UNDERSTANDING HOME-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN AN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY IN AN URBAN PUBLIC SCHOOL

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
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ABSTRACT

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This study examines relationships between Indigenous parents and their children’s non-Indigenous teachers. As many Indigenous students are taught by mostly non-Indigenous teachers, this thesis aims to provide teachers with insights or strategies on how to work in a community that is perhaps unknown to them. There are three areas of focus within this thesis: critical issues within systems of education in Indigenous communities, critical issues that Indigenous parents face, and critical issues that schools with Indigenous students face.

This project has given both parents and teachers the chance to talk about the experiences of Indigenous children, the experiences of parents and teachers, and the relationships that form between the school, home, and the community. Also included are ideas that can be used by schools, school boards, and Indigenous communities to encourage strong relationships between homes of students and their schools.
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CHAPTER ONE: CONTEXT

Research and Questions

This study examines relationships between Indigenous parents and their children’s non-Indigenous teachers. This is a critical area to examine as many Indigenous students are taught by non-Indigenous teachers. “Ninety per cent of Native children in this country will, at one time or another, be taught by a non-Native teacher, and many of these children will receive most of their education from non-Native teachers” (Taylor, 1995, p. 225). Taylor continues by adding that non-Indigenous teachers therefore have great influence on Indigenous children, the likelihood of them graduating, and the school climate.

According to a Toronto District School Board census, approximately 73.1% of employees are white (2007). A similar census was conducted for students that same year in which only 31% of grade 7-8 students identified as white and only 33% of grade 9-12 students identified as white (Toronto District School Board, 2007). Since the number of students coming from Indigenous and other visible minorities far outweigh that of teachers, it may be that many of these students will be taught by teachers who are unable to relate to or even understand the various cultural sensitivities that accompany racial and ethnocultural diversity within their classrooms. Furthermore, as many of these same teachers working in Toronto, the Greater Toronto Area, or a broader Ontario come from white, middle-class backgrounds (as I realized when I entered the teaching profession), most teachers lack the educational or experiential background of how to work with people from historically marginalized and underserved
communities, as this is something that is generally not taught in most teacher education or undergraduate degree programs (Hollins & Guzman, 2005).

My initial goal in undertaking this project was to provide teachers with insights or strategies on how to work in a community that was perhaps unknown to them. I originally felt this desire because of my own experiences of uncertainty when I first started teaching within an Indigenous community. Quite often I felt I was an outsider within the community as I was uncertain about many of the traditional beliefs and practices of various Indigenous groups. I therefore fought hard to learn about Indigenous cultures as it was something that was never included in my own schooling. I want to share some of what I have learned with others with the hopes that non-Indigenous teachers can work within Indigenous communities with a greater awareness and understanding.

Since my desire to create a study such as this stems from my own experience as a non-Indigenous teacher faced with working within an Indigenous community for which my own schooling had not adequately prepared me, I in no manner want to claim that I have all or even many answers. As teaching and learning is a continuous process, I am able to share what I have learned up to this point. Initially, when I began teaching in an Indigenous community, I almost immediately realized my ignorance of not knowing the history and traditions of peoples who have lived on this land for centuries. In addition, it was difficult for me as a teacher to build meaningful relationships with people of whose customs and traditions I was unaware. Therefore, I attempted to immerse myself in learning about the Indigenous culture of the community. I also began to plan this study as I wanted to give non-Indigenous teachers strategies with which to work with Indigenous families I had begun to realize many non-Indigenous teachers found
themselves teaching within Indigenous communities and like myself, recognized that their own schooling experiences were lacking the strategies with which to work with Indigenous families.

All of the research collected for this thesis was done at a public, urban Canadian school located in Toronto. Therefore I attempted, whenever possible, to use literature that would reflect issues related to urban Indigenous peoples. The school studied here has a very diverse population, with students coming from a great range of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The single largest cultural group is Indigenous, followed by students of African descent, students of South Asian descent, and students of European descent. As there is a large population of Indigenous students, the school offers Ojibwe language classes as well as Aboriginal Culture classes for Indigenous students. Some of the families with children in attendance at the school have strong academic backgrounds in the sciences as well as social science disciplines. This is significant as for centuries, the dominant culture has viewed Indigenous and other visible minority groups as ignorant and/or uneducated needing assimilation (Hampton, 1995, p.9).

Over the course of this project and in working as a non-Indigenous teacher within an Indigenous community, I have come to understand how both Indigenous parents and non-Indigenous teachers feel about the relationships that do or do not develop between them. This project has given both parents and teachers the chance to talk about the experiences of Indigenous children, the experiences of parents and teachers, and the relationships that form between the school, home, and the community. All of these experiences are powerful; some are positive, some are negative, but all provide insight into what strategies non-Indigenous teachers and other non-Indigenous educators can use to improve their relationships with Indigenous
families. Also included are ideas that can be used by schools, school boards, and Indigenous communities to encourage strong relationships between homes of students and their schools.

To reach a deeper understanding of relationships between non-Indigenous teachers and the Indigenous families of the students they teach, this study focuses on the following three areas within an urban Canadian schooling context:

1. Critical issues within systems of education in Indigenous communities;

2. Critical issues Indigenous parents face;

3. Critical issues that schools with Indigenous students face.

While these issues are examined individually; they are interconnected in several ways. The interconnectedness of these issues exists as both parents and students may face similar issues as they attempt to navigate our current systems of education.

Once any historically marginalized community is educated within an institutionalized environment by people who are historically the oppressors, there needs to be work done to modify lessons using an anti-racist framework. Schick and St. Denis discuss the fact that if racism and race privilege are not acknowledged, the effects of colonization continue (2005, p. 296).

In addition to examining issues that arise for Indigenous parents and the community, issues that arise for non-Indigenous teachers will also be discussed. One of the main goals of this study is to assist educators in facilitating relationships with the Indigenous families of their students and the communities in which they teach. Ultimately, this research seeks to reach a deeper understanding of relationships between students’ homes and their schools and thus more
actively engage children in lifelong learning. The following research questions have been
developed in order to uncover current issues that emerge for non-Indigenous teachers and
Indigenous families.

1. How are Indigenous families involved and engaged in their children’s schooling and
what occurs as a result of their engagement?

2. What do teachers do to engage Indigenous families in the schooling of their children?

3. What does the school do to facilitate relationships with Indigenous families?

These questions have been devised in order to explore the ideas and opinions of both
families and schools and allow both teachers and parents equal opportunities to share their
voices. This study aims to analyze both the needs of the community as well as the needs of the
school.

Generally, much of the current research in the field of Canadian Indigenous education
discusses the need for non-Indigenous teachers to become more aware of diverse cultural
backgrounds within the communities in which they teach. This study aims to address this need
by creating an increased awareness of culturally appropriate interactions and teachings for non-
Indigenous educators. It is hoped that non-Indigenous educators who find themselves regarded as
outsiders working within Indigenous communities will be able to relate to the literature explored
here and find some commonalities with the experiences and stories shared. It is also hoped that
educators considered to be outsiders working within other historically marginalized and
oppressed communities may also be able to use the strategies explored here to help them
understand their students’ cultural identities.
Personal Background and Disclosure

Prior to beginning the exploration of the relationships that exist between schools and the Indigenous families and communities of the students they serve, I feel that it is important to acknowledge and pay tribute to our Creator. It is necessary to make this recognition as it is through our Creator that we have everything that surrounds us. It is a belief of many peoples throughout the world that we all originate from a Creator, a God or gods, or Allah and that we must know where we come from in order to know where we are going. I believe that by learning about and understanding of our past, we can begin to map out a path for our future that will lead our children to health and peace.

Within this study, not only am I undergoing academic and professional growth myself, but I find that I am on a personal journey in which I am learning more about who I am, my relationship with our Creator, and where I am situated in our world spiritually. I have been learning more about my own spiritual and religious identity and through this I feel that I am coming to an understanding of how to make deeper connections with my students and their families. As someone who has been educated within the public school system here in Canada, I am seeing more and more how my view and opinions have been shaped by a Eurocentric frame. I am finding that as I teach within communities that share both similarities and differences from my own cultural background, I must work to break or un-learn some of the bias and cultural misunderstandings that I have been taught in order to be a holistic practitioner. Since teaching and learning about spirituality is often viewed as something that should be taught at home or by religious groups, learning about it within the public school system is quite often ignored or shunned. It is therefore important to me that I learn to connect with my own spirituality more
deeply in order to feel more comfortable teaching about it in schools through “greater ethno-
cultural equity in education” (Dei, et al., 1997).

Another aspect of myself that I must disclose is the privilege that I come from. While I do not come from excess, I have a certain amount of class privilege due to my socioeconomic background. I was raised in a middle to upper-middle class neighbourhood in Toronto. I grew up with both of my parents and they had jobs granted to them by their formal (university) education. There was the expectation that I too would go on to seek a post-secondary education and I knew in advance that my family would assist financially in addition supporting the extra-curricular activities that I was involved in throughout my life. I am also a bi-racial woman whose (Black African) father immigrated to Canada from Guyana and whose (White European) mother immigrated from Scotland. My racial background has enabled me to take on a dual perspective; I have the eyes of someone of a visible minority yet at the same time I recognize that the shade of my skin has granted me a certain privilege within the Black community and beyond.

**Background of the School**

The school used in this study is located in Toronto and approximately one third of its population is of Indigenous descent. The majority of these students and their families are from the Anishinaabe community although this has been changing in recent years as more Indigenous families from across Canada have been moving to urban areas such as Toronto. As stated previously, the school offers Ojibwe language classes to students and they may opt to take Ojibwe instead of French and Ojibwe language classes begin at the Kindergarten level rather than waiting until grade four as occurs for French instruction. The school also offers Aboriginal
Culture classes and there are also programs and workshops for adults during and after school hours.

**The Need to Explore Relationships Between Home and School**

It is critical for all teachers to have an understanding of the students and school environments in which they teach. As mentioned earlier, Taylor (1995) states that “Ninety per cent of Native children in this country will, at one time or another, be taught by a non-Native teacher, and many of these children will receive most of their education from non-Native teachers” (p. 224). Teachers need to learn about and understand the cultural background of their students and school environments. Taylor also explains that Indigenous students are influenced by their non-Indigenous teachers and this has an effect on their self-identity, their interactions, and their cultural perceptions. This demonstrates the amount of influence educators have and the importance of educators recognizing their role within diverse communities.

Presently there is an increasing need to better facilitate the education of historically marginalized peoples, particularly students of Indigenous decent in Canada. This is especially the case within urban areas as more Indigenous peoples are living off-reserve than ever. A recent City of Toronto study found from 2001 to 2006, the Indigenous population of Ontario increased by 28.8%, which is a faster rate than that of Canada as a whole (City of Toronto, 2008, p. 2). Within that same time period, the study found that the Indigenous population in the Greater Toronto Area also increased significantly as it went from 23,950 to 31,910 which is an increase of 33.2%. These statistics are a clear indication of the need to examine and understand issues affecting the needs of the Indigenous community in order to engage Indigenous students in their learning and address their needs. Since the research proposed by this study analyzes home and
school relationships, both the successes and challenges that some educators face in developing relationships with students and their families in Indigenous communities will be explored.

**Structure of the Thesis**

Chapter one describes the context of the research and presents the research questions. I provide a brief professional background of myself in order to add more context and give an understanding to the perspectives of the researcher and the study itself.

In chapter two I provide an overview on the literature about parent and school relationships. Non-Indigenous teachers who teach Indigenous students are also examined in the literature. Some Indigenous traditions are also explored here as it is essential that all people begin to acknowledge and learn about Indigenous knowledges if we at all aim to make progress and decolonize our systems of education. Various terminology is explored and definitions of the language used are provided. A second more thorough professional and personal background is provided in order to add additional context and give an understanding to the research.

Chapter three explores the methodology used in this study in order to obtain the data. The theories I used and the way in which I analyzed data is also discussed here. The data collected for this study was using a qualitative methodology. I conducted four interviews using three main questions and I interviewed two Indigenous parents and two non-Indigenous teachers. The interviews were conducted in order to establish an idea of the relationships that exist or do not exist between the school and parents. Only three main questions were used to guide the discussion as they were developed to encourage discussion so that both parents and teachers would feel free to share experiences and personal stories.
Chapter four provides a Western view of the findings of this research for the parent and teacher participants. Chapter five analyzes the data using the medicine wheel as the framework. In both chapter four and five, I analyze and focus on parent and school relationships.

Chapter six summarizes the research, discusses implications, and begins to put together ideas for future research. It is here that recommendations are made and the research project establishes productive practices for non-Indigenous educators who work with Indigenous populations. This chapter also highlights productive practices for any educator who works in historically marginalized and under-served communities as the key to engage communities is for educators to develop an understanding of the community through awareness and acceptance.

As the aim of this research study is to share practices and understandings gained from working as a non-Indigenous person within an Indigenous community, there are many lessons that can be applied to other historically marginalized communities. That is not to say that there is necessarily a shared experience of all racialized groups, but there may be some common ground on which others can benefit. At the same time, this study does not attempt to prescribe solutions for all issues related to home and school relationships.
CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Terminology and Language Used in the Literature

Many sources of literature use differing terms to describe culturally diverse Indigenous groups. Quite often Indigenous peoples are referred to as Native Canadians, Native peoples, Aboriginal peoples, or First Nations peoples. The term “Indigenous” is often used as it allows for the inclusion of diverse communities and groups. Unless otherwise noted, this study will use the term Indigenous, however, if there are references made to other research which use them. The terms favoured by this study are outlined below.

Naming and Cultural Sensitivity

The term Anishinaabe will be used in this study as it describes the specific community that will be explored, and after consulting with community members, is recognized as the term preferred by the community. The terms Native Canadians, Native peoples, or Natives are also used at times by people from the Anishinaabe community and these terms may be used to refer to all people of Indigenous descent in Canada when using direct quotes from participants. It is important to note that although the term Indigenous is used often in this study, Smith (2006) refers to it as problematic as it can “collectivize many distinct populations whose experiences under imperialism have been vastly different” (p. 6). Although the use of the term Indigenous can be debatable, it is a term that will be used within this study and the utmost care is taken to ensure cultural sensitivity is respected.
It should be noted that there are various spellings of the term Anishinaabe and similarly with the word Ojibwe. This is due to the fact that the Ojibwe language is historically and primarily oral. Some of the various spellings will be reflected within this study.

**Definitions of Home and School Relationships**

In much of the current research, there are various terms associated with the relationships that exist between students’ families and their schools. These relationships are referred to as parental involvement, parent partnerships, and parental engagement among many other terms. The term “home relationships” will be used in this study as it applies to parents, extended family members, and community members. “Home relationships” also allows for wide defining parameters as students may have a variety of family and community members who foster their development both socially and academically. In addition, “home relationships” is used as it can be seen as an environment completely separate from the institution of the school in which families and communities play a dominant role in raising children.

In addition to the word “home”, the word “family” is also used in discussion here to represent parents, siblings, and extended families. In many cases there may be more than a mother or father who parent the children in the household therefore “family” takes into account larger relationships that include grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, and cousins that care for and raise children. This is what often occurs in many Indigenous communities as Battiste (2000) suggests when she says “a whole community becomes one’s relatives” (p. 50). Battiste describes that it is Mi’kmaw cultural practice for children to refer to all adult women as ‘Auntie’ and that often children may not know who the direct descendants are of their family as there are many people considered as close as direct family.
In defining the relations between the home and school, the term “engagement” is not used here as it can imply that it is parents, or other family members, that need to work better with the school rather than the existence of a mutual partnership. The term “involvement” can also present a disconnect for relations between the home and school. “Parental involvement” can be seen as something that parents must do that is separate from the school, rather than a mutual and well-balanced relationship between home and school.

**The Idea of a Mutual Relationship**

Through my experiences I have found that the term “partnership” often elicits the belief that families and teachers are on an equal playing field when that may not be the case. There are often various social and cultural hierarchies in schools and other institutions that may prevent equal and level relations from occurring and it is important to recognize these variances. For instance, in some schools teachers who have been teaching for many years or those who may have been at that specific school for a long time may have more seniority or may hold more of a presence because of their understanding of the school climate. Also, for some cultural groups, teachers who come from outside of the community may be seen as outsiders and families may classify them as different therefore contributing to opposition between the insiders and outsiders. Instead, the term “mutual relationship” is used in this study to define the work that occurs between the home and the school. It is used in hopes that the school can be active in fostering mutual understandings between the home and school through more open communication between the two.
Relationships Between School, Family, and Community

Pushor and Murphy (2004) work with the term “partnership” as many schooling environments use it to define relationships between schools, families, and communities. Like me, they also question this term and argue that parents may not be given a voice in their children’s education as “many parents are positioned in marginalized ways in regard to their children’s schooling” (p. 221). The term “partnership” implies a relationship based on equality but as Pushor and Murphy argue, since many parents may not have a voice, this relationship between the home and school may not be mutual due to the historical marginalization and oppression of certain cultural groups. The authors specifically examine issues affecting Indigenous parents and their perspectives. By sharing the teaching experiences of one of the authors, Pushor and Murphy demonstrate their view on what educators can do to encourage positive parental participation as they hope to make change in teachers’ thinking and practice.

Pushor and Murphy begin by characterizing four types of “parental involvement” in schools. These four types of parental involvement were originally identified by Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, and Bloom (1993). They are described as:

- Family support – generally includes nutrition, health care, and social services components;

- Parent education programs – there is a focus on the role of parents as partners in their children’s education and attempts to alter some aspect of parental knowledge, attitudes, or behaviours;

- Parenthood education programs – helps parents learn about child rearing and child development principles;
Parent involvement and parent participation programs – involves parents in school activities and/or teaches parents specific skills and strategies for teaching or reinforcing school tasks at home (p. 222-223).

These education programs have been identified here as they clearly reveal and distinguish between varying levels of relations and possible interactions between families and their children’s schools.

The education programs listed here are targeted at parents. Due to an importance of establishing a mutual relationship between home and school, this study will also explore other programs and ways of developing relations.

Another approach to defining “parental involvement” is described by Epstein (2001). Epstein refers to a highly detailed understanding of what parental involvement accounts for. She argues that it includes the dimensions of communication, parent involvement at home, and parent involvement at school and offers specific ways parents can be involved under each type” (p. 8). In her analysis, Epstein explores both what is done by families and educators. She defines six types of parental involvement. Using a framework originally articulated by Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, and Walberg (2005). The following list describes the six types:

Type 1: Parent. The basic obligations of the family, such as establishing positive home conditions to encourage school success.

Type 2: Communicating. The communication between home and school that facilitates the flow of information about school curriculum and the child’s progress.
Type 3: Volunteering. The recruitment of parents to act as volunteers in order to help and support school initiatives and functions.

Type 4: Learning at Home: Parental involvement at home, such as helping children with homework and other learning activities, based on the information schools provide.

Type 5: Decision Making. Active parent involvement in school decisions and advocacy to lobbying for school improvements.

Type 6: Collaborating with the Community. The identification and dissemination of a network of available resources and services in the community in order to assist parents and schools in their efforts to better their children’s education. (pp. 8-9).

Epstein’s typology allows for families and schools to work together towards student success. Her framework is appropriate for this investigation which examines home-school relations from the perspectives of both parents and educators.

Corter and Pelletier (2005) discuss family involvement in schooling by asking questions about what parents and teachers do. These questions attempt to push thinking towards successful parental involvement. They seek to discover and understand how families are involved and engaged in their children’s schooling, and what occurs as a result.

What does the parent do differently and what does the teacher do differently – how do the child’s interactions and environment change as a result? How do these changes effect changes in the child’s
attitudes, emotions, and thinking that contribute to academic gains or more general developmental gains? And/Or how does the child learn directly as a result of these interactions and experiences? In short, what is parent involvement and what are the processes that might link it to student outcomes? (Corter and Pelletier, 2005, p. 299).

To continue to explore home and school relationships, this study asks questions that aim to understand how family and school relationships can be better facilitated. What factors contribute to successful relationships between the families and schools? What is successful involvement on behalf of families and communities? What communication is necessary on behalf of the teacher? Ultimately, this study will attempt to understand what parents and teachers can do to develop relationships between students’ home and schools.

Possible Reasons for “Parent Disengagement”

Mackay and Myles (1995), found that a major reason for poor relations between families and teachers was due to a lack of communication. One of the physical barriers to open relationships between parents and teachers was that day-to-day communication was limited. In some of these cases, families did not have home telephones. The issue of poor communication was further exacerbated by the fact that students may have been given notes by their teachers but may have failed to deliver them to their parents. In addition, Mackay and Myles also recognize and explain that some parents may not have been able to read or understand the notes from teachers. In other instances, the authors discovered that some families found communication that occurred unsatisfactory as it was primarily initiated by the school, thus not on the terms of families or the community. In addition, Mackay and Myles reported that a great deal of teacher
communication with families was negative as the notes and other reports home were frequently only about problems and difficulties encountered by the school rather than any positive reports.

Mackay and Myles (1995) also explored other factors that led to a lack of parental involvement in children’s schooling. Their study found that both Indigenous parents and non-Indigenous teachers reported that Indigenous parents did not participate in or attend parent/teacher nights that were organized by the school. They also found that many parents had feelings of discomfort in coming to the school. Some of the reasons why parents experience discomfort are due to being unfamiliar and intimidated by systems of education. They view the school as part of a system of which they do not participate. Some families may also view the school and formalized education as institutional and oftentimes there is implicit discouragement from the principal and almost completely non-Native teaching staff. Another reason for discomfort and feelings of alienation may be due to the negative schooling experiences that parents faced themselves.

**The Impact of Colonization and Geocultural Constructions**

Since colonization, many systems of governance such as educational institutions have marginalized Indigenous peoples. In their work, Abu-Saad and Champagne (2006) found that centuries of oppression have created a state in which there is a lack of access to current systems of empowerment for Indigenous people. The authors explain that many Indigenous peoples have lost their lands and their cultures and traditional beliefs have not been well understood and ultimately marginalized. Abu-Saad and Champagne state that due to oppression, generally Indigenous people “do not exercise either political access or empowerment within their surrounding nation-states” (p. 1). The authors continue by describing the feelings encountered by
Indigenous people as not feeling welcome as well as being in an environment in which they cannot easily succeed (p. 2). Both of these examples directly relate to the experiences of discomfort discussed previously and detailed in Mackay and Myers (1995).

Paul (2000) makes a similar argument as he explores reasons for why Indigenous peoples mistrust government systems. He argues that our current structures are based on a system that was initiated in order to assimilate Indigenous peoples and make traditional cultural beliefs and practices extinct. Paul discusses the fact that the racism that many students face in this system has made it very difficult for Indigenous people to obtain an education. He states it is “practically unattainable” (p. 258). Many students’ parents, grandparents, and other family or community members have encountered extremely destructive and damaging schooling experiences, and these experiences have a lasting effect on their own lives, those of their children, and a repercussion on the community.

Our current systems that are based on the assimilation of populations that Paul (2000) describes have been and continue to be extremely damaging. Abu-Saad and Champagne (2006) explain that although our current policies advocate equal opportunity in a theory-based open market, our environment is highly competitive, and it requires skillful participation based on high socioeconomic status and individual achievement. The authors also describe institutional practices that are discriminatory in nature as they use the views and beliefs of the dominant group as the norm. Institutions are said to “inhibit the access of some minority group and immigrants, but [nevertheless] they are expected to share mainstream values and ideals and participate within the civic community of the nation” (p. 3). These are the types of environments that impede and virtually disallow opportunities for socioeconomic advancement and do not grant the same chances for success as they promise.
Paul (2000) discusses the importance of getting to know others and understanding the impact of colonization. In his work he predicts what may have occurred if Europeans had come to a greater understanding of Africans and other Indigenous peoples during first contact. “If Europeans had gotten to know and had accepted Amerindians and Africans as equals during colonial times, instead of adopting White supremacist racist beliefs, which have ruled supreme in negatively depicting both as savages for the better part of five centuries, these peoples of colour would not have suffered the indescribable hells they have” (Paul, 2000, p. 257). Coming to know and understand diverse people is a major goal of this research. It is critical that non-Indigenous educators come to understand and genuinely embrace the diversity that their Indigenous students within their classrooms bring. Creating classrooms that are safe, caring and in which all students feel included is critical for meaningful learning to take place.

Colonization has led to the systems of privilege and dominance that continue to exist today. Taylor (1995) found that “non-Native staff dominate the dialogue and often attempt to impose their standards and plans on the school” (p. 234). These types of environments continue to occur within our schools as many non-Indigenous educators fail to acknowledge their privilege and their place within racial and social hierarchies.

In addition to the racial and social settings that influence our perceptions, our physical locations impact our identity construction and how we interact with each other. Downey and Hart (2005) question social definitions that are based on physical positions and they list some urban and rural positions and the implications. For instance, they found that some cultural groups were not seen as having a “full Indigenous identity” if located in urban settings and that “a ‘remote’ Indigenous identity [was seen] as being closer to the ‘real’ thing” (p. 51). These discriminatory beliefs can often be linked to people who struggle to understand their own
identity against a certain racial, cultural, or ethnic group. If the group itself struggles to understand or reconnect with their language and traditional beliefs, individuals within that group may also struggle to form identity.

In my own experience, the perceptions of others have affected the development of my own identity. As a biracial person I have experienced occasions in which people have inappropriately questioned or misjudged my racial background, and this has led me to be more dominant in asserting my race when asked. Teaching and working in a diverse community in which there are children of multiple racial, ethnocultural, and/or religious backgrounds, it is not unusual to have people ask about your heritage. I have also found that in a diverse Indigenous community questions about heritage in terms of family, clan, band, and geographic regions are frequently posed. Once as it was established that I was not of Indigenous descent, I have often been seen as a contributor to a system of government that has oppressed Indigenous peoples for centuries. In addition, I hold a position of power as a teacher within a public school system thus building the trust of the community has been extremely difficult.

One of the main areas to focus on during the interview process is gaining and maintaining the trust of the participants. As Fontana and Prokos (2007) discuss “gaining trust is essential to the success of the interviews, and once it is gained, trust can still be very fragile” (p. 45). Since I am a teacher at the school in which the participants work or have their children attend, trust is of great importance. Confidentiality during data collection and analysis was maintained at all times. For the parent participants, they are not identified in any way nor are their children. Similarly for the teacher participants, neither the teachers nor their students are identified in any way. As I have worked with the participants and/or members of their families I am working at an advantage in that I have a relationship with all participants already. This previous experience
provides me a basic understanding of the participants’ personalities as well as a level of trust that already exists.

As stated previously, I am a cultural outsider within the Anishinaabe community as well as the broader Indigenous community. Therefore, I have drawn on the work and commitment from working within the community for eight years at this school. I do have an understanding of the community due to some trust that has been built over time. This will assist during the interview process since many Anishinaabe parents currently communicate and advise me about cultural perspectives and teachings related to schooling within the community.

Trust has been developed primarily because I have remained at this school for several years and it is a school that usually has a high turnover rate in teaching staff and within the community, a known teacher is often more respected than one who is unknown. Secondly, I have participated in some activities and workshops within the community therefore many families have come to know me outside of my role as their child’s teacher. Thirdly, I may have taught some of the participants’ children and/or worked with the participants’ children in other capacities within the school through school clubs and/or teams therefore many families know who I am and have developed a relationship with me. I am also a colleague of the teacher-participants and we have worked together on many assignments and projects within the school. I work extremely hard to ensure that the students I teach learn about issues related to social justice and equity and I try to incorporate a diverse range of perspectives by including members of the local community in their learning.
Critical Issues within Systems of Education in Indigenous Communities

In a discussion paper by Malatest & Associates (2002), the following were identified as significant issues within Indigenous education:

- limited engagement of school staff with Indigenous parents in activities such as Parent Advisory Committees and extra-curricular activities,
- teacher and Indigenous parent dissatisfaction with school-parent communications,
- lack of teacher and administrator awareness and understanding of Indigenous culture; and,
- distrust and antipathy expressed by Indigenous parents of the public school system in their region (p. ii).

The discussion paper also states that it is necessary for Indigenous parents to become more involved in the education of their children and more actively participate in schools (p. 13). At the same time, schools must become or ensure they provide welcoming and inclusive environments in which parents and community members feel safe to make certain their participation. This is a key area that will be further examined in this research project.

Malatest and Associates also note that school processes can often be seen as a barrier to parental involvement (p. 13). Therefore it is necessary for schools to increase comfort levels for parents and families and actively initiate partnerships. This can be accomplished by acknowledging Indigenous culture within the school and by showing genuine care and respect for Indigenous perspectives and traditional practices.
Relationship to this Study

Working as a non-Indigenous person within an Anishinaabe community, I have become more aware of issues related to colonialism and its impacts on Indigenous peoples in Canada. As a woman of African descent whose family immigrated to Canada from the Caribbean, I have only had my own experiences to draw from, until now. Working closely with families within an Anishinaabe community, I have been fortunate to learn from them about issues that affect their communities as racialized and marginalized peoples. It is through the stories shared by both my students and their families that I have been learning about their culture and life experiences related to oppression. I also find that I am coming to recognize some of the similarities and differences of the impacts of colonialism that diverse Indigenous and African groups face and thus I am learning more about myself as a woman of African descent living in the Diaspora. I now feel that I am on a spiritual journey of self-discovery as I share stories with other globally displaced and historically marginalized peoples.

One of the key reasons as to why I have undertaken a study such as this is that in most of my previous learning and teaching experiences I have been viewed as a racialized woman. In coming to teach within an Indigenous community, I therefore naively believed that in being non-White, I would be viewed as a visible minority and thus have commonalities with Indigenous peoples. I was quick to realize that this would not be the case and that as non-Indigenous, I would be seen as just that, with little or no commonalities to the Indigenous children I was teaching. As this was surprising and shocking to me, I began to ask myself questions about myself, my own education, and the education that I was trying to impart onto the children of others. I came to the realization that it was what I represented and my potential of perpetuating
the system of oppression of which I represented that could be damaging to the children around me.

Through the introduction of the medicine wheel, I have provided a basic understanding of some of what I have learned about Indigenous culture working as a non-Anishinaabe teacher within a strong Anishinaabe community. This is an area that I will continue to explore in upcoming chapters, as I seek to explain my data and its findings. Chapter three explores how in which I obtained the data in order to provide this study with context from which to base the findings.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research recognizes that the researcher’s subjectivity affects the research (Hara, 1995). This is one of the main reasons for using a qualitative methodology as it is important to acknowledge the experience I have from working within the community of the parent participants. In addition, it is also necessary to recognize my relationship with all of the research participants who were interviewed for this study. Since a level of trust already existed due to my preexisting relationships with the participants they were interviewed to obtain rich data in which all of the participants shared their experiences. Hara also states that a strength of a qualitative methodology is that “it is able to explain the psychological dimensions of human beings which are impossible to represent numerically in a quantitative way” (1995, p. 357). Obtaining this type of rich data would not have been possible using a quantitative method.

The data collected was attained using the qualitative method of interviewing. Qualitative research is appropriate in situations in which the objective is to understand human action as opposed to control or predict these actions (Clandinin in Pinnegar and Daynes, 2007, p. 4). With a qualitative methodology, the ideas and opinions of the research participants can be upheld and respected and can allow for representation of both Indigenous parents and non-Indigenous teachers. In order to obtain and analyze data, participants of this project were interviewed. As I interviewed parents of Indigenous children, I hoped parents would share their experiences and I hope the teachers interviewed would describe experiences working with Indigenous families and good teaching practice. By using a qualitative methodology, I could examine relationships, and
specifically, “the reconstruction of a person’s experiences in relationship both to the other and to a social milieu” (Clandinin & Connelly, in Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 5). This helped me to allow for a historically marginalized group to have a voice, and to ensure the stories of the Anishinaabe community would be heard.

**Research and Colonization**

Linda Smith discusses the notion of research as embedded in colonization. She states that “the term research is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, ‘research’ is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” (1999, p. 1). This idea had an incredible impact on me as I began to question my own beliefs that I consider to be from an anti-racist framework and my desire to practice decolonization. I began to question myself as an educator because I wondered how I could truly be opposing colonialism when my entire educational background is from institutions rooted in imperialism. Furthermore, in my current work as a teacher employed by a public school board, I am in many ways perpetuating colonial thought and practice. These thoughts became huge issues for me as I began to question my own teaching practice and my personal views as well.

Another large concern that kept arising for me was the fact that I am an outsider within the Indigenous community. Throughout this study I questioned and continue to question who am I to discuss Indigenous issues as a non-Indigenous person. I attempted to whenever possible seek the advice and guidance of Indigenous educators and those considered to be elders within the community. Similarly to Mark (2002), “I was hoping that the people I interviewed would be guides in my own learning journey about myself and how to work more ethically” (p. 29). These thoughts and questions that have been circling in my mind are what propelled me to undertake
this study as I wish to share what I have learned as a non-Indigenous teacher working with Indigenous children and families.

Brown-Jeffy and Cooper argue that in using a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework allows researchers to focus on culture in schooling and on the sociohistorical effects of race and racism (2011, p. 65). In addition, they discuss the importance of the broader use of CRT to work through race and racism and the way in which systemic facets of school relationships have also been produced. It was through my reflection of who I am as a non-Indigenous educator working within an Indigenous community and through my understanding of CRT that I recognized the need to infuse the two.

To conduct this study it was necessary for the proposed research to go through an ethical review by the University of Toronto, Office of Research Ethics. For this process, I was required to submit a research proposal approved by my thesis committee and a detailed ethics approval application. Within this application I submitted the proposed work and a detailed account of the interviews and the process, which included the interview questions. Of upmost importance to me was the confidentiality of the participants. I made it clear that pseudonyms would be used and that in no way would the participants be named.

Once chosen and contacted for this study, participants were asked to sign consent forms in person and all future notifications will be via their preferred method of contact listed on their consent forms. This will allow for participants to be reassured in sharing information on their terms. Once the interview data has been compiled, prior to analysis and publishing the study, participants will have the opportunity to view their contributions and make any additional
statements in order to ensure that the data is a fair representation of participant perspectives, opinions, and beliefs.

To ensure participant comfort with information disclosed, participants had the opportunity to withdraw from the project at any point prior to publishing the data and their information will not be used. Participants will be informed of their right to withdraw on the consent forms and they may withdraw without any adverse effects.

No person other than myself have had access to the raw data. The information gathered in this study will not adversely affect parents or their children in any way as I am no longer their child’s teacher and the children and their parents will not be identified. Pseudonyms are used to maintain confidentiality at all times. The relationship between the research and the parent participants as well as the teacher participants has not be used to exploit the participants; it is hoped that it can be used to better understand best practices in education.

Throughout the course of this study, the interview transcripts and tapes were safely stored in a secured and locked cabinet at the researcher’s place of residence. Both the transcripts and tapes will be destroyed seven years after the completion of the study.

The Interview Process

Smith (1999) writes that asking directly for consent to interview can be taken as rude behaviour in some cultures (p. 136). She continues by explaining that in giving consent, quite often a person is giving their trust and believes in the credibility of the researcher. This is why in many instances the process of performing Indigenous research can be so deeply moving. I took extreme care in seeking support from the parents who I wanted to interview. I ensured that there was a level of trust already existing between us as I am an outsider looking in.
For the interview process, two parents were interviewed and two teachers were interviewed in order to get the perspectives from both families and the school environment, that is from the inside and outside of the school. Interviews were conducted in order to gain personal opinions and information that draws directly from the experience of each individual. Gubrium and Holstein (1998) discuss personal narratives through storytelling and the power of obtaining meaningful data. “Personal experience provides an endless supply of potentially reportable, storyable items, it is the incorporation of particular items into a coherent account that gives them meaning” (p. 166). Discussion around broadly framed questions was fostered during the interviews in order to guide the interviews. As storytelling is “an ongoing process of composition”, I encouraged each participant to share their personal experiences (Gubrium and Holstein, 1998, p. 166). Since the data was collected through interviews with each of the four participants, there are separate questions for the two teacher-participants and the two parent-participants. The interview questions that were used for the parent participants can be found in Appendix A and the interview questions used for the teacher participants are in Appendix B.

Both of the teachers interviewed for this study are female and both parents interviewed are male. None of the participants were chosen based on gender, they were chosen based on their knowledge of the community and the level of a pre-existing relationship between us. My intentions were to allow for both the parent and teacher participants to be able to discuss their experiences and share their stories freely.

Prior to conducting the interviews, I engaged with both the parent and teacher participants to determine a neutral location in which to conduct the interviews. I wanted the research participants to feel comfortable in the setting and thereby increase the ease with which the interviews were conducted. This did allow for more ease during the interviews and for myself
I felt as it was more of a discussion or conversation than an interview. Once each interview was complete, each participant acknowledged that it felt easy and that they had been eager throughout their interview to share as much information as they could. Three of the interviews were conducted at the school by request of the participants and one of the interviews was conducted at the home of the participant. All participants seemed relaxed and willing to share regardless of the location.

All of the interviews were tape recorded in order to ensure that I had all of the information recorded and that the quality of data preserved. It was important to me that I transcribe all of the interviews myself as I wanted to review and gain new perspectives on the interviews as I wrote about them. Listening to each interview several times allowed me to have a deeper understanding of the data and I felt like I could truly make out each point or argument presented by the participant. As I began to transcribe the interviews, I began to notice themes and ideas that were common throughout. This therefore made it easier to code the data once the transcription process was complete.

For this study to hold credibility, it is important to observe the context of the participants’ experiences. Their social location, cultural background, previous and current environments, and various experiences must be acknowledged and understood. In my own experiences as a non-Indigenous teacher/learner working within an Indigenous community, I have come to understand the importance of listening to the experiences and stories of the community. Elders have expressed to me and others how critical it is to listen in order to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of peoples. There is much insight to be gained from both the listener as well as the one sharing the experiences as it can be empowering for both parties.
Reflexivity

It is critical in a study such as this that any bias of the researcher should be questioned and examined as the researcher runs the risk of exposing their research to their own bias. I believe it is natural for all humans to possess individual bias and it is challenging for researchers to be completely neutral. Researchers need to uncover, assess, and challenge their own bias and perspectives that may contribute to inaccurate findings or findings that do not resonate with the community. In this thesis I challenged the method of analysis to allow for cultural relevancy of the data. In chapter four, the data was analyzed using a contemporary (western) analysis. In chapter five, the data was analyzed using the medicine wheel, a traditional Indigenous teaching. It is through the medicine wheel analysis that I was able to ensure cultural relevancy of the data and make this study more meaningful for the participants and the Anishinaabe community.

Smith (2006) classifies research within ethnocultural environments as “a significant site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting of the Other” (p. 2). In recognizing this, there are many complexities that must be taken into account when performing a study that explores those who have been historically marginalized and seen as the “Other” by the dominant cultural group. A great deal of learning about the needs and issues in the community is essential and recognizing my role as an outsider within the community has been necessary in order to be welcomed into areas of the community and allow myself to be immersed.

One of my largest fears in undertaking a study such as this has been the fear of appropriation. As a non-Indigenous person I do not want to misrepresent the Anishinaabe participants, the broader Anishinaabe community, or any Indigenous person. I also do not want
to misinterpret the information and experiences shared with me in any manner and this is something that I have struggled with throughout the process of analyzing and writing about the data. As a non-Indigenous person, I recognize that I could never speak from what Smith refers to as a “‘real’ and authentic indigenous position” (2006, p. 14). I have not come from the Anishinaabe community and I am clearly an outsider working within; I can only share what information and knowledge has been imparted on me by the community. I do not want to portray myself as an expert or authority, I simply wish to share the experiences of those who I have had the opportunity to work with, both parents and teacher colleagues.

One of the many aspects that I now bring into my classroom is that I can learn as much from my students and their families as they can from me. This is something that I heard from various educators previously, but now it is something that I believe whole-heartedly as I have experienced it. I realize that regardless of the background and experience of my students, they have the ability and potential to share diverse knowledges with me. It is up to me to be willing and able to accept and acknowledge it.

**Background of Parents**

The two parents that were interviewed have children at the school used in this study. Both parents have more than one child who has either attended the school or who are current students. Both parent participants are also male. They are both highly engaged in their children’s education and up-bringing. The parent participants Justin and Chris (pseudonyms used to protect their identities) grew up mainly in various regions throughout Ontario with significant times spent in Toronto. Justin also spent some of his time in Nova Scotia as well as the United States and specifically in New York and California. Both parents are familiar with schools and systems
of schools in North America, Canada, Ontario, and more specifically, Toronto. Both are active in the Anishinaabe community as well as the local community in the area where their children’s school is located. They are also active in the broader Indigenous community. Justin and Chris are highly respected by other adults and elders, and children and parents in the community frequently talk with them and seek advice on a full range of issues. Both parents can often be seen in the school or in and around their housing community. They are both people who can be easily reached by teachers if a concern were to arise as they are highly devoted to the health and well-being of their children.

**Background of Teachers**

Both of the teachers that were interviewed are teachers at the school used in this study. The teachers are White women of European descent. Their names are Heather and Kim (pseudonyms are used to protect their identities). Heather received her elementary and high school education in Britain, while Kim was born in Canada to British immigrants and she was educated in Canada. Both teachers received their teacher education training in Ontario and Kim has been teaching in Canada for eight years. Heather received her teacher education training in Britain and in Ontario and has been teaching in Canada for approximately 20 years. Kim is currently pursuing a Master of Education and has done research in literacy and special education, while Heather has done extensive work in early literacy education. Both teachers also have training and experience teaching in Special Education environments. As both teachers seem to be highly dedicated to the school in this study, the teachers had attended in-service presentations and had done self-study into Indigenous traditions as well as issues affecting the community.
Summary of Methodology

In this chapter I provided an account of a qualitative methodology and why it is used in this study. I outlined the interview process and discussed reflexivity and its relevancy to this study. I also described the backgrounds of research participants to give context to the data. The upcoming chapter begins to analyze the data using a framework that is typical of the Western academic world.
CHAPTER FOUR: CONVENTIONAL (WESTERN) ANALYSIS

Introduction

This thesis uses two techniques to interpret the information obtained from the participants. The first approach used to analyze the data does so through a more conventional (western) academic lens. I focus on themes that arose from the interviews to interpret the interviews in a more conventional manner. This approach is used here in chapter four. Chapter five uses a different approach, one that infuses the traditional Indigenous medicine wheel with conventional (western) academic literature. The analysis of this thesis is designed in this manner to allow for the reader to interpret the data in a conventional manner while also allowing the reader to engage in thought and reflection that provides the subjects of this study with more meaning.

I decided to analyze the data using the two techniques described above because I wanted the project to be seen as legitimate by the Anishinaabe community. Initially I was only going to use the conventional approach to data analysis, however, I recognized that it would not provide the data with the internal or face validity that I wanted it to have (Lincoln, 1997 and Lather, 1986). I therefore separated the two techniques so that in the second type of analysis, the integrated approach using the medicine wheel, I could focus on a culturally relevant analysis that allowed the cultural teachings of the participants, and more specifically, the Anishinaabe community, to be heard.

In this thesis I initially wanted to display the emerging themes from the interviews conducted. I thought that this would best represent the data collected as I anticipated connecting
the themes from the interviews with the current literature in the field of Indigenous education. However, my desire to depict the words and stories of each participant clearly was what I found to be more significant. I wanted to show how powerful the interviews were by reflecting the words and experiences of each of the participants. I felt that if I simply pulled apart themes from the data by quoting the participants, I would not be able to illustrate the fluidity that was present in the interviews, or what seemed to me to be conversations with both the teacher and the parent participants. Therefore this analysis is clustered by parents and teachers interviews then finally an examination of the similarities and differences between the two.

**Critical Issues within Systems of Education in Indigenous Communities**

Parent interviewee Chris believes the school board itself needs to know more about Indigenous teachings and Indigenous children (Interview, June 2, 2010). He illustrates this by describing a concern of his child who was teased due to his appearance. Other children in the class teased his son for having long hair. If this had been handled effectively it would not have been ongoing. Nor would it have occurred in the first place had there been adequate training on behalf of the teachers and students. There is a lack of understanding across schools throughout the board and this stems from texts and resources that are used to teachers and their teacher education programs. Schools have a history of being oppressive institutions for all indigenous peoples and this is something that Indigenous groups continue to face. Justin agrees as he believes that there is not enough education for teachers about Indigenous traditions and teachings (p.1).

Although most people in the Anishinaabe community would like their children to learn more about Indigenous traditions and teachings, many do not wish their child singled out since
the children go to a school that has not only Indigenous children but children from diverse racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. In some ways there is a bit of a contradiction in thought however, because Justin wants his children to learn about Anishinaabe culture although his desire is that “everybody should be treated the same” (p. 2). He continues by explaining that some of the events that the school provides are not specifically Indigenous in nature although they may be passed off that way. He states that “I can’t see anything else they can really do…they’re doing their job (p. 4). This contradiction exists because there have been instances in which some children were isolated by other children because they were receiving special cultural programming whereas others were not. Parent interviewee Justin, like many other Anishinaabe families, does not wish his children to be targets of isolation in a school with many students from diverse backgrounds and culture.

As most parents wish that their children have positive experiences in school, being a target of isolation or negative attention is something that many parents work hard to avoid. Some parents have themselves had negative schooling experiences and therefore do not wish their children to have to endure similar experiences. Many parents have communicated to me that due to their own negative experiences in schooling institutions they do not want their children to face the same type of isolation at school and later on in life.

Wording continues to be an area of contention for many Indigenous peoples as school boards and those who work within them make errors in speech and in writing. Chris describes a situation in which something was worded offensively during a meeting he had with the school administrators. He explains that he didn’t know whether the comment was made to the Indigenous race or his specific community. “They worded some things that were improper to me… I had a meeting with them one day and they mentioned something to me that I found was
very offensive. I didn’t know whether it was directed towards the Aboriginal race or towards the [Anishinaabe] community” (Interview, June 2, 2010). In my experience, these types of situations occur often for historically marginalized communities as the offenders of racist or other discriminatory remarks are often overzealous about being politically correct and when offensives such as these are made the offenders can be in denial about what was stated. In his book, Jackson discusses the denial of racism as “lip service” (2008).

Schools and personnel not apologizing or making excuses for mistakes made is a common problem. The issue that Chris was dealing with was not resolved adequately in his opinion. When he challenged the comment no one responded except by stating that “we can try better next time” (Interview, June 2, 2010). Another problem that arose from this situation is that he was then blamed for making accusations of school personnel being racist. Chris now finds that the school now wades overly cautiously with him and his children as they contact him for every minute detail. All of these concerns aside, Chris continues to assert that this school is one of the best for the needs of Indigenous children as the programming and events reflect those of the Indigenous community (Interview, June 2, 2010).

Many of the parents believe that the policies of the institution do not reflect the needs of the Indigenous community and do not assist with the needs of the students. For example, Chris feels that the report card system does not adequately assess the individual child (Interview, June 2, 2010). He finds that quite often the report cards look so similar it is difficult to distinguish one child’s from another’s. The fact that there are many standard and automated policies throughout the school allows students to be missed and fall through cracks due to wording that may be unfamiliar to families and non-teachers. This is an area of great concern in the local Anishinaabe community. In terms of other forms of student assessment, Chris expressed the desire for more
of his children’s teachers to communicate directly and openly with him about their progress so that he could have an ongoing and up-to-date understanding of their strengths and needs rather than finding out only once a term about gaps in learning that could have been prevented if he was made aware. Chris was clear in indicating his disdain for the school as an institution unable to meet his needs as a parent.

Mackay and Myles (1995) share reasons for why parents may have a lack of interest in schools as an institution:

(1) some parents are unfamiliar with and are intimidated by the educational system;
(2) they may view the school as an alien world in which they play no part;
(3) ambivalence towards the purposes of school education as an institution;
(4) the principal and the almost exclusively non-Native teaching staff may implicitly discourage parents from participating” (p. 166).

For Chris, the main area of contention with the school as an institution, according to Mackay and Myles, is that often parents are discouraged from participating. This occurs as parents are told to communicate with teachers but it is often left up to the teacher to indicate when and for how long. The report card is often seen by teachers as a communication tool, however, as Chris indicated, he would rather know about how his children are progressing in school so that he can work with them to make improvements before the report card is finalized and issued.

In addition, Mackay and Myles found that parents “couldn’t always read or understand” some written communication sent home by the school (1995, p. 167). As a teacher, I have encountered several parents who have confided in me that they themselves lack literacy skills
due to negative experiences in school and that they want their children to rise above. Malatest & Associates (2002) also argue that educators often use school jargon and they “do not make an effort to communicate using parent-friendly language” (p. 11). It is therefore essential that schools communicate with parents and families of marginalized communities in a broad range of approaches that can be understood by non-educators.

One method of having the school seem less institutional in nature would be for teachers to make home visits. Justin advocates for this as he explains that it would be more personal and allow for a better relationship between parent and teacher (Interview, June 21, 2010). The teacher would clearly have a firsthand view of their student’s individual life at home and thereby be able to more effectively relate to their family and life outside of school. Malatest & Associates (2002) also found home visits to be beneficial for improving communication between families and schools (p. 23). They discuss the fact that although schools tend to favour written communication, most Indigenous communities find face-to-face communication more respected due to understanding through body language and the personal connection that can be formed (p. 11).

In my experience as a teacher, some colleagues have expressed to me concerns about home visits. They can be seen as invasive and because of the legacy of government intervention in Indigenous communities, some parents and community members might object to them. As an educator, I find that if I clearly communicate my intentions with the family and if they are welcome the notion or provide an invitation, home visits can be especially valuable. Deep, meaningful connections can be formed with the family and throughout the community as families are often eager to share positive experiences with others.
There are concerns of those people of Indigenous descent who work within historically oppressive institutions such as school boards and other organizations that deal with children and families. Justin explains that if the community disagrees with how the institution is run it can leave those employed by the organization in limbo as they may be forced to choose between their job or their community or, worse yet, be ostracized from the community (p. 7).

Some educators feel that all students should be receiving education about Indigenous culture and traditions, not only Indigenous children. Teacher interviewee Kim explains that she feels that all students within the school should receive school mandated diversity education about culture for various cultural groups. “They’re taking the Native students out which is wonderful for them to learn their…culture. But at the same time maybe you should be coming into a regular class (p. 6). She describes the current in-school programming for students as a “Band-Aid solution”. Students are not being taught how to take their cultural understanding and fit it into a larger, more diverse community. Integrating cultural understanding can help to foster positive experiences for Indigenous students in schools. Kim explains that there is a need for this and although she suggests that it can be done by nurturing relationships with the families of students and the larger community, she cannot provide specific information on how it can be done as it is highly complex, “I don’t know, it’s difficult” (p. 5).

A large problem that has been thoroughly documented in a variety of settings is the fact that often historically marginalized groups are over-represented in special education programs. Kim explains that in her experience, she finds there is often an abundance of Indigenous students in behavioural and special education programs. “Why are all [Indigenous] children being funneled into Spec Ed?” (p. 6). Malatest & Associates (2002) found a similar pattern; in their study many Indigenous parents and staff noted a higher proportion of Indigenous students
receiving special education support. This type of segregation is alarming and must be addressed. “While Aboriginal parents acknowledged that such supports were often necessary, it was also noted that such programs should not become a catch-all for Aboriginal students who may be experiencing difficulties” (p. 14).

Another key issue that Kim discusses is the notion that some teachers may have biased beliefs. She suggests that this may be a reason for why Indigenous students may be over-represented in special education and behavioural programs. Kim also suggests that educators need to be able be reflective practitioners. Teachers need to “look critically at [their] own practice, and [their] own beliefs” (p. 6-7). This can be addressed through providing school environments in which diversity of learning styles is accepted. Teacher interviewee Heather brings up the idea that schools and school boards need to support a diverse range of learning styles and teaching philosophies. She suggests that there is a need for all educators to be “able to accept that…things [can be done] differently and try to arrange that we can do it” (p. 3).

Critical Issues Faced by Families

School and board personnel need to have an understanding of Indigenous culture. “they need to learn more about the teachings…especially in a school like this with so many Aboriginal children in it…they need to have a little bit more insight” (Interview, June 2, 2010). Malatest & Associates (2002) discuss this as a lack of understanding by schools. They found that Indigenous families felt that schools need to be more aware of the local Indigenous culture and become more familiar with Indigenous issues. They clearly noted that “Aboriginal parents feel that teachers are not knowledgeable about Aboriginal culture, and that Aboriginal culture is not valued within the school system” (p. 13).
This relates back to the issue of wording. School personnel must become more aware of Indigenous culture and in order to avoid ignorance. Oftentimes when mistakes are made with the use of words deemed as discriminatory or clearly racist, school personnel makes excuses or is in denial of the possible intentions of their mistakes. With the issue that Chris described in which school personnel were not willing to admit their mistake, these types of issues dramatically effect families as it creates or further develops a negative relationship between the family and the school (Interview, June 2, 2010).

Due to this now negative relationship, parents may view teachers or the entire school as racist and teachers may become apprehensive in working with that specific family or any family associated with them. Chris describes this from his own experience by explaining that some teachers do not communicate well with parents on an ongoing basis (Interview, June 2, 2010). Based on how parents have reacted previously or rumours they may have heard, these teachers may be concerned about how the parent might react to hearing that their child is not be doing well academically or behaving appropriately.

Another concern of families relates to trust. This is common in many historically marginalized and oppressed communities in which the dominant group continues to hold power. Many oppressed peoples find it difficult to trust the dominant group and it quite often takes time and a great deal of work to gain trust. Once this trust is established it can be extremely strong and overcome many challenges. This trust may only be for the individual thereby making it difficult if that individual leaves the school (Interview, June 2, 2010).

There seems to be a lack of Indigenous programming for the specific community. Quite often schools determine programming based on what they think the needs are without consulting
the community. This is a problem as the school may not have a realistic idea of what the true needs are within the community. The staff at the school might be trying to reach their agenda that may have nothing to do with the community. Justin makes the suggestion that there should be more community programs and activities specifically for Indigenous children and he also advocates for home visits (Interview, June 21, 2010). He explains that when he was growing up his teachers came to his home and this built a strong relationship with his family as he and his parents knew his teachers well and they knew that the teachers truly cared about him and his progress.

Communication between the schools and homes can often be inadequate. As a teacher, parents have often spoken to me about concerns or even events at the school of which they had no knowledge. Justin explains a situation in which there was a raffle at the school that he did not know about. Had he known, he would have made a large donation for the community (Interview, June 21, 2010).

Facing individuals who have racist beliefs is something that in our society is prevalent. Another critical discourse that Kim raises is the fact that some teachers hold generalizations and stereotype about their students and their families. She also declares that some teachers are racist. “I’ve been privy to hearing conversations with some teachers that are blatantly racist and blatantly inappropriate in reference to the Anishinaabe and Inuit and Métis families… I’ve heard them referred to as savages and…this is an individual who would come across...progressive” (Interview, May 20, 2010).
Critical Issues Faced by Schools

As a teacher I find that establishing financial support for specific resources and programs within schools can be problematic whether from school administration or the school board. Interestingly during the interviews, only Kim raised this as a concern. “There’s an Aboriginal Education Department that is ridiculously underfunded. Absolutely ridiculously underfunded” (Interview, May 20, 2010). She also raises the issue of how few staff work for the department and how for her, both of these factors illustrate what the school board values. Kim makes it clear that she does not have solutions for these concerns, however, she suggests that the school and school board should re-evaluate how it educates Indigenous children and addresses the needs of families and the community as a whole (Interview, May 20, 2010).

Theme #1: Colonization and Geocultural Construction

Justin discusses the need for cultural understanding and sensitivity for all Indigenous peoples. He explains that a lot of non-Indigenous people group all Indigenous peoples together although they are from different nations. He explains that “we’re not all the same…Mi’kmaw are different from Ojibwes” (Interview, June 21, 2010). Therefore there are different traditions and customs depending on the Indigenous group. Malatest & Associates (2002) also noted that “there is not one single Aboriginal culture, as the school Aboriginal population could include Aboriginal people from a variety of different cultures” (p. 12). As a teacher myself, I find this to be an area in which teachers and all educators need to become more aware and knowledgeable. In my opinion, I feel that this is in part the responsibility of the teacher education programs, the specific schools in which teachers work in addition to the school boards, as well as the teachers themselves. Teachers should be provided with this training as part of their teacher education.
programs because the schools have a responsibility as institutions to train teachers in an ethically sound manner. The schools and school boards in which teachers are working should further this training and assist teachers in becoming more knowledgeable about the families with who teachers are working. Teachers themselves also have a responsibility in building upon their cultural proficiency as teaching is a process that requires continuous reflection and self-learning. Heather discusses this as she comments that “we [teachers] have to know about their culture” (Interview, May 26, 2010). She argues that trust might be an issue for some parents but that it is the obligation of the teacher to facilitate discussion through talking with children and parents to ensure there are open lines of communication.

For many Indigenous families and in many Indigenous communities the residential school experiences is not too distant. As there continues to be many survivors of residential schools, present-day children continue to be effected by this legacy. Kim discusses the need to take into account the experiences of schooling that some families faced. “In certain families and in certain communities they have a negative experience with the school based on their…past experiences” (Interview, May 20, 2010). By taking the experience of the family and the community into account, teachers can better understand their students and thereby develop more meaningful relationships with them.

It is common among educators to carry bias as all people carry bias. Kim explains that she finds that many teachers have “stereotypes and prejudices and preconceived biases about students and families because they’re Anishinaabe” (p. 3). This is something that needs to be addressed as they can lead to discriminatory behaviour that is harmful towards students and their families. Goldstein (2003) asks teachers to critically analyze their beliefs and practices. “How
are you and your students perpetuating and reinforcing the negative messages that are so pervasive in our culture? How can you both begin to challenge them?” (p. 100).

**Theme #2: Engagement of Anishinaabe Families and How Teachers Facilitate Engagement**

The Anishinaabe community studied in this research project was the single largest group within the broader geographic community. Because of this, the school must acknowledge this cultural group. Chris recognized this and explains that it forces the school and the board to somewhat participate and be engaged with the community (Interview, June 2, 2010). In some school communities in which there is a small population of a certain cultural or ethnic group those students and their families may be isolated. This can inhibit engagement between families and the school.

Chris is a parent who is highly engaged in his children’s schooling. He communicates regularly with his children’s teachers and with the school administrators. He is also engaged in the school on behalf of the Anishinaabe community. “I love all those kids like my own…they all know me as Big Chris…their parents ain’t outside and I am… Me and my wife are always outside so…I have a good rapport with all of the parents and all of the kids” (Interview, June 2, 2010). He continues by stating: “I’m the one that my community comes to me and asks me to speak on behalf for them when it comes to the school… I’m very on top of my kids, my community’s kids because…if I see something that I don’t like I will approach the teacher or whoever…that’s just how I am” (Interview, June 2, 2010). Since Chris is seen by many as an elder, he takes on this role as a community leader and works hard to navigate the system. This propels him even more as a respected elder within Anishinaabe community as he those who are hesitant to confront certain issues can go to him and he will work with them. Conversely, some
teachers and administrators within the school are hesitant to work with him as they view him as aggressive. He explains that in confronting the incident in which he was dealing with racism, some teachers are apprehensive about communicating with him while others school staff communicate with him in excess. They call home to discuss matters about his children that he considers non-issues. “If it’s not serious I don’t want you guys to call me…they’re worried about I’ll come back, fight, fight back against them” (Interview, June 2, 2010). Chris raises a significant point, however, it is also difficult for teachers to judge what a parent may consider serious and what is not.

Justin discusses how his teachers worked to engage students in learning. He explains that there was a variety of skills taught such as beadwork, pot work, and carving. Another aspect that had an effect on Justin and his family’s engagement in his schooling is the home visits that teachers made. These visits assisted his family as it made it more convenient and accessible for parents to have meaningful discussions with teachers. Teachers were seen as extensions of the family. Justin is an advocate for home visits and he recalls an occasion in which a teacher came to his family home to hand deliver his report card: “I remember sitting there as a kid eating with my teacher, and my grandmother, and my mum” (Interview, June 21, 2010).

Teachers who make telephone calls home to communicate with families have a profound effect on families within the Anishinaabe community. Kim shares that this is a practice she often does and is received positively by families. “I make good news phone calls…it makes [parents] feel more connected to you as the teacher and more appreciative to what you’re doing” (Interview, May 20, 2010). Justin agrees with this and states that the teachers who he found worked well with his children were the ones who actively called home and those who did not call
frequently or at all were the teachers he did not form a connection with (Interview, June 21, 2010).

This type of active communication with parents is something that Chris also appreciates. He discusses a couple of situations in which he had problems when teachers were not communicating their concerns with him. One of his sons was having difficulty in class and it turned out he needed glasses. “I feel right upset because nobody knows that” (Interview, June 2, 2010).

Chris explains that he does not see teachers (besides Ojibwe language instructors or Aboriginal culture teachers) actively including the families of Anishinaabe children in their classrooms: “I don’t see nothing really… Nothing at all” (Interview, June 21, 2010). He adds that he has noticed some teachers actively involving themselves in community activities. Chris continues this discussion by stating that he wants teachers to make the children from the Anishinaabe community feel comfortable, however, he does not want them to be centred out as the school as a whole is multicultural (Interview, June 2, 2010). Chris recognizes that it is clearly a delicate balance between including Anishinaabe traditions and teachings in the regular classroom as well as the traditions and cultural values of others. He also appreciates the teachers who actively learn and inquire about Anishinaabe practices (Interview, June 2, 2010)

Heather shares what she did when she began teaching at the school in order to engage with the community is that she tried to: “find out a little more about Aboriginal values” (Interview, May 26, 2010). She explains that she tried to get to know the families of Indigenous students and learn from them. Whenever she travelled throughout North America, Heather actively searched for classroom library materials and teacher resources that include a variety of
Indigenous perspectives and she explains that her students were more engaged and interested in literacy development because of this. Kim also shares teaching practice and she explains that students should see themselves represented in the texts that they are using (Interview, May 20, 2010). She continues by adding that she seeks out Indigenous publishers that offer texts and other resources for both students and teachers designed around Indigenous teachings and perspectives. Furthermore, Kim discusses the need for having meaningful and critical classroom discourse about what her students are seeing in and around her classroom. She is actively “using it and reflecting on it and talking about it and going back to what it represents and what it means” (Interview, May 20, 2010).

Both Heather and Kim discuss the ideas of building trust and treating parents as equals. Heather shares that she communicates frequently with parents to assure them that she really does care about their children. She also works to makes the children feel safe and she recognizes that many parents of Anishinaabe children did not have good experiences with schools (Interview, May 26, 2010).

Heather shares that building trust is key for non-Indigenous teachers working within the Indigenous communities (Interview, May 26, 2010). She continues by explaining that it takes time and “it’s over the years” how one can build a strong connection with families.

**Theme #3: How Schools Facilitate Engagement**

The school in this study provides a larger amount of programming for students of Indigenous descent and their families. As mentioned previously, there is Ojibwe language class and Aboriginal culture class. There is also an Aboriginal Headstart program for preschool aged children and children in Kindergarten. Parents and other community members can also
participate in various activities and workshops dedicated for adults. In addition, there are numerous activities that occur within the school and in other locales within the surrounding community that address the needs of the Indigenous population. It is for these reasons that Chris asserts that this school is one of the best for the needs of Indigenous children and their families as the programming and events reflect those of the Indigenous community (Interview, June 2, 2010).

Justin disagrees as he feels that there is more that the school as a whole could be doing to foster the development of Indigenous students. When asked if the school does anything to include and engage Indigenous children and families, his response was “No, not really. I don’t see nothing” (Interview, June 21, 2010). Justin’s reaction to this question may in part be due to his own experience in school and the amount of Indigenous teachers he had growing up. Either way, it is clear that there is more that the school could be doing to foster and engage children and their families.

Chris brought up a major concern of the community during his interview. As there has been a great deal of trust established with an administrator at the school, there are many within the community who are worried about when that administrator leaves the school. The Anishinaabe community began to trust this administrator as they were a stable and strong voice who advocated on their behalf frequently. Many people within the community acknowledged and praised the work that was started and continues to be done due to the commitment by this administrator. Chris expressed his concern about the potential for some of this work to end: “I don’t know if it’s going to go down, like if it’s going to go backwards” (Interview, June 2, 2010). He also shared that he did not know how the school could improve relationships with Indigenous
families. This may relate to the fact that oftentimes it is just as difficult in maintaining positive relationships as it is to establish positive relationships.

Due to the oppression of Indigenous peoples through colonialism, establishing a degree of trust within historically marginalized communities is often difficult. The concern that Chris raises is prevalent throughout the Anishinaabe community as many feel uncertain about who may be brought in by the school board to take the role of principal. Some community members feel that the board has a responsibility to ensure that the person who would take on this role is an individual who is aware of the issues faced by the community in order for there to be continued progress. Some feel that the board has an obligation to the community and should hire a principal who meets the approval of the community. Ultimately, the primary concern is leadership with stability in order to ensure students can develop to their potential.

**Summary of Conventional (Western) Analysis**

Broadly, this project aims to create an awareness of the need for culturally appropriate interactions for educators working within historically marginalized communities. Since this project aims to inform educators about facilitating home and school relationships, the teacher participants involved in this study can identify successful strategies as they reflect on the stories of their teaching practice. They can learn more about themselves and their role as mediators between families and the school as an institution. Educators can also learn how to assist parents and students as they navigate the system. The parents who participated in this study can come to a deeper understanding of themselves and their role as advocates for their children.
CHAPTER FIVE: MEDICINE WHEEL ANALYSIS

Introduction

The findings in this chapter are organized according to the medicine wheel in Indigenous tradition. In Canadian Indigenous culture, there are many ways in which the medicine wheel can be represented as it is often referred to as a contemporary graphic or visual representation of holistic Indigenous critical teachings. This thesis uses the medicine wheels in Figure 1 and Figure 2 as illustrations although there are many other representations of the medicine wheel throughout Indigenous culture that are used and could be applied to this thesis.

I decided to use the medicine wheel as it is a graphic representation of Indigenous teachings that many Anishinaabe community members used and referred to during my time working at the school. As this is such a significant aspect to Anishinaabe culture, I wanted to analyze the data in a way that that was culturally relevant allowed the teachings of the participants to be highlighted.

The medicine wheel is an ancient symbol of a set of teachings that has many interpretations. The Medicine Wheel below in Figure 1 is an illustration of a medicine wheel that can often be used by a variety of and throughout Canadian Indigenous communities (Pheasant, 2011, Retrieved On-line, http://www.anishinaabemdaa.com/medicinewheel.htm). The four sections of the medicine wheel illustrate the four directions: east, south, west, and north and although they are separated by lines that make a cross, the directions are all connected by the circle. Oftentimes, the illustrations of the medicine wheel contain four colours that are representative of the four races of the world; yellow being people from Asia, white being people
from Europe, black being people from Africa, and red being people from the Americas. East represents new beginnings; Spring and children. It is the direction of change. South represents Summer, youth (or adolescence), maturity, and growth. It is a direction of learning, the acceptance of change, and understanding. West represents Fall and adulthood. It is also the time to prepare for the Winter. North represents spirituality and elders. It is the time to be grounded and understand wisdom given.

**Figure 1: The Medicine Wheel: A Traditional Model**

(http://www.anishinaabemdaa.com/medicinewheel.htm)

In many Canadian Indigenous communities, elders teach about the medicine wheel, as it is a key aspect of Indigenous spirituality and well-being. For the community to be healthy, all areas within the wheel must be well balanced.

Within western educational institutions, educators work hard to foster the development of our students’ needs. These needs also can be described in terms of four directions: physical,
emotional, mental and spiritual. Vizina (2007) illustrates these four directions through integrating the symbol of the medicine wheel (see Figure 2: The Medicine Wheel: A Holistic Model) (Retrieved On-line, http://www.aerc.usask.ca/downloads/Discussion%20Paper%20March%206%202008.pdf). Each direction of the medicine wheel can connect to a different aspect of education. In Indigenous communities, all four directions are critical and connected to the cycle of teaching and learning. Similarly in Vizina’s model, all four sets of student needs are critical. A healthy school is a school where the four sets of needs are addressed.

Figure 2: The Medicine Wheel: A Holistic Model (http://www.aerc.usask.ca/downloads/Discussion%20Paper%20March%206%202008.pdf)
Vizina’s integrated medicine wheel is used to analyze the data in this thesis as it is a model that was described to me by elders and educators from the Anishinaabe community. By developing an awareness of spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical practices represented in the medicine wheel, teachers can work towards a healthy classroom. In western classrooms, teachers often support their students mental, physical, and emotional needs, however, particularly challenging is the spiritual direction. In my experience, teachers are aware of the many religions that may occupy their classrooms and are therefore concerned about impeding on varying religious beliefs and not being politically correct. It is for these reasons that teachers may ignore or overlook the spiritual direction. However, through learning and teaching about the medicine wheel I am finding my own spiritual understanding is deepening and I am better able to connect with my students and their families in order to strengthen our relationship. It is also a way to understand my research findings.

**Building Strong Relationships**

To build strong relationships between the home and school, there are a variety of practices that can support Indigenous communities. Below the following practices for building strong relationships are linked to the directions of Vizina’s medicine wheel. They are: Creating a Deep Understanding of Indigenous Teachings (Spiritual Direction), Building Trust (Emotional Direction), Effective Teacher Training (Mental Direction), and Community Programming (Physical Direction).

**Spiritual Direction**

In this study, the notion of Creating a Deep Understanding of Indigenous Teaching refers to being able to have common goals or common interests. This means that teachers are working
with their student’s families to ensure there are shared goals. The Spiritual Direction has been linked to Creating a Deep Understanding of Indigenous Teachings as it is crucial that non-Indigenous teachers recognize and validate the spirituality of Indigenous students in their classroom.

Creating a Deep Understanding of Indigenous Teachings

In order to form meaningful relationships with others it is important to form connections and come to mutual understandings. Similarly, Battiste (2000) describes an Indigenous perspective about the importance of understanding: “From the Indigenous vantage point, the process of understanding is more important than the process of classification” (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 37). Having a deep understanding of a person or a group of people is critical if one wishes to form genuine relationships with them. Through understanding one’s background and perspectives, it is easier to identify with that person or group of people and begin to show empathy by making meaningful connections. Without forming these types of connections, people can be objectified and negative impressions of the ‘Other’ can emerge.

Heather discussed the need for teachers to form connections with her students and their families. “I always try to…get to know them because once…you know them, it makes it a lot easier” (Interview, May 26, 2010). This process of getting to know students and their families works both for the teacher learning about their students and also for their family to become more familiar with the teacher. It is critical that students and their families learn and understand the teacher so that a connection between the two can be formed.

In order to prevent the objectification of peoples, Johnson (2000) argues for systems of learning that are less formalized. He argues that formalized systems may not necessarily contain
the most valuable opportunities for learning as “some of the best learning programs are created in-house and by individuals who are not formally schooled” (p. 132). In environments such as these there is the potential to create a rich pedagogy that is culturally-relevant. In this type of schooling there should be programming that is based on Indigenous values and experiences.

In terms of resources, it is not simply enough to have them and use them, but also use them effectively. Johnson (2000) discusses the fact that there are many instances in which community members are asked to be involved within a school, however, the type and purpose of the contribution may not have been discussed. This leaves the community members and the school at a loss and students may not have the opportunity to learn in a potentially meaningful way. Elders have valuable information and lessons to share yet if the students do see or understand the meaning due to difficulties making connections, much is lost.

Justin shared a situation in which he was not informed about an event at the school that he could have assisted with. The school was having a raffle as a fundraiser and Justin had something that could have been used as a grand prize. “If they had a told me before when they had that draw over at the school, I could’ve did that” (Interview, June 21, 2010). This would have increased the sales for the fundraiser thus benefiting the school. In addition, connections between the Anishinaabe community and the school could have improved due to the enthusiasm for the prizes and the event.

For many Indigenous peoples, the circle is an important shape that represents life and can be applied to learning. Johnson (2000) explains that “the circle design reinforces a traditional decision making concept of the Anishnaabe people that encourages decision-making in a manner that insures that no one person or thing is viewed as superior to the other” (p. 129). It is critical that non-Indigenous people learn about these types of inclusionary practices so that these
understandings can be implemented within schools. Johnson (2000) continues by describing the parts of the circle with having equal importance. “The circle represents the concept that all elements of the educational organization or decision making are inclusive rather than exclusive” (Johnson, 2000, p. 129).

Another critical aspect to deepening our understandings is what Martin (2005) describes as ‘relatedness’ which she explains this as an Indigenous worldview (p. 28). Relatedness is understood as the formation of identity and acquired through being immersed in situations with contexts of people, and that there is past, present, and future change. These types of connections and deep understandings are necessary critical teachings for teachers to embrace and pass on to students in order to foster motivation and create environments in which students feel empowered as learners. Downey and Hart (2005) argue that educators must have an understanding of the social and cultural realities of their students (p. 48). For example, teachers must be aware of the school culture in which they are teaching.

In another critical area of his study, Taylor (1995) found that highly successful relationships between families and schools are those in which there is genuine care and an open mind to diverse perspectives. “To be successful, non-Native teachers entering Native communities must do so with an open mind, aware that life will be different and that different and new ways do not have to be threatening” (p. 230). By recognizing the humanity in teaching and the importance of understanding students and their backgrounds, educators can strengthen their relationships with families and the community.
Emotional Direction

Forming Mutual Relationships Based on True Human Emotions

In terms of establishing mutual relationships between families and teachers, Kim suggests being welcoming to families and making them feel comfortable (Interview, May 20, 2010). Heather also recommends this as she states that once families of Indigenous students know the teachers, it is easier for the two groups to connect (Interview, May 26, 2010). Both Heather and Kim discuss the importance of teachers as welcoming, accessible, and approachable so that both teacher and parent are on an equal playing field and that a teacher-parent hierarchy does not exist. Kim continues by explaining that it is easier to maintain this type of relationship than to “build one after something’s happened or re-build it” (Interview, May 20, 2010).

Due to colonization and especially the residential school system, many Canadian Indigenous individuals and groups have lost trust of non-Indigenous people and institutions. Trust is a virtue or principle based on human emotions and interactions therefore in order to rebuild it, non-Indigenous people and institutions must work towards earning it. The notion of Building Trust is therefore linked with the Emotional Direction as it relates to overcoming challenges that exist due to colonialism.

Building Trust

Napier (2000) explains that it was necessary to work at gaining the trust of the community: “We knew that the key to a successful partnership was trust among and between players. The tribal community needed to see us as an advocate and not a threat” (p. 125). Napier describes the academic research in which she was involved as her way of paying back the education she received from Indigenous communities. “I knew that trust between all of us was
imperative if this highly volatile partnership would work. People have to know your motives-failing to explain why you want to help is the biggest mistake educators can make” (Napier, 2000, p. 126). For Napier both professionally and personally, trust was an essential aspect of her research.

Due to some of the impacts of colonization discussed above, gaining the trust of Indigenous people is necessary in order to move forward in developing positive relationships. Nee-Benham and Cooper (2000) describe how and why the distrust of schools exists. “In some Native communities there exists attitudinal, economic, and structural barriers that limit Native student opportunities. Some communities, because their members have been so deeply affected by the boarding school experience or public school practices that have excluded Native history and culture, view schools today with distrust” (Nee-Benham & Cooper, 2000, p. 127). It is therefore crucial to build trust in order to foster relationships between the home and the school.

Heather discusses the idea trust and how it can be built over time: “I think it’s over the years…the fact that they will trust that what you say, what you are going to do, you’re not going treat their children, you know, you’re not going to be mean to them or anything like that” (Interview, May 26, 2010). As Heather is a teacher who has been working at the school for a long time, she often expresses the fact that it is with time that trust is earned and connections are formed with families. She continues this discussion by sharing that she has worked with many older siblings: “I think a lot of it is just that you’ve taught the older brother or sister, you have a connection with the family”. In observing Heather’s interactions with students and her teaching practice, many of her conversations with students allude to her pre-existing relationships with their family members and it is interesting to note that there is frequently a positive reaction from students.
Mental Direction

Reflection

In the teaching profession, being a reflective practitioner is something that is admired and teachers continually reflect on how to make improvements to their practice. The Mental Direction has been linked with Effective Teacher Training because reflection is a key aspect of mental strength and training relates to planning and internal development.

Effective Teacher Training

Taylor (1995) argues the importance of teachers knowing and understanding the people, cultures, and environments in which they teach. “Non-Native teachers should be responsible for education themselves about the community; culturally appropriate content, and culturally appropriate teaching methods” (p. 241). It is also the responsibility of the school and the systems in which teachers are trained to provide these educators with the tools and resources to encourage their own learning. It is true however that all teachers should be responsible for learning and understanding the environments and climates in which they teach. Downey and Hart (2005) also support the argument that educators must have an understanding of the social and cultural realities of their students (p. 48). They state that teachers must be aware of the school culture in which they are working in order to be effective teachers.

In Heather’s interview, one of the first things that she discussed was the need for teachers to seek out information about their students backgrounds. She shared that teachers should “find out a little more about Aboriginal values” (Interview, May 26, 2010). Heather also discussed how she actively participates in community events within and outside of the school community. “I went to a couple of Pow Wows, not necessarily that children from here were in, just so that I
could see what…it’s like”. It is important that non-Indigenous teachers value and seek out a variety opportunities to learn about the culture of their Indigenous students.

Teacher training and professional development is another area for focus. Taylor (1995) advocates for the creation of workshops that increase the awareness of teacher roles and teaching styles. In addition, Taylor stresses the importance of creating and fostering hiring practices that are reflective of the school community. These types of practices assist in involving parents in the education of their children as they see and can engage with people from their own communities who have a genuine understanding of issues that exist within the community most often without a vested or self-pleasing interest. Taylor discusses that although hiring teachers from the cultural community is necessary, there must also be teachers who show a genuine understanding and who are empathetic towards the community. “The people responsible for hiring need to give greater consideration to hiring people who are suitable for cross-cultural teaching…[as] most Native children will be taught by non-Native teachers” (p. 214).

**Physical Direction**

**Dialogue and Collaboration**

Working to ensure that there is collaboration between students’ homes, their school, and the community takes Epstein’s typology of parental involvement and adds the involvement of the community (2001). In order for this to take place, it is necessary for all three agents to dialogue and collaborate. To facilitate this union of support, the school can be used as the platform in which this can be encouraged. The Physical Direction has been linked with Community Programming because it is where relationships between the three agents can be developed to put positive action for student success.
Community Programming

Another key aspect to developing relationships between families and educators is for educators to embrace Indigenous communities through communicating with elders. Battiste (2000) asserts that Indigenous knowledge and heritage should be “preserved and enhanced; it is also important that they are recognized as the domain of Indigenous peoples and not subverted by the dominant culture” (p. 87). By creating room for the Indigenous community to have a voice, knowledge can be shared and culture and heritage validated.

Chris acknowledged that there is a strong commitment at the school for Indigenous culture to be validated: “I just see that the school tries to include themselves into a lot of Aboriginal things that happen like in say this community” (Interview, June 2, 2010). This needs to exist at the school level, within classroom, and also at the school board level. During his interview, Chris noted that this is not necessarily the case as he stated that in classrooms: “I don’t see nothing really”. However, later on in his interview Chris did acknowledge that some teachers were actively working to involve Indigenous families: “there’s other teachers here who are very involved”. As for the school board, Chris stated clearly that there is much work to be done to include Indigenous families: “They’re one that I have the problems with. They need to know more about the teachings and about the Aboriginal children”.

It is important for the community and school to come together to create opportunities for shared learning. Programs that are designed to elicit community input and support can assist in facilitating life-long learning for students and target the needs of specific communities. Johnson (2000) describes a model that uses a frame for community building (see below Figure 3: Focus on the Community). Johnson describes how this model works outward with a focus on the
community. With community as the centre, the needs are more easily identifiable with a greater traditional Indigenous framework.

**Figure 3: A Model for Focus on the Community**

![Diagram of a model for focus on the community with layers: Programs, School Staff, Students, Community]

**Summary of Medicine Wheel Analysis**

The medicine wheel is crucial to Indigenous culture and spirituality. Non-Indigenous teachers can learn from its teachings and can incorporate its teachings into their schools and classrooms thereby promoting inclusive teaching practice. Inclusive teaching can also be promoted by having Indigenous educators and community elders participate in sharing their teachings with school staff thus creating an environment that is holistic in nature in which true partnerships exist.
CHAPTER SIX: IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY

Spirituality in the Classroom

hooks (2010) describes spirituality in the classroom as “needed for genuine academic and/or intellectual growth” (p. 150). As a teacher this is the type of growth that I wish to facilitate for both myself and my students. I feel the need even more so when working with Indigenous children and families because of the history of colonialism. “Indigenous peoples have had little power and control in matters concerning their cultural and spiritual knowledge and property” (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 116). For this reason spirituality in the classroom is something I do not wish to ignore and as a teacher, I would like to address. Some see this as challenging since there are often students coming from many diverse religious beliefs and backgrounds any given classroom.

Building Partnerships

It is with discourses that foster the development of meaningful relationships between families and educators that students can become empowered and increase their motivation for learning. Additionally, there is a need for all educators to promote Indigenous knowledge and holistic practice so that students can learn about themselves and the world around them. I feel that traditional Indigenous practices must be embraced and as Wetere-Bryant states: “I believe it is most important that we tap into our Native, and even a more universal, Indigenous knowledge base, and begin to acknowledge that this is a divine gift” (2000, p. 151).
Non-Indigenous educators should familiarize themselves with the four keys to building relationships with Indigenous students and their families discussed in this study. It is through Creating a Deep Understanding of Indigenous Teachings that spiritual healing can take place. Building Trust can foster emotional growth, Effective Teacher Training can strengthen mental health, and Community Programming can build physical well-being. All four of these areas can be nourished and supported by educators, students, their families, and the community. In doing so, educators, students, families, and the community can work towards an anti-racist cross-cultural connection.

Working Toward an Anti-Racist Cross-Cultural Connection

Teachers, schools, and school boards who work with any children who come from historically marginalized and racialized communities need to include in their curriculum is culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson- Billings (1995) in Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) define culturally relevant pedagogy for students as enabling academic success, maintaining cultural competence, and developing a critical consciousness in which students challenge the current status quo of social order (p. 67). In my own practice as a teacher at a school that uses culturally relevant pedagogy as a correlate for success, our objective is to use authentic and relevant teaching and learning experiences that reflect our commitment and social realities to engage and extend critical numeracy and literacy skills. It is the obligation of educators to ensure they have a deep and meaningful understanding of their students and their families. According to Taylor (1995) “educational authorities, school administrators, and teachers themselves must all be aware of the non-Native teacher’s role in the school and the community” (p. 225).
It is also important that non-Indigenous teachers begin to understand where we are positioned in today’s colonial context in order to begin to work with Indigenous children and families. Once one has begun to position themselves and their community in today’s colonial society, work can be done to decolonize. Mutua and Swadener (2004) discuss the notion of decolonization versus post-colonialism and suggest that post-colonialism continues to engage the interrelationships of colonialism whereas decolonization fights against and opposes oppression (p. 255-256). For teachers working within a school setting, this work towards decolonization can be directly linked to anti-racism classroom practice.

In the classroom anti-racist education aims to “change institutional policies, and practices which are discriminatory, and individual behaviours and attitudes that reinforce racism” (Ministry of Education for Ontario, 1987, as cited in Henry, 1998, p. 87). As anti-racist education is popular among Afrocentric educators, Henry further elaborates that a “critical, antiracist, African Centered pedagogy, should help students learn how to analyze situations, problem-_pose, and problem-solve; and how to be self-directed and effectuate change in their immediate environment, and then in the wider society” (1998, p. 148). This type of critical teaching pedagogy is what is necessary in any school environment, especially within historically marginalized communities. Therefore it must be embraced by non-Indigenous teachers working with Indigenous students and their families.

**Future Research**

Effective teacher training programs for non-Indigenous teachers is an area for continued development so that teachers are adequately prepared to work with Indigenous students and their families. There is also a need for research into current education and training practices that exist
to evaluate there effectiveness. What types of training programs exist? Are there programs for pre-service teachers? Are there programs for in-service teachers? Do they exist at within schools and within school boards? Is their effectiveness measured and if so, how?

It is critical that non-Indigenous teachers work with the families of their Indigenous students in order for meaningful learning to take place. This thesis ends with a recount of traditional education, how it was undone, and hope for the future. It is written by Ojibwe elder, Solomon, and residential school survivor.

“The traditional way of education was by example and experience and by storytelling. The first principle involved was total respect and acceptance of the one to be taught. And that learning was a continuous process from birth to death, it was a total continuity without interruption. Its nature was like a fountain that gives many colours and flavours of water and that whoever chose could drink as much or as little as they wanted to and whenever they wished. The teaching strictly adhered to the sacredness of life whether of human or animals or plants. But in the course of history there came a disruption. And then education became ‘compulsory miseducation’ for another purpose, and the circle of life was broken and the continuity ended. It is that continuity which is now taken up again in the spiritual rebirth of the people” (1995).
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: Interview Questions – Parents

1. As a parent, what do you see that is currently being done to include families of Anishinaabe children within classrooms?

2. How do you think teachers and other educators within the school can make Anishinaabe children and families feel welcome and comfortable within classrooms or within the school environment as a whole?

3. How do you think relationships with Anishinaabe children and families can be improved by:
   a) teachers;
   b) the school community;
   c) the school board?
APPENDIX B: Interview Questions – Teachers

1. As a teacher, what do you do to incorporate families of Anishinaabe students in your classroom practice?

2. What do you do to make families feel welcome and comfortable in your classroom or within the school environment as a whole?

3. How do you think relationships with Anishinaabe students and families can be improved by:
   
a) teachers;

   b) the school community;

   c) the school board?