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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

How Schools Can Impact Student Retention Among First Nations Students Leading to Higher Graduation Rates?

by

Clarice Beebe

A DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This study examines how schools can impact student retention among First Nations students and bring about higher graduation rates. The perceptions and perspectives of eight high school students were examined to discover how effective schools were in helping them succeed academically. First Nations student graduation rates are statistically low across Canada. In 1996, Statistics Canada revealed that 60 percent of First Nations on-reserve residents aged 20 – 24 had not completed high school or obtained an alternative diploma or certificate (Mendelson, 2008). The 2006 Census results that were released 10 years later reported no change in the data on high school completion among First Nations youth.

The researcher conducted a qualitative study in 2011 in order to acquire the perspectives and perceptions of the participants regarding their high school experiences. The study sought to identify what factors in the school positively influenced them and at the same time what barriers they encountered and how the school addressed these. Internal structures such as school leadership, teachers, support staff, and school programming were important factors in the academic success of these students.

Significantly, this study found that educational attainment among students is dependent upon effective school structures such as school leadership, teachers, and school programs that make quality schools. School structures must be responsive to the diversity of the student population. In the case of First Nations or Aboriginal students, most schools clearly made a concerted effort to recognize student diversity. Also important is that schools must

be prepared to meet this challenge by planning for and implementing appropriate structures that support Aboriginal students as they work towards completing high school.

Important issues such as racism and discrimination were evident in several of the schools. The outcome of this research provides recommendations and conclusions to further student retention for the Aboriginal or First Nations student population.

Without effective school structures in place students may find an opportunity to leave school. Research shows students leave school for various reasons, including socioeconomic conditions, student disengagement, racial discrimination, in addition to teacher and school ineffectiveness or a, lack of sufficient family support and resources. Research must collect data on schools that are effective in retaining students until they complete high school to find out what they are doing that is making an impact.

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My appreciation goes to the Native Center at the University of Calgary, with special thanks to Cate Hanington and Cheryl Chagnon-Grey Eyes for their assistance during my research.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my seven grandchildren,

Keith, Theoren, Hanna, Kimberly, Alexandra, Georgie, and Robyn Beebe

whom I love and cherish

I encourage you to strive for a good education

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT…… ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS…… iv
DEDICATION…… vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS…… vii

1. Chapter 1: Introduction…… 1

1.1 Background…… 1
1.2 Background of the Issue…….. 6
1.3 Statement of the Problem……. 7
1.4 The Purpose of the Study……. 9
1.5 Research Questions…….. 9
1.6 Research Design…… 10

2. Chapter 2: Literature Review…….. 12

2.1 Demographics of First Nations in Canada…….. 12
2.2 Educational History of First Nations in Canada……. 14
2.3 Current State of First Nations in Canada…… 17
2.4 Understanding the Achievement Gap……. 26
2.5 Effective Schools…… 30
2.6 The Importance of Effective Leadership…… 35
2.7 Types of Leadership…….. 37
2.7.1 Instructional Leadership…… 38
2.7.2 Transformational Leadership…… 42
2.7.3 Distributed Leadership……. 43
2.8 Similarities and Differences among Leadership Practices 45
2.9 Social Justice in Education…… 47
2.10 Social Justice and School Leadership……..... 49
2.10 Summary…….. 50

3. Chapter 3: Methodology…… 52

3.1 Introduction…… 52
3.2 Definition of Terms…… 53
3.3 Site……. 54
3.4 Sample…… 55
3.5 Access and Sample Selection…… 55
3.6 Selection of Participants…… 56
3.7 Data Sources…….. 57
3.8 Data Collection & Analysis…… 58
3.9 Trustworthiness…….. 60

3.10 Ethical Concerns…… 61
3.11 Limitations……. 61
3.12 Conclusion……. 62

4. Chapter 4: Findings…… 63

4.1 Introduction…… 63
4.2 The Sample……. 63
4.3 Data Sources and Procedures……. 64
4.4 Individual Interviews……. 65
4.5 Research Questions…… 65
4.6 Profiles of the Participants……. 66
4.7 Site of the Study…… 67
4.8 Table 1: Participants…… 68
4.9 Table 2: Participants Families and Communities……. 69
4.10 Marcia's Story…… 69
4.11 Janine's Story……. 71
4.12 Pam's Story…… 71
4.13 Denise's Story…… 72
4.14 Cora's Story……... 73
4.15 Ron's Story…… 74
4.16 Kyla's Story…… 74
4.17 Greta's Story……... 75
4.18 Question Analysis…… 75
4.18.1 Subsidiary Question #1…….. 75
4.18.2 Subsidiary Question #2…….. 79
4.18.3 Subsidiary Question #3……... 83
4.18.4 Subsidiary Question #4…….. 85
4.18.5 Subsidiary Question #5…….. 90
4.19 Summary…….. 97

5. Chapter 5: Discussion and Interpretation…… 98

5.1 Summary of Findings…… 98
5.1.1 Teacher Quality…… 99
5.1.2 Supports in the School……. 100
5.1.3 Establishing a Sense of Belonging…….. 102
5.1.4 Leadership Focus…… 105
5.1.5 Family Backgrounds…….. 106
5.2 Interpretation of Findings…… 110
5.2.1 The Importance of School Leadership……. 113
5.3 Context of Findings…… 115
5.4 Implications of Findings……. 118
5.4.1 Social Justice in Education…….. 118
5.4.2 Effective School Leadership…… 119

5.5 Elimination of Barriers…….. 121
5.6 Limitations of Study…… 122
5.7 Future Directions…… 122
5.8 Highlights of Research…… 124
5.9 Conclusion……... 128

REFERENCES…… 129

Appendix A: Professional Profile of Researcher…… 142

Appendix B: Call for Participants…… 146

Appendix C: Questionnaire…… 147

Appendix D: Student Consent Form…….. 148

Appendix E: Interviews Questions…… 150

Excerpts of Interview Transcripts……. 151

List of Tables

Table 4.8 Participants…… 68
Table 4.9 Participants Families and Communities……. 69

CHAPTER 1

1.1 Introduction

The researcher of this study has been an educator in various capacities for the past 26 years in a First Nations community (See Appendix A). She has a vested interest in the education of First Nations students. Working in a First Nations education school authority as a teacher, school administrator, and program administrator she sees the need for more research in First Nations education in Canada. Ultimately, this research study will help create an understanding among educators, government, policy makers, researchers and parents about the important role of effective structures in schools. The examination of the structures within the school such as leadership, teacher quality, and school programming aims to further the understanding of how influential they are to student success.

In 2010-2011 there were 15,811 First Nations students attending K-12 schools in Alberta. Of these students, 9,012 were attending on-reserve schools and 6,521 were attending off-reserve schools. There were 210 students attending private schools and 68 students were attending federal schools (Aboriginal Affairs & Northern Development Canada, 2013). Structures currently in place in some of these schools do not serve First Nations students well and, as a result, some students choose to leave school because of the difficulties that they may encounter.

The history of First Nations education in Canada for the most part has a poor reputation. Presently, there is a huge emphasis on the low educational attainment of First Nations students in comparison to the mainstream population. The researcher agrees that more needs to be done to reduce this gap. However, educators and government must

become proactive in addressing what is currently happening in First Nations education and be able to provide some solutions to this problem through effective research. Educators, school leaders, government, and those who have a direct relationship with First Nations students need to look at better ways of serving these students.

Research plays a vital role in the implementation of best practices. As a result, the researcher took on this study with the intent of discovering from students themselves what factors in the school setting were influential in their academic success. Aside from parental and community influences there are many factors involved in academic success for high school students, quality and effective teachers, school leadership, student achievement, and community-school relations. In this study the researcher had decided to focus specifically on structures within the schools because she believes that these areas have a tremendous impact on student academic success.

Research in Aboriginal education in Canada is limited to a few research studies focusing specifically on the K-12 education of First Nations students. This research helps identify how pivotal school structures are to the academic attainment of First Nations students. The results of this research study will contribute to the pool of knowledge needed to improve the educational opportunities of First Nations students across Canada. Research studies are needed to understand why these students are not attaining the goal of high school completion.

First Nations people are a distinct group of people in Canada who have historical roots rich in language, history, and culture. Today their educational experiences as a collective group of people in Canada have not served them well, as is evident through the

recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission report (Castellano, Archibald, & DeGagne, 2008). Educating First Nations students is both a provincial and federal responsibility, depending on where the students reside; however, this study focuses specifically on provincial schools.

Research will help educators, parents, students, government, and agencies understand the underlying causes of low educational attainment. There are many factors involved in students leaving school, and there is no single definitive answer to the problem. A proactive approach to dealing with this issue will ultimately bring forth new and better approaches to improving First Nations education. Evidence-based programs can then be directed to the needs of First Nations students.

In recent years there has been increased emphasis on the reasons why First Nations students in Canada lag behind mainstream society in high school completion rates. This is supported by statistical reports that show that First Nations students lag behind the rest of Canadians in high school completion. For example, according to a recent report the largest Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal gaps exist among North American Indians living on-reserve in Canada, and among Inuit. For both groups, the high-school completion rate is less than 40 percent when compared to the mainstream population which stands at approximately 87 percent (Richards, Hove, & Alfolabi, 2008). The Census results in 1996 show that Aboriginal people have surpassed the one million population mark. *This population is growing fast with 60 percent identified as First Nations. In Canada the Aboriginal population consists of Metis, Inuit, and First Nations.*

The opportunities for educational attainment of First Nations students as compared to the mainstream population have not led to similar outcomes in terms of high school completion rates (Carr-Stewart, 2006). Over the past two decades the government and school authorities have strived to find ways of improving student outcomes among First Nations or the Aboriginal population in Canada. Alberta Education, for instance, has implemented the First Nations, Metis, and Inuit framework (FNMI) as an attempt to improve educational outcomes. Similar government initiatives are evident across all provincial jurisdictions (Alberta Education, 2002). Recent government reform efforts have focused specifically on First Nations education since these students lag considerably in high school completion rates.

Most recently, the federal government has mandated a First Nations Education Act that is slated for completion in September, 2014. The implementation was to consist of two key stages: the first was between December, 2012 and April, 2013 with consultations between the federal government and First Nations to begin designing the education act. First Nation parents, educators, leaders and others were invited to participate in regional consultations during the initial phase. The final phase will see, the draft legislation shared with all First Nations communities, and provincial governments (Aboriginal Affairs & Northern Development Canada, 2012).

At a recent Western Canadian First Nation Administrators Education Symposium a panel that included four Aboriginal Affairs Regional Directors from Saskatchewan, Alberta, Manitoba, and British Columbia presented their government initiatives on education. All directors gave an overview of First Nations Education in their provinces.

British Columbia was the only province that gave some promising statistics on high school completion rates. Their off-reserve high school completion rates have increased to 56%, an increase of 14% in the last 10 years. They have implemented some innovative partnership projects with education jurisdictions in their province that see a new funding arrangement for First Nations schools (9th Annual Western Canadian First Nations Administrators Education Symposium, 2013).

Schools have an important role to play in changing or working towards improving the achievement rates for First Nations students. Throughout the research literature, school leadership is linked to positive student outcomes. School leadership is pivotal in ensuring that schools promote equitable opportunity for all students. Public schools that serve a large First Nations population must ensure that adequate school leadership is in place. Leaders who are knowledgeable and skilled in implementing effective programming that will benefit all students, including First Nations will help in retaining students. School leadership must be understanding and sensitive to First Nations people by having a good understanding of their background. School leadership must demonstrate that they can work collectively towards high school completion for First Nations students.

According to Deer (2009) educational problems stems from the oppression that First Nations people experience today. For over a century, the Canadian government has controlled and set the parameters of formal education for First Nations students with little input from parents or First Nations' communities (Carr-Stewart, 2006). Aboriginal youth and the general population have felt that "the quality of education on-reserve is poor compared to the general population," Since the beginning, on-reserve education delivery

has been the responsibility of church officials and, government. Most recently the process became known as the *Indian Control of Education* which essentially means that Indian Reserves control the delivery of education with the federal government overseeing the funding (Mendelson, 2008).

There are long-term effects faced by individuals who fail to complete high school and move away from post-secondary education to enter the job force. According to recent research, the negative repercussions resulting from non-completion of high school is felt in the social and civic fabric of Canada. Students who do not complete high school cost the Canadian government substantially in health care, social assistance, crime, labor and unemployment. This research states that if there was a one-percent increase in graduates in 2008 it would save the government an estimated $7.7 billion (Hankivsky, 2008).

1.2 Background of the Issue

There has been a growing concern in Canada regarding the educational success of Aboriginal students. The number of First Nations youth is growing at a substantial rate according to Census Canada (2006), with the population increasing by 29 percent over a ten-year period between 1996-2006. Most of this population is young with a median age of 23 years in the province of Alberta. These data also confirm that projections show this population is growing. As a result much work is being done on trying to remedy the problem to improve high school graduation rates.

According to Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (2005), on-reserve students have shown no improvement in high school graduation since 1996. This report goes on to show that “many students who are normally resident on reserve must take up temporary

residency off-reserve to go to high school. They are still classified as students residing on reserve" (Mendelson, 2008, p.19). As a result students who attend provincial schools and are classified as First Nations comprise the statistical data showing high school completion rates.

According to Sheila Carr-Stewart (2006), educational opportunities on-reserve as compared to the off-reserve are not equitable. The federal government has relied solely on the Indian Act to shape the delivery of education. The Indian Act does not specify how the education of First Nations students should be carried out. Basically, it states that First Nations people are to be educated (Carr-Stewart, 2006). Missionaries who operated out of the residential schools delivered on-reserve education during the 19th and 20th centuries. The Government of Canada relied on the missionaries to administer the education as they saw fit. This resulted in an education program that was geared to assimilating Aboriginal children by removing from their families for extended periods of time. This resulted in low educational attainment for students over the years. In the 1970s, the Band Chiefs of Alberta lobbied the Canadian Government over the low educational attainment of First Nations students and presented a document to the Prime Minister stating that their people had the lowest education of any group in Canada (Carr- Stewart, 2006).

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Although First Nations graduation rates have come to the forefront of many government and education initiatives in recent years, the problem continues to exist. Research in Canada on First Nations education is lacking. Few research studies have been done over the years and this has resulted in little progress being made in trying to remedy

the problem. Governments continue to dictate what needs to happen in First Nations education in terms of programs and funding. Most recently in 2012 the federal government proposed a First Nations Education Act that has been legislated (Aboriginal Affairs, 2012). The administration and delivery of education for First Nations continues to fall under the jurisdiction of the federal government.

The First Nations Education Act is just one of the recommendations recently made by the National Panel on Elementary and Secondary Education for students living on reserve (Haldane, Lafond, & Krause, 2012). These recommendations have been legislated in 2012 by the government of Canada and are currently ready for development and implementation beginning in early 2013 (Aboriginal Affairs, 2012). The National Panel was launched in 2011 with a number of panel discussions and meetings held across Canada and arrived at the following recommendations:

1. Development of a First Nations Education Act scheduled for implementation in 2014.
2. The creation of a National Commission on First Nations education.
3. The establishment of First Nations Educational Organizations.
4. Accountability and Reporting Framework.

While some progress in the improvement and quality of education for First Nations has occurred, it is clear that much remains to be done (Kirkness, 1999). According to Kirkness, the answer lies within the people themselves. The future is of great importance as First Nations must collectively work towards a solution in the improvement of education attainment among their people. First Nations people should be involved in school jurisdictions that serve their student population. First Nations people should be involved in

school leadership, teaching, and school board representation. Their input is critical and it must happen soon in order for effective change to take place.

Ultimately, this study aims to foster an understanding among educators and governments as to why some First Nations students are successful in completing high school. This study shows what can be done through the implementation of effective school structures to retain First Nations students and eventually graduate them from high school.

1.4 The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to find out what factors or influences in the school setting may influence student retention leading to increased high school completion rates for First Nations students. A qualitative case study of First Nations participants shows how school leadership is pivotal in promoting school success for First Nations students. How can teachers make a difference with First Nations students in the classroom? How can effective school programming influence students to complete high school?

The focus of the case study will be on a select group of successful high school students who at the time of the study were enrolled in post-secondary studies. These students may have attended off-reserve or on-reserve high schools. The selection of the participants will be based on their successful completion of high school. A search for prospective students focused on a post-secondary institution where participants were enrolled in full-time studies.

1.5 Research Questions

The central question of this study is:

What are First Nations students' perceptions and perspectives regarding the factors that have influenced their educational success in schools? The subsidiary questions are:

1. How influential was the school principal in their academic success?
2. How influential were teachers in their academic success?
3. How influential was school programming in their academic success?
4. What are the barriers in schools that participants' experienced and how can these barriers be addressed?

1.6 Research Design

The research method and procedures for this study are explained in Chapter Three. This section is provided as an overview.

This study used semi-structured interviews in order to acquire the necessary data. Eight participants were chosen to take part in the interviews. A call for participants was made to prospective students at a highly recognized post-secondary institution. Interested participants were required to submit an application in order to determine eligibility. They were asked when they graduated from high school, their age, what First Nations group they belong to, and whether they were registered as a full-time student in a post-secondary program. Participants were chosen based on whether they completed high school two years prior to the study.

Participants were asked to address the following points during the interview:

1. Please introduce yourself by giving me a background of yourself.

2. Describe your parents, family, and community.
3. I'd like you to think back to your high school experience, what was it that kept you in school aside from your family?
4. How was the school instrumental in keeping you in school?
5. Describe a teacher that has made a difference.
6. Was the school principal instrumental in keeping you in school? How?
7. Describe barriers that you have had to overcome during your time at school.
8. How did you overcome these barriers?

Interviews were conducted at the post-secondary institutions that the participants attended.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants lasting up to two hours. Additional information, if required, was done separately by phone and email. Participants were assured that the process was fully confidential and pseudonyms were used to protect their identity.

All interviews were audio-taped and the data collected was transcribed in order to develop themes and categories.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

2.1 Demographics of First Nations in Canada

The Aboriginal population which consists of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit comprises approximately 4% of the Canadian population and has surpassed the one million mark. Almost half of the Aboriginal population is aged 24 and under, compared with 31% for the non-Aboriginal population according to 2006 Census figures (Census Canada). Of this population an estimated 698,025 people identified themselves as both status and non-status First Nations people living on and off reserves in Canada. Section 35(2) of the *Constitution Act, 1982* defines Aboriginal people as including the First Nations, Inuit, and Metis people of Canada (Terminology, para.1). First Nations people, a term that has become common, were defined by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada in 1970. Prior to 1970, First Nations people were referred to as *Indian* which is a term that was found to be offensive and is no longer used. First Nations can be identified as Status, meaning that they have treaty rights that fall under the Indian Act, or non-Status, meaning that the individual does not have treaty rights.

In Canada in 2010 there were 615 First Nations reserves, which are Crown lands allocated by Treaty agreements to First Nations by the Government of Canada. Treaties with the Government of Canada and First Nations people were signed in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The total percent of Canada's land that is set aside for reserves is 13 percent (Aboriginal Relations & Reconciliation Report, 2006). Through the signing of treaties the Government of Canada essentially ceded land for First Nations people to live on with

specific conditions. First Nations people agreed to the terms of the treaties that they signed. These treaties have allowed First Nations people with treaty status to reside on reserves with a settlement of land, and annuities. In most cases, education was one of the key federal responsibilities. The delivery of education, however, was not detailed in the treaties that were signed by the federal government. As a result, there has been a long history of a variety of attempts to educate and assimilate Aboriginals since the signing of treaties.

According to growth statistics based on the 2006 Census (Statistics Canada), the Aboriginal population will grow to between 1.7 million and 2.2 million by 2031. This would represent a growth of between 4.0% and 5.3%; in comparison the non-Aboriginal population will grow approximately 1.0% during the same period. This Aboriginal population growth presents challenges in areas such as education (Statistics Canada).

Aboriginal languages in Canada were surveyed between 1996 and 2001 to determine whether they were declining in use. According to Statistics Canada (2001), the use of Aboriginal languages was declining. It was reported that 24% of the Aboriginal population in 2001 could speak their mother tongue when conversing with others. This was down from 1996 when 29% of Aboriginal people were able to maintain a conversation in their native language. Some languages however were continuing to remain strong over the years; they are the Dene, Montagnais-Naskapi, Atikamekw, Micmac, Dakota/Sioux, and the Oji-Cree. Other Aboriginal languages are also showing a decline (Perkel, 2012). According to Perkel most Aboriginal groups are teaching the language in schools in a revitalization effort. It is hoped that these revitalization efforts will help save languages

such as Mohawk, Blackfoot, Cree, and others which are in danger of becoming lost. In British Columbia it is estimated that only one in twenty Aboriginal people are fluent in their language (Perkel, 2012).

The housing situation on many First Nations reserves in Canada continues to be a contentious issue that has an impact on the educational outcomes of First Nations children. According to CBC News (2011), First Nations housing on-reserve is in dire need of an overhaul. There is a shortage of housing on reserves which would take money and time to remedy. Overcrowding in some households is a problem and in some cases there are up to three generations of families living together. This not a choice for First Nations people but often a predicament. It is estimated that 41.5% of First Nations homes on-reserve are in need of major repairs as compared to the mainstream population where only 7% of home require major repairs. On-reserve homeowners cannot access mortgages as the land they live on is Crown land, so they are not able to have collateral. Ottawa allocates a certain amount of money for housing on-reserve; there is never enough money to cover the needs. The housing situations of many First Nations families in most cases may have a huge impact on their children's ability to achieve their educational goals.

2.2 Educational History of First Nations

It is important that education and government officials are cognizant of the educational history of First Nations education in Canada. First Nations educational history has deep roots in what is known as the residential school era. The residential school era has had a significant influence on the education attainment of First Nations people as a collective group in society. After the signing of the Constitution Act of 1869, the

Government of Canada was granted full control over the Indian people who were being settled on reserves throughout Canada (Castellano, Archibald, & DeGagne 2008). Once the treaties were signed many Indian children were taken from their families and placed in residential schools.

Beginning in the late 1800s and lasting up until the 1900s, large numbers of Aboriginal children were placed in residential schools. These schools government-funded and church- run were faced with the task of educating and assimilating Aboriginal children who were as young as five years of age up to adolescence. In most cases these children were taken forcibly from their parents, placed in the residential schools for long periods of time, and only allowed to go home during Christmas and summer breaks (Castellano, Archibald, & DeGagne, 2008).

Prior to entering residential schools, most Aboriginal children came from a culturally rich and nurturing families (Barnes, Josefowitz, & Cole, 2006), as most children came from a culturally rich and nurturing family. In most cases children were only fluent in their native tongue. Upon entering residential school they were forbidden from speaking their native language. Children were also expected to shed their cultural practices and ways, adopt Christian beliefs and speak only English or French. Schooling focused on teaching Western ways such as homemaking, farming or, ranching, as it was expected that once they left residential school students would take on this way of life.

As The Royal Commission on Aboriginal people (RCAP) wrote in their recommendations in 1996, the Aboriginal people's experience in the residential schools was a devastating experience that would be felt for generations. Families were torn apart

and child rearing was taken from parents. As a result, children were without family nurturing for long periods of time. Today, that devastation is felt in First Nations communities where social problems continue to manifest themselves as a result of the disruptions experienced in residential schools.

Canada's residential school system was introduced by the Davin Report that studied industrial schools in the United States where children were separated from their parents for extended periods of time (Castellano, Archibald, & DeGagne, 2008). The Government of Canada approached the Catholic and Anglican churches of Canada to become partners in the process of establishing residential schools to begin the assimilation of the Aboriginal people. The goal of the residential schools was to assimilate the Indian child so that they would be rid of their traditional language and cultural ways. The means used was to confine Indian children to residential schools for long periods of time where there was no family and community influence. According to the research on the effects of residential school (Barnes et al., 2006), these schools were poorly staffed by unqualified teachers, children spent less time learning and more time doing domestic duties. Parents were discouraged from getting involved in their child's schooling and correspondence was often prohibited. The goal of the residential schools was to completely transform Aboriginal people so that they become accustomed to the Western ways.

From 1831 to 1998, residential schools operated throughout Canada. Indian parents who did not cooperate with the authorities in the placement of their children in residential schools (from the young age of four years until age 16) were punishable by law (Castellano et al., 2008).

The residential school system is linked to many of the social problems experienced by some First Nations people today. During the residential school era Aboriginal children were placed in the schools for long periods of time away from family. Many children lost their identity, language, culture, and most importantly parenting skills. It became evident in later years that the residential school era was responsible for many of the problems evident among First Nations people today. These problems continue to persist in First Nations communities across Canada and it is only through education and research that these problems may begin to diminish over a period of time.

In 1996 a public inquiry was held to determine the abuses suffered by Aboriginal people during the residential school era. As a result of this public inquiry a report by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) was written and presented to the Government of Canada. This report resulted in the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which took place in 2008 (Castellano, et.al). The Commission was responsible for advocating on behalf of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada in working towards compensation for the suffering they endured. Once the Truth and Reconciliation was established, the Government of Canada made a public apology to the Aboriginal peoples of Canada for the ills caused by residential schools. Former students of residential schools were compensated for their mistreatment beginning in 2007.

2.3 Current State of First Nations Education

Today, First Nations people in Canada have managed to survive as a people through their rich language, customs, and traditions. However, there are many problems evident, according to a report by Marie Battiste (2005),

> Colonization of First Nations has seriously affected their lives, and the people feel the oppressive nature of prejudice and racism in Canadian society. Very early colonists justified land seizure; removed First Nations from their homelands and put them on isolated and under resourced reserves; imposed residential and federal day schools and compulsory English colonial education; subjected them to overt, covert and systemic racism; imposed disempowering policies, practices and attitudes that have continued to the present, restricting their movement, livelihood and survival. As a result, it is understandable but tragic that First Nations youth have the highest school departures before graduation, the highest suicide rates, highest incarceration rates, and perform far below the achievement and employment rates of average Canadians (p.5).

Up until two decades ago, policies enacted by the Government of Canada have been directed at assimilating First Nations peoples. According to Marker (2000, p.80), compulsory attendance at residential schools and day schools meant that Aboriginal children were trained for marginal participation in the labor market and socialized into a model of Christian civility. Their languages, identities, and cultures were almost eradicated. These past events were unsuccessful in educating and assimilating First Nations people and much has been written about the abuses that have continued to manifest themselves in First Nations people. As a result of this growing awareness, the Government of Canada recently established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to study the effects of residential schools in Canada.

After residential schools and day schools were eradicated in the 1990s most reserves in Canada were given local control of their education. Local control essentially means that First Nations people can make major decisions regarding the running of schools, although the federal government maintains jurisdiction and control. There are more than 500 First Nations schools located on Indian reserves in Canada (RCAP, 1996). Funding to these schools is made through the federal government but falls short of what provincial schools require. According to Carr Stewart (2006, p.998), "…the Crown's jurisdictional obligations to provide educational services have not lead to similar educational opportunities and attainment achievement for First Nations students as compared to Canadian students in provincial schools." The lack of adequate funding means that teacher salaries are not equal to their provincial counterparts, a fact which affects the standard of teachers being hired. As well, resources and school buildings fall short in providing an adequate education on reserves. According to Carr Stewart (2006, p.1002), "although Canada and the First Nations entered into an educational partnership through the treaties, quality educational services for First Nations students and equitable programming with that provided in provincial schools has not evolved."

A high percentage of First Nations parents choose to send their children to provincial schools even though many of these schools may not be successful in retaining First Nations students. In 2008, Richards, Hove, and Alfolabi produced a report specifically focusing on off-reserve schools. At the time of this report, British Columbia is the only Canadian school jurisdiction that assembles and regularly publishes detailed school-level evidence on Aboriginal student progress during primary and secondary education. Approximately three-quarters of the Aboriginal population live off-reserve and

the achievement gap for this population remains large. A large number of these students do not complete high school.

The report concluded that educational leadership is critical in order for improved student outcomes in Aboriginal education. In this study leadership addressed issues such as improving student outcomes through a shared decision making process which would include community stakeholders. Through the participation of the community, Aboriginal stakeholders are included in decision making structures such as school boards and parent-school partnerships. District staff, teachers, principals, families, and Aboriginal leaders play an active role in the formulation and implementation of new options designed to improve the outcomes of higher educational attainment for Aboriginal students. Finally, schools are proactive in the setting of targets for improvement based on the use of performance data to measure the achievements attained. Clearly, improved school quality is the only factor that is amenable (Richards et.al).

The achievement gap has become an issue for federal and provincial governments. According to a report from the Auditor General in 2000 and 2004 the rates of high school graduation for First Nations students was declining (Carr Stewart, 2006). Based on this data, governments and school jurisdictions across Canada began making changes in educational environments in order to accommodate First Nations learners. Most recently the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) developed key policies in Aboriginal education aimed at identifying and strengthening data and evidence gaps. The desired result would be that school jurisdictions will better support Aboriginal learners in provincial and territorial schools.

Currently, initiatives developed by government and provincial school jurisdictions have tried to identify what needs to happen in order to reduce the achievement gap. In 2008 the Reforming First Nations Education Initiative was implemented to focus on increasing academic achievement. The First Nation Student Success Program (FNSSP) and the Education Partnerships Program were a commitment from the Government of Canada to begin work to improve educational attainment. The Partnerships Program is geared to on-reserve and off-reserve working partnerships through tuition agreements. The FNSSP program aims specifically at improving literacy, numeracy, and student retention for First Nations students attending on-reserve schools.

In 2010 the government of Alberta signed an historic memorandum of understanding to strengthen learning and educational success for First Nations students (ATA News, 2010). The goal is that ongoing collaborative work between the federal government and First Nations will bring about change. In 2013 on-reserve school authorities were mandated to develop a First Education Act that will ensure First Nations students attending on-reserve schools will receive adequate education programs. As part of the process school authorities will implement accountability measures. The First Nations Education Act is slated for completion sometime in September 2014.

A national panel on First Nations education was launched in June 2011, specifically targeting on-reserve education. Round table discussions with elders, educators, government, parents, and students, plus 25 visits to First Nations schools and 60 key meetings across Canada, took place to discuss ways of improving educational opportunities for First Nations students. The result was that five key recommendations have been

legislated by the federal government in 2012. One of those recommendations is the development of a First Nations Education Act which would ensure First Nations students receive an education equivalent in quality to that of students in other parts of Canada. The Act would provide a framework for achieving better results through reform by clarifying roles and responsibilities, strengthening governance and accountability and addressing the need for stable and predictable funding. The Education Act is expected to be final and complete for implementation in March 2014 (Aboriginal Affairs & Northern Development Canada, 2013).

This proposed Education Act will place more accountability on First Nations education authorities in terms of improved student outcomes and more financial accountability. Improved student outcomes as measured through standardized testing will be part and parcel of the overall changes. The First Nations Education Act seeks to address the fact that on-reserve education authorities have been without any form governance structure similar to that of provincial jurisdictions.

The data concerning First Nations education is dismally inadequate on its own and doesn’t provide any real solutions in terms of creating better schools or improving educational opportunities. In this case money and accountability may not be the only answers, as little attention is being placed on the structures of the education system. Structures within the schools (effective leadership and, programming, interventions for struggling students, as well as quality teachers, and adequate supports) all count towards quality experiences for students.

First Nations students attend schools both on and off-reserve in Canada. Parents have a choice regarding where they want their children to be educated. In many cases, however, First Nations parents must reside off-reserve due to lack of housing on-reserve or because of educational or career opportunities off-reserve. In 2006 the Aboriginal population was 1,172,790 of which 60% are First Nations peoples. First Nations students in grades K-12 living on-reserve include 60% who attend band-operated schools, 37% in provincial schools, 2% at private schools, and 1% at federal schools (Aboriginal Affairs & Northern Development (2011).

According to the data that Aboriginal Affairs (2011) has produced, there is some improvement in the overall high school completion rates. But yet on-reserve high school completion rates are still low at 40 percent. This compares with 56 percent for Aboriginals students who attend public schools. Many on-reserve schools have developed culturally relevant curriculum and have integrated this into the provincial curriculum, but on-reserve schools face a huge challenge as they attempt to meet the needs of their student population. Financial resources are limited which makes it difficult to meet the needs of the student population.

In recent years, Alberta has implemented improvements to address the needs of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit students. This initiative is similar to that of other provinces in Canada. In Alberta the First Nations, Metis, and Inuit (FNMI) framework was established in 2002 after a process of consultations with stakeholder, reflecting the process by other provincial governments to improve the opportunities for First Nations students. This FNMI framework has been designed to be a living document, on a vision of what

educational opportunities should look like for FNMI students in the 21st Century. A number of strategies and performance measures were adopted, such as increasing learner outcomes, improving learning opportunities, reducing barriers to success, and bridging home and school for FNMI students. Five goals were established to support FNMI learners in their journey towards educational achievement: high quality learning opportunities, excellence in learner achievement, preparation for post-secondary education, and the labor market, community and elder participation, and responsive government (Alberta Learning, 2002).

The 2008 FNMI Policy Framework Progress Report concluded that the resources to support language and culture were developed and authorized for schools. The infusions of Aboriginal content into Kindergarten to grade 12 were in progress. Coursework for FNMI workers was being delivered through Bow Valley College. A number of Alberta School Initiative School Improvement projects had acquired funding to help to retain and promote high school graduates. Alberta Education provided $1.5 million to school jurisdictions that had a high Aboriginal student population. Professional development for teachers focused on the development of an appreciation for Aboriginal cultures. A number of conferences showcased what is happening in schools with high Aboriginal student populations. All of this work has been excellent in terms of promoting Aboriginal culture, history, and language (Alberta Education, 2008). However, these initiatives are continuing despite limited progress in graduating First Nations students from high school.

Another study resulting from federal and provincial government initiatives was conducted as a follow-up to a meeting held in Kelowna, British Columbia in 2005. The federal government and leaders from Aboriginal groups met to discuss ways to improve

education. The goal was to close the achievement gap in Aboriginal education. This resulted in a study of 366 schools in British Columbia. Data from standardized assessments were correlated with a case study in which school personnel were interviewed along with Aboriginal leaders. The outcomes of the study indicated that students began to lag behind after Grade Four. Schools that formed relationships with Aboriginal parents and included them in their vision were successful. These schools developed home-school partnerships with parents by involving them in the school activities and school decision making. It was clear throughout the study that teachers and district leadership were influential in forming connections with the Aboriginal communities. These connections began at the classroom level and continued into the district level where decision making involved Aboriginal leaders who were influential in the promotion of educational opportunities for their children (Richards et al., 2008).

The schools that promoted achievement among Aboriginal students saw positive results. There was an attempt to make schools more inclusive for Aboriginal students and the best educational programs and quality schools helped make a difference in academic achievement among Aboriginals. In this study there was an attempt to place Aboriginal students in the best schools in province. The study was very comprehensive and spanned more than five years (Richards et al., 2008).

While some people fear that the outlook is bleak, improvements in educational attainment have happened, according to White, Spence, and Maxim (2005, p. 67). High school completion rates increased from 31.4 percent to 41.4 percent over a ten-year period from 1991 to 2001 among Aboriginal groups in Canada. Some recent Statistics Canada

data has been challenged as some First Nations communities, for various reasons were not represented on the collection of data. Statistical data alone are not enough, more research is needed to properly document educational attainment among First Nations students, with an eye to improvements.

2.4 Understanding the Achievement Gap

The big question in recent years in Aboriginal education is how governments and policy makers can influence educational attainment for Aboriginal students in order to reduce the educational achievement gap. Why, for example is there is an educational achievement gap in the first place? Researchers, government, and policy makers recognize there is a problem, but the big question is "why are some students leaving school?" There are many reasons. The literature identifies reasons such as student disengagement, ineffective teachers, family problems, negative peer relationships and, low academic achievement. As well, instability in families causes frequent moves resulting in school changes that may have a negative effect on student engagement in school (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007).

It is quite evident that the demographics have changed in recent years and schools need to carefully address these changes. Public schools are presently dealing with a much more diverse student population. This student population presents schools with a range of challenges regarding race, color, disability, learning, and socio-economic status. Schools must somehow effectively educate all students and ensure they are all included in all class and school activities. Schools cannot change family and social demographics but they can

certainly make schools a better place to be for students, promoting success and successful transitioning into post-secondary education and the job market (Christle et al., 2007)

More needs to be done to discover which approaches help enable First Nations students to succeed academically in schools. For example, research could discover why 39% of First Nations students are succeeding and use that data to inform policy that would be beneficial to future initiatives. It becomes quite evident that what some schools are doing in terms of student success in educational attainment must be documented to help inform practice. Educators and government need to begin implementing evidence-based practices based on this research. But first and foremost researchers must develop an understanding as to why this education gap persists.

School environments play an important role in the education of students. Students who leave school do so for a number of reasons. They may become bored with school, or fall into the wrong crowd, or experience an unplanned change such as pregnancy or parent unemployment (Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007).

Student social background was found to be a determinant when students may be at-risk for leaving school (Stout & Christenson, 2009). A study found that Native Hawaiians students were not doing well academically in the state schools as opposed to the mainstream population (Vogt, Jordan & Tharp, 1987). A research project with Native Hawaiian students found that what was happening in classrooms in terms of teaching and student learning was not reflected by standardized testing of these students. Changes needed to be made in the instructional practices of teachers as traditional teaching practices were not making an impact with Native Hawaiian children. Teacher professional

development and the building of curriculum resources that were culturally appropriate became a priority in the project. As a result, Native Hawaiians experienced improved learning and improved student outcomes.

In the United Kingdom social justice in education has been a focus in recent years. Research has recognized that inequality arises from an educational system set up to serve White and middle class people (Goodman & Burton, 2012). Schools are segregated by class and students from disadvantaged backgrounds bear the brunt of inequitable schooling. The achievement gap is represented mainly by people who belong to marginalized groups. As the research indicates these groups of people are much less likely achieve educational success. There is a growing diversity in schools today that needs to be addressed by school jurisdictions. Schools must begin to examine their institutional processes such as instructional delivery, curriculum, teacher professional development, and supports within the school. Effective school structures are dependent on effective school leadership that will direct staff to meet the needs of all students (Vincent, 2003).

Certain predictors may identify students who could be prone to leaving school. Studies show that students who pose a risk for leaving school lack a sense of belonging in the school (Schulz & Rubel, 2011). Participants in this study were five male school non-completers or school leavers who came from low socio-economic backgrounds and represented a marginalized group. The participants experienced disengagement from school for four reasons. The first cause was multiple school transitions through frequent moves. Next were negative peer relationships where students fell into the wrong crowd because they lacked personal connections within the school. A third reason was the failure

to progress academically, with the result that they failed to maintain parity with their peers. Finally, some individuals experienced instability at home, with tensions such as divorces and social problems, and these contributed to their disengagement.

In the United States there has been extensive research on the warning signs of school departure for students. Findings show that the early predictors of students leaving school began as early as the middle grades. In following over 14,000 middle school students over six years they found early signs like poor grades or a low test score that would give students a 75 percent probability of leaving school. Students who received failing grades, even a failing grade in one subject, had a higher risk of leaving school at some point. The study found that these students who received failing grades were actually struggling in school. Such struggles may indicate a severe learning disability, home and school problems, behavior problems, or other issues where the school can intervene. Students may exhibit signs by the ninth grade which will indicate their potential to leave school. Their desire to leave to school may be the result of high academic demands and social pressures. If their school subject marks fall, students may miss more school. There are several strategies that need to be implemented in programs to target these students. Philadelphia piloted a program called "Keeping Middle School Students on the Graduation Path." This program seeks to develop tools and practices for early intervention. It's based on two fundamental assumptions: First, students give signals as surface indicators of deep academic and family problems which surface in schools. Proactive measures need to be undertaken by schools in order to address these issues. Second, schools then can identify strategies for addressing each signal such as three-tiered support or intensive intervention (Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007).

The statistical data on Canada's First Nations people shows that many students are not completing high school. This according to researchers (Arnold, 1993 & Ford, 1996) may be due to many factors in home and school such as poverty, poor housing, lack of parenting, lack of access to supplemental educational programs to enhance their learning, lack of quality school programming, poor quality schools including underprepared teachers, low teacher expectations, cultural and language differences and, negative peer influences.

Mulford (2008), identifies important things that counts as good schooling for students: developing identity and quality of life, being better skilled, flexible and adaptable and having a desire to be a constant learner. Schools must have good early childhood programs, well prepared teachers, and a bridge between home and school. They must make an effort to continually promote student success, demand success from schools themselves, and, support students academically with tutoring and follow-up (Weiss, 2003).

2.5 Effective Schools

One of the characteristics of an effective school is the teachers who are at the forefront of student instruction and the promotion of positive student outcomes. Teachers have the greatest impact on students, and school leadership is second, according to Mulford (2008). In schools that have made considerable progress in closing the achievement gap, teachers were responsible for this happening to a great extent. Teacher quality and teachers effectiveness are the key ingredients in improving student outcomes. The characteristics of an effective teacher can be subjective; however the research surrounding teacher effectiveness centers on some common traits.

Common traits of an effective teacher are knowledge of subject matter, linking of subject matter to the real world, student accountability, and awareness of student motivating factors which lead to accountability, continuous improvement and lifelong learning (Bright, 2011). The behavior and techniques of an effective teacher center on communication skills, creativity, professionalism, pedagogical knowledge, knowledge of student assessment and evaluation, and a strong desire for continuous learning (Polk, 2006)..

Teacher effectiveness makes a huge difference in student outcomes. For example, one study compared effective versus a poor teaching (Duffrin, 2006) in terms of reading achievement. It was found that students' academic gains in reading jumped one and a half years as opposed to students under poor teaching where reading gains only increased by half a year. There is a marked impact on student academic outcomes, especially when a student has a quality teacher over consecutive years (Konstantopoulos, 2011). Good teachers ensure that adequate instruction takes place and instill, confidence in students through an understanding of concepts.

According to Howard (2007) the school environment was found to be another variable critical to student success. In schools that are serving a diverse student population the implementation of five key changes were identified to be effective in meeting the needs of students. First of all schools need to build an environment where the school is transformed into a climate of openness and trust among students and staff. Next, engaging personal culture in the school enables teachers, with the help of administrators, to build cultural competence. They are engaged in a vigorous and ongoing process of self-

examination and personal growth related to cultural competence. Third, by confronting social dominance and social justice, educators can address current and historical inequities in education and create a compelling narrative of social justice. This change begins in central office and extends to school leadership, eventually making its way into the classrooms. A fourth change looks to transforming instructional practices with new and better strategies that will make a difference. Finally, there must be an engagement of the entire school community, where home-school connections enhance the increasing student achievement in schools. Using this process a New York school saw achievement scores increase over the years (Howard, 2007).

Keeping students in school is imperative in order to keep them engaged with the ultimate goal of high school completion. For example, Project EXCITE (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006) was devised to reduce the achievement gap prevalent among minorities. The program enlisted supplementary programming to increase opportunities for students in high school. Students were given strategies to cope with peer pressure by providing peer support. Programming was provided for parental and family support, and students had access to supplemental educational programs and opportunities. Schools have to be innovative in furthering student success primarily in middle and high schools.

Eighteen projects that initiated in high schools throughout Alberta designed to increase high school completion under the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) Cycle 2 in 2003-2006. The AISI projects are developed in school districts throughout Alberta with an action research focus. Action research is often used in organizations that want to see change or improvements. It requires full participation from

professionals who collaboratively question their practice, make changes, and assess the effects of those changes (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

The major recommendations arising from the eighteen AISI projects were: Supporting students to complete high school, providing students with instructional and academic support, providing students with alternative programming, providing students with social/psychological support, professional development for teachers and administration, and increasing parent and home support. Students who came from minority backgrounds were targeted in this project (Gunn, Chorney, & Poulsen, 2009).

A case study was conducted in Boise, Idaho to find out if an innovative program designed to reduce student absent rates was successful over a two-year period. This innovative program was built on a court intervention program acting on Idaho law that legislated that parents and guardians must ensure their children between the ages of 7-16 years of age attend school on a regular basis. Students who had chronic absenteeism or tardiness were referred to the court system by the school when they had missed school consistently. Parents and children were summoned to court where the judge would hear their case. Instead of parents facing punitive measures, supportive recommendations were made by the court to intervene in supporting the family with the help of community agencies. Family intervention programs and support such as parenting programs and, health care follow-up, helped parents ensure that their child would attend school. Follow-up by school personnel, law enforcement, health and welfare, justice, and other social agencies assisted families in curbing their children's tardiness and absenteeism (Mueller, Giacomazzi, & Stoddard, 2006). Although, this was a small study, the outcomes were

positive in helping curb student absenteeism and tardiness. This study included direct observations, interviews, and examination of quantitative data on student absences and court proceedings. Student absences and tardiness dropped significantly as 65% of the cases were successful. Student grades improved as attendance improved.

Student retention has focused in four areas. Tough sanctions were enacted where schools showed a low tolerance for absences. As well, academic enrichment programs designed to provide student support were linked to computerized attendance programs where parents and school personnel have immediate access to attendance. Multi-agency collaboration ensured that attendance at court proceeding were implemented (Mueller et al.,2009).

Schools must begin the transitioning process for students as early as the eighth grade and on to high school so that they are prepared and ready. This may be a pivotal point according to Lys (2009). The strongest predictors of high school completion are gender, home language, family history, and after- school employment. It was found that male students are most at-risk for non-completion of high school, as eighth grade students were already beginning to show whether or not they would complete high school. Schools must gather data on students to determine whether they pose a risk for non-completion of high school, and then implement preventative measures such as mentoring and programming. The home-school connection must be strengthened to include parents in school activities and, emphasize the importance of academic success. Professional development for teachers and school officials must be a priority to create an understanding of cultural diversity (Lys, 2009).

The literature clearly shows that students who may leave school have characteristics that may place them at a disadvantage in an education setting. Therefore, the social context of the schools may play an important role in enabling students to succeed (Zvoch, 2006). A study of eleven schools in the United States with 20,000 students was done to determine the number of students who were potential school leavers and whether the school context would play a role in retaining these students. It was determined that school context can serve to encourage or discourage students.

School organization, or how a school is managed, plays a key role. It is clear that schools that are clean, orderly, and provide a safe and caring environment will retain students. Teacher collegiality and teacher commitment were also seen as important in offering a meaningful program to students. Teachers who collaborate on an ongoing basis to improve student outcomes will see positive results. As a result, school context and organization can have positive influences on students who are potential school leavers (Zvoch, 2006). These schools present an inviting learning environment that engages students through smaller classes with opportunities for team teaching, mentoring, and more personalized learning.

2.6 The Importance of Effective School Leadership

Leadership is pivotal in promoting positive student outcomes in schools that serve a diverse student population. The qualities of effective school leaders in the 21st Century have never been so critical in ensuring that they lead schools effectively. Over the past ten years, researchers in education have begun to shed light on the importance of leadership in education. Studies have focused on attempting to identify what it is that school leaders can

do that will make a pivotal impact in promoting positive student outcomes through effective practices. One important question that relates to this study is how can school leadership influence student retention among First Nation students leading to increasing rates of high school graduation?

First of all, it is vitally important that school leaders are properly trained and educated in school leadership programs. School leadership is defined as by Mulford (2008) as being all about human behavior, action, and practice. It is important that school leaders develop a plan that takes into account the needs of students, teachers, and community. When implementing an effective plan, school leaders need to be aware of the data surrounding the low graduation rates of First Nations students.

Over a period of five years in Australian schools, a model was developed to produce successful school leaders. Predictable variables for improved student outcomes in schools were characteristics such as school type and size. Other characteristics include age, gender, staff qualifications, and years of service, the socio-economic disadvantage of students, school reputation, and the extent of educational support in the home. From this evolved three models of successful schools: the first was improved student achievement, the second was teacher and school-level effects leading to capacity building, and the third was student empowerment. "school principals who, in collaboration with their staff, promote both capacity building and systems of accountability and evaluation to the extent that their teachers perceive these two factors as characterising their schools, are also advancing student empowerment, student social development and student academic achievement (Mulford & Silins, 2011, p.76)."

Effective schools foster good relationships among staff, students and parents as evident through the Leadership for Diversity Project (Sather, 1999). The leadership qualities of administrators, teachers, and students must be promoted if schools are working towards a vision of raising the achievement of diverse groups of students. Robert Cohen, a Jewish American principal at one of the high schools that took part in this project stated that according to the research and experience done on dropout prevention programs, it wasn't about fixing broken students but about transforming schools (Sather, 1999, p.555). The dropout rate at Cohen's school decreased and at the same time attendance, student performance, and graduation levels increased substantially. The pursuit of excellence according to Cohen was built on the experiences of school dropouts, on school improvement, and on school restructuring. Cohen points out that it is important to seek a good education, but in order for students to acquire a good education, they must work hard and study at least three to five hours each evening. He set high standards and, believed in students. He also, met with individual students at the beginning of every school year to review their education plans.

2.7 Types of Leadership

Concepts in leadership will be explored and how they influence positive student outcomes primarily for disadvantaged students in schools across the country. The three types of leadership are instructional leadership, distributed leadership, and transformational leadership. Since 1980, the focus has been on building effective schools as a result of research studies and efforts at school reform. School- wide reforms initiated by government were set on restructuring initiatives aimed at improving student achievement. As a result,

leadership began to take a forefront to educational issues, and since then it has transpired into the conceptualization of leadership practices. There has been much debate among stakeholders in recent years over which type of school leadership would be most effective in order to meet the needs of students. Most observers, however, would say that there needs to be an overlap of leadership practices and theoretical concepts used in order for school leaders to meet the needs of the student population.

In order for school leaders to address the needs of all students they must understand the different concepts of school leadership that make schools effective in the area of student learning and improved student outcomes. The following concepts in school leadership are developed for different purposes. School leaders must take from each leadership practice and develop a unique approach to maintaining their school organization. Each leadership practice and concept has its strengths and limitations with regard to effectiveness.

2.7.1 Instructional Leadership

The first leadership practice is the instructional leadership concept which evolved in the 1970s and 1980s as a result of external school reform policies developed by government. The idea behind this concept is that educational leadership should take the lead in curriculum and instruction, and should be directly involved in the teaching and learning that takes place in classrooms. As a result, instructional leadership was developed to play a key role in curriculum and instruction in K-12 schools. In order for schools to be effective there should be strong leadership to take the lead in moving the school to achieve desired student outcomes.

An instructional management framework developed by Hallinger & Murphy (1986) is outlined below:

1. The mission is absolutely clear
2. The mission is visible throughout the school
3. Academic development is appropriate to the needs of the student population
4. The mission sets out the work that teachers must do
5. The mission is legitimate to teachers
6. The mission is articulated, actively supported and modeled by the principal

School leaders who plan professional development activities must have the knowledge and skills to plan and implement programs. In this regard, school leaders must be instructional leaders who are able to lead in curriculum and instruction and are directly involved in the teaching and learning that takes place in the classroom. The school leader must have a strong leadership capacity to lead the school to reach the desired student outcomes. Instructional leadership has been very popular in the past and it continues to be popular over the years. A framework for instructional leadership was developed which saw a two dimensional construct comprised of leadership functions and leadership processes (Hallinger, 2005, p.4). These following functions basically outline the instructional leadership role:

1. Framing and communicating school goals by implementing a clearly defined mission through staffing, resource allocation, staff development, and curricular decisions.

2. Supervision and evaluation of instruction in which principals in effective schools continually supervise staff in order to maintain teacher accountability in the classrooms. Teachers are given constructive feedback in order for them to improve on classroom instruction and teaching strategies.
3. Monitoring of student progress through formal and informal assessments that basically drive the instruction in the school.
4. Principal coordinating curriculum which is aligning instructional objectives, curricular materials and testing instruments.
5. Protecting instructional time whereby the school principal ensures that instructional time is not taken away from students. Strategies to reduce staff tardiness, absenteeism, and truancy are implemented in the school.
6. Promotion of professional development and instructional improvement by supporting teachers through in-service workshops, promoting subscriptions to professional publications that are made available to teachers.
7. Development of high standards and expectations for staff and students through school-wide expectations that are reported through assessment measures.
8. Providing incentives for students and teachers through school-wide initiatives to promote student achievement and teacher recognition for teaching excellence.

These functions cannot be properly implemented without the guiding activities of communication, decision making, conflict management, group process in effective

collaboration, and effective planning. It is though these processes that school leaders are able to maintain collegiality with consistency and continuity in school functions (Hallinger, 2005).

This form of leadership was popular during the 1980's, and as a result a vast amount of research was generated. There were over 125 empirical studies done between 1980- 2000 (Hallinger, 2003) to determine the effectiveness of this school restructuring effort. The results from the research indicated that school principals contribute to school effectiveness and student achievement indirectly through actions taken throughout the school. The most striking influence is that of the school principal's role in shaping the purposes of the school. A principal can influence the learning of students who are at-risk or come from low socio-economic status backgrounds through this process. It was found that instructional leadership influences the quality of school outcomes through the alignment of school structures such as academic standards, time allocation, and curriculum with the school's mission.

According to Hallinger (2003) instructional leadership is a top-down approach and directive in its approach. The principal oversees the delivery of instruction in the school and makes decisions based on student performance. Today, instructional leadership is still inherent in many schools, as it tends to be used by leaders who believe that they are accountable for student outcomes. One area where principals continue to do more is the supervision of curriculum and instruction. It is believed that teachers need to be made more accountable for the learning that takes place in classrooms, and through teacher supervision the principal can greatly impact this area.

2.7.2 Transformational Leadership

The second school leadership practice is the transformational leadership concept. Transformational leadership is defined as "elevating the follower's level of maturity and ideals as well as concerns for achievement, self-actualization, and the well-being of others, the organization, and society" (Bass, 1999, p. 11). According to Bass (1999), the changing demographics and dynamics within large organizations resulted in a need for transformational leadership. The workplace has undergone changes since the 1960s from an organizational hierarchy to teams of educated professionals who saw themselves as colleagues rather than superior-subordinate relationships (Bass, 1999). According to Bass, "transformational leadership refers to the leader moving the follower beyond immediate self-interests through idealized influence (charisma), inspiration, intellectual stimulation, or individualized concentration (p.11)."

According to Mulford "transformational leadership is thought to provide a more powerful way of thinking about school leadership than competing approaches because it leads to an investigation of all workplace conditions that contribute to all school outcomes, not just instructional strategies (2008, p.41)."

Transformational leadership is evident in a learning organization when a trusting and collaborative climate is present (Mulford, Silins,& Leithwood 2004). The factors that influence organizational learning in this context are community focus, teacher leadership, administration team leadership, and valued staff. With these factors in place a clear vision and mission are the key focus for all involved.

Desired outcomes for students are academic self-concept, participation, and engagement within the learning organization that is directly influenced by teachers. Students become confident and look towards success and completion of high school. Leadership then has a direct effect on the total organization including the community, parents, teachers, and students.

A transformational leadership model was developed with a bottom-up approach to support school improvement whereby school staff become empowered to coordinate school improvements. Second-order effects see transformational leaders increasing the capacity of others in the school to produce first-order effects on learning by creating a climate in where teachers engage in continuous learning (Hallinger, 2003).

2.7.3 Distributed Leadership

The third leadership practice distributed leadership concept is a widely used term in educational leadership. One must be aware that this concept may have a range of meanings. It is critical at this point that an inventory of the multiple usages of distributed leadership be explored (Mayrowetz, 2008) in order to gain a better understanding. Three distinctive elements of this concept have emerged (Woods, Bennett, Harvey, & Wise, 2004):

1. Emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals who through concerted action contribute initiative and expertise and produce something greater than the sum of an individual action.
2. There are no limits built into this concept, which allows an openness of the boundaries of leadership.
3. Varieties of expertise are distributed across the many, not the few.

Using these elements, the organizational leader must make choices and priorities so the organization will define and structure itself to accommodate a distributed leadership perspective. This concept is therefore left wide open in terms of how it will evolve in an organizational setting. There are advantages and disadvantages to this type of leadership. According to (Woods et al., 2004) the school leader needs a clear focus before the actual implementation. Important variables such as control and autonomy, and organizational structure and individual agency, and how leadership will contribute to these variables must be considered. Informal leadership alongside formal leadership helps determine the process of distributed leadership. Conflict resolution among staff, for example, demands that the leader must have a process in place to deal with these situations.

The empirical base of distributed leadership is growing (Mayrowetz, 2008) however, the usage and practice of this concept still needs to be clearly defined. We also need to know through empirical data whether distributed leadership has an impact on the goals of school improvement.

According to Mulford (2008), distributed leadership is built upon the concept or idea that school principals are far too busy these days to administer and manage a school on their own, and instead rely heavily on the expertise of their staff. This is based on current research that the tasks are far too complex for a principal, and instead more forms of distributed leadership are needed requiring the enhanced capacity of more than one person. This is evident in teacher leaders throughout the school who may take on leadership in curriculum areas.

2.8 Similarities and Differences Among Leadership Practices

The three leadership practices detailed above are oriented towards school improvement and improved student outcomes. The differences among the three concepts is the leadership practices and leadership styles that were developed for effective school leadership. When examining instructional leadership it is a top-down approach solely directed by the school principal. In the past schools operated on this type of leadership concept; however, over the years the demographics of schools have changed considerably. As a result two concepts later emerged: Transformational leadership and distributed leadership, which both display a bottom-up approach whereby school staff are empowered to take a lead role in their school. These last two approaches are geared more to the staff of an organization where individuals can make a difference in organizational learning. In all three concepts of school leadership, the principal is the leader in ensuring that the mission and vision of the organization is attained.

The instructional leadership concept evolved when governments began implementing and legislating school reforms and restructuring efforts in the United States and other countries. Later, the transformational and distributed leadership practices evolved as a result of the increasing diversity of the student population in schools. It was realized that no longer were schools restricted to middle and upper class students but to a diversity of students who came from varied backgrounds. The 1970s saw the emergence of education for all regardless of background. The teaching profession began to feel a huge impact of school reforms as their teaching practices had to adhere to requirements of newly implemented curriculum (Goodson, 2003). More accountability became the norm as

schools began working towards higher test scores on standardized tests. An instructional leadership approach was evident during this time as school leaders were accountable for their school's performance on standardized testing.

While the instructional leadership concept supported the trend towards more accountability on the part of schools, transformational and distributed leadership approaches followed suit, with the same goals but with a different form of practice. Transformational leadership took on the role of instilling participation from all members within the educational setting and working towards a shared vision and mission. According to Bass (1999, p. 13), "transformational leaders can be directive or participative, authoritarian or democratic." This depends greatly on the circumstances of the organization.

Transformational and distributed leadership are similar in that they both require full participation from all members of the organization. It then becomes important that staff become familiar with school leadership practices and expectations. Creating a collaborative climate where staff are made to feel that they are an important part of the teamwork required in moving forward to create and work towards a school vision. The distributed leadership concept is built upon delegated leadership and remains wide open in terms of its definition, therefore, schools must be careful in how they implement this type of leadership (Woods et al., 2004).

First Nations schools, or schools serving a large number of First Nations students must be cautious in approaching leadership practices. A school leader cannot choose one leadership concept and expect it to work for their school in terms of raising academic

achievement. The school leader needs to concentrate on areas that need improvement such as school-community partnerships which are so critical for bridging the gap that currently exists. As Mulford (2008) mentioned, the school principal will make a difference by concentrating on key areas that need improvement. Such areas as curriculum, resources, staffing, professional development, and promoting staff knowledge and understanding regarding diversity are key to improvement.

Leadership is the driving force behind improved student outcomes. The implementation of evidence-based practices that are evident in similar situations would be beneficial. Leadership is critical to effective schools as shown by the various research studies conducted in recent years. Schools must continue to build on the concepts of leadership.

2.9 Social Justice in Education

Social justice in education has become a topic of discussion in recent years. As a result, there is no concrete, definitive meaning for social justice. It can be about fairness and equity in education promoting the inclusion of all students. Social justice can also be about legitimacy, fairness, and welfare, and defined as both a process and a goal (Hytten & Bettez, 2011; Ryan, 2006).

The idea of social justice began with an early sociologist named Pierre Bourdieu who began the study of social exclusion with Algerians (Calhoun, 2006). The Algerians were a minority community that had become marginalized because of French colonialism. As Bourdieu conducted his research into the lives of Algerians and their communities, he noticed that they had become marginalized. Bourdieu then turned to the schools as a way

of remedying or eliminating social exclusion. However, his hope was short-lived as he soon realized that schools continued to perpetuate social inequality.

Marginalization is a form of oppression that a collective group of people experience along with exploitation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Vincent, 2003). First Nations people are considered a collective group of people in Canada who have experienced oppression since the beginning of colonization as evident in historical accounts. These people continue to be marginalized today even though there have been efforts made to reduce this disparity. Collectively they have not benefitted from the same opportunities as other Canadians primarily when it comes to educational opportunities.

When examining oppression in society Young (2006) argues that oppression is built into the policies, procedures, and institutions in society; it is more than the result of individual actions. These policies, procedures, and institutions reinforce patterned relationships through which distribution occurs (Ryan, 2006). Groups or minorities as a collective unit may be excluded, and as a result they may not benefit from certain institutional processes such as education. According to Kumashiro (2004) what schools teach and the way they function is based on the perspectives, experiences, and values of only certain people in society, especially those who have traditionally been privileged or currently wield political influence. Since the beginning of First Nations educational history it is evident that education has set parameters or limited their educational attainment which has resulted in a gap in education achievement today.

In order for the achievement gap in education to be reduced or eliminated for First Nations students, there must be a concerted effort among government and educational

institutions to eliminate barriers for these students. These barriers serve to marginalize and further reduce the potential for these students. Barriers that are encountered by First Nations students are a harsh reality for them as they work towards educational attainment. It is also important that school structures are designed to properly serve and support all students including First Nations students.

2.10 Social Justice and School Leadership

In looking back at the educational history of First Nations people it is clear that school structures in the public school system have failed. In order for educational reform to show positive student outcomes it is important that the structures promote equity and inclusion. In one study (Jean-Marie, 2008) four principals who promoted social justice were studied; their leadership practices promoted and embraced social justice, democratic schooling, and issues of equity. It was found that all four principals had a deep commitment to all students in their schools with the intent that students will achieve. Staff is engaged in professional development that is geared towards improving outcomes for those students who have diverse needs. Engaging teachers in talking about diversity issues is important in increasing their understanding. In this case public schools in Canada that have a high student population of First Nations students can focus on how they can improve their outcomes.

Social justice leadership is concerned about inclusion of all students. Schools in Canada now have a more diverse student population than ever. Canadian and provincial governments are demanding an increase in the educational attainment rates of First Nations students.

2.10 Summary

In order to understand why the education achievement gap exists for First Nations students, it is imperative that their history of education be examined and understood. Through this process it becomes clear that what has been happening in most classrooms in the education of First Nations students across Canada has not worked for the most part. Instead government, policymakers, and educators need to examine the structures that are currently in place. They have an important role in making a difference, although much of the research also implicates the parents and communities. Parents, teachers, students, principals, community, district personnel, and the school board all have a role to play in this scenario.

Education attainment for First Nations students is a national priority and every effort needs to be put into improving the opportunities for students. However, First Nations communities need to become more proactive in ensuring that their concerns regarding education are addressed. The literature review has made it quite evident that schools must become more proactive in retaining students who may be disadvantaged or marginalized. Too often schools or teachers or administrators tend to take a reactive approach which only leads to student disengagement. In order for schools to make a difference they must utilize the current research on student retention and focus on keeping students in schools. Particularly effective are strategies and innovative ways of retaining students such as a social justice approach that focuses on acceptance of all students in order to see them complete high school.

Leadership has never been more important to school effectiveness. The changing demographics and reform efforts in schools that serve First Nations need to first consider effective leadership as a top priority. It has not been a good experience collectively for this group of people and today there are many uncertainties as to how the achievement gap will be eliminated. Educators need to understand that there is no clear cut answer to this problem. More attention, however, needs to be paid to effective research in making schools more effective and responsive to student needs.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The methodology employed a case study approach where a sample of participants took part. The central question of this study was "What factors or influences in the school setting may impact student retention and academic achievement?" In order to explore this question a qualitative case study with a select group of First Nations student participants was undertaken. According to Creswell (2009, p.13) a qualitative case study is "a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals." Participants were interviewed individually to acquire their perceptions and perspectives on their school experiences and how these influenced their eventual completion of high school.

This study focused on individual experiences which meant interviewing the participants. This primary strategy was used to capture the deep meaning of experience in the participants' own words (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 55). The researcher analyzed the data to develop categories and themes that evolved from the participants' educational experiences.

A qualitative study was most appropriate as it allowed for multiple perspectives on what influenced student retention among First Nations students. The researcher gained an understanding of the deeper perspectives that were captured in a face-to-face interaction with the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p.53).

3.2 Definition of Terms

The terminology used in this study will be explained and defined in order to clarify terms or names (Aboriginal Issues – Glossary of Terms, 2006):

Aboriginal: are comprised of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples of Canada.

First Nations: are the various Aboriginal peoples in Canada who are neither Inuit nor Metis. First Nations are not defined as a visible minority under the Employment Equity Act or by the criteria of Statistics Canada.

Indian: a term used up to the 1970s and afterwards removed because it was considered offensive. However, *Indian* still a legal term used to identify *status Indians* or First Nations people who fall under the treaties with the government of Canada.

Indian Act: is a Canadian statute that concerns registered Indians, their bands, and the system of Indian reserves. It was enacted in 1876 by the Parliament of Canada.

Residential School: just after confederation until the 1970s large numbers of Aboriginal children in Canada were required to attend government funded, church-run residential schools.

School leaver: school leavers are students who have left school before they complete high school for various reasons.

Treaty: Treaties were signed between the Indian people and the government of Canada in the late 19th century. It was at this point that Indians were placed on reserves in Canada and their affairs were managed by the government.

3.3 Site

An exploratory case study was undertaken with eight participants who were involved in the study. The participants were of First Nations descent and may have attended an on-reserve or off-reserve high school and successfully completed high school. A search of prospective students took place at a post-secondary institution in the province of Alberta. Prospective students who were interested in participating in the study were required to fill out an application. With the help of the Native Center at the post-secondary institution; participants were recruited to participate in the research. There was little difficulty in attracting participants. A call for participants was sent out and posters were distributed through email and posted at the post-secondary institution (Appendix B). A number of participants expressed interest in the study. Participants contacted the researcher through email and were required to fill out an application and questionnaire in order to take part in the study (Appendix C). The researcher reviewed the applications and informed the successful volunteers that they were selected for the study. An interview schedule was developed and the researcher planned to meet the participants at the institution for the initial interview and the formal interview. Once the researcher met with the participants individually they were informed of the purpose of the study and what was expected of them as participants. They consented to a semi-structured interview that would last up to three hours. In the event that the researcher needed more information from the participants were contacted for a follow-up interview or they were required to answer further questions through email or telephone.

Participants had to have completed high school in the previous two years and at the time of the study were enrolled in full-time studies at a post-secondary institution. The post-secondary institution was the site of the study. Interview rooms were booked well in advance of the interview with the scheduled time allocated to each interview.

3.4 Sample

The study focused on eight post-secondary students who had graduated from high school within the past two years of the study. At the time of the study they were attending a post-secondary institution on a full-time basis. The researcher purposefully selected participants. Initially the researcher planned an even mixture of males and females for the study but at the conclusion of the study there were seven females and one male who were selected to participate. Due to the limited number of volunteers it was difficult to have an even mixture. Several male applicants were turned away due to their ineligibility based on the criteria for selection. Two was turned away because they had not graduated from high school in the past two year prior to the study. The purpose of the study did not focus on a specific gender or made any differentiation between genders.

3.5 Access and Sample Selection

In order to access student participants at the post-secondary institution an ethics application was completed by the researcher which was then forwarded to the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board for review. Ethics clearance was approved by the Ethics Review Board; as well the researcher completed certification for Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS): Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics.

After acquiring ethics approval, the researcher presented the research study to the First Nations student body at the post-secondary institution to introduce the research project and met with prospective participants to explain the research study. Interested participants completed applications indicating their interest to participate in the research study, these were reviewed by the researcher at a later date. Once the researcher reviewed the applications, determination was made on participation. The researcher informed the successful participants informing them that they were selected for the study.

3.6 Selection of Participants

The selection process began with the participants who completed the application form and indicated the following: Ancestry, full-time status in a post-secondary institution, the year they graduated from high school, age, and the reserve that were they registered in. From the applications the researcher began the selection of participants and with selections made. The researcher then contacted the successful participants through phone calls or emails.

Participants who were selected fell into the range of 19-21 years of age. They were all of First Nations descent, they had graduated from high school in the previous two years prior to the time the study took place, and they were studying full-time at a post-secondary institution. Once the interviews were set up the researcher informed the participants of the requirements in place for their participation in the study. They were required to fill in a participant consent form and sign off indicting their consent to take part in the study (Appendix D). Participants were also informed that at any time they could opt out of the study for whatever reason and that the study was strictly voluntary.

The researcher also acquired personal contact information for each participant in case follow-up was necessary. This information was stored separately from the transcripts.

3.7 Data Sources

Face-to-face interviews were arranged and conducted with all the participants after eligibility was determined. These interviews were semi-structured interviews which allowed the researcher to ask additional questions if more information was needed on a topic. According to Cohen and Crabtree (2006), a semi-structured interview is best used when using open-ended questions to further understand the topic at hand. Semi-structured interviews also allow the participants freedom to express their views in their own terms.

The interview process took place with the following steps: First: the initial informal interview took place where the researcher and the participants met to discuss the topic and determine participant eligibility. The second step in the interview process was the scheduling of the formal interview with each participant. The third step involved the formal interview where the participants and the researcher met for a face-to-face interview which lasted for two to three hours. At this time the interview began with the researcher reading from a script which explained the research topic (Appendix E). At that point the participants had the opportunity to ask questions or as for clarification. Once the formal interviews began an audio-tape was used to collect the data. The researcher also kept notes during the interviews. The final part of the interview took place as a request by the researcher if there was a need for more additional information from the participants.

The researcher scripted a list of eight questions that was used to interview participants (Appendix E). The interview technique according to Marshall and Rossman (2006) captures the deep meaning of experience in the participants' own words (p.55).

Each interview was audio-taped and the researcher took notes at the same time in order to further the understanding of each interview transcript. Immediately following each interview the recording was examined. The researcher then typed each interview verbatim ensuring that the language used was intact and not changed or altered. In this way the deep meaning was captured. The researcher proofread and annotated the transcripts. In this way the researcher was able to add notes explaining the stories. These interview field notes were kept for future reference (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2007). As the participants were being interviewed, the researcher wrote notes about key ideas that participants used in answering the questions. In this way the researcher was able to make important connections to each story that participants contributed to the study.

3.8 Data Collection and Analysis

The objective of this study was to examine how schools may influence student retention among First Nations students by capturing the perspectives and perceptions of participants. In order to ensure that the data was objective and free of bias, steps and procedures were implemented in analyzing the data.

Once the data was collected through face to face interviews, the researcher devised a structured procedure for analysis. There was a huge amount of information that needed to be organized so that the researcher was able to make meaning from it. The following steps were modeled after the procedures used by Marshall and Rossman (2006):

1. Organization of the data: the researcher sifted through the data and organized it by names, when, and with whom the data was gathered. A log of data-gathering activities was arranged and assembled. Interview transcripts were completed on each interview. This was done by the researcher typing all the transcripts verbatim and no editing was done. Notes taken during the interviews were assembled and placed in files so that it was easily accessible. Interview transcripts were saved on a separate file and the only person who had access was the researcher.

2. Once the data was organized and arranged so that it was easily accessible the researcher then became totally immersed with this data. Because the amount of data was huge, the researcher spent time familiarizing herself with it by reading transcripts and making notes. Data was arranged on templates that were organized according to topics or questions. This data management technique allowed the researcher to guard against losing or misplacing important data.

3. Generating categories and themes: the researcher engaged in this process as she became familiar with the data. Steps one and two were important as the data was organized and the researcher began generating categories and themes. In this process, the identification of salient themes, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of belief that link people and settings… (Marshall & Rossman, p.158). Once the researcher became familiar with the recurring

ideas, they were then categorized into themes. At the same time the researcher noted patterns that were beginning to emerge.

4. Writing analytical memos: writing notes, reflective memos, thoughts and insights were done. Observational notes, methodological notes, theoretical notes, and analytic memos were useful.

5. Offering Interpretations: the researcher began to tell the story bringing meaning and coherence to the themes, using patterns, categories, and developing linkages to create a story line that made sense. Interpretation resulted in deriving significance in what was found.

6. The report was written up lending a shape and form that would summarize and reflect the complexity of the data. An outline of the chapters for the dissertation emerged. The researcher began to tell the story bringing meaning and coherence to the themes, patterns, categories, developing linkages and a story line that made sense. Interpretation meant attaching significance to what was found (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

3.9 Trustworthiness

The researcher selected participants who did not know her personally. All the participants were informed at the beginning of the study that the researcher understood the current issues in First Nations education. By explaining the purpose of the research, confidentiality, and the process in conducting the research, the researcher helped the participants understand the importance of the study. Participants were also informed that

the data collected was to be used only to improve First Nations education. The researcher demonstrated sincerity about First Nations education and the importance of the study.

3.10 Ethical Concerns

All the participants were informed that there would be no names used as the data was transcribed and written. Students were assigned a pseudonym during the data analysis and write up of the study in order to protect their identity and ensure confidentiality. There were no names of schools, places, or teacher names used in the transcribing and reporting of the research. The post-secondary institution where the participants attended would not be revealed in order to protect the identity of the participants. The researcher explained to the participants that all data was kept in a locked filing cabinet and only the researcher would have access to it.

3.11 Limitations

The sample size of this study was small and cannot be generalized to the First Nations population of Canada. The findings would not be generalized to the total population of schools across Canada as settings and demographics differ in context. The findings were also limited in that they only report on school factors that may influence students to complete high school. There were many other factors involved in the influence of students to complete high school. This study only reflects findings in a small sample of First Nations students and acknowledges the existence of other important factors such as home and community.

The researcher's intent during the data analysis was to search for main themes that were reminiscent of student experiences in the education setting. These themes may be drawn from student experiences during their time in a school setting. The researcher intended to narrate some of the experiences that students had in order to portray and bring true meaning to the information that was collected. These experiences may be achievements or failures, and may include people who played a significant part in their failure or success in their lives. The study of students helped bring about a better and thorough understanding of how school structures play a role when it comes to student retention efforts.

3.12 Conclusion

It is evident in this research study that students must be allowed equitable opportunities in schools in order to be academically successful. Opportunities such as quality and caring schools, effective teachers, and effective school leadership are some of the school structures that will allow all students to be successful in the school. School leadership is vitally important in setting the direction among school staff in order to work towards meeting the needs of all students. Schools have a tremendous influence in making a difference in improving high school graduation rates among First Nations students. In working towards this goal schools need to carefully examine student demographics and carefully plan and establish responsive school structures.

In the process of collecting the data, the researcher ensured that the findings that emerged from the study would be used to bring student voices and in this case First Nations students voices to the forefront.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will present the findings from the data analysis of First Nations students' perceptions and perspectives on their high school experience. The researcher will begin by presenting each participant's story. The participants of this study were assigned pseudonyms by the researcher during the analysis of the research. The pseudonyms- Marcia, Janine, Pam, Denise, Cora, Ron, Kyla, and Greta were assigned. In order to illustrate their backgrounds and how their life experiences influence their encounter with schooling each participant's story will be presented. In this way the experiences both in family and school help present a better understanding of the participants and what challenges and barriers may influence their educational attainment.

4.2 The Sample

Eight students who attended a recognized post-secondary institution in the Province of Alberta were chosen to participate in the research study and were interviewed by the researcher. At the time of the study these students were in their first or second year of post-secondary studies. They had all completed an advanced diploma program in high school and upon high school completion they enrolled in post-secondary studies. There were seven female participants and one male participant who volunteered to participate in the study. The First Nation student population at the post-secondary institution was unknown to the researcher at the time of the study.

The case study method is an appropriate approach as it allows the researcher to become close to the participants in order to gain their perceptions and perspectives. This will help in creating an understanding of their high school experiences and what factors influenced their academic success.

Prospective students were required to fill out a questionnaire prior to their selection. Once the participants met the criteria required for participant selection they were contacted. Participation was based on the following: (1) the participants must have graduated from high school in the two years prior to the study, (2) the participants must be of First Nations descent, (3) the participants may have graduated from an off-reserve or on-reserve high school, (4) the participants must be attending a post-secondary institution as a full-time student, and (5) upon being selected for the study the participant must sign a consent form. In the final analysis there was no differentiation made between on-reserve and off-reserve high schools. The sole purpose of the research was to reveal how important school structures are in retaining and supporting students in their pursuit of high school completion.

4.3 Data Sources and Procedures

Data collection followed a number of steps: (1) informal meeting with the participants at the post-secondary institution, (2) interested participants filling out a questionnaire, (3) selection of participants for the study, (4) administration of semi-structured interview questions, and (5) audio-taping of all interviews with the participants. In this process the researcher was able to acquire participants' perceptions and perspectives regarding their high school experience. The researcher kept notes during the interviews and

after the interviews and continually reviewed the interview data. Transcripts of interviews were developed and reviewed on a consistent basis.

4.4 Individual Interviews

Individual interviews were scheduled with the participants at the post-secondary institution they attended. The interviews lasted from between two and three hours and took place on campus. Any follow-up information that was needed by the researcher was done through phone or email.

The interviews were in a semi-structured interview format; in this way, the researcher was able to ask additional questions in order to get complete information from participants. The interview questions were intended to focus completely on the participants' schooling experiences. All of the interviews were audio-taped and the creation of transcripts was done soon after the interviews. The researcher kept notes during the interviews and after reviewing the transcripts.

4.5 Research Questions

The following research question and subsidiary questions helped guide this study:

The central question of this study was: what are First Nations students' perceptions and perspectives regarding the factors that have impacted their educational success in schools? The subsidiary questions were as follows:

1. How influential was the school principal in their academic success?
2. How influential were teachers in their academic success?

3. How influential were school programs in their academic success?

4. What barriers in schools that might contribute to students leaving school and how can these barriers be addressed?

This chapter will be organized by the four subsidiary questions.

4.6 Profile of the Participants

In order to protect the confidentiality of all the participants, each had a pseudonym in the written analysis. All eight participants experienced different backgrounds in terms of culture, family, and community. These individual profiles create a better understanding of how culture, family, and community may influence students' educational attainment.

Seven of the participants graduated from an off-reserve provincial school system. One participant graduated from a First Nations on-reserve high school. Janine was the only participant who graduated from an on-reserve high school, but has lived in the city all of her life. She chose to attend an on-reserve high school alternative program for a number of reasons. Marcia, Ron, Kyla, and Greta lived on-reserve for the majority of their lives. They left the reserve to attend post-secondary schooling after they completed high school. Pam, Janine, Denise, and Cora have lived off-reserve for all of their lives.

All of the family circumstances show individual differences. Three participants-- Marcia, Ron, and Greta-- have all lived with their biological parents for all of their lives. Participants Janine, Pam, Denise, Cora, and Kyla have all lived in a single-parent family which began at some point in their lives. Cora lived with a step-father and her biological mother for much of her life.

All of the participants were academically successful as they completed high school and went on to post-secondary studies. The participants were between the ages of 19 and 21 years of age at time of the study. All of the mothers of the participants except one had completed high school. Four of the participants' mothers acquired a university degree. Pam's dad acquired a law degree and is presently practicing law. Four of the fathers of the participants were involved in trades and had not completed high school; they are now involved in carpentry, ranch work, iron, and railway work.

4.7 Site of the Study

The study took place in a post-secondary institution where participants were attending full-time studies. They were interviewed over a period of time with the use of semi-structured interview questions. There were eight participants selected for the study and interviews began in March, 2012 and concluded in December, 2012. Interviews were audio-taped and reviewed on a continuous basis in order to search for themes and categories.

Tables1 lists the following information: The participants' school attendance which lists off-reserve located in a provincial school jurisdiction and on-reserve located in a First Nation school authority. It also shows, the year they graduated from high school, their age and gender.

4.8 Table 1: Participants Purposefully Selected for the Study

	High School Jurisdiction	Completion of High School	Age	Gender
Participant #1:Marcia	Off-reserve	Graduated in 2010	19 years	Female
Participant #2:Janine	On-reserve	Graduated in 2011	21 years	Female
Participant #3Pam	Off-reserve	Graduated in 2011	19 years	Female
Participant #4:Denise	Off-reserve	Graduated in 2010	20 years	Female
Participant #5:Cora	Off-reserve	Graduated in 2010	20 years	Female
Participant #6:Ron	Off-reserve	Graduated in 2011	19 years	Male
Participant #7:Kyla	Off-reserve	Graduated in 2011	19 years	Female
Participant #8:Greta	Off-reserve	Graduated in 2010	20 years	Female

Table 2 shows the participants' family structure, place of residence during high school, parents' education and parents' occupation. Five of the participants lived in single parent families and three of the participants came from traditional families which had both parents. All of the mothers of the participants had attained high school and most went on to obtain post-secondary education. Five of the dads were high school leavers and three had completed high school and went on to obtain post-secondary education. Four of the participants lived on-reserve during high school and four participants lived off-reserve in

cities and towns. Participants' parents are employed in various areas from trades to professions in social work and law. It is evident that parental influence may have had a positive effect on high school completion.

4.9 Table 2: Participants' Family and Community

	Family Structure	**Residence During High School**	**Parent Level of Education**	**Parent Occupations**
Marcia	Two-parent	On-reserve	Mom: college Dad: school leaver	Mom:secretary Dad: trades
Janine	Single-parent	City	Mom: leaver Dad: school leaver	Mom: social worker Dad: unknown
Pam	Single-parent	City	Mom: college Dad: university	Mom: business Dad: law
Denise	Single-parent	City	Mom: university Dad: school leaver	Mom: social worker Dad: railway worker
Cora	Single-parent	City	Mom: university Dad: school leaver	Mom: social worker Dad: ironworker
Ron	Two-parent	On-reserve	Mom: highschool Dad: highschool	Mom: medical records Dad: trades
Kyla	Single-parent	On-reserve	Mom: highschool Dad: highschool	Mom: social worker Dad: unknown
Greta	Two-parent	On-reserve	Mom: university Dad: school leaver	Mom: human services Dad: rancher

Each participant shared their stories about themselves including their background, family life, school experiences and future plans. These stories provided a snapshot of each participant, giving is an understanding of their individual backgrounds.

4.10 Marcia's Story

Marcia spent most of her life living on a reserve in Alberta. At the time of the research study she was 19 years of age. She grew up with both parents and lived a happy

childhood with her two siblings. She has one older brother and one younger brother. Both siblings have graduated from high school. Marcia graduated in 2010 in an off-reserve high school in a small town in Alberta. Mom has a secretarial job and Marcia describes her dad as a "jack of all trades." Marcia received the majority of her education in on-reserve schools. Her parents decided when she began high school that she would attend off-reserve, although she lived on-reserve during her high school years. Marcia's brothers also have all enrolled in post-secondary studies. Marcia plans to complete a chartered accounting degree which will take her four years. She is currently in her second year at the time of the study. She is doing well academically and looks forward to completing her degree.

When Marcia reflects on her high school years she speaks of high school teachers who had high expectations. First and foremost her high school teachers wanted their students to remain in school. She remembers teachers going out their way to get students to stay in school. She recalled a time when she was skipping school and one of her teachers took her aside and told her that if she wanted to do well in his class she needed to stop skipping. Marcia stopped skipping and she her grades improve. Marcia said that this teacher basically "woke her up" and she realized that teachers do care and want to help students. One teacher wrote personalized notes to her students, messages of encouragement and success. Teachers were supportive and if Marcia had a question they guided her through the process if she needed assistance.

4.11 Janine's Story

Janine at the time of the interview was 21 years of age. Most her years were spent in the city living with her single mom. Although, Janine is First Nations she has spent little time on-reserve. She mentioned that she has spent a lot of time engaged in cultural activities such as taking part in traditional dancing. At the time of the research study Janine was in her first year of post-secondary studies. She said that her mom has returned to school, and she maintains contact with her dad. Janine attended a junior high school in the city but found that she couldn't take the constant bullying and teasing. She left school and went to work for a short time and soon realized that she wanted to go back to school. In her own words Janine described her decision to leave school after grade 8 because, "I was teased a lot, 'I was teased because I was Native.' I was teased every day and it got to the point that I just didn't want to go to school anymore." She enrolled in a high school alternative program on-reserve and much to her satisfaction she really liked it. Janine didn't think that she would like school but her friends were all graduating from high school and she decided to go back. She's had an excellent experience attending the alternative program.

The school principal was important to Janine's success in high school and in Janine's words, "she was very good and she took the time to know her students." Janine believed that this individual attention by teachers was the key to her success in high school.

4.12 Pam's Story

This is Pam's first year in a post-secondary institution and she is finding the transition quite difficult. She grew up in suburb just outside of a large city where she had

attended school for most of her life. She was 19 years of age at the time of the interview and grew up in a single parent family. She has maintained contact with her dad. In grade 10 she was attending a Catholic separate school which emphasized religious values in addition to the regular curriculum. She found that she needed to make a switch to a public school for grades 11 and 12 because of programming. The public school had a better advanced placement program and she had done exceptionally well in the sciences. Pam is quite involved in extra-curricular activities like gymnastics, volunteer, dance, and equestrian show jumping. She did well in balancing both home and school activities. Pam's determination to succeed stemmed from the fact that many family members didn't get a high school education. Her parents felt that they didn't want their daughter to face the same scenario so they made education a priority.

All of Pam's experiences in the school were positive. She spoke of all the activities that truly engaged students such as the equine program, drama, fundraising, and school-wide activities that promoted unity in the school. The teachers were friendly and outgoing and wanted only to be involved with students. The school was large with a population of approximately 1200 students.

4.13 Denise's Story

Denise is 20 years of age and in her second year of post-secondary studies. Denise grew up in a single parent family. Her mom is a social worker and her dad works on the railway. She graduated from high school two years prior to the research study. She never lived on the reserve and completed all of her education in the city. She explained that during her school years she was never made to feel different because she was First Nations.

Also, her high school did not accept students skipping classes. Students who did well in their school work were respected and it was accepted that everyone could graduate from high school. Supports in the school centered on career planning, tutoring, and student workshops. The school population at the school Denise attended was between 400-500.

In Denise's school teachers were mostly good and all seemed to want to help all students. There was an Aboriginal program in the school for students who needed academic and counseling support. She attributes the school counselor as the person who was influential in her academic success because he implemented a high school completion plan that fit perfectly.

4.14 Cora's Story

Cora was 20 years of age at the time of the interview. She comes from a First Nations reserve, but completed most of her high school in a large city. She graduated from a large city separate school in 2010. She grew up in a single parent family and lived in the city. Her mom is a social worker and her step-dad is an ironworker. Cora plans on completing her undergraduate degree and then go to law school. At the time of the interview Cora was in her second year of post-secondary studies. She spoke of how her elementary school years were good, but when she reached her teenage years she became involved in drugs. She soon found that by the end of grade 10 she had received credit for only one course. She moved to a public school and found that there was too much freedom placed on students as they were only given textbooks which they were expected to read and complete assignments. This wasn't working so she moved back to the separate high school for the rest of her studies.

What really stood out in high school for Cora was her French teacher, who had a negative impact on her. According to Cora the French teacher made her feel dumb because she wasn't good in French. The teacher was strict and stern, and not friendly at all. Cora was afraid to speak out in class and often times she would not say anything because she was afraid of being ridiculed. In contrast, someone who made a positive impact on Cora was her social studies teacher, who made her feel important in everything she did. Cora offered an example of one time when she had forgotten to bring her material to class. She informed the teacher of this and he said to her, "you have got to be one of the most honest people I have met."

4.15 Ron's Story

Ron comes from a reserve outside of a small town where he attended high school. He is 19 years of age and immediately after high school he enrolled in a post-secondary institution. He is in his first year of post-secondary studies. Ron has lived all of his life with his parents but his grandmother has had a strong influence on him. He comes from an extended family where there has been much support in his education throughout his schooling. Both his parents work on the reserve where he has lived all of his life. At the time of interview he was just completing his first year of studies. He planned on becoming a pharmacist, but instead enrolled in an engineering program.

4.16 Kyla's Story

Kyla grew up on a reserve and graduated from high school in 2011. She was one of thirteen Aboriginal high school graduates in a graduating class of 1400 students. At the time of the research study Kyla was in her first year of post-secondary studies and nineteen

years of age at the time of the interview. She was raised traditionally by her grandparents and lived with them for most of her life. Her mother overcame addictions and went on to receive a Masters in Social Work degree. Kyla maintains contact with her dad. She hopes to complete her Bachelor of Arts degree in 2016. She spoke of how alcohol addictions have ravaged her community and how she herself has lost two siblings to addictions. She remains positive that education can change her future.

4.17 Greta's Story

Greta was raised by her parents who attended residential school. She is the youngest of five siblings; the oldest is 38 years of age and the closest sibling to her age is 33 years of age. Greta graduated from high school in 2010 from an off-reserve high school. At the time of the interview Greta was 20 years of age and she was in her first year of post-secondary studies. Her parents are in their 60s and raised Greta with the traditional cultural ways of her people. After Greta graduated from high school she took two years off and then enrolled in higher education. She is currently doing her first year of studies and has yet to choose a major.

4.18 Question Analysis

The following analysis presents the themes and categories that emerged as a result of the data analysis.

4.18.1 Subsidiary question# 1: How influential was school programming in your academic success?

There were a number of patterns that emerged from the data regarding the school programming in the school. One of the key areas that participants mentioned throughout the interviews was the strong influence that the school counselors made in their educational attainment. Most of the school counselors referred to in the interviews were the Aboriginal or Native Liaison workers. Since these workers act in the capacity of student counselor, they are referred to similarly in the data analysis. In most provincial schools the Native Liaison workers are hired to promote and support the education of Aboriginal students. In most cases they liaise between home and school, act as mentors to students and parents, and support the school in delivering an educational program to Aboriginal students. These workers are hired under the FNMI programming that is funded by the division.

The participants spoke of how supportive the student counselors were during in their education. What was most significant was that school counselors made a large impact on students. Participants mentioned their supportive, caring, and close connection with students. They were very helpful when it came to students having to deal with problems in the home and school. They also provided excellent mentoring in the areas of career planning, setting up individual student programs, and monitoring student attendance. According to one student Marcia, the school counselor encouraged her to take advanced classes. She went on to describe of how he supported her in all areas of her schooling such as programming, counseling, setting career goals, and he acted as a liaison between students and principal, or school and home. Marcia credits the school counselor as in her own words, in her own words, “the biggest thing that kept me in school was the school counselor… he was very, very caring, and he really enjoyed his job.”

The second common pattern that emerged from the data was the school's promotion of the importance of education. According to students the school did this in a number of ways. In the participants interviews it was evident that the schools had implemented individualized student- graduation plans. In this way students were aware of where they were going and what they had to do in order to get there. Post-secondary institutions visited high schools and students discovered career planning and post-secondary schooling options.

School programming focused strongly on the core subjects but important enhancements were the extra-curricular activities and option classes. Students were encouraged to take part in sports. There were trips to enhance study in social studies; one trip took students to Europe as a follow-up to their studies. In one school an anti-racist program was implemented where all students were taught about differences among people. One activity that stood out was "pink-shirt day" where all students wore pink to signify acceptance of gay and lesbian people. Usually these activities had a real story to tell students about the realities of what it means to be different. This is an excellent example of what schools can do in promoting acceptance for people who are different.

Programming was geared to community and in one school a partnership with another institution to promote an equine program was initiated. The school counselor at Pam's school promoted the partnership with a post-secondary institution to pilot an equine program. This was in response to the high number of students who were interested in this area.

Some schools promoted student attendance by keeping track of absences and following up with individual attendance problems. Parents were contacted and asked to come into the school to meet with administration in an attempt to resolve the problem. This type of immediate follow-up resolved attendance issues for some students; for example in one school the vice-principal tracked students down and took them back to school.

Another important role for school counselors was enabling a school-home connection and partnership to take place with some First Nations parents. Some parents were very open and receptive to the school counselors. It opened a line of communication that may not have been existed if it wasn't for the school counselors making this happen. Parents who are sometimes reluctant to connect with the school need to be made to feel welcome. This gives them that incentive to begin forming meaningful connections with the school.

It was found that in some cases participants experienced some problems both in home and school. School counselors met the physical, social, and emotional needs of the students. They greatly influenced the students and had a huge impact on many of them. Some participants attributed their success to the school counselor for getting them through school. According to one participant there were times during class that she would be called by the counselor to find that they were just checking up on her to ensure that all was well. They basically asked how the student was doing and if there was anything they could do to help. In Cora's school two student counselors were available to help. They made the most significant impact for Cora because in high school she had so many challenges including lots of things going on at home. When Cora felt that she needed someone to talk to because she was angry, she would go the Aboriginal Pride room where the counselors were there

for her. The counselors were also credited with ensuring that students participated in sports activities in the school. Counselors would invite coaches into the student lounge where Aboriginal students were asked to try out for teams. According to Kyla, “They would make sure that we tried out for everything.”

Students lack financial resources they may be unable to enter school sports. This study revealed many examples of school counselors encouraging extra-activities for students. There were lots of opportunities for fund raising in the schools and this is how most extra-curricular activities were funded.

A key to increasing First Nations graduation rates is that schools need to understand what kinds of influences help these students complete high school. According to Knestling (2008, p.3), educators must look at factors within the schools and the possible interactions between schools and students. This relationship is critical in enabling students to have a sense of belonging to the school. As the researcher listened to many of the participants, they spoke fondly of the many school activities that truly made a difference for them. One participant spoke about how the school influenced her to take part in sports and, with the help of the school counselor, she ended up winning a national title.

4.18.2 Subsidiary Question #2: How influential were teachers in your academic success?

As participants spoke of teachers who were influential in their academic success they spoke of teachers who were committed and dedicated to their teaching and to the success of all students. Participants also spoke of teachers were not so influential and this is covered in a later section. Teachers have a huge influence on students and at one time or other individuals can easily recall a teacher who has made a difference. One of the main reasons

that students leave school is poor teacher relationships (Stout & Christenson, 2009). According to Stout and Christenson they reported that the predictors of students leaving school may be the result of the students' social background, students' educational experience, and school characteristics including teacher-student relationships. In this study participants reflected on their relationships with teachers and how teachers taught important knowledge and skills. It is evident that in order for students to learn in schools they must have an established relationship with their teachers. Students need to feel good about their teachers in order to be successful.

When participants were asked how their teachers influenced their success, the majority said that teachers made a difference in how they felt about school. In most of the schools teachers established a connection with students by establishing a relationship and it took place through informal and formal settings. Teachers respected and valued students. Janine had a bad experience in a city school and decided to enroll in an alternative program on-reserve. She didn't think that she would like the school but once she enrolled her whole perspective had changed. "I never thought I would like going to school, like doing homework and all these different things. The teachers really took time to know the students on an individual basis. I think that's what really helps you to succeed."

Teachers in most of the schools had high expectations of students and would usually follow-up when students failed to attend class or needed help on an assignment. Marcia talked about how her math teacher noticed that she was skipping school. One day the teacher took her aside and said to her that she shouldn't skip if she wanted to do well in her class. She said that from that day on she made an effort to attend classes. Teachers

showing and demonstrating that they care makes a real difference in the attitudes that students have toward school and their learning. Janine remembers well her high school English teacher who made it a priority to teach her students presentation and academic writing skills. The teacher made them aware that once they entered post-secondary they would need to write, and excellent writing skills would benefit them greatly in the future. Janine is grateful that she acquired the necessary knowledge and skills that she is using today in her classes. Students also spoke of how teachers changed their perspective on subjects that they didn't like initially. Denise, for example, started taking social studies class but she was reluctant because she hadn't done well in the past. Her teacher helped her change this by making social studies fun and engaging. Her teacher made her aware of current events and what was happening globally. The teacher also made students accountable and she expected all students in her class to take formal notes during class. She learned how to write an effective paper and in the year-end project she earned a 100 percent mark. Denise says, "If you have a teacher that wants you to do well and actually helps you, it makes you feel successful."

Students spoke of how their teachers made them feel valued and an important part of their class and school. Teachers valued students with mutual respect, treating everyone equally. In most of the students' experiences in the school, they were made to feel accepted for who they were.

Participants described teachers as helpful. Most teachers seemed to like their students and were supportive and encouraging. They valued students' opinions, promoted students' personal stories and gave them the opportunity to succeed. Good teachers were

approachable and made students feel important. In one situation a teacher wrote personalized messages to students. These personalized messages contained encouraging and motivating messages to individual students. Marcia remembers that one of her teachers wrote personalized messages about her future success. One student spoke of how teachers always made a point of interacting with students, even during lunch when, teachers would sit and talk with them. They believed that these teachers were fun and cool. These students likely felt that teachers were able to make them feel important and respected. At the same time teachers were able to make important connections with students, helping them feel that school was fun and engaging. Teachers did enjoyable and meaningful projects with students.

Most participants described teachers who had high expectations of students and made them accountable for their learning. Students valued most learning that was meaningful and engaging. For example, students who were learning about government had attended a band meeting with the Chief and Council. In this way they became aware of community issues. To further this learning, students then met with the National Aboriginal Chief to voice some of their concerns. The issue of poor housing on the reserve was brought up and how it has become a crisis in Canada. One student said, “If you have a teacher that wants you to do well and actually helps you, this motivates students to do well.” This student didn’t like social studies because it was subject she never did well in, but her social studies teacher changed this by engaging her in project-based activities. By the end of that class she had received an excellent mark on her project work.

In most of these schools the student population was large and in some schools it was as high as 1200 students. In many ways most of the participants felt that their teachers were able to connect with them whether it was learning in the classroom or in an informal setting. Some schools had teachers who made learning fun and every day there was something added to make school interesting. For example, on cold days in one school students would get free hot chocolate. Teachers were well liked at most schools and they always made time for students.

When participants spoke of teachers who had high expectations these teachers usually had strict rules for in-class behavior for students. In one class students were not allowed to talk in class freely or show disrespect to anyone. But the teacher was fun and she did fun projects with the students, projects that were meaningful. Teachers who went out their way to compliment students really seemed to make an impact on how they felt about school.

Teachers who were able to teach to every student's needs stood out as effective. Teachers can only be effective when they have established important relationships with students on an individual and class basis. This means that teachers have to be responsive to students in class and on an individual basis. They must develop that fine line between high expectations and good relationships.

4.18.3 Subsidiary Question # 3: How Influential Was the School Principal in your Academic Success?

Over the past ten years researchers in education have focused on the importance of effective school leadership. Studies have helped identify what it is that effective school

leaders do that is pivotal in promoting positive student outcomes. School leadership must pay attention to the diverse needs of the school population that they serve. School leadership is about setting directions and influencing teachers, students, parents, and the community (Leithwood, Seashore, Louis, Andersen, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

Common strengths that emerged from the data regarding school principals were the following:

1. Principals promoted acceptance of students in their schools.
2. Principals developed relationships or connections with parents, teachers, students, and community.
3. Principals were visible throughout the school.
4. Principals held high expectations for students.

School principals are the driving force behind successful schools, and with this comes improved student outcomes. According to the research on closing the achievement gap it has become evident that transforming schools to better meet the needs of all students can make a dramatic difference (Sather, 1999). In this case, the dropout rate decreased, student attendance improved, and graduation levels increased. The school principal along with school staff, made a concerted effort to understand why students leave school. At the same time the school principal made it clear to students that there were high expectations placed upon them.

Leadership practices are the driving force behind effective change in schools; these in turn bring about improved student outcomes. School principals make significant contributions to school and student outcomes (Gurr, Drysdale, & Mulford, 2006). The

types of leadership practices evident in the research literature suggests that schools must have effective leadership in place and that leadership matters (Bass, 1999; Goodson, 2003; Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Mayrowetz, 2008; Mulford, 2008).

4.18.4 Subsidiary Question #4: Was the school principal instrumental in keeping you in school? How?

The principal in the schools promoted acceptance of all students and respected differences among students. It was very evident in all of the schools that the principal promoted acceptance of First Nations students by the infusion of First Nations cultural values in the schools. This was done through activities both cultural and the promotion of acceptance. The support for First Nations students in most of the schools was a FNMI liaison worker who was very active in supporting students in all areas, such as counseling, advocacy, and supporting them in sports and activities to promote skills.

Parent-school relationships were evident in some of the schools. One participant mentioned that the principal connected with the community through Aboriginal activities that took place in the school. Most of the schools had a celebration of high school completion and usually the principal was quite involved in this. Some parents were frequent visitors to the school and met with the principal on an on-going basis. In the event that there were problems the principal would call parents for their support.

When participants were asked how the principal was influential in their high school experiences that eventually lead to high school completion they spoke out and shared their perceptions and perspectives.

According to one participant, “It was clear that the principal promoted activities like Native Awareness Week in the school I attended”. It was hoped that such an activity would promote acceptance of First Nations students. There was also an event that honored all First Nations graduates in this participant’s school as well. “The vice-principal was the person that I mostly dealt with; he was strict but he was also fair. I liked him the most; there were two vice-principals and then the principal. But I felt that the vice-principal did a lot more than the actual principal in trying to keep kids engaged. He would go around and he would walk and he would look out for students who were skipping and try to get them into class. They were good about that because it was a small town. They would drive around and go looking for students. They would try to deal with the home. I remember my mom getting a phone call in grade 10. I’ve heard of other parents getting phone calls. He had high expectations and if you broke rules he would explain the consequences.”

Another participant mentioned that the principal was also her English teacher, and she supported all students. The building of self-esteem through workshops and attending community meetings with local government give students an idea of the issues in the community. “We had consistent classes every day. My principal was also my English teacher; she valued our opinions; she wanted us to share our personal stories. She taught us how to be better speakers. She motivated us and she showed us different way to be successful. She shared with us her personal background and she gave us a personal bond. She was a good support system. She made a lot of things accessible for everybody. She treated us as adults and didn’t treat us as little kids. She had lots of elders come in and speak to us. She knew things that were going on in the community”.

One participant spoke of her principal as someone who was proud of his students. In her school the principal was always showcasing his students. "He would have the local newspaper publicize events and give recognition to students who did well. He was so proud of his school. He recognized all students, not just the sports people or the smart ones but also the kids in welding. It's good to see this because at our school it makes it a nicer environment. The principal was one that you did not want to make mad. If you didn't have to go to his office, you didn't want to go there. We had a culinary class and, if we made extra food then we went to him. Other than you didn't want to go to the office because it usually meant you had an in-school suspension. We had an officer at our school because of drugs and stuff like that; there was a lot of marijuana. So he was trying to keep it out of the school. So if there was anything going on he would make sure that it was dealt with and not continue. One girl got suspended for having weed in her locker. Stuff like that he said "I don't want that in my school. I don't want the school to have a bad rep." He wanted it to be academically good. He wanted a good learning environment."

In another school there were three principals, there was a principal for each grade: 10, 11, and 12. This participant remembered the grade 11 principal the most. "I was always getting into trouble and he would always bring me into his office." Now that this participant is in post-secondary, her grade 11 principal is asking her to go back to the school and talk to students about how to excel and go on. "But I was like I couldn't believe it because I was in his office all the time." This participant spoke about how each principal differed in their principal duties. It was clear that the grade 12 principal had no difficulty in weeding out students considered to be unruly or deviant. If the principal felt that a student was posing significant problems they were told to leave the school for an indefinite period.

"In grade 12 I never had to deal with the principal because I was really trying to get my stuff together to graduate. "But the grade 12 principal she wasn't a very nice lady and I didn't like her…" "She kicked out a lot of people from our school---like people were getting kicked out left and right. She really brought the school from a place that wasn't so good to a really good recognized school. But in order to do that she had to let go of so many, and like people were getting kicked out because of one strike and it was like you're gone. It was like you're gone for this and you're gone for this. So really we lost a lot of my friends. She went around the school a lot. I didn't really see her interacting with staff and students." This participant remembers vividly her experiences with her high school principals.

In a male participant's view, "the school principal was someone that I never got to know. I never really talked to him all that much. I know that he was a fairly good guy. Yah, I never really talked to him so I didn't know him all that well." This participant has done extremely well in high school and had no problems or barriers in his education. His home life was stable and he was well supported in his education.

Another participant, Kyla, had the utmost respect for her school principal. "He would meet me in the school and greet me by my first name and ask how I was doing. Once he knew what I was about, he really took an interest. He would joke around and he was really nice. During Native Awareness week at the school we would have a mini powwow and the school would have people from the First Nations community come in and explain the dances. The principal demanded respect from everyone; that was kind of his deal. I watched him try with dozens of students before they dropped out. The school would even

have home visits to encourage the parents to get their kids to come to school. He had a very open relationship with my mom and that was initiated on both their parts. When I had first went to the school I had gotten into arguments with other students and I was in his office a lot.

A participant named Greta remembers how her principal reacted when an incident happened in the school. “I heard many stories about how hard he was on the Natives, but I remember one time this girl got into a fight with a White girl and he actually took the side of the Native girl. I see that he was strict but at the same time he’s like that for everyone. He was around the school all the time. Principals are there to push you and I know as Natives sometimes we don’t like that but it’s necessary. He would come in to the class, be in the hallways, and at his desk. He was everywhere.”

The majority of the schools that the participants attended were effective in that they provided an education that prepared them well. Most schools provided an inclusive environment where students were accepted and recognized for their efforts in their academic pursuits. Most of the schools provided a special recognition event to recognize First Nations students accomplishments in completing high school. This event was held to honor and acknowledge First Nations students collectively at year-end. It also provided an inclusive school environment where these students were made to feel accepted. An excellent example of this is that in several of the schools there was a special recognition event held to honor and acknowledge the successful First Nations students who completed high school. There were supports in place such as the Native Liaison worker who helped and supported students and families when needed.

The majority of participants believed that the school environment strongly influenced their decision to complete high school. Effective teaching, supportive school programming, quality school resources and curriculum, testing and assessment, graduation planning, equitable educational programming, career planning and development, student recognition, community-school relations, school-parent relations, and acceptance of all students were evident throughout the study.

The school principal is instrumental in ensuring that adequate student supports and programming are properly implemented and accessible for students. School principals set the direction for the school in terms of setting priorities for students and following through with staff who have high expectations for student outcomes. It was found that schools that offered the best educational programs made a difference in academic achievement among Aboriginals (Richards, Hove, & Afolabi, 2008). School principals are instrumental in shaping the school directly and indirectly through actions that they take (Hallinger, 2000).

Leadership qualities of school principals must be promoted if schools are working towards a vision of raising the achievement of diverse groups of students (Sather, 1999). As evident through the perspectives of participants the school principals played a key role in ensuring that school structures were in place to accommodate these students.

4.18.5 Subsidiary Question # 4: What are the barriers in schools that participants' experienced and how can these barriers be addressed?

The common barriers that students experienced in schools were bullying, racism, lack of teacher effectiveness, disengagement from school, family and social problems, low expectations, student labeling by school staff, inequitable educational opportunities, and

placement in modified classes. These barriers can greatly affect a student's educational achievement if the school does not properly address or implement effective measures. Students may leave school for one or more reasons so it becomes important that schools recognize these barriers early in order to address them (Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007).

The school addressed some of the barriers that students encountered such as bullying and how the school principal or student counselor intervened to resolve the situation. It was clear that when the school addressed student bullying it was eliminated. Several of the participants had mentioned that they were bullied and teased by other students. In most cases the school counselor intervened to resolve the differences and students were able to go on in school. Janine spoke of how she was bullied and teased on a daily basis in a city school, and as a result she ended up leaving school. In this situation the bullying was never dealt with by the school because they were never informed. Students need to be proactive in ensuring the school becomes aware of bullying. Janine enrolled at an on-reserve alternative school later on and failed to resolve the problem at the school she left.

Marcia spoke of her experience of cyber bullying: "They (students) were putting stuff on Facebook. It was pretty much slander and I had to get the student counselor involved." The school was very effective in addressing it early, and as a result it was resolved. According to Marcia, "After he talked to both of us, we sat down and worked it out. We left each other alone after that. He helped us talk it through and see both sides."

Throughout the literature it is evident that a positive school environment is critical in making students feel good about school and being able to establish effective relationships with students and staff (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Howard, 2007; Schulz & Rubel, 2001; Zoch, 2006). Equipping students with strategies in order for them to cope

with peer pressure in the school environment is also important. Above all schools need to intervene in situations where students find themselves needing support as in the case of bullying.

Another barrier that emerged was racism and stereotyping. One participant in the study spoke vividly of her experience of racism and stereotyping in the school that she attended. Enrolled in a public school, she was placed in modified classes. She knew that she was far more capable of excelling academically. According to her experiences white students at the school made fun of her and made racist comments. It was clear from the onset of this interview that the majority of teachers and students in her school did not accept her because of her background. As this participant spoke of her experience, she said, "Racism was probably the biggest barrier. All the non-native kids were really mean to me. They all have these negative assumptions of First Nations just because one person did this and we were all that way. They would say racial slurs like they would call me, 'Pocahontas' and stuff like that. When we would come to town and my mom drove a nice vehicle, they would say where our horses were and if we brought our teepee and stuff like that. I felt like I was blocked up with other First Nations kids. Put in those modified classes. I was never really given a chance to excel. They expected us to sit in class and be quiet. But when I took my Diploma exams it came to the surface that I was excelling. In order to obtain a scholarship you have to make 85% average, mine was 89%. So I got a $500.00 scholarship. So that's when all of that came out in grade 12 and I was moved to advanced courses. I got into AP courses and they were hard but I liked the challenge. But it made me feel equal to other students rather than inferior. In many ways the teachers weren't there: if I needed help it was kind of 'well the answer is in the textbook.' Then I'd

say, ‘That I know but I want to learn the process.’ Things like that if you wanted help you had to go elsewhere. I felt like I was imposing on them when I needed to learn something.”

In this case the participant proved to the school that she was well advanced in her academics and they had no choice but to place her in an appropriate placement. Throughout the interview it was clear that this participant was bitter towards the school and some of the teachers who didn’t have any interest in her. Her mother was her mentor and really made her feel confident about the things that were in her life. In this way she was able to overcome the barriers that were so evident in the school setting.

The lack of teacher effectiveness was another barrier that emerged from the study. According to one participant she spoke of one teacher who had a significant negative impact on her in high school. “She was made to feel ‘dumb’ in her words because she didn’t do well in speaking French. She was expected to sit in class and be quiet. The school counselor and the Aboriginal room were her supports, providing support and encouragement. Teacher effectiveness can have a lasting effect on student outcomes. Students who have a quality teacher will actually reap the benefits of increased learning outcomes (Duffrin, 2006).

Another barrier that students encountered was if the school and teachers labeled them as slow learners, placing them in modified programming. This was the case of one participant when she moved to an off-reserve school in grade 9. According to her, “The teachers had assumptions like when I went to town school; I was put in modified classes when I was supposed to be in advanced classes.” She spoke of the supports that she received from the Aboriginal programming that promoted her success in school activities

and community events. These activities raised her self-awareness and confidence in herself as a learner and individual who excelled and went on to post-secondary studies after high school.

This negative impact continued to affect this student on into post-secondary studies. She believes that this this one teacher continued to make her develop low self-esteem over the years. Here is her account: "I think what really stood out for me, was my French teacher, and I don't know why I have been thinking of her a lot. I think she had the most negative impact on me in school because she always made me feel really dumb. I was never really good at French. I was behind the level of French that I was supposed to be doing. But I always felt really stupid in her class. But it reflects on me now because I get really shy, embarrassed or reluctant to speak up in class. I am afraid that I'm going to get ridiculed or look stupid. The other day I had to do an in class presentation in my post-secondary class and one of my professors came to me afterwards, and he was really surprised because I had done a really good job on my presentation. He said "I couldn't believe the shyest, quietest girl in class could do a presentation like that." I know it's because I don't like to speak up.

This participant went on to speak about segregation, "In high schools you see that Aboriginal students are segregated. But we had our Pride room and everyone would go there and hang out. For me it was kind of my safe haven. I would go sit there and I would not have to feel like an outcast or loser. For me it was the most significant impact. I don't think the school counselors helped me set an academic direction but they helped me to be able to feel confident about where I was going. The counselors nominated me for an

award. They actually nominated me for a couple of awards. Knowing that they nominated you for awards and knowing stuff about you helped push you to do better."

The segregation of white students and First Nations students was evident in some of the schools. As one participant says in her interview, "Segregation between First Nations and non-First Nations was evident in the earlier grades. In grade 10 there was a pilot project in the town where I went to school and we First Nations were put into a separate classroom along with two special needs students."

In some of the schools, participants mentioned that students were segregated because of choice. First Nations students and the white students kept to themselves and there was little mixture between groups because of choice. One participant who was very light skinned and didn't pass for a First Nations student said that she didn't encounter any racial discrimination as she was accepted by the mainstream population in her school. However, she became friends with a boy who was First Nations and very dark skinned and through him she witnessed racism and discrimination. She was shocked and couldn't believe that these things could actually happen.

Another barrier that students encountered was that social problems sometimes presented as a barrier to their schooling. Social problems can actually place students at a disadvantage in areas of school attendance. One participant spoke of how her family was affected by family problems and addictions over the years, and as a result she ended up moving in with her grandparents. She had a large extended family, and in the end when she was completing high school she moved in with her mother who had obtained a degree in social work. She found that it made life much easier for her and she was able to complete

high school. One participant spoke of how family problems affected her attendance at school. She mentioned how problems at home were affecting her ability to be at school on time. One of her teachers pulled her aside one day and said to her, “You know it’s not so hard to wake up in the morning and come to school.” As the teacher was saying this to her, she remembers thinking in her head that actually this is the hardest thing when you’re up till four or five in the morning.

Establishing a connection with students is important to finding out what is the cause of their problems in school. In this case the student was experiencing a lot of family problems and not getting enough sleep. Schools can utilize outside resources such as community agencies to help in identifying supports for the family. Follow-up through such areas as family intervention, parenting programs, health care follow-up, and agreements that their child will attend school can be implemented (Mueller, Giacomazzi, & Stoddard, 2006).

Skipping school was another barrier that some students encountered, but in most cases it was short lived because there was always adequate follow-up to students skipping in all of the schools. As Denise mentioned in her interview, “When I first went to high school it was so much easier to skip classes. Like in junior high you don’t skip. In high school you have to become responsible. The teachers aren’t going to babysit you anymore. I skipped a lot when I first started high school and realized that I failed science for the first term because of skipping. It was my own realization; clearly I didn’t do it anymore. I stopped skipping and brought my marks back up. It has to be a student’s own realization

that high school is where you need to begin growing up; people aren't going to always be babysitting you."

4.19 Summary

The factors that play a role in retaining First Nations students in schools are huge. It is imperative that school become aware of what First Nations students face in terms of barriers that may impede their success. At the same time First Nations students should enjoy the same educational opportunities as the mainstream population. They have a right to quality learning opportunities. The participants who took part in the study were well aware of what they need in life in order to succeed. Because they want the best for themselves they valued education.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion and Recommendations

5.1 Summary of Findings

The intent of this study was to foster an understanding among educators and government as to how schools are pivotal in promoting high school completion among First Nations students. The central question of this study was to explore the perceptions and perspectives of First Nations students regarding the factors in the school that influenced their educational success. After interviewing the participants of this study it was evident that they had varied experiences in their schooling and family background. What made all the difference was the quality of education that they received and how it truly made a difference in their educational success. This study shows schools can make a tremendous difference in the lives of all students through the structures support and further learning and a sense of well-being. These factors included teachers, school programming, school leadership, and barriers that may have posed an obstacle. Participants were asked to explain any barriers that they may have encountered and to explain how the school addressed these barriers. The significance of this study rests on the fact that school quality did make the difference for these students.

Significantly this study shows that school quality makes a huge difference in the way students feel about themselves and their learning environment. Successful approaches in some schools to reduce the achievement gap points to the need to develop an understanding of student diversity issues. At the same time, schools need to become more knowledgeable about why the achievement gap is prevalent in a certain ethnic and social

group of and then make a concerted effort to reduce this achievement gap. This can be done by examining the issues in First Nations education in a historical and current context so that there is an understanding of why issues have persisted over time and continue to prevail (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007).

5.1.1 Teacher Quality

Participants spoke of high teacher expectations that helped them develop and further their academic attainment. Knowing that teachers cared inspired students to put more effort into their education. Teachers did things like writing personalized notes to their students about encouragement and success. One student who was skipping school was taken aside by a teacher and simply told that she must be in school if she wanted to remain on the class list. In another school it was unacceptable for students to skip school. There was the expectation that all students would complete high school. Students were instilled with the value of education and at the same time had acquired ownership of their educational attainment.

In addition to high teacher expectations was the knowledge and skills that teachers passed on to students in the various subject areas. Students felt a sense of empowerment when they talked about how their learning was influenced by a particular teacher. When one participant spoke about how effective her teacher was in high school, she went on to say that the knowledge and skills she attained have helped her succeed in post-secondary education. Another participant said all the teachers were helpful in the school and their overall goal was to help students. Student academic gains are directly influenced through

an effective teacher, one who is well versed in subject material and has the ability to effectively engage students (Konstantopoulos, 2011).

5.1.2 Supports in the School

Student supports in the school are a necessary part of schooling primarily for those who represent a marginalized minority group such as the FNMI students (Gunn, Chorney, & Poulsen, 2009). Graduation plans were put in place in all the schools prior to grade 10, so that each student had a guide in working towards high school completion. Post-secondary institutions were a vital part of the transitioning process once students completed high school. School programming reflected this as they partnered with some of the institutions in the delivery of option courses. For example, one school delivered an option course from a nearby college to give students the opportunity to experience post-secondary level courses. This also gave students an opportunity to have some realistic goals for their post-secondary education.

All of the participants mentioned how important it is to set educational goals in most cases, even before they entered high school. The graduation plan acts as a guide throughout the participants' high school experience. It was evident in this study that the participants knew where they were going and what they had to do to get there. One participant had fallen behind due to lost credits because she was not applying herself to her studies in her first year of high school. However, in grades 11 and 12, she knew that she would have to focus because she was serious about her studies and wanted to get through high school. She knew exactly what to do in order to complete her high school requirements. The school had set a plan in place with her and in this way she had

ownership to the plan. Students absolutely need to be involved in this type of school planning. She ended up completing her high school requirements and graduated with the rest of her class.

The school counselors or FNMI school counselors play an important role in supporting students throughout their high school experience. Some students attributed their academic success to the FNMI workers who were instrumental in ensuring that school was a good place to be. They helped settle issues such as bullying, and in some cases it was just a matter of getting everyone together to settle the problem. In some schools a room was set aside for FNMI students to use for various activities. In some schools it was known as the "Pride Room" where students would go for support or just to get away from everything. One participant referred to it as a safe haven. It was here that she was able to feel safe and protected when school dealt some harsh realities. Sometimes school can be very demanding aside from all the peer pressure so this room acted as a safe room for these students.

The FNMI worker or school counselor was instrumental for student success in many ways. Students credited much their academic success to the school counselor who helped them set career goals, kept them on track, advocated for them, and helped them gain confidence in their ability to do well academically and socially in the school setting. The school counselors continually looked for ways to assist students during high school. They searched for opportunities such as scholarships, sports involvement, and competitions. One student entered a major competition and attributes her success to the school counselor; she ended up winning the title. They were also instrumental in building home-school

partnerships through regular home visits. This increased the school's capacity to effectively work with the students as it allowed for regular communication between home and school.

The establishment of effective home-school relationships was attributed to the FNMI worker who regularly communicated with parents. This helped bring parents into the school where a room was set aside to host them during school activities or parent visits. Parents were called if their student was not attending school regularly or could participate in a traditional function such as dance and FNMI awareness activities. The culminating activity that finalized the academic success of FNMI students was held specifically to honor students and parents for their commitment to high school completion. This event remained a significant event in the minds of the participants of this study.

5.1.3 Establishing a Sense of Belonging

For the most part schools were very receptive to their student population. Participants felt a sense of belonging within the school setting. In most cases they were not treated differently because of their cultural background. When participants reflected on their high school experience they talked positively about how they were supported in the school so they could eventually reach their academic success. For the most part participants felt that schools accepted them like the rest of the general student population.

When participants spoke of success in the school it was evident that there were relationships established with school staff that enabled good things to happen. Not only did students feel a sense of belonging to the school, but they discovered opportunities to

succeed. These opportunities emerged in academics, sports, scholarships, extra-curricular opportunities, and incentives that helped students excel.

In reviewing some of the literature on why students leave school, it is apparent that one of the main reasons is a feeling of not belonging to the school. According to Schulz & Rubel (2011) student disengagement from the school stemmed from four reasons: multiple school transitions, negative peer relationships, failure to progress academically, and a lack of academic parity. Equally important were teachers who demonstrated care and empathy and at the same time had very high expectations of their students. They provided quality teaching and learning in the classroom and students were able to make connections with the world around them.

These experiences were student-centered which resulted in student engagement both in the classroom and throughout the school. One participant mentioned that her social studies teacher wanted her students to know about everything that was happening in the world. Through project-based activities students learned about the world. When participants mentioned high expectations from teachers they spoke of how it motivated them to strive for better marks.

A good example of this was one participant's experience in her school; she said the teachers all had high expectations for students. First and foremost they wanted students to be in school. But she found herself skipping and soon after one of her teachers took her aside and simply said to her, "if you want to do well in my class, you need to stop skipping." From this time on the participant felt that this teacher cared about her success and the teacher had high expectations that she had to try and meet. She said that this

teacher basically woke her up and from that time on she stopped skipping and started attending class regularly. Participants were keen and able to sense excellent and effective teachers, describing them as knowledgeable, skilled, creative, kind, caring, and, helpful. They liked students, they were supportive and, encouraging. They valued student opinions, and they gave them the opportunity to succeed.

Many of the participants mentioned how the school supported them in many different ways. It was evident that most of the schools were very student centered. Schools that have low dropout rates offered courses and school-sponsored activities that were geared to the interests of the students (Christle, Jolievette, & Nelson, 2007). Schools need to take this into consideration when planning for the needs of the student population that they serve. When one participant spoke of her experience in high school and how teachers were supportive, she said that teachers are there to help you. She felt their enthusiasm and their positive attitudes rubbed off on their students. Courses that keep students engaged and interested have a huge effect on improved student outcomes.

In this study it was evident in many of the participants' experiences that teacher quality made a huge difference in how they perceived high school. Quality teachers who had high expectations and, displayed empathy were also knowledgeable and effective and gave students a sense of purpose. Many of the participants mentioned how quality teachers made a difference in their day to day schooling. It didn't take students long to distinguish a quality teacher from a poor teacher. Having quality teachers gave students a sense of belonging and they felt like the school was a big part of their lives. Activities then became more meaningful and they were able to make connections with what they were learning to

the outside world. On the other hand, students were quick to recognize an ineffective teacher. In the study participants described an ineffective teacher as one who failed to help students and didn't seem to care about students.

5.1.4 Leadership Focus

The study also found that most principals in this study displayed a strong instructional leadership approach. Their schools had a good curriculum focus. In this study it was evident that school principals wanted their school to stand out and be the best. In some cases that meant the school principal was responsible for weeding out those students whose behavior was unacceptable. Many of the participants said that in the beginning of the grade 12 year there were a high number of Aboriginal students but by the end of the school year most of them had left. These students left for various reasons but what was clear was that some students left because they couldn't handle school or they had been expelled.

From the participants' understanding these students were told to leave for various reasons, such as being involved in unacceptable behaviors. It was clear that there was minimal programming on proactive approaches to bullying and substance abuse. However, one school did have a drug and alcohol counselor who worked in the school on a regular basis with some of the students. One of the participants had stopped smoking marijuana and she attributed this to positive peer relations and support from the drug and alcohol counselor.

School principals are pivotal in setting the direction for the school in terms of promoting equitable opportunities for students. According to Mulford (2008), "leadership

is not an end in itself; rather, it is a means to enabling children and young people to learn, achieve, and develop." Schools must ensure that the appropriate conditions are in place in order for students to excel in the school setting. It then becomes important that school principals are knowledgeable of the various types of leadership practices and concepts in order to effectively lead a school. As mentioned in the literature review, instructional, distributed, and transformational leadership are all directed towards school improvement and improved student outcomes. An effective school leader will take from the three practices and tailor them to their school. It then becomes important that principals are attempting to include parents as much as possible in the school in order to further the academic success of students.

In some schools there was a home-school connection established by the FNMI counselor and in some cases parents visited the school. A room was set aside for them and this was the 'Aboriginal Pride' room. It was made clear in the study that parent involvement was limited to FNMI activities. It wasn't evident that parents had a voice in school affairs. The communication between home and school was carried out the FNMI counselor and this was excellent. It was mentioned by one participant that this was involved in the community, and even attended family events.

5.1.5 Family Backgrounds

In listening to participants' stories regarding their high school experiences there was a sense that they had good supports from family and the school. In the case of one participant who had made many transitions during her early life because of a family break-up, she had grandparents who practically raised and cared for her. This is common in many

First Nations families where extended families help raise the children. It is not uncommon for grandparents to care for their grandchildren and in some cases they will take full responsibility for them. She left the grandparents to live with her mother in another province when she was in high school. Although she endured some hardships in the school she had the support of her mother who had earned a degree and was able to relate to her daughters' problems in school. She found herself in modified classes in the new school and she was experiencing racism on a continuous basis. She also found out that she had support within the school like the FNMI worker who ensured that she got to play school sports. She even went on to compete for and win a national title.

One common element in the participants' family backgrounds was that many of them grew up in a single parent family. Only three of the participants were in a traditional family setting with both parents. Most of the participants had strong cultural connections to their communities. Marcia, Janine, Cora, Ron, Kyla, and Greta all had a strong tie to a First Nation Reserve. They had spent most of their lives in this setting and in their case they had left home to pursue an education. Returning to the reserve is probably the plan for most; however, circumstances may prevent that from happening. Their careers will definitely have a strong impact on a desire to return to their home reserve.

Another finding was that there were no participants who were fluent in their Native language. All of the participants were very articulate in their command of the English language. Several of the participants mentioned that they were involved with cultural activities such as traditional dance. The remainder of the participants didn't seem concerned with cultural activities. When one participant spoke about culture, she

mentioned that some students in her school were quite involved in cultural activities such as taking Native language and history classes. The choice depended on what students felt and whether it enhanced their school experience. In most of the schools that the participants attended there were First Nations, Metis, and Inuit (FNMI) programming. As a result, the FNMI workers had a strong influence on student academics, counseling, and parent-home connections. Many of the participants spoke highly of the FNMI workers, and in most cases these people played a major role in supporting them during their schooling.

The participants spoke very clearly about their career plans: Marcia plans on completing a Chartered Accountant degree, Ron plans to become a pharmacist but may change his mind and take engineering. Participants spoke of making plans for post-secondary early in their lives, and in Ron's case, his parents told him from the time he was a young boy that he was going to university. The value of education was a priority early in their lives, and their school worked hard to get students acquainted with universities and colleges during high school. One school had partnered with a local college to offer an equine course in partnership. Students received credits and at the same time they became knowledgeable about veterinarian work.

On the other end of the spectrum, some participants' stories depicted the sad reality of what some First Nations students may face when attending public schools. They shared negative experiences that were barriers in the process towards high school completion. For example, one participant had to leave a city high school because of constant teasing and bullying that were rooted in racial discrimination. As she recalled this experience she mentioned that it got to the point where she couldn't take it any longer and left school.

Obviously, the supports were not there for her in this public school. According to Zvoch (2006) school context can serve to encourage or discourage students. In this case that is exactly what happened. She left the public school in the city and enrolled at an alternative school and ending up completing high school. According to the participant she thought that she would never like school again after this negative experience. But much to her surprise she ended up liking school.

Schools have the ability and responsibility to prevent students from leaving school (Knesting, 2008, p.8). Teachers and administrators can make a difference in a student's ability to persist in school. It is clear in this study that teachers and school principals had a direct influence in retaining these high school students. This study has brought to the forefront the reality of many First Nation students' experiences as they attend public schools. Some of the challenges and struggles First Nations students face in school are more than what a typical student would experience on a day- to-day basis. Schools with a high population of First Nations students must ensure that they have the appropriate school structures in place in order to support these students.

This study found that racial discrimination and student segregation were evident in some schools. The racial discrimination involved both teachers and students. Some students mentioned that white and aboriginal students segregated themselves within the schools, (for example aboriginal students stayed together, and white students did the same). In another case, a student mentioned that she was labeled as learning impaired and put into modified courses. It came out towards the end of high school that she was actually quite advanced in her learning and because she excelled on the Diploma exam she ended up

winning a scholarship. In one case a participant reported that most teachers she had in one school refused to offer support and when she would ask they would tell her to look in the book or give her an unsympathetic look. In cases like this students are student is put in a very difficult situation: where do they turn to for support? In order for racial discrimination to be eliminated in public schools there has to be a policy eradicating racism in schools; otherwise, it becomes difficult to deal with.

5.2 Interpretation of Findings

The results of the study indicated that school structures play a pivotal role in First Nations students' educational attainment and have a significant influence on positive student outcomes. The participants in the study were successful in the completion of their high school and went on to enroll full-time in post-secondary studies. Comparing this study with the overall population of First Nations students would not be valid. School context and specific groups of First Nations students differ considerably. This study represents a small sample of First Nations students who have overcome barriers and are successful. The participants were already enrolled in post-secondary studies and volunteered to participate.

The data collected indicated that the participants had attended high schools that supported their aspirations to complete high school. None of the participants had academic problems or any other problems that they associated with schooling in terms of requiring learning support. They did well academically in the classes that they took and didn't require extra tutoring or specialized supports.

Family factors play an important role and, in the case of the participants in this study, they all had excellent family support. They had all been raised with values and one of those important values was education. Their parents made it clear that they wanted their children to succeed academically. As one participant mentioned, his parents wanted him to go to university when he was very young. Although, most of the participants came from single parent families they had good family support. It was clear in the data that the participants came from families with low to moderate family income during their school experience. This did not play a factor in presenting itself as a barrier in their schooling. Some participants were very resourceful in finding ways to pay for the costs for extra-curricular activities. School fundraising helped many to be successful in taking part in activities that promoted their interests.

The data analysis revealed that school structures played a key role in the participants' academic success. Structures in the schools that were influential and played a major influence in academic success were teachers, school programing and school principals. Effective school structures ultimately retain students and in this case it was found that First Nations students benefit from school structures that are conducive to their learning. The school context can actually serve to retain or discourage students. Key people who serve as principals, teachers, counselors, and support staff can make a difference. It was clear that these schools underwent changes in order to meet the needs of their diverse student population. Such changes were the inclusion of Aboriginal programming that benefitted many of their students. The FNMI support workers were one of the main supports that benefitted students. It becomes important that schools pay close attention to the structures that are already in place and evaluate their effectiveness.

The need for social justice in schools emerged in the findings because some of the participants were not given fair and equitable opportunities in order to engage in appropriate academic programming. According to Villegas (2007), schools and teachers act in the capacity of a sorting function. An education-based stratification system can ultimately change the lives of students if equity and fairness are not representative of the school's mission. "Historically, factors such as social class, race, and ethnicity have been forceful predictors of school experience (Villegas, 2007, p.371). Schools that are serving a high student population of First Nations students must have some measures in place to promote equity and fairness for all students.

All of the participants attended different schools within the province of Alberta. These schools were located in cities, towns, and on-reserve. Schools based their programming on the provincial Program of Studies, and infused Aboriginal perspectives and support to Aboriginal students in most schools.

The findings revealed that most of the schools that the participants attended built trust and created a supportive school climate. Teachers were effective in their teaching and used effective approaches with their students. Teacher behavior and techniques defined teacher quality (Polk, 2006). They demonstrated good subject knowledge, creativity, and thorough and appropriate student evaluation of student assessment. These qualities are an important variable in whether students want to continue to stay in school. Accountability to student learning, awareness of motivating factors, and meaningful links to what is happening in the world are all part of effective teaching. Effective teaching is all about improving student learning outcomes. Instructional practices of teachers have a direct

influence on student learning. The best teachers can greatly impact student learning in academic achievement (Duffin, 2006). Students can actually increase achievement by up to a year and a half in one school year.

The school context is also an important variable in the retention of students. Participants indicated that most schools were safe and caring. Most of the participants had a sense of belonging to their respective school. Some of the schools, participants indicated, were clean and well managed. The school ensured that students were supported through effective practices such as supplementary programming which allowed them to cope with problems in the school and at home. This enabled them to further their academic attainment even though some problems may have persisted (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006). Adequate follow-up to skipping school and tardiness ensures that students attend school regularly. In this way this problem is curbed and in most cases eliminated as school personnel teach the value of education. It was found that when adequate follow-up is initiated absenteeism and tardiness decrease (Mueller, Giacomazzi, & Stoddard, 2006). Schools were student-centered which allowed learning to be personalized. As a result, learning was meaningful and students were engaged in learning.

5.2.1 The Importance of School Leadership

Research on school leadership shows it is pivotal to increased student learning. In this case school leadership plays an even more important role in furthering the retention of First Nations students. Leadership is about setting directions and influencing school staff to move in that direction. The data that emerged from the study indicated that school leaders were knowledgeable about the practices of effective school leadership. Clearly,

these school principals were leading their schools in a direction that benefitted all students in most cases. In order for school leaders to properly lead a school they must be trained and educated in school leadership programs.

Schools in Canada serving a high student population of First Nations students need to be cognizant of the education gap in First Nations student achievement. Schools that make it a priority to get acquainted with the problem and initiate dialogue with staff can effectively bring about change. This change, based on research practices, can ensure that their student population needs are being met through improved student outcomes (Sather, 1999).

The debate surrounding effective school leadership asks which leadership practice is most effective with students of diversity. The literature on social justice in education suggests that leadership can ensure that equity and fairness are evident throughout the school. Social justice becomes evident when the structural and inherent features of an already unequal system are changed (Ryan, 2006). This also means that First Nations people need to be allowed to participate in school affairs such as school council and school boards. In this study there were cases of racism and discrimination towards First Nations students. The demographic composition of schools dictates the need for a social justice approach in school leadership primarily if there is a high population of First Nations students. In a study of four principals who implemented social justice into their leadership roles (Jean-Marie, 2008) the leaders had implemented school practices such as inclusion, understanding, and support for diverse constructs. Knowledge of students and parents were

also a key priority. Culturally sensitive teachers need to be actively recruited by schools and students must be taught about the history of First Nations people.

5.3 Context of Findings

According to the research findings on the factors that may influence First Nations students in their high school completion school structures play a pivotal role in how schools serve First Nations students. School leadership, teachers, school curriculum and programming, parent school relationships, and school-community partnerships are some of the structures within schools that serve students on a day to day basis. It is these structures that sometimes fail to meet the needs of First Nations students in public schools. In this study that was sometimes the case. In some schools with a high First Nations student population, the structures are not serving them in a fair and equitable manner.

The data collected indicated that participants were able to identify teachers who were effective and made a difference in their educational attainment and influenced the way they felt about school. Teachers are important variables in students' educational experience. The findings support the research literature in defining what makes an effective teacher. According to Bright (2011), the main variable in student learning is the teacher.

Effective teachers display a number of characteristics such as teaching students to do well in life. These teachings usually happen through the teaching and engagement of students in real world events that may affect them in some way. This would agree with teachers linking instruction to the real world. Accountability to student learning is another teacher quality characteristic that was mentioned in the literature (Duffrin, 2006). Teachers

who are accountable to student learning by using assessments to drive student instruction will see marked results in core subject areas.

School programming should focus on the needs of the student population of the school. Some of these schools had a First Nations, Metis and Inuit program (FNMI) that worked with the student population of Aboriginal students. It was clear that these students were supported largely by this program. In the case of students who were experiencing problems at home and at school, they were able to get support from the FNMI workers as well.

It is clear that schools need to examine their institutional processes when serving students from diverse backgrounds. According to Goodman & Burton (2012) some students from less privileged backgrounds bear the brunt of inequitable schooling. In this study it was evident that some of the participants experienced unequal or unfair treatment when accessing programming. This study highlighted the importance of effective school structures in promoting high school completion for First Nations students.

Access to quality schooling for First Nations students is supported by the study of 366 students in British Columbia (Richards, Howe, & Afolabi, 2008). Researcher found that the best educational programs and schools helped make a difference in academic achievement among Aboriginals. This included a First Nations education study over a five year period that focused on how structures within schools could support academic attainment among these students. Quality schools make all the differences for students.

In another study that looked at Aboriginal students who were failing, it was found that the school structures didn't support them (Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987). This project

with Native Hawaiian students found that what was happening in schools was not working for them. A project that supported the building of curriculum resources and teacher professional development made a huge impact in student outcomes. Inequitable schooling was found to be a barrier to students who were marginalized which results in disengagement from schools. These types of factors need to be taken into consideration by school leaders who have a high population of First Nations students.

Students who fail to engage in classroom and school activities may be doing so for a number of reasons, according to Schultz & Rubel, (2012). The reasons can be a failure to learn, instability at home, poor peer relationships, and a lack of connectedness with the school. In this study those students who faced some of these problems gained support from the FNMI programming or from a teacher who may have inspired them to do well. It was quite evident in the study that some students who became reliant on school supports were actually experiencing a problem at school or in the home. Most of the problems seemed to be addressed by the school, but in those cases where problems continued to exist it becomes imperative that the school must adopt and implement a structure that will serve these students.

In comparing the findings with the current research on narrowing the achievement gap the study and research literature focused on effective schools. According to (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006), Project Excite was designed to reduce the achievement gap. In the participants schools it was very evident that they implemented strategies that were innovative, thus keeping students in school. Extra-curricular activities, graduation incentives, and FNMI student recognition to mark high school completion were some of the

initiatives. There was a lot of emphasis on counseling and mentoring with FNMI programming in the schools. This type of support was instrumental in helping students cope with the day to day challenges, including peer pressure. It was found that in order to increase high school completion (Gunn, Chorney, & Poulsen, 2009) schools have to be proactive. Supporting students through alternative programming, mentoring support, and professional development for teachers and administration were helpful in furthering student graduation rates.

5.4 Implications of Findings

Future improvements for First Nations students must take a priority in school jurisdictions and First Nations school authorities. The whole idea of social justice in education must be examined and implemented in public schools. Equal opportunities for students and families must be enacted in school policies and legislated through governments in Canada. It is vital that the structures in place in most schools be re-examined and altered in order to meet the needs of First Nations students. What is currently happening in schools today is not working for the collective population of First Nations students. Change has to happen in schools so all students have access to quality teachers, effective supports, and good connections to home and parents are a vital part of the school.

5.4.1 Social Justice in Education

Social justice in education needs to become a priority in all schools, including those schools that serve a high population of First Nations students. The implementation of social justice focuses on examination of school structures and whether those structures are serving the diverse student population as a whole. As student diversity has become more

apparent in many schools across the country it only makes sense that this approach is implemented in schools. Social justice supports a process built on respect, care, recognition, and empathy (Theoharis, 2007). The historical evidence and current statistical data support the need for a social justice approach in public schools.

5.4.2 Effective School Leadership

Aside from the implementation of social justice in education it also becomes imperative that schools hire school leaders who are knowledgeable about effective schools. The leadership concepts introduced in the literature review are all critical concepts that may be adopted and implemented by a knowledgeable and effective school leader. It is vitally important that school jurisdictions who serve First Nations students both on and off-reserve pay close attention to the research in school leadership. Schools jurisdictions that focus on school leadership as the leading force behind school change will see positive results among students. Over the past 10 years, researchers in education have begun to shed light on the importance of leadership in education. Studies have resulted in attempting to identify what it is that school leaders do that is pivotal in promoting positive student outcomes through effective practices. One important question is: what can schools do to further student retention and increase graduation rates among First Nations students?

School leadership is about setting directions and influencing members of the organization to move in a specific direction (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, Wahlstrom, 2004, p.4). According to research studies school improvement initiatives rely solely on the leaders' motivation and capacities (Leithwood, 2007). According to Leithwood & Jantzi (2008), leadership self-efficacy is a key variable in better understanding effects in most

organizations and whether school reform will move forward (Leithwood et al., 2004). School leaders need to believe strongly in what is needed for their organization.

In order for school leaders to improve student outcomes, they must interact with the larger social and organizational context in which they find themselves (Leithwood et al., 2004). Schools cannot work in isolation, especially when it comes to working with a diverse group of students. School leaders need to be proactive in promoting a working relationship with parents, community, and community agencies (Mulford, 2008). School-Home Partnerships, parent education programs, and school linked integrated social services are just some ideas (Leithwood et al, 2004.). These programs or partnerships are not instantaneous, but instead require a process of deliberate collaborative networking.

School leaders must have the capacity to make effective change happen. If they don't have the knowledge that is necessary in understanding how change works, then all is lost. Today's schools have become very complex as a result of changing demographics, advances in science and technology, globalization, and pressure on the environment (Mulford, 2008). Leaders must then be able to use their knowledge base and problem-solving abilities to determine how best to plan for positive student outcomes for First Nations students.

The recruitment of effective and quality teachers must become a priority in schools that serve First Nations students. As evidence in the study, high quality teachers play a crucial role in ensuring student academic success. Professional development and collaborative networks need to focus on the needs of First Nations students. Teachers need to collaborate on what they can do to better serve these students. Through collaboration

and professional development teacher capacity is being built to allow for improved teaching and understanding of these students.

5.5 Elimination of Barriers

It became quite evident as a result of this study that First Nations students face constant barriers as they pursue their educational journey in mainstream schools. Although this study was small in scope it was quickly evident that students experienced racism and labeling. One student who had transferred to an on-reserve alternative program dropped out of high school because of the daily bullying and racist attitudes of some students. Schools need to seriously examine racism and implement effective measures to address this problem. In order for schools to work towards eliminating racism against First Nations students, a proactive approach needs to be taken in the school jurisdiction in order to address racism. Effective measures such as school-wide approaches to dealing with racism, teacher and staff professional development, and student awareness of the effects of racism will all promote acceptance among students and staff.

In order for schools to promote student retention in schools, teachers are key in making this happen. Excellent and effective teachers were seen by students as making a significant impact on their success within the school. In fact, having a quality teacher made a lasting impact on some of these students. Effective teachers are knowledgeable about subject matter, aware of student motivation, and continually improving in their professional learning. They are knowledgeable about assessment and evaluation, building cultural competence, and confronting current and historical inequities of a particular marginalized group (Bright, Duffrin, 2006; 2011: Polk, 2006). Schools need to ensure that effective and

high quality teachers are hired to teach to all students. These teachers must be aware of the barriers First Nations students face in schools.

According to Goodson (2003), teachers are grouped into three categories when it comes to teacher quality: Approximately, 10-20% of teachers fall into the elite group which means that they are the most motivated; they are responsible for making change happen. The mainstream group comprises about 60-70% of teachers who are the backbone of teaching, and 10-20% are the borderline teachers who are simply in teaching for monetary reasons.

5.6 Limitations of Study

This study focused on a select group of First Nations students who were successful in acquiring high school completion, and is not representative of the entire First Nations population. This sample was small and was selected based on successful educational attainment. It is hoped that the results and recommendations will serve those schools who are struggling with improving high school graduation rates among their First Nations student population.

5.7 Future Directions of Research

The future directions for research in First Nations education needs to focus on what is currently happening in schools and draw from that research in order to devise ways to work towards eliminating the achievement gap. Schools that are successful in improving graduation rates among First Nations students over the years are worth researching. With all the emphasis on the gap in achievement among First Nations students in recent years it

becomes imperative that research studies take place in schools with school principals, teachers, parents, and students to find out what is happening in order to inform effective practices.

The restructuring of school programs also needs to be the focus as the school principal is instrumental in ensuring that adequate implementation takes place. Support programs should be a priority in schools with a high First Nations student population in order to ensure that adequate programming is in place to help students. School leadership is crucial in setting direction in the school by ensuring that teachers are being effective in their teaching, and that adequate supports and programming is in place for all students.

Schools need to do more in order to challenge oppression and they can do so by implementing four approaches (Kumashiro, 2004):

- Improving the experiences of students by transforming schools into spaces where all students will be safe, addressed, and affirmed.
- Changing the knowledge that all students have about people in this world who have traditionally been labeled "different." They do this by broadening students understanding of differences.
- Focusing on challenging the broader and often invisible dynamics in society that privilege or favor certain groups while marginalizing or disadvantaging others; students to be aware of, critique, and resist these dynamics.
- Addressing reasons why anti-oppressive education is often difficult to practice can be done with students by encouraging them to work together.

Based upon the findings of this study, the following recommendations for further research are recommended:

- A similar study of schools with a high First Nations student population, asking school leaders, teachers, parents, and students to find out what practices are effective.
- A study of parental influences on First Nations student achievement.
- A study of teachers who have had quality student outcomes with First Nations students and how these practices can be implemented in schools with a high First Nations population.
- A study that focuses specifically on effective school leadership in schools with a high First Nations student population; and a comparative study of high achieving and low achieving First Nations students.

5.8 Highlights of Research

The highlights of this study revealed that schools have a huge impact in the elimination of the achievement gap in high school completion among First Nations students. School structures that were identified as the most influential were the school principal, teachers, home-school partnerships, support staff, and programming. They were of significant importance in supporting these students in attaining high school completion. School jurisdictions and government initiatives for reform in First Nations education must be cognizant of the importance of these structures for both on and off-reserve schools.

Qualified and effective school leadership is required in schools to ensure that the school has clear a mission and goals, an effective management of instructional programs, and a positive school climate is created in schools (Hallinger, 2003). Their direction and expertise in effective leadership in schools gives them the ability to work with their staff in the planning, implementation and delivery of appropriate programming to meet the needs of all students. It was quite evident in the study that school programs were directed towards students. An excellent example of this was the FNMI programming that served students in various ways to ensure that they were adequately supported in the school setting. Another excellent example of programs was the graduation plan or personalized learning plan that was developed and implemented before high school so that students had ownership of this throughout high school. It also acted as an important guide for students in terms of course and credit accumulation.

High school transitioning was important to students. Schools partnered with post-secondary institutions to transition students into post-secondary education. This transitioning acted as a bridge or stepping stone for students after high school. All of this empowered students to work towards high school completion and plan for post-secondary education. It was clear in the interviews with participants that this plan made a huge impact in setting the direction for each student. The FNMI counselor played an important role in advocating for students on a consistent basis to ensure that they were doing well in high school. They searched out opportunities for students in sports, scholarships, and other opportunities to enhance their potential such as national competition in sports and competitions.

The study also confirmed the fact that quality teachers made a huge difference in the ways students perceive education and the school environment. Teachers made all the difference in making the school a good place to be for students both in their academic and social interactions with students and staff. High teacher expectations, thorough subject knowledge, and the ability to actively engage students were key indicators of quality and effective teachers. These school experiences remained with students well beyond high school and on into their post-secondary education.

Home-school partnerships were created by the FNMI counselors and this was a huge positive for the school. It enabled parents to visit the school and take part in activities in and around the school. These partnerships are critical in ensuring that parents are included in the school. Parents can also get more involved by volunteering to sit on school councils or school boards so that they can have a voice in school affairs.

Increasing parental involvement for schools for both on and off-reserve schools remains a challenge. In order to promote student retention and increase high school graduation rates among First Nations students, parental involvement must become a priority in schools. Increased communication between home and school, understanding of cultural differences, a development of awareness and understanding among principals and teachers of societal factors that have set parents and schools apart (Ippolito, 2012).

Increased communication between home and school must become a focus for schools. Teachers need to establish a connection with parents in a variety of ways by developing innovative ways of reaching out to parents. At the same time parents need to be empowered to become more involved in schools and in the education of their children.

Opening the lines of communication may mean parent workshops, community forums on education, and professional development for teachers.

Cultural differences sometimes create a barrier for students. In order to eliminate this barrier, schools and First Nations must work together to create a working partnership. Innovative ways of developing cultural awareness is open-ended. Both community and school have to be involved in this process, as it is a two-way process. School principals are pivotal in ensuring that this happens through various means. It was evident that cultural activities are happening in schools such as traditional dance. To further this, teachers and students need to be immersed in cross-cultural activities. This can happen through teacher exchange programs, First Nations parent council representation, and student exchange programs. What becomes important is that school jurisdictions and government implement policies directed specifically at eradicating racism in schools.

The historical and societal factors that have set education and First Nations parents apart in the past has continued over the years. Today, there are some First Nations parents who continue to remain apart from the schools. As a result, their children are not doing well in school and this has a direct impact on high school graduation rates. This has to change and it can only change through a deliberate attempt between home and school. Changing this societal factor is not easy and it will require a process that will unfold over time with the establishment of a plan in order for this to happen. Community awareness and parent forums on this issue will further the understanding among First Nations parents of how influential they can be in their child's education. How this plan will look will be determined by the school jurisdiction and First Nations community leaders.

5.9 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to find out what schools are currently doing in retaining First Nations students until they complete high school. The study was informed by eight First Nations students who successfully completed high school. This study sought to identify what factors in the schools positively influenced students and what barriers were evident and how they were addressed by the school. The analysis of this study can serve as a tool for public schools to use in planning programs, identifying effective teachers, and implementing effective programming for First Nations students.

This study concluded that school structures serve a pivotal role in the success of First Nations students. School leadership, teachers, and programming are important to these students as they strive to complete their high school requirements. Although, the factors that influence high school completion are complex, further research is needed to inform public schools in these areas.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Professional Profile of Researcher

PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

- Accomplished career in education for 26 years in K-12 and post-secondary.
- Outstanding track record in improving student outcomes.
- Knowledgeable and skilled in the implementation of programs through change process: research phase, planning phase, implementation phase, and evaluation phase. This change process ensures that programs are sustainable, yet remain flexible.
- Extensive background in developing and implementing programs through a collaborative process with parents, administrators, and teachers.
- Effective communicator both written and oral along with excellent planning and organizational skills.

EDUCATION

University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, Alberta 1987
Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.)

Gonzaga University, Spokane Washington, USA 1996
Master of Arts (M.A.)
Specialization: Administration & Curriculum
Thesis: Improving Literacy among Primary Grade Native Students

University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta 2013
Doctor of Education (ED.D.)
Specialization: Educational Leadership
Dissertation: How Schools Can Impact Student Retention Among First Nations Students Leading to Higher Graduation Rates?
Supervisor: Dr. Gail Jardine, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB

WORK EXPERIENCE

Kainai Board of Education, Standoff, AB: 2009 – Present
Senior Administrator
Special Student Services Coordinator (2009-Present)
Coordinated and facilitated special education programs in K-12 in collaboration with parents, teachers, and administrators. Responsibilities included: coordination of professional assessments, INAC Reporting, coordination of specialized programming, facilitation of consultation for

counselors, teacher professional development, etc.

Red Crow Community College, Standoff, AB: 2012 Summer
Sessional Instructor
Sociology 100: Introduction to Sociology
Pyschology 211: Human Growth & Development Across the Lifespan

Kainai Board of Education, Standoff, AB: 2004-2009
Senior Administrator in Central Office
Language Arts & Curriculum Specialist
Worked within school system with principals and
teachers on improving student outcomes through various initiatives
to improve student outcomes: E.g.: The Early Education Committee

Kainai Board of Education, Standoff AB: 1995-2000
Acting Principal;
Fulfilled all duties of administrator and then for a six-
month period I assumed full-time duties
of Principal. During this time one of the key highlights was
working in collaboration with community and school leaders and
parent advisory committee in the changing of the name of the
school from an English to a Blackfoot name.
Levern School-Aahsaopi School, *Blackfoot interpretation, 'A nice place to be'*

Red Crow Community College, Standoff, AB: 2005
Instructor for Sinte Gleska Masters Program
Planned and delivered 2 courses for the Reading Specialist program:
ED 640: Trends and Programs in Reading Instruction & Approaches
ED 642: Techniques for Teaching Reading
Students who were enrolled in the program received a Master of Education degree.

Kainai Board of Education, Standoff, AB**:** 1987-2004
Classroom Teacher
Taught preschool, kindergarten, grades 1, 2, 5 and 6
Taught core subjects based on the Alberta Program of Studies with
an integration of Kainai culture and language.

Red Crow Community College: 1998
Sessional Instructor
Taught Psychology 1000 an introductory course on human
development.

Lethbridge Community College: 1987
Sessional Instructor
Planned and delivered a College/University Preparatory Program

For First Nations students who were about to enter post-secondary.

University of Lethbridge: 1986
Research Assistant
Education 4406
Worked with Dr. Phil Lane throughout the course to assist students. This course was based on the wholistic approach to learning that was developed by the Four Worlds Development Project.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Private Consultant: 2009
Conducted a Principal Evaluation in Montana First Nations School, Hobbema, AB.
Developed a rubric designed to evaluate the role and responsibilities of the school principal based on school and community input, along with student achievement.

Board of Director: 2009-2013
Piikuni Youth & Education Foundation
Completed a 4-year term as Board of Director
The goal of the foundation is to assist Piikani Nation members by creating programs which provide scholarships, bursaries, recreation, culture and entrepreneurial development and support. The foundation enables youth to participate in activities that may otherwise be inaccessible due to barriers and funding. Assisted in the development of criteria for bursaries and scholarships, planning proposals, reporting, strategic planning, budget, activities, and school retention programming.

ADDITIONAL TEACHING ACTIVITIES

Summer School Teacher, Kainai Board of Education
Summer Reading Camp teacher who worked in collaboration with a group of teachers and leaders who planned and delivered a variety of camps to on-reserve students with the goal of enhancing literacy skills in reading and writing.

HIGHLIGHTS OF PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- Planned and facilitated a ‘Three Year Early Education Initiative for Kainai Board of Education schools to address low literacy levels among primary grade students 2006-2009 through professional development and professional learning teams. The results after three years marked considerable progress made by students as measured throughout standardized reading assessment. Parental involvement in the schools also improved significantly.

- Initiated and planned in collaboration with classroom teachers a 'Kainai Board of Education' Spelling Bee from 2007-2009. The objective of the spelling bee are to:

    - Encourage students to explore and study the English language,
    - Assist students in spelling and comprehension,
    - Promote proper word usage
    - Promote competition among peers in an atmosphere of fun and friendship.

- Initiated and planned 'An Author in Residence' program in KBE schools that was proposal driven through the Alberta Arts Foundation for a two-year period during the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 school years. The objective of this initiative was to expose students to an accomplished author and improve writing ability. The end result was that students wrote and published short stories which were shared with the community.
- Worked with school principals, teachers, and parents on improvement of Provincial Achievement test scores that focused on setting goals and targets as a result of the interpretation of the tests. Initiated teacher involvement in provincial committees which saw their participation in designing assessments. Also, initiated teacher involvement in the marking of the achievement and diploma exams over a six year period. There were marked improvements on achievement test results.
- Developed a rubric for principal evaluation that was used in an actual evaluation.
- Acquired locally developed course: Reading 15 for high school students who were struggling with reading.
- Planned and facilitated KBE Community Conferences in collaboration with administrators and principals.

Call for Participants

Appendix B:

Seeking participants to interview for a research project titled: "How Schools Can Impact Student Retention Among First Nations Students Leading to Higher Graduation Rates."

First Nations students are being sought for a study during the months of February and March, 2012. If you graduated from high school in the last two years, are 18 years of age and older, are First Nations, and are currently enrolled full-time at a post-secondary institution then you meet the criteria.

The study requires you to:

1. Complete a questionnaire to determine whether you meet the criteria in order to participate.
2. Once you are selected to participate, you will be interviewed over three interview sessions. The three sessions should last no more than three hours.

The research is trying to find out what your perceptions and perspectives are regarding the role of schools in the academic success of First Nations students.

I would be happy to interview you, so please email me and I will send you the questionnaire. If you would like to speak to me and have questions, or call me.

Thank you so much for your interest.

Clarice Beebe, Doctor of Education Student.

Appendix C: Questionnaire for Interested Participants

A study titled: "How Schools Can Impact Student Retention Among First Nations Students Leading to Higher Graduation Rates" is being conducted. Please answer the following questions and submit back to the researcher at your earliest convenience. All information submitted will be held strictly confidential. If you are not selected or choose to withdraw from the study your information will be destroyed.

Name: _____ Email: _____ Phone: _____

1. What date did you graduate from high school? _____.
2. What is your age? _____
3. Did you graduate from an on-reserve high school Yes _____ No _____
4. Are you of First Nations descent? Yes_____ No_____
5. What reserve or First Nations do you belong to? _____.
6. Are you currently a full-time student at the University of Calgary _____.

Thank you for your time and I will be contacting you soon to let you know if you are selected to participate in the study.

Appendix D: Student Consent Form for Participation in the Study

I'd like to welcome your participation in this study that will focus on your high school experiences. I understand that you successfully completed high school in the past two years. You are now enrolled in a post-secondary institution pursuing higher learning.

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of the study will be to find out the perceptions and perspectives of first and second year First Nations students who attend the university. This study will attempt to find out how your high school experience played a role in your academic success leading to high school graduation.

Participants involved in the study will take part in an in-depth interview to give your perception and perspectives on what variables and factors helped influence your academic success. The study will also attempt to identify the role of school staff such as principals, teachers, and support staff in influencing academic success.

This study will be very valuable as it will provide insight to educators, community members, parents, policy makers, and researchers on the role of schools in promoting academic success among First Nations students.

In this study I will be requiring the input of First Nations students who meet the following criteria:

- Must have completed high school during the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years.
- Must be of First Nations descent.
- Must be enrolled at university as a full-time student.
- May have attended an on-reserve or off-reserve high school in the province of Alberta.

I will be conducting an interview with each student that should last no more than 3 hours in total. The interviews will be conducted by the researcher only. There will be three meetings where interviews will be conducted. The interviews will take place at the university campus and will not interfere with your class schedule. It is planned that this study will involve ten participants. Once a firm location is secured on campus, all participants will be informed of the details of the meeting place. The interviews will be audio-recorded.

Your participation is voluntary, and you may at any time during the study choose to withdraw. Your withdrawal from the study will mean that all data from your interviews will be shredded and not included in the research. There will be no risks to participants as a result of the study. Pseudonyms for participating students will be used to protect participant confidentiality during the data analysis and written paper. Student names will not be used in the study or the final written document which is the dissertation. Participants will be referred to using their pseudonym if required in the study.

Schools, locations, staff names, names of reserves or First Nations communities will not be identified in the study.

This project has been reviewed by the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB), the researcher has been granted permission to conduct this study. If you have questions regarding this research project contact the principal investigator.

Student interviews will be audio-taped then transcribed into a written document. The data collected during the interviews will be kept in locked filing cabinet, and destroyed one year after the dissertation is completed. The researcher will be the only person with access to the data. The results of the study be written up in the following dissertation titled: "How Schools Can Impact Student Retention Among First Nations Students Leading to High Graduation Rates." It will be made available to the public and a copy will be made available to each student.

All information received during the interviews will be confidential and used for research purposes only, names of students and the school will not be used in the writing of the research once it's published. You will be provided with a copy of the dissertation once it is complete.

You may choose to opt out or drop out of the study at any time. Information received from you up to this point will be shredded.

Do you have any questions at this time?

By placing your signature on this form you are indicating your consent as a participant in this research study:

_____	_____
Printed Name of Participant	Researcher's Printed Name
_____	_____
Signature	Signature
_____	_____
Date	Date

Appendix E: Student Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Students

Education is so important to the success of individual students. I understand that you are a high school graduate at the conclusion of the 2010-2011 school year. You have been selected to participate in this interview as a result of your success in high school. The research study wants to find out what it is that schools have done to keep you here in high school. Your answers to the following questions will be very helpful in identifying what schools are doing to promote student success.

I have a list of questions that I will be asking, please answer to the best of your ability. If you do not understand a question, please indicate this and I will explain. Remember that this study does not use names and all information is used for research purposes only. As a result, I am going to assign you a number, this will used to transcribe the information that will be obtained during this interview.

1. Please introduce yourself by giving me a background of yourself?
2. Describe your parents, family, and community?
3. I'd like you to think back to your high school experience, what was it that kept you in school aside from your family?
4. How was the school instrumental in keeping you in school?
5. Describe a teacher that has made a difference?
6. Was the school principal instrumental in keeping you in school? How?
7. Describe barriers that you have had to overcome during your time at school?
8. How did you overcome these barriers?

Excerpts of Interview Transcripts

Interview#1

Researcher: Please introduce yourself by giving me a background of yourself?

My mother graduated high school and may have went on to post-secondary. My dad did not finish high school. They have worked various jobs, my mom is a secretary and a librarian and different kinds of administrative stuff like that. My dad is a jack of all trades, he built our house. He does various other things. Both brothers have been involved in music. Both brothers have graduated from high school. The younger brother will graduate from high school this year. My older brother graduated from high school in 2008.

Researcher: I'd like you to think back to your high school experience, what was it that kept you in school aside from your family?

The biggest thing that kept me in school was the school counselor for the Native population. We had two school counselors, one was the Native Liaison. He was very, very caring. He really enjoyed his job. He wanted to help the students get to where they were going. He would offer to pay for tuition deposits on his credit card because the Native students' parents didn't have credit cards, and for whatever reason they couldn't pay it for themselves, he would just pay it for them. He would help students in figuring out what they wanted to do. He helped with just more than schooling, was very involved with all the students. Everyone liked him. He really helped us out, he would help in setting career goals. All the students thought very highly of our counselor. That was one of the biggest things that helped keep me on track. He was an authority figure and we didn't want to upset

him or disappoint him. He did see your potential and wanted us to succeed. That made you work harder.

Researcher: How was the school instrumental in keeping you in school?

My math teachers were very good and they were influential into me going into accounting. They really helped you along with stuff that you didn't really understand and we would just go and ask. He saw the potential of individual students. the other counselor was good.

The counselors were also helpful if you had family problems, they would talk to you about it. They would help you through it and also if you had problems with another student. The counselor would bring both of you in and have you sit down and talk to each other. He would work through problems. He was just trying to make school a better place.

In the school what really stood out was all of my teachers. They expected us to be there. If I skipped, my teacher would come up to me and tell me not to skip. In grade 10 my math teacher came up to me and talked to me about skipping and he basically just told me if I wanted to be in those classes I needed to put in the effort. This just basically woke me up. After that I just kept to it. They took the time to talk to us. Also, being a role model, I was the token Native and the only one in advanced courses. I wanted to set an example to the others and let them know that they could do it. I think it a mindset with Native kids and may be the reason that they don't try those courses. They don't even attempt them; they just go into the lower classes.

Researcher: Describe a teacher that had made a difference/

I took Math 31 which is calculus with Mrs. F. as a teacher. They really liked me and they saw potential and always encouraged me to go above and beyond. And Mrs. F. we had a very small Math 31 class, there was like six of us in there. So we became really close with her. At the end of the semester she gave us all a story book and she read story books to us all the time in math. She wrote a personalized note to all of us just telling us that we had potential and that we can succeed in our lives and that she would be thinking about us and I thought that was really nice. It was nice of her to do that for all of us. They were supportive like if I had questions and they would walk me through it.

Researcher: Was the school principal instrumental in keeping you in school? How?

The school principal I only met him once, it was not a good meeting. I had some problems going on with another girl and he was accusing me of being the instigator in a disagreement with another student. He made me out to be the bad person there. The vice-principal was the person that I mostly dealt with. A lot of the students felt that he was too hard but he was always very nice to me, he was strict but he was also fair. He would point out what you were doing wrong but you couldn't really argue with him because he was right. Because I was the token Native in my classes the students were really nice to me. So I never felt any discrimination towards myself personally but you could tell there was little bit of segregation between the non-native and native. Basically the Natives would hang out together. It was usually Natives and non-Natives. Everyone was pretty friendly though and there was the usual things that go on when people go to school together. If there were problems they would always get fixed before they escalated. You could tell that discrimination was around because the Whites would be amazed that I was in the advanced

classes. If think they believed Natives were remedial or something like that. But they were always really nice to me.

The school was just outside the Native community. The school would have their Native awareness week and they would have various activities. Usually it was the Language teacher who would set this up, they would have a princess pageant and various things. They had the Native graduation which was where we received blankets and it where our families would come and celebrate this achievement. That was nice of them to do that. I think they realized that they had a large Native population. Some students may have said that it was unfair to non-Natives but it's nice that they do this but it shows the students that they do care. There was about 105 high school graduates and there was about 30-40 Native high school graduates. Apparently, our graduation class that year was the largest.

Researcher: Was the school principal instrumental in keeping you in school? How?

My fellow Native graduates felt that the vice-principal was out to get them. I think that they had doubts about the non-Native kids because they didn't take too highly to them I guess. I don't believe that they went through any discrimination. Everyone pretty much kept to themselves.

The school treated everyone alike in terms of opportunities. The Native counselor was always working with the students. He always listened to students and their ideas of what was working and what wasn't and he would bring it to the attention of the principal and try to get something worked out.

Researcher: Describe barriers that you had to overcome during your time at school?

I guess one of the biggest obstacles was maybe and I didn't have any problems per say with school, but it was with some of the people I went to school with. Some girls would get jealous, that was the biggest thing. I lost a lot of friends in grade 12.

My parents were not really involved in the school. With my parents I felt that they could have pushed me a little more. Because I was in the pure classes and I was getting good grades, I was only getting like B's and I could have gotten A's if I had put more effort but my parents didn't ask me if I had homework every night. They just kind of assumed that I was doing my homework. They were always more focused on my brothers because they were the ones who would struggle in school. I think they just felt that I would just do it on my own. They get me up every day and got me to school and made me go to school every day.

I was bussed to school and the driver would show up every day except when the weather was bad. They had a good bus system.

In regards to the promotion of culture in the school, I don't think any of the white kids cared or were interested in it. I know that during the Native awareness week a lot of the students would skip out of school. I believe that the promoters really tried, some students took it as a positive activity. There was one non-native girl that took Cultural Studies 10, 20, and 30 and I know that she was really into it. I think that the promotion of culture in the school made a minimal impact with the white kids. But I think that the Native kids appreciated it.

I think that academic success needs to begin in junior high and making the kids realize that they have to value education. Just the fact that they need support is important. My

boyfriend in grade 10 started in pure math and dropped out. Tutoring is needed for all students. Just giving them confidence to know that they are able to do it.

Interview #2

Researcher: Please introduce yourself by giving me a background of yourself?

I was born and raised in the city. Then I moved to Jamaica for 3 years and then I went to school there for a bit, that was good experience. The education there is actually higher than Canada and then when I came back about 3 years later I found that I just lost all my ability to do multiplication. I just sort of forgot about it. So I'm from First Nations community. I like to take part in traditional celebrations and I like to go to powwows, I like to speak my own language. I like to learn about different cultures as well. I like to spend time with my friends and try new things.

Researcher: Describe your parents, family, and community?

My parents are very nice, they are very supportive. My father was a high school dropout. He wants to a go back to school, he's about 38 years old. I don't know if he could do it. He really supports me with my whole education. He supports me a lot when it comes to education. My mother she's very awesome, she's very supportive. She's a very smart women, she's my hero. She knows everything. She's a very cultural woman. She's a good cook. She taught me how to do everything. She taught me to be a better person. She taught me not to be a follower, but to be a leader. She always wanted me to be in touch with my community and culture. She brought me up on the powwow trails, we traveled a lot. We have really good bond. She could take over the world if she wanted to.

My community is good. I find it's very entertaining, where I come from, my people are very good people. I believe that my community is moving towards the idea that education is important. I'm seeing more people attending the university from my community. I also see a lot of entrepreneurs coming from the reserve. The majority of my time has been spent in the city. I've spent a lot of time on the reserve. It makes me proud to be from a First Nations community.

Researcher: I'd like you to think back to your high school experience, what was it that kept you in school aside from your family?

So I went to junior high in the city, I went to junior high until about grade 8 and I quit. The reason why I quit, the total education there just wasn't good. I was teased a lot, I was teased because I was native actually. I was always teased every day and it got to the point that I just didn't want to go to school anymore. So I dropped out. I ended up working a good two years. I go lots of work experience. I got another job for a couple of months and I decided that I would go back to school. All my friends were graduating and I decided to just go back to school, just go back and hopefully get a good education. I never thought I would like going to school, like doing homework and all these different things. So I went back and I was learning lots of new things and I went to school in the city and I did about 8 courses and I got some credits and I didn't write any finals. I found that I didn't get any mentoring at this school. So I decided to go to an on-reserve school, my friends said that it was really good school. They all graduated from there and my boyfriend graduated from there the year before. It was a really good school. The principal, she was really a good principal. She was very good and she took the time to know her students. I think it was a

big part of learning and knowing who's teaching you. Knowing about their family and what they do in their own time and keeping everything on a friendly basis.

Researcher: How was the school instrumental in keeping you in school?

My teachers were really good too. They really took time to know the students on an individual basis. I think that's what really helps you to succeed. Students need to make sure that they ask questions. You can't be shy. It was an alternative school. We had classes every day and it was on a consistent schedule. We had the same thing every day and I think if they brightened it up a bit, a change of pace. I was in school almost every day. It took me about an hour to get to school every day by bus. But I made it. I was took the bus from the city out to the reserve. I noticed that a lot of people had lived out there and I was showing up at school more than they were. The students were getting lazy and it brings you down. Seeing other people just want to give up and it brings down your spirit a bit. It kind of makes you not want to learn, but then it kind of motivates you a little bit more by proving to your teachers that we can succeed. You just have to have the right motivation and support and you can make it. You just have to have the want of education, you just have to want to learn and what learning is about. So besides having a good support system like family and friends and so on but most important is support from your teachers. I think teachers especially in First Nations communities do not stay on top of their students, I think too much. I think that they need to stay on top of them and make sure that they get to school and make sure that they can motivate them. Make sure that they support them and their educational needs. Some days there'd be only 3 of us students in class. This would be a 20 student class. Some students just stopped going and I think that they have a sense of

giving up. I think that the teachers should take the time to call them. Students need to know the limits and they need to know that education is important. Once some students know that there is work involved they drop out of school. It's really sad to see. I think it's just all up to the student and their commitments. They need to make commitments and say that they can do it. It makes you sad, like I know that they can do but there're just too lazy or something. Just keep the student informed about missing school.

Researcher: How was the school instrumental in keeping you in school?

Working towards my high school graduation and the actual graduation exercise influenced me a lot. At the high school that I attended, a major incentive was a trip to Disneyland. So once we graduated we all ended up going to Disneyland. A lot of our high school experiences were built on self-esteem. I think that a lot of Aboriginal people have low self-esteem. They think that they can't do things. They need to participate and they can't be shy, they need to have a voice. A good example of a self-esteem building activity would be a leadership program. For example, an Ambassador program; I remember a lot of students signed up for this program. It helped students learn about themselves, and what type of person you are. Also, what type of role model students can exemplify for others. Teaching students how to be a better role models and how to have fun at workshops. In this students can acquire presentation skills, having workshops that help you come out of your shell and get out there and get used to speaking to people. Things like getting used to building your communication skills, getting over your shyness. Finding your cultural or spiritual. Fitness also has a lot to do with building self-esteem. Students also acquiring Coaching Certification, for example, I can coach a Volleyball team. They also included students in

Band meetings. It helped us to learn about community issues. I actually got to go speak with Shawn Atleo, the AFN Chief. He bought us all lunch, he's a very nice man. I got to raise issues that affect my community. For example, the housing issues and crisis that is happening in my community presently. I believe it's good to know about community issues. This gave me the opportunity to raise issues that affect me. It was actually broadcasted on live internet video. I addressed housing issues. In a lot of the houses that are in my community have non-drinkable water. They are mold infested. Sometimes there's more than six people living in a two bedroom house. I told them: How can the Indian Affairs make up for these houses? This land that you gave us to build our families and the houses are rotting away and breaking down.

Researcher: Describe a teacher that has made a difference?

My principal was also my English teacher, she was very good. She really valued our opinions; she wanted us to share our personal stories. She taught us how to be better speakers. She motivated us and she showed us different ways to be successful. She shared with us her personal background and she gave us a personal bond by being a friend. She was a good support system. She made a lot of things accessible for everybody. She gave everyone an opportunity to succeed and she gave us an opportunity to graduate. She helped me all through the way, as well as the other teachers did as well.

Researcher: Was the school principal instrumental in keeping you in school? How?

She had lots of elders come. She knew things that were going on in the community. She informed us of powwows and round dances and volunteer opportunities. She went out and she asked students if they would like to attend info sessions on a career program. She

organized lots of fund raising opportunities and grad committee was involved. She really helped us succeed and I owe her my life.

When I started there were over 20 students, almost 30 and there was probably only about 20 students working towards graduation. So they were in the same position that I was and taking the same classes and all pumped about working towards graduation. Then eventually once work started coming around they just started dropping out. One by one they were going and by the time I graduated there was about 12 of us. About 4 out of the 12 were accepted at the university. So I thing students these days don't know what they are getting themselves into. There're unprepared and they are not committed enough. I think that having an education you have to have full commitment. Be well prepared about what is expected from teachers and yourselves. Student sometimes are too busy partying and wasting their time. There were some students who just lived down the road from the school and they wouldn't show up for days and weeks on end. I lived all the way across the city but I made it to school every day. Everybody would leave as soon as the school day was over, but I would stay sometimes until 5:00. I was doing lots of courses and I had a full course load. I just wanted to get it over with. My course work involved courses where I was on my own, I took drama, art, social studies were all done by one teacher. Math and English were done by one teacher.

I felt that I was more accepted in this school. I felt comfortable in my own skin. When I was going to school in the city I didn't feel comfortable because I was constantly teased. I had a really mean principal.

Researcher: Describe barriers that you had to overcome during your time in school? How did you overcome these barriers?

One barrier was getting bus fare every morning. The big thing money, stress, weather. I dropped out because of bullying. The school in the city need to teacher Aboriginal languages. Bring out more cultural things in school and makes things more relevant for students. Teach things that will be needed for careers in the future.

Interview #3

Researcher: Please introduce yourself by giving me a background of yourself?

I am a first year student at the university. I graduated in 2011 from an off-reserve. I have found the transition to be somewhat difficult. I realize that the full responsibility is now on me to succeed.

Researcher: Describe your parents, family, and community?

I started Kindergarten and grade 1 in the city but we moved to the town where I went to school from grade 2 to grade 9. It was a Catholic school. I went to a Catholic high school for grade 10 and then switched into a public school for grade 11 and grade 12. There program was better for advanced placements because I was really good in the sciences. I do other things besides school, I do gymnastics and then I did dancing and I still do equestrian show jumping. So that took a lot of time so I had to balance both school and activities. In grade 10 I was in leadership and I found that that really helped me good. I was also in school groups and I found that it really helped me, I was also in community group which was volunteering for things like the Terry Fox run, food banks, and shoes for Kenya. I

volunteered for a school for disabled kids before they went into Kindergarten. In grade 11 and 12 I tried to be as much involved in school but I found that it a little bit more difficult with the workload because I was in the advanced placement. But I was still involved in putting on some events and stuff like that

Researcher: I'd like you to think back to your high school experience, what was it that kept you in school aside from your family?

I've always liked school from the time I was little, I was always wanting to learn. My mom's family was not well off at all. So from school I saw some of my aunties barely graduating and I didn't want that. In school I always kept focused, school always came first. In junior high in math I wasn't very good so I found it very hard. I got help from my math teacher and I would actually go talk to my teachers, I'm not shy. I wouldn't wait until it got really bad, if I you get a bad mark, go see why you got a bad mark. I didn't find my teachers as very engaging, this was a Catholic high school. I didn't like that school atmosphere at all. In religion class I found that the ideologies they were teaching were not fair. I didn't like that so that's why I moved. I think that's wrong so I moved to a different school and found it completely different.

Researcher: How was the school instrumental in keeping you in school?

All the teachers want to get their students engaged, actually doing stuff, like picking out your stuff. Actually getting prepared for university, in grade 12 I had a teacher who actually got me to like Social because I didn't even like Social in grade 10 and 11. I found it boring and when I had to write a paper I didn't know how to write a paper. Like you go to them and ask them, 'how do I write a paper?' They really tell you so this teacher actually got me

interested. My mark went from being a 60 to being an 80 from grade 11 to grade 12. So I find that if you have a teacher that wants you to do well and actually helps, you feel that you can actually do it. Then it goes from being your assignments to being consistent in marks. My year end project I got 100 percent. You can actually get 100 percent on an assignment, you just have to do it right. In the town I lived I was not seen as Native, I was treated just like the other people. I never got judged for it and I never got bullied for it. Some people would say that I could get certain scholarships than them. The people I grew up with were open to all people and open to gays and others. I never had to hide anything. I'm sure if I grew up in the city it would have been completely different. The population was about 1200 students in the public school that I attended. I had 450 students in my graduation class.

At our high school, they focused on things like making students aware of minorities, for example there is a story of a boy who went to school with a pink shirt and he got really bullied. Well at our high school we had pink shirt day for that actual purpose. Like all the guys that I knew actually did it too, they all wore pink, all the teachers wore pink. Everyone wore pink because they wanted it to be okay to be yourself and why it's not okay to not be yourself. So if someone is gay then its okay and that was the big thing. We had in social we had stuff like that where we learned about racism like my teacher emphasized that like It's not acceptable. We had current events every week and so everyone would learn about what's going on in the world. We knew about Libya and we knew everything that happened, we knew everything that going on in Egypt and we knew everything that going on. We even knew the past events like Hitler and we knew everything that went on and that's it not okay to be like that. As a whole school my principal was like a model and

showed how to be enthused about school about achievements. They were very driven like you have to have these marks and like it not appropriate to dress like this in school and they would say your're going home. They did not tolerate any of that and they didn't tolerate bullying at all, you were kicked out of school for one incident of it. There was no smoking allowed in the parking lot, if you were caught smoking you were in trouble. It was very strict in that way. Teachers were always talking with students, like if you were sitting alone at lunch, they would sit with you and say" how's your day going." We all liked the teachers, they were all cool. They were very involved with the students and would never say, oh I can't talk with you. Sure the teachers had to supervise us, but they saw it as a way to have fun with us. They were really involved in the school and we had lots of events. Like my school is big on sports and like arts and all that. The sports team they all had to wear a shirt and dress tie if it was game day, they all had to. If you didn't then you weren't playing that day.

Researcher: Describe a teacher that has made a difference?

The social studies teacher. She gave me the best reference, I asked her to give me a reference and she was like an awesome teacher. She was hard, she was not easy. If you did something bad in her class like she did not put up with it. She did not put up with talking, she did not put up with students who were disrespectful. If someone had something to say, she would let you speak like but if anyone else spoke and was being rude she would say don't do it. She didn't put us on the spot for anything to make us feel uncomfortable. She was really fun, she would like let us do projects like just fun projects. She wanted us to know about the world, she wanted us to succeed. We had a Europe trip when I went on

Spring break in grade 12 and she went on that and that was when I really started to like her. She scared me at the beginning of the year actually, she told pretty much at the beginning of the year, "If your're not going to study, your're not going to pass this course." You have to do well in the course, if you don't feel like your're going to put any effort in at all you're not going to do well at all. She pretty much just scared us off from the top. I sat in the front of the class and I just thought I better take notes. She didn't give the notes to us. She didn't do what a lot of teachers do like power point. I don't feel like you learn from them. She just like spoke the whole class so you better write down the notes or type them or whatever. So she was getting us ready for university. If I didn't have that class I probably wouldn't know how to take notes. I wouldn't have known because a lot of my university teachers just speak or they have slides but they speak about them to go more in-depth so you have to pay attention. So if you don't have the notes, and she doesn't have them written down anywhere or you miss that day, you get them from someone else. So when we went to Europe with her, she was like so much fun. We went to Paris, Rome and London like she knew because she was a social teacher like when we weren't with the guys all the girls would go shopping with her. When we would go around the cities she would be able to tell us about the places. She like has her Masters and she would tell us stuff like that. She just like knew her stuff so that was really helpful so she knew what you didn't need to know in Social 30 but she just wanted us to know about the world and get interested in and know about the world affairs and know what actually is going on right on. She wanted us to know what was going on in the 1900's because that's not right now even though you didn't need to know about that. Some students don't know what going on in the news. Some students are just like in a bubble and that's all they know. I actually want to know about the outside world. I want to

know what's going on and go to these places. I could be working in one of these places one day so I was glad that she emphasized that. She was a good teacher.

Researcher: Was the school principal instrumental in keeping you in school? How?

The school principal he was one that you did not want to make mad. If you didn't have to go to his office, you didn't want to go to his office. Like we had a culinary class, if we made extra food then we went to him but other than that you didn't want to go to the office because if you were there it was because you had in-school suspension or something bad that you had to be in the office. So he was very on keeping because we had an officer at our school because of drugs and stuff like that, there was a lot of weed. So he was needing to keep that out of the school. So if there was anything going on he would make sure that was dealt with that it was not going to keep continuing. Like a girl got suspended for having weed in her locker. Stuff like that he was "I don't want that in my school." "I don't want the school to have a bad rep." He wanted it to be academically good. He was very on getting the school in the newspaper about all of the achievements and all the sports teams to the drama to the arts and what's going on in culinary. What's going on in the sciences, what's going on in the math department and he was very on that. He wanted to keep the school very clean and he wanted it painted good and he wanted everything just clean. It makes it nicer for a better learning environment, if the school is completely crap then who would want to be there. He would make sure that the school budget allowed for keeping a clean school. He would always be very proud of his students. Like at our graduation he would be very proud because my graduating class had ton of like good things come from the students. Like we had a girl who is a professional singer, we had a guy who is going

into pro football and we have a guy who is in pro hockey. We had so many potential valedictorians that it came down to half a percent who got chosen. He was just very proud that he could have been representing this class. He actually recognized all the students not just the sports or the smart ones but also like the kids in welding. We had choral stuff and all that. He was just very proud. It's good to see this because at our school it makes it a nicer environment.

He was in his office during classes but when there was class breaks he would always be outside his office. He talked to different people like teachers. My biology teacher would always be talking with the principal. He was chatty. Like when we had hair stuff at our school he would get his hair cut. He interacted with students. He would make jokes. You didn't know if you were really in trouble or not.

We had parents at everything like meet the teacher night, like my Europe trip we had meetings up until the trip. We had these meetings monthly and every week closer to the trip and we all had to make a presentation on the trip and the parents were always there. He wanted the parents to know what we were doing and all that stuff. He was always at sports games like all the time. Like at drama performances and he wanted the parents to come and see their students and what they were actually doing. Parents were like do we have to but he was like bring your parents. Like teacher-parent night and I knew a lot of moms when their daughters were in hair stuff and they would get their hair done by their daughters. This would make them feel good about it.

Researcher: Describe barriers that you had to overcome during your time at school? How did you overcome these barriers?

High school was pretty unique for me. Sometimes girls are kind of catty, I think that's everywhere but that wasn't anything like huge. We were just kind of like everyone's friend. There wasn't anything that I could really think of.

Researcher: Did you have someone in the school who helped set the direction for you?

Yes, we had three counselors which was nice because in grade 10 we only had one and that was hard to get an appointment with. Grade 10, 11, and 12, all the grade 12's we had 3 counselors. For grade 10 you're trying figure out what you want and for grade 11 too. When I got into grade 11, I moved and the new school wasn't in my zone so I had to write a letter to get into that high school. About what I did in grade 10 and why I wanted to be there, why the school's great. At my Catholic school we didn't have IB or AP programs, and there they did. The school that I transferred to was good if you wanted to be in sports and the arts or anything like that, it's very good. In grade 10 at the Catholic school I never went to the counselor once because you could never get in. but the only time that I saw the counselor was for a correspondence course instead of a shop course. So the counselor switched it for us. So I met with her once in grade 10 and she was helpful but she was more for the grade 12 students. In grade 11 I met with the counselor at the new school at the beginning of the school year. When I started getting my equine program going for the college I met with the counselor. I didn't have social problems so I didn't see the counselor other than dropping paper work at his office every month. I did see the counselor helping other students out with problems such as family things going on. The counselors are helpful with that and also with the school aspect.

Interview #4

Researcher: Please introduce yourself by giving me a background of yourself?

I just turned 20 years old. I am in my second year program in my post-secondary studies. I just applied my for my sociology major and I plan to get my marks up and apply for psychology. I graduated from high school in 2009. I am thinking about moving out over the summer or in September. I am interested in psychology, I want to get a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology. I am pretty sure this is where I want to go. After taking some classes and looking around, I have a good idea of what I'm good at. I have part-time work and everything is going good. I was born in a small town.

Researcher: Describe your parents, family, and community?

I have never lived on the reserve, my dad moved from a reserve in central Canada when he was like 19 years of age. He worked on the railroad and he moved to a small town. My mom is Native, she's Cree. My dad is First Nations. My parents did not graduate from high school. My mom went back to school and went to university. She's a social worker now. She works downtown. My dad never graduated he went to work at on the railway for a while and he worked at the mine. Now that he's coming back here to city, he has had heart problems and he wasn't really working. Now he's going back to school

Researcher: I'd like you to think back to your high school experience, what it that kept you in school aside from your family?

I lived in a small town until I was 12. I went to a catholic school. Because of a choice I made I transferred to a public school. When I was in grade 7, I moved with my mom and

the rest of my siblings to the city. So I attended school from grades 8 to 12 in the city, in grades 8 and 9, I was in a catholic school. In grades 10 to 12 I attended a catholic high school which I graduated from.

Researcher: How was the school instrumental in keeping you in school?

I think that in public schools, students are careless and its cool to skip classes. But at my school it wasn't like that, kids who stayed in school could be popular kids. I guess it was my friends cause all their friends were going to graduate. So the environment that you hang out in friends was like I hung out with. I think there was like two of my friends that didn't end up graduating.

We had a lot of sports and stuff like that, I was involved in stuff like this. But there really wasn't anything on the side that you could be involved in, there was like the Aboriginal program. Even I felt like I didn't need it or go to it very often, there would be times during class that they would call you while you were in class and you would go in there and they would just check on you. Like "how are you doing?" So if you were like you never went there, they would make you come down there. Then if you did need help they would talk or sometimes they would have guest people come in. Like this one time I think it was like to do with the sciences, engineering like a school came in. they talked throughout the school. They would get you excited about your future and you would see what's out there. So they had stuff like that was going on.

Researcher: Describe a teacher that has made a difference?

In terms of a standout teacher, I don't think there was anyone in particular that was very good. Like most of the teachers seem like they help you. There're there but its' not overly personal. Like if you need extra help there're there to help. There was no one in particular.

Researcher: Was the school principal instrumental in keeping you in school? How?

The school principal was male at first and then we had a female. I don't remember talking to them that much. They just walked around. My parents attended school functions.

Researcher: Describe barriers that you had to overcome during your time at school? How did you overcome these barriers/

When I first went to high school it was so much easier to skip classes. Like in junior high you don't skip. In high school you have to become more responsible. The teachers aren't going to babysit you anymore. I skipped a lot more when I first started high school and once I realized that I failed science the first term because of skipping. It was my own realization, clearly I didn't do that anymore. I stopped skipping and brought my marks back up. It has to a student own realization that high school is where you need to begin growing up, people aren't going to always be babysitting you.

I just turned 20.

<u>Interview #5</u>

Researcher: Please introduce yourself by giving a background of yourself?

I am from a First Nations reserve. My adoptive father is Cree and I have known him all my life. I lived in the city since I was younger.

I did a year of school in the city then we moved to another province and did a couple of years there and then moved back to city and finished off my schooling. I graduated from a city high school in 2010.

Researcher: Describe your parents, family, and community?

When I moved back to the city I was 9 years old. My brother started powwow dancing and when I was 15, they asked me and my younger brother who was 13 at the time to teach a powwow dance class. So we have been doing that for 5 years now. From there we do a lot of performances around the city, some are volunteer and some are for pay. For my own work in the community, I work in Family Services. I work with a lot of things there, I work with high-risk Aboriginal children, youth groups, day care, stuff like that. My step-dad makes drums. My parents live in in the city, but they have a house on the reserve that they will go to when they are ready.

Researcher: I'd like you to think back to your high school experience, what was it that kept you in school aside from your family?

When I was young and attended elementary it was good, but when I entered high school it became difficult. When I reached my teenage years I become very troubled. I quickly had to clean it up and as a result I graduated from grade 12 When my cousin got cut from the high school basketball team she said that she was going to drop out of high school. So I told her that if she stuck it out, I would go over there and transfer so that she didn't have to feel

like she was alone. At this school it's hard to meet other students because you don't have classes. So I did that a semester there and it was really hard and that put me behind. You don't have classes or teachers; you just get workbooks and are expected to use them in your own time. There was lots of freedom, too much freedom I think for me. So I got really nothing done in that semester, I think in one course I got something like a 54%. I moved back to my previous school. My experiences there were kind of positive and kind of negative. I was involved with sports in my junior high years and I made the basketball team. But then I left it because it conflicted with the powwow dance classes. Lots of experiences with the powwow dance club. We had what was called an Aboriginal Pride room. The school hired some Liaisons who were going to help us. They made the most significant impact for me because in high school you have so much to deal with and also I had so much going on at home. When I would lash out and get my temper to get the best of me in class. So I would go there and cool off and go there and have someone there to talk to. I think what really stood out for me there was my French teacher, I don't why I have been thinking of her a lot. I think she had the most negative impact on me in school cause she always made me feel really dumb. I was never really good at French. I tried and somehow I kept passing the classes. But I was behind the level of French that I was supposed to be doing. But I always felt really stupid in her class. But it reflects on me now because I get really shy, embarrassed or shy to speak up in class. I am afraid that I'm going to get ridiculed or look stupid. The other day I had to do an in class presentation and one of my professors came to me and he was really surprised because I had done a really good job on my presentation. He said "I couldn't believe the shyest, quietest girl in class could do a presentation like that. I know it's because I don't like to speak up. In high school I had two

Aboriginal mentors when I first started out in high school. One female worker was the laid back but it's easier to have someone like that because it's good to be open. The other counselor was really strict like get your work done and also really friendly. The one of them left our school because she said that she had to leave to where she was secure in her job. I found that they were always worried about funding. Because when she left it really hurt me because I developed such a close relationship with her. But now there was no communication but I saw her every now and then. But the one worker stayed and we had someone else come in, a male. They were both really good. They were both really nice, my family is still close to them. They will give me character references and stuff when I need them. But they were there mainly for support. Like they would help with school work, people would go there to for that. But I didn't get them to help me with my school work. But I would go there and talk to them just like what's going on in my life. But in high schools, you see that Aboriginal people are segregated. But the counselors had their own room and everyone would go there and hang out. For me it was kind of my safe haven. I would go sit there and I would not have to feel like an outcast or a loser. For me that was the most significant impact. I don't think that they helped set an academic direction for me but it helped me be able to feel confident about where I was going. They nominated me for an award. They actually nominated me for a couple of awards. Knowing that they nominated you for awards and knowing stuff about you helped push you to do better. But in terms of choosing a career and a career path, they didn't help. My parents visited the Pride Room. I noticed for my brother now, my parents aren't as involved as they once were because they don't have anybody working there. My French teacher tried to involve me in the class but I feel that we started off on really bad terms because she came into the class

she was replacing a previous teacher. The students really like the first teacher because she was friendly. So when this new teacher came in students didn't like her. She was strict and very stern. She wasn't friendly. So that's where we got off on a bad footing. In know that I kind of had been a problem to her. I just felt like everytime when I would speak she would tell me things like I don't understand what you're saying or like one time she was talking and giving us instructions in English and so I put my hand up to ask to go to the bathroom and she's like excuse me and I was like I couldn't figure out what I did wrong. So I just sat there and she just stared at me and she was like what did you just say? I said I want to go use the bathroom and she was like excuse me. I had no idea what she was getting at but she was trying to imply this is French class you should say it in French. I knew how but I just didn't. But at that point I was like I don't know why she's doing this to me. There was lots of stuff like that.

Researcher: Describe a teacher that has made a difference?

A teacher that made a real impact was all of my teachers. The teacher that comes to mind first was my social studies teacher. He made me feel like important just by like really little things. Like one time I had forgot some material I had put away and I asked him if I could get it. He told me, " you have got to be one of the most honest people I have ever met." That always stuck with me when he said that simple comment. I always remember what he had said to me and I never forgot that. When I had went into social with another teacher I had not done well in that class. I was failing that class and I know I was missing a lot. I also had some other things going on in my life, like my sister is an alcoholic and her kids being taken away from her. Like I was going through all this stuff and I would be up really late at

night. But one day she pulled me aside and she said, “you know it’s not so hard to wake up in the morning and come to school in the morning.” But I was thinking in my head that actually this is the hardest thing when you’re up till four or five in the morning. But I just said, yah ok I’ll try to do better and come to class and I stopped going after that and I failed her class. But when I went back to take the same class with another teacher I done really, really well.

In my school we had one principal that took care of everyone, but we had a principal for each grade from grade 10 to 12. I remember the grade 11 principal probably the most because I was always getting into trouble. He would always bring me into his office. But now he was telling my mom that he wants me to go back to the school and speak to the kids about how to excel and go on. But I was like I couldn’t believe it because I was in his office all the time. In grade 12 I never had to deal with the principal because I was really trying to get my stuff together to graduate. But the school principal she wasn’t a very nice lady and I don’t like her. She kicked out a lot of people from out school, like people were getting kicked out left and right. It was an IB school and she wanted to have like, she really brought it to a place that wasn’t so good to a really good recognized school. But in order to do that she had to let go of so many and like people were getting kicked out because of one strike and it was like you’re gone. It was like you’re gone for this and you’re gone for this. So really we lost a lot of my friend. I don’t know how I feel about her but she’s nice. She went around the school a lot. I didn’t really see her interacting with staff and students.

Researcher: Was the school principal instrumental in keeping you in school?

I guess the principal tried to cut me some slack, because there was lots of times that I got into trouble. The principal of the school stood out to me because I didn't think what she was doing (kicking kids out) was fair. For me I got to hear all the perspectives of the students. It was like," I did this, and really that all you did (for getting kicked out). I know that the school transformed but it was at the expense of some students. A lot of these kids still didn't even graduate from school. The school is not one of the top schools today. The school is in a low SES community in the city. So I remember when I went there kids were doing drugs. So I remember one time this one kid came and he blew all the smoke inside the school. You would be allowed to smoke where the fences were. People come from all over the city for the IB program so it was a lot of good kids would start all of these activities. No more smoking and stuff like that.

Researcher: Describe barriers that you have had to overcome during your time at school? How did you overcome these barriers?

I had a lot of academic problems. In my grade 10 year I only got credit for one course for that whole semester. It put me behind and there was another thing that happened where I only got credit for one course. So essentially I had to complete my high school in two years. But I was really behind, I was going into grade 12 where I had all these mandatory classes that I had to take. I had to pass them in order to graduate, but I did it. I'm not really sure how but my boyfriend and I helped each other. We met in grade 11. We bought weed at the same place and we had seen each other there and we were at a party and that's how we met. We never really saw each other and then we decided to go to a big event together. Then after that we started dating. From there we helped each other. We stopped smoking

weed over two years ago. We decided that we were going to stop drinking last year, but we were never really drinkers. I think that he probably helped me the most. When I smoked weed it made me lazy and I didn't feel like doing anything. I think that's where my schooling really fell behind. Without it I was able to get things done. I wanted to get good grades whereas before I didn't care. So probably he made the biggest difference I think.

The advice that would give to a high school student is go to class. That makes an extremely huge difference. It did for me it made such a huge difference. I think you have to know when people are making a bad influence on you. Just say 'no' because you'll eventually get caught up in it just like I did. I didn't have any more friends and I had to leave. For a long time I didn't have any more friends but that's what I had to do for me to be successful. I had to be okay with being alone.

Researcher: Did you feel it made a difference because you were First Nations?

I didn't necessarily feel different because I never experienced feeling different until I started dating my boyfriend and I knew that it really existed. He's First Nations also and he is really dark skinned. It's just everywhere we go. For me being light-skinned I never experienced anything until I experienced it and saw it, I was like shocked. I couldn't believe that the world was like that. I think if I was the person that I am now in high school I would have been more supported but I know that I was a bad kid. I disrespected my teachers and stuff like that. But I had to be able to move past that and I think teachers don't understand that when kids are behaving this way, there're behaving like this for a reason. I lashed out at my French teacher because I felt so dumb. I was horrible but I think

professionals and people have to realize that these behaviors come from somewhere. We weren't just born like that.

Researcher: How did your high school experience prepare you for post-secondary?

I think because I struggled so much, I never really had to push myself in my last year of high school. Realizing that if I pushed myself I could get it done. It's hard to say that high school prepared you for university because you come into university and its' such a drastic change. I first went to another university before I came here and it was so challenging. I think just overcoming and knowing that I could do it. That's what helps me. I'm 20 years of age at this time. I plan to complete university in a couple of years. In grade 12 I had no idea where I was going academically. I have always wanted to go to law school. So that was kind of my goal. I didn't know what I wanted to do, I just knew that I wanted to go to law school. But I think for me it was just to know that I could do it. But I wanted to go into psychology because my mind frame was the more I applied myself the better my grades would be. But psychology was so boring and when I came here I decided that I would go into social work. I helped my mom along with her degree. So I was like I think I could do it.

Researcher: In grade 10 you mentioned that you didn't do well and you only acquired 5 credits throughout the year. What helped change your perspective after that point in time?

I think at that time I had a lot of freedom at that school and I was with my first cousin. Like we were teenagers and we just had way too much freedom. It was not structured and that's where I failed there. In grade 11 the problems I had were from what was going on at home. I think that the biggest thing for me was that I stopped smoking weed, because it makes

such a huge difference. I don't think people really understand. But I was lazy and I had no motivation to do anything and when I changed I was able to apply myself. It was like okay I can do it. It was way easier. I wasn't on track to graduate and I wasn't doing nothing. I needed somebody to help me get my life back on track. I didn't know who else to turn to and I just started talking to her. I think she helped not in kind of ways to deal with it but just being somebody there who would listen. She gave me advice like 'if you know you're going to relapse' get involved in a hobby for example.

Researcher: Did the Aboriginal counselor have an impact on you?

Absolutely! When I would get in trouble they would come and they would advocate on our behalf. They would say well this is what is going on. They would say to the school that they need to help us. I know that when they couldn't help us it really impacted them. So I know that they did everything that they could to advocate for us and help us to just stay in school and graduate. The FN school population was not large but there was a lot of people who used the Pride Room. There was like 10 people who would go there regularly. There was 20-30 people who would come in there to work. Everyone was supported.

Researcher: Were there any tutoring opportunities that helped students who were struggling academically?

Well I know the FNMI worker had her education degree and she would be there to help the kids academically. But there was no outside help. They would help in getting resources.

Researcher: How would you describe the general teacher population in your school. Describe them?

I had a lot of really good teachers. I also had some that were not so great. In my opinion what makes a good teacher is one that encourages you. A lot of times you get a teacher who gives you a bad mark and you want to give up. But a good teacher will say to you let me help you get this done. And then you do well and they are so happy for you.

Interview # 6

Researcher: What was it that kept you in school aside from your family?

Probably knowing that nowadays that you pretty much have to have education to get a job anywhere. Jobs won't hire you if you don't have a high school diploma. Most of the stuff I was pretty interested in like math and physics and all the sciences. I found that pretty interesting. I kind of planned on doing a job that needed some university. You need a diploma to go to university.

Researcher: How was the school instrumental in keeping you in school?

It was basically just coursework that kept me engaged in school. I set a school record for school attendance. I had quite a few friends that were Native. Always with them after school and on weekends. In my school Native and non-Native were segregated to some point. It seemed like the Natives were just friends with just the Natives and white people were friends with just the white people. A lot of the times when we got to like high school we started to mix a liitle bit. We were friends with whomever.

Probably the counselors, they emphasized that you need to go to school and get a good education and good attendance. The Native liaison was one of the counselors there, he kind of said that you have go to school, he kinda kept me in school. I didn't have any attendance

problems or problems with skipping school. My friends seemed to skip school a lot. We had the vice principal he was always trying to keep kids going to school. He was always catching kids skipping. But a few did go to class quite regularly but it was just a smaller group of kids that would skip.

Researcher: Was there a teacher in the school who made a difference?

My favorite teacher was either my physics or my math and calculus teacher. My physics teacher he was like a pretty fun guy, he would always have us watching pet talks or doing physics experiments or demonstrations and stuff like that. He would always have a different way of teaching that kind of stood out. My math and calculus teacher, he was a pretty funny guy, he had us work quite a bit but it was one of my favorite classes.

Probably the majority of the FN students graduated.

Researcher: Was the school principal instrumental in keeping you in school? How?

The school principal was someone that I never got to know. I never really talked to him all that much. I know that he was a fairly good guy. Yah, I never really talked to him so I didn't know him all that well.

My parents weren't involved in the school. My grandmother on my mom's side she would come into my grade six class once a week for a few years. She was also a kindergarten teacher.

Researcher: Describe barriers that you have had to overcome during your time at school? How did you overcome these barriers? Not that I could think of.

Researcher: What about your courses, can you think of any difficulties?

The classes that I seemed to not do so well in were my social studies and English. To get better in my English classes I started reading more and getting more help from my teacher. In my social studies I have a social teacher, he was a pretty good teacher. I just found social a little easier when I had him. It was easier to get through the class. Overall the teachers were pretty good at my school.

Researcher: When did you start planning on what you would do after high school? Probably when I was very young in elementary, my parents would say " you're probably going to university." They would tell me that I would pretty much have to go to university. But not that I have to but I probably should. My dad went to university so I wanted to go. Probably since middle elementary school I probably knew that I was going to go to university.

Researcher: What about your decision regarding post-secondary, did someone at the school influence you?

At first I kind of wanted to go into the states but I figured I would just come somewhere closer where it would be a lot easier to move and a lot cheaper than having to move somewhere far. If I did run into trouble it wouldn't be too far away from home. So I kind of wanted to attend two universities.

Researcher: Do you feel that your high school experience prepared you well for university? Some of the classes that I took in high school like my calculus class and some of my math classes and physics class we did at high school the same things that we did at

my classes here but here at the university there is a lot more homework than I had expected. There is also a lot more class time than I had expected. Yah, some of my classes it was like a review so it was a lot easier there.

Interview # 7

Researcher: Please introduce yourself by giving me a background?

I graduated high school in June 2011. I was raised traditionally and graduated from an off-reserve high school. She helped a lot even with the fees because the Band wouldn't cover it. I lived with my grandparents for the majority of my life. My mom was overcoming addictions and my dad was nowhere to be found. My mom overcame addiction and she now has her Masters in Social Work. She very supportive of my education and she is currently paying for my education because I'm not getting any funding. So she's my biggest support right now. I have a job and trying to follow my dream. I expect to complete my B.A. in 2016. I am going for four years and then hope to do my Master's. I haven't decided where yet. I expected it to be hard work but which it obviously is. I've seen the payoff because I look at my younger siblings and they have a life that my mom couldn't provide for me. It's addictions free and that's the kind of role model that she has been towards me. I'm addiction free and alcohol free. That's the kind of life that I hope to role model to my future children. I lost two sisters to drug and alcohol addictions so I just don't want to have any part of that. I try to stay away from that but there's also pressure from school. So being in university you've just got to think about what the payoff will be. I see my friends going out nowadays and its like "they can do that now, but I can do that in four years" because I'll still be only 23.

Researcher: You mentioned that you attended on and off-reserve schools. Can you tell me about that?

I was attending on-reserve schools for my grade 7 to grade 9. Then in my grade 9 year, my brother started dating our principal's daughter and that ended up bad anyways. Our principal ended up beating up my brother and we both got banned from the school property. So we ended up going to the town school. But if anything that was one of the biggest things for me, if it wasn't for that it ended up working in my favor.

Researcher: Was there quite a transition from on-reserve to an off-reserve school?

Yes, there was especially racism wise. That was the first time I ever experienced racism in my grade 9 and 10 year. People have all these negative assumptions of First Nations people. So I had to overcome that and really try open up a lot of eyes mainly with the young people because they are already set in their ways from their parents.

Researcher: Tell me about your high school experience and what was it that kept you in school?

The Native Liaison offices, there was a man and a lady. Something about them was welcoming. The teachers already had assumptions like when I went to town school, I was put in modified classes when I was supposed to be in advanced classes. So those assumptions they really brought me down and the Native Liaison officers they got my confidence back up. They ensured that I took advantage of every opportunity. They gave us opportunities, they made sure that we tried out for sports teams. That experience alone

helped a lot because I got to go to summer games. I went to the North American Indigenous games because of them

When I had first arrived at school they asked me what classes I had been taking before and I told them. After I had taken all these tests and stuff and I had taken diploma exams. I excelled in those exams. Right away from the tests marks came back, they came to me and said "why didn't you say something." I ended up joining the Math Leads team and stuff like that. I got to go all over for that. In 2009 my Aboriginal Liaison she signed me up for a competition. So I went there and I won that title and that was big accomplishment for me. She supported me the whole way, she made sure I had everything I needed before I was going. She made sure I had a place to stay when I got there and she appealed to culture because even when I lost my sister she came to the wake. She came and helped serve food, she worked in the kitchen. She generally cared and she did not expect anything in return.

Researcher: Was there anything else in the school that was positive?

They had sports programs and all the time they would come into the Native lounge. The coaches would come into the Native lounge all the time and round up everybody. They would get them to try out for teams, so that really helped. But before I got into a car accident I was into soccer and stuff. They would make sure that we tried out for everything. Even if we weren't the best they would get us on the team and they would help us improve. So I thought sports was a really big thing for us. That's really all we had. I'm involved in hockey for the girls team. The principal and coach of my school got me on a team. My dad couldn't afford to pay my fees so they had like a little fund raiser in the school. That's how I got to play so it was a good opportunity for me. Other than that there was really

nothing there for us. it was like here's your Native Student lounge and hang out and kinda mind your own.

The graduating class had 1400 students; there were thirteen Aboriginal graduates, there was only 3 of us who were under the age of 18.

Researcher: Which high school stands out and why?

It would probably be the off-reserve high school because that's when the Native Liaison officers really ensured that we had every opportunity. Also, that's when I really experienced that culture shock coming from the reserve into town like my mom described it as taking in the residential school because that's what it felt like. I didn't know anybody, like they were mean. My second day I didn't go, my third day I didn't go, my fourth day my mom forced me to go. It wasn't something I wanted to do, that's why it stands out for me.

All of the non-native kids were mean to me, it was everybody, it was black kids, Asian kids. They all had these negative assumptions of First Nations just because one person did this and we were all that way. They would say racial slurs like '*Pocohontas'* and stuff like that. When we would come to town and my mom drove a nice vehicle, they would ask where our horses were or if we brought our teepee and stuff like that.

Aside from the students, what about the teachers? I had one black teacher that was phenomenal, he really catered to everybody. He taught everybody in a way that they could understand. Other than that I felt that I was blocked up with other First Nations kids. Put in those modified classes. Never really given a chance to excel. They expected us to sit in

class and just be quiet. But when I took my Diploma exams it has come to the surface that I was excelling. In order to obtain a scholarship you have to make 85% average, mine was 89%. So I got a $500.00 scholarship and it could have been used for anything throughout the school year. I never really had that much white friends. All the Indian girls were always nice to me. I was never really accepted by the White students. Especially when it came to a classroom setting when the teacher has you go to the board. The f word and the b word would be said just as you are passing them by.

Researcher: Was there a teacher in the school who made a difference?

In very many ways they weren't there. If I needed help it kind of well the answer is in the textbook. Then I say that I know but I want to learn the process. Things like that if you wanted help you had to go elsewhere. I felt like I was imposing on them when I needed to learn something. A lot of the times it was kind of just like they had better things to do. And they would do the eyes and odd look when you didn't understand something. Can you be that dumb and things like that. I may have been only 15 or 16 but I wasn't stupid. I understand what those looks are.

I had the support of the Black teacher, the student liaison, and my home that helped me succeed academically. So how did you do in the classes of these teachers who were not supportive? How did they grade you? In the 60's and 70's, at times I would argue my mark or I would show my mom. She was taking her Masters and I would say "I know this isn't university work but this is better than a 60 or 70 percent average. Then I would see some of my friends work, some of my guy friends, it was like how did you get an 80 or a 90? This one teacher would say "oh you didn't understand it." I say, "I fully understand it." I

would verbally explain to them the entire process. Whether it be my physics class or my English class which I excelled in and I always got full marks throughout my high school years. So I didn't want to put up with that rudeness from them. I didn't want to argue, and instead just get passing marks and get out of there.

Researcher: Did it make you bitter towards the school in any way?

Yah, it did I kind of felt like they were all one of the same. My mom pointed out that was the assumption that they had about me because they had assumed that I was the same as all the First Nations kids. If I had gone there and done bad things, if I gone there to start fights. So I kind of had to chew up my pride and really start to just get it done for me. I decided that I wasn't there for them.

Researcher: You mentioned from the beginning that there were something like 14 other FN graduates, how did they do, did you have any idea?

I know a lot of them barely passed. When I was going to high school, there were seventeen of us staying in a house. In the beginning of the year there were originally 40 First Nations students who were supposed to graduate. In the first semester we lost basically half and then in the second semester it was like the exception of me and two of my other good friends, everybody else had barely passed.

Researcher: Was the school principal instrumental in keeping you in school? How?

I grew up traditionally with my step dad. We would go hunting and traveling and hunting moose and you don't ask questions. I just sit there and listen and I'm used to that. These kids are used to talking back and he wouldn't take that. He demanded respect if you wanted

respect. That was kind of his deal. I respected him personally. He was always nice to me. Like “hi , how you doing.?” But other kids he just would not give them the time of day because of the rudeness. At the same time I understand where there’re coming from but I understand where he’s coming from, I understand because I watched him try with dozens of them before they dropped out. They would even have home visits to encourage the parents to get their kids to come to school. What I had said earlier is there were 3 of us who were under the age of 18 with one who graduated. I had lived with two of them and they were over the age of 21. There were like six or seven who were over the age of 21. He had a very open relationship with my mom and that was initiated on both their parts. When I had first went there I had gotten into arguments with other students and I was in his office a lot. Once he had found out my potential and who I was and where I had come from. I had opened up and he started to really take an interest. He was skipping class. He would joke around and he was really open with a lot of ceremonies too because they had a Band that would take students to school. During Native Awareness week they would host a mini-pow wow and then they would have people come in and explain the dances. Then all the grade 12 graduates that came from the school that he teamed up with the First Nation and they had like a mini grad for them. Just like a half-day thing, soup and sandwich. Then were all given a feather for graduation. He tried to promote the involvement of the community. But it was a red neck town so the First Nations people would come but nobody from the general community would engage.

Researcher: So the teachers were not involved in the Native Awareness activities?

If they did it was on school hours and if so they were forced to bring their classes down for that half hour. Other than that they couldn't be bothered.

Researcher: Describe a teacher who really stood out and made a difference?

There was no teacher in my high school experience that gave me credit for my abilities. Once my grade 10 year went by and there was all this hype that an Aboriginal student won an award. From then on I felt like I was never given a chance. The opportunity never presented itself. After the way I was treated by teachers like dumb looks.

Researcher: What barriers did you have to overcome?

Racism was probably the biggest barrier. Once I had lived with my mom I had a very privileged life, my step-dad was working in the oil mines. I kind of always had the nicest stuff. The girls were teased a lot for what they wore. Like how they did their hair. And if they didn't have name brand stuff. Even though I was one of the people who did have it they always gave me the same. If any of us had problems we would all band together and stick up for that person. All the First Nations boys they would all stay together. They really ventured out.

Researcher: In this province there is currently an initiative to promote academic success among First Nations. In your school did you notice any of that?

There was a poster and there was never anything really done from it. I took a trip and we tried to apply and it said that details would follow later. That was the end of it. As far as I know now there's nothing going on now, I have an adopted younger sister. I have 10-12 cousins that go to school there but they have all been moved to Outreach. And people who

can't work in their classroom setting get send there. So I went to Outreach for one of my classes and this was after I had graduated but I needed to take one more class before attending the university. So I went to take a class there because it was faster. I worked by modules. When I went there, there was 95% First Nations students. Then there were a few Black people and it was like this for the entire two months that I was there.

Researcher: Do you think cultural awareness in the schools is increasing understanding and acceptance?

In my opinion "No." You can't help someone that doesn't want to help themselves. Although, culture plays a big role in my life because I grew up with it. I know my role in ceremony. My grandfather always told me that you education to survive in a white man's world. We had to know that balance between the First Nations and the White man's world. And to always maintain that balance and respect it. I really missed my sister when she passed away. I think if First Nations traditional practices are going to come into the school it has to be done by traditional elders. That language has to come back. This big initiative, this big money that there're spending is going to waste.

Interview #8

Researcher: Please introduce yourself by giving me a background?

I have very old parents from the residential school days. I am the youngest of five siblings. The oldest would be 38 and the closest one to my age would be 33. So I guess I was mostly on my own. My mom went to school here when I was still a kid so my sister babysat me a lot.

My dad is 61, he didn't graduate from high school. He was in residential school and he was working most of his life. He was a security guard and he was the head boss. He knows how to run a business. He was into rodeo so he got my brothers into it. As for my community, if you go off the reserve there is a high chance of high school graduation. When I graduated I was the only girl amongst a bunch of Native guys. Out of my friends I am the only one who has graduated. They are working currently towards it except for my best friend's younger sister. She graduated from the on-reserve school. I usually do see graduates from there but they do not have the complete, they just have the requirements. They don't have their main courses like Chemistry, Biology, Math, English, and Social Studies.

During school even though I was going to an off-reserve school they often held conventions and they would pull us out or have the white kids come with us. There's like a lot of opportunities presented to us. And there's a lot going on with healthcare. So we got a lot of support from the reserve administration. They would have presenters come in and tell us what they did, what school they went to, what programs they did and then most schools would make up a list.

Researcher: I'd like you to think back to your high school experience, what was it that kept you in school aside from your family?

Some of the teachers were very supportive. They were there to help you. And from there enthusiasm and attitude rubbed off on me and I was enthusiastic about their classes. There were also my friends, It's nice to have people around you and all these events like the counselors who was there. He was very helpful in trying to pick a school and when not and talking with your parents. Some of the teachers were not interesting or I couldn't really see

what they were trying to teach me. I did drop out of my math course due to that. But I did try with the others. They gave you every opportunity to pass your classes. Even if it means dropping down a level, you can do that if you want to and if it's needed for you to pass a course.

Photography was a course that really stood out and kept me engaged. Why? I really liked the teacher, she was informative. She was the computer teacher but she was also the photography teacher. She really pushed you, and she'll keep reminding you about assignments. She introduced Moogle which is like blackboard. There were incentives for signing up on Moogle. The school counselor gave help if you needed it. She's the one who got me a therapist. She would check up on me every so often. I'd be called to her office. My progress was monitored and kept me on track. At the beginning of grade 12, I missed about a month of school, the school counselor would fax me the documents and she met up with the teacher and they decided that maybe I should just go down to -2 level to be able to pass this course at least. I agreed. The school would add incentives to passing courses, they'd encourage you, they would check up on you. Like maybe a pizza party. One time they had all Aboriginal kids go to a classroom and they started asking the questions like: "we know that because you are not attending an on-reserve you don't have access to your own culture, what could we do to help make it better? So they got our opinions through that entire thing. Some students wanted access to their language, more art classes like beading and all that.

My culture was not instrumental to my high school success simply because I do not have much access to my own culture. I never really had much access to any Native people,

adults, only my parents. My parents decided that their children would not speak their native tongue in case we developed an accent. They do regret because now we don't know our language.

The cultural activities that came into our school were pow wows, celebrations, and would get community members into the school. They had the Chief there one time to talk to our students and to talk to him. It was my grade 9 graduation and we had the Chief there. The school always tried to get a Native speaker into the schools and maybe have him once a week to teach us our language. There wasn't much culture on the off-reserve schools. I never had access to it. I don't think it had too much influence.

My photography teacher was the one who really made a difference. She was a tall, formidable woman. Like with most teachers, I sometimes will give attitude but with her I never gave attitude. I gave her my respect. Due to that I tried my hardest in her presence. I would always be going to her for career advice and I tried really hard in her class. It showed, it also helped pave a way for me in a way because I wanted to go into photography. I got compliments under her tutelage.

Talking to her was similar and when she talked to me it was like another person giving me advice. She was like this with all students. She was fair to everyone and she really didn't push us. She was very strict about how she wanted things which was good because you need structure in life. A lot of students complained about her. She had high expectations of everyone. She would give us a chance to modify assignments if they didn't meet her expectations with a deadline. If you didn't understand, she'd explain it to you and give you examples.

Researcher: Was the school principal instrumental in keeping you in school? How?

I heard many stories about how he's really hard on the Natives. I remember one time this girl got into another fight with another girl and then he actually stuck up for her. She was shocked that she was on the Native side. I see that he is strict but at the same time, he is just not like this for the Natives, it's like this for everyone. They are there to push you and I know as Natives sometimes we don't like that but it's necessary to continue on with life. I know one time we got into trouble with drugs because they smelled it and I know that he didn't have a good relationship with this one boy. At the same time that boy was in his office and the principal told them I'm not suspecting you I'm just seeing what's going on. He was around the school all the time. He would come into the class, be in the hallways, and at his desk. He was everywhere.

My parents involvement in the school was at parent-teacher interviews. They seemed comfortable in going into the school.

Researcher: Describe barriers that you had to overcome during your time at school? How did you overcome these barriers?

When I was growing up I didn't have that much interaction with other people. There was a lot of influence with bad things and I had to abstain from that. When I wanted to give up, I couldn't really because it's difficult for a Native to drop out. It's not typical to graduate and it was really something just standing on that stage getting that Diploma. There's nothing quite like it.

There were really no teachers who posed as a barrier. They understood. They were there. There wasn't a negative teacher at the high school. They were pretty helpful. As for students, some of the Natives were a bit resistant to the teachers. Mostly, the girls, the boys understood the system. They had their ups and downs at that school over the years but now they just want to graduate and they try their hardest. With the girls they are kind of still young, they are younger than me and I hear them complain, "Oh that teacher did this." I could say that it has to do with the parents. I was raised with a strong hand so were some other people. With some they were allowed to be free-ranged. They couldn't really do that at school. One got expelled. But there were too many indiscretions. So she was pretty upset over that. Some dropped out.

In the end there was about 7 – 10 students who graduated from high school. The graduation class was 22 students. There were only 2 students who could not graduate; they both didn't have enough qualifications. I know one did go on to post-secondary, the other was my friend and she never graduated. Right now she is trying to upgrade. She has been trying that for two years.

The students weren't judgmental and the teachers were helpful. That was very surprising. I got very self-conscious among the Native girls. But every phobia I had just increased by then to the point where I didn't want to be around that big of a group.

Segregation between Native and non-native was evident in the earlier grades. In grade 11 and 12, the there was a mixture of girls. It all depended on the attitude of the girls. In grade 12, both groups communicated with each other. They were all pretty much best friends. The

Natives would group together but if a white kid wanted to join, they would just let them. Segregation was not an issue. We were always joking around with the white kids.

In grade 10, there was a pilot project that all Natives were a part of. I don't know how I passed. I passed with the highest marks but I don't know how because I don't remember anything from pure math 10. I don't remember much English and a bit of math but we had so many different teachers. We got transferred from upstairs to downstairs. I'll admit there was segregation right there. The entire grade 9's had their own class and us grade 10's were on our own. There was like only six of us. Eventually there was me, my friend, and three other boys left to continue on with that grade 10 class. Two of the students were special needs because they always had support.

In grade 11 and 12 I had the opportunity to take part in advanced classes, but my grades weren't that high. Our grade level dictated our placements. I was able to go into Chemistry 20 and Biology 20.