How do you know when you've achieved an example of belonging?

FOCAL QUESTIONS (does not preclude other sources of information from other responses)

Documents from school district personnel

Documents from parents/caregivers

How do educational leaders use their role to facilitate spaces of belonging for their Aboriginal learners?

Interviews with Principal/Past-Principal(s)/Director of Instruction and Vice Principal of Aboriginal Education

What structures or policies have you put in place to enable Aboriginal students to feel a part of this school's community?

FOCAL QUESTION (does not preclude other sources of information from other responses)

Interviews with parents/caregivers/Advisory Council Members

What do the leaders in this school do that helps your child feel as though they belong?

FOCAL QUESTIONS (does not preclude other sources of information from other responses)

Interviews with Aboriginal Support and Classroom teachers

In what ways do you build a relationship with your Aboriginal learners?

In what ways do you build a relationship with the families of your Aboriginal learners?

FOCAL QUESTION (does not preclude other sources of information from other responses)

Documents from school district personnel

Documents from parents/caregivers

What do Aboriginal students say to their care-givers, teachers, and educational leaders about their school experience?

Interviews with Principal/Past-Principal(s)/Director of Instruction and Vice Principal of Aboriginal Education

What do Aboriginal students share with you about their school experience?

Please share a story of success or a powerful 'a-ha' moment with me.

Interviews with parents/caregivers/Advisory Council Members

What does(do) your child(ren) share with you about their school experience?

What does your child enjoy at school? What about that do they enjoy?

Can you tell me about a powerful moment that your child experienced at school?

Interviews with Aboriginal Support and Classroom teachers

What do Aboriginal students share with you about their school experience?

Please share a story of success or a powerful a-ha moment with me.