WE CAN DO IT (EDUCATION) BETTER: AN EXAMINATION OF FOUR SECONDARY SCHOOL APPROACHES FOR ABORIGINAL STUDENTS IN NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO

By

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Abstract

The following study is an exercise in understanding how educators can improve their professional practice in terms of addressing the needs of Aboriginal high school students. The study was delimited to four different high schools in Northwestern Ontario in order to develop a broader understanding of best practices used by various school communities. Interviews were conducted with students and educational professionals such as teachers, administrators, guidance personnel and school board members. The study was completed over a period of one week, where one day was spent in each school completing interviews.

This study is unique in two ways: it presents the voices of secondary school educators (which had scarcely been reported or heard in the academic community) outlining the direction in which Aboriginal education should go and secondly, as a researcher I attempted to use the medicine wheel as a model for completing and conducting research.

There were a number of findings that appeared through the interviews. Teachers and administrators agreed that in order for Aboriginal students to succeed they needed to have involved parental support. It was important to teachers that parents take an active role in the educational life of their child. Additionally, it was acknowledged that First Nation communities were ideal settings for schooling of Aboriginal students as they were supported by family and community kinships. Yet in this study, it was also acknowledged that First Nation schools suffered financially in comparison to provincial schools. They were not able to provide programming comparable to provincial schools and
were limited to a barebones program with compulsory courses being offered. In some cases, if students failed a course, they were not able to participate in the rest of the school program, until the course was re-taught in two years. Despite these shortcomings, students might do better in First Nation based schools if they were adequately funded with current resources and adequately compensated teachers.

This study offers some suggestions on how to improve the practice of educating First Nation secondary students.
Acknowledgements

This document is a result of a passion that I have for trying to better the schooling process for Aboriginal students. I would like to acknowledge the support of the four communities that were involved in this study, without them this study does not happen. As well, I would like to thank Jean-Paul Restoule for the support and patience that he has provided in reading the many drafts of this document. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the support of my family, Petra, Ben and Katrina, who allowed me to struggle with this document over the past few years. And finally, I would like to acknowledge the truthful and kind hearted words of my dear departed friend, Michael O’Neil, who encouraged me just to get this done.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

My research focuses on Native Education, where I am trying to understand which teaching strategies and or practices, in the broadest sense of the word, will enhance the success of Aboriginal students in secondary school settings in Northwestern Ontario. In this study, I define student success as the willingness of the student to stay in school and complete the necessary tasks to earn high school course credits. The following study is based upon interview data that I have collected from teachers, administrators and students in four different school settings in Northwestern Ontario, three of which are based on First Nation communities. One school is based in a local non-Aboriginal community.

I hope that this study, through the voices of the participants, will provide certain strategies, ideas and methods that may be applied in working with Aboriginal students. You will read their thoughts as teachers, students and administrators. During the study, different ideas arose related to teaching, evaluation strategies and conditions needed for a successful school program for Aboriginal students. In the conclusion, I offer fifteen recommendations that could be used in communities serving Aboriginal students.

In struggling to find a conceptual model that would enable me to understand what was going on with First Nation students, I remembered the medicine wheel, an important element of my culture that had been taught to me at Trent University.

The medicine wheel has six different aspects associated with it (Bopp et al., 1988): four directions, circle centre and community support surrounding the circle. Each of the directions is associated and linked to different meanings, depending upon the cultural heritage of the writer.
In this study, I offer the following meanings related to the different directions. This will be discussed in greater detail in the next section. I associate the directions east with mental health, south with emotional health, west with spiritual health and north with physical health. While circle centre is linked with aspects of student success, it is based on the condition that students are receiving a balanced educational program. Finally, community support or influences is necessary for the success of any school program. Once I applied the notions of research and conceptions of school to the medicine wheel and its components, as described above, it all made sense to me. And I hope that it will all make sense to you.

I believe that we, as educators, can use the medicine wheel as a process. This will enable us to examine what we are providing in school programming to Aboriginal students. If we honour the elements of the medicine wheel, by offering appropriate school programming, we will be meeting the needs of Aboriginal students. For example, to address:

- mental needs, schools can provide Aboriginal relevant curricula while using teaching and evaluation strategies that respect Aboriginal learning styles
- emotional needs, schools can provide Aboriginal responsive counseling programs while creating a positive and supportive school atmosphere.
- spiritual needs, schools provide opportunities for the honouring and development of Aboriginal cultural practices.
- physical needs, schools provide opportunities and venues for students to participate in school based recreational activities.
- community needs, schools need to have the involvement of community members in order for students to be successful.
- student success can be achieved if all of these conditions are achieved.

In the following research, I found that some of the schools were strong in some areas and not so strong in other areas.

In the following pages, I will outline my conceptual model and research process.

1.1 Conceptual Frameworks
In the following pages, I outline and describe the medicine wheel as a process linked to some Aboriginal cultures. Aboriginal people in different communities have, traditionally, always tried to maintain a balance in their lives (English, 1996; Hill, 1999). For example, Charlie Fisher, Aboriginal elder, talked of living a good life (Ross, 1992), something that can be achieved by balancing all things in our life. Some people will try to achieve this balance by using the medicine wheel as a guiding framework which enables them to structure their lives in a good way.

There are six components to the medicine wheel: the community which is comprised of family members, friends and Elders who provide support for the circle; four directional sectors, north, east, south, and west and the circle centre. Each of the directions represents different aspects in a person’s life. For example, each of the directions will represent one of the following: mental, emotional, spiritual and physical, I will explain these concepts in the pages to come. The circle centre represents the person (Bopp et al., 1988; Graveline, 1998; Hart, 1996). In this study, the circle centre is focused on the students and their success. The following graphic shows the circle in its simplest form.

Figure 1: Medicine Wheel
1.2 Circles and medicine wheels as a way of understanding the research process

Although Figure 1 is a simplistic form of the medicine wheel, Graveline (1998), in *Circleworks*, showed how complex the medicine wheel could become in the context of her research. Writers, in Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Canada, 1996), suggest that there are simpler descriptions of the medicine wheel.

The circle is perhaps the symbol most widespread among Aboriginal cultures. All creatures in the biosphere are conceived of as part of the circle of life. Time is understood as cyclical, returning the daylight and the seasons in predictable round while carrying human beings inevitably toward a stage of life where they are dependent, like children, on the strength and care of others.

The medicine wheel, a centered and quartered circle, is a teaching device associated mainly with the First Nations of the plains: Cree, Blackfoot, Dakota, and others. It has only been adopted in recent years by teachers in many First Nations. The medicine wheel represents the circle that encompasses all life and all that is known or knowable, linked together in a whole with no beginning and no end. Human beings exist in this circle of life, along with other beings and the unseen forces that give breath and vitality to the inhabitants of the natural world. The lines intersecting at the centre of the circle signify order and balance. An infinite number of elements of analysis can be inserted in the medicine wheel for teaching purposes. (Canada, 1996, p. 646-647).

For example, Hart (1996), while researching the application of healing circles to social work practice, states:

The medicine wheel usually explains concepts in sets of four, with one factor represented in each direction of the wheel, East, South, West, and North. In regards to good health and healing there are considered to be four primary components to a whole individual: the spiritual, the emotional, the physical and the mental (citing Bopp et al., 1984). Recognizing these four aspects every individual needs to balance them by paying attention to each component. When each aspect is developed equally, an individual is considered well-balanced and in harmony. If an individual concentrates on only one aspect, the other three suffer. All aspects are connected together through the individual. When off-balance the individual is not considered to be whole. (Hart, 1996, p. 66)

The point that I wish to address with this statement is that the medicine wheel can be used in a variety of ways within the teaching profession. For example, Lovelace (2001)
suggested that it can be used to acknowledge how we, as individuals, have four aspects in our life: the mental, emotional, spiritual and physical. Balance and wholeness are important parts of the medicine wheel and it is important as a person, to ensure that we take care of all parts of our personhood. Lovelace (2001) continued by asking the following questions to check on this: what are we doing for our mental needs? How do we address our emotional needs? How do we fulfill our spiritual needs? Finally, what are we doing to help meet our physical needs? He felt that if all four elements were addressed equally, a person would be considered whole or balanced. He continued by stating that problems would arise when one aspect was not addressed (Lovelace, 2001). This process can also be applied to the public school system where aspects of a school environment can be reviewed and assessed determining whether a school is addressing all four features of the medicine wheel and meeting the needs of Aboriginal students. The medicine wheel, can be used individually or systematically to help students in a school setting.

The research process can also be adapted to the medicine wheel where it can be used as a problem solving practice. In using the medicine wheel, as a problem solving process, we can look at what community issues are not being addressed and suggest strategies that will meet these issues. In this research process, the following concepts, as found in White (1996), are shown on Figure 2.
Table 1 (see below) makes the connection between medicine wheel and the research process. It is important to remember the area outside the circle represent the supporting kinship and community members.
Table 1: Relationships between the research process and medicine wheel.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>South</th>
<th>Emotional</th>
<th>To feel</th>
<th>Problem identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>To do</td>
<td>Clarification of the problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>To see</td>
<td>Data gathering: seeking wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East</td>
<td>Mental</td>
<td>To know</td>
<td>Analysis, reflection, understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circle Centre</td>
<td>Balance</td>
<td>To become</td>
<td>New knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside of the Circle</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>To support</td>
<td>Sharing the findings with community members</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are a number of ways in which one can move around the Medicine Wheel, depending upon cultural group. Bopp et al. (1988) tell us that Aboriginal groups used the Medicine Wheel in different ways. One way starts with the east direction and proceeds to the southern direction, continuing to the west and finally going on to the northern direction. For the purpose of this study, I will identify this movement as the cyclical process meaning the direction in which the sun rotates.

Within this study, I use the medicine wheel in a different way, while meeting the demands of the traditional research process. Our starting point is in the south symbolizing emotions, as we recognize that a problem exists and proceed to the north, the physical aspect in order, to reflect and clarify the problem. Then we continue to the west, the spiritual element, where we seek answers from others, such as data gathering and finally, move on to the east, the mental state, where we analyze the data and try to understand it as new knowledge. We then
move outside the circle on to the community, where we share our data. If this is successful, then we know for the circle centre, or person at the centre of the circle, it is successful.

The goal of Aboriginal people, who follow the medicine wheel teachings, is to maintain a balance in their life (Hart, 1996). Hill (1999) suggests that the data gathering and research process involves the following four capacities or activities: to feel, to do, to see and to know. An awareness or understanding is created, if all four capacities are fulfilled. As one seeks balance and awareness, one acknowledges other aspects of their personhood. In this research study, the attainment of new knowledge can be considered analogous to these points as we come up with new knowledge, we become whole, balanced and aware, and ready to start a new day, and later, a new problem. The circle continues, never stopping, just as the circle of life never stops. The process is therefore cyclical.

In seeking new knowledge, the format of this thesis will reveal the results of this study, using the afore-mentioned research process of the medicine wheel. I will begin in the east, where I outline a problem and then, travel to the north, where I seek to clarify my problem through literature review. Then I will proceed to the west where I will develop a process through methodology and data gathering to seek answers from others. I will then travel to the east direction, loaded with raw data for analysis and understanding which was gathered through discussion. I will then take this new knowledge and develop in a way that it can be shared with the community, comprising of parents, friends and Elders. As I reflect upon the newly created knowledge, I will develop new questions, problems and draw conclusions and then travel to the south, to start the process all over again. This is the basic structure of how the process will unfold.
1.3 The medicine wheel and school programming

The medicine wheel will also be used in an application to the school process. For example, the circles below outline the different school roles found in the context of the medicine wheel directions. For example, the east direction considered the direction that features the rising the sun and the arrival of new knowledge. It also features activities that focus on the mental aspects of the students such as curricula.

In the south direction, considered the area for emotions, schools can feature programs related to helping the emotional health of its students. While the west direction, considered the domain of spiritual health, is an opportunity for the implementation of cultural appropriate programs. The north, considered the domain of physical health, can be an area for the establishment of providing recreational programs for the participation of Aboriginal students. Around the circles, it appears that there is empty space but in reality, the circles are surrounded by members of the community which feature family members and provide support to the students. Circle centre outlines the state of balance (success) that one (student) has achieved. A student, who has received appropriate programming, will be a successful student.
The medicine wheel and its six aspects (emotional, physical, spiritual, mental circle centre and community support) are central to understanding how students function (Canada, 1996, p. 447). Charter (1994, p. 29), stated that “all persons must pass through four basic stages of development: childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and maturity. At each stage, there are specific learning tasks that must be mastered”. It is the job of the teacher, and people, who have experienced the task at hand, to ensure that the student is prepared for what life has to offer, providing they ask for instruction (Charter, 1994, p. 29). In addition, the teacher, as a servant of the community, is expected to bring balance to communities and individuals (Katz & St. Denis, 1991) by helping individuals perceive and clarify the natural and spiritual worlds in a harmonious manner (Marashio, 1982).

The school program should be able to address all needs of its student population. For
example, by providing appropriate counseling and recreational programs to students, emotional and physical needs are met. Physical needs are also addressed by the provision of extra-curricular programming or sport programs as well as courses such as Physical Education and Nutrition. Meanwhile, spiritual needs can be accommodated by acknowledging the importance of cultural and spiritual beliefs within the school routines. Mental needs are usually addressed by appropriate curricular content, such as courses of study that are aimed at enriching the lives of students and contain appropriate teaching and evaluation strategies.

Schools that feature an engaged Aboriginal population, where students are achieving credits and are involved in extra-curricular activities, showcase the importance of a balanced offering of culture which includes the recognition of Aboriginal spirituality (Haig-Brown et al., 1997; Paulsen, 1999; Bazylak, 2002; Jones, 2003; Jeffries & Singer, 2003; Debassige, 2002). Unfortunately, these results are often found in alternative school settings. Why can this not be done in public school settings? What are the barriers that prevent this from happening? Perhaps the answers to these questions will become evident in the following pages.

The medicine wheel framework was used to guide me as I developed the remaining portions of this study. Interview questions, asked in a structured setting, and data analysis were framed within the context of the medicine wheel. Interview questions were developed with a specific focus, such as counseling support, recreational and spiritual opportunities and academic programming. As well, the findings were reported with the following perspectives in mind; student success, community influences, mental, emotional, spiritual and physical.
Chapter 2  South: Starting the research

The direction south, located on the medicine wheel, is considered to be the domain of emotions, and is usually associated with sensitivity and femaleness (Bopp et al., 1988). South is a domain that enables our personhood to express itself emotionally. When something disturbs us, we react with action and feeling and in the end, causes us to do something. In Aboriginal communities, the emotional aspect helps to balance out the physical aspect and as well, provides a passion for learning and developing an appreciation for the spiritual aspects.

What distresses me the most is the fact that Aboriginal high school students are not as successful as non-Aboriginal students. For the purposes of this research study, success is defined as the completion of high school courses that result in the awarding of a high school diploma.

In the following pages, I will outline and clarify my research purpose offering the initial perspective to set the stage.

2.1 Goals of education/schooling

Charlie Fisher [Elder from Kenora, Ontario] explained that traditional Native common law was comprised of only five words. The first was "Respect", which meant respect for all things, for all people, for the Creator, and for yourself. The next two were "Good" and "Bad". If you learned respect, you would then know what was bad and what was good. The last two words were "Good Life" for if you understood the law and followed it, a good life would be the result. (Ross, 1992, p. 166)

This statement, made in the context of marrying the traditional Native justice system with the Ontario court system (Ross, 1992), relates to the goals of current school programming. Teachers, within the public school system, are interested in developing skills and nurturing values within students so that they have a wide range of opportunities when they leave the schooling system (Limestone District School Board, 1996). This goal is not unlike Aboriginal philosophy, where
Elders and parents state that the educational process should provide students with the opportunity to have a good life (Canada, 1996, p. 434). In addition, the following statement clarifies the role of schooling:

> Education must develop children and youth as Aboriginal citizens, linguistically and culturally competent to assume the responsibilities of their nations. Youth that emerge from school must be grounded in a strong, positive Aboriginal identity. Consistent with Aboriginal traditions, education must develop the whole child intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically. (Canada, 1996, p. 434)

Additionally, there are values that must be taught. In some Anishinaabe (Ojibway) communities, teaching and learning (prior to contact) incorporated the following values known as the Seven Grandfathers:

1. To cherish knowledge is to know WISDOM
2. To know LOVE is to know peace.
3. To honour all of the Creation is to have RESPECT.
4. BRAVERY is to face the foe with integrity.
5. HONESTY in facing a situation is to be brave.
6. HUMILITY is to know yourself as a sacred part of the Creation
7. TRUTH is to know all of these things. (Benton-Banai, 1979, p. 60-64)

[Emphasis is part of the original text]

This teaching, found in Ojibway tradition, represents values that we, as teachers and parents, should be teaching our young people. If we can help our students achieve values like the seven grandfathers, they will be able to live fruitful lives.

However, one must ask whether these same values are reflected in mainstream schooling? Some researchers (Ledlow, 1992; Cole, 2002; Graveline, 1998; Lavell, 2004) tell us
that the values taught in mainstream schooling are different as there is an emphasis on individuality and personal development of the self in preparation for personal success (Kirkness, 1973; Castellano, 1974). For example, personal success is not considered as important as developing skills that contribute to the community. Many Aboriginal parents feel that a student is successful if the student leaves the school system with a secondary school diploma that enables him/her to have access to other opportunities such as employment and post-secondary schooling (Mosher-Rae, 2001; Turner, 1997).

Yet, there are statistics, reflecting the dropout rate of Aboriginal students from mainstream schooling programs (Mackay & Myles, 1989; Canada, 1996; Ferguson et al., 2005), that suggest that two thirds (2/3) of the Aboriginal high school student population are not participating in mainstream school programming. How can Aboriginal children take advantage of the benefits of education if they are leaving school before the schooling process is completed? Furthermore, for those who complete the educational process, Burns (1998) and Cole (2002) suggest that students have become changed by the school system to the point that they no longer share the same perspectives and values of their community and simply choose to not go back. Schools are agents of change and can be a factor contributing to the drop-out rate by Aboriginal students (Lavell, 2004). For example, RCAP (Canada, 1996) points out that many communities feature 80-90 percent drop-out rates from secondary school. Some Aboriginal students do not want to change to become successful. Others felt that by becoming educated they would lose their sense of Indianness (Castellano, 1974). Schools should be places where students can feel confident that they will graduate with values and skills that will help them and their community.

The previous research suggests that students feel threatened by the school system. How can students participate willingly in a school system that they do not trust? How can students
become engaged in the school process when they feel that their culture is not respected? As educators, our challenge is to provide an educational system that does not threaten or discount Aboriginal cultures. In order for students to stay in school longer, they need to feel safe and trust that the school system will honour them, as Aboriginal students.

2.2 Research purpose

The purpose of my research is to seek an answer, from people involved in the educational process, for the following question related to Aboriginal schooling:

What are the educational practices that enable Aboriginal students in Northwestern Ontario secondary schools to be successful?

I would like to find an answer that could be used by educators and institutions to improve their schooling practices and methods. It is my hypothesis, based upon the reviewed literature, that Aboriginal students will succeed when their mental, emotional, spiritual and physical needs are met by the school environment. I invited participants (teachers, administrators, education board members/parents and students) from four different schools in Northwestern Ontario to participate and test my hypothesis by providing their insights about teaching Aboriginal students. This research and data gathering was conducted through interviews or through a written response to a questionnaire. It should be noted that all participants volunteered and were given a pseudonym. All communities were also provided with a pseudonym.

As schooling is broad in focus, I found it necessary to break this topic into smaller areas of study. For example, by using the medicine wheel as a guide to create sets of questions, I examined how a school program addressed the mental, emotional, spiritual and physical aspects of an Aboriginal student. I used the following as guiding questions in each sector:

East (mental): Curricula
What kinds of secondary school curricula enable Aboriginal students, in Northwestern Ontario secondary schools, to succeed?

South (emotional): Counseling Support

How are counseling programs developed to ensure that Aboriginal students in Northwestern Ontario secondary schools feel that they belong in the high school environment?

West (spiritual): Spirituality

How is spirituality, considered important for Aboriginal student success, manifested within schools in Northwestern Ontario?

North (physical): Recreational Program

How do Aboriginal students, in Northwestern Ontario secondary schools, participate in recreational programs?

Haig Brown et al. (1997) and Bazylak (2002) suggested that if these four areas of schooling were addressed, the opportunities are greater for ensuring success of Aboriginal students.

2.3 Educational significance

In reviewing the literature, there appeared to be little written that represented the voices and opinions of educational practitioners (teachers and administrators) who are in daily contact with Aboriginal students. There have been numerous research studies that acknowledge and validate the voices of the Aboriginal student population (Lavell, 2004; Debassige, 2002; Bazylak, 2002; Seguin Brant, 2001; Paulsen, 1999). However, with the exception of Danyluk (1998), little research was found that highlighted the words of the teachers and administrators with respect to the needs of Aboriginal students. Danyluk focused his research upon the teachers of grades five, six and seven students in Northern Alberta, a different setting and grade level from the participants in this study where I focused on secondary school practitioners in
Northwestern Ontario.

Educational practitioners and teachers are called upon to create and implement educational plans for the students that they teach. They have created educational learning expectations and course profiles to help guide their peers and colleagues. Teachers, in their departments, schools, and school boards, select methodology, resource materials and evaluation procedures appropriate to their learning environment. They, with the support of their administrative team, identify students who understand the course content and conversely, those who do not. They develop strategies that may enhance their students’ learning and they may recognize the obstacles that inhibit student learning. Attempts, by teachers and counseling support, are made to help students overcome any barriers that might impede their success.

In reviewing the words and voices of teachers and administrators, I have been able to add to the growing body of literature that outlines the schooling factors that affect the learning of Aboriginal students. The words and voices, of the educational practitioners, outline some strategies and ideas for consideration that may enable schools to develop similar strategies and programs to encourage successful schooling of Aboriginal students.

By using the medicine wheel in an educational setting, I wanted to add to what has already been started by Graveline (1998) and The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Canada, 1996) through the continued validation of the medicine wheel as a conceptual framework for research on educational issues. Hart (2002) states that:

The medicine wheel is an ancient symbol of the universe used to help people understand things or ideas, which often cannot be seen physically. It reflects the cosmic order and the unity of things in the universe. Indeed it can be expressed in many ways as there is no absolute version of the wheel. On one level, many Aboriginal peoples, for example, the Anishinaabe, Cree and Dakota, have utilized the medicine wheel to reflect their understanding of themselves. I have also heard traditional ceremonial leaders explain that every person has their
own medicine wheel since it can reflect each person’s own life. Despite these variations, the medicine wheel has generally been constructed as a circle with four equal pie-shaped sections....As a central symbol used for understanding various issues and perspectives, the medicine wheel reflects several key and interrelated concepts that are common to many Aboriginal methods of helping and healing....(Hart, 2002, p. 39)

Hart (2002) and Bopp et al. (1988) state that wholeness and balance are key concepts to understanding how the medicine wheel works. By knowing that wholeness and balance are important, one can assess other situations and determine what is missing in order to be balanced. When I examined the schooling experience of Aboriginal students in the context of the medicine wheel, I outlined a process of assessment and evaluation. This was used to look at the structures of a school program, and outline how it could be improved. Perhaps this new process will be considered valuable to the academic audience interested in working with Aboriginal students.
Chapter 3  North: Outlining the literature

The North direction teaches reflection. Sometimes, we use physical activity to aid in the reflection process, or sometimes, it is a matter of changing seasons like winter, a season considered important rejuvenation of plants (Bopp et al., 1988). In the school context, students who are involved, within community and school activities, are able to reflect on and think about the school process and what they want to learn and understand.

The literature review is an opportunity to share the reflections of others who are working in this field of research. The following pages will outline some of what is currently known in the area of Aboriginal schooling practices: teaching and learning pre-contact, day schooling before residential school, residential schooling, integrated band controlled schooling, learning characteristics of Aboriginal students, arguments against learning style research, Aboriginal content and teacher relationships, cultural differences, effective methods for teaching Aboriginal students and linking the published literature to this research study.

3.1  Teaching and learning pre-contact

The following two statements provide an overview of Native education prior to the arrival of the European.

The actual practice of education was not a segregated segment of a First Nation child's life. It was the responsibility of the child's family, as well as the community, to create a total learning environment for each child. This was achieved through story-telling, apprenticeships and ceremonies-- in particular, the rites of passage during puberty. Education curriculum was not divided into segments of instruction in specific skills; rather, the goal was the 'development of the whole person...through experiential learning.

And secondly,

Children were taught by their parents and grandparents from a very young age. They were taught acceptable social behaviour and the means of survival in an often harsh environment. Girls were taught, among other things, how to prepare
and sew garments made of animal hides, how to set up camp, how to prepare food to keep it from spoiling, and how to care for children. Boys were taught to be courageous, skilful hunters. Bravery was admired. Training for boys and girls in preparation for adulthood was very important. (Ontario Public School Teachers' Association, 1993, p. 1-2)

This process was similar to current public school practices where school was meant to prepare students for a successful transition to the world of work, adulthood and citizenship. However, teaching and learning, within Aboriginal communities, was not separate and distinct from everyday life (Canada, 1996, p. 433), it was an ongoing and integrated focus of life as it was for all students in pre-public school days of Canada (Prentice, 1977).

Brant (1990) commented that individual autonomy was an aspect important for members of Aboriginal communities.

A high degree of respect for every human being's independence leads the Native to view instruction, coercing or attempting to persuade another person as undesirable behavior. (Brant, 1990, p. 535)

Pre-contact education meant that a child learned in a holistically integrated manner and that skills were modeled for the child to observe and develop. Children were not told when to do something instead the learning process involved a hands-on or modeling approach where students completed the tasks at appropriate and necessary times. For example, helping mom with housework or helping dad with firewood. At first, the child would complete low skilled tasks, and then, when confident, complete more complicated tasks. The child would become self-motivated to complete the tasks.

3.2 Day schooling prior to residential school

Early in Canadian history, schools were set up on reserve communities. Recruited teachers provided instruction in literacy and mathematics. Churches and philanthropists were instrumental in providing funds to support the educational programs:
In some regions, schools operated by religious missions were introduced in the mid-1600s. In other locations, formal education came much later. But if there were many variations in the weaver of history, a single pattern dominated the education of Aboriginal people, whatever their territorial and cultural origins. Formal education was, without apology, assimilationist. The primary purpose of formal education was to indoctrinate Aboriginal people in a Christian, European worldview, thereby 'civilizing' them. Missionaries of various denominations played a role in this process, often supported by the state (Canada, 1996, p. 434).

This particular schooling process came to an end with the introduction of the residential school system, where reserve based schooling was to be later re-introduced during the 1970's. Government officials and church leaders were concerned that the school's program was being undermined by the student’s parents at home. Students continued to use their Native language and maintain Aboriginal beliefs and attitudes despite the teachings of the school. Therefore, residential schools enabled government officials and church leaders to cut the ties of students to their families, homes and cultural heritage as students lived in group home settings for 10 months of the year. This was another aspect of colonialism, a process that denigrated the legitimacy of Aboriginal cultures in the eyes of their own people (Alfred, 1999, p. 59). Aboriginal students were forced to accept the notion that their lifestyle was not worth anything or valued as an acceptable way of living.

3.3 Residential schooling

Department of Indian Affairs offers this perspective, on reasons for implementing residential schools:

The Indian youth, to enable him to cope successfully with his brother of white origin, must be dissociated from the prejudicial influences by which he is surrounded on the reserve of his band. And the necessity for the establishment more generally of institutions, whereat Indian children, besides being instructed in the usual branches of education, will be lodged, fed, clothed, kept separate from home influences, taught trades and instructed in agriculture, is becoming every year more. (Department of Indian Affairs, 1880 as cited in Barman, 1996, p. 275)
Their intention, according to Barman (1996, p 275), was to fully civilize and change the way Aboriginal children think and learn within a single generation so that they might work and participate in the non-Aboriginal world. However, this has not been the result, family values and issues of identity have become confused in many Aboriginal communities. Barman (1996) states that:

...the legacy of residential school endures. For many families, negative attitudes toward schools today are grounded in their own experience, or that of parents and grandparents, in residential schools that were meant to assimilate aboriginal children into mainstream society but that in reality educated them for inequality...Four factors ensured that residential schools, and their lesser counterpart of federal day schools, would not educate children to compete with non-aboriginal counterparts but for inequality: the government's assumption of aboriginal peoples' sameness across Canada; pupils' lesser time in the classroom than their non-aboriginal counterparts in public schools; the generally poor quality of teaching; and the lack of federal funding for the operation of schools (Barman, 1996, p. 271)

Barman (1996) reviewed a wide range of historical and contemporary sources to document the results of the residential school legacy. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Canada, 1996) also confirmed the process as outlined by Barman. The residential school was an institution where:

Children stayed...for at least ten months of the year, from the ages of six (sometimes younger) through 18 years. ...Residential schools provided a very basic education designed to prepare students for futures as working farmers, housemaids, mechanics or the like. It was to make provision for the domestic and Christian life of the Indian children. ... After being separated from their family, the children were then subjected to a severe regiment of work. The boys were expected to clean the stables, mend broken machinery, butcher cattle, and work in the field. In fact by the "half-day plan," they were expected to spend as much time in this kind of manual labour as they spent in school. The same was true of the girls, who had to spend half of their time doing laundry, sewing, working in the kitchen and doing other forms of housework (Ontario Public School Teachers’ Association, 1993, p. 3-4)

Aboriginal writers such as Shirley Sterling (1992), and Basil Johnston (1988) among others,
have documented their experiences within the residential school setting. Many of them described negative experiences while attending a residential school (Canada, 1996; Knockwood, 1992).

The residential school era affected the lives of many Aboriginal people. The process created generations of people with poor self-esteem and a lack of respect for their own cultural traditions, such as language maintenance and child rearing behaviours (Teichroeb, 1997).

3.4 Day schooling/integrated and band controlled schooling

With the tabling, in government, of the White Paper of 1969 (Canada, 1969), and the commissioned “Hawthorn Report” (1966-67), there were immediate reactions from Aboriginal peoples across Canada. It resulted in the development of responses in the form of the Citizen’s Plus (National Indian Brotherhood of Canada, 1970) and the policy statement of Indian Control of Indian Education (National Indian Brotherhood of Canada, 1973). A movement was created that resulted in Aboriginal people demanding to take greater control of their lives, in and out of the reserve system. This movement allowed two things to happen: Aboriginal communities sent their children to publicly funded day schools and secondly, communities were allowed to set up their own schools with their own curriculum, with approval from Department of Indian Affairs (Canada, 1996).

As Aboriginal communities took control of education, tuition agreements were made with non-Aboriginal communities for the purchase of educational services for Aboriginal students within their school system. In some cases, educational services were purchased for elementary students but the majority of the agreements, educational services were purchased for secondary students. This meant that Aboriginal youth had to leave their reserve community to attend school in a nearby town. For many, it meant boarding with non-Aboriginal families. Aboriginal students coming into town, from distant and isolated communities, had to cope with not only the
transition to high school but also had to adjust to the new rules of the foster home and social nuances of town life (Canada, 1996, p. 485).

Depending upon the community, tuition agreements varied. Some agreements included resources and programs such as transition programs and guidance counselors and or teachers. In other communities, tuition agreements did not have any extra programming. Aboriginal students, who had access to extra programming such as busing for extra-curricular activities, seemed to have greater success within mainstream schools (Seguin Brant, 2001; Debassige, 2002).

3.5 Research on the learning characteristics of Aboriginal students

Howard Gardner (1983) suggested that students learn in different ways. He pointed out that there were a number of different intelligences that students had. He felt that past classifications were limited and thought that with better scientific research, cross cultural observations, and educational study, a more detailed classification system could be made (Gardner, 1983). He went on to state that there was no prescribed list of intelligences but it could be any number ranging from three to three hundred, it just had to meet certain criteria:

To my mind, a human intellectual competence must entail a set of skills of problem solving-enabling the individual to resolve genuine problems or difficulties [his italics] that he or she encounters and, when appropriate, to create an effective product-- and must also entail the potential for finding or creating problems-- thereby laying the groundwork for the acquisition of new knowledge (Gardner, 1983, p. 60)

Although Gardner is quite clear that intelligences are more than sensory know how, he does conclude that intelligences can be thought of as “sets of know how” (Gardner, 1983, p. 68) -- procedures for doing things. Offutt (1997) succinctly lists the intelligences as: verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalist (Offutt, 1997, p. 3-18). She goes on to state:
When children have an opportunity to learn through their strengths, they become more successful at learning all subjects. Many teachers and parents are finding that when an individual becomes more proficient in one area, all other intelligences are enhanced. For this reason, it is important to encourage children to explore and exercise all of their intelligences (Offutt, 1997, p. 4).

Gardner (1983) adds that intelligences are different from learning styles, which prescribe approaches to addressing students who learn in different ways. He does maintain that it is important that all teachers use different approaches to ensure the learning of all students.

Researchers (Jeffries & Singer, 2003; Pewewardy, 2002; Van Hamme, 1996), in addressing Aboriginal and Indigenous students, tell us that Aboriginal students share the following traits or learning style characteristics:

1. **Field Dependence** refers to how students learn. Aboriginal students need to see the whole picture rather than pieces of the picture. They need to know the outcome; how the product will look or work when all the pieces are put together.
2. **Perceptual Strengths** visual, auditory, and kinesthetic refers to how students learn best. For example, students learn best when there is a visual representation, followed by discussion and then an opportunity to put the learning into practice. When a student watches their parent make cookies, they hear from the parent who outlines the steps necessary to make the product, and they see the parent do the work and finally, hear ‘now, it’s your turn’.
3. **Reflectivity versus Impulsivity** is a reference to how students react to different situations. Aboriginal students tend to be reflective and think of implications of the whole situation before reacting.
4. **Classroom Management and Behaviour** is a reference to the idea that greater understanding is needed on the part of teachers as Aboriginal students do not react well to stringent rules of non-Native schools.
5. **Role of the Family, Tribe, Elders** are important in the successful schooling of Aboriginal children as they provide kinship support.
6. **Teacher/Pupil Relationships** are important as successful teachers will use culturally responsive teaching strategies to encourage Aboriginal student success.
7. **Cooperation versus Competition** is a concept where Aboriginal students would rather work with others as part of a team. Aboriginal students avoid situations where one gets singled out. (Pewewardy, 2002, p. 27-36)

In order for Aboriginal students to succeed, they have to be in schools with teachers who acknowledge these characteristics and correspondingly, develop teaching approaches that enable
students to demonstrate their skills (Bazylak, 2002; Jeffries & Singer, 2003; Pewewardy, 2002; Paulsen, 1999; Haig-Brown et al., 1997; Van Hamme, 1996).

### 3.6 Arguments against learning style research

Learning style research is not without controversy. Hodgson-Smith (2000) and Sawyer (1991) both argue that teachers and administrators should not rely upon the use of learning style discrepancies to explain the reasons for Aboriginal student failure. Hodgson-Smith states:

> The proposal that there is a unique learning style might suggest genetic differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The consequences of such a suggestion are both alarming and profound. The research findings could lead us to believe that Aboriginal students are not as able as their non-Aboriginal counterparts. In considering the research findings, it might be advanced that Aboriginal students are working from a deficit, since right-brained learners are postulated as being disinclined towards logical sequential learning. If teachers tended to teach to their right-hemisphericity of their Aboriginal students, then this could have serious implications for literacy, since reading and writing are predominately left-brain activities. At the present time, there is no such thing as right-brained curriculum, so this leaves educators in a quandary....The most important criticism, however, is that the research on the LS [learning style] of Aboriginal students does not yield results that are significantly different from what is found in non-Aboriginal students. (Hodgson-Smith, 2000, p. 162).

In addition, she adds the following:

> LS [learning style] research should not be considered in isolation from other elements of pedagogy. The failure to acknowledge the oppressive impact of school environments and to see LS within that context is a likely result of a fragmented approach to investigating Aboriginal learning. It is not surprising that many Aboriginal educators have turned their attention to creating whole learning environments that are infused with Aboriginal values both in terms of curriculum and in terms of pedagogical processes. (Hodgson-Smith, 2000, p. 164).

Hodgson-Smith tells us that Aboriginal student failure is the result of more than the inability of the school environment to address learning style differences. There are other issues involved such as culture and economic differences.
In the section 3.8, I will examine how culture and economics impact learning opportunities of Aboriginal students. Before examining this issue in detail, let us look at some concerns related to Aboriginal content and teacher relationships.

### 3.7 Aboriginal course content and teacher influence/relationships

For Aboriginal learners, it is not the curricula content that is important (Debassige 2002; Seguin Brant, 2001; Lavell, 2004), rather research shows that students were more concerned with the culture of the school environment. Aboriginal content or courses were nice to have but not necessary for students’ continued enrolment. However, a culturally responsive school climate, created by positively acknowledging Aboriginal values, community members, and issues within the school environment (Mackay & Myles, 1989; Bazylak, 2002) were more important.

Research studies (Bazylak, 2002; Jeffries & Singer, 2003; Seguin Brant, 2001) pointed out that students were motivated by teachers who respected and interacted well with them. This may be due in part to the following notion:

In traditional Aboriginal communities, learning is an intimate process. Traditionally, teachers loved their students dearly. Teachers were moms, dads, grandparents, and other loved ones. Student motivation was most often not individually oriented but, rather family- and community- oriented (Farrell-Racette cited in Hodgson-Smith, 2000, p. 163).

Good relationships with teachers and a culturally responsive environment were listed as keys for successful Aboriginal student involvement (Jones, 2003).

### 3.8 Cultural and economic differences

Most researchers found that cultural differences had an impact upon the development of Aboriginal children. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Canada, 1996) found that:

Values and tradition of Aboriginal peoples and nations are diverse, but there are common elements that often conflict with those dominant in the conventional classroom. For example, Aboriginal children may be raised in a home
environment where co-operation and non-competitiveness are emphasized. They may be taught that intellectual and other gifts are to be shared for the benefit of others rather than for personal gain. In some Aboriginal cultures, the principle of non-interference predominates; the child's will is respected and adults do not interfere in the choices made by the child. The imposition of the adult's will on the child is considered inappropriate except of course, in instances where the child may encounter harm. By contrast, the regimentation of the classroom experience, the emphasis on individual achievement, and the exertion of the teacher's authority may constitute a rupture with the child's home environment (Canada, 1996, p. 454).

Culture differences that exist in schools centre upon issues related to language, parenting, behaviour and values as most schools in Ontario use English as the first language of instruction (Taylor et al., 1996). However, many Aboriginal students, who arrive at secondary school, come from homes where languages other than English are spoken. This is evident in most northern Quebec and Ontario communities (Taylor et al., 1996). With these students, English language learning becomes a focus for most teachers and represents the starting point of making adjustments to the curricula. This is in contrast to non-Aboriginal students, who possess appropriate language skills, can direct their own attention and time on concept and content learning of particular subjects.

Additionally, many Aboriginal parents, schooled in residential schools or having little or no schooling, are also cautious of the school environment (Friedel, 1999). They are not confident enough to support their children in ways that will ensure their success in the school environment. For example, many parents feel their math skills are not good enough to help their children with homework. As well, children, as pre-schoolers, are not given the same opportunities for such things as number counting and pre-reading as students in non-Aboriginal homes (Taylor et al., 1996; Canada, 1996).

Aboriginal students, who enter public school systems, start from a deficit position as
many will have to learn the language and culturally appropriate behaviours in order to be successful. This is not to say that all Aboriginal students start in this position, but there are significant numbers who do (Taylor et al., 1996; Common & Frost, 1994).

Brant (1990), Ross (1992), and Cleary and Peacock (1998) suggest that Aboriginal students do possess behaviours and values that are unique to their culture and environment. They stated that Aboriginal students process and work within the school setting in a different way than non-Aboriginal students. Cleary and Peacock (1998) stress that Aboriginal students need to be taught with a variety of different teaching strategies or approaches as there are distinct differences in the following areas:

- Eye Contact, Body Language and Attention; Social Discourse Difference: Respect and Reserve; Interference versus Influence; Modes of Inquiry; Shame/Competence; Issues of Time; Privacy of Teachings and Language; Humour; Concept of Family; Competition and Collaboration; Material Possessions; and Oral and Literate Traditions (Cleary & Peacock, 1998, p. 27-38).

Environmental factors have played a role in the development of these behaviours (Brant, 1990; Ross, 1992). Brant, an Aboriginal psychologist and Ross, a lawyer with strong links to Aboriginal communities, suggest that Aboriginal people developed ways of coping with a harsh lifestyle. These coping mechanisms became framed as a set of ethics or behaviours that Aboriginal people demonstrated. Ross (1992), in highlighting the work of Brant (1990), wrote of the following concepts:

- Ethic of non-interference is a reference to how people should not interfere in the day to day life of an individual. In other words, you did not tell somebody to do something, as it would take away from the individual’s personal autonomy;

- Ethic that anger not be shown is a process of controlling one’s emotions as it would not do the community any good for someone to be angry. The person would not be co-operative;
Ethics respecting praise and gratitude is a process where public displays of this would create negative feelings in other community members, who might feel that they also should be getting praise and gratitude. Again, co-operation amongst community members would be threatened;

Conservation -withdrawal tactic is another process in which community members are protected in the event of a major disaster. A hunter always kept some energy in case of an emergency;

Notion that time must be right for things to happen. As most Aboriginal people were traditionally hunters and gatherers, they spent the bulk of their time outside and became sensitive to the timing of weather and game. Timing became intuitive (Brant, 1990; Ross, 1992).

These ethics become evident in the classroom when they are acted upon. For example, the ethic of non-interference becomes apparent in many ways, such as, when a student is doing something wrong on the band saw in a carpentry shop class, and everybody stands back and watches instead of reacting with help to correct the problem. It could also mean that when a student chose not to complete their homework that is a decision that they were making. We, as educators, in respecting this particular ethic, should not say anything, as it would challenge the student’s sense of personal autonomy.

When educators get angry with their students, this violates the cultural ethic related to anger. It may cause the student to withdraw, especially if the anger is directed towards them.

In the third ethic, respecting praise and gratitude, it was important to not praise people too much. For children in the classroom, praise from teachers will generate teasing amongst students and possible situations of jealousy. Again, harmony and cooperation is threatened amongst the students. For some, the phrase "teacher's pet" is a negative label and could create situations that result in efforts that do not earn any reward or merit. If a student sees that certain efforts will result in earning praise, the student could withdraw their efforts in order to avoid this
potential cultural conflict.

Students, for example, working in the classroom will often employ the conservation-withdrawal tactic, in that they will provide the teacher with an effort that will get them a pass, rather than an honours mark. For many teachers, this is a frustrating situation, as they know that student x can earn better grades, however these students are satisfied with lower marks. Energy needs to be preserved in the event that more important things happen that require their efforts.

In the classroom, students may view time differently. For example, in schools, students are expected to arrive to class on time but if one is used to living with the notion that “the time must be right ethic,” then getting to class on time, is not highly regarded. The student will get to school, when they are able to get up, eat and get there. If they wake up on time, then that is better but if they don’t, well, they will get there when they get there. This, for many teachers and administrators, is hard to deal with as school and society, in general operate according to the time on the clock not on a sense of when the time is right.

As teachers of Aboriginal children, it is not good enough to simply make changes to the curricula, it is also important to change approaches in order to mesh with local cultural nuances and body language of the students.

Brady (1996), while conducting research on Northwestern Ontario communities, offers another perspective:

While it cannot be denied that many Native students find themselves in alien cultural milieu while attending mainstream secondary schools, such cultural differences alone do not account for a number of interesting anomalies. Among these are: (a) the fact that there is a strong correlation between the economic position of individual Native students and the inclination to dropout, (b) the fact that dropout rates vary widely from one First Nation community to another and (c) why the school experiences of Native and non-Native dropout rates closely resemble each other (Brady, 1996, p.14).
He says that cultural factors may be confused with economic reasons for early student leaving, also referred to as dropping out. It is true that many Aboriginal families are not economically well off (Common & Frost, 1994; Canada, 1996). Research has shown that cultural differences, along with economic situations, do affect the schooling success of Aboriginal students (Mckay & Myles, 1989; Ferguson et al., 2005).

Economic positions might be seen in a variety of ways, for example, in terms of resources available for preschool readiness, such as books in the household to encourage reading and writing. Later in a students' life, the lack of financial resources might be seen in terms of what types of clothing is worn and what materials are available for school programs, for example, running shoes and sportswear for physical education. A student's lack of involvement on school trips or extra-curricular programming might be predicated by their perceived lack of financial resources, as students and or parents may not be aware that financial resources are available. The financial position of a student's family could contribute to a positive or negative outlook towards the school environment (Brady, 1996).

3.9 What are the most effective teaching methods that enable Aboriginal students to be successful?

Rehyner (1992a) suggests we should do the following in order to improve the learning opportunities of Aboriginal students:


Rehyner believes schools that have too large of a student population decrease their chances of having successful Aboriginal students. Debassige (2002), Jeffries & Singer (2003),
Paulsen (1999), and Haig Brown et al. (1997) conclude that for students it was important that they have a positive relationship with their teachers and school environment and as well, they wanted to be acknowledged, valued and appreciated.

Teachers who stood out for Aboriginal students were those who cared for them (Seguin Brant, 2001; Jeffries & Singer, 2003). They were able to joke with them, and listen to them as autonomous individuals and provided honest feedback without judgment (Jones, 2003). These teachers were appreciated and respected by their student population (Jeffries & Singer, 2003, p. 50-51; Powers et al., 2003, p. 38). Additionally, teachers who acknowledged cultural differences were more apt to have excellent relationships with students (Bazylak, 2002; Pewewardy, 2002; Mackay & Myles, 1989). Pewewardy (2002) goes on to say that students were inspired by the teachers’ interest:

Teachers should try to identify the learning styles of their students, match their teaching styles to students' learning styles for difficult tasks...when differences in learning styles are addressed, the American/Alaska Native student will become motivated and encouraged to succeed. Personalization of educational programs make learning more meaningful to all involved. Ultimately, American Indian/Alaska Native students must believe that there is respect for their cultural backgrounds (Pewewardy, 2002, p. 41).

Accepting and acknowledging learning styles is an aspect of Rehyner's (1992a) active teaching comment, whereby teachers, who use varied approaches will be more successful with Aboriginal students. For example, teachers may begin to start using stories (that are holistic and provide a context and significance for the content), demonstrations (modeling), and experiential types of education, as active forms of teaching.

What is apparent, from the research, is that many respondents (Debassige 2002; Jeffries & Singer, 2003; Bazylak, 2002; Seguin Brant, 2001) felt that Native Studies curricula were not necessarily important. However, cultural acknowledgment, respectful environment and culturally
responsive staff were considered to be more important. It was not necessary to have Native
Studies courses but to have courses that engaged students and forced them to look at themselves
analytically (Bazylak, 2002, p. 145). Research shows that school environments that offer positive
elements of Native content, in a way, created a respectful climate, which was important for
students (Friedel, 1999, Rehyner, 1992a).

Additionally, Mosher-Rae (2001) found, while reviewing the perceptions from a
Northern Ontario reserve community, that there was some concern about what was a culturally
responsive curriculum. As a teacher with experience in several different schools and in different
communities, she found that notions, relating to what was traditional Native culture, varied
depending upon the degree of Christianity existing within the community (Mosher-Rae, 2001, p.
5-7). Significant amounts of literature espouse that Aboriginal based schools must incorporate
and or integrate traditional Aboriginal/Indigenous practices and knowledge into their daily
school programming. However, Mosher-Rae points out that there are Aboriginal communities in
the northwestern Ontario which would prefer not to do this. These communities see Indigenous
knowledge as being "knowledge of the savages" (Mosher-Rae, 2001, p. 7). This view, reflective
of a colonial mentality, whereby local people’s values and knowledge are discounted (Alfred,
1999), can be found in some Aboriginal communities across Canada. It is in contrast to the
resurgence of Aboriginal pride in Aboriginal values and traditions that have developed in
Aboriginal and Canadian communities in the last 40 years.

This study is focused upon students of northwestern Ontario, and there are communities,
in northwestern Ontario, which would prefer to not have a Native Studies focus in their school
curricula. These schools were not part of this study as most of these school communities were
located in remote locations and were only accessible by air transportation. Needless to say,
school content should be a result of a partnership between school officials, community members and parents. If school content is supported by the Aboriginal members of the community, perhaps one could state that it is culturally responsive. This view would parallel the thinking of Rehyner (1992a).

Additionally, Rehyner (1992a) suggests that culturally responsive testing techniques should be used. In recent years, Canadian, or specifically, Ontario educators have developed a greater range of assessment procedures that enable students to demonstrate their skills, abilities and knowledge. For example, evaluation techniques range from the completion of various types of writing pieces, research projects along with opportunities for oral expression and demonstrations of accumulated knowledge in various forms. Teachers do not base their assessment solely on tests or examinations; rather, this method is just one part of the whole picture (Ontario, 1999).

Wilson (1992, cited in Mosher-Rae, 2001) suggested that students, coming from small communities, were vulnerable and sensitive to non-Aboriginal teacher's perceptions. Students, not comfortable with the new situation, became prone to fulfilling teacher expectations. Unfortunately, most teachers had low expectations of Aboriginal students (Mosher-Rae, 2001, p. 37-39). However, schools, with teachers who set high expectations for their Aboriginal students, often had better results (Mackay & Myles, 1989; Jeffries & Singer, 2003; Mosher-Rae, 2001; Seguin Brant, 2001; Bazylak, 2002). Students were willing to make an effort provided that they were appreciated and valued as demonstrated in studies conducted with elementary school children (Whitbeck et al., 2001).

Turner (1997) and Seguin Brant (2001) suggest that parental support is very important for student achievement at the secondary level. Turner suggested that a sense of community and
good life experiences contributed to a strong positive identity, which enabled students to appropriately deal with any challenges. In addition, good role models and supporting teachers were important for a student's success. In a study examining the involvement of parents in school councils in Edmonton, Alberta, Friedel (1999) found that Aboriginal parents wanted to participate, but did not feel that public school environments were very inviting. She added that this feeling was enhanced by cautiousness as a result of residential school experiences. Friedel also stated that Aboriginal parents would participate more when school councils operated and functioned in a manner that honoured and respected the voices of Aboriginal participants. It seems that a school environment that is inviting of Aboriginal parents would also be a school that is respectful of Aboriginal cultures. Student success would be enhanced by this factor as well.

In order for Aboriginal students to succeed, there are a number of factors that need to be in place. The research literature suggests that if schools were culturally responsive and had teachers that were genuinely interested in the welfare of Aboriginal students, then Aboriginal student success would be increased.

How does one measure or identify the factors that enhance student success? How do we gather data which will determine when a school is successfully educating its Aboriginal population? From the many variables, can we predict which schools will succeed?

3.10 Linking the literature to my research process

The following table (table 2) outlines how the directions on the medicine wheel are related to different aspects and to the school programming within a school community.
Table 2: Linking the research areas to the Medicine Wheel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outside the Circle</th>
<th>Community Influences</th>
<th>Teaching Background and School Funding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Recreational Programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East</td>
<td>Mental</td>
<td>Curricula and Teaching Strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Counseling Support Programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Cultural Programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circle Centre</td>
<td>Student Success</td>
<td>Creating student success</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This research study was designed with the intent of discovering what teachers, students and administrators had to say about the following:


b. Counseling support in the school

c. Aboriginal culture in the school and classroom

d. Recreational opportunities in terms of extra-curricular activities.

Each of these areas (in table 2) was linked to a section of the medicine wheel and was a direct by-product of what was said in the literature review. For example, students who felt respected and appreciated, perhaps through athletic engagement in sports, were more likely to stay in the school environment. Consequently, they had a better chance of earning course credits necessary for their high school diploma.

By using a qualitative approach, in a collective case study form, I went to four different schools to see what school communities were doing in light of what was stated in the literature. I
wanted to see if schools were physically responsive to students, hear how teachers were teaching Aboriginal students and I wanted to understand how we, as teachers, could connect to them (students) in our school communities. I conducted the research hoping that this study and its results would help other educators make the necessary changes to improve the quality of life in schools for Aboriginal students.

However, before sharing the results of my work, I will outline the process that I used to complete this study. For that information, we must proceed to the direction of the west, where I outline the methodology.
The Western Door: Seeking advice from others

The west direction is the domain for spirituality (Benton-Banai, 1979, p. 25). In this direction, I looked for answers from others, such as elders, and spiritual advisors, to help guide my research. In traditional times, either in sweat lodge ceremonies or fasting sessions or in our dreams, we, as a people, called upon our ancestors to guide us. It is here, in this western domain, where I used the teachings, of those who had gone on (or previously completed studies), to outline my approach to data gathering.
Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The focus of this study is to develop an understanding of the factors that contribute to the successful schooling of Aboriginal students in Northwestern Ontario. In the next few pages, I will outline why I chose the qualitative method of case study to conduct my research.

Marshall and Rossman (1999) state that qualitative researchers have common considerations and procedures for its conduct:

Qualitative researchers are intrigued with the complexity of social interactions as expressed in daily life and with the meanings that participants themselves attribute to these interactions. This interest takes qualitative researchers into natural setting rather than laboratories and fosters pragmatism in using multiple methods for exploring the topic of interest. Thus, qualitative research is pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 2).

Simply, qualitative research enables a researcher to examine issues or concerns in the context of everyday life. The following study looks at the lived experiences of teachers, administrators and students in a classroom and school setting.

Qualitative research uses snapshots of participant perspectives to generate data. I gathered information by observing the dynamics of the school environment and by conducting in-depth interviews in naturalistic settings, as suggested by Patton (1990, p. 14). He also stated that:

The task of the qualitative researcher is to provide a framework within which people can respond in a way that represents accurately and thoroughly their points of view about the world, or that part of the world about which they are talking, for example, their experience with a particular program being evaluated (Patton, 1990, p. 24).

In many ways, my research is a way of presenting information about the world in ways that many people can understand and relate to it. The conclusions and findings are meant to be holistic and
intertwined with other parts of reality, as pointed out by Johnson and Christensen (2004). Although qualitative researchers have little or no control over what happens at the selected research sites, I found that everything flowed together. I was able to meet with respective teachers and student groups in their school settings (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Outlined in the next few pages is a review of the elements of case study research.

4.2 Case study methodology

Selecting a study design can be a complicated process. I knew that I wanted to examine the school processes of the North and help teachers become better practitioners in teaching Aboriginal students. In order to achieve this, I knew, that as teachers, we were not using all of the available teaching tools, and that we needed to use other tools to help Aboriginal students succeed. My question was how do I communicate the practices of successful teachers in some schools with those who are not as successful in other schools?

In selecting a collective case study methodology, I discovered that I was able to examine a number of school situations and then observe them in comparison with each other. Johnson and Christensen (2004, p. 376) describe case study “as research that provides a detailed account and analysis of one or more cases”. Hays (2004) provides the following ideas around the parameters of case study research:

…[It] can involve the close examination of people, topics, issues or programs. These studies might explore student experiences in law school, cheating at a community college, effects of school reform in a middle school, a special program for Gulf War veterans, or countless other entities. These entities are known as particular cases unique in their content and character (Hays, 2004, p. 218).

Yin (1984, p. 21) tells us that conclusions that we draw from stories and experiences can be applied to similar type settings in the same fashion as a quantitative researcher conducts multiple forms of experiments before stating the conclusion. As a researcher, I wanted to highlight the teaching
practices that were effective with Aboriginal students, which other teaching communities could adapt and or adopt.

I wanted to determine what factors and processes are more effective for educating Aboriginal students successfully. In order to gain this knowledge, I reviewed the secondary schooling situations in four different communities in Northwestern Ontario. Robert Stake (1994) describes the concept of collective case study:

> With even less interest in one particular case, researchers may study a number of cases jointly in order to inquire into the phenomenon, population, or general condition (Stake, 1994, p. 237).

Each school setting has its own unique set of circumstances. For example, in three out of the four school settings, students attend high school or learning centres, while living in their First Nation community. In the fourth school, Aboriginal students have a choice of leaving their home community to live in boarding homes to attend high school in another community or attend a learning centre in their First Nation and participate in an internet based high school. Three of the four schools are able to offer a regular school program with extra-curricular activities. Stake (1994) notes that:

> “[I]ndividual cases may be similar or dissimilar, redundancy, variety each having their own voice. They are chosen because it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding, perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases” (Stake, 1994, p. 237).

By reviewing four different schooling processes, through the eyes of teachers and administrators, we may learn and gain an *emic perspective*, in the sense of using the participants’ viewpoints to teach us about the phenomena, in this situation, effective teaching practices (Gall et al., 1996, p. 548). Gall adds that a researcher, by maintaining his or her perspective as a researcher, can have an *etic perspective* when they make conceptual and theoretical sense of the case (Gall et al., 1996, p. 548).
In this study, I seek to present both perspectives, an emic, as an insider, and etic, as the researcher.

In reviewing the various schooling programs, with all of their different nuances, we should be able to develop further insight on how to effectively educate Aboriginal students. This notion is supported by Campbell’s comment, “case study can usefully be seen as a small step toward grand generalization” (Campbell, 1975 cited in Stake, 1994, p. 238).

In doing a collective case study, I wanted to see if patterns would emerge from the collected data that either affirm and verify existing knowledge, or create new ideas on how to teach Aboriginal students either in the context of Northwestern Ontario or in the broader realm of Aboriginal education in Ontario or Canada.

4.3 **Need for the study**

For the past 15 years, research has been conducted to understand why Aboriginal students are not successful in mainstream schooling (Mackay & Myles, 1989; Rehyner, 1992a, 1992b; Dehyle, 1992; Ledlow, 1992; Van Hamme, 1996; Brady, 1996; Haig-Brown et al., 1997; Agbo, 2001; Whitbeck et al., 2001; Swanson, 2003; Jones, 2003; Pewewardy, 2002; Bazylak, 2002; Powers et al., 2003; Jeffries & Singer, 2003; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Bell, 2004). There have been a number of studies that focused exclusively on the secondary school experiences of Aboriginal students such as Lavell (2004), Bazylak (2002), and Paulsen (1999). They found that students had concerns with the school process, ranging from irrelevant curricula, to a lack of connection to the school community, or fear of losing their culture in the broader school community. However, these studies were limited in scope as data was only collected from one school (although in different parts of the country) and each of the researchers used only students as the data source. In adding the perspectives of administrators, board members and teachers, I know that the present research study will have a wider range of perspectives from the various
stakeholders engaged in this study.

Researchers have recognized that there are concerns and problems with current educational processes. Some researchers highlighted cultural conflicts (Pewewardy, 2002; Jeffries & Singer, 2003; Bazylak, 2002; Lavell, 2004; Ledlow, 1992; Reyhner, 1992a) as being the key reason for lack of student success. Meanwhile Brady (1996) acknowledged that it is more than cultural differences, and suggested that it may also be related to socio-economic issues within different communities, as there are far ranging success rates among Ontario Aboriginal populations.

It is apparent that schooling processes can be improved. Haig-Brown et al. (1997), Jones (2003), Paulsen (1999) and Bazylak (2002) highlighted practices that seemed to be successful with Aboriginal students in secondary schools in Saskatchewan and Ontario. Each of the studies reported on how particular schools were able to address the educational needs of their student population by providing: a culturally supportive climate, curricula that was relevant to the students as individuals and collective whole, while honouring their Aboriginality, a teaching and evaluation strategy that related to the students and allowed time for growth and reflection through culturally specific workshops.

4.4 Research purpose

The topic chosen for this study is focused on understanding the factors related to the schooling success of Aboriginal high school students. Previously written studies (Paulsen, 1999; Seguin Brant, 2001; Bazylak, 2002; Lavell, 2004) have focused upon the student perspectives. Bell (2004) has published a more recent in-depth examination of schooling for Aboriginal students across Canada. In examining 10 schools with varied grade levels and in various communities, he found that the schooling processes varied from region to region and were
unique in their own way. For example, Bell stated that there were various factors that contributed to a school’s success:

   Effective leadership; creating a welcoming school climate with high expectations; caring and dedicated school staff; adequate funding and strategic use of resources; engagement with community and forms of governance and quality programs (Bell, 2004, p. 11).

Furthermore, in gathering data during 2003-04, Bell’s study outlined information based upon a developing pattern in each of the communities: school related factors, teacher retention and community relationships. Bell (2004) and his research team found that their findings supported what was found in earlier research from such writers as Rehyner (1992a) and Cleary & Peacock (1998) and Pewewardy (2002). Each of the researchers found that Aboriginal learners needed to be taught in culturally appropriate ways and teachers had to use various teaching approaches in order to successfully meet the needs of their students. Bell’s work provided some insight to my study as its breadth and range of topics addressed offered me a framework in which I could build my own study around.

   This study is designed to highlight the words and voices of educational practitioners. I have been able to complement their ideas, to some extent, with voices of students and education board members. In addition, I used the structures of the medicine wheel to guide my research process.

   Each segment of the medicine wheel was defined in terms of the research process. Each area of the research process was associated with a sector of the medicine wheel. For example, the emotional sector was linked with identification of the problem; the physical sector was linked with clarification of the problem; the mental sector was linked with outlining new knowledge, while in the spiritual sector, procedural information was sought from previous researchers. As I
generated new knowledge, other questions would arise and if I could not easily answer them, the research process would begin again.

In reporting the results, found in the circle centre sector, I was generating new knowledge. Researchers, like Strauss and Corbin (1990), state that this reporting is grounded theory, meaning that, “theory was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed” (p. 12). They state that “theory derived from the data is more likely to resemble the reality” (p. 12). Furthermore, grounded theories, drawn from data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding and provide a meaningful guide to action (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 12).

This study, in using perspectives from teachers, administrators, students, parents and board members in four different high school communities, provided some new insights related to teaching Aboriginal students in a secondary school environment. Consistent with existing research, I found that schools that kept students engaged in the school system provided the following:

- Created a warm and inviting school climate;
- Used teaching and evaluation strategies that acknowledged Aboriginal learning styles;
- Had a respectful and responsive school staff;
- Used a curriculum that was relevant to student needs;
- Provided opportunities for students to participate in extra-curricular activities such as sport teams;
- Had an involved parent population who responded to the needs of their children.

If schools are able to address these notions, they are likely to have students who will successfully complete high school courses and earn credits towards their high school degree.

4.5 **Participants**

This study is based upon interview subjects found in four schools. In three of the schools, I interviewed three to five teachers, one administrator, one board member and or parent council
member, and a focus group of students that varied between 4-8 students. In the fourth school, a series of remotely located learning centres connected through the internet, I was not able to speak with an advisory board member from one of the thirteen school communities or meet with students from the single road accessible learning center that I had visited. I had hoped to meet with students while making this visit, however, no students showed up on that particular day.

Each school, each community and each subject interviewed has been given pseudonyms to protect its identity and maintain confidentiality in the process. All of the schools involved in this study are located in Northwestern Ontario. The first school, Mars First Nation School, is located on Mars First Nation, which is fifty kilometers from Copper, the largest non-Aboriginal town in this particular area of Northwestern Ontario. Jupiter Secondary School, the second school in the study, is located in Copper and is the largest of the four schools studied. It has a student population that is a mixture of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students unlike the other three schools which have an exclusive Aboriginal population. The third school in the study, Venus First Nation School, is located 75 kilometers from Copper and is also 75 kilometers from Gyprock, pseudonym of another non-Aboriginal town. Venus First Nation School is located on Venus First Nation and has the smallest secondary student population of the four schools. Mercury Internet High School is the fourth school in the study and is made up of thirteen learning centres with students that collectively create school classrooms over the internet, along with the head office in Zinc Falls. Student populations vary between eight and twenty students in each of the learning centres. Each of the schools involved in the study is unique and provides a different insight into the diversity of school programming for Aboriginal students in the region using Ontario school curricula. There are some characteristics that should be understood about the schools in the study. Three of the four schools:
Have an exclusive Aboriginal student population.

Enable the Aboriginal student populations to continue living with family members in their home community.

Are small in terms of secondary school populations as they range from 35-170 (total of Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) learning centres).

Provide limited course opportunities, with an emphasis on compulsory courses.

The largest secondary school, Jupiter Secondary School, has a mixed student population of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. It provides greater opportunities for its students, in terms of course selections and extra-curricular activities, but is not able to retain the bulk of its Aboriginal students and as a result, they cannot take advantage of these opportunities. Many of the First Nation students that come to Jupiter Secondary School are from out of town and board with strangers or live with foster families, away from their biological parents and extended families. Jupiter Secondary School is undergoing a transformation in the composition of its school population as more Aboriginal families (from nearby First Nation communities) are moving into the town of Copper (Canada Census, 2007). It should be noted that there are a number of schools like Jupiter scattered across communities in Ontario which feature significant populations of Aboriginal students.

The majority of the Aboriginal students in this study are Ojibway from Northwestern Ontario and many students share the same cultural heritage and life experiences. Most of the students have lived or resided in First Nation communities. The students, despite being geographically separated by distances up to 20-75 kilometers from each First Nation, share a similar lifestyle. Most of the students come from small communities surrounded by lakes, rivers and evergreen bush where some community members continue to generate a lifestyle derived from the resources of the surrounding environs.
If students want to change their lifestyle, it is necessary for them to obtain a secondary school education, which means that they may have to go to larger communities as job opportunities are limited in small communities and living from the land is getting harder and harder. Most students have to overcome the residential school fallout of their parents, which is sometimes expressed in different ways such as a negative attitude towards the importance of school or where the parents are unable to provide support in a way that enables Aboriginal children to be successful in the school program (Ing, 2000). Although the students live in remote and sometimes, isolated, communities, they are also aware of the outside world as brought in by the internet and television.

4.6 Selection of the participants

Contact was initially made with educational authorities in each school community. A letter was sent outlining my research goals and research plan along with a request to meet with teachers, administrators and students in their respective schools. Upon receiving permission, I contacted administrators and shared my sets of questions for review. In accordance with the ethical guidelines of University of Toronto, I proceeded to invite participants through letter and face-to-face invitation. At Jupiter Secondary School, having had prior working relationships with some teachers on staff, I invited their input. Although I had not worked at Mars First Nation School, I knew some of the staff as I had previously shared professional experiences (volleyball games and professional development workshops) with them, and while I was at Mars First Nation School, I was able to invite them to participate although they had not arranged time for an interview. The administrators organized the interview schedule that included meeting with teachers, students and themselves.

The focus groups of students were arranged spontaneously in two of three schools. At
Mars First Nation School, a group of students was recruited and encouraged to meet with me. At Venus First Nation School and Jupiter Secondary School the classroom teacher and I recruited students from the English and Ojibway classes.

All three student focus groups were Aboriginal and comprised of both genders. All interviews were conducted in a classroom or in a room in the library without the teachers present. This was done to protect student anonymity with hope of more candid responses. Students were shy and quiet for the most part and responded to most questions. In each group, given the right questions, students could burst out simultaneously and spontaneously with responses.

4.7 **Data collection methods**

In this study, the collected data is based upon tape recorded and transcribed interviews, written notes taken during the interviews and a self reflective commentary that was tape recorded at the end of each interview session.

Interviews were coordinated to occur during one week in April of 2006. As Northwestern Ontario is sparsely populated and schools are located at some distance from each other, it was necessary to structure interviews for particular schools on designated days. I was also able to obtain data, where subjects were not able to attend an interview, through the use of a completed questionnaire (one teacher and one student filled out this questionnaire). Each face-to-face interview lasted 40-50 minutes. There were two interviews that lasted two hours, as the interview questions became topics of discussion. In most cases, interviews were semi-formal. A formulated set of questions was used and as the interview progressed, areas that needed enrichment and clarification were pursued and developed.

Interviews were audio taped and recorded on mini cassettes, these were labeled and
numbered (each interview subject and each school was given pseudonyms). Each set of tapes was listed on a tracking organizer—with the subjects’ original name and pseudonym. Interview notes were organized in file folders that corresponded to the appropriate school community. I later included the transcribed interview in the notes. Upon the completion of the interviews, I started the process of transcribing interview data. When this was finished, I sent a copy of the text to the subject for verification. Most subjects responded while others did not. I can conclude that 90% of the texts were verified.

One tape, featuring student feedback from Mars First Nation School, became lost or taped over. I did make notes during the tape recording of this interview. When I reviewed student feedback, I related their comments to various parts of this study in a general way.

One subject refused to be voice recorded. She approved the conversation to be recorded with notes and she verified my transcribed interview of our session.

4.8 Research questions

The types of questions that were used for this study were oriented to four directional areas of the medicine wheel. Some questions were derived from the Bell study (2004) while others were inspired by readings from the literature review. However, all questions were framed with the following objectives and hypothesis in mind.

Objectives

To investigate how culturally appropriate curricula affect student success.

To examine how teacher perspectives and attitudes affect student success.

To examine how Aboriginal parent involvement affects student success.

To determine how school environment affects student success.

Hypothesis
Successful Aboriginal school programming occurs when:

- Students learn in a culturally supportive environment.
- Mental and academic needs are honoured.
- Appropriate counseling is provided.
- Extra-curricular and recreational programs are offered.

Different sets of questions were created for each of the target groups. In each of the question sets, attempts were made to address the different sections of the medicine wheel. For example, questions related to curricula and teaching strategies were addressing the mental aspect of the medicine wheel. Questions that addressed recreational and extracurricular opportunities and involvement addressed the physical aspect of the medicine wheel.

Some of the questions were designed to provide confirmation and validation of other groups’ responses. For example, questions related to the use of various teaching practices could be found in the student and teacher questionnaire. While questions related to school environment were found in both teacher and administrator questions, in some way, the links were meant as a modest form of triangulation of data.

As the interviews took place in a short period of time (one week), there was limited time to really reflect upon the clarity and usefulness of the questions. Questions related to parental involvement were not asked of the participants, but teachers and administrators raised it as an important factor for student success. I realized that this aspect, which was important to the interviewees, was important in the development of my conclusions and development of grounded theory.
4.9 The position of the researcher

As an Aboriginal student researcher, I have come to realize that the Ontario educational school system is not a reflection of my culture or my heritage. It is a reflection of the non-Aboriginal people who have created it. Throughout my academic career, I have taken ownership of my studies. For example, by choosing my research topics, I was able to study what I was interested in, such as Aboriginal issues in a European history course. When I use the medicine wheel as a research model, I am continuing this process as an Aboriginal learner.

In my research, the medicine wheel and its symbolic meanings are a starting template in which I examine the health of the Ontario educational system as it relates to Aboriginal students in one region of Ontario.

One of the interview subjects helped clarify the language that was needed for this study in reference to the spiritual element of the medicine wheel. When we use the medicine wheel, we look at the spiritual, emotional, mental and physical health of the children. This raises the question of what is the link between the school and Aboriginal student health?

In this study, I offer a variety of perspectives from a variety of roles: as a student researcher, teacher, Aboriginal person and a former student of the Northwestern Ontario school systems. I am a former student who has achieved success in the elementary, secondary and post-secondary school systems of Ontario. I am also Aboriginal (Ojibway, from a Northwestern Ontario First Nation) and I was born and raised in the region where this study takes place. I have worked as a teacher for 11 years in the town of Copper, where Jupiter Secondary is located. I have also worked as a colleague with two interview subjects and know professionally six interview subjects. My position, in this thesis, has been to show that I have perspectives that reflect an insider’s views, not only as a teacher but also that of a Northwestern Ontario
Aboriginal person who has gone through the public school institutions.

4.10 Description of schools

Jupiter Secondary School

Jupiter Secondary School is located in an urban environment away from the downtown of Copper, in Northwestern Ontario. It has the largest student population of the schools involved in the study, around 900 students in 2006, and it is considered to be mid-sized in the context of other provincial secondary schools. The school is reflective of the town’s population in that it has a mixed racial composition of students with Ukrainian, Irish, English and Aboriginal heritage. There are limited students with Jamaican or Chinese heritage. The town is currently undergoing a transformation as more Aboriginal people are migrating to the town from nearby First Nation communities.

There are 13 Aboriginal First Nations surrounding the town of Copper. The town itself offers a wide range of services, such as food, health, justice and retail, all of which are necessary for the communities’ survival. Most Aboriginal people use the town as a place to get their essential needs met and as a place to meet friends. One interview subject raised the point that it was provincial dollars, raised through local and provincial taxation, that paid for these services and this created some tension amongst local ratepayers. Resentment towards outsiders, such as Aboriginal people, is always an ongoing concern.

The town is further affected by the fact that the local primary industry, being the paper mill, has shut down which has affected 350 families. Many of the affected families moved to other communities while those, who stayed, were able to find other jobs within the community. School services have been reduced as a result of the decline in student population.

Jupiter Secondary School is a mid-sized school that offers a school program consisting of
a mixed range of courses offered at the academic and applied levels (in grade 9 and 10) and workplace, college and university levels (in grade 11 and 12). In recent years, with the onset of more Aboriginal students, there has been an increase in the numbers of courses offered at the essential or locally developed level. The school also offers a full complement of secondary course selections, sufficient to graduate secondary students.

The school also offers a wide range of extra-curricular activities. Participation in extra-curricular programs has always been encouraged, however, events that focus on Aboriginal students have been rarely presented. This has changed in recent years, as the school has initiated school wide feasts and powwows as a way of recognizing Aboriginal cultures.

Current school projections suggest that the school population will be comprised of 50 percent Aboriginal students. However, the school does not have Aboriginal teachers. It has two Aboriginal guidance counselors and two Aboriginal Educational Assistants. The physical climate is devoid of any images that reflect Aboriginal cultures.

The staff of the school works hard with all students. Some staff members are married with Aboriginal partners or have worked in Aboriginal communities or have worked with Aboriginal students. Staff members are interested in seeing Aboriginal students succeed.

**Mars First Nation and Venus First Nation**

The second and third schools are located in First Nation communities within 50 kilometers of each other. Each school consists of students ranging from pre kindergarten to grade 12 who have similar cultural roots and are comprised of Aboriginal students. Additionally, both schools have female Aboriginal principals with the majority of their elementary teaching staffs having Aboriginal ancestry. The secondary staff members are usually non-Aboriginal.

**Mars First Nation School**
The second school is the largest of the First Nation schools in Northwestern Ontario. It has a population of 198 students with 80 high school students. The school population is made up of Aboriginal students who reside in the community of Mars First Nation. The teaching staff is comprised of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members. There are many Aboriginal teachers in the elementary panel but there are few in the secondary panel. Many of its teachers commute one and a half hours from the local non-Aboriginal town of Copper. However, there are also a large number of teachers, who reside in the community.

The secondary curricula are based upon Ontario Ministry of Education guidelines, but the elementary curricula are not. Like Venus First Nation School, the elementary teachers may choose to follow the Department of Indian Affairs curricula. The differences in elementary curricula choices have resulted in concerns related to the readiness of elementary students going into high school.

There are current discussions to implement a First Nation Language immersion program, however this plan is met with some controversy, as most current students cannot pass the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT).

Mars First Nation School (MFNS) offers a range of extra-curricular activities. Volleyball, basketball and hockey teams are able to compete well with non-Aboriginal schools in the Northwestern Ontario Secondary School Association (NORWOSSA). The local school is proud of its graduates and profiles them on the school walls.

School philosophy and school policy are based upon the teachings of the Seven Grandfathers (Wisdom, Love, Respect, Bravery, Honesty, Humility and Truth) which guide the behavior and conduct of its students. The teaching and support staffs are trained in implementation of the teachings of the Seven Grandfathers in their day-to-day classroom duties.
Despite the inclusion of Aboriginal culture in their school program, there are challenges. The building and space allocation are not able to meet the needs of a growing student population. The school unofficially offers an alternative education program for high school students. Retaining teaching staff continues to be a challenge, as it is for most First Nation communities, as a fall out of inequitable funding (Postl, 2004).

**Venus First Nation School**

The third school in this study is the smallest of the four schools. It has a total school population of 130 students with 35 students in the secondary panel. Programming for the high school students is limited and presents an ongoing challenge for all parties involved. Most of the community’s students, who are of high school age, come to this school.

Venus First Nation School was first created by the local community in 1974 (York 1990). Parents felt that their children were being improperly treated at the local day school at Diamond (pseudonym), a nearby non-Aboriginal community. The Aboriginal community of Venus First Nation refused to send their children to the Iron Ore (pseudonym) School and instead, set up three house sites to school their children: the primary students, the juniors and the intermediates. The teaching staff shared in the administration and running of this make-shift school until a new school building could be created.

Of that original teaching staff, two of them were still teaching in the current Venus First Nation School. Penny (pseudonym for an original teacher) pointed out that discipline issues were non-existent as the local clan families had complete control of what was going on in the school when it first opened up.

The local community lobbied the Department of Indian Affairs for redirection of its school funding in order that a local building be created. This school was the first of many (in the
province) to be locally built. Prior to that time, students from most First Nation communities went to schools in local non-Aboriginal towns or residential schools such as Diamond and Iron Ore (both pseudonyms of towns and schools in Northwestern Ontario, respectively).

Many of the current teaching staff, as well as the principal, are graduates of Venus First Nation School. Hailey (pseudonym of an education board member) commented that it was a dream of hers to see “our own teachers teaching our students.”

Nonetheless, Venus First Nation School faces a variety of challenges such as limited resources, limited course selections and few extra-curricular opportunities.

**Mercury Internet High School**

The fourth school used in my research is internet based. It is a series of school communities linked together through the internet. Each site or learning centre is located within an Aboriginal community, which is often remote and only accessible by air transportation. Each learning centre has one teacher and sometimes, an educational assistant, who happens to be a computer technician. The school program is based upon Ontario Ministry of Education course guidelines. Each teacher is responsible for one course per semester. In addition, each teacher is expected to mentor students that are on-site and monitor the progress of the students in their respective courses.

Students, who remain in their home communities, start or continue with secondary schooling with the support of their families. In order for Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) to be available to students, the school must be invited to set up a learning centre by the local community. A parent advisory committee is set up and monitors the local program.

In the past, an Ontario Ministry of Education regional supervisor carefully monitored the program to ensure that the Ontario high school courses were being taught according to the
Ministry of Education expectations and standards. Mercury has managed to maintain its program as a result of this monitoring.

Funding for this program continues to be a challenge as start-up costs (computers and appropriate software) can be quite expensive. The school has found it difficult to hold on to its teachers because the gap between provincial and federal salaries continues to widen.

Each particular learning centre, although connected through the internet, is unique in terms of student population and school operation times. There are three types of students populating these learning centres: a student who continues to secondary school after having graduated from grade 8 or one who has tried to make the transition to an urbanized school environment and failed or the adult student who, having been out of school for some time, returns to try and complete their education while in the community.

The numbers and types of students vary from centre to centre. Each site is managed and monitored by a member of the community who sits on an Advisory Board. Discipline issues, when they do arise, are handled locally. The principal is directly responsible to this board and works together with the local representative on issues concerning the local school.

4.11 Data analysis

After finishing the transcription process, I tried to sort the answers of the interviewees to correspond to the sectors of the medicine wheel: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. I discovered that there were responses that did not correspond to the four parts of the medicine wheel that I was using. I went back to my sources (Graveline, 2000, Hart, 1996) on the medicine wheel and realized that I was not using all the parts, I had omitted the area surrounding the circles, identified as community influences and circle centre, identified as student success. In using all parts of the medicine wheel, I was able to relate all of the responses to the elements of
the medicine wheel.

I used an inductive process (Thomas, 2006; Maxwell, 1992) to make sense of my data. I worked with interview responses from each school, reading the responses and grouping them based upon similarity of ideas and theme. Each set of data became a case study. This work was done using a word processor so that I could group themes which I could then write about.

I then compared my themes with that of the concepts found in the teachings of the medicine wheel. I grouped similar themes into categories that were related to the appropriate section of the medicine wheel. Dey (2005) described this process as abductive reasoning, where a preconceived theory is applied to data.

In chapters 5 to 8, I provide a report of the data. Each school is presented as a separate case study and has its own matrix (table of information) where an overview of the generated data is linked to themes and sectors of the medicine wheel. Each school generated different types of data and this was evident in the quantity of data related to particular themes. For example, at Mercury Internet Secondary School, there is little data related to recreational opportunities but a great deal of data related to community support.

Following the presentation of the findings for each of the schools, I turned to the direction of the east where I collated the data into similar themed concepts. Chapter 9 outlines the findings in the following areas, respectively: Circle centre and student success; outside of the circle and community influences; east and mental health concepts; south and emotional health concepts; west and spiritual health concepts; north and physical health concepts. Additionally, I summarized what has been said by the interview participants.

Finally, in chapter 10, I offer some concluding thoughts related to each sector of the medicine wheel. This chapter outlines my recommendations that have evolved as a result of the
findings in this study. I hope that some of these recommendations will be useful to other educational practitioners.

4.12 Matrix that links interview data to medicine wheel sectors

The following matrix outlines the data themes that were generated based on the interviews. Table 3 shows how these data categories that correspond to different aspects of the medicine wheel.

Table 3: Outlining the research areas in each school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample School</th>
<th>East: Mental</th>
<th>Teaching strategies</th>
<th>Student characteristics</th>
<th>Evaluation strategies</th>
<th>Relevant curriculum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South: Emotional</td>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>Relationships with students</td>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>Communication with parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West: Spiritual</td>
<td>Respect for Aboriginal culture</td>
<td>Language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North: Physical</td>
<td>School as the heart of the community</td>
<td>Extra-curricular activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside of the circle: Community influences</td>
<td>Teaching experience</td>
<td>Influence of school board members</td>
<td>Small schools</td>
<td>Quality of local education</td>
<td>Funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circle centre: Student success</td>
<td>Issues inhibiting student success</td>
<td>Identifying and clarifying student success</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Using an inductive approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Dey, 2005; Thomas, 2006) to code the interview data, I created categories in which I could see patterns. Thomas (2006), Maxwell (1992), Strauss & Corbin (1990) and Glaser & Strauss (1967) outlined a process for using qualitative research methods to help create grounded theory. In this study, I used case research, as cited by Stake (2005), to help create grounded theory related to the education of Aboriginal students in secondary high schools. The patterns were highlighted using an abductive reasoning process, where Dey (2005) states that:

“abduction is to move from a conception of something to a different, possibly more developed or deeper conception of it. This happens through our placing and interpreting the original ideas about the phenomenon in the frame of a new set of ideas.” (2005, p. 91)

When applying concepts of the medicine wheel to my research (mental, spiritual, emotional, physical, circle centre-- student success and community influences), I used an existing framework to collate the concepts derived from an inductive coding model. For example, statements, related to teaching strategies, student characteristics, evaluation strategies, or relevant curricula, were placed in the mental/east areas as it related to the mental/intellectual development of the student. All statements were sorted into different themes and different directions.
The Eastern Door: What did the participants say?

In the east direction, we examine those teachings related to the mental capacity. From a research point of view, the eastern door is similar to the phase where collected data is presented and reviewed.

I found that, due to each school’s size and local operation, issues that arose through the data were different from each of the other schools involved in the study. For example, a transition program was thought to be necessary for Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter) but not so in Venus First Nation School (Venus). I present the findings as samples of the unique nature of each particular school. There will be a follow-up discussion related to the similarities and differences in chapter 9.
Chapter 5: Jupiter Secondary School

In the following pages, I will outline the findings from Jupiter Secondary School interview participants in the following categories: community influences, mental health issues, emotional health issues, spiritual health issues, physical health issues and circle centre (student success) issues. The following table, similar to Table 3, reflects data themes that emerged from three different sets of questions for each respective interview sample: administrators, teachers and students. Similar questions were used for each sample group in each school and yet, what is notable is that there were slight differences in the content of the data themes.

Table 5.1: Themes related to medicine wheel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Jupiter Secondary School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community influences</td>
<td>Teacher experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Funding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decision making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parent council.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transitioning to larger schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental</td>
<td>Learning style and student characteristics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluation strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relevant curricula.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Expectations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Role models.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self esteem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parental confusion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Respect for Aboriginal culture within the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Language programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Extra-curricular activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student success</td>
<td>Issues that inhibit success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identifying and characterizing student success.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.2: Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barry</td>
<td>Principal was not an interview participant but coordinated and arranged the interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>Vice Principal, former teacher with 25 years of teaching experience  Non-Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>Teacher and guidance counselor with 22 years of experience  Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamarra</td>
<td>Teacher and guidance counselor with 22 years of experience  Non-Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Teacher, 9 years of experience  Non-Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curt</td>
<td>Teacher, less than 18 years of experience  Non-Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick</td>
<td>Teacher, 25 years of experience  Non-Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus students</td>
<td>Six students interviews</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.2 is a listing of interview participants and outlines their ancestry and teaching experience. Taylor (1995a) suggests that experienced teachers are likely to have greater success with Aboriginal students. Interviews were conducted on April 5th and organized by Barry, principal of the school. Interview participants were provided with a set of questions beforehand. All interviews lasted between 45-65 minutes. In most cases, interviews were guided by a set of questions and additional questions were used when answers were ambiguous or unclear. The data from Curt was derived from a semi-structured interview that lasted for two hours where we explored and discussed different areas of education. Rick mailed in his completed questionnaire, a month after the interviews had taken place.

Table 5.2 outlines participant experience and shows that Michelle and Tamarra worked as guidance teachers, with 20 plus years of experience each. Karen and Curt work in off-site
programs where they teach in community based settings with independent learning courses. Rick was department leader of physical education on site and had worked in a First Nation's school as a teacher, and later as a principal before coming to the public education system. Barbara, vice principal, has worked in another secondary school that also had an Aboriginal student population.

5.3 Community influences

Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter) is one of seven high schools in the larger Nexus School Board (pseudonym). School board members may take on the responsibility of one secondary school and have other portfolio responsibilities as a result of its size. Nexus School Board (NSB) features an administrative team that included three superintendents along with other specialized support staff. Due to the school board's size, education board members are not as close to the operation of a high school as education authority members in First Nation communities.

The category of ‘community influences’ consists of the following information: teacher experience, funding, decision-making, parent council and transitioning to larger schools.

Teacher experience

Most of the teachers working in Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter) are not Aboriginal despite having a school population that is roughly one third Aboriginal in 2006. According to Barbara, vice principal, some staff members are married to Aboriginal partners or have worked in Aboriginal communities or with Aboriginal students. The teachers and administrators at Jupiter have a wide range of educational experience. Some staff members have up to six years of experience while others range between 25-30 years and then there are some members with 10-20 years of experience. Mackay & Myles (1989) and Taylor (1995a) suggested that an effective
school needed to have staff that was balanced in terms of experience and energy.

In this case study, interview data was gathered from five teachers (Curt, Karen, Tamarra, Michelle and Rick), one vice principal (Barbara) and a focus group of students. All interviewees were given pseudonyms and will remain anonymous. With the exception of Michelle, all participants were non-Aboriginal. Although all interviewees had experience working with First Nation students, Rick and Michelle, additionally, had experienced working in First Nation schools in First Nation communities.

Teachers, with wide and varied teaching experiences, can contribute to the success of Aboriginal students (Brady, 1994). Furthermore, teachers, who are culturally responsive, as a result of working in First Nation communities, are more than likely to work effectively with Aboriginal students. Students, in their interactions, develop positive relationships and often, stay in school longer because of their relationships (Jeffries & Singer, 2003). Schools, with teaching staff who are aware of Aboriginal issues, should be more effective with Aboriginal students. Yet, in this study, Jupiter Secondary School was not as successful as schools located on First Nation communities such as Mars First Nation School or Mercury Internet High School.

**Funding**

School staff and school programs are often determined by funding and student enrolment. Schools have to make good decisions related to the school program when funding monies are limited. Most schools have a need for more money, to purchase updated resource book materials and equipment. Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter) is no different from other schools. For example, Barbara, vice principal, explained:

[B.11]. There are new textbooks coming out some with updated Aboriginal sections. That is $4000-5000, [and] that is the whole budget of one department. That is not realistic.
Barbara pointed out that running a school is expensive, and yet, when new text material comes out, the cost of purchasing them can be more than what is allocated to the budget of most departments. She added that creating new programs can be expensive, for example, equipping a new kitchen that will meet industry standards with stainless steel counters and fixtures. She also outlined some different funding realities. For example, when the school received new funding, targeted for particular resources, but it did not cover all costs related to it. The local school had to pick up the shortfall in funding.

Resources are a challenge, when it comes to updating both physical resources and academic programs. It seems that more money needs to be invested to update current school programs, although when compared to the First Nations schools in this study, Jupiter is certainly not a school in need, as they have what small schools want, in terms of resources and programming.

**Decision-making**

Most schools have varied decision-making processes. For example, teachers make decisions related to classroom management or curricula. In certain cases, curricula decisions, including evaluation, are made in consultation with department heads and administrators, principals and vice principals. There are many kinds of decisions that need to be made at different times of the day such as those related to student behaviour or issues related to the implementation of board policy. Sometimes, consultation with staff or supervisory officers is necessary and at other times, decision-making is often dictated by pre-determined set protocols as found within school policies of the school board. Barbara, vice principal, commented on one type of decision-making that was done in her school:
Sometimes we strike a committee and pick people who are good go
getters, and get a committee going so that it is shared ownership. Sometimes we
start out and present it at a staff meeting saying that [this] is what we are thinking
and seeing if anyone will run with it. For example, we are thinking about offering
all year long grade nine applied math and alternating it with some subject like
physical education. [The students] would have math one day and physical
education the next to see if there is a difference in the success between those who
do math one semester versus those who have it all year.

Barbara talked about shared decision making in three ways: amongst themselves as
administrators, amongst staff as co-workers and finally, as managers overseeing staff relations.

In addition, she described another kind of decision making that she and her fellow administrators
would do where they would consult with staff members about special events and decide which
group of students would benefit the most. Schools, and their corresponding staff, use different
kinds of decision-making methods to make varied decisions. For example, in addressing staff
and student issues, decisions could be made for all staff members or it could be an administrative
consultation amongst administrators with or without guidance staff.

Rehyner (1992b) and Pewewardy (2002) described how schools, which use a democratic
decision making model, will have staff committed to meeting the needs of its student
populations. In the case of schools with Aboriginal students, those with an involved teaching
staff were more likely to be successful teaching Aboriginal students (Friedel, 1999; Schissel &
Wotherspoon, 2003).

Parent Council

Friedel (1999) and Rehyner (1992b) suggested that involving Aboriginal people as part of
an active parent council was key to ensuring the success of Aboriginal students in a school
environment. The parent council, of Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter), is made up of eight or
nine members from the community, functions according to Ontario education guidelines. The
parent council of Jupiter has four appointed Aboriginal community members with Marcy G (pseudonym), an Aboriginal parent, as chair of the council. Michelle, guidance teacher, Karen, off-site teacher and Barbara, vice principal, stated that the parent council, in working with student council, has been responsible for initiating and organizing many cultural events that focused on Aboriginal themes.

According to both Michelle and Barbara, there has been an active interest in Aboriginal issues over the last few years. Jupiter has made an effort, to address various needs of its Aboriginal population, by trying to make its school community more welcoming. Michelle and Barbara stated that the school administrative team has worked cooperatively with Student and Parent Councils to incorporate more enrichment opportunities. Barbara described how the rest of the student body could be exposed to anti-racist perspectives with the inclusion of performances by outside touring groups such as De-ba-jeh-mu-jig [An Aboriginal touring stage play group] or participation in workshops. There is an ongoing effort, on the part of the Jupiter school community, to develop positive working relationships between the non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal student populations. When students know that Aboriginal parents are involved in the operation of the school, as shown by Jupiter’s Parent Council, Aboriginal students are likely to stay in school longer (Friedel, 1999; Bazylak, 2002; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).

**Transitioning to larger schools**

Michelle, guidance teacher, said that Aboriginal students had a major transition stage to go through when they arrived at Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter). She found that they were intimidated by the structure, expectations and size of the larger school. They were not used to being the youngest in their school environment. Michelle also admitted that Jupiter could be intimidating for parents.
It is a big school. It can be intimidating to parents and students. You walk in here and everything is on a schedule. You have to be somewhere at certain time, [like] stand up for *Oh Canada*. If you are in the hallway… you have to have a hall pass. You have to be somewhere at a certain time all day. It can be very intimidating for somebody that is new or [for] parents who want to come or need to come in.

Aboriginal students, like other students who come from smaller schools, have to adapt to the larger school environment in order to be successful. Michelle explained how students are technically alone in the school, because not all of their elementary classmates will attend Jupiter. Rehyner (1992a) wrote that a larger school and [perceived] uncaring teachers are contributing factors to students becoming disengaged from the school process. Adapting to a new school is problematic as incoming students become separated from their friends and peers, due to streamed classes or different interests. Michelle told us that this experience could be quite daunting and overwhelming.

In addition, all of the interviewed participants stated that Aboriginal students, coming from surrounding First Nation communities, had different levels of literacy and numeracy skills than students coming from provincial schools. Michelle, guidance teacher, said that First Nation schools in the surrounding community needed to bring their curricula to the level of the in-town provincial schools. The same criticism is also directed towards rural and remote schools, as student standards are different.

Most First Nation students must leave their own community and board out in new homes with strangers. Michelle said that parent/student relationships often break down when the student leaves for high school. Parents lose touch as there is no daily contact with their high school aged students who now live in foster homes in another community (Mackay & Myles, 1989; Canada, 1996). Aboriginal students are left without family support as they do not have any emotional
connection to their foster home or to the educational counselor. Students have to learn how to cope on their own and for some, without parental support, they do not succeed or flourish. In addition, Aboriginal students are dealing with other issues than just being students. Karen and Michelle observed that some students were often teen parents and had to cope with the realities associated with raising a child along with addressing regular teen issues.

It is clear that there are a number of academic and social issues that Aboriginal students have to address when they go into a publicly funded high school in a non-Aboriginal town. Some First Nation students must cope with a new large school and a new school program without the immediate support of their parents. Some teachers felt that these issues were enhanced when they observed that many Aboriginal students, coming in from First Nation communities, were starting at a different academic level than other students who had gone to school in town.

Conclusion

At Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter), the teaching staff was made up of a mixture of young and older staff members. Within the group of interview subjects, I noted that many had been teaching over 10 years. Taylor (1995b) pointed out that experienced teachers were likely to be more effective than younger teachers. Given the makeup of the Jupiter’s teaching staff, it is likely that they would be effective with the student population in general. However, this was not the case for Aboriginal students attending the main school of Jupiter, who became more successful when they were placed in specific programs such Urban Aboriginal Program or Parents Attending Secondary School. Both of these programs required experienced teachers who were open minded, flexible and able to build relationships with students.

Schissel & Wotherspoon (2003) suggested that schools with adequate funding would be more successful with its student populations. According to Postl, (2004), public schools, such as
Jupiter, received more funding than their First Nation school counterparts. Some teachers, in both public and First Nation school systems, wished that they had more funding to enhance the learning opportunities of its students.

Friedel (1999) stated that in order for Aboriginal students to be successful, they had to be in schools where they could see their parents involved and knew that their voices were being heard at the administrative level. At Jupiter, Aboriginal parents were involved with the school's Parent Council and were instrumental in creating workshops related to Aboriginal themes. Inclusive decision making was also key part of the school program, as feedback was solicited from students, staff and parents before some decisions were made.

Jupiter was the largest of the four schools involved in the study and as a result, had its own particular concern related to students transitioning from small schools. Aboriginal students, like other students attending small elementary schools, are used to a relaxed learning environment. Aboriginal students generally know everyone in their school community and developed a comfort level with the educational practitioners of the school. The interview subjects pointed out how many non-resident Aboriginal students struggled with Jupiter's school environment and likely needed some kind of transition program to help them adapt to the change.

It was evident that Jupiter was taking steps to improve their success rate with Aboriginal students. They had incorporated Aboriginal perspectives in Parent council, implemented cross cultural workshops and created programming that enabled Aboriginal students to be more successful than they had been.

5.4 Mental

The direction east teaches us about the mind and the development of its mental capacities. The mental aspect makes reference to human intelligence, and development of new
knowledge. Researchers (Bopp et al., 1988) have coined this as the “enlightenment” as new perspectives are revealed and a new beginning is initiated with new knowledge.

In this section, I examined comments related to: learning style and student characteristics, teaching strategies, evaluation strategies and relevant curricula.

**Learning style and student characteristics**

The student population at Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter) comprises a mixture of Ojibway and Oji-Cree students from the surrounding First Nation communities and local non-Aboriginal students. Jupiter has a student population of 900 in which Aboriginal students make up between 25 to 50 percent of the student population according to Karen and Barbara. Sometimes, identifying Aboriginal students can be difficult as there are many definitions of a First Nations person (This is directly related to governmental definitions, as prescribed in the Indian Act (Canada, 1989; Reed, 1999). First Nation students make up a significant part of the student population at Jupiter. What is interesting to note is that students, from the focus group, did not perceive that there was a significant population of Aboriginal students around the high school. [Student quotes will not be individually identified].

[S1]. Half the population of Jupiter Secondary School is native. I heard that 50 percent of the population is Ojibway.

[S2]. There are only 62 students. That is what Mrs. Galloway (pseudonym) said. Most of the native students probably take Ojibway. There are only 62 students taking Ojibway.

According to Barbara, at least one third of the school population was Aboriginal. She also acknowledged that there are differences in academic ability and socialization skills between those students who come to school from First Nation communities and those who come from the local community of Copper. Students who are raised in urban communities have little trouble
adapting to the larger school and community (Mackay & Myles, 1989; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). Barbara pointed out that there were some Aboriginal students who would prefer not to come to school but would choose to be involved with negative and drug related activities. While there were others, who participated but had trouble coping with the demands of new teachers. Curt, off-site teacher, offered his perspective on this adjustment process:

[C 10] The Indian culture plays a big part into their educational lives, especially around here. There is such a difference in lifestyle from living in their community to living in town. There is a big difference. And there is a lot happening here. The kids are getting bussed in. They live in foster homes. They get boarded in town. There is the law. There are lot of things that you think are okay to do but they are not okay like walking into Zellers [a local department store] and taking something off the shelf because you need it. You go to jail for that.

From the interview comments, we can see that issues outside of the school affected student engagement in the classroom. Curt and Karen said that student involvement with school programming is affected by factors outside of the classroom. This is reiterated in previous research (Brady, 1996; Canada, 1996; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).

In addition, students who do make it through the front door and into the classroom exhibit certain behaviours. Tamarra, guidance teacher, offered the following perspectives on student characteristics:

[T 1]. I would find that students were quiet and not very comfortable with getting up in front of the class. As I would with any other students, I never forced it. I found that some of the kids did not want to change [into appropriate gym clothing] in front of the other kids. I would allow them to change in the washroom or wait until the other kids had left or if they didn’t feel comfortable, I didn’t care if they changed at all. I guess because I taught physical education for so many years, I did not see a whole lot of differences in terms of learning styles. There were some very good athletic kids and kids who weren’t so athletic. Maybe they were more visual or less so auditory. They were generally quieter.

She knew that she had to work with Aboriginal students differently than with other students.

Michelle generally found that Aboriginal students would get into trouble with teachers because
of the strict guidelines used for submission of assignments.

Jupiter school population features a significant Aboriginal population, although interviewed Aboriginal students don’t see it. The teachers and vice principal acknowledged that Aboriginal students, in order to remain engaged in the school system, presented them with challenges inside and beyond the classroom. Many of these challenges were directly related to social and environmental issues. Tamarra acknowledged that there were cultural differences among their students. Researchers, such as Pewewardy (2002) Rehyner (1992a) and Gilliland & Rehyner (1988), told us that Aboriginal students have some learning style and cultural differences that are not necessarily found in non-Aboriginal students. These learning style differences, as outlined by Gardner (1983), were not acknowledged by many of the interviewed staff at Jupiter. But they did acknowledge how cultural characteristics affected their learning.

**Teaching strategies**

In reviewing the interview data, I discovered that most teachers, from Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter), did not really acknowledge any learning style differences among Aboriginal students, with the exception of Tamarra. It appeared that most interview participants were concerned or affected by student behaviours that seemed to be caused by lifestyle factors such as staying out late at night or not attending school regularly.

Teachers, at Jupiter, were working with a mixed student population. It appeared that the interview subjects were concerned about not centering out Aboriginal students in their classroom. It seemed that there was an emphasis on “not teaching Aboriginal students any differently” than other students. Or, there was simply no acknowledgement that Aboriginal students were oriented in a visual-kinesthetic fashion. Or, perhaps teachers taught to all types of learners. Students stated that teachers often used games and made learning fun, which suggested
that teachers were using a variety of teaching approaches.

It was clear that Jupiter teachers used the following approaches in addressing the needs of Aboriginal students:

- teaching all students the same way using a variety teaching strategies
- creating different programs;
- providing extra time and extra help
- creating positive teacher-student relationships

Tamarra, guidance teacher, stated that she did not use any different teaching strategies while teaching Aboriginal students but later contradicted herself by saying that she allowed them (Aboriginal students) to make personal presentations (to her) rather than presentations to the class. She acknowledged that they (Aboriginal students) were in some ways different from non-Aboriginal students, as they were shy and reluctant to speak out in class and felt uncomfortable making presentations from the front of the room. Meanwhile, Karen, teacher of Parents Attending Secondary School (PASS), said that in her program, she never singled out Aboriginal students with specific teaching approaches. She chose to work with students individually and made an effort to know her students, as individuals.

Alternative programs, located off-site, such as Parents Attending Secondary School (PASS) and the Urban Aboriginal Program (UAP) involved students who were not succeeding in the main program at Jupiter and relied upon one to one instruction with the use of Independent Learning Courses (ILC), as well provided them with time and space along with opportunities to engage in Aboriginal cultural activities. Curt, teacher of UAP, added the following:

[C 17]. A lot of them [students] just need a break. Right now, they are going through a hard time. In six months, they could snap out of it. So, in that six-month period, it might be different. I have some good success stories. I am proud of what I do. I do this because I can help more people than I can here [meaning at Jupiter Secondary School].
In some ways, linking the right teacher with a particular group of students is important for the success of students. Schissel & Wotherspoon (2003) and Rehyner (1992a) suggested that positive relationships with teachers were important for Aboriginal students to succeed.

Not only does Jupiter provide opportunities for students to succeed off-site, the school also provides some new in-house courses. Michelle, guidance teacher, explained how Jupiter teachers coped with students who were having trouble with Physical Education:

[M 8]. We have had a lot of new courses developed for students who are running into problems. Sometimes girls don’t want to go into gym. We set up a class, a PPZ [Healthy Active Living] course, it is more health related. They get that compulsory credit. The school has tried to set up courses that ensure student success. We have had another one, an Aboriginal art class but it is not running this year. They tried it for one year, just to see how the students would respond to it [if the course had been successful, would the course be still running?].

Jupiter has set up in-house courses that are meant to work with students who are struggling with the curricula. In addition to the essential courses, Michelle pointed out that Jupiter is developing more hands-on courses that would meet the learning style needs of students who learned better from kinesthetic or visual approaches. Tamarra and Michelle said that they would like to see a new program developed that would help students cope with high school better. It would allow students time to become adjusted to the high school program and give them a chance to earn credits at a slower pace.

The concept of fairness was a concern to many teachers and this was evident in their comments. Fairness is often a big issue, when it comes to deadlines and finishing a task or assignment. Michelle, guidance teacher, told us that teachers reached out to students by offering help and giving them extra time to complete the work. However, she described how extending deadlines could be an issue, amongst some staff members, but it was done as a practice within the school. The question that arises is whether students take advantage of this situation? Michelle
pointed out that it is student dependent, meaning that it’s based upon their comfort level:

[M 2]. If the teachers know that it is Aboriginal students who are running into problems, then they make a point of talking to them. They have a guideline now to let them know that they are available for help.

Providing extra help is one solution, but if the students are not comfortable, they will not reach out for help from the teachers (Danyluk, 1998; Bazylak, 2002; Jeffries & Singer, 2003). Based upon previously written research, it may be better to use a wide range of teaching strategies to cover all learning intelligences and develop positive relationships with students. Curt, UAP teacher, gave us his perspective on what seems to work with Aboriginal students:

[C 1]. Yes I do [in reference to whether he used any special teaching strategies]. One of the big things is not to be confrontational. Try not to be too much of an authoritative figure. A lot of what I got to say relates to Caucasian kids as well. With Aboriginal kids, if I tell them to stand up, they will sit down. If I say go left, they will go right. It is just the way they are. These kids are 16 or 17 years old. I do high school. No matter what I say or do, they will do the opposite. If I don’t take an authoritative position on things, I don’t have a problem.

And he offered the following ideas and suggestions, in terms of getting students to complete work. He tried to establish a good rapport with his students:

[C 25]. I use a lot of things like, ‘I would really appreciate it.’ It is a non directive. What happens if I choose not to? I really want you to. I have had kids say that they don’t want to do it. I can’t make them.

Karen, teacher in the PASS program, said that she tried to be sensitive to her students’ needs. She respected her students’ cultural heritage and thought that they (students) knew that.

From the interview data, I found that Aboriginal students respond positively, when they have teachers who are more lenient and willing to give them some space. They respond well to non-directive suggestions. In applying the concepts outlined by Spielmann (1998) the approaches used by Curt and Karen were culturally appropriate as it was considered rude to tell someone to do something in Aboriginal communities. Jeffries and Singer (2003), Jones (2003), Bazylak
(2002) and Rehyner (1992a) affirmed Curt and Karen’s approaches, in that Aboriginal students need flexible programming and a relaxed environment in which they are able to work at their own pace. Ross (1992) suggested that this is a way of maintaining personal autonomy and is critical to maintaining a student’s sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Perhaps the education system, as modeled, actually impedes the development of student self-esteem instead of building it up in Aboriginal students it undermines it.

**Evaluation strategies**

In a discussion related to evaluation strategies, all of the Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter) teachers in the study, with the exception of Karen, Parents Attending Secondary School teacher, did not speak directly to how students were evaluated. They identified how attendance and work completion were necessary for credit completion. Michelle, guidance teacher, outlined how teachers were guided in their evaluation by what was listed in the curricula and what students had to complete in order to earn a credit. When they did not complete the work, they would not receive the course credit in which they were enrolled. Karen offered the following perception:

[K 2]. I try to use a more holistic approach as far as observation and, work habits go. When we do our report cards, we have to have areas of strength, areas of weakness and areas for improvement. When I assess my students, I tend to look at them, following those guidelines. Evaluation, as far as Aboriginal specific, they are not penalized for attending powwows or going to a three day funeral service or special ceremonies.

Curt, Urban Aboriginal Program teacher, stated that students were often removed from the Jupiter school environment, when attendance was recognized as a problem. Students were losing credits because they were not attending classes, not because they were failing or lacking the ability to complete the work. Yet, students, who attended Jupiter, recognized that teachers
were expecting certain behaviours in terms of earning marks.

Students, from the focus group, offered the following:

[R]. How do you earn your marks in your class?
[S]. We do our work.
[R]. The work that is assigned to you? What happens when you don’t get it done?
[S]. You lose marks and we have to do it for homework.
[R]. How else do you get your marks?
[S]. We can do extra work to earn extra marks.
[R]. What else? Tests, projects, research assignments?
[S]. Yes, we do that too.
[R]. What about oral presentations?
[S]. Yes, that too.

It is apparent, from the students, that teachers used a wide range of teaching strategies
and evaluation tools. However, interviewed teachers and administrators were focused on issues
related to attendance and completion of assignments. Pewewardy (2002), Rehyner (1992a) and
Sawyer (1991) advocate using varied assessment strategies to acknowledge the abilities of their
students. It is difficult to be successful when students are not engaged in the learning process.

**Relevant curricula**

As Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter) is a school within the Ontario public educational
system, there is a legal obligation to follow curricula of the Ontario Ministry of Education. Some
teachers, such as Karen and Curt, questioned the relevance of the curricula to their students’
lives. For example, Karen offered the following thoughts related to the content of Independent
Learning Courses (ILC) materials:

[K 2]. They [ILC material] are very Toronto white, southern Ontario based. The
examples in the lessons are where you take the subway and have to go seven
kilometers. This is where most of my exceptions come in. I say to my students,
‘you have to walk in from Boran’ [pseudonym of a nearby town]. It doesn’t
matter whether they are Aboriginal or not, we alter our curriculum materials and
reshape it to fit the needs of our students.

She acknowledged that the curricula was not appropriate but adapted the curricula to meet the
needs of her students, something that Schissel & Wotherspoon (2003) identify as effective teaching. Schissel & Wotherspoon (2003) suggested earlier that the public educational system was doing more than educating, it was transforming young people into different people, a concept that Burns (1998) outlined in reviewing the current school system. He stated that the school program taught more than just content and skills—it taught values and beliefs that were not consistent with the values and beliefs of the local Aboriginal community. Additionally, Curt, Urban Aboriginal Program teacher, wondered why the educational system had not changed over the past 30 years. Ferguson et al. (2005) maintained that Aboriginal students disengaged from the education system because they did not see the importance or necessity of school in their lives.

Jupiter has responded to these concerns by creating programs that are designed to re-capture the disinterested youth. For example, rather than lose these failing students, Jupiter created alternate education programs to support them such as Parents Attending Secondary School (PASS) and Urban Aboriginal Program (UAP). Curt, UAP teacher, attempted to make the program relevant to his students by offering a series of workshops that focused on Aboriginal themed topics which were coordinated and set up by his teaching assistant.

[C 14]. I have a coordinator, Allan Garp [pseudonym], who works as liaison between the Friendship Centre and the school. Thank god for Allan, I would be lost. He will coordinate a lot of my field trips, workshops, where I bring in the Elders. Everything that is traditional. We do a lot. Here is the scary part, from my perspective, the kids couldn’t care less. They love the powwows because I can feed these kids 24 hours a day.

Curt described how he was able to blend Aboriginal culture into his school programming although it was not part of the school curricula. He felt that this cultural inclusion enhanced the success of his students.

Conclusion
Although, Aboriginal students in Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter) represented one third of the school population, its teachers did not acknowledge that they had unique learning needs. The teachers knew that the Aboriginal culture had some effect upon the behaviours of their students. However, Jupiter students said that their teachers used a variety of teaching strategies, ranging from group work and games to individual assignments. Evaluation processes were varied, depending upon the nature of the assignment. The interviewed teachers highlighted how they reached out to students and tried to be relaxed when it came to deadlines in order to get assignments turned in.

Teachers acknowledged that there was a lack of connection between the school curricula and the lives of their Aboriginal students. This was offset with Ojibway Language program and off-site programs, Urban Aboriginal Program (UAP) and Parents Attending Secondary School (PASS). Jupiter was trying to meet the needs of at-risk Aboriginal students (not all Aboriginal students were in this program) by placing them in these programs.

It was clear that Jupiter was making an effort to address the mental needs of Aboriginal students.

5.5 Emotional

The south direction teaches us about emotions and our feelings related to it. Emotion is a reference to how we feel about an issue (Bopp et al., 1988). At times, it affects our desire to live and work. How we feel connects us to our motivation and desire to participate.

When we look at emotions in education, we look at how a student relates to the school environment emotionally. We look at what aspects encourage students to have the desire to attend school. We also look at how a student is supported, emotionally, during his or her time at school.
Based upon the interviews, students, teachers and administrators provided feedback on the following areas: expectations, role models, self esteem, caring and parental confusion.

**Expectations**

Student attitudes and motivations are often affected by how they think they are perceived by the people around them (Rehyner, 1992a; Bazylak, 2002). The students at Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter) felt and knew that teachers were influenced by what the students were wearing as clothes. The students had mixed perceptions of what their teachers expected of them, as they knew that some teachers had low expectations while other teachers had high expectations.

At Jupiter students are expected to adapt to the school program. Michelle, guidance teacher, said that out of town First Nation students were expected to attend regularly and succeed in the school program. She offered the following thoughts on what Jupiter teachers expected:

[M 7]. Their [teachers] expectation is for the students to be in the classroom and try. If students come into the classroom and try, then they are doing well. They are doing well, if they are trying. But if students come in and don’t try and they put their heads down on the desk and sleep because they have been gallivanting the night before. It is difficult to teach. They can’t learn that way.

Michelle pointed out that Jupiter teachers expected the same of all students, to participate, work hard and submit assignments. Researchers (Jeffries & Singer, 2003; Bazylak, 2002; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003) suggested that schools, which expected students to succeed, recognized the difference in learning needs and addressed them.

According to Karen, Parents Attending Secondary School (PASS) teacher, attendance and submitted work were key parts of the expectations for her program. This is similar to what the Urban Aboriginal Program (UAP), expected. Curt, UAP teacher, was concerned about having students come to class regularly:

[C 17]. I am very off the cuff. It is not structured. You have a place, it is right
here, this is where you come, it is yours, treat it with some respect. You can come and go as you please. Dress how you want to dress. We have food there, so eat when you want to eat. Go outside if you need to have a smoke, go have one. During the day, [at some point], I will try to pull something out of you, a lesson, a question.

Curt addressed more than just the school curricula. He provided an environment that was fairly relaxed and flexible compared to the standards held by other teachers. He gave his students time and space, in which they can do their school work. It was their space. A space that they could count on—it was a place that they belonged to and it gave them a reason for being in school. Seguin Brant (2001) stated that it was important for students’ sense of self to have their own place. He also said that it was important that with the space he provided, he had to have high expectations of his students.

Off-site programs are oriented to particular client groups. Curt and Karen, as off-site teachers, had different expectations for their students than their colleagues at the main school of Jupiter. Curt and Karen worked with students who had become disengaged from the main school and were achieving some success by completing some courses for which they are granted credits. When teachers had reasonable expectations of students, they were likely to be successful (Danyluk, 1998; Seguin Brant, 2001; Bazylak, 2002; Rehyner, 1992a; Jones, 2003; Jeffries & Singer, 2003; Ferguson et al., 2005).

**Role models**

Karen, Curt, and Michelle, outlined that Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter) lacked Aboriginal teachers. Karen used the phrase “Aboriginal mentorship” to describe the role that Aboriginal teachers would contribute to the school community. At Jupiter, students do not see anybody from their Aboriginal community in positions of authority. Research (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Jeffries & Singer, 2003) suggested that Aboriginal students are positively
influenced and affected by the presence of role models. How can students take school seriously if they don’t see other Aboriginal people being successful? Curt said that there were few Aboriginal professionals working visibly (such as in stores) in Copper.

Role models, within the school and community, are important for students (Jeffries & Singers, 2003). The students know that if there are Aboriginal teachers working in a school, it is likely that the school will respect Aboriginal peoples and provide an environment that is supportive of Aboriginal students. If students know this, they are likely to be motivated to attend and succeed in this school environment (Rehyner, 1992a; Danyluk, 1998; Bazylak, 2002; Jeffries & Singer, 2003; Ferguson et al., 2005).

Self-esteem

According to research (Radda et al, 2003; Danyluk, 1998), students will succeed when they have the confidence and self-esteem to take risks and participate. Michelle, guidance teacher, stated that there are some successful Aboriginal students in Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter). Usually they are supported by their parents who are active in their life. Yet, there are some students who are easily influenced by older students in negative ways. Barbara, vice principal, said that students with low self-esteem were often vulnerable to the influence of drug and alcohol users. Karen and Curt, off-site teachers, acknowledged that their students had many different challenges than non-Aboriginal students and encouraged them to become involved with their cultural heritage to overcome the issues. Karen encouraged her students to engage in cultural activities to boost their self-image. Curt observed that his students were discouraged because they identified themselves as being Indian, a negative self image. However, he explained what he tried to do with his program.

[C 26]. They can’t visualize something happening next week that is positive
in their lifestyle. That is probably why a lot of them are in trouble, they take, take. No confidence, no self-esteem, very little self-worth. I try and build that up. If I can get you one credit, damn, I can get you a second one. By the time, you are on your third credit and, you are saying to me, this is not that bad. Hey, you can do it. It is just a matter of little effort. Spend the year with me and I will build your confidence up and your self-esteem. I will make you feel good about yourself. You can demonstrate by being here and proving to me.

Deducing from the interview comments, students, who are not successful in mainstream schooling, suffer from a lack of positive self-esteem. Students, placed in the off-site programs of Parents Attending Secondary School (PASS) and Urban Aboriginal Program (UAP), have been rejected by the school system and also, faced issues of negative self-esteem. For those students, placed in these programs (PASS or UAP), it is a second chance to get high school credits and achieve some success within the school system. Radda et al. (2003) and Toulouse (2004) explained that positive self-esteem is a critical factor for schooling success. Students, without it, faced a dismal future. Somehow, school programs need to work with students to develop and restore their self-esteem. Some researchers (Danyluk, 1998; Bazylak, 2002; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003) have highlighted how caring teachers can aid in the development and restoration of self-esteem.

Caring

One of the major concepts that emerged from the interview data was the notion of care, being cared for or being shown care. Successful students needed to have teachers who cared about them (Danyluk, 1998; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Jeffries & Singer, 2003). According to researchers, teachers need to care about their student’s future, care about their progress, care about the decisions that they make and care about their development as young adults.

At Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter), caring became unfolded in two ways as presented
in the interviews with teachers and students. The teachers explained that care is shown through extra time and extra help along with positive and welcoming greetings. Students, from the focus group, however offered the following:

[Rocky]. One of the ideas that is out there, that teachers care for you. If you are going to do well in this school, they care for you. Do you see it here?
[S]. No
[S]. Sometimes.
[R]. Some [teachers] will tease [joke with] you?
[S]. Like they tease us in a joking way but they never mean it.
[R]. What about Mrs. Galloway? Does she tease you?
[S]. No.
[R]. Is she always serious?
[S]. Yes. Not always.
[R]. Do you think your teachers care about you here?
[S]. Some do. I think.
[S]. They [teachers] like favourites.
[S]. Yes.
[S]. They have their favourites.
[R]. Do you feel appreciated in your class?
[S]. No, I am just another student.
[R]. Just another student? What do you think a caring teacher is like?
[S]. They are nice.
[S]. They’re fair.
[R]. What does a caring teacher look like? How do they act?
[S]. They ask you questions about your life.

The students had varied opinions about whether teachers cared about them.

Curt knew that his program was providing his students with an opportunity to earn high school credits. He felt that if he could show his students that he cared and supported them, it would inspire them to take control of their education. It is important for teachers to demonstrate their concern for their students as they work with them (Danyluk, 1998; Bazylak, 2002).

**Parental Confusion**

Researchers (Seguin Brant, 2001; Dornai et al., 2001; Jeffries & Singer, 2003; Ferguson et al., 2005) stressed the importance and necessity for students to have good support from
parents. Students, with good parental support, can develop the necessary coping skills to address difficult issues as found in the school environment. Teachers at Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter) identified that parenting or lack of parenting was identified as a factor affecting student success. Karen and Curt, off-site program teachers, described the challenges faced by their students such as coping with peer pressure and drugs. The students of Jupiter must overcome these issues in order to succeed in the school system. Teachers and administrators believe that this can be overcome with good parental support. For example, Michelle pointed out:

[M 7]. We have some great students here. There are some students that do very well with their courses. They are here every day, they come for extra help if they miss classes. They are open. They ask questions. I think a lot of these students have a good background, like a home background. They have a lot of support at home.

Parents, who are involved with their students, come out to parent/teacher nights. But they are not the ones who teachers want to see, meaning that they would like to see parents of those children who are having difficulties in school. From the teacher’s point of view, there were not enough parents involved with their child’s education.

The issue of parental support is confusing. It seemed to Michelle that Aboriginal parents had given up their responsibility as parents and they were expecting the school to do their work for them. This is likely due to the fact that Aboriginal students are placed in boarding or foster homes in towns away from their First Nation community. They are monitored by an Aboriginal Education Counselor (AEC). The AEC works for a local First Nation and is part of a provincial network (Ontario Educational Counselor's Association). Some First Nations may have an AEC who works and monitors the progress of its secondary students. In addition, they are responsible for finding homes for the students to live in, as well as providing clothing and spending allowances (Ontario Public School Teachers’ Association, 1993). Furthermore, the AEC also
made arrangements within the school for the payments of team or activity fees. A school, like Jupiter, could have an AEC as part of its school staff, however it would be dependent upon the terms of the Tuition Agreement between the public school board and local First Nation (Ontario Public School Teachers’ Association, 1993). Confusion arises when teachers are concerned about the progress of a particular student. Should they contact the AEC, foster parent or parents? This confusion, over who is responsible, has led to a lack of contact with parents and as a result, Aboriginal students make decisions without the guidance of an older adult.

Curt, Urban Aboriginal Program (UAP) teacher, offered an interesting point about Aboriginal parents, who appear to be not interested in their student’s progress. They may be confused over their role and responsibilities. Curt stated:

[C]. I think these parents don’t know how to be parents. They just want to be their friends. They want to be a lot of things but do not want to take on the responsibility for being a parent. They are afraid to hurt their children. They are afraid to do their children any wrong at all. But in reverse, they are doing a lot of damage because somebody has to teach them and in relation, kids learn by imitating their parents.

[C 6]. These parents ask these kids, what do you want to do? It is your choice. They are 14 years old, how do you know what you want to do? Obviously, what you want to do is take the easiest courses that you can possibly take, the less work that you can possibly do, for the majority. I [do] have some keeners. And then there are parents that are very up on the system to ensure that things happen. But, for the majority of parents and students, no they don’t.

Curt felt that Aboriginal parents did not know how to be the type of parents that were needed by the school system where the school wanted parents to be more of an authority figure and provide directives to their young students. This particular perspective is contrary to acceptable cultural behaviour in Aboriginal communities as it is considered inappropriate to tell or direct students to do something (Ross, 1992).

The teachers at Jupiter struggled with the lack of parental involvement. Michelle felt that
the school staff had reached out as much as they could and something had to change if Aboriginal students were going to succeed. From the interview comments, it is evident that communication with Aboriginal parents needs to be improved. Who should teachers contact? This should be clarified right at the beginning of the school year.

Conclusion

Students perceived that teachers had varied expectations of them. They were not really sure why but some felt that it was dependent upon their clothing. On the other hand, interviewed teachers had a different impression than the interviewed students. They knew that their students were coming from different lifestyles and had an open mind about what to expect of them. Aboriginal students were more successful when teachers had reasonable expectations of them (Bazylak, 2002; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).

Karen stated that Jupiter needed more Aboriginal teachers working in the high school program. Students needed to see positive role models so that they could realize that they too could be successful. Danyluk (1998) and Bazylak (2002) suggested that students were likely to be more successful when they could see other Aboriginal people being successful.

Teachers said that Jupiter Aboriginal students struggled with developing a positive self esteem. In many ways, it was related to how they felt about themselves as First Nation students. They did not see very many positive images around them and did not see a reason for trying to participate in society. Karen and Curt worked with their students to counter these perceptions. It was important to have a positive self image in order to be successful in the school program (Radda et al., 2003).

The interview data showed that Jupiter teachers were willing to reach out to students as long as they were willing to make an effort. In some ways, reaching out can be considered as a
form of caring. Students had mixed feelings about their teachers with some students saying that some teachers treated them unfairly and other students saying that teachers were nice to them.

Teachers and administrators had a lot to say about parental support. They noticed that successful students often had good parental support, but there were many students who did not have that support. The teachers and administrators of Jupiter were concerned about connecting with parents of students who were struggling. From their perspective, it appeared that Aboriginal parents had a different perspective on caring for their children than non-Aboriginal parents (was it cultural?) Additionally, parental support was aided by the confusion on who was responsible for the teenaged child while he/she was boarding out and away from their home and First Nation. It was evident, to me, as the researcher that some clarification needed to be done at the start of the year related to parental contact.

Aboriginal students are more successful when their emotional needs are addressed and supported. We can see that at Jupiter, off-site teachers had reasonable expectations for their students. They tried to create flexible and comfortable learning environments. The teachers also knew that they needed to nurture parental support in order to help their students and when the support was not there, they knew that they, as teachers, had to support their students.

5.6 Spiritual

The direction west teaches about spirituality. West is considered to be an area where Aboriginal culture is affirmed and shared. When we look at spirituality, we look at its components: language, ceremony and ways of transmitting knowledge.

The following pages outline how spirituality is presented and encouraged in the school environment of Jupiter Secondary School: respect for Aboriginal culture within the school and language programs.
Respect for Aboriginal culture within the school

With the exception of an Ojibway Language course and a grade nine Native Studies Art course, Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter) teachers felt that there were few venues for the integration of Aboriginal culture into the school program. Barbara, vice principal, and Michelle, teacher, stated that between the years of 2004-06, Jupiter enriched the school program by inviting touring Aboriginal groups to do workshops or educational forums for their student body. These workshops were open to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Seasonal feasts and powwows have also been blended into the school year as the staff has tried to improve the visibility of positive Aboriginal images within the school climate.

Although the school completed a number of Aboriginal focused workshops during the school year, the focus group students had two concerns: 1. They felt that Aboriginal culture was respected only in the Ojibway classroom and not anywhere else in the school environment. 2. That there needed to be more cultural activities blended into the school program.

[S]. No. The only place that the Aboriginal culture is respected is in Ojibway class with Mrs. Galloway’s classroom.

[S]. That’s the only place that I have seen where they respect it.

[S]. I don’t see any pictures here. Like at my old school, there were posters and pictures on the way, like the traditional stuff other than the Ojibway room.

The students compared their experiences with their attendance at a First Nation’s secondary school and they felt that Aboriginal culture was not as respected in Jupiter. According to Jupiter staff interviewees, Aboriginal culture was starting to be acknowledged, however students believe that more activities needed to be done. It is clear, from the interviews, that the school was making an effort and more activities and curricula inclusions are forthcoming.

Karen, PASS teacher, felt that more effort was needed by the school to create a more
culturally responsive climate at Jupiter. She wanted to extend this appreciation by honouring the holidays and seasonal celebrations of the Aboriginal communities in the region. Research (Jeffries & Singer, 2003) has outlined that students are more successful when they feel their culture is respected and reflected in the school climate.

Language program

Ojibway language is taught in the Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter). According to the students, 62 students were enrolled in Ojibway during the 2005/06 school year. Classes were offered at the introductory, intermediate, and advanced levels. Cheryl, Ojibway Language teacher, was viewed by Barbara, as a “real go getter”, in that she was always interested in taking her students on field trips to pow wows, career fairs or places of student interest in Northwestern Ontario.

Aboriginal language represents only one course of a student’s course load. However, the student focus group felt that it was important for the expression of their identity as Aboriginal students in Jupiter. Spielmann (1998) and Lickers (2004) maintained that language courses are critical to understanding and continuing the cultural behaviours of Aboriginal culture.

Conclusion

At Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter) the focus group of students felt that Aboriginal culture was not well regarded and respected within the larger school community, but they acknowledged that Aboriginal culture was respected in their Ojibway Language class. Attempts to improve the positive imagery and visibility of Aboriginal people were being made by Jupiter’s Parent Council which co-sponsored several workshops and special events with Jupiter student council. The sponsored workshops were designed to increase sensitivity amongst the general student population. Researchers (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Pewewardy, 2002; and
Rehyner, 1992a) suggest that students are more successful when they feel comfortable in their school environment. This was likely to be found in small school alternative education programs like Parents Attending Secondary Schools and Urban Aboriginal Program.

5.7 Physical

The direction north teaches us about rest and reflection (Bopp et al., 1988). We obtain reflection through involvement with physical activities. Many people believe that if one has a healthy body, then one will have a healthy mind. When we look at the physical component, we look at how it is related to the food that people eat, the physical activity that they do and the reflection that they do as a result of that physical activity.

In education, when we look at the physical needs of students, we ask, what is the school community doing to meet the physical needs of the Aboriginal students in their school setting? In this case study, physical activities were identified as involvement with extra-curricular programs.

Extra-curricular activities

Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter) is the second largest public high school in Northwestern Ontario with a population of 900 students. It offers many opportunities for students to be engaged in the process of socialization and learning. Students can participate in drama club, music club, environmental club, outdoor education and sport teams. Barbara, vice principal, commented on how Jupiter provided a variety of opportunities:

[B 9]. I believe that we have everything on the shelf for the taking. We have a Native counselor, we have Native classes. We have lots of activities at Jupiter Secondary School, more than we could ever offer. We have a bus that brings you right to the door. The fees are paid. The book cards are paid. I cannot see what more we can do to make someone [else] do it.

During the focus group discussion, I asked the students about the activities in which they were
involved. With the exception of participating in Ojibway class field trips, students stated that they rarely got involved in any extra-curricular activities. It was surprising to hear they were not taking advantage of the opportunities, given that one of the students had played volleyball at Mars First Nation School (Mars).

While reviewing photos of a number of sport teams located on the walls near the gymnasium, I noticed a number of brown faces scattered throughout the years. I’ve learned while working with Jupiter colleagues, that if any Aboriginal student tried out for the team and they had marginal skills, they would be kept, knowing that the student’s skills would develop. Jupiter has had a history of including Aboriginal athletes in its school teams such as football, hockey and basketball. For some students, being part of a sports team can be the only real good thing about school. Participation on sports teams allowed them to focus their life around the practices and games of the sport, something that was beyond the academics. Extra-curricular activities increased the motivation of the student to stay in school (Whitbeck, Hoyt, Stubben & LaFramboise, 2001). What was stopping the focus group of students at Jupiter from participating in extra-curricular activities? Was it something related to the school climate or environment?

Maybe, the answer to the above questions lies in the idea that students will take risks when they feel comfortable and safe. As educators, we need to understand and realize the importance of a comfortable environment for Aboriginal students. Danyluk (1998), Jeffries and Singer (2003) and Pewewardy (2002) suggested that students enjoy an environment that is culturally supportive and respectful and are likely to take risks when they stay in the program.

**Conclusion**

One issue was raised by the interview data: involvement in extra-curricular programming. Students said that they were not participating in extra-curricular activities, although many
opportunities were available. In order for schools to improve the opportunities for student success, they need to find ways to encourage students to participate in extra-curricular programs (Jeffries & Singer, 2003).

5.8 Circle centre

Circle centre is at the centre of the circle. It is a reflection of all that is around the circle. It can represent a balance of the four directions (Bazylak, 2002; Hart, 2002). When we talk of student success, we are asking questions related to those aspects which will encourage students to keep attending school and completing courses.

Within the set of interview questions, one question directly asked, what participants thought were the factors necessary for student success. All teachers and administrators agreed that it was necessary for a student to have good parental support. In the data, I discovered that two key areas emerged: issues that inhibit success and identifying and characterizing student success.

Issues that inhibit success

Students, in order to achieve success, had to overcome many challenges, according to Karen, Parents Attending Secondary School (PASS) teacher:

[K 8]. In my classroom, there are so many barriers to learning: they are parents and their [own] children can get ill; they have a continual fight against poverty and money issues; a continual fight for self esteem and self worth; and they’re also battling all the other [kinds of] teen issues because they are teen parents, and they also battle just regular teen issues plus other things like drug, alcohol and substance abuse. In some cases, like one of my students, who comes to mind, has a history of mental illness. You are talking about all of these barriers preventing my students. Those barriers are in place for my Aboriginal and Caucasian students.

Students must address issues related to family as well as those related to being a teen.

Sometimes, Aboriginal teens were affected by their understanding of being Aboriginal. Curt,
Urban Aboriginal Program (UAP) teacher, felt his students were more concerned about surviving than learning about their culture. He knew that they had minimal family support and needed some kind of support in order to succeed in any kind of school program. Curt knew that if his students attended regularly and did some school work, they would be successful.

As the researcher, I have to ask the following question, why do students have to go to off-site programs to achieve success? Why can they not achieve success within mainstream programs? Is it the structure of the school? Is the school environment the key? Danyluk (1998) and Jeffries & Singer (2003) stated that the alternative school setting is flexible and enables students to work independently. It is likely that a flexible and relaxed school setting allows some students to cope and address obstacles that they face. Perhaps it is related to a cultural issue, such as personal autonomy as suggested by Ross (1992) and Spielmann (1998). Or it could also be related to informal teaching environment where students are not centered out by teachers, a behavior that is uncomfortable to Aboriginal students.

**Identifying and characterizing student success**

This study has been focused on understanding the dynamics related to student success. Some studies (Bazylak, 2002; Swanson, 2003; Seguin Brant, 2001; Jones, 2003) have identified Aboriginal student schooling success in the context of participating actively: in the school program, earning their course credits, going on to post secondary schooling or developing skills that contribute to the community (tradesman) and returning to the community. Ideally, these are the aspirations or hopes that teachers, administrators and parents have for their students. Barbara, vice principal, stated that students had to have their own personal desire to want to achieve and do well. If a student is motivated or wants to do something, challenges and obstacles become achievable. Bazylak (2002) described how students needed to have their own volition and their
own personal motivation, in order to succeed. But, how do we, as educators, help create or nurture that personal motivation? Perhaps, we can by developing their self-confidence and self-esteem by providing a culturally respectful curricula and environment.

Other teachers suggested that for students to be successful, they had to have family support, good attendance, positive attitude and a good work ethic. However, teachers also stated that a number of students did not have these characteristics. How do we help students develop these characteristics? Perhaps, the following thoughts offered by Michelle, guidance teacher, can answer this question:

[M 9]. We need to work with the First Nations community. Our administration needs to work with the First Nations administration. The Native organizations in the community, like in the Treaty Three area have to come to an understanding on how to help the students. There needs to be open [communication that is respectful and] welcoming between the First Nations and our non-Native population.

Michelle said that the school authorities need to communicate in better ways with First Nations educational authorities. This would be a step in the right direction. Tamarra, guidance teacher, outlined a number of ideas, such as the need to develop Aboriginal student leadership and create a transition program. In addition, she commented about the need for the school to develop a welcoming environment with the help of Aboriginal education counselors (AEC).

Based upon the comments made by Michelle, Tamarra and Barbara, it is obvious that somebody needs to help these students. Should it be the Aboriginal Education Counselors? Or should it be some other part of the public school system? Perhaps, it can be helped by the proposed transition program. Barbara, vice principal, said that in her previous school that they had tried two different things: hired a teacher’s aide to work with Aboriginal students and had a homework tutor to work with students after school and lunch hours. These programs were
effective but were not sustained due to funding shortfalls, as they were not able to keep part-time workers. She also suggested that some staff (in her last school) would go to First Nation communities to recruit and register students. It is important for staff to see and experience where their students are coming from as it helps develop empathetic understanding for them (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Jones, 2003).

Karen, PASS teacher, talked about creating a more welcoming environment at Jupiter, where students would feel welcome and comfortable. Perhaps, another approach to education is needed, although Barbara seemed to think that Jupiter has done as much as it can do. Curt, UAP teacher outlined a streamed apprenticeship program, as found in Europe, where students were placed in a hands-on type of program, while completing the required academic basics. Perhaps, this model could be considered so that other groups such as Aboriginal students can become successful. Curt also suggested that this program might be incorporated in a newly created high school. As Copper was undergoing a population shift and primary industry jobs were dwindling, people have been leaving the community for other places. School populations have shrunk and school space was being made available. Curt predicted that there would be several school closings in the next few years. With that thought in mind, given that more Aboriginal people were moving into town, Curt presented the following thoughts:

[C. 27] I would like to see an Aboriginal school. But I would like to see them do it properly. I would like to see them build a school but incorporate a wellness centre. And if you are going to do it right, then do it right, so that the traditions are there on a daily basis where the Elders are there. You walk in the morning and the drums are pounding.

Curt felt that creating a new school, tailored to shop classes and Aboriginal culture, was a solution. Perhaps, it would be the environment and place that would be comfortable for Aboriginal students to develop a sense of belonging and connection to, which is important for
Aboriginal students (Seguin Brant 2001).

Karen and Michelle, guidance teachers, both stated that there needed to be more Aboriginal teachers teaching at the high school level. Research (Danyluk, 1998; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003) suggested that schools, with Aboriginal staff, enable students to relate and feel a sense of community within the school. Karen told us that she saw Aboriginal students needing Aboriginal mentorship. Karen and Michelle acknowledged that Jupiter needed more Aboriginal teachers.

Perhaps a newly vacated school can be renovated to reflect Aboriginal culture and its values and be staffed with Aboriginal teachers. However, this would reduce the current school population of Jupiter and this could have implication in terms of programming and staffing. Certainly, a new school environment is something to consider.

Conclusion

In the last few pages, we have seen how teachers and administration struggled to meet the needs of Aboriginal students at Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter). They recognized that there were many issues that an Aboriginal student had to overcome: disruptive home life, transition to a new high school, transition to a new community, peer influences, and issues around race and culture. Teachers, in this study, struggled with trying to find ways to help their students.

The teachers acknowledged that they could see which students would be successful as they had:

- a good work ethic;
- support of their parents;
- personal drive;
- willingness to do better.
Off site programs, such as Urban Aboriginal Program and Parents Attending Secondary School, seemed to have more success than school programs located at the larger Jupiter school environment. The climate at Jupiter needed to be changed in order to make it more welcoming and comfortable for Aboriginal students.

Other suggestions, such as the creation of a transition program or the creation of a new secondary school, were aimed at creating a new comfortable environment for Aboriginal students. A transition program would enable students longer periods of time to adapt to the new environment, whereas an Aboriginal high school would be a place that First Nation students would see, acknowledge and recognize as their own. It is likely, based on the results of previous studies (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Pewewardy, 2002; Jeffries & Singer, 2003) that students would be more successful in these new programs.
Chapter 6: Mars First Nation School

In the following pages, I will outline the findings from Mars First Nation School interview participants in the following categories: community influences, mental health issues, emotional health issues, spiritual health issues, physical health issues and student success issues. The following table, similar to Table 3 in chapter 4 (4.12), reflects data themes that emerged from three different sets of questions for each respective interview sample: administrators, teachers and students. Similar questions were used for each sample group in each school and yet, what is notable is that there were slight differences in the content of the data themes. For example, there were only 3 sub themes (within Community Influences) in Mars First Nation School sample compared to the 5 sub themes (within Community Influences) of Jupiter Secondary School.

Table 6.1: Themes related to medicine wheel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Mars First Nation School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community influences</td>
<td>Teacher experience. Role of the local board of education. Quality of local education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Culture of the school. Reactions to the inclusion of Aboriginal culture. Language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>School as the heart of the community. Extra-curricular activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student success</td>
<td>Issues that inhibit success. Identifying and characterizing student success.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6.2: Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carmene</td>
<td>Education Director, former education counselor with 15 years of experience, Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>Principal 2\textsuperscript{nd} year, former teacher with 15 years of experience Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rochelle (Ro)</td>
<td>Teacher, 7 years of experience, Non-Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Randi (Ra)</td>
<td>Teacher, 15 years of experience, Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art</td>
<td>Teacher, less than 10 years of experience, Non-Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eileen</td>
<td>Teacher, 17 years of experience, Non-Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus students</td>
<td>Four students interviews, plus one written response in the form of a completed questionnaire, all students were Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.2 is a listing of interview participants and outlines their ancestry and teaching experience. Taylor (1995a) suggests that experienced teachers are likely to have greater success with Aboriginal students. In this case study, interview data was gathered from Mars First Nation School staff, who were comprised of: four teachers (Rochelle, Randi, Art and Eileen), one principal (Kathy), the education director (Carmene) and a focus group of students, who will remain anonymous. Interviews were conducted on April 4, 2006 and were organized by Kathy. Interview participants were provided with a set of questions beforehand and one teacher had taken the time to write out her answers. All interviews lasted between 45-65 minutes. In most cases, interviews were guided by the question set. In cases, where answers were unclear or ambiguous, additional probing questions were asked to help clarify the answers.

Table 6.2 outlines participant experience and shows that all of the participants were female, with the exception of Art. There was also a split on racial lines, Kathy, Carmene, and
Randi are Aboriginal and from the community and Art lived in a nearby village of Diamond (pseudonym). Eileen and Rochelle drove in from the nearby non-Aboriginal town of Copper (pseudonym). With the exception of Eileen, all participants have only worked with First Nation students. Randi is an elementary teacher who provides special education services for all of the students in the school.

6.3 **Community influences**

The focus of this study is to understand the factors related to Aboriginal student success in the secondary school program. However, the schooling process is often affected by the circumstances occurring outside of the school itself. For example, most schools are managed by a principal and vice principal, who respond to an administrative team led by a Director of Education, who is overseen by an elected board of trustees or community representatives and sometimes (depending upon the size of the school district) Superintendents. The impact of decisions of the school board can be felt by the school in varied degrees, depending upon the size of the community it serves. In most First Nations, the aforementioned administrative line is limited, as there may be only one school in the community, as in the case of Mars First Nation School (Mars), where the education director, working with an education board, oversees the actions of the principal.

The category of “community influences” consists of the following classifications: teacher background, role of the local board of education and quality of local education.

**Teacher experience**

Many (50-60 percent) of the teachers working in Mars First Nation School (Mars) are Aboriginal. However, most of the Aboriginal teachers are found at the elementary level and often, are from or live in the community. Kathy, principal at Mars, stated that teachers worked in
her school, on average, for 15 years, whereas teachers in publicly funded schools stayed on average for 20 years (Postl, 2004). In other words, she did have some experienced teachers and also, younger teachers with fewer years of experience. Taylor (1995b) has pointed out that having experienced teachers on staff enhances the success rate of Aboriginal students in a school environment as they can respond effectively to the needs of their students. Additionally, experienced teachers mentor younger teachers in that they provide guidance on how to handle new situations. Mars has a balance of younger and older teachers, approximately 50 percent of each. Furthermore, students are likely to be more successful when they see Aboriginal leadership, as mentors in their school community (Danyluk, 1998, Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).

**Role of the local board of education**

The local board of education, Mars First Nation Education Authority, is comprised of seven locally elected board members. Unlike the public system, the local board of education is made up of community members residing in the community, whereas, members of the Nexus School Board (pseudonym) reside in the region, given its large geographic size as there are several large non-Aboriginal towns within the realm of this school board.

In this particular community, Carmen, education director, pointed out that education board members met regularly and were given different portfolios to manage. In all cases, board members were expected to become familiar with their area of responsibility and for some members that meant becoming familiar with the operation of the school. Eileen, math teacher, commented on the differences between the First Nation educational authority and the way the public board of education were managed:

[E 20]. You know, in Copper, the education director is the person who makes the
decision and the board rubber stamps it. Well, here [Mars First Nation], the board has to agree with everything [before decisions are made].

Eileen suggested that their students’ educational program is often affected by factors beyond the teacher’s control. Carmene pointed out, that the board members do not get involved with the daily operations of the school, but are expected to learn about the various portfolios that they do take on. The education board makes decisions regarding the operations of the school in this community. Carmene stated that the board was interested in setting policy, setting up salary structures, and creating and maintaining budgets. Yet, Eileen noted that there was a different process used in Mars First Nation than in the school board in Copper. It is likely that school authority decisions are addressed quickly as there are fewer communication links than in the larger public school board. Sometimes, school authority members can have a direct impact upon school policy decisions.

Quality of local education

All of the interviewed teachers commented that the quality of education was a major issue for the development of their secondary students. For example, Eileen, math teacher, stated the following:

[E 5]. I don’t know if you have got the idea or not, but a lot of these kids are severely undereducated, profoundly undereducated. I get kids coming to me in grade 9, who have never worked with fractions or don’t know what integers are or have seen a graph. They have not done 90 percent of what they should do when they get here. I have to scaffold them right up to the curriculum. I have to teach it. Not having been taught something is not the same as not being able to learn it.

Rochelle, English teacher, stated the following:

[Ro 11]. We are finding that by the time they [students] hit the high school and we [the teachers] do have to go by the curriculum. They [the students do not have the skills as required by the secondary teachers] are not up to what the curriculum is asking for. There are huge discrepancies.
Eileen and Rochelle stated that elementary teachers at Mars First Nation School (Mars) have no requirement to follow any particular curriculum. This particular fact added to the continued disparity in the quality of education. Students who left Mars to attend Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter) in Copper found that they were lacking in academic and work skills. In addition, Eileen added:

[E 18]. And [then] they can go out and do the math. But their language skills are atrocious and literacy is one of your biggest building blocks for success in college. Honestly, 99 percent of these kids would not pass at university.

Art, who teaches shop and geography, identified another fault with the school system. He felt that some of his students would be better off going somewhere else. He knew that there would be more time spent on learning rather than putting up with classmates who wasted time fooling around.

[Art 11]. Those certain kids, there are not many of them, there’s a few of them, I think they would be way better off if they went to a town school or somewhere maybe where they have better facilities. Like what I teach in the shop, I mean it’s, when I go to Jupiter Secondary School or any high school, in Copper or anywhere, I go into the shops and stuff. It makes me sick that the kids are able to go to a computer and design what they want for a week or two on the computer and take it out and build it to scale on a metal lathe. We don’t have anything like that. It is just depressing. I don’t think our kids are getting a fair shake. They can’t compete. If you were to take kids from town [meaning Copper] and take kids from here and put them together, say okay, who is going to get a better job?

However, at the same time, Art pointed out the discrepancy and disparity between the public and First Nation educational systems. Postl (2004) and Malatest et al. (2004) stated that there were funding discrepancies between federal and provincial school systems. Art’s school shop program lacked the resources such as computer technologies, shop materials and equipment. Art also highlighted his frustration with the federal government and at the same time, demonstrated his concern for the future of his students. According to him, it seemed that the local First Nation’s
board of education was providing a lower standard of education in comparison to the surrounding public schools. Art maintained that the onus of accountability rests with the government because they are not providing the necessary resources. Art’s comments raised the following questions: whose fault or responsibility is that, when it comes to the school’s budget or resources? Does it rest with the principal, or with the parents, or with the teachers? Art suggested that the responsibility rested with Department of Indian Affairs. Certainly, this notion is supported by researchers who worked in the field of education (Canada, 1996; Brade, Duncan & Sokal, 2003; Brady, 1994; Taylor, Crago & McAlpine, 1996).

Conclusion

In order for students to be successful, they need to have teachers who are able to teach curricula and are able to spend less time on classroom management issues (Taylor, 1995b). Mars First Nation School (Mars) featured a well-rounded complement of staff. It has many teachers who have worked successfully with First Nation students. In addition, there was a group of younger teachers, who were learning the craft of teaching.

The local board of education was visible within the community and was responsible for Mars. Board members tried not to take part in the day-to-day running of the school. Individual board members have unofficial connections to the school through extended family relationships to members of the school community. According to Friedel (1999), when students know that their parents are involved with the operation of the school, they are likely to be involved with the school program, knowing that their learning needs are being addressed.

All teachers were concerned about the standard of education that was being offered by the school. Half of the Mars teachers involved in this study thought that their students would not succeed in post secondary education whether it was college or university as students were pushed
on before they had learned the necessary skills to succeed. In many ways, this issue is related to
the fact teachers have to teach language skills before they can proceed to the school curricula.
Many students come to school with limited English language skills as they are being raised in
homes which use two languages. If students are to succeed they have to be able work at levels
that are meaningful to them (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).

6.4 Mental

The direction east teaches us about the mind, the development of its mental capacities.
The mental aspect is a reference to the intelligences, development of the mind and engagement
of new knowledge. Some authors such as Bopp et al. (1988) have said it is the “enlightenment”
as new perspectives are revealed and a new beginning is initiated with this new knowledge.

In this study, I examined the comments related to learning style and student
characteristics, teaching strategies, evaluation strategies and how relevant the curriculum is to the
students of Mars First Nation.

Learning style and student characteristics

The student population of Mars First Nation School (Mars) is made up of Ojibway
students from Mars First Nation. Kathy, principal, maintained that students follow their
traditions and have been enriched with weekly visitations with an Elder this past school year

Most teachers acknowledged that students in this school need to be taught using visuals
affirmed this view in their work with American and Canadian Aboriginal students. Eileen, math
teacher, outlined out her observations:

[E 2]. Artistic intelligence is really high, music intelligence is really high, body
intelligence is really high and visual intelligence is really high but not auditory. So, to sit there and lecture in front of them, you can just watch them, puft. They are not interested in hearing it, and it’s kind of bla, bla and bla.

Art, shop teacher, concurred with her observations and Rochelle, English teacher, added:

[Ro 1]. Anything that has them standing up that puts them in the spotlight in front of their peers, is really difficult. I thought it was low self-esteem. But the Elders have said that it is part of their culture not to draw attention to themselves.

This would affirm what Ross (1992) found with his observation of people in Northwestern Ontario where he noted that there were cultural sensitivities relating to praise and gratitude which made Aboriginal people uncomfortable. Singling out students and praising them are important parts of a teacher’s tool kit within the public school setting. However, this practice, when used with Aboriginal students, is contrary to Aboriginal cultural practices. Aboriginal community survival relies on the cooperation of all community members and when individuals are centred out, it can disrupt the cooperative flow of its members as people start to get jealous and envious of others.

Art also felt students enjoyed his class because he provided a hands-on type of class. He also had two other observations about Mars First Nation student behaviour. First, for example, he noticed the lack of team building or teamwork:

[Art 15]. What I find, is a lot of kids, they don’t help each other. They don’t help each other at all. I find that weird, but I see it with the adults too. Like if someone is out there pushing their car, everybody will just drive on by or if someone is stuck in the ditch, they will drive right on by. Nobody even offers to help. Or if there is something that needs to be picked up, or anything like that, [they say] ‘Oh I didn’t do that’ or ‘That is not mine.’ If I can get the kids to work in teams a little bit, it helps. I mean they will share a drink, but they won’t help each other cut a board. Here is one kid with a band saw and it is binding and smoking. Everybody is standing there watching, smiling and laughing. But nobody is going to go over there to help him straighten it out and pull it through, unless I tell them to give him a hand. That is one thing I find weird. Maybe that is just part of the culture that they are used to.
According to Ross (1992), Art’s observation would be an excellent example of Ojibway cultural ethics at work. Nobody is going to volunteer or help, as it would be a sign of disrespect for the individual. If the person asks for help, the situation changes, there’s an acknowledged need for help. Personal autonomy is very important for all (Ross, 1992). Art also finds that the behaviour exhibited in class is often different from what he sees when he goes out in the community. His second observation is related to the following behaviour exhibited outside of school:

[Art 9]. But when they are away from here, at their own house, they are totally different. You know, those kids who just sit in their own shack, they are totally, different. I have seen them. Yes, they talk and they fool around and are active. I don’t know what it is?

Art pointed out that there was more to teaching Aboriginal students, than just being able to incorporate visual aids. He acknowledged that he, as a teacher, needed to be aware of the students culturally, as he found them exhibiting behaviour that did not make sense to him. He also noted that these students have more responsibilities other than just being students, such as being young parents who had to look after their own children.

Bazylak (2002), in his work with five female students, found this as well. Students had more issues to address than just school. Although Bazylak worked with a small group of students in an inner city school in Saskatchewan, he found that his students needed support in other ways in order to succeed in the school program. This is parallel with the atmosphere of small schools, where teachers and staff are familiar with many of their students. Teachers and staff will support their students beyond the classroom as cited by small school researchers (Thomas, 2004, Slate & Jones, 2005).

From the comments, the following conclusions can be gathered about Mar’s Aboriginal students: they are visually oriented and need visually-based teaching strategies to learn, they
exhibited cultural behaviours that necessitated different approaches in the classroom and they have to cope with life issues beyond the classroom such as being parents.

**Teaching strategies**

Eileen, Art, Randi and Rochelle stated that they used a variety of teaching strategies to engage their students in their lesson plans. For example, Randi explained her method:

[Ra 2]. [Over] the years that I have been teaching, [I’ve used] regular methods [of teaching]. The teachers that I have learned from, they just used formal methods. I think here, one thing that stands out, is that I need to use more visuals, more things that the kids can see. They are not really verbal, even with the language [used in] the stories that they are trying to read, the vocabulary that they have to learn [which] is in some of these books that they are required to read, we have to pre-teach everything. The vocabulary, the context, how to pronounce words, syntax, everything.

Art concurred with the same opinion. He said that he could talk until he was blue in the face and the students would not understand what he was saying to them. Rochelle explained how class presentations, a widely used teaching tool, were not favorably received and it was an accomplishment if she was able to get someone to answer a question in front of her peers. Randi suggested that students need to be directed more and had trouble answering open-ended questions. The focus group students commented that their teachers did not talk enough. Students stated that they enjoyed the relationships that they had with their teachers. They knew that they had good relationships because of the positive comments that they (teachers) made. The students in one of Rochelle’s classes told her that she would never find a more special group of students than what she was enjoying then.

What is missing from the list of strategies, as presented by the teachers at Mars First Nation School (Mars), is that there were few comments related to the importance of having a positive relationship with students. However, the focus student group did suggest that this was
important to their success. Researchers such as Danyluk (1998) and Bazylak (2002) stated that a positive relationship with Aboriginal students was crucial to their success.

Additionally, teachers at Mars felt that it was important to provide in-school opportunities for students to complete their school work. Many of the teachers recognized that assigning homework was a waste of time and it was better to offer students with opportunities to come in and complete the school work. Art offered the following comment:

[Art 4]. Yeah, exactly, that [meaning academic work load] is the problem. I don’t know what the solution to that is. Because, they would be working on that for awhile, if you gave it to those certain kids for homework, that is usually a big deal for them. They won’t do the homework and they probably won’t show up for class and you want to keep them in [school]. I find that if you push, push, push, push those certain kids they don’t respond, and they drop out and fade away.

From the interviews, the staff noted that if they pushed to get homework completed, students disengaged from the process. For all staff, this is unacceptable, since it is better to keep students in the school system. At least, when they are at school, the staff felt that they can make progress with them. For example, Eileen provided us with her observation:

[E 7]. I don’t give them a bunch of homework to do at home, because I understand that they don’t have the support. My room is open every day at lunchtime. And I spend extra time with the students in my room.

Eileen, math teacher, provided students with the opportunity to come in for extra help during lunch hours.

The interview comments inform us that when a teacher teaches Aboriginal students, he/she needed to use a variety of strategies that revolve around visually-oriented approaches. Teachers have to use teaching strategies that respect the cultural nuances of the students in the local First Nation. Furthermore, teachers have to be willing to work beyond what they did in the actual class time. Teachers, such as Eileen and Art, provided time for students to come in during
lunch hours and provided extra help to ensure understanding, comprehension and success.

Schools that were able to provide additional in-school support for Aboriginal students were likely to be more successful (Danyluk, 1998, Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).

**Evaluation strategies**

Teachers, in Mars First Nation School (Mars), stated that they and their students liked rubrics and checklists. Rubrics are evaluation tools in the form of a chart that contains information about what is required for the completion of an assignment. They are structured in a way that students are able to determine the mark that they want to receive by completing the elements required as outlined on the rubric. Checklists are another evaluation tool that enabled a teacher to quickly assess the completion of certain elements on a student completed task or assignment. All of the teachers in Mars used these two tools among others. Rochelle, English teacher, said:

\[\text{Ro 3}. \text{For me, each student has something that they are really good at. The rubrics provide a chance for a mark to be given to those strong points and it also shows the students what they can improve in. Instead of giving them a general mark….I use checklists at the beginning to say this is what I am looking for. If [the students] can go through and say I have done that, they know that they will get a good mark for the knowledge and understanding part of the assignment.}\]

In math, Eileen pointed out that she used a wide range of evaluation tools such as quizzes and projects and she tried to cover all learning style intelligences. In addition, she commented on the use of a survival guide, a list of formulae and notes, which her students were allowed to use during assignments and tests.

\[\text{E 2}. \text{For instance in my 3 E, my grade 11 essentials math class, we have a unit coming up on buying decisions and purchasing power. They have to design a poster and will have to come up with an outline for a camping trip. They will have to find stuff on sale, justify why they are buying it and put their trip together, plan their menus. I try to cover all intelligences when I assess and test because I don’t think it is fair when you exclude students based on the intelligences. I have never}\]
believed in teaching to one kind of kid. I think that it is so wrong.

Eileen acknowledged the fact that there were many ways of learning and tried to get students to utilize their strengths. In addition, she made the assessments real and practical to her students. Aboriginal students are more successful when they feel the curricula assessment is relevant and appropriate to their world and community (Brady, 1994; Canada, 1996; Taylor, Crago & McAlpine, 1996; Bazylak, 2002; Brade, Duncan & Sokal, 2003). Schissel & Wotherspoon (2003) said that teachers who used flexible and appropriate assessment tools were more successful than those teachers who did not.

Curricula relevance

According to Mackay and Myles (1995) successful schools have staff members who use appropriate teaching and evaluation strategies. Schissel & Wotherspoon (2003) pointed out that teaching staff are more successful when they adapt and adjust the curricula to be meaningful to its students. One of the important issues raised in Mars First Nation School (Mars) is the fact that much of Ontario’s curriculum was not relevant to the lives of its students as illustrated by Art, shop teacher:

[Art 2]. It is hard to follow the curriculum that the ministry gives you for these guys. For shops, it makes no sense to me or them. [The Ministry of Education curriculum for shops wants] you to make a cupola for their house. Now who is going to put a cupola on your house?

He added the following:

[Art 5]. Yeah, if you are going to set expectations, you have got to make sure that what you teach is just directed to those expectations. They funnel into that. I find that these kids, they don’t have much of life experience, other than around here, and for me to use ministry’s expectations. It just doesn’t apply to here. They [Ministry course designers] don’t have a clue.

Art told us that, at times, the expectations were not appropriate for his school community. Eileen,
math teacher, offered the following comment related to the relevance of the grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) which had been introduced by the Premier Harris with his government’s educational reforms in 1998:

[E. 19]. I don’t think the literacy test is very relevant. It really bugs me. I think if they really wanted to know the literacy levels of these kids, they would collaborate with people who helped set up literacy tests for Aboriginal students in Northwestern Ontario. [You should] talk about things that are relevant in their lives, [things] that they are going to be able to give you an answer to.

During the interviews, it became apparent that teachers questioned the applicability of current course guidelines and profiles to the lives of their students.

All teachers interviewed said that they made necessary adaptations to their particular subject areas in order to make them more relevant to their students. Research suggested that Aboriginal students are more successful and engaged when curricula is meaningful and relevant (Brady, 1996; Taylor, Crago & McAlpine, 1996; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Bazylak, 2002). Randi explained how she made the curricula meaningful:

[Ra 4]. Now that became interesting. We have always had, in the school, the seven grandfathers teaching. Our rules are based on it. They are posted. Our curriculum is based on it. In the history books, we have to teach about the other native cultures, not only Ojibway, but [also] about the Mohawks and the other tribes across Canada. But I changed the history books somewhat, you know, how they read about how Columbus came to discover, that kind of thing. I presented it as it was in the books but I added our perspective. We did a double kind of thing. We kind of more or less critiqued what they had written. I presented it like that….Even when we are required to teach the migration theory, the evolution theory. I added our Creation story. I didn’t say this was better than that. I presented all of them and made [the students] realize that they had their own story. That was one way we did it.

In order to be effective with their students, teachers at Mars adapted their curricula to make it interesting and relevant to them. For example, Eileen used area problems related to using a powwow ground while Rochelle incorporated Aboriginal authors into her English assignments.
Art, when he was teaching geography, highlighted the local area and its particular environmental issues. In addition, Art described how he would bring in an old truck for students to work on, in order to teach useful and relevant skills in his shop class.

The teachers’ comments suggested that they need to use teaching strategies and evaluation methods that corresponded with their students’ learning characteristics and physical environment. They have noted that student motivation is enhanced by relevant and meaningful curricula. Bazylak (2002) made the observation, with his study participants, that having teachers who are willing to provide students with curricula that related to their lives would enhance Aboriginal student success.

**Conclusion**

At Mars First Nation School (Mars), teachers acknowledged that First Nation students have different learning needs than non-Aboriginal students. Accordingly, First Nation students need to be taught using visual and kinesthetic teaching methods. Some of these strategies involved the use of overhead written instructions and hands-on demonstrations of skills of what students needed to learn. Opportunities for evaluation were varied and diverse. Teachers attempted to use meaningful and relevant types of learning tasks for evaluation and sometimes, provided tasks that were oriented to the student’s strengths.

Most of the teachers discussed the relevance of the Ontario school curricula to First Nation students’ lives. Many of the learning expectations, as outlined by the Ministry of Education guidelines, were not important for students in this community. Teachers from Mars had to modify the content of the courses to make it meaningful to its students. Aboriginal students were more successful in school when they knew the curriculum was relevant to their lives.
6.5 Emotional

The south direction teaches us about emotions and our feelings related to it. The emotional aspect is a reference to how we feel about an issue (Bopp et al., 1988). At times, it affects our desire to live and work. How we feel connects us to our motivation and desire to participate.

When we look at emotions in education, we look at how a student relates to the school environment emotionally. Students need to feel connected to a place in order to feel comfortable and valued (Seguin Brant, 2001; Ferguson et al., 2005). As well, we look at what elements/aspects that encourage students to have the desire to attend school. We also look at how a student is supported, emotionally, during his or her time at school. Based upon the data collected, students, teachers and administrators commented on the following areas: expectations, relationships, self-esteem, parental support and motivation.

Expectations

Student attitudes and motivations are often affected by how they think they are perceived by the people around them (Rehyner, 1992a; Bazylak, 2002). Eileen, teacher, supported this idea:

[E. 11]. If I say, ‘you know what, you need to get an 80 and you need to get an 80 and its okay, for you to get a 60.’ What is that saying to you? It repeats, it reinforces to these kids that they are not smart and they are not worthy. It just drives me nuts.

At Mars First Nation School (Mars), students were expected to work to the best of their ability. Students were expected to attend regularly and complete the assigned school work. Below is an outline of the expectations made by teachers at this school:

Randi said: “To be good human beings.”

Eileen offered:
[E 7]. I have every expectation that these kids will perform as well as they do in any other school. I believe in them and I tell them that all the time.

Art continued along with:

[Art 10]. I don’t know, whatever. I want them to get work ethics. I want them to show up on time. [To] be prepared for what is out there in the world, in reality. Cleaning up properly and just taking care of tools and stuff like that. In the academic courses, just practice reading and writing. There are a lot of kids who don’t read. And then if I give them something to read, they don’t want to.

Kathy had a different perspective of the word “expectations”:

[K 4]. We try to keep it consistent. The consequences might be different for depending upon each division like k-3, 4-6, 7-8 and then high school. We are trying to keep consistent. It is working out.

Rochelle said that she wanted her students to be responsible and to complete their school work.

And yet, Carmene, education director, had a different reaction for “expectations”:

[C 3]. I would like to see the students learn at their level. Sometimes, students are not ready and are pushed on. I would like to see the teacher fulfilling their responsibilities.

She went on to outline how she found some teachers did their job well while there were others who did not do it as well.

From the interview comments, it was apparent that the teachers have varied expectations of their students, some as simple as being a good human being to others more complicated as achieving as well as non-Aboriginal students. Carmene had a slightly different perspective, where she wanted students to work at their level. Meanwhile, Kathy was concerned about appropriate behaviour. The research suggested that when teachers have expectations that are realistic, honest and sincere, then students are more likely to be involved and engaged in the school process and be successful (Danyluk, 1998; Bazylak, 2002; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).
**Relationships**

During the interview with the focus group students, they all said that they liked their teachers and saw them as their friends. They felt that they were able to talk with them and felt valued and appreciated as well as, encouraged to achieve higher.

Kathy, principal and her teachers admitted that they had a pretty good relationship with their students. Eileen, teacher, offered:

[E 3]. I get along really well with my students no matter where I teach. It is important to me. At the same time I am definitely the alpha female in the classroom. They do know that I am the authority in the classroom. They call me by my first name. They joke, they come in, they have a good time but when I say it is time to get their books out, they listen and they abide by the rules in the classroom.

Art, shop teacher stated that he saw his students as friends who knew that they could talk to him about anything. Randi and Kathy, both Aboriginal, felt that their positive connection was due to the fact that they were able to converse in the local First Nations’ language of Ojibway and also because they were both from the community.

[K 5]. They are more open with me because I am also from the community. They give a lot of respect. It is the same when the parents come here because I speak the language.

This notion is also supported by research where Swanson (2003) said that when students are more comfortable and able to relax, they will participate readily in the school program. Schissel & Wotherspoon (2003) found similar situations in programs that were successful with Aboriginal students. They were more likely to be involved as school leaders and contributed to a positive atmosphere in the school environment.

My experience, while meeting with the students, suggested that they felt good about their teachers. One student stated that she liked the teachers here and was too scared to leave. From
the interview comments, it is evident that, students and staff in Mars First Nation School mutually respected one another and valued their interactions. This created a pleasant school environment. Research (Danyluk, 1998; Bazylak, 2002; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003) suggested that students who enjoy being in school are more likely to continue earning credits.

**Self-esteem**

On a number of occasions during the interviews, teachers and administrators made reference to their student’s sense of self-esteem. Eileen, teacher, said the following about the importance of self-esteem:

[E. 5] I really focus on self-esteem. I think it is huge and you can’t learn well without good self-esteem. I find that it is a pretty big issue for me with a lot of the kids in just building them up.

Eileen, throughout the interview, made reference to building up the students’ opinion of themselves. She described how she supported her students, one of which was to reward her successful students with a placement on her “wall of fame”. Students earned the right to be on it with good performance in school. She also continually praised their efforts and abilities and nurtured a growing inner self-confidence with each of her students.

Rochelle, also thought her students’ behaviour was related to low self-esteem:

[Ro 8]. They have a hard time thinking for themselves, meanwhile in [an] English class, it is all about what is your opinion? They are always looking to me, what do you want? Is this okay? Do you want this? That is all part of low self-esteem. Right? They always want to know what I want and are also looking to me to do the work for them. Instead of me saying, well, what do you think about that?

One of the consequences of low self-esteem is that students are vulnerable to people who will pay attention to them. For example, Rochelle said:

[Ro 10]. The whole cycle stems back to if the parents aren’t disciplining and caring about the education then why should the kids?... I will get the kids in there, and they will say, ‘I don’t care if I fail.’ Because there is nothing stopping them
[meaning they lack the support of their parents]….To them no one cares about me [them as students], they stop coming to school.

Some of the students in Mars First Nation School (Mars) have little or no parental support and as a result, associate with people who will support them. At times, the students look to the classroom teacher as a source of support to questions that they might have about life in the community. Art, along with the other teachers, know that Mars First Nation is limited in the variety of services that it can provide to its community members. Students, in particular, are frustrated. Kathy, principal, stated that they try to combat this frustration by engaging the students in sports:

[K 9]. We use a lot encouragement to bring their self-esteem [up]. We praise them a lot. The other thing in our school is the NORWOSSA [Northwestern Ontario Secondary School Association, the governing sports body for high schools). They really enjoy their volleyball, basketball and badminton.

Efforts to combat self-esteem are made by providing opportunities in sports for the athletically inclined student. Eileen stated by repeating and praising that her individual students were smart.

She knew that her words could change their outlook on life and education:

[E 8]. When I first started here I was teaching grade eight, it drove the kids nuts. I would say, ‘Kris, you are such a smart guy’ and he would cringe and say, ‘I am not.’ And I would say, ‘yes, you are, and you are and you are,’ as I point around the room. And we would talk all the time about being smart and about halfway through the year, they would joke and say, ‘I am smart.’ And I would say, I have been telling you that for the past five months.

Students start to feel comfortable when they are made to believe that they are smart as shown by Eileen’s comments. Self-esteem development is an ongoing battle in this community and in others as reported in other research (Danyluk, 1998; Bazylak, 2002; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). Randi concluded this discussion with the following illustration:

[Ra 6]. My grandma talks about when a baby is born that is when they [grandparents] would take their belly button, they would keep it, and they would
hang it up, that is their identity. Whenever you start to see a teenager go off, wander around, starting to drink, or doing drugs, the old people say that they are starting to look for their belly button, that they have lost their belly button, that they have lost their roots….It has worked with a few people who are in their twenties and they realize that the choices that they are making are not the right ones. They are starting to wander, question their values. It is a way of getting them back.

We can see that efforts are made by the teachers, parents and administrators in Mars to address self-esteem issues. In some ways, the search for positive self-esteem for students may go beyond the scope of the classroom. The interview comments suggested that more support was needed to help their students.

**Parental support**

Another observation that surfaced during the interviews was the importance of parental support to a student’s high school career. This study has identified parental support as one of the key factors for Aboriginal student success. All of the interview participants have agreed that without parental support, students were less likely to succeed. Carmene, education director, started the discussion by stating:

[C 5]. I think parental support is very important. I think if there is no parental support, the students, they will choose another way. They will choose the bad side if there is no parental support.

She pointed out that students would seek the solace or advice of those willing to support them.

Randi offered:

[Ra 12]. Family support. I noticed that a lot of the kids that are struggling, [they] don’t have the family support or they [the family] don’t value education. They are not made to do the homework.

This results in the lack of responsibility for their respective classes. Kathy, principal, had similar thoughts as Randi, in that she observed that students were more successful when they were encouraged by their parents.
Carmene felt that parents were not sure of their role with respect to school expectations. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Canada, 1996) and Ing (2000) profiled the damaging effects of residential school on the Aboriginal people of Canada. Aboriginal children, while attending residential school, were not exposed to good parenting role models. They never learned how to be good parents as they were culturally alienated from their parents and communities (Ing, 2000). The parents in Mars First Nation show similar characteristics as outlined by Carmene’s comments. She also described how the school community was reacting:

[C 6]. I don’t know intimidation. If you make parents feel comfortable. If you make parents feel part of the school. But how? I have talked about it for years and it is not happening. We have done so many things like lunches and potluck dinners. There are too many things happening in today’s age. There are too many things.

In many ways, some Aboriginal parents see themselves as having no role to play in their child’s life when they reach a certain age, as noted by the following teacher comments. For example, Rochelle said:

[Ro 7]. For the parents, there is [a] fear because of the guilt [that comes with] disciplining [their child]. They are allowing their kids to run, to run wild. I heard one of my parents say, ‘Well, they are 14 now. There is nothing I can do about it.’

She added to the negative tone of this discussion by telling us that the school was often cited as the problem, when there were issues late at night in the community. Yet, Eileen, teacher, pointed out that only some parents had this perspective.

[E 15]. It depends upon the parent. You know, one of the issues that we run into a lot is that the kids are receiving very little parenting and virtually no discipline. School is a place where we need rules and a lot of the parents resent the fact that we have rules. The flip side is that we have other parents like Rhonda Smiles (pseudonym), Sarah Smith (pseudonym), Missy Frown (pseudonym) and Susan Miles (pseudonym), who respect and like what the school does. So it depends upon the parent. But I think overall, the school is a safe place.

In some ways, teachers can be their own worst enemy, as teachers try to be diligent and caring in
establishing contact with parents of students who struggle, it becomes a handicap and deterrent (Deslandes et al., 1997) who found that too much communication aided in the shut-down of students and family with respect to the school performance. When teachers, who are diligent, continually make contact with the home about a student, parents tend to stop listening as they get upset with the lack of success by child in the school program. Eileen tried to engage her students’ parents positively, such as at Open Houses. She wanted the parents to see what the school was doing with their children and at the same time, establish a rapport with them in the event, that she needed their support in the future.

The big question, according to Carmene is how do we (teachers) get the parents involved with their students’ life? She also expressed frustration with trying to get parents involved in the local school community. For this aspect of the student’s life, there are no easy solutions. If each child is going to succeed, there needs to be some kind of support, where the child knows that they will be emotionally supported, otherwise they will not succeed (Friedel, 1999; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). Researchers (Danyluk, 1998; Mackay & Myles, 1995) went on to state that active parental involvement enhances student achievement.

Some interview respondents felt that some Aboriginal parents were not sure of how to parent their children. One could easily argue that residential school has affected their ability to be parents (Canada, 1996, Ing, 2000; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003) or perhaps, they parented in a culturally appropriate manner. To further illustrate this idea, we have seen two reasons in the interview comments: lack of comfort with the school process and secondly, lack of realization that they, as parents, need to be involved with their children’s education career. Teachers expressed their frustration at not being able to involve the parents in the school lives of their students. It seems that school expectations contradict cultural expectations. Ross (1992) and
Spielmann (1998) both suggested that Aboriginal people have a cultural rule about not interfering or intervening in the lives of their students and children without an invitation, as it affected their development as autonomous beings. This might be a reason for the style of parenting as exhibited by the parents of Mars First Nation School or as Mosher-Rae (2001) found, parents simply expected the schools to address any issues related to school, as they (educators) were the experts and knew best.

**Motivation**

A student’s drive or motivation has been highlighted by a number of teachers in this study as important for their success as students. All of the interview participants agreed that a student had to want to learn, to get up in the morning to attend classes and to want to come in for extra help if needed. Bazylak (2002) described this as volition; students have to have some internal willingness to persevere.

Rochelle said that someone, who is motivated, would be willing to take responsibility. She expressed a concern about the lack of personal motivation in terms of achieving success. Some students were more interested in developing their skills while other students simply wanted a pass. Kathy, principal, described three keys to schooling success: parental support, motivation and attendance at school. However, when students did not have personal motivation to attend school, the staff relied upon external things, such as sports clubs, field trips and relationships to keep their students interested. For example, Randi offered the following:

[Ra 9]. I also get to work with the regular kids. You hate to see the regular ones struggling, but then I get those ones who could use a little bit of encouragement in school. I encourage those ones. That is why I coach too. To get them through [the school year], [The sports] motivates them to do better. [They say to themselves] ‘I have to get my academics before I can play the sport.’ That is how they get that little push.
However, Rochelle pointed out that once the sport season was over, so did the interest in school and attendance quickly dropped.

[Ro 10]. They will drop out. Usually by the end of the first month, I will be down to 18. Depending upon the sport and when the season stops, some of the kids will stop coming. They come to play volleyball. They stop coming. That is the main reason for failing, one or two or three will struggle with the work, they simply drop out. They can’t get up in the morning.

Yet, Art, shop teacher, noted that students who liked a particular subject often took responsibility for their own learning. Perhaps, that is the issue and this raises another question? How do we get students interested so that they have a personal interest in school and or in the courses? Randi made the suggestion that perhaps by offering more courses than just the basic compulsory courses, the students would stay interested. In some sense, small high schools are at a disadvantage as they can only offer a limited selection of courses. Research on small schools suggested that schools, although limited in resources, can provide students with an excellent education (Slate & Jones, 2005; Dawes, 2005). They have shown that students, graduating out of small schools, have high achievement rates (Kennedy, 2001).

From the interview comments, establishing, nurturing and creating motivation is something that is hard to do. Schools can do it, to some extent, however the major thrust needs to come from the individual student.

**Conclusion**

Emotional support has been identified as comprising the following areas: expectations, relationships, self-esteem, parental support and motivation. Mar’s teachers pointed out that they had reasonable and positive expectations for their students. Staff and students stated that they enjoyed the relationships that they had with each other as students felt they could talk with their teachers. Teachers and administrators stressed the importance of students having good parental
support and were very concerned about those students who did not appear to have that support. In many ways, the lack of parental support could contribute to the lack of motivation for school by students. Certainly, students were more motivated when they were involved with the school program such as sports or shops. It was clear from the teachers, involved in this study, that they cared for and supported their students.

I did not see a guidance office and I later wondered how counseling services were provided? Based on the comments of teachers, counseling was being provided by the teachers of the school and this aspect is important if one is going to have a successful student population (Mckay & Myles, 1989).

6.6 Spiritual

The direction west teaches about spirituality. West is considered to be an area where Aboriginal culture is affirmed and shared. When we look at spirituality, we look at its components: culture of the school, reactions to the inclusion of Aboriginal culture in the school program, and language.

In education, spirituality is often neglected in the public school sector, but in some First Nation communities, Aboriginal spirituality is quite strong, as in the case of Mars First Nation School. The following pages outline how spirituality is presented and encouraged in this school environment. Discussion is centered around the importance of language instruction and teacher perceptions on students’ attitudes toward Aboriginal culture.

Culture of the school

The community of Mars First Nation is Ojibway and the community continues to hold on to its language. Kathy, principal of Mars First Nation School (Mars), stated that it was a school that followed its traditions. School policy and philosophy was based upon the teachings of the
Seven Grandfathers:

1. To cherish knowledge is to know WISDOM
2. To know LOVE is to know peace.
3. To honour all of the Creation is to have RESPECT.
4. BRAVERY is to face the foe with integrity.
5. HONESTY in facing a situation is to be brave.
6. HUMILTY is to know yourself as a sacred part of the Creation
7. TRUTH is to know all of these things. (Benton-Banai 1979: 60-64 emphasis is from the source)

In all parts of the school environment, Aboriginal culture was evident. Most classrooms had various traditional medicines hanging in the classrooms such as tobacco, sage, sweetgrass and cedar. In other areas of the school, posters and Aboriginal images decorated the hallway walls. In some areas, plaques and pictures were found honouring past students. Eileen, math teacher, pointed out:

[E 4.] I think it would be different if this was a mixed school, because I would feel like I was excluding Aboriginal students if I never had an Aboriginal staff. Look at our school; we have Aboriginal words all over the place, our lockers are painted, there is culture throughout the whole school.

In addition, Kathy pointed out that the school had its own ceremonial drum. Carmene, education director, said that last fall (2005) they went to Shaking Tent ceremonies, where they asked for direction of the drum [every Aboriginal drum has its own beginnings and purpose and sometimes, the purpose has to be learned by the owners] with respect to the school. Carmene and the education board were seeking insight as to the types and kinds of decisions that they needed to make with respect to the Mars First Nation School (Mars). Furthermore, school and community teams were organized to participate in eight seasonal feasts of the year. In all of these events, students were involved in activities such as wild rice processing, tanning hides and smoking fish. These events were supported by the community people of Mars First Nation.

Carmene and Kathy stated that for the past two years, a cultural coordinator was hired to
organize weekly cultural events. Kathy described how students gathered in the gym:

[K 2] Like every Monday, we have an assembly in the gym, that is where we bring in an Elder [who] comes in and does an invocation, an opening for the week and we smudge all the students who are in there.

[K 6]. They go to each classroom and the coordinator, that’s doing the cultural program, translates the language because the Elder speaks in the [Ojibway] language, so the students are able to understand.

It is obvious that Ojibway culture is visible within this school community. Learning about traditions, oral history and ceremonies are all part of the culture. Bazylak (2002), Danyluk (1998), Pewewardy (2002) and others have pointed out that when students realize that a school recognizes and honors Aboriginal culture, student achievement is high. Students know that they are respected and feel comfortable knowing this.

**Reactions to the inclusion of Aboriginal culture**

Rochelle, Eileen and Art had some concerns about the role that cultural programming played in the classroom and school environment. From their observations, students had a negative reaction to the cultural teachers that were brought in. For example, Rochelle offered the following:

[Ro 5]. They know their culture, so when people come in and to talk to them about their culture, the seven grandfathers, the medicine wheel, they say why? Again. A lot of them do try to get out of it, to be honest…They were taught it [referring to the seven grandfathers, medicine wheel among other things]. It goes all the way down to kindergarten. It is not a bad thing. It is just the exact same thing. They know the basics. Give them something more than the colours of the medicine wheel. They know that by grade 12.

She found that students, in her English program, would look at ways of avoiding the presentations made by the Elders. Meanwhile, Art and Eileen acknowledged that students did not use Ojibway in their classroom, as most students would converse in English. Furthermore, Eileen heard from parents that Ojibway was not spoken in the majority of the homes. It seemed that
those who still had the language were imposing the acquisition of language and culture to a student population that was not receptive to it.

The irony is that the students, in the focus group interview, never expressed this view. If anything, they expressed pride in their community and school. It seemed that they were proud of their traditions, as many of them were powwow dancers. In an earlier comment made by Rochelle, she outlined that many of her students were absent because of their attendance at a powwow on the weekend. The students seemed to contradict the perceptions of Rochelle as they would not attend powwows if they did not value their culture. The student group was enthusiastic about school and their culture.

Language

Another key aspect of the culture is the maintenance of a First Nations language. According to Randi, Special education teacher, speaking a First Nations language is an effective way of redirecting and focusing student’s attention, which is important in order for her students to succeed. They work better when they are relaxed, which they get from speaking Ojibway. Kathy said that knowing and speaking Ojibway language is important in building a relationship with her parents. Randi concluded the following:

[Ra 12]. The old people are saying that the only way that we are going to survive is that if our culture is taught and if our language is taught. They think that our culture is going to die when the Creator does not hear Ojibway spoken anymore.

Language and culture represent pillars that students can rely upon as they face the challenges of the ever-changing world. Proponents, of English as a Second Language (ESL), maintained that it was important for children to be bilingual, knowing their home language and English (Ontario, 2005). Furthermore, in developing two languages, a child’s thinking capacity is increased and will have a greater opportunity to be successful in school (Ontario, 2005). Interview participants
had different opinions about this particular topic of language maintenance. It appeared that those people, who were not native speakers of Ojibway had an opposing opinion on the importance of language. Eileen, a strong proponent of the students, felt that:

[E 21]. The big focus for our board for the last couple of years, and you have to take this as I am intending it, has been that they want to do immersion Ojibway until grade four, no English whatsoever. And I am saying that they are failing the Grade 10 literacy test [Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test] and they need the language skills. You can’t take any more English time away from them. Well, it is an Anishinaabe school and they should be speaking Ojibway. And they should be speaking it at home and they don’t speak it at home.

Some of the study participants (teachers and administrators) felt that Ojibway language acquisition and maintenance was a major issue as it affected the English literacy development of Mars First Nation students. However, one has to ask, is it the only factor? It can be fairly stated that it is a contributing factor to the limited development of English language skills as Randi pointed out that they had to pre-teach everything including the language used in the classroom. There are other aspects that can contribute to the lack of success for Aboriginal students such as lack of parental involvement, lack of resources and lack of relevant curricula. Eileen maintained that culture and language should be taught in the home and that school should be a place where students focus on academics. However, ESL proponents supported the concept of dual language acquisition, as it helped with brain synapses development (Ontario, 2005). Art, shop teacher, offered the following view:

[Art 6]. It is not [in answer to the question, do students use the language?]. When I worked further up north, it was. But what I find and I have seen it a lot of times in this school, I don’t know how to react to it, I have seen kids, heard them say, ‘They do not want to learn it. What do I want to learn it for?’ I was that way [with] French. I sat out in the hall way during grade seven, because I didn’t want to learn French. I’ll never use it. Now I am kicking myself in the butt because I could have used it. You know I hear that all the time. But then, I talk to them. I say that, ‘You can’t let something special that you have disappear.’
Anyone who speaks Ojibway language will say that language maintenance is paramount to maintaining Aboriginal culture (Canada, 1996; Lickers, 2004). Perhaps, that is the right course of action for students of Mars First Nation School, as students will have a sense of identity if they have their Ojibway language. Given that there are a number of obstacles, if the school decided to set the language aside, would students be more successful? To make these changes, the answer to this question is related to time. It will change, but in what direction? That answer will be based upon the decisions of the youth going through the school program.

**Conclusion**

What is evident is that the local community, through its school, is interested in providing opportunities for students to learn about their culture and language. The participating teachers have indicated that this effort is not being well received by the students as indicated by student behaviour in their classroom. Yet, the opinion of the focus student group differs from the teachers’ observations. Several researchers (Danyluk, 1998; Bazylak, 2002; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003) have stated that schools with cultural activities are important for student participation however, it is not critical for student success, as students just needed to know that they were valued and respected.

**6.7 Physical**

The direction north teaches us about rest and reflection (Bopp et al., 1988). We get reflection through involvement with physical activities. The focus on the physical is where body needs are addressed. Many people believe that if one has a healthy body, then one will have a healthy mind. When we look at the physical component, we look at how it is related to the food that people eat, the physical activity that they do and the reflection that they do as a result of that physical activity.
In education, when we look at the physical needs of students, we ask, what is the school community doing to meet the physical needs of the Aboriginal students in their school setting? In the case of Mars First Nation School, physical needs are made up of the following categories: the school building as the heart of the community and how extra-curricular programs enhance the health of students.

**School as the heart of the community**

In small communities, such as Mars First Nation, the school, nursing station and band office are often the larger buildings. Generally, most schools located on a First Nation will have a gymnasium and these become places for large gatherings. Art, shop teacher, and Randi, special education teacher, offer the following information about how the school is used:

[Art 11]. I think the school is kind of like the heart of the community because whatever goes on, kind of happens here, whether it is, you know, volleyball on the weekend, sometimes they have funerals here, bingos here. What else do they do in here? They have little yard sales and stuff like that. It is a multi use facility. You know what I mean. As far as during school hours, I hope that it is serving its purpose, like to educate the kids and so that they go out in the community and gonna (sic) be model citizens.

Randi stated:

[Ra 9]. We have a strong cultural base. We graduate kids, who go off to college. We have strong sport teams. We have high school kids who are around, who are graduates and we also have some [students], who are not good role models. The gym is open every night to different events. There is judo or bingo or whatever.

In many ways, the school is the focus of the Mars First Nation community. Students, at one time or the other, use the school facility for functions outside of school hours. Meanwhile, Randi also pointed out that the gym was often used as a place where education meetings were held.

Carmene, education director, said that activities for youth were possible because they had a young supervisor monitoring the programs. Students have a place to go to after school hours
that allows them to expend their physical energies in meaningful ways in connection to community events. When a school is used in this manner, it creates a feeling of ownership and comfort. It is understandable to see and hear how the focus group students were proud of their school environment. Students who feel comfortable in a school will often become successful (Danyluk, 1998; Friedel, 1999) as they want to keep attending and this is evident in the students of Mars First Nation School.

Extra-curricular activities

Schools are places of academic learning, but they also are places where students learn social and teamwork skills. Extra-curricular activities such as sports programs, drama and music productions, outdoor and environmental clubs contribute to the development of social skills. When students become involved in programs such as these, they are likely to be successful in the school program (Whitbeck, Hoyt, Stubben & LaFromboise, 2001; Swanson, 2003). Randi, special education teacher, mentioned that, as part of her teaching life, she coached.

[Ra 8] The idea of sport teams is that it is modeling for the better athletes. That is why most of the schools have gone to de-streaming [meaning that there are no special classes for academically challenged youth, they are blended in with mainstream students] so the weaker students are blended in and can see the better students. They are not off to the side removed from the program.

This school prides itself on the development of its students as good athletes. Kathy, principal, has been linking good academic behaviour with the right to participate in sports.

[K 9]. We have a policy in our school that they have to have a certain average and have to be enrolled in three or four credit courses. If they fall below, they would not be eligible to play in the following year. We are trying to restrict that. It was never really enforced before. Now that I have gone on board, the new principal, I am trying to enforce this policy.

Participation in extra-curricular activities is an important part of a student’s life. It provides the participating student a sense of identity within the school community. For students, who are not
academically oriented, but who are athletically smart, extra-curricular programs provide them with an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities. Mars First Nation was one of the few First Nation Schools to participate in the regional high school sports program league. Female and male students are actively involved.

**Conclusion**

Mars First Nation School honours extra-curricular programs as an aspect of its students’ life. Whitebeck, Hoyt, Stubben & LaFromboise, (2001) stated that students, who are involved with the school community, albeit through extra-curricular programs, are more than likely to stay in school and consequently, be successful. Swanson (2003), in her article on motivating learners in the north, explained how building a community within the class and within the school, enhanced student participation and involvement. When teachers coach and organize teams, they are essentially creating a community. This is important as teachers can improve their student’s opportunities for success by creating new communities of learners.

**6.8 Circle centre**

Circle centre is at the centre of circle. It is a reflection of all that is around the circle, which is why it is known as the heart of the circle. It represents a balance of the four directions (Bazylak, 2002; Hart, 2002). When we talk of student success, we are asking questions related to those aspects which will encourage students to keep attending school and completing courses.

Within the set of interview questions, one question directly asked what participants thought were the factors necessary for student success. I expected a reiteration of what had been said earlier in the interviews, such as comments related to attendance and work habits. I was surprised by what the participants had to say. All teachers and administrators agreed that it was necessary for a student to have good parental support. In the data, I discovered that two areas
emerged: issues that inhibit student success and issues that identified and characterized student success.

**Issues that inhibit success**

Carmene and her teaching staff told us that negative peer influence often affected the development of their students. For example, in cases where students, with low self-esteem and poor family support, negative enablers would provide voices of optimism and support and convinced these vulnerable students to ignore the demands of the school program and participate in activities that would lead them to drop out of school.

Eileen, math teacher, said that she spent a lot of time bolstering her students’ sense of self-esteem. She repeated to her students that they were good at math which, over time, was accepted by the student who realized that in fact they are smart. Lack of self-esteem was seen as the biggest barrier to student success. The teachers at Mars First Nation School (Mars) recognized this and took time to address it in their programs.

However, was that enough? For some students, yes, as they would develop strong relationships with staff, but for others, no, they would not. It is in the latter case where the parents need to reclaim their roles as guardians and mentors. Studies (Brandt, 1992; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003) have shown that students, who are supported by parents, throughout their high school career, will stay in school longer and have a greater opportunity for school success. In so doing, the parents help their child improve their self-esteem. Many teachers identified that successful students had supportive parents. Those who were not successful often did not have supportive parents. This point should be acknowledged as another issue in preventing student success.

The size of the school, on one hand, could also be seen as a barrier by the fact that it
provided limited program and course opportunities. Randi had mentioned that for some time, the school was only providing the basics [meaning compulsory courses] and students had limited choices and opportunities. She also stated that many students, in a previous year (2004/05), were wishing they were somewhere else. Carmene, education director, said that their school’s population had exceeded the space of the building and an addition [set of classrooms] was needed at the school. Art also noted that his budget was limited and he had to be careful with his material resources in order to keep his program functioning. He felt that his budget limited what he could do as a teacher in terms of making the program meaningful to his students. More resources, such as building space, building and plumbing material, could enhance academic programming.

Despite these physical limitations, teachers, in a small school were able to develop close relationships with students and create a sense of family within the school community (Slate & Jones, 2005; Jeffries & Singer, 2003). Students, in this school, were confident of their school environment.

It is apparent that there are three key barriers to enhancing student success in this community: student’s lack of self-esteem, lack of parental support and limited school resources.

**Identifying and characterizing student success**

If one is to improve student success for the students of Mars First Nation, then it is clear that action has to be done to improve the three barriers: issues of student self esteem, lack of parental support and limited school resources. The interview participants described individuals who had become successful within and outside of the community. For example, Carmene spoke with pride, of one young man who had left the community in grade nine and had gone on to earn his Master’s Degree and was now the principal of a school in Northern Minnesota. She felt the
whole community had been instrumental in helping him succeed. There are other individuals, from the community, who also went on to achieve just as well but in different ways. For example, there are graduates who, as Randi told us, have become local young teachers now teaching in the school. From Carmene’s perspective, there are many factors that contributed to a student achieving success in the schooling process. Yet, at the same time, Randi stated that current students needed to see other viable professions, something that was lacking in Mars First Nation School (Mars). Aboriginal role models, in other professions, are simply limited in the north. This is directly tied to the economies of the community and outside the control of the school board (Brady, 1996; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).

Every school can improve, including Mars First Nation School (Mars). Many of the interview participants felt that this could be accomplished by increasing the size of the school and putting more financial resources into the programs. Teachers would be able to offer a greater variety of courses that would attract the interests of their students and likely become a source of motivation, similar to the way sport programs were. Some teachers thought that programs that were focused on the everyday needs of the community would be beneficial such as setting up business courses like small engine repair or plumbing and electrician programs. While other teachers thought it would be better if there was a regional vocational Aboriginal high school set up to enable students from all surrounding First Nations to attend (there are 13 First Nation communities in the Treaty Three area):

[E 13]. Do you know that I have been advocating this but nobody seems to want to do it [build it]. I think with the Treaty Three land that they have around Round Lake, why would they not build a great big high school with a focus on trades and vocations because the other two high schools in Copper have an academic slant. Have all the Aboriginal high school students come into [one school] for high school and any of the other students in the community that wish to come into [the other school] for trades. And the kids who are far more academic slanted let them
go over to the other high schools. It would be a big high school with all of the kids mixing and mingling.

Eileen, math teacher, had some other ideas related to exposing students to a larger school setting. She thought that there needed to be better transition programs that would get the students ready for success at high school (going from grade 8 to grade 9) and success at college as too many students returned to their community. Perhaps, in having a separate larger high school, students who went away to post secondary schooling, would have less of a culture shock. (One would think that the transition issues would be less severe, given that students did not have to switch schools or leave the community in order to get secondary education.)

Furthermore, additional funds would be ideal from Kathy’s point of view, as she would be able to keep more experienced staff. Taylor (1995a) and Chiefs of Ontario (2004) outlined how teachers, in federal First Nation schools, often transferred to private or provincial schools in order to gain salary and security. With additional funding resources, Mars would be able to pay its staff more and possibly increase the staffing complement to support its students.

Student self-esteem would be improved if one could engage more students in the school program. This could happen if more resources were available to develop and implement new programs; enrich existing program resources; offer better financial packages in order to keep effective teachers; increase the physical space of the school. If the school community was to have all of this happen, it is likely that self promotion would entice reluctant parents to become involved with the school program.

**Conclusion**

At Mars First Nation, student success was more likely when a student was able to:

- live at home (and have kinship support) and attend school;
- go to school programs which use learning strategies that met their learning styles;
• learn from teachers who provide a comfortable and relaxed learning environment;
• be evaluated with practical and appropriate assessment;
• engage in curriculum that is relevant and related to their lifestyle;
• participate in extra-curricular programs;
• interact with educational practitioners who create positive and caring relationships;
• attend school in a culturally respectful environment.

These findings, related to student success, have been based upon the perceptions from teachers, students and administrators of Mars First Nation School. The interview data pointed out how student needs were being addressed in the school community.
Chapter 7  **Venus First Nation School**

In the following pages, I will outline the findings from Venus First Nation School interview participants in the following categories: community influences, mental health issues, emotional health issues, spiritual health issues, physical health issues and student success. The following table, similar to Table 3, reflects data themes that emerged from three different sets of questions for each respective interview sample: administrators, teachers and students. Similar questions were used for each sample group in each school and yet, what is notable is that there were slight differences in the content of the data themes. For example, under the mental area of the table, Mars First Nation outlined four themes (Learning styles and student characteristics; teaching strategies; evaluation strategies; curricula relevance) whereas Venus First Nation presented six themes (student characteristics; teaching strategies; relationship building; evaluation strategies; relevant curricula; sequential curricula).

**Table 7.1: Themes related to medicine wheel**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Venus First Nation School</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community influences</strong></td>
<td>Teacher experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Funding.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local board of education.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Small schools.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Quality of local education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mental</strong></td>
<td>Student characteristics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching strategies.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Relationship building.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Evaluation strategies.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Relevant curriculum.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sequential curriculum.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional</strong></td>
<td>Expectations.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication with parents.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Self-esteem.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Parental support.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Spiritual</strong></td>
<td>Culture of the school.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Language.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Physical: Extra-curricular activities.


Table 7.2: Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hailey</td>
<td>Education board member, Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine</td>
<td>Principal 2\textsuperscript{nd} year, former teacher with 15 years of experience, Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>Teacher, 15 years of experience, former principal of Venus First Nation School, Non-Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>Teacher, 25 years of experience, Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>Guidance, Teacher, more than 20 years of experience Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Six students in one focus group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7.2 is a listing of interview participants and outlines their ancestry and teaching experience. Taylor (1995a) suggests that experienced teachers are likely to have greater success with Aboriginal students. In this case study, interview data was gathered from three teachers (Penny, Tony and Melissa), one principal (Christine), one Education board member (Hailey) and a focus group of students. Interviews were conducted on April 6\textsuperscript{th}, 2006 and organized by Christine. She invited Hailey, an education board member, as well as other Aboriginal staff members, to participate in the study. Interview participants were provided with a set of questions before-hand. All interviews lasted between 45-65 minutes. In most cases, interviews were guided by the set of questions, and probing questions were used in areas that needed further clarification.

The interview data from Penny came from a semi--structured interview that lasted for
two hours, as we explored and discussed different areas of Aboriginal education. Penny asked to not be tape recorded and information from the interview was written down and later summarized as a single document.

The focus group of students consisted of students who had only attended Venus. I did not exclude any students. All of these students have been attending Venus for four or five years and were recruited from the grade 12 English class. All students had been here since elementary school.

### 7.3 Community influences

Venus First Nation School (Venus) is situated in a small community of 500 residents (Canada Census, 2007). As a result of its small size, decisions made by the local board of education can have an immediate impact upon its student population in contrast to what happens at Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter), where decisions of the elected board of trustees are not felt immediately as decisions have two or three administrative levels to filter through. Contact between teachers and school board trustees is minimal or non-existent in the Jupiter school system. This is in contrast to First Nation communities where contact between board member and teachers are made regularly.

In the case of Venus, community influences are comprised of: teacher’s experience, funding, local board of education, small school and quality of local schooling.

**Teaching experience**

There are four non-Aboriginal teachers at Venus First Nation School (Venus) who teach at the high school level. All of the elementary teachers are Aboriginal and live in the community. Melissa is the only secondary staff person that is Aboriginal. Researchers (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Swanson, 2003) stated it was better for schools to have Aboriginal teachers
where there is an Aboriginal student population, as they are more likely to respect Aboriginal culture.

With the exception of Tony and Penny, all interview participants had only worked in First Nation communities and only with First Nation students. Penny, with 23 years of experience, has moved around and taught in other communities several times, she has only worked with First Nation students. Tony is the only non-Aboriginal teacher interviewed in this study group. He has worked in adult education centres in the town of Gyprock (pseudonym) and was formerly the principal of Venus First Nation School. Melissa, guidance counselor, has taken on various positions at Venus and works wherever she is needed, sometimes filling the role of an administrator, counselor and even as acting director of the board of education. She has been part of the Venus community, since moving here from Toronto, Ontario in the 1970’s.

Christine, principal, is Aboriginal and a former graduate of Venus First Nation School (Venus). She was one of the students affected by the community’s takeover of its education system, where local First Nation students were kept out of the non Aboriginal day school located in the nearby town of Diamond (pseudonym). Christine has been part of Venus for the past three years as a teacher and coordinator. In the past year, she took on the role of principal. Her work experience includes 12 years of teaching split between Mars First Nation School (Mars) and Venus. The school has excellent community support. Christine has little experience as the principal of this school and relies upon the guidance of staff and community members.

Taylor (1995a) suggested that most First Nation communities were training grounds for young teachers, who are learning how to teach. Experienced teachers spend less time on behavior management and more time using strategies that will engage their students on learning tasks. At Venus, the elementary school program generally had Aboriginal and experienced teachers while...
the secondary program had non Aboriginal teachers who were generally less experienced. This has contributed to inconsistent programming in the school.

**Funding**

In a small school, funding becomes a major issue. Most schools operate with a teaching ratio of twenty students to one teacher, at Venus First Nation School (Venus) the teaching ratios were less than eight students to one teacher. The school was expected to offer a wide range of subject areas over four grade levels (9, 10, 11, 12) however it was difficult to staff these subject areas with only three or four staff members. Christine, principal, outlined:

[C 11]. And that is what the ministry [of education] requires, so many minutes per class. You can’t split the classes. You might have one grade 9 student and maybe, two grade 10 students. You have to have separate times and separate blocks [of time] even though, you have only a few students. That is our downfall. The teacher might be teaching classes with two students. You can split levels and you can have academic and advanced level, I mean academic and applied levels students together. You can’t have separate grades together [with the same subject such as English]

In addition to the complexity of providing a secondary school program according to Ontario’s Ministry of Education criteria. Christine said that providing secondary schooling was actually hurting the progress and development of the elementary students at Venus.

[C 15]. And the other thing is, [in order] to run a high school, it is very expensive, when the [enrollment] numbers are low. We get paid, we get money per student. So our numbers are greater in the elementary [section]. And then the high school program, the numbers are lower and it is more expensive to run a high school program than elementary. So that all of the money that is there for the elementary [section], we have to subsidize the high school. The [elementary] money is used up all there.

At Venus, there are 100 elementary students and 35 secondary students. According to Christine, providing secondary schooling actually hurts the development of students in the elementary section. Monies, that could have been used to enrich elementary programming, were needed to
supplement the funding shortfalls of the secondary program. She also felt that there were two
other reasons for the funding shortfall: inequity in funding ratios and the wrong formulae used to
calculate funding between provincial and federal schools. She offered the following thoughts:

[C 15]. It is the way that the system is set up again. We get funding per student
like the provincial school. They get all of the money. It’s way more than what we
get here, because of their board of education. They are sponsored by the province.
I don’t know. I don’t know how they determine it. How many schools there are
and how it is divided up.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Canada, 1996), later Postl (2004), Malatest et al.
(2004) and Anderson (2004) have documented the inequity in funding between federal and
provincial schools, which Christine confirmed through her own experience.

Adequate funding is important for a school system to be successful. Without adequate
and current resource materials, students are not able to compete academically and professionally
with students from other communities. Brady (1994), Canada (1996), Postl (2004), Chiefs of
Ontario (2004) and Burns (1998) argued that First Nation communities have been severely
underfunded in terms of education since they started taking control of their own education in the
early 1970’s. This has resulted in inadequate space, less than current resource materials,
inadequate staffing (as communities are not able to keep teachers very long) and in the end, a
less than adequate school system.

Local board of education

Venus First Nation education authority is comprised of seven locally elected board
members who serve the community for two years. In Venus First Nation, a Director of education
was not evident, unlike that of nearby Mars First Nation School (Mars). At Venus First Nation
School (Venus), Hailey was the chair of the board and was an active member of the school
community. She said that the education board made decisions related to the ongoing operation of
the school however they were cautious of micromanaging the school and left many of the
decisions with Christine (principal). Hailey also pointed out that she dropped in at the school
daily and was kept appraised of what was going on and helped out wherever she could such as at
meetings, feasts and celebrations.

Members of the local board of education are involved with the operation of Venus, unlike the
role of the board of trustees found in the public system, where board trustee visits are a
formal event. In Limestone District School Board [personal work experience in Kingston Ontario], for example, board representatives or trustees are called upon to help with the opening ceremonies of most academic and promotional celebrations. Within the smaller community of Venus, there seemed to be less formality to these situations as illustrated by Christine, who discussed how she worked with education board members in resolving different situations. She pointed out that they responded quickly and immediately to her concerns. Christine explained that she had a protocol for decision-making when school emergencies arise. Despite this, she raised an area of concern:

[C 17]. One area that I would like to see [improved] is that the strategic plan [for the school] shared with us. They [board members] haven’t really involved us with the plan and they expect the principal [me] to take the plan, and implement it with the teachers. The teachers have no clue what they have decided. I am trying to make sense of it and bring down the decisions. It is here and you have to do it. If the strategic planning was done with the teachers, I think it would make more sense. They [teachers] would understand why they have to do these things.

According to Christine, the education board members also set the education policy without consultation of the education professionals working for them. Hailey added that the decision-making process was similar to other education boards. First there is a great deal of discussion, where the members try to reach a consensus and finally, voting takes place on the different decisions.
From the above interview data, it is clear that the education board members are included in the procedures and daily functions of Venus. Friedel (1999) wrote that schools with Aboriginal people as board members are likely to have an Aboriginal student population that is successful. This was not true for Venus as it had not graduated any students from its high school program in recent years.

**Small schools**

One of the main topics of discussion, which occurred throughout the interviews, was related to the limitations of the school program. Venus First Nation School (Venus) is small, in terms of student population. In most mainstream secondary schools, such as those in Limestone District School Board (LDSB) in Kingston Ontario, class enrolment varies between 20-30 students, in comparison to classes at Venus which average around 8 students. In Venus First Nation, the secondary school is supposed to provide programming that meets the needs of students across four grade levels covering multiple subjects. According to Ontario Secondary School Guidelines (OSSG), students receive a secondary school graduation diploma when they earn passing grades in 30 courses of study, pass the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) and complete 40 hours of community service. Tony, teacher, presented the following perspective of the school environment:

[T 7]. We are a small staff and we can only offer only so many credits and so many options, given what we need to do, in terms of diploma requirements. That means we tend to offer a pretty academic regiment of courses, generally at the applied level. We are offering math, English, geography, history. We don’t have tech lab or carpentry or the technology courses. Over the course of the year, our school would be very boring to attend. There are not just that many options, that way.

Hailey, education board member, agreed with Tony's perspective and added that she felt that students would have a hard time fitting in all of the required courses. She knew that they
struggled with that expectation. Venus offers a limited program with a limited course selection. Students provided the following comments in answering a question on what they wished for in their school environment.

[S]. More Aboriginal teachers.
[S]. More classes.
[S]. Yeah, more programs
[Rocky]. Ok, more programs. Ok, what kind of programs in particular?
[S]. Like courses not like course that ain’t….
[Rocky]. Academic…
[S]. Yes.
[Rocky]. Like shop classes or cooking?
[S]. Yes.
[S]. Teach other cooking classes.
[S]. Extra-curricular activities.

From the discussion, it was clear that students preferred to stay in their home community. However, they wanted more courses, programs and Aboriginal teachers. Slate & Jones (2005) stated that students enjoyed the comforts related to a small school environment because all of the teachers knew them. In addition, small schools tend to have more of an informal and casual relationship with its students than larger schools (Slate & Jones, 2005).

Quality of local education

Venus First Nation School (Venus) teachers made an effort to provide students with curricula that was similar to what was used by other school programs in the area. Christine, principal, pointed out that Venus parents expect that, when their children left Venus First Nation and went to school in surrounding communities that they would be able to fit into the existing curricula. In addition, Christine had observed that some incoming students were not strong academically and were having trouble coping with the high school program. Ideally, she would like to be able to track the development of student skills in a sequential fashion so that as a staff, they could create effective programs related to their students. Additionally, Hailey, education
board member, said:

[H 6]. We haven’t a graduate in this school not for a number of years. We were looking to see what happened. We are going through some kind of famine. We didn’t get into the reasons. We tried to figure out what were we doing wrong. We need some help, in order to determine what we are not doing right. There is something there that is not right. I don’t know if it is the school itself, or whether it is teachers, or is the parents or a combination of all. I know that there is a problem. We are aware there is a problem there.

The purpose of school is to help create successful students who will go on to be contributing members in the community (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). When it comes to Venus, Hailey and other board members recognized that the school was not graduating students. The question is what can they do about it? Do they continue with the status quo or do they try and do something different? Perhaps, Christine, principal, has the beginnings of a solution, in that she has stated that she would like to map out the individual skills of each of her students. Perhaps, through the identification of skill sets, Christine and her staff could address what the students needed in order to be successful.

**Conclusion**

At Venus First Nation School (Venus), there were 4 secondary school teachers, 3 of whom were not of Aboriginal ancestry. The lone Aboriginal secondary teacher was the language teacher. The teachers’ teaching experience ranged from 3-15 years. They had limited exposure to other educational systems.

Venus is a small secondary school in a small community. It is easily influenced by community members such as Educational Authority Board members. Research (Friedel, 1999) suggested that when students knew that their parents were involved with the operation of the school, they were likely to be successful. All students knew that their school was a result of the community parents taking control of their own education system and initially, they were
successful as shown by the graduates working in the school. However, the situation had changed in recent years.

The secondary school program at Venus was limited by the Ontario's provincial school regulations and could only provide a limited number of courses. This created problems for students when they failed courses and sometimes were left with only taking one or two courses per semester. This situation was also exacerbated by federal funding shortfalls as presented by Postl, (2004) and Malatest et al. (2004). The secondary program had to be supported by the monies from the elementary program. As a result, the school became limited in what they could provide in their elementary school program.

It was clear, from the interview comments, that the teachers and administrators recognized that the school was experiencing some difficult moments with their student population.

7.4 Mental

The direction east teaches us about the mind, the development of its mental capacities. The mental aspect is a reference to the intelligences, development of the mind and development of new knowledge. Some writers such as Bopp et al. (1988) have coined this development as “enlightenment” since new perspectives are revealed through learning and a new beginning is initiated with the new knowledge.

In education, this perspective can be interpreted as data related to the learning realm of the students, for example, in the areas of student characteristics, teaching strategies, relationship building, evaluation strategies, relevant curricula and sequential curricula.

Student characteristics

The student population is made up of 130 Ojibway students from Venus First Nation, 35
of whom made up the secondary school population in the 2006 academic school year. Tony, teacher, stated that average classes have 5-10 students.

Christine, principal, said that Venus First Nation School (Venus) gives students the opportunity to stay in their home community to obtain their secondary schooling. Ward (2005) suggested that this is an ideal situation. Students, with family and kinship support, followed local traditions and had Elder visitations during 2005/06 academic school year.

Melissa and Penny, both long time teachers with 23 and 25 years of experience respectively, outlined that attitudes in the community were changing in a negative way. Students had stopped caring and were very disrespectful of the institutional frameworks of the community. Melissa, guidance teacher, seemed to associate the negative behaviours, of students with the adolescent development. She continued with the following comment on the need for acknowledging different learning styles in order to successfully teach Venus First Nation students:

[M 2]. What I see of the teachers, they will use all of them. They will use the visual, auditory, the kinesthetics, because some kids learn by doing. If a teacher uses all of them, they are better able to connect with the kids. They will learn that concept depending upon what the subject is. I find that if a teacher uses all three learning styles [they will be more successful]. In the classroom, they will have [students with] a variety of learning styles. There will be one [student] who is visual, another [student] who is auditory and another [student] that is kinesthetic. If you teach only using visual, you will miss those other kids. I find that the teacher who uses all three of them will get their message across.

Rehyner (1992a), Schissel & Wotherspoon (2003) and Cleary & Peacock (1998) showed that Aboriginal students have wide and varied learning characteristics that were affirmed by Melissa, with the Venus student population. She pointed out that student learning styles may range from auditory to kinesthetic to visual. Melissa has observed that teachers, who use a variety of approaches, tend to be more successful than other teachers who do not use them. If teachers are
going to be successful with Aboriginal students, they need to be aware of the learning styles of their students and use strategies that enable students to learn effectively (Cleary & Peacock, 1998).

**Teaching strategies**

Melissa, guidance teacher, was the only person of the five people interviewed, who made a comment related to the use of teaching strategies to meet learning styles. Penny, teacher, described how she used traditional Ojibway stories to teach her lessons. Whereas, Tony, teacher, talked about different strategies that he used with his students:

[T3]. What I do, first I try and start with a lecture type model, basically where I explain to them what the concepts are. I teach History and English. [I] explain what the concept is, do a real overview, if it is short stories, overview of the genre. [Outline] what to expect in short stories and go through a lesson. What a short story is about. What a novel is about. Begin from that perspective. If they haven’t had it before, if they had it before, it is a review. If it’s new material, then they are getting it as new material. Working it, or approaching it. The novel, if it is bent that way. If it’s sectional or if it’s in chunks. Have them read those chunks, work through the themes that are played out in that. I don’t spend a lot of time talking about character and character development or things like that with the senior students, we spend the time doing that with the grade nines and a little bit with the grade tens.

Tony contradicts what Melissa says will work with their students. In addition, he promoted a lecture overview with a focus on understanding what he was teaching. Mars First Nation School teachers felt that this would not work and perhaps given the recent lack of success at graduating students, they may be right. Yet, students, who had Tony as a teacher, offered the following comments:

[Rocky] How do your teachers teach you here? That is one of the things that I want to know. What kinds of things do they do here?
[S]. Like writing notes, lectures.
[Rocky]. Are there any classes with a lecture and notes that follow?
[S]. Sometimes.
[Rocky]. Watch a video?
[S] Not really.
[Rocky] They just give you the work and that is it?
[S.] Around here, there are no options. You just do lectures, notes.
[Rocky]. If you went to school in Kingston, you would have teachers doing the same thing.
[S]. It is not any different.
[Rocky]. Which way do you like best? Do you have a particular way that you like learning? Do you like taking notes all of the time or when someone comes in lectures.
[S]. Yes.
[S] Lectures.
[S]. No, we learn more. It is more interesting. They explain it more. We can pass on the information.

From the interview, I was able to witness that students were quite clear about how they liked to learn. In their minds, they enjoyed teachers talking and discussing issues with them. This is contrary to what the research (Rehyner, 1992a, Pewewardy, 2002) has shown where Rehyner and Pewewardy state that Aboriginal students are mainly visual and kinesthetic learners. It is noteworthy to acknowledge that these same students are close (50 kilometers) to Mars First Nation School, where teachers stressed using visual/kinesthetic type strategies with their students. There are some connections between the two communities such as similar lifestyles, which are economically, geographically and culturally alike.

**Relationship building**

Small schools’ researchers (Slate & Jones, 2005) stated that relationship building was important. Teachers knew their students well. Tony, English teacher, said this about his teaching approach.

[T 1]. They [meaning other teachers from mainstream schools] couldn’t handle the stress of working with these kids. The kids come from much different backgrounds, in terms of values. We don’t have the same type of restrictions. And so when you try and have it so where you can only leave the classroom when you say so [a student must get permission from the teacher to leave the classroom], you run into confrontations. If a kid goes or not. If I choose to have that problem, it is my problem. The kids will come back. They know that when they leave, that
they are not supposed to be gone too long. I don’t restrict it, if you want to go to the bathroom, find the way. You are adults, you can use the bathroom. If you miss something important, I will let you know what that is. You know where you go from there. You know, we have had people who are really tense. Because of that, the job was giving them [teachers who are really tense] stress. And they would start getting into confrontations with the kids. The kids would close up and wouldn’t work for them and they would think that the kids were in-capable of doing the work and the kids felt that and so they would shut down more. So, they [students and teacher] would get into all kinds of power struggles over that.

In Tony’s opinion, it was important to have a casual relationship with his students. He felt that if he was able to eliminate the power struggles, he could get on with the job of teaching and students could get on with their job of learning. Researchers (Rehyner, 1992a; Danyluk, 1998; Pewewardy, 2002; Bazylak, 2002) supported this idea of being flexible. Tony treated his students, as young adults and expected them to behave as such. In addition, this allowed him to be able to talk with them about various issues within the community. He said that small classes allowed him to reach out to his students and make personal connections with them. In some ways, Tony's approach was consistent with the ethic of respecting individual autonomy as presented by Ross (1992) and Spielmann (1998). Tony allowed his students to make choices and be accountable for their own learning. Danyluk (1998), Bazylak (2002), Swanson (2003) and Powers et al. (2003) explained that good relationships between teachers and students are important for their success. Melissa, guidance teacher, affirmed this idea:

[M 2]. The teachers need to know who the kids are. It is good that they know the families or the family that the kid comes from. I have found that teachers that live here, or are from here, relate much more effectively with our kids than those who are, excuse the expression, outsiders. We do have teachers who commute on a daily basis. When they walk out that door at 4:00 p.m. they leave it all behind.

Melissa and Hailey thought that teachers, who live in the community, were more effective than teachers who commute to their school from other communities. This opinion is in contrast to what Tony and his students maintained where they (students) felt that high school teachers do
care about their progress. Meanwhile, researchers (Ward, 2005; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Seguin Brant, 2001; Bazylak, 2002; Rehyner, 1992a) have shown that Aboriginal students are more successful when they are able to have casual and meaningful relationships with their teachers. Teachers, in a small school setting, can provide students with time and care.

**Evaluation strategies**

Students at Venus First Nation School (Venus) were evaluated by most teachers through the use of rubrics that outlined not only the expectations but also how a student was marked.

Tony, teacher, said:

[T 4]. This one, when they get into their essays, we will use a rubric. It is not so much provincially mandated, but as much as a guideline for that. I will use a rubric to mark an essay. They will get the rubric ahead of time, to prepare them for the expectations for any major assignments like that.

He ensured that his students had the rubric ahead of time so that they could use it as a guideline to form their assignments. Melissa, guidance teacher, outlined how rubrics provided more detail and structure than the old report card system did. She also told us how important rubrics were for student and parent learning, as both parties could observe how the student was progressing.

Students also had to complete tests, quizzes and various types of project work. Students from the focus group offered the following thoughts:

[Rocky] What kind of things do you do to earn your marks in school? How am I going to give you marks?
[S]. Do the work. Tests. Work on other stuff.
[S]. You have the answers. It is a bit difficult.
[Rocky]. You have tests you do. You have assignments to do, and you have projects.

Venus teachers used a wide variety of evaluation techniques to enable their students to show their understanding and knowledge. This point is consistent with researchers (Goddard & Shields, 1997; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Ward, 2005) who stated that students were more
successful when teachers use varied assessment strategies.

**Relevant curricula**

All teachers commented that Aboriginal culture was incorporated in Venus First Nation School’s (Venus) program. Christine, principal, stated that many of her elementary teachers blended Aboriginal culture as part of their daily lesson plans. Penny, an elementary teacher, said that she started her classes with an opening circle and smudging ceremony [a ceremony that is used to clear the mind of negative thoughts by covering oneself in the smoke of a traditional medicine such as sweetgrass or sage]. According to Melissa, guidance counselor, students had the option to not participate in cultural activities. Christine outlined how culture was brought into the school:

[C 4]. We do a lot of activities school wide. We have a drum for this school. So we will do all of our feasting [with the drum]. The students know what it takes to have a ceremony. This fall, the high school students were able to go hunting. They got to fish and hunt duck. And then some of the older ones, grades seven and eights, got to clean them. So they did the cooking and they got to clean the bear. Yes, then it was the grades fives and sixes, who went and did all the cooking for the feast. It was done in our big three day conference. There was hunting, preparing and then cooking. I was surprised because all I had to do was stand there, and watch. That’s how far we are now. They [students] bring in the drum and they know how to smudge it. They know how to set up the chairs. They know what direction the poles go, [they know how to do] everything.

In addition, she said that she encouraged weekly Elder visitations along with guest visits by community members. They would lead different workshops with students. Tony offered:

[T 6]. Here in this community, it is very difficult to ignore culture because the kids, while they may not themselves, be fluent speakers, they are aware of their culture. They understand more Anishinaabe [an Ojibway word meaning the people and their language] than they speak. We often find in the school there are cultural ceremonies or celebrations or different things. It is not brought into the classroom but it is never excluded from the classroom, if that kind of makes sense. You know it is recognized as being there.

He felt that, as the school was located on a First Nation community and was attended by First
Nation students, there really is no other culture than Ojibway present in Venus. This is an interesting point, as research literature (Canada, 1996; Mosher-Rae, 2001) would disagree. In both studies, the authors noted how some schools, despite being located on and in a First Nation, actually discredit the culture by not being legitimately placed in the school system. For example, Mosher-Rae (2001) explained how community members discouraged the inclusion of Aboriginal culture into the school curricula. This point is different from what actually happens at Venus where teachers such as Tony and Penny blended in Aboriginal content wherever they could.

Christine supported this statement with the following:

[C 1]. Mostly in the elementary teachers they do [use Aboriginal culture]. The high school [teachers], they don’t seem to [want to learn about Native culture]. Either they don’t have the desire to learn or they don’t think it [Native culture] is important.

Christine and Hailey were concerned that secondary teachers were not supportive of Aboriginal culture in their school community. Christine knows that teacher support is important in producing successful students (Ward, 2005). Yet, secondary school teachers are not aware of how important their acknowledgment of the culture is to the community members around them. When secondary teachers provide support, they legitimize the credibility of Aboriginal culture in the eyes of their students. There seems to be some confusion related to curricula integration between Tony’s perception and what Hailey and Christine had observed. Tony believed that he was integrating Aboriginal perspectives in his curriculum and they (Hailey and Christine) did not see it.

**Sequential curricula**

Hailey, board member, shared her concerns that students and teachers did not have a sequential curriculum format in which skills were organized by grade and age levels. She said:
I have visions of what I want to see with the school but they are only my visions. Like I told you one, I want to see the people from the reserve, teaching our kids from the reserve. Another one is I want to see, you know, our curriculum start from kindergarten and progress all the way to grade 12. Like in grade one you are going to know this and in grade two, you are going to know this, in grade three this. You know, like sequential learning. All the way up to grade 12. But it is not. It is not happening right now. I want to know [as education board member] that the grade one teacher will tell the grade two teacher [what skills and knowledge that the students achieved] and the grade two teacher will tell them [the parents] what the grade one teacher will know when they [students] get to grade two. Things are going to start, you know. You know, little kids will come in and the kids don’t know how to even spell their name.

Christine agreed. She stated that, it would be great to be able to track student skill development.

She expressed her concern related to the lack of a clear curricula guideline that identified skills and knowledge to be learned by students to her education board members.

**Conclusion**

The interview comments pointed that students in Venus First Nation School (Venus) were able to live at home and gain credits for a high school diploma. Melissa, guidance teacher, stated that understanding the concept of varied learning styles was important. Teachers used a variety of teaching strategies. They also felt that it was important to have casual and personal relationships with their students in order to engage them in the school program. Bazylak (2002) and Van Hamme (1996) pointed out that varied teaching approaches, along with good relationships combined with varied and appropriate assessment strategies enhanced the success of Aboriginal students. Some interview respondents felt that it was important to incorporate Aboriginal culture within the school curriculum and environment while others felt that it was important to teach students with programs that offered business opportunities. A key concern raised related to the need of finding or developing a tool that would track and monitor the attainment of academic and social skills for each student. As a result of not being able to track
the progress of their students, some teachers were concerned that students were not being taught all of the necessary skills to succeed.

Schissel & Wotherspoon (2003), Bazylak (2002) and Ward (2005) suggested in order for students to succeed, they had to be taught with varied teaching strategies and be assessed with appropriate assessment activities. They also said that Aboriginal students enjoyed having causal and relaxed relationships with their teaching staff. Students and teachers at Venus affirmed that these three aspects were occurring. Additionally, it was important to have curriculum that was relevant to the needs of the students (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). Staff were concerned that they were unable to do this successfully. There was also a concern about the skills sets being developed by students within the school community.

7.5 Emotional

The south direction teaches us about emotions and our feelings related to them. The emotional aspect is a reference to how we feel about an issue (Bopp et al., 1988). At times, our emotions affect our desire to live and work. Our emotions connect us to our motivations and let us understand why we do something (Bopp et al., 1988).

When we look at emotions in education, we look at how a student relates to the school environment. We look at what encourages students to have the desire to attend school. We also look at how a student is supported, emotionally, during his or her time at school.

During the interviews, students, teachers and administrators commented on the following areas: expectations, communication with parents, self-esteem and parental support.

Expectations

Students at Venus First Nation School (Venus) believed that teachers expected them to come to class and do well. Tony, teacher, stated:
What I expect from them is to try and do the best to their ability. I expect them, when they come to class, to try to do their work. If they are having a tough day, for reasons outside, let me know. Accommodations could be made. If they don’t understand something, I really want them to tell me that they don’t understand it.

He knows that if he is persistent, in terms of reminding students to complete their school work, they will eventually get their work completed. Melissa, guidance teacher, expected her students to be open to her suggestions and many of them were. Christine, principal, on the other hand, expected her students to do well and to realize that they should be proud of where they were growing up and going to school.

I guess the message that I am trying to get across to my students is that, the way that we live in here is totally different than any town, from any place, from any Aboriginal community. And there is nothing wrong with the way we live here. That is the message that is out there. Your life really matters, and that is the message that I am telling them. The stuff, that you learn here, will not be found in any curriculum.

Positive teacher perceptions and high expectations were considered important for student success by researchers (Van Hamme, 1996; Canada, 1996; Bazylak, 2002). Each of the interviewed participants expected different things from their students. Tony wanted good work ethics, Melissa wanted honesty and Christine wanted her students to be proud of where they live. It is clear that the interview participants had positive perceptions of their students.

Communication with parents

It is important to maintain a positive relationship in order to keep good communication with parents and community members (Friedel, 1999). Christine, principal, said:

I usually talk to them first. The parents [when] they come in here will blow off steam first. I just listen. For me, I don’t know if that is part of our values. But that’s me. When I am talked to, I just listen. By the time they are done, they have gotten rid of [their anger]. By then I can ask them, ‘so what do you think. What do you think what we should do.’ I make it their idea. ‘Ok, I will arrange that.’ You know whatever they suggested. If they want me to talk to that teacher I will. I will
tell them, at some point, they will have to meet. I try and encourage a solution in a more positive way.

While talking with parents, Christine tried to be patient and calm. She also talked about a time when she was looking for volunteers and sent a letter home to which the parents didn’t react positively because she was contacting them. Parents became threatened when the school made contact with them. Aboriginal parents, in general, do not have a positive history with the school environment as a result of their own negative experience or with residential school (Barman, 1996; Canada, 1996). Melissa, guidance teacher, further explained:

[M 7]. Yeah, right, every parent, they don’t want to hear negative stuff about their child. And if they know that a teacher is coming to the house, which is what they [precisely] think. That is what I thought right away when a teacher showed up at my house. ‘What are they going to tell me about my child? How rotten he is in school? How badly he is doing in school. I don’t need to hear that.’ Right away, your defenses are up. You start to feel guilty as a parent. How did I fail? All of the defense barriers are up.

Melissa outlined how Aboriginal parents did not like to hear bad news. Deslandes et al. (1997) stated that parental support is important but yet, when teachers contacted the home, there was a limit to what they wanted to hear. For many parents, when a teacher contacts the home too many times, it can negatively impact the development of their children (Deslandes et al., 1997). Melissa outlined how students and parents reacted similarly with the following question, what I have done now. She described an approach that some teachers used in the community:

[M 8]. My approach is, your child is having trouble reading. What would you suggest? The parent will come around and say maybe I should start reading to them at night. Good idea. Or I could have the child read to me. Good idea. Let it [the idea] come from home [the parent] instead of the other way around [the teacher]. I got the parent thinking [and break the notion that when] the teacher is coming over here, [he or she is not] going to tell me what to do with my child.

Melissa reiterated the importance of being non-threatening in order to establish a positive relationship with the parent. She felt that it was important to empower the parents by letting them
come up with a solution to problem. Tony, teacher, provided a different perspective in terms of what he communicated to parents:

[T 10]. I let parents know when their child is not doing well on the report cards. I don’t give them funny little Johnny is doing really and is a great student, keep up the good work, and by the way he has only got 43 percent. No, I say that when somebody is doing really well. I will scratch it out and list their weaknesses.

Tony had different approach as he would state the deficiencies of the child and outline what needed to be done to fix the academic issues. This is contrary to what Melissa and Christine stated where they encouraged the Aboriginal parent to come up with a solution for their children.

Tony told or made suggestions on how parents could support their children whereas Melissa and Christine, empowered the parents, indirectly addressed the situation and let the parent come up with their own solution. Ross (1992) and Spielmann (1998) would be supportive of the latter approach where maintenance and development of personal autonomy was an important cultural attribute.

In order to be successful, teachers need to consider other approaches as they attempt to get their parents engaged in the school program and in the lives of their children. Researchers have pointed out the importance of linking parents to the schools in different ways as it helps to create a positive feeling with the school environment (Friedel, 1999; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). Melissa, guidance teacher, and Christine, principal, know that they have the support of local community members and parents of their students and can get parental support in ways that are culturally appropriate ways.

Self-esteem

One of the concerns, frequently raised during the interviews, was the issue of self-esteem. Christine, principal, pointed out that when Venus students participated in events at other high
schools such as those in nearby Gypsum or Copper, they became intimidated by the larger schools as those schools had organized cheerleading squads. Tony, teacher, pointed out:

[T 7]. I think they struggle with self-esteem, in terms that they are not that successful at school, some of them do. They struggle with the fact that the school is not able to give them things that they want or what they need. We do our best.

He also identified that a shortcoming felt by students in going to a small school was accessing resources and school programs. In addition, Tony said that students perceived that there were differences in the quality of their school programming when compared to schooling found at Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter):

[T 6]. They sometimes question their school. ‘This is just a bullshit school. This is just an Indian school.’ Sometimes, they say things like that. They don’t think that other schools are doing the same thing. They think this is way easy school. We [Venus] get kids who come back and do better here than they do when they are in Copper. They get this idea that our school [Venus] is way easier. I don’t know if it is as much as the school is easier here or whether they do get the attention that they deserve. In the classroom, where the numbers are smaller I and the other teachers can provide them with more assistance or as they need it or want it.

He said that students don’t realize that they do better in Venus because of the care and attention that they obtain, something that they do not receive in larger schools.

Yet, students still perceived differences and this was fueled by what they saw on television. Christine said that her students were influenced by television programs and compared their lifestyle with what they watched. They realized that that their life was not the best. Even though, the teachers in the school spend a lot of time developing their students’ self-esteem, it disintegrated when they started to look outside of their community.

Melissa seemed to think that this perspective leads to self-imposed peer pressures, where students started to deliberately fail because they were scared of leaving the community.

[M 6]. It is like a typical trend. When they are graduating, they may be one or two credits short. They deliberately blow it. Why do I think like that? Because all
along, they are pulling off 70 percent and 80 percent and in some cases, 90 percent. And they get close, bang, it’s down to 30 percent. They’re not showing up for class, they are not doing class assignments and they’re not handing in their homework. So I feel it is deliberate. And I am wondering, why? Is it because they don’t want to leave here? What is the hold?

It appeared that small school schooling has affected the students to the point of where they are fearful of leaving their small and secure community. Many researchers have identified that one of the major issues that Aboriginal students have to address, is the transition to the outside (of the community) institutions (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Malatest et al., 2004; Ward, 2005; Ferguson et al., 2005). Students need to feel confident and safe when they venture outside of their First Nation.

Parental support

Venus First Nation School (Venus) was started through the efforts of parents in the community in 1974 (York, 1990). Christine, principal and member of this community, highlighted the importance of parental and community support.

[C 13]. When we had our own school, our parents took over. I was fortunate enough because we had these teachers that I had in high school and even in elementary [school] that they all believed in me and that was what carried me [through the program]. Because I had people calling me and telling me what to do, that this community was wrong by taking control [of its education system]. [It was] because we were the first ones to have control in Canada.

She also said that it was important to make contributions to the community. Christine identified some of the fears that she had when she was forced to go to a school outside of her community. She also highlighted how important parental and community support were to her development as a student and as a professional. This is exactly what Hailey, education board member, hoped for when they set up the school. The students would come back, as adults, to help out and develop their community of Venus First Nation. Tony offered the following observation:
But what happens when you have students who have parents, who are interested and who come and talk with the school? They tend to be high achieving. They are generally on pace to graduate. There is a value placed on education by that family. I think that is fairly typical of other communities as well. Not just here.

The students, who have the support of their parents and families, will be successful. However, parenting or parental support is a continuing concern for the teachers in this community. Hailey, Tony and Melissa agreed that there was a lack of parental participation in the lives of their students. They recognized that parents do not have a habit of being involved with their child’s education. Tony offered the following:

[1]. Basically it would come down as, I would not say, it is a cultural difference, but perhaps a difference in the way most kids are parented here. I would say it is not a cultural thing. It is probably due to something here. I couldn’t put a finger on it.

Students, in the focus group, had this to say about their parent’s role:

[Rocky]. Your parents don’t come in and say, ‘It’s time to get out of here and I don’t want you sleeping all day?’
[S]. My parents do that for me.
[Rocky]. Your parents do that for you? You would be still sleeping today if you didn’t have that?
[S]. Yes.
[S]. Not me.
[S]. The sun wakes me up.
[Rocky]. The sun wakes you up?
[S]. Yes

Within the student group, there were mixed reactions related to the role of the parents. Some students had parents or grandparents that would get them to school while other students were left to get up and make the decisions on their own. Hailey, education board member, said that 1/3 of the students had parental support and were often successful in the school program. In addition, Hailey, Christine and Tony wondered how parents could not be involved with their child’s education.
Melissa thought that parents had been scared away by the negative feedback from the school. Hailey recognized that it was important for parents to start being parents and confront their children to get them to attend school. She did not understand how parents could let their children stay in bed and not go to school.

Ross (1992) and Spielmann (1998) outlined that Ojibway people did not believe in interfering in the affairs of other people as part of their cultural ethics. In Aboriginal communities, it was considered rude to tell someone to do something. A child, 14 years of age or older is considered to be near adult, or someone who knows better. It was impolite to tell them to do something. In our current society, we are told that they, as 14 year old teens, are not adults, and need to be told what to do. Some researchers (Ledlow in Brady, 1996) have pointed out that this situation is reflective of cultural conflict or cultural discontinuity where:

Culturally based differences, in the communication styles of the minority students’ home and the Anglo culture of the school, leads to conflicts, misunderstandings and ultimately, failure for those students. (Ledlow 1992: 23)

Brady (1996) discredited this idea by stating that issues of student failure are more related to socio-economic factors such as income levels and employment rates. Researchers (Canada, 1996; Danyluk, 1998; Bazylak, 2002; Seguin Brant, 2003; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003) suggested that there was some support to cultural misunderstandings between school and home.

Conclusion

Teachers at Venus First Nation School (Venus) had varied expectations of their students, all of which were positive. However, students had a different perception, where they thought that their teachers expected them to attend class regularly and do well academically. Researchers (Van Hamme, 1996; Canada, 1996; Bazylak, 2002) have pointed out that if teachers and administrators have high expectations, they are likely to be more successful.
Communication with parents is important for student success (Friedel, 1999; Deslandes et al., 1997). However the quality and kind of communication can determine the kind of success that a teacher will have. Some parents become tuned out by too many negative phone calls and become less supportive of the school program. One teacher suggested that it was important to empower Aboriginal parents by getting them to suggest solutions to school concerns. Parental support was important for students to be successful.

Student self esteem was an important issue for the teachers of Venus. They recognized that students became negative about themselves in comparison to students outside of their community. In many ways, this feeling became self destructive as students, close to graduating, would fail instead of graduating. It was better to stay in their home community, knowing everyone and everything. Teachers and parents knew that they needed to do something differently to change this mind set.

7.6 Spiritual

The direction west teaches about spirituality. West is considered to be an area where Aboriginal culture is affirmed and shared (Bopp et al., 1988). When we look at spirituality, we look at its components: language, ceremony and ways of transmitting knowledge.

In education, spirituality is often ignored in the public school sector, but in some First Nation communities, Aboriginal spirituality is very strong, as in the case of Venus First Nation School. The following pages outline how spirituality is presented and encouraged in this school environment: culture of the school and language.

Culture of the school

Venus First Nation School (Venus), located in the heart of Northwestern Ontario, is able to maintain its cultural links with its traditional culture in that fishing and hunting are still
important economies of the community. Like other First Nation communities, in Venus First Nation there are other religious faiths which co-exist with each other, such as Catholicism, Baptistism and Anglicanism. Melissa, guidance counselor, presented the breakdown of the school population:

[M 4]. We do have a mixture [of religions at Venus]. We do have people who follow the Catholic faith. [They will participate in cultural activities] depending upon where the child is coming from, and the kind of feedback that they get at home. I had one parent call me up and asked me, ‘Why was their child participating in smudging [cleansing ceremony done at the beginning of meetings or events]?’ One of the teachers was doing some smudging. He didn’t want his child to participate, but the child made a choice. This is the thing that we run into.

Venus provides its students with opportunities to participate in various cultural activities. Christine, principal, added that the school participates in Aboriginal ceremonies such as traditional feasting which occurs during each of the respective seasons. She stated that the whole school was involved with the feasting with each of the grades having a particular role to perform. These are activities that are not acknowledged in Ontario school curricula but yet, teach students structure and protocols that are necessary to be a member of Venus First Nation. This is in contrast to the school program at Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter) where Aboriginal cultural activities were not included as part of the regular school program, rather it was included as enrichment.

Christine and Hailey also stated earlier that elementary teachers were better at blending in cultural traditions into the school program than secondary teachers. They stated that the integration of culture stopped at the secondary level. Christine said:

[C 2]. I think it is the high school [that] teachers don’t want to do it. They don’t seem to get involved with it. They do a little bit of it, [perhaps] they don’t know enough about it [culture]. A lot of them aren’t from around here and haven’t grown up around here.
They thought that the issues would change if there was an Aboriginal secondary teacher, who lived and worked in the community. Researchers (Bazylak, 2002; Swanson, 2003; Ward, 2005) suggested that Aboriginal teachers would be more open for a better integration of culture within their school program thereby making students realize that their culture was important and related to their education. Incorporating Aboriginal culture into a school’s environment is dependent upon the staff and its leadership (Toulouse, 2004). This is affirmed by Hailey.

**Language**

In order for a group to maintain its culture, one has to maintain its language (York, 1990; Spielmann, 1998; Lickers, 2004). Tony, teacher, pointed out that his students knew that their culture was all around them and it was difficult to get away from. He said that Venus students have knowledge of the language, but do not speak it while in school. Research (Canada, 1996; Mosher-Rae, 2001; Ward, 2005) pointed out that a school might be in a First Nation’s community, but that will not necessarily perpetuate the values and aspirations of the local community. Burns (1998) and Agbo (2004) made the suggestion that elements of the “hidden curriculum,” might discredit or delegitimize Aboriginal culture in the classroom. Perhaps, this attitude accounted for the lack of attendance by students in a secondary language course as they may have felt that taking an Aboriginal language course was not important for their success as students.

There are many local teachers in the elementary panel, who speak Ojibway and use it within the school environment. I observed that Ojibway seemed to be part of the school’s language of commerce as conversations were carried out between teachers as it was used in the staff room and school halls. Hailey offered the following thoughts:

[H 12]. What I am doing, in the meantime, what I am doing is our language, our
language, our ways on the reserve. We can do it. I know we can do it. But it is going to take time.

Hailey said that Venus First Nation had gone through a phase where the use of the language was set aside but was now seeing the revitalization of Ojibway by community members. Lickers (2004), Spielmann (1998) and Goddard and Shields (1997) have shown us through their studies that language was important in maintaining connections to the culture.

**Conclusion**

The study participants, from Venus First Nation School, stated that Ojibway culture was an important part of the school community. This was evident in that the school was located in Venus First Nation. In addition, the principal and community members blended cultural activities within the school program. The instruction of Ojibway language was important to both Aboriginal staff and community members. However, at Venus, it was not a factor in determining whether students graduated or not.

7.7 **Physical**

The direction north teaches us about rest and reflection (Bopp et al., 1988). We get reflection through involvement with doing. Many people believe that if one has a healthy body, then one will have a healthy mind. When we look at the physical component, we look at how it is related to the food that people eat, the physical activity that they do and the reflection that they get as a result of that physical activity.

In education, when we look at the physical needs of students, we ask, what is the school community doing to meet the physical needs of the Aboriginal students in their school setting? In this case, physical needs are addressed through extra-curricular activities.

**Extra-curricular activities**
Teachers and administrators had little to say when it came to this area of student development. However, students were the ones to talk openly about the activities in which they participated. During the interview, they pointed out that last year there were a couple of them who went to Mars First Nation School (Mars) to play on their volleyball team. Locally, there were not enough players of either gender to create a team to participate in Northwestern Ontario Secondary School Association (Norwossa) League play.

No one from the student focus group commented about how the school offered students activities after school hours as was highlighted by interview participants from Mars. Christine, principal, said that they were limited, by enrolment, in what they could offer their students in terms of school programming. It was noted that Venus staff provided opportunities for a limited sports program. Extra-curricular programming encourages and enhances the motivation of students to participate more effectively within their school environment (Whitbeck et al., 2001; Ferguson et al., 2005). However, school size has an effect upon the programming at Venus, especially with respect to limiting extra-curricular programming. Students pointed out that parents and the school community made an effort to get students involved by participating with another local First Nations team, such as when two boys played Senior Boys volleyball with Mars in 2004/05.

Conclusion

There were limited interview comments related to extracurricular involvement with the physical area of the medicine wheel. Venus’ staff made an effort to provide extra-curricular opportunities but they were limited by a small student population. Schools that provide extra-curricular programs in which Aboriginal students participate are likely to have successful Aboriginal student populations.
7.8 Circle centre

Circle centre is a reflection of all that is around the circle, which is why it is known as the heart of the circle. It represents a balance of the four directions (Hill, 1999; Bazylak, 2002; Hart, 2002). When we talk of student success, we ask questions related to those aspects that affect attendance and student completion of school credits. Within the set of interview questions, one question directly asked what participants thought were the factors necessary for student success. All teachers and administrators agreed that it was necessary for a student to have good parental support. However, they also offered information related to the following areas: issues that inhibit student success; and identifying and characterizing student success.

Issues that inhibit success

Students at Venus First Nation School (Venus), faced issues related to isolationism such as being limited in opportunities as a result of attending a small school. Additionally, they have limited choices in their school course selections as well as limited extra-curricular opportunities. Melissa, guidance teacher, observed disrespectful behaviours in the Venus school environment which she attributed to the frustrations of living in a small community. She felt that these behaviours were not conducive to creating a positive learning climate. In addition, she noticed that students, who were getting close to graduating, deliberately failed. They stopped doing class assignments or handing in homework. Melissa thought that students might fear leaving their safe and secure environment. This point confirmed what Hailey had stated earlier about students not leaving. It seemed that students were reluctant to leave the community, but at the same time, were frustrated and bored with the lack of opportunity. Tony highlighted earlier that students would look around and say, ‘What is the point of going out? If I have all these skills, I will not be able to find a job anyway. I may as well stay.’
Students were faced with challenges related to self-esteem, lack of course variety, lack of options for school programming and employment prospects in their own community.

Researchers (Taylor et al., 1996; Canada, 1996) pointed out that communities, with high unemployment rates, have a discouraging future as students see no value in the school program.

**Identifying and characterizing student success**

Success, in the context of this study, has focused on students earning enough credits to graduate from high school. At Venus First Nation School (Venus), success was characterized in three ways: models for success; parental involvement; and changes in school programming. In the first years of its inception, Venus produced 11 graduates, of whom Penny had kept track. She stated that they had gone on to become contributing members in society, some of whom had returned to Venus First Nation. Hailey pointed out that Christine was one of those former graduates and was a role model for all to see. She was one of the first graduates of Venus who went on to university, became certified to teach and now, became the principal at Venus. In addition to Christine, there were several other elementary teachers who were also graduates of their school program and had made the decision to return to the community to teach.

As models of success and as successful graduates, Christine and her colleagues have tried to inspire their students to strive to succeed in the academic environment. Christine, principal, explained why she chose to come back to Venus First Nation after her graduation, knowing that there were other options in her life. She illustrated this through a story:

> For me, I choose to live on a First Nation. That is a choice that we all make, I choose to work in a First Nation’s community, knowing that as a teacher I am going to be underpaid. I am not going to get the same salary that I would get if I were working in a provincial school system. Knowing that there is not enough resources in that school and knowing that a lot of the curriculum that we teach to the kids is not in there. I have to be a better person and learn about that. I know that I will have to live in that community and I know that I am not going to have a
Christine said that choosing to work on a First Nation’s community was choice of the heart, knowing that there are other options in life. She felt that she had to give something back to the community because of the support that they had given her. This perspective is reflective of the values found in Aboriginal communities (Spielmann, 1998; Ross, 1992) where Aboriginal people are expected, as community members, to make contributions to their community.

Christine, principal, pointed out that it was important to have the support of parents and teachers in order for students to be successful. She said:

[C 13]. The parents make the students do their work. The teachers [must] believe in the students. I think that is what it was for me. I always felt that I owed these guys, because I always was so lucky that I had my parents who believed in me to stay in school. [They] told me from grade five, that I was going to be a teacher, and they nurtured that. And now, coming to this school and [being in charge of] these teachers, it was totally different.

She felt that it was important for teachers and community to believe in the students with whom that they were working. Melissa, guidance teacher, added that successful students were punctual and prepared for class. Tony, teacher, added that students, who have been successful, usually had the support of their parents as discussed above. He also described how he would not pass a student unless he knew that they had the skills to succeed:

[T 9]. I don’t pass kids just because they show up. When a student gets a credit, they deserve the credit. I don’t believe you should give people something for nothing. Showing up isn’t enough. There are certain things that you need to do. My hope is that as students are successful. They get their grade and they will go off to college. If they go off to college and they can’t function. I didn’t do them any favours. That’s why.

Melissa and Christine stated that students needed to work hard in the school program. Tony stated that students must be accountable and responsible for their schoolwork in order to earn passing grades.
Yet, there was a concern that the Ministry of Education Guidelines restricted the school's ability to offer a well rounded and rich school program to her students. The guidelines were very limiting for a small high school. Tony, teacher, said that the school community needed to look at ways to generate economic development and economic opportunity for its students and young people. He suggested:

[T 12]. I would like to see more parental involvement. I would like to see more focus around the community like in terms economic development. It would give the kids something to shoot for. I have an idea in my head. Sometimes it would be really nice to run a seniors program built around an entrepreneurial idea. Focus all of the courses towards operating a small business and work with a team of kids and do that because there is only one successful business in the community, [it is the] corner store/gas bar. Be able to, as the community does grow in terms of population, the Band Council [local government] can’t employ everybody. There isn’t enough money there but there needs to be some way to keep some of the wealth that is generated here in the community and to bring wealth in from somewhere else and create opportunity.

Tony wanted to see high school courses structured to reflect some kind of small business perspective. He suggested that local community members could provide support to create a successful tourist operation but lacked managerial skills. If the school had a focus on developing these skills, the community would be better served. Alternative programming, such as hospitality and tourism, were raised as possible solutions to some of the dilemmas that were facing Venus.

Students in the focus group affirmed the ideas outlined by Christine and Tony that the school needed more programs and more variety in course selection. Students are likely to drop out or disengage from the school process when they feel bored or sense that school has nothing to offer them (Mackay & Myles, 1995; Canada, 1996; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Ferguson et al., 2005). Schools have to keep the curricula and school program interesting and challenging in order to retain the current student population.

**Conclusion**
In Venus First Nation School (Venus), issues related to student success were identified as lack of opportunity and reasons for attending school. Students did not have any need to get their Ontario Secondary School Diploma and/or go to post secondary schooling as there were few jobs for them when they returned.

In order to have successful students, teaching staff at Venus knew that they needed to have good school programming, supporting parents and teaching staff who believed in their students, and an engaging school environment. This is consistent with what researchers (Bazylak 2002; Schissel & Wotherspoon 2003) have found out.
Chapter 8  Mercury Internet High School

In the following pages, I will outline the findings from Mercury Internet High School interview participants in the following categories: community influences, mental health issues, emotional health issues, spiritual health issues, physical health issues and student success issues. The following table, similar to Table 3, reflects data themes that emerged from three different sets of questions for each respective interview sample: administrators, teachers and students. Similar questions were used for each sample group in each school and yet, what is notable is that there were slight differences in the content of the data themes. For example, in the emotional area, the themes of Mercury Internet High School were slightly different than that of Venus or Mars First Nation Schools (Venus or Mars). Creating a comfortable classroom and role of Mercury School in the lives of their students emerged as being important whereas communication with parents was important for Venus while motivation became a topic in Mars.

Table 8.1: Themes related to medicine wheel

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community influences</th>
<th>Mercury Internet High School</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community influences</td>
<td>Teacher background.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Funding.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Community partnerships.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Role of the education board.</td>
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<td>Small schools.</td>
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<td>Quality of local education.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Mental</th>
<th>Mercury Internet High School</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental</td>
<td>Student characteristics.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship as a teaching strategy.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teaching strategies.</td>
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<td>Evaluation strategies.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Relevant curricula.</td>
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<th>Emotional</th>
<th>Mercury Internet High School</th>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Expectations.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Role of Mercury Internet High School in the lives of their students.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Creating a comfortable classroom environment.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-esteem.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Parental support.</td>
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Table 8.2: Interview Participants

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<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Principal 4th year, former teacher with 16 years of experience Non-Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Guidance and administrative support, 23 years experience Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phil</td>
<td>Teacher, 4 years of experience, Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Teacher, 1 1/2 years of experience, Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.2 is a listing of interview participants and outlines their ancestry and teaching experience. Taylor (1995b) suggests that experienced teachers are likely to have greater success with Aboriginal students. Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) is a unique secondary school in that it is not like a traditional high school where students attend one building with many rooms; instead Mercury is a school with an administrative office in one town and learning centre classrooms scattered throughout communities in Northwestern Ontario. The classrooms and classes are connected with each other through the internet. Announcements are sent out on a school bulletin board, students are taught with visually presented lessons and are expected to complete all learning tasks. In this study, I interviewed Phil and John who were located at Mystic First Nation Learning Centre located on Mystic First Nation. Sara and Sam were interviewed at their administrative centre located 500 kilometers away.

Phil and John agreed to be interviewed together. Each of whom provided their own
distinctive flavour to the discussion and often generated an idea for the other to offer additional thoughts. After the interview, I felt that both interviewees complemented each other. Sam and Sara were interviewed on a different days as the Mercury head office was located in another town. All respondents/interviewees provided different perspectives on the interview questions. Unlike the other schools used in this study, there was no group discussion with students attending Mercury.

8.3 Community influences

Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) is a school made up of 13 learning centres located in communities across Northwestern Ontario. There is an administration centre located in one community. Each of the learning centres within Mercury Internet High School function independently and are connected to the other learning centres through the internet. There are no Education directors or Superintendents; rather the organization features a principal, vice-principal and on-site teachers, who work with local Advisory education representatives to implement a unique educational experience for their isolated students. These education representatives are selected from each of the communities where the learning centre is located. Parents and community representatives make and participate in local decision making related to their particular learning centre. Each community learning centre provides representation on a regional advisory board which monitors and guides Mercury as a school.

Although the leadership differs from the other school communities involved in this study, the notion of community influences still applies as the decision making within the school environment is like other secondary schools. Sam, principal, described how he respected the guidance of his community member committees and he was able to make decisions appropriate to the situation. The category of ‘community influences’ consists of the following classifications:
teacher background, funding, community partnerships, role of the education board, small schools and quality of local education.

**Teacher background**

The teachers from this group of interview subjects were Aboriginal as Phil, John and Sara (pseudonyms) were from the various Aboriginal communities involved with the school programming. Sam (pseudonym) was a non-Aboriginal principal. All participants have varying years of experience with Sara having the most at 23. Sam was next with 16, Phil had been teaching for 4 years while John was just starting out with 1.5 years of experience.

All interview subjects had only worked in First Nation schools. Sara said that she rarely did any teaching as she provided administrative support and was a full time guidance counselor. Phil and John were both full-time teachers working at Mystic First Nation Learning Centre. Sam had been a teacher in Northern Ontario and in the Maritimes, prior to becoming a teacher with Spruce Meadows First Nation (pseudonym) with Mercury. One year later, he became the principal of Mercury, which he had been since 2003. The sample group was a good representation of teaching staff, as there were teaching staff with many years of experience (Mercury often had contracts with teachers who had retired from the public school system) and some teaching staff members with limited amount of experience.

Taylor (1995a) and later, Chiefs of Ontario (2004) pointed out how First Nation teaching staff was comprised of younger teachers, who generally used First Nation communities as a way of gaining valuable teaching experience. The staff at Mercury, with the exception of John, contrasted with these findings, as Mercury hired a variety of teachers, some of whom had retired from the public sector or had been employed in other non-Aboriginal communities. Taylor (1995b), Postl (2004) and Chiefs of Ontario (2004) suggested that First Nations students did not
receive quality teaching as many teachers were often learning how to teach while working in First Nation community schools. Mercury was reflective of this research, many of its teachers focused on two other issues before addressing the needs of their students, internet-teaching and coping with life in a remote First Nation community.

**Funding**

Many of the schools in this study have outlined that they could benefit from additional funding. This situation is no different for Mercury Internet High School (Mercury). Sam, principal, outlined his concerns:

“[Sam 13]. You know, we are running [as a school]. We can run on a bare bones budget and we have been for the short time that we have been here. And it is very easy to say, ‘No they do not have enough money.’ When you compare us probably to, you know, Indian and Northern Affairs (INAC) is saving probably half a million dollars by having us deliver schooling to these students as opposed to sending them to off-reserve schools. We try to make them see this and say, ‘If you gave us a portion of that extra money to allow us to put into our pilot project, to try new things, we could come up, at the end of our pilot, with a model that’s worked out all of the kinks.’ We have come up with a good model, a good [financial] rate and it would work [be successful]. But we have been struggling here. Right now, our teachers are not paid as well as most teachers in this area. When we first came, our [pay] scale was higher than it was here [provincially]. It was higher than the area’s [provincial salary] and now, either it is holding its own or going below.

Sam, like other principals in the study, suggested that there are discrepancies in the funding allotments between federal and provincially funded schools. Canada (1996), Postl (2004), and Malatest et al. (2004) affirm this point, in that First Nation schools are not funded as well as provincial schools. Sam maintained that his school saved INAC money and if he had access to the savings, he could use the additional funding to address staffing needs such as providing additional opportunities for professional development and enriching salaries of his staff. He had observed that teaching salaries for his staff had not kept pace with salaries of provincial teachers
in his region.

Although, Sam wanted to hire additional local staff for each of the Learning Centres, he was hindered by inadequate funding. For example, Sam had to conduct phone interviews, rather than meeting with teaching candidates face-to-face. Sometimes, this process was not very effective as newly hired teachers would leave quickly, once they realized that this teaching environment was not suitable for them. Taylor (1995a) noted that teachers have to go through an adjustment phase when settling into a new community. Sam said that holding onto staff could be a real challenge.

It was clear that Mercury provided a learning opportunity that was unique for the students in remote communities of Northwestern Ontario. It gave them the opportunity to earn their secondary school diploma while living in their home community. Sam, principal, described how his school was providing a savings for Department of Indian Affairs. However, he knew that his program was underfunded and as a result, was limited in the program that they could provide.

Community partnerships

In times of economic restraint, schools have reached out to communities for support in the form of partnerships. One can find connecting programs dedicated to day care spaces or Parent Learning Centers such as those found at Frontenac Elementary School in Limestone School Board. The Mystic Learning Centre is part of the Mercury network and is located on Mystic First Nation, near the city of Green Stone (pseudonym). Phil outlined how his school shared space with two other community groups. In addition, he mentioned the age differences among the student population:

[Phil 17]. You are not going to stick a 19 year old with a bunch of grade tens, they are 15 or 16 years old. It is not going to happen. So we have allowed different services to come on board and been able to partner with different counseling
services, employment resource [agencies].

In an effort to start and keep an innovative program functioning, partnerships are necessary. Phil pointed out that the community had specific needs and blending both programs addressed those needs. For example, Mercury is able to address the needs of the older student, who had dropped out and wanted to return but did not want to be in a classroom with younger students. For the younger students, they were able to address their school needs while living in their home community.

Partnerships are important for the development of good programming as secondary students can benefit from potential community and career related placements (Goddard & Shields, 1997; Swanson, 2003). Phil described how, at Mystic Learning Centre, they were able to provide opportunities for at-risk youth and adult students who had dropped out of mainstream school programming.

**Role of the education board**

The main goal of Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) is to allow Aboriginal students to have the opportunity to stay in their home communities to complete their secondary school diploma. This was capsulated in their philosophy as featured on their school website:

> Northern youth need the opportunity to continue strengthening their family and community bonds as well as their linguistic and cultural knowledge, while completing their secondary school education at home. Secondary school course delivery via telecommunications capitalizes on the technological capabilities of the participating First Nations to ensure that our youth fully utilize *their* [original emphasis] potential and that of the technology available to us in the twenty-first century ([www.kihs.on.ca](http://www.kihs.on.ca) 2007).

Mercury, as other schools examined in this study, is managed and overseen by an education board that’s made up of community representatives. In the following description, Sam, principal, highlighted the different roles that the community partners played:
[Sam 12]. Well, my role is almost like a program manager. We have an executive director and board of directors, who are the chiefs from our Mercury communities. They make any kind of major policy or any direction decisions that need to be made. There is very little hands-on [administration]. So all of the hands on decision-making, [like] running of the school, funding, even allotment is handed to me or at my direction. So I make up the budget, make up the schedule with my vice principal, make up the courses, the course selections and all that is handled here [meaning the administration office of Brass]. More or less made here, sometimes I will go to my executive director for direction. When it comes to decisions about the community, even if it is like whether we are going to close the community or whether we are going to be hiring a staff member there or whether we need a new classroom assistant. We always work with the educational program in the community, the director and steering committee member. We have a steering committee member for each community. We try to make that person very active within the community and [get them to] communicate with us [the administration team]. Sometimes it works well and sometimes it does not.

Unlike the other schools in this study, Mercury, as stated previously, is overseen by two community groups: one group that keeps a larger focus where decision making is shared with the principal, while the second group is more localized and within each First Nation community.

Each community has a teacher and teaching assistant, supported by their local advisory representatives. Sam stated that local discipline issues are handled by the teacher on-site and he, using community input, made decisions related to the school’s program. For example, changes to the school’s operating time were often adjusted from community to community as well, day to day activities of their teachers.

Sam, principal, relied on community input in order to address the needs of his individual school communities more effectively. Research (Rehyner, 1992a; Danyluk, 1998; Jeffries & Singer, 2003; Swanson, 2003; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003) suggested that schools that reflect local partnerships are more representative of the community it serves and have a tendency to be more successful with its students. Students are more likely to see themselves reflected in that school environment and will likely continue with their schooling.
Small schools

Sam said that Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) was an excellent alternative to mainstream schooling, as many First Nation students became lost in the larger public system.

[Sam 23]. A lot of our students are at risk because the public system is not working for them. The kids in this district were lost because of the model of public [school] system doesn’t jive with their make-up [as Aboriginal students enjoy personal relationships and being able to work independently without drawing attention to themselves. This is not possible in mainstream school programs].

Sam pointed out that internet schooling model worked well with particular groups of students (in this case Aboriginal students) due to its self-directed and hands-on nature. The Mercury learning model is one that involves the use of the computer as a teaching tool as it meets the learning needs of students who are visually and kinesthetically oriented. The lessons placed on the computer screen enable students to read and see learning instructions and by using a keyboard, it is both tactile and hands-on. As students complete lessons which are autonomous and flexible and are dependent upon the effort that a student puts forward.

Given that many of Mercury learning centres are in small, remote First Nation communities, they have class enrolments between 6-20 students (McMullen & Rohrbach, 2003). The small population size of the learning centres enables students to be successful as they are able to develop personal relationships with their teacher mentors. This is affirmed by the writings of Bazylak (2002) and Pewewardy (2002). Small school populations are successful with their student populations because they can provide lower pupil-teacher ratios and create a school environment that all students can feel that they are part of (Slate & Jones, 2005). Mercury students are able to work independently in a comfortable school climate and be successful.

Quality of local education
Literacy and gaps in learning have been topics of much concern across all schools used in this study. Sam, principal, acknowledged that many First Nation students across the Northwestern Ontario region struggle with literacy as presented in the provincial curriculum. He emphasized that in order for students at Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) to succeed, they must be able to read well. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Canada, 1996) and later Malatest et al. (2004) acknowledged that Aboriginal community schools did not provide an education system that was equal or comparable to provincial schools. Students graduated with less than adequate skills and many students were unable to succeed in non-Aboriginal provincial schools let alone succeeding in post-secondary settings (Malatest et al., 2004). Sam noticed literacy and learning gaps with his students as most of his students in his area were at least two grades behind from where they should be.

[Sam 16]. I know that probably a lot of our grade sevens and eights language arts curricula are operating at grade five and six literacy level or below. And students do have to write the [Ontario Secondary School] literacy test. We had it this year, we deferred this year. In the past, we have had successful students, small numbers, but that is very reflective of the north where there are a lot of Aboriginal students [who] will end up doing the literacy course. We have offered it the last three years that I have been here, but we didn’t offer it this year. We probably have 10 students who have been successful in one, two or both of the strands.

He later stated, as a result of contact with his students, that it was imperative that they develop effective reading skills. He reported that, in recent years, literacy levels had gone up.

Conclusion

The interview comments revealed that Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) was developed as a result of partnerships between various Aboriginal community organizations. The goal of Mercury was to provide secondary schooling opportunities while students remained in their home communities and able to maintain family and kinship ties. Brady (1994), Canada
(1996), Malatest et al. (2004), Anderson (2004) and Postl (2004) identified that First Nation schools were inadequately funded and staffed. Staffing at Mercury was a challenge as it faced the difficult task of attracting and keeping staff members due to location and funding.

Each community was managed by a local Advisory board which provided support to teachers and administrators of the local school community. Sam pointed out that the advisory committees were able to leave all decision making with the principal and its teachers. He also outlined how Aboriginal students in Northwestern Ontario have trouble passing the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT). Students from Mercury had some success with the OSSLT, but many students would inevitably take the literacy course (as prescribed by the Ministry of Education, for those students who had failed the OSSLT) in order to meet graduation requirements.

8.4 Mental

The direction east teaches us about the mind, the development of its mental capacities. The mental aspect is a reference to the intelligences, development of the mind and new knowledge. Bopp et al. (1988) has said it is the ‘enlightenment’ as new perspectives are revealed and a new beginning is initiated with this new knowledge.

In education, this can be expanded to the learning realm of the students. For example, I examined the comments related to: student characteristics, relationships as a teaching strategy, teaching strategies, evaluation strategies and relevant curricula.

Student characteristics

The student population at Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) is made up of Ojibway and Oji-Cree students from the surrounding First Nations communities in Northwestern Ontario. Mercury (as of 2006) had 13 classrooms located in small isolated and remote First
Nation communities. Each learning centre site had a student population ranging from 6 to 20 students. Sam described the student demographics of the learning centres:

> [Sam 1]. I think our student population is pretty varied. I don’t think it is homogeneous at all. We have a certain number, I would say probably about 60 percent of our students who come out of grade eight and decide to stay home for grade nine. They would be the students who we have the most success with. Those would be our core successful students. And then we have a group of students who are probably single moms or single parents and dads as well, who decide, I want to finish my schooling and I want to stay here or re-enrol and [they] decide to re-enrol. We get 15-20 percent of our students who do that. They are moderately successful but not greatly successful. Then we have a group of students, maybe 20 percent, who, as students, have multiple experiences with failure. They have gone out, come back, gone out, and came back. They continue that cycle with us too but we never turn anybody away if they are home and they want to try. And we have very little success with a lot of those, as well, but there are exceptions as well.

He identified that students, completing the transition from grade eight to grade nine, were usually more successful at Mercury in terms of completing credits. Phil, teacher, told us that his student group was comprised of mainly at-risk students. John, teacher, described how his group of students had a short attention span which needed to be refocused every 15 minutes. They (students) needed to have the freedom to get up and move. Phil pointed out that it was not necessary to use a lecture style with the students, instead it was important to keep them busy with hands-on activities. He felt that it was important to teach his students to recognize that there were different learning styles and different approaches to learning.

Students, in using the internet and its supporting programs, rely upon visual and kinesthetic ways of securing information. Mercury uses the internet, as a vehicle for teaching and is meant to address students who are visually and kinesthetically oriented.

**Relationships as a teaching strategy**

At Mercury Internet High School (Mercury), it is important to have teachers with friendly
dispositions in order to get students to work productively. John, teacher, said that it was important for teachers to be able to read their students’ body language. Phil, teacher, elaborated on the importance of having teaching staff who were Aboriginal and from the local First Nation community. He felt that it was an advantage as they could use their common understanding along with their sense of humour to work with their students.

John highlighted that the students are very accepting of him as a teacher, even though he came from West Mill’s First Nation (pseudonym). Meanwhile, Phil identified that it was important to treat students with dignity and respect, regardless of where they come from. In addition, Sam, principal, explained the importance of using various incentives to encourage students to complete assigned work. He and his administrative team recognized the importance of their teachers to be involved with their students beyond the confines of their classroom. Sam lists ‘trips on the land’ [as field trips-- either hunting or fishing] as ways of getting students and parents involved in the community-school program. He said that teachers who can engage students in positive and safe relationships are usually successful. Sara, guidance counselor, said that it was important for teachers to create comfortable work places.

Research (Danyluk, 1998; Jeffries & Singer, 2003; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003) told us that relationships are important for student success as Aboriginal students enjoy having easy going relationships with teachers. Sam and the teaching staff of Mercury recognized the importance of establishing and maintaining good relationships with their student population.

**Teaching strategies**

The school program offered by Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) is computer based. Courses and course instructions are presented through the use of internet based learning platform called Moodle. Sam talked highly of the learning platform as it was three generations
removed from the bulletin board format that was used when Mercury was first conceived. One program, called Breeze (used in 2005/06), was a learning platform related to synchronous teaching, where students and teaching staff are on-line at the same time. The lessons can also be recorded and linked from a website that students can review or access when absent from school. Sam told us that current student lessons were more interactive as technology kept becoming more sophisticated. Both students and teachers were continuing to learn how to use them and apply them to their particular situations.

Phil said that each student had to be prepared to work as an individual, as their success was based upon the completion of work and at their own speed. He contrasted Mercury teaching environment with that of mainstream programming and suggested that in order for students to be successful in Mercury programming, they needed self-discipline to complete their assignments.

Meanwhile, Sam, principal, said that the school environment had to accommodate cultural differences of the student population.

[Sam 7]. A lot of learning [has been done] on how to deal with that [cultural differences] and how to address that [cultural needs] by our staff. We try to address that, when we have a workshop here and a learning orientation in September. We have people come in and we have presentations and we give them literature. Just talking about some of the differences that you will notice while teaching in Aboriginal communities and teaching Aboriginal students. They [students] are not going to respond the same way as students in city locations. Then we give them strategies that will help the teacher to remember what to do in that situation such as not to directly single students out for any kind of behaviour. We really make sure that teachers are aware of some of these things.

Sam and his administrative staff are sensitive to the cultural nuances of their student population. They completed workshops that would enable their staff to develop strategies on how to effectively work with their students. Phil, teacher, said that it was important for teachers to understand body language as a form of communication amongst their students. In some ways,
this strategy goes hand in hand with developing a good relationship with one’s student group. John said that some teachers incorporate audio visual clips or sound clips as means of teaching. In addition, Sara, guidance counselor, pointed out:

[Sara 3]. When you are in distance education, your record keeping has to be more targeted, whereas in the classroom you are being more observant and more hearing. In distance education, you are hearing them in different ways, through their writing, and maybe through the mentor in the classroom.

It is apparent that teachers, in an internet class setting, must use and employ different methods in order to connect with their student audience. Sam added another method:

[Sam 8]. Also though, we try to get our students involved, as much as we can, in some of the decision making process that is local. For example, planning things, planning events for the school, giving them ownership of the school, so that they can feel like I belong to something, that is important to me, they do that.

The teachers in Mercury have confirmed what has been stated by researchers on Aboriginal learning styles in that Aboriginal students should be taught using methods that enable them to succeed (Rehyner, 1992a; Gilliland & Rehyner, 1988; Canada, 1996; Danyluk, 1998; Bazylak, 2002; Pewewardy, 2002; Jeffries & Singer, 2003; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). At Mercury, the teachers encouraged students to develop independent learning skills, which involved self discipline. The teachers also know that culture and body language play a role in the student’s learning. Finally, Sam stated that they encouraged students to participate in the learning process through community engagement. In the end, students were encouraged to engage in decision-making process that was appropriate to their learning environment.

**Evaluation strategies**

Evaluation strategies used by teachers in this setting are similar to those used by teachers working in a face-to-face atmosphere at schools such as Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter). The difference at Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) is that evaluations are done in an online...
format. For example, students are expected to complete tests, and various types of text-based assignments, including art assignments that are digitally uploaded to computers. John offered the following:

[John 5]. The way I thought that the evaluation [worked] was how to get [student] grades. I was thinking of the little standard written tests that we try to do. We’ll, in the IT [internet technology] course, try to have a hands-on component out of it. Instead of doing a written test, which they still have to do, they also get a partial grade on the hands-on part like building a computer or constructing a network.

He pointed out that some teachers would build in an application component as part of the assessment process. Phil explained that evaluation assignments were used as formative instructional aspects of assessment and were designed to the needs and strengths of their students. Phil said that Mercury staff tried to deemphasize the culminating activity and final exam in order to reduce the stress and pressure on their students. In addition, Sam, principal, explained the attitude of Mercury staff towards deadlines:

[Sam 10]. It is not the official policy, we still tell students to turn in their work on time, but our official policy, if a kid turns in the majority of his work during the last week of school, we will grade it.

There have been discussions related to the use of deadlines for school work in public education. At Mercury, it is permitted for a student to submit a late assignment. Sam continued with his observations:

[Sam 11]. Students are working in a totally different environment, they are working at a different pace, and they are working independently. I think with all our teachers right now, they say, ‘Hey let’s do what we can to get our students to be successful.’

Van Hamme (1996), Bazylak (2002) and Schissel & Wotherspoon (2003) stated that varied methods of assessment will enable students to demonstrate their knowledge and in time, become successful within the school environment. Sam told us that the Mercury staff had mixed opinions
related to the acceptance of late assignments. However, given the unique nature of the program, teachers were supportive of their students as they tried to complete their courses. Teachers were flexible and willing to use varied assessment tools in order to have students demonstrate their skills and knowledge.

**Relevant curricula**

The Ministry of Education, in its revisions of curricula in 1998 and later, 2005, have made sincere attempts to acknowledge and incorporate the diversity of its student population throughout the curricula. For example, English teachers use a wide range of content that includes stories related to different cultural groups while in Social Sciences such as Canadian Law and History, topics related to Aboriginal peoples are addressed. Researchers (Ward, 2005; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Pewewardy, 2002; Turner, 1997; Canada, 1996; Rehyner, 1992a) suggested that in order for Aboriginal students to be successful, it was important that they saw themselves within the curricula that they were studying as it gave them a sense of positive well being.

Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) teachers, like other teachers involved in this study, have the ability to incorporate Native culture into the curricula in two ways: through Native Studies courses and secondly, through the substitution of content in courses of study. John said that Phil often localized the content to reflect the communities with which they were working.

All of the teachers, at Mercury, blend in elements from the students’ environment to help them understand who they are in the context of the global world. Sam provided us with a similar insight about what his teachers did:

> [Sam 7]. All they do is take the course profile and almost follow the course profile to a T. But what they [teachers] will do, if there is a section in there where it says, 'Take them to a local zoo or botanical gardens, look at this or look at that,' they can’t do that. So the teacher can say, ‘We will go online and check here for these pictures’ or they will say, in your community, we can find a plant like this or tell
me what plants you can find that you can identify there. It is changing the curriculum to a certain extent but not changing the expectations. That is what we really encourage.

John had a similar view with his IT [internet technology] courses. He felt that he could incorporate an Aboriginal perspective by allowing his students to produce assignments that were reflective of their reality. Sam added the following comment which complements what John was talking about.

[Sam 6]. So really even though the course wasn’t written for Aboriginal students, it is being taught in an Aboriginal context. And that’s how I think our school works. At least that is how I taught it when I was up north. And we really encourage our teachers to do that.

Mercury teachers have adapted their courses to reflect the Aboriginal communities in which they teach. The Mercury administrative team reviewed courses that were being developed, for example a Native Studies science course at Green Stone University (pseudonym). Mercury is concerned with providing curricula that relates to students and their particular environment and culture. But, Sam also stated that there was a concern for ensuring that it was similar to what is expected by the Ontario Ministry of Education.

Aboriginal students are more successful when the curriculum is connected to their culture and environment (Rehyner, 1992a; Canada, 1996; Agbo, 2001; Pewewardy, 2002; Ward, 2005). Teachers at Mercury, working with the Ontario Ministry of Education school curricula, adjust and make it relevant to the needs of their students.

Conclusion

Teachers, at Mercury Internet High School (Mercury), described their students as having a variety of learning styles, who were primarily oriented to visual and kinesthetic modes. Curricula, used by teachers, was adapted and adjusted to reflect local Aboriginal cultures.
Teachers, at Mercury, used a variety of teaching and assessment strategies to enable students to learn and demonstrate what they learned. These findings are reflective of previous research completed by Rehyner (1992a), Canada (1996), Agbo (2001), Pewewardy (2002), and Bazylak (2002).

8.5 Emotional

The south direction teaches us about emotions and our feelings related to it. The emotional aspect is a reference to how we feel about an issue (Bopp et al., 1988). At times, emotions affect our desire to live and work. How we feel connects us to our motivation and desire to participate.

When we look at emotions in education, we look at how a student relates to the school environment emotionally. We outline what elements encourage a student to have the desire to attend school. Students, teachers and administrators commented on the following areas: expectations, role of Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) in the lives of their students, creating a comfortable classroom environment, self-esteem and parental support.

Expectations

Teachers, at Mercury Internet High School (Mercury), expected students to complete and produce assignments. Phil, teacher, said:

[Phil 12]. Well, I have pretty high expectations for anybody, whether they are Aboriginal students or not. One of the most important things that I expect, especially from Aboriginal students, is to be respectful. That is the key word in this classroom, be respectful. Not just to other people, not just for the environment you are in because it is your school, but respectful of themselves as well…. We make them feel important.

Phil expected his students to show respect in order to be treated with respect. He felt that equal treatment built personal character. John also said that students sometimes had difficulties with
learning some content and they, as teachers, expected their students to learn and overcome their
difficulties. John and Phil made it clear that they were willing to help out and make adjustments
to their studies. Sara, guidance teacher, expected her students to be respectful of all that was in
the school environment. She expected the Mercury students to respect the equipment in the
classroom environment along with participating fully in their respective courses.

Sam, principal, was concerned about the future and where his students were going to end
up after finishing courses at Mercury. He expected Mercury students to put forward their best
effort, work hard with the support of teachers, parents and their respective communities, and go
beyond secondary school.

[Sam 4]. We expect our students to move ahead and to continue on in education. We are always gearing them up for that commitment now, and goal setting now will pay off in the future. So we expect that our students to succeed and get their diploma and move ahead. We are not just telling [them] to get a credit and you are in there. We want them to go on.

Students at Mercury are expected to succeed in this classroom environment. The expectations are not any different from those found in mainstream schools such as Jupiter Secondary School. Additionally, research (Rehyner, 1992a; Bazylak, 2002) stated that when teachers have high expectations of their students, for example, continuing with post secondary education or entering the work force, they are more likely become successful.

**Role of Mercury Internet High School in the lives of their students**

Research has shown that it is important for Aboriginal students to find a sense of purpose in education (Mckay & Myles, 1989; Turner, 1997; Ferguson et al., 2005). Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) is a school that is intended to provide secondary schooling for Aboriginal students living in their own community. They can live at home and benefit from family support which, according to McMullen & Rohrback (2003), is an important reason to attend school.
The classroom, at Mystic First Nation, had a different focus from other Mercury learning sites. Phil, teacher, stated that the goal of their students, was to develop necessary skills and work habits so that they could return to mainstream schooling. This was unlike the remote communities, where there was only one school in the community and the only option, other than attending Mercury, was to fly out to a larger urban town such as Zinc Falls, or Copper or Tintown (all pseudonyms) and board out in a stranger’s home to attend secondary school. Many of the students, according to Sam, did not have any other choice unlike the students of Mystic First Nation who could bus to various schools in Green Stone. Mercury represented an option for students who were suspended or expelled from schools in Green Stone. According to Phil and John, the mood and perception by students of Mystic Learning Centre was not very good, as they had no other options but to attend school in an alternative education facility away from their peer group.

[Phil 17]. We are providing an opportunity for kids to stay in their communities and to be able to have a different avenue and of trying to be able to reach that ultimate goal of attaining a grade 12 education. That is so important and that has kind of eluded so many people of our community in the past. It is kind of hard, I guess for some of the kids.

Research shows that Aboriginal students have a difficult time with transitioning to high school (Mckay & Myles, 1989; Canada, 1996; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Ward, 2005). Mercury has tried to bridge that gap by offering a secondary school program on First Nation communities. The purpose of Mercury was also to prevent students from dropping out of high school. Ward (2005) stated that going to school in your home community was better as teen aged students would have the emotional support of family and community members. Given the information from Sara, who pointed out that students were earning 50% of their credits, one could suggest that this method of education was effective for this particular group of students,
who would likely have failed had they left their own community to attend school in non-Aboriginal communities.

**Creating a comfortable classroom environment**

Students are more successful and more motivated when they can attend school in a environment that is comfortable and relaxed (Van Hamme, 1996; Turner, 1997; Danylik, 1998; Bazylak, 2002; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). Seguin Brant (2001) found that students enjoyed having a place to belong to—they knew that there was a place in the school that was their space. John and Phil emphasized how being local and being Aboriginal could help build upon their relationship with their students. They stated:

> [Phil 9]. It is that whole idea of being Aboriginal and having all that culture and all that humour that comes about with it, being very humble and stuff like that. It is very much sort of the climate, or the mood that you kind of sense when the kids are around. They like that. They like interacting and integrating the funny things that they can relate to.

Interacting and involving students was a way that Mercury teachers used to engage students. When Aboriginal people are gathered together, there is usually a great deal of laughter, as there is a tendency to find something to laugh about. Students appreciated this attribute.

According to Phil, Aboriginal people have an ability to generate humour from regular life situations. Humour was identified as one of the factors that contributed to the development of a comfortable classroom environment. Sara, guidance teacher, describes:

> [Sara 5]. Comfortable, that is a good word. I think they are comfortable but I think the teacher has a lot to do with that. But the comfort zone and the work zone is how the teacher relates to the kids. I have seen classrooms where the teacher is on his computer and the kids are on their computer and he is not really walking around, helping out. He is in his own little world too and I don’t know how much the kids benefit from that or are comfortable with that.

The mood in many of the internet classrooms was upbeat and positive. Sara attributed this to the
teacher’s personality and energy. She also felt that as Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) had been invited into that particular community by its parents, the community would be supportive of the students and the teacher in that environment.

In order to have an effective school climate, it helped to have the school program invited to the community. It also helped to have teachers, who showed an interest in their students and a willingness to engage their students in the school process, as outlined by the interview participants. Researchers (Van Hamme, 1996; Turner, 1997; Danyluk, 1998; Bazylak, 2002; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003) pointed out how it was important for students' success.

**Self-esteem**

Toulouse (2004) suggested that self-esteem was dependent upon the development of good school programming and a respectful school community towards Aboriginal people. In many of the Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) communities, this statement would appear to be true as all First Nation communities had invited Mercury to operate a secondary school program there. According to Mercury principal, Sam, teachers and administrators were concerned about providing an Aboriginal sensitive program for their students. Yet, at Mystic First Nation, there were other issues that affected the development of self-esteem.

Community members, along with students of Mystic First Nation, have recognized the divisions between Mystic First Nation and the urban non-Aboriginal town of Green Stone. Phil, teacher, described how his students acknowledged that these divisions have existed since the treaty-signing period of the 1850s where the surrounding Ojibway of Lake Superior signed the Robinson-Superior Treaty. They have accepted and understood that their community remained separate and distinct from the non-Aboriginal community of Green Stone. They are also proud of being Ojibway/Oji-Cree, according to Phil:
[Phil 9]. But I guess the mood has kind of changed, more or less, in the years, like a different kind of distinction. I am over here, across the river, on the rez (sic) and the kids in town. There is a clear separation there sometimes. But the kids out here, in the Aboriginal community, I mean, the mood is, more or less, that they are proud of where they come from and they will be the first ones to voice out their opinion if anything is said to them if it is positive or negative. So in terms of the community, kind of like the mood, yes we know we are here and we know that you are there. And this is basically the way it has been probably, since the 1850s, at the signing of the Treaties.

Sara, guidance teacher, did not have the same opinion as that of Phil and John, instead she offered:

[Sara 6]. The north is a pretty unique place to be growing up. I wonder, how, and this is my own wondering, I am not even sure if the students feel good because of so many suicides are happening up north. How much of that affects them and how much of that bothers them and how much they think about it. Sometimes I think, there is too much, too much media attention on the suicides and the suicidal rate of the north. Do they think that they are just another statistic? Or that could be me? Or I should do it because I would get all that attention in the district? That is what I think [that they are thinking]. That is just my own thinking. I don’t know what the students are thinking and maybe, we should ask.

She stated that she was not sure if the students felt good about themselves, this was in contrast to the description that Phil had of the Aboriginal students at the Mystic Learning Centre.

Researchers (Bazylak, 2002; Ferguson et al., 2005) stated that students who are lacking in self-esteem have a tendency to not be successful. Sara outlined how students were aware of the media reports related to teen suicides in the north and she felt that this issue weighed heavily on the minds of all Mercury teens.

Students, within the confines of their own community, have a good sense of self-esteem. Turner (1997) and Ferguson et al. (2005) stated that students were likely to become successful in life as a result of being successful in their school program.

**Parental support**

Like other school communities in this study, the teachers and administrators at Mercury
Internet High School (Mercury) have agreed that parental support is important for student success. Phil offered the following points:

[Phil 16]. I think that a student is a lot more successful when they have parental support. It is crucial that parental involvement is there even if it is just getting them out of bed and feeding them breakfast and saying to them, ‘What do you [have] to do today? Well, see you later.’ That is good enough because the student realizes that somebody does care for them. Some of the students we have, on the other hand, don’t come from an environment like that. There is no one to get them up in the morning, nothing like that, or no one to send them off to school. Parental involvement is such a big factor in terms of success because we want the students to realize that if there is someone there that cares. It kind of motivates them to do a little bit better.

He added that when a student lacks support from home, a teacher sometimes fills the void acting as a counselor, friend, or even a relative. He described how some teachers would try to connect with parents so that they could take an active role in their children’s lives. Sam, principal, explained that the challenge for the school community was to get parents involved.

Researchers have shown that students, who have parental support, are successful in school (Seguin Brant, 2001; Bazylak, 2002; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Ward, 2005). Sam pointed out that students at Mercury were more likely to have parental support, as a result of being invited to the community.

Conclusion

The staff of Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) pointed out how they attempted to address the emotional state of their students by creating an alternative school setting that had the following characteristics: a comfortable classroom environment and a teaching staff that cultivated and nurtured parental support. This supports previous research (Van Hamme, 1996; Haig-Brown et al., 1997; Danyluk, 1998; Seguin Brant, 2001; Jeffries & Singer, 2003; Pewewardy, 2002; Bazylak, 2002; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Ward, 2005).
8.6 Spiritual

The direction west teaches about spirituality (Benton-Banai, 1979; Bopp et al., 1988). West is considered to be an area where Aboriginal culture is affirmed and shared. When we look at spirituality, we look at its components: culture in school, and language.

In education, spirituality is evident in some First Nation communities, as shown in this research. In Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) spirituality is not brought into the school climate by teachers. As the schools are located on First Nation communities, it is surrounded by Aboriginal culture. The following pages outline how Aboriginal culture/spirituality and language are presented and encouraged in the Mercury learning centres.

Culture in school

Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) classrooms are located in First Nation communities in Northwestern Ontario. According to Sam, each school community was distinctive and yet, similar with enrolment ranging from 6-20 students. He described the school environment:

[Sam 6]. I look at this as almost like an immersion. You know that I find it very difficult with high school programming, and that is what we deal with, sometimes it is less easy to take a course that is prescribed by the ministry and really change it around a lot to make it have a lot of Aboriginal flavour within the course itself. It is very difficult to do with science and math directly. But my thinking on that is that the students are in their community, the teachers are living in the community and they are delivering a course in their community. So all the little examples that the students are going to be using and what the teachers are using, they are pulling them from around them.

Sam explained that their students live and go to a school on a First Nation reserve. It was difficult to not include Aboriginal culture within the school, although not in a formal academic way. Phil, teacher, described how culture in the classroom helped create a relaxed and comfortable classroom. Students were more relaxed in this environment and interested in coming
to school regularly, such as those found in the study by Seguin Brant (2001). Mercury students live in remote communities of Northwestern Ontario. Despite the fact that Mystic Learning Centre (pseudonym) is located near the large urban centre of Green Stone (pseudonym), the students in the learning centre still acknowledged that they are Aboriginal students living in a community where Aboriginal culture is still distinct and urban. Van Hamme (1996), Seguin Brant, (2001), Haig-Brown et al. (1997) and Danyluk (1998) stated that when students are in a culturally supportive school setting, they tend to attend regularly and as a result, complete more high school credits.

**Language**

Teachers, at Mercury Internet High School (Mercury), did not comment about the importance of language in the school community. Sara, guidance teacher, is an Ojibway language speaker but Phil and John were not speakers of a Native language. In reviewing the Mercury website, I was able to view the course offerings. I found that in each semester a Native language course was offered, as well as several Native Studies courses. According to Lickers (2004) Ojibway and Cree languages are more likely to be widely used in 2020. Many of the communities hosting Mercury learning centres were either Ojibway speaking or Cree speaking peoples and the usage of their Aboriginal language was less threatened than in other Aboriginal communities in Ontario.

**Conclusion**

Schools that feature a strong sense of respect for Aboriginal culture usually are successful with its Aboriginal student population (Haig-Brown et al., 1997; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Ward, 2005). Interview comments were limited in the area of spiritualism and language within this school study. All interview participants, with the exception of Sara, agreed that their student
body were strong culturally and felt good about their identity as First Nation citizens.

8.7 Physical

The direction north teaches us about rest and reflection (Bopp et al., 1988). We reflect through involvement with physical activities. Many believe that if one has a healthy body, then one will have a healthy mind. When we look at the physical component of human life, we look at how it is related to the food that people eat, the physical activity that they perform and the reflection that they have as a result of that physical activity.

In education, when we look at the physical needs of students, we ask, what is the school community doing to meet the physical needs of the Aboriginal students in their school setting? In this study, physical needs are addressed by a student’s involvement in extra-curricular programs.

Extra-curricular activities

Extra-curricular activities are an important part of the school community and students that participate in extra-curricular activities are generally successful in school (Whitbeck et al., 2001). Two schools, Mars First Nation School (Mars) and Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter), within this study have outlined how student participation in extra-curricular activities was beneficial to their development. Some of the extra-curricular activities found in some of the schools are various sport teams, drama clubs, outdoor education and student leadership activities. Many of these clubs and teams are supervised by teachers.

In many of the Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) communities, the Learning Centre is one part of the educational infrastructure found within a First Nation community. Often, there is an elementary school located within the community and sometimes, in larger communities, there is also a local First Nations High School. Sam, principal, explained how he encouraged his staff to make use of local resources to promote extracurricular activities.
[Sam 15]. We have thought about that lots of times, but we look at numbers in the classrooms and sometimes we only have 6 and some [classrooms] may have 20 [students]. They [the teachers] do schedule time in their gym, even when they are not doing physical education. We schedule gym time and their teachers are supposed to and are encouraged to schedule extra-curricular physical activity, whether it is a walk or you know a hike or whatever. Those things that we talked about, like going out in boats and fishing, if their [student’s] teachers haven’t been doing their extracurricular, they will save it up and in the spring, they will say, ‘Friday we are going to go fishing.’ Or, they are going to go see some of the harvest. We encourage that. We encourage exchanges as well as we can do that.

He said that his staff tries to do the extra things but they can be limited by a variety of things such as class size. It will vary from classroom to classroom, student’s interest levels, physical resources and time as a resource. He felt that parents were often a resource that could be utilized, as volunteers, on extra-curricular outings. All of the Mercury teachers were expected to be in the school two nights a week to provide opportunities for students to complete their work. Danyluk (1998) pointed out that, teachers, who worked above and beyond of what is expected, have successful classrooms and students.

Phil told us how his students organized a powwow and feast for the National Aboriginal Science Council at Mystic First Nation. He felt that students, given an opportunity to do something special, would rise to the occasion to do it. Sam said that teachers in his school were willing to work and engage students during after school hours. Whitbeck et al., (2001) maintained that extra-curricular involvement also motivated students to be successful in school. The interview comments from Sam and Phil suggested that Mercury students had a variety of opportunities to engage in extra-curricular activities.

Conclusion

In order to motivate students, teachers will spend extra time with students to ensure continued attendance and connection with the school environment. Evenings and trips on the
land are arranged during the school year, instead of running sport programs.

8.8 Circle centre: Student success

Circle centre is at the centre of the medicine wheel. It is a reflection of all that is around the circle, which is why it is known as the heart of the circle. It represents a balance of the four directions (Bazylak, 2002; Hart, 2002). When we talk of student success, we are asking questions related to those aspects which will encourage students to keep attending school and completing courses.

Within the set of interview questions, one question directly asked, what participants thought were the factors necessary for student success. I expected a reiteration of what had been said earlier in the interviews, such as comments related to attendance and work habits. I was surprised by what the participants had to say. In the data, Mercury produced comments in the following areas: issues that inhibit success and characterizing and identifying student success.

Issues that inhibit success

Sam, principal, discussed how funding issues related to staffing affected student success. In his mind, if the school was not staffed appropriately, it would inhibit student programming and opportunities. He said, as a result of limited funding, that it was often difficult to select and recruit good teacher candidates to work in the north. He knew that if he could identify teachers who were enthusiastic about their students and environment, they would be able to provide excellent programming for their students.

Additionally, Sam said that if a student was not working as well as he or she should, his staff would try and work out a solution with him or her in terms of completing the missed assignments instead of being suspended from school. Teachers would work with students to enable them to obtain one or two or three credits, rather than lose all four. Sam observed that
when students become aware that they were in danger of losing courses, they would often turn their work habits around and try to get their lessons completed to avoid losing the credit. If a student did not have good work habits, they would not succeed.

Another issue, revealed during the interviews, centered on family responsibilities. Sara, guidance counselor, outlined how some students, although living in their home community, had other concerns related to parental or family obligations to which to attend. This often created other kinds of stress and pressure for students. Yet, by living in a First Nation community, students were able to successfully cope with their issues rather than dropping out of school as would have happened had they attended an non-Aboriginal high school (Seguin-Brant 2001; Ward 2005).

Sam described how funding issues were barriers to student success while Sara thought that students were affected by the social and family issues of their own community. According to both Sam and Sara, Mercury staff tried to address these issues with students so that they would earn one or two credits, rather than losing all four credits in one semester. It helped students when they were supported by their parents.

**Characterizing and identifying student success**

At Mercury Internet High School (Mercury), student success had different characteristics depending upon the location of the learning centre. Phil stated that, depending upon the economic circumstances of his community, the focus of his particular learning centre had two purposes: 1. Reintegrate students into mainstream schooling and 2. Encourage students to complete sufficient credits to obtain their grade 12 secondary school diploma so that they can get hired locally. He described how students were starting to realize that they had more choices if they had their grade 12 diploma. This became a source of motivation for some students. In
addition, they (John and Phil) hoped that students would become further motivated by the fact that the educational program was owned and operated by members of their own First Nation community. Haig-Brown et al. (1997) pointed out that community involvement with the school was important for student success. Phil, felt that if students, realized that their schooling was developed and controlled by Aboriginal people, they would likely to become more motivated. This point was affirmed by Haig-Brown et al. (1997) and Swanson (2003), who outlined how community involvement enhanced student belonging and ownership of the school program.

Sara, guidance counselor, described success for students at Mercury as:

[Sara 7]. Successful? I guess there is different ways of being successful. Successful, you could have perfect attendance. You may submit only half of the activities that have been assigned. You could be successful in submitting maybe, all of your activities and plus you are only attending half the time, right. So what is being successful? Is successful getting that credit that you have been working for? Even though I have been keeping stats since the beginning of the school, I think our success in terms of giving credits is slowing climbing [gradually improving]. …Learning how to ask for help because if you are stuck and your instructor is two or three hundred miles away, you know you have to learn how to ask for help.

She highlighted how Mercury featured a 50 percent credit completion rate on the part of their students and students needed a variety of skills in order to be successful in Mercury. One of the major skills was learning how to ask for help. This was consistent with Ojibway cultural ethics (Ross, 1992) where help was not offered until it was asked for.

Furthermore, Sam, principal, explained that one of the reasons why students enjoyed Mercury was due to the fact that they enjoyed the independence of learning at their own pace. Teachers, at Mercury, are trained to not centre students out, and some students appreciate this and thrive. Students thrive in environments where they are allowed to work independently (Rehyner, 1992a; Seguin Brant, 2001; Bazylak, 2002).
Sam also pointed out how parental involvement was important for student success at Mercury. He had observed and noted that when parents decided to keep their students in their home community, instead of sending them out to larger non-Aboriginal high schools, they were likely to continue to be involved in their child’s education. The parents would help the students make choices related to their course selections and provide a goal for completing their education program. Haig-Brown et al. (1997) and Friedel (1999) highlighted the importance of parental involvement as a key for the success of Aboriginal students in school environments.

Sara thought that a student could become successful if he or she was able to earn secondary credits in his or her home community and work with school content that reflected their home environment. Small classrooms with low pupil-teacher rates also enhanced student success. Some researchers (Sawyer, 1991; Rehyner, 1992a; Van Hamme, 1996; Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Pewewardy, 2002) suggested that Aboriginal students possess certain types of learning styles such as being predominately left brained where they tended to be visual and kinesthetic learners. Mercury meets those learning needs when students complete their work from a computer. They read from the computer screen where they have to respond and process the information and complete the assigned work. As students use the key board, their learning becomes a hands-on process that enables them to learn actively as opposed to sitting and listening to a lecture.

Sam felt that more support could be provided to his students if they had access to resources like those found in the public schools. Postl (2004) and Malatest et al. (2004) stated that First Nation schools were underfunded in comparison to provincially run schools in Ontario. Yet, Mercury is a school system that could grow even more if it had access to the same resources as the schools in Ontario public system. For example, Sam suggested offering competitive
salaries to teachers as well as offering incentives to employ them longer than two years.

Additionally, Sam outlined how Mercury has reached out to other First Nation communities. He said:

[Sam 20]. We can use our program and our expertise and through our model go anywhere in Ontario for Aboriginal students that have small classroom. If they [other schools] want more of a choice for courses, that way I mean, if we could get some resources and develop that way, I think we could really do some interesting things. I think that it is a really good model and idea.

He suggested that partnerships with other small schools could be a possible direction to pursue as smaller secondary schools were often limited in what could be offered in terms of course selection, as found in Venus First Nation School. Sam felt that a partnership could be negotiated where a member of his staff could train staff in their schools on how to provide support to the Internet based student.

He was optimistic about his school’s future in the lives of First Nation students. He said that as his staff and school had developed some experience related to online teaching, they could use that expertise to enhance the learning opportunities of other programs. Certainly, there are many possibilities.

Conclusion

Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) is an innovative school program designed to address learning style tendencies of Aboriginal students who are located in remote communities of Northwestern Ontario. Students become engaged in learning by attending regularly, using the computer to access course instructions and related learning materials and completing their assignments. Students are able to earn eight high school credits over four half semesters yearly.

Teachers felt that there were three key issues: lack of funding to provide an enriched program with quality teachers; a student’s ability to complete the assigned school work; and lack
of parental support. They provided support to students when they have difficulty understanding the content. Although, each learning centre has been invited into community and has the support of an advisory group and the students’ parents, there were still some parents who were not as involved with their student’s educational program. Perhaps, with the additional parental involvement, students, who were reluctant workers, might reverse this pattern.

Student success in this school remains high, featuring a 50 percent completion ratio, according to Sara. This is significant, since students in programs with face to face interaction at provincially run schools tend to have 10-20 percent credit completion success range (Canada, 1996; Ferguson et al., 2005). Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) is the first school that has been developed that has tried a new and innovative approach to addressing the learning style characteristics of Aboriginal students since Confederation College of Green Stone (pseudonym) provided independent learning courses in the 1980’s (Fiddler, 1992). With enhanced funding, this school would be able to create better opportunities for their students.
Chapter 9

Circle Centre: What did we learn from the data?

Circle centre is a reference to the individual at the centre of the circle (Bopp et al., 1988). Lovelace (personal communication, 2001), in counseling his students, described the process, where he would review each aspect of the individual’s life in terms of emotional, mental, spiritual and physical needs. In assessing the student’s life, Lovelace made the student aware of the areas that needed to be addressed in order to achieve a balanced lifestyle.

In the area of circle centre, I examine the concepts related to student success. From a research point of view, the circle centre is the last phase where collected data is assessed in terms of understanding which processes contribute to the success of Aboriginal students. In doing this, I am: firstly, outlining what was stated by the research participants; secondly, confirming research that was found out earlier by other researchers and thirdly, perhaps creating new knowledge or grounded theory in areas not previously researched.

The following pages represent my assessment of the findings. According to Rubin and Rubin (1995), data analysis is referred to as a process where researchers come to terms with the participant data within the study, or in other words, researchers offer theoretical musings related to the implications of the data. In this study, data analysis is a reflection of the findings from the participants within the four participating schools on related topics: student success, community influences and issues related to mental, emotional, spiritual and physical health. Each of these areas will be discussed in light of its own particular themes. For example, under the heading community influences, I reviewed teacher background, funding, role of education board members and quality of local education. Each of these areas will be discussed in the following sections. As a result of what was found in the study, I created a series of recommendations
related to the respective themes and can be found at the end of the appropriate section.

The interview data revealed that all of the schools were providing educational programs to meet the needs of their student populations. Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter), the largest school, provided a greater range of course selections that were not available in Venus First Nation School (Venus) or Mars First Nation School (Mars) or Mercury Internet High School (Mercury). As well, Jupiter had school resources such as industrial shop and hospitality facilities that exceeded those found in any of the other three schools. Jupiter was able to provide students with opportunities to engage in a wide range of extra-curricular activities such as drama, music and various sporting teams. Mars was also able to provide extra-curricular activities to a lesser degree where the emphasis was on sporting teams. Venus and Mercury, due to their size, were unable to provide a wide range of extra-curricular activities.

All of the schools were effective at providing teachers who could establish and maintain effective relationships with their student populations. Students from the three focus groups were very supportive of their teachers and their teaching strategies. They stated that they felt their teachers cared about their progress and development. Two of the schools, located on the First Nation communities of Venus and Mars, provided students with spiritual and cultural activities on a regular basis. Mercury did not provide any cultural events as part of its school program but Jupiter did so with student-centered workshops. Efforts were being made by the staff of each school to ensure that its student population continued to earn high school credits to be successful.

9.1 **Circle centre: Student success**

Creating and achieving a balanced lifestyle is a goal for Aboriginal people (Hill, 1999; English, 1996; Ross, 1992). As educators, we can link our students to the centre of the circle and review the school system using the various aspects of the Medicine Wheel. In reviewing the
school programs of four schools located in Northwestern Ontario, we can take a look at the school's Aboriginal student successes and the degree to which they address various areas of the Medicine Wheel in terms of school programming. In completing this study, I anticipated being able to describe the programs and approaches used by each of the four schools as they addressed the needs of Aboriginal students. By sharing their professional practices, I hoped that a process, using the Medicine Wheel, could be developed and applied to various school settings.

The following pages represent some of the important comments made by the various participants from each of the schools. When participants, teachers and administrators, were asked about what they saw as important for student success, participants provided a range of opinions that were collected and arranged into two main themes: 1. Issues that inhibit student success; and 2. Factors that encouraged success.

**Issues that inhibit success**

Mackay & Myles (1989), Ferguson et al. (2005) and the interview participants identified the following issues as barriers which prevented students from becoming successful in the school program.

- Student as parents with parental responsibilities
- Teen peer pressure
- Financial support
- Limited course selection
- Lack of economic opportunities
- Low self-esteem

Each of the participating schools identified similar types of issues but yet, they also identified other issues that were unique to their own particular situation.

For the teachers at Mars, three key issues were identified that prevented student success: student’s lack of positive self-esteem, lack of parental support and limited school resources.
Rochelle (Mars First Nation teacher) said that students, lacking positive self-esteem, often associated with supporting friends who encouraged them to engage in unhealthy lifestyles (such as alcohol or drug abuse). Many of these same students exhibited a lack of confidence, enthusiasm and motivation for school studies as a result of this negative peer engagement. Students who lacked parental support often looked for advice in the wrong places. Teachers were able to provide some support to offset the limited input of parents. Other teachers said that limited resources reduced student opportunities and school programs as: it was difficult for a student to retake a course when the student failed it. Material resources were limited within school programs.

Students at Jupiter had different issues to cope with. For example, Curt and Karen, Jupiter teachers, outlined a variety of socio-economic issues such as securing money for rent and food along with adapting to the non-Aboriginal cultural climate of Copper. In some sense, given that many of Jupiter student successes came from those who were enrolled in off-site programs, it was evident that the mainstream school had trouble keeping many of its Aboriginal students enrolled. It appeared that structured classes and inflexible programming were identified as concerns for some enrolled Aboriginal students as compared to their successful attendance in off-site programs, such as the Urban Aboriginal Program (UAP) and Parents Attending Secondary School (PASS). Both programs featured settings that enabled students to work independently and within an environment that had a limited number of rules. Research (Dehyle, 1992; Rehyner, 1992a; Danyluk, 1998; and Pewewardy, 2002) showed that Aboriginal students needed a flexible and informal environment in order to be successful. The main school at Jupiter did not offer this.

At Venus, the teachers identified three concerns: lack of economic opportunity,
limitations related to the small school size and lack of positive self-esteem in students. Melissa, Venus guidance counselor, observed students, who were on track to graduate, became self-destructing. It seemed to her that they would deliberately fail in order to avoid leaving the community. Tony, Venus teacher, noted that his students lacked the motivation to succeed because of their perceptions of a dismal future. Venus students had to consider the issue of whether to pursue their vocation in urban communities or maintain their culture by remaining in their home community. This behaviour affirmed Castellano’s earlier observation (1974) where she noted that Aboriginal youth, faced with a choice of having to pursue post secondary education often had to give up their ties to their extended family and culture. Castellano noted that students had to choose between maintaining their culture and remaining in their First Nation community or taking on a job in a larger non-Aboriginal community and potentially, losing their connection to their family and culture. If students did not have a high degree of positive self-esteem, they were not likely to graduate or continue on through post-secondary education.

Sam, Mercury principal, like Kathy, Mars principal, and Christine, Venus principal suggested that limited resources hurt the academic development of his students. If he could hire more supporting staff, students would be helped and encouraged to overcome their struggles. Sara, Mercury guidance counselor, stated that students, in the various learning centre communities, had a number of issues to deal with, such as those related to parenting and looking after extended family members, similar to what had been stated by Karen, off-site teacher, from Jupiter Secondary School.

Although the teachers, participating in this research, were teaching in different situations, communities and schools, they acknowledged that their students faced similar types of issues: lack of positive self-esteem, lack of parental support and lack of community opportunities. The
barriers the students faced at their respective schools were similar to those identified by Schissel & Wotherspoon’s (2003) comprehensive research.

**Factors that encouraged success**

Student success, as compiled from the interview data, was based upon a number of factors: motivation, supportive and involved parents, and a positive school environment with positive and friendly teachers. All of the teachers agreed that in order for students to be successful, they needed to attend class and complete the school work to earn high school credits. Interview participants also stated that the following factors would keep students in school:

- Positive relationships with teachers
- Flexible and varied evaluation assessments
- Varied teaching strategies that address all learning styles
- Respectful and friendly school environments
- Continuing parental support
- Cultural and language programs
- Opportunities to participate in recreational or extra-curricular activities
- Varied program opportunities that developed skills that enable Aboriginal students to complete in non-Aboriginal societies.

If students remained in the school environment longer, rather than dropping out, they were more likely to earn credits toward the completion of their high school diploma (Dornai et al., 2001; Ferguson et al., 2005). In having a high school degree, students would have choices, either to join the workforce or continue on to post secondary schooling. The challenge, faced by participating teachers, was to convince students that they had this choice.

All of the interview participants knew that students were successful when they attended school regularly, participated in extra-curricular activities and completed assignments. Each of the communities had different ideas on what was a successful school program. Sam, principal at Mercury, pointed out that his students liked working independently and knew that they would not be centred out by teachers. Mercury students, in general, had parental support as the Mercury
school program had to be invited in by parents of the community. The teachers knew that if students had good families and their parents were actively involved in their education, they would be successful.

Mars First Nation addressed absentee issues by offering financial incentives for good attendance. Teachers and community members encouraged students to become involved in extracurricular sport programs and student leadership opportunities. The administrative staffs at Mars and Venus First Nation Schools wanted to ensure that their students were culturally aware of themselves as both schools provided a number of cultural workshops throughout the school year. For these First Nation communities, it was important to graduate Aboriginal students, who maintained their Aboriginal identity and had skills to succeed in either the Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal world.

According to teachers at Mars, success was when students were able to retain and maintain their cultural connections to their community while earning high school credits. Jupiter teachers had a similar perspective of successful students. Curt and Karen, teachers, who taught in alternative education programs, Urban Aboriginal Program (UAP) and Parents Attending Secondary School (PASS), incorporated Aboriginal cultural workshops into their class scheduling in order to connect students to their culture. Studies (Canada, 1996; Bazylak, 2002; Seguin Brant, 2001) stressed the importance of completing schooling with an intact Aboriginal identity. This would also appear to be the goal of the interview participants in this study. Consistent with the findings of this study, is the fact that participants wanted their graduating students to know who they were as Aboriginal community members.

Teachers and administrators were very creative when they were asked on how they would change the school environment. The following opinions were offered as possible solutions or
enhancements to the current school system:

- Hire more secondary Aboriginal teachers
- Create a separate secondary school with a focus on professional trades for Aboriginal students in the region
- Offer innovative course offerings such as hospitality and tourism or career focused trades
- Alter the Ministry of Education guidelines for small schools
- Hire teachers who cared and believed in Aboriginal students
- Encourage parental support

These ideas highlighted areas that could be considered by First Nation School authorities and local School Board Districts as possible solutions to address some of the issues faced by individual school communities. The following pages review some of the solutions provided by the interview subjects.

**Hire more Aboriginal teachers**

Four teachers, (Karen and Curt, Jupiter teachers, Eileen and Rochelle, Mars teachers), wished that there were more Aboriginal secondary teachers in the school system. Research (Mckay & Myles, 1995; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003) has shown that it is beneficial to the success of Aboriginal students to see Aboriginal teachers teaching as they may be understanding and empathetic as well as being role models and mentors. Karen and Curt, Jupiter off-site teachers, stated that role modeling and mentoring by Aboriginal teachers were important for Aboriginal student success.

**Create a separate secondary school in Copper for Aboriginal students**

Another common suggestion was to help create an all-Aboriginal secondary school-- four teachers from three schools raised this idea (Curt and Rick, Jupiter teachers, Eileen, Mars teacher and Tony, Venus teacher). Rick, Curt and Eileen felt that the school should be vocationally based or directed towards trade professions, such as plumbing, electrical and carpentry. The skills
required for these professions would be consistent with approaches needed to address the visual and kinesthetic learning styles of Aboriginal students. In addition, Curt, Jupiter teacher, stated that the school should include some kind of treatment care facility and Tony, Venus teacher, felt that there needed to be a trained counselor/psychologist to address some of the psychological needs of the students.

**Develop innovative course selections**

All of the schools felt that if their school program could be expanded with resources and a greater variety of courses, they would be able to meet the needs of their student population better. Tony, Venus teacher, suggested a school program that was focused upon the resources that were available in the community, such as in the hospitality or tourism industries, or in the trades industry. This was affirmed by Barbara, Jupiter vice principal, who pointed out that their school program featured innovative school facilities that matched the standards in the local tourist industry. She felt that if students experienced the same kind of atmosphere in school, they would likely be successful in the workplace. Tony felt that students should be trained to work in jobs that were available for them within the region. Sam, Mercury principal, wanted to provide enough courses that would enable students to graduate.

The interview data showed that teachers and administrators had acknowledged that there were areas that needed improvement, such as development of new courses, updating resources and improving physical space.

**Accommodate small school communities**

Although this issue is specific to one school, it should be mentioned. It was noted earlier that Christine, Venus First Nations School principal, was particularly frustrated with the Ontario Ministry of Education’s requirements. She felt that the ministry guidelines were not appropriate
for a small high school. She found it difficult to offer a wide selection of courses, as the ministry guidelines did not allow classes to have multiple grades together in terms of particular subjects such as English. Although there may only be two students in the class, the school was expected to have one teacher teaching the course since one teacher could not teach grade 9 and 10 English simultaneously. When students failed a course, it became difficult with timetabling for students to retake that particular course. It was clear that Venus teachers wanted to have another approach but were limited by the requirements of the Ministry of Education and the concerns by parents, who wanted their children to have a comparable education to that offered by provincial schools.

**Hire caring and believing teachers**

The issue of hiring caring and believing teachers came up with two interview participants: Hailey, Venus education board member and Carmene, Mars First Nation School education director. They both felt that their schools needed to have teachers who believed in their students. Researchers (Rehyner, 1992a; Danyluk, 1998; Pewewardy, 2002; Bazylak, 2002) discussed how the views of teachers were important for student success. Student perceptions contradicted the views of Hailey (Venus board member) and Carmene (Mars Education Director) in that they knew their teachers cared for them and knew they (teachers) would provide extra support for them. However, students, in Jupiter, stated otherwise, as they felt that there was only one teacher in the school that cared for them and that was in their Ojibway Language class. Jupiter students, who had transferred from other First Nation schools, thought that the teachers in First Nation schools were more supportive than their current group of teachers. Sara, guidance counselor at Mercury, said that students generally did better at the learning centres when the teacher was showing an interest in what the students were doing. Schools that had teachers who took an interest in their students had a tendency to create successful student populations.
(Bazylak, 2002; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). In this study, students were successful when school had caring teachers.

**Encourage more parental support**

In reviewing the findings of this study, the following question arose: Why are First Nation based schools able to retain more of its students? From the data collected, the answer could be the following: It is likely that more students have parental, kinship and community support in local First Nation schools than they do in larger, urban schools, usually located in non-Aboriginal communities. Eileen and Art, teachers at Mars, described how the parents were involved within the school community, whereas Aboriginal parents were less likely to be involved with the teachers in Jupiter. Friedel (1999) stated that schools with Aboriginal parental involvement were more likely to have successful Aboriginal student populations.

All of the participants in this study agreed parents needed to be encouraged to participate in the lives of their children in different ways. Kathy, Mars principal, suggested that parental support was necessary since it motivated students to have good attendance patterns. Christine, from Venus, felt that parents needed to provide support by encouraging their children get up in the morning to attend school and complete their homework. They (teachers) knew from their experience that students with parental support had fewer issues related to self esteem. Melissa, Venus teacher, told us that parents needed to be encouraged and invited to participate with their child’s educational program.

**Conclusion**

Student success, located in centre of the circle, is the reason why we, as teachers and administrators, are in education. We have a compassion for working in the school system to create opportunistic moments for our young people. Some of us became involved in the
educational system to change it so that it would meet the needs of Aboriginal students. We know that students will succeed if they are given a push, a supporting hand and an opportunity.

The study participants recognized that in order for Aboriginal students to be successful they needed to have the following conditions:

- Positive relationships with teachers
- Flexible and varied evaluation assessments
- Varied teaching strategies that address all learning styles
- Respectful and friendly school environments
- Continuing parental support
- Cultural and language programs
- Opportunities to participate in recreational or extra-curricular activities
- Varied program opportunities that developed skills that enable Aboriginal students to compete in non-Aboriginal societies.

For all schools, student self-esteem was an issue that had to be addressed. Graduation from secondary school was not necessarily viewed positively by the students in some school communities, as there were few job opportunities available in the home communities.

Finally, teachers and administrators recognized that new approaches would be useful such as: hire more secondary Aboriginal teachers; increase funding for First Nation schools; create a separate secondary school with a focus on professional trades for Aboriginal students in the region; offer innovative course offerings; alter guidelines so that small secondary schools can be more effective; hire teachers who care and believe in Aboriginal students; and encourage more parental support.

Most of the ideas would require additional financial support, which according to interview participants, was in short supply for all school programs-- public or private.

9.2 Community influences

The interview data revealed that student success was often influenced, at times, by decisions beyond the control of teachers. For example, the board of education or local education
authority was responsible for hiring the school’s teaching staff and as well, was responsible for
determining the use of funding in its schools. In addition, in small communities, the local school
board or education authority could be influential in terms of decisions related to school
operations as there was an immediate and close connection to either one of these parties, the
education director or education board member.

In the following pages, I will discuss how the following areas impact student success:
teacher experience with Aboriginal students, community influence (Education Board or
Educational Authority) on the operation of the school and the quality of local school
programming (funding).

**Teaching experience with Aboriginal students**

Taylor (1995a) suggested that teachers working in Aboriginal communities were often
young and lacked the experience and expertise found in older teachers. Younger teachers spent
time learning how to teach and manage classroom behaviour of their students. In addition, young
teachers, working in Aboriginal communities, were often working in a cultural climate with
which they were not familiar. They were not aware that in order to be successful, they had to
learn the nuances of local culture (Taylor, 1995a; Mackay & Myles, 1989). Postl (2004) pointed
out that public schools, having more experienced teachers, were likely to have more success with
its students. Experienced teachers are able to meet the needs of their students in more effective
ways, as they are able to provide mentorship and utilize a wide range of teaching strategies.
Taylor (1995a) said that provincial public boards of education offered greater financial security
for teachers and this was often a reason for teachers to leave the employment of schools located
on First Nations (Postl 2004; Chiefs of Ontario, 2004). First Nation community schools have
become a training ground for teachers, who go on to work in public schools in other
communities (Taylor, 1995a) after a short period of time.

I noted that Mercury or Venus had fewer experienced teachers than Mars or Jupiter. Mercury experienced a high degree of teaching staff turnover, due in part to lower salaries than provincial school boards and as well, their learning centres were often more isolated than other school communities. Venus First Nation School was a small secondary school with 30-40 students and 4 staff members, whereas Mercury had 120-150 students with 13 teachers. Sam also said that the web-based learning environment was a challenge for all teachers to adapt. They had to learn how to function in it as well as provide face-to-face tutelage for on-site learners and cope with living in a remote community.

It is worth noting that Venus and Mars First Nation schools had both elementary and secondary students. Elementary teachers at both schools were mainly of Aboriginal ancestry and usually from the local First Nation. This aspect, although, I was not looking for it, may have a role to play in the mood and comfort level of the school climate as students develop a feeling of comfort when they know there are community members who are employed at the school. This was affirmed by the Mars and Venus student focus groups.

Mercury students earned at least 50% of the credits for which they registered. Mars in contrast, was able to retain 70% of its starting secondary school population whereas Jupiter, with the more experienced teachers, only managed to keep 20% of its Aboriginal student population (Ferguson et al., 2005). Although Jupiter was more successful with its off-site programs of Urban Aboriginal Program (UAP) and Parents Attending Secondary School (PASS), it is apparent that schools with experienced teachers were not always successful at retaining Aboriginal students. It is noteworthy to mention that two schools, located on First Nations, were more successful than the larger public secondary school.
Some interview respondents suggested that having more Aboriginal teachers at the secondary level would be beneficial for students. Given the limits of this study, this point is inconclusive. It is likely that schools with Aboriginal secondary teachers would help create a comfortable climate. However, what is clear is that a school needed to have teachers who were willing to interact and engage Aboriginal students (Danyluk, 1998). Experienced teachers are able to develop effective relationships with their students (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Mackay & Myles, 1989). Students who have positive relationships with their teachers are likely to remain in school longer, as found in the case of Mars and in Jupiter alternative education programs, Urban Aboriginal Program (UAP) and Parents Attending Secondary Schools (PASS).

**Recommendation #1**

*Given that First Nation schools employ younger and inexperienced teachers, affecting the quality of its school programming, the Federal government and local Educational Authority are encouraged to adequately fund First Nation Schools in order to retain and attract experienced teachers to improve the quality of its school program.*

**Influence of community members upon the operation of the school**

Friedel (1999) and Rehyner (1992a) revealed that parental involvement in a school’s program aids in the development of a successful school environment. Friedel (1999) found that those schools, which had Aboriginal parents as part of parent council, were likely to have school populations that featured successful Aboriginal students. Schools and school staff were often influenced by the voices and presence of Aboriginal parents. It is likely that the mood and climate of the school would be respectful of Aboriginal culture if Aboriginal parents were involved.

In this study, Aboriginal perspectives in the school climate were evident in a number of ways. Firstly, three of the four schools are based in First Nation communities. Secondly, as three
of the four schools are based in First Nation communities, the school boards are comprised mainly of First Nations people. Thirdly, the school boards are made up of elected or appointed members of the community and are not necessarily parents of the students in the school, but are likely to be related to someone in the school. In three of the four school communities, the mood and climate was favourable and respectful of Aboriginal cultures. Based upon the research (Danyluk, 1998; Friedel, 1999), it is likely that three of the four schools would produce successful Aboriginal students.

Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter) is one secondary school of seven found in Nexus Public School Board (Nexus) (pseudonym) in Northwestern Ontario. Jupiter is attended by students of all races and is not limited to Aboriginal students. There are two ways in which parents can be involved in the education of their students: school council and education board. However, Nexus is a larger school board, made up of elected school officials from the different geographic areas that it serves. Aboriginal communities have been granted one seat of ten available seats on the education board and this position is appointed by the local regional Aboriginal organization.

Like other provincially funded schools, Jupiter also has a parent council, made up of mainly parents and some teachers. The role of the parent council varies from school to school across Ontario, with some having a fundraising role while others have programming input, such as that found in Jupiter. Aboriginal parents have worked with Jupiter’s student council to sponsor workshops focusing on Aboriginal cultures within the school climate. An effort has been made by the parent council and student council to create an Aboriginal friendly school environment to enhance Aboriginal student success.

Aboriginal students have not been as successful in the Jupiter school environment as their
counterparts in Mars, Venus or Mercury. There are other factors that affect student success such as the size of the school and feeling within it. Michelle, Jupiter teacher, outlined that students were often overwhelmed by the sheer size of the school and the rigid structures of the school operations as many First Nation students come from small schools in small First Nation communities. Interviewed students, from Jupiter, pointed out that they did not see and feel that the school was warm and inviting. This opinion was in contrast to student perspectives from Venus and Mars, who liked the comfort of their school community. Rehyner (1992a), Danyluk (1998) and Pewewardy (2002) have suggested that it is important to create a comfortable environment in order to nurture Aboriginal student success. Jupiter has started to do this, with the integration of cross-cultural workshops.

It is apparent that the size and makeup of the school could affect the degree of influence that its school board members have. Jupiter has a larger, diversified student population in contrast to the three First Nation schools who serve a small First Nation population with an Aboriginal student body. In this study, First Nations people have a limited voice in the operation of Jupiter, unlike what happens in the other three schools. Aboriginal students will succeed in a school community when they know that Aboriginal parents are actively involved in the operation of the school, as demonstrated in First Nation communities.

**Recommendation #2**

*Given that Aboriginal student populations are increasing and becoming integrated in non-Aboriginal school communities, and that Aboriginal student success is increased when Aboriginal parents are involved with the operation of the school, administrators and school practitioners are encouraged to invite Aboriginal parents to become involved in the school community and furthermore, encouraged to nurture their participation.*

**Quality of school programming (funding)**
Many of the interview participants felt that Aboriginal students were not getting the same kind of education as their provincial counterparts when they attended school in First Nation communities. This finding affirms what was found by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Canada, 1996) where it was noted that First Nation schools were underfunded, understaffed, under-resourced and produced students at least two grades behind their provincial school neighbours (Postl, 2004). Christine, Kathy, Hailey and Carmene, administrators and education board members from Venus and Mars, respectively, felt that Ontario provincial schools received higher grants per student than what First Nation schools received from the Department of Indian Affairs. Postl (2004) and Anderson (2004) affirmed these points. Both authors maintained that provincial funding exceeds federal funding by at least 20 percent.

Christine, Venus principal, described how her elementary program had been supporting the secondary program and would like to see additional funding in order to even up the resource allocations. She stated that as a result of the costs of the secondary program, the elementary program was being short-changed. If the elementary students were being short-changed, they were leaving elementary school with insufficient skills to cope with secondary school. The Assembly of First Nations (2005) stated that First Nation schools had been under-funded for years.

The interviewed teachers commented on the lack of skills, literacy levels and motivation of their students. Teachers, in Jupiter, noted the difference in skill levels between students coming from First Nation communities and with students coming from local, provincially-run, elementary schools. Barbara, Jupiter vice-principal, said that if First Nation students had an opportunity to attend provincially-run schools or if they had supportive and involved parents, they would develop similar skills as students who attended provincial elementary schools. They
Lickers (2004) reported that Ojibway and Cree languages were strong in Ontario. It is likely that many First Nation students in Northwestern Ontario are raised with parents speaking Ojibway in their preschool years and they started to learn formal English when they first arrived in elementary school. According to Many Roots, Many Voices (Ontario, 2005), families who raised their children in a language other than English, had to adapt and adjust to English as a second language. This point has been supported by research (Malatest et al., 2004; Postl, 2004). Taylor et al. (1996) suggested that language teaching may account for time lost in the classroom, where teachers teach language comprehension rather than curricula content. Randi, Mars special education teacher, told us that Mars teachers had to pre-teach everything from the language used in the classroom to the instructions written on assignment pages. This would contribute to the poor showing of Northwestern Ontario Aboriginal students in Ministry of Education (Ontario) regulated literacy tests.

Provincial schools may provide a better school program but Aboriginal students do not participate fully in them and do not receive the full benefits of the program as they tend to drop out (Mackay & Myles, 1989). This is in contrast to students, who go to schools located in First Nation communities and are more successful, as they have the support of their family. They participate in more of the school activities in their community schools. The Assembly of First Nations (2005) pointed out that in the organization’s long-range education action plan, more money should go to First Nation communities so that First Nation schools can enrich and expand their programming.

Despite limited course selections and fewer extra-curricular opportunities, students had
positive personal relationships with supporting staff, teachers and administration. It seemed, comparatively, that small First Nation schools retained their Aboriginal student populations better as they lived with their families and had the support of extended family relationships. This is in contrast to many students currently attending Jupiter, who lived with unrelated families. Students, who live in boarding home situations, are vulnerable to a variety of distractions that can interfere in their schooling and lead to them dropping out of the school program (Mackay & Myles, 1989; Ferguson et al., 2005).

**Recommendation #3**

*Given that Aboriginal students are more successful when they are able to attend secondary school in their home community, the Federal government is encouraged to provide funding that is at least comparable to that of which is received by provincial schools. And in communities, where secondary schools do not exist, the Federal government and Educational Authority are to develop a strategy/plan that will enable Aboriginal students to remain at home and attain secondary school credits.*

**Conclusion**

In determining the school processes that would encourage Aboriginal student success in secondary school, I found that a number of factors were involved, which tended to be outside the control of the teacher and principals. These outside influences consisted of three variables: hiring of teachers, community influence (Education Board or Educational Authority) on the operation of the school and quality of local schooling (funding). Each of the schools was affected in different ways.

It was noted that schools in provincial school boards could offer better salaries and benefits than those schools which existed under Department of Indian Affairs (Postl, 2004; Malatest et al., 2004; Canada, 1996). As a result, teachers, working in First Nation communities, would often learn their craft and move onto nearby public schools. There was a tendency for
public schools to have more experienced teachers as in the case of Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter). Due to its proximity to Copper, Mars First Nation School also had long serving teachers. Venus and Mercury had smaller staffs and experienced greater turnover in staff. Both Venus and Mercury had school sites in more isolated areas of Northwestern Ontario.

Aboriginal students rarely enjoyed the benefits of experienced teachers, who understood behaviour management and had a variety of teaching strategies in their teacher’s toolkit. In addition, teachers were burdened with the added responsibility of improving the English literacy of their students, as many were 2 grades behind in terms of English language development (Postl, 2004).

Researchers (Friedel, 1999, Danyluk, 1998) told us that First Nation students were successful when they knew that schools had the influence of Aboriginal parents. Mars, Mercury and Venus Schools were located on First Nation communities and served an Aboriginal population. Parent Councils and First Nation Educational Authorities tended to be dominated by Aboriginal community members. This was unlike the public school board of Nexus where Jupiter Secondary School was one of seven secondary schools. Aboriginal communities had a limited role in the operation and atmosphere of the secondary school.

Members from each of the schools were concerned about the quality of the education program in First Nation schools. Given that Mars, Venus and Mercury schools had younger teachers than found in Jupiter, it is likely that students were not receiving instruction from experienced teachers as students in provincial schools.

9.3 Mental

Mental health was a reference to elements related to the mental development of Aboriginal students. In order to foster mental health, schools had to provide opportunities for
students to engage in the process. This was achieved by having teachers who acknowledged the learning characteristics of their students and used appropriate teaching and evaluation strategies while building strong interpersonal relationships. In addition, they used and developed curricular content that was relevant and meaningful to their students (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). In the following pages, I will discuss how these areas impact upon student completion of high school credits.

**Student characteristics**

Each of the school administrators were asked to describe their school populations. Two of the First Nation schools, Venus and Mars, had small secondary school populations ranging from 30-80 students, respectively, while Mercury had 120-160 students combined in thirteen classroom sites located in local communities. Jupiter, in 2005/06, had a school population of 900 with 25 to 30 percent made up of Aboriginal students.

Most Aboriginal students, featured in this study, were surrounded by the traditions of their own community, despite the fact students attending Jupiter Secondary School, were urbanized. The students in this study were of Ojibway or Oji-Cree heritage and lived in rural or near remote communities. Many of the teachers, working in First Nation schools, acknowledged that First Nation students were recognized as having visual and kinesthetic learning modalities which meant that they learned best when they could see what they were expected to learn and were able to demonstrate their understanding with productions. Yet there was an acknowledgment by teachers and researchers that there were some First Nation students who would learn in other ways and it was important that all learning styles were addressed. Schools which recognized and adapted to the learning styles of First Nation students tended to be more successful than those that did not (Pewewardy, 2002; Rehyner, 1992a).
Recommendation #4

Given that Aboriginal students are more successful when they are taught appropriately, where appropriate teaching strategies are used for different learning styles, faculties of education and teacher associations are encouraged to develop pedagogy and professional development opportunities which acknowledge and address Aboriginal student learning styles.

Teaching strategies

The second area of inquiry addressed the use of appropriate teaching strategies. Previous studies (Paulsen, 1999; Seguin Brant, 2001; Bazylak, 2002; Lavell, 2004) have stated that Aboriginal students required a certain set of teaching strategies in order to be successful. Hodgson-Smith (2000) suggested that by linking students with particular learning styles, teachers and schools could be ghettoizing students and not allowing for growth and redefinition. Sawyer (1991) suggested that teachers needed to use a wide range of strategies to be effective. As manner of good practice, eight teachers from this study pointed out that it was important for teachers to provide instruction in a variety of ways to enable all students within the classroom to learn.

Many of the teachers knew that their students were visual-kinesthetic learners and felt that they needed to use a variety of hands-on strategies such as where a shop teacher demonstrates the dynamics of building a chair or a science teacher conducts a science experiment to teach a scientific concept. The interviewed teachers stated that students needed to see the curriculum content wholistically, in order to understand the context of the concepts that needed to be learned. They needed to see visually where their learning fit in. Rochelle, teacher at Mars, pointed out that she never lectured, rather she used a short discussion and got the students on task by having them complete assigned reading. Or sometimes, she would use a video as a way of
engaging her students in the curriculum. Rochelle, Art and Eileen (Mar’s teachers) were
cognizant of using strategies that enhanced the success of their students in their teaching. They
knew that they had to keep their verbal instructions limited and provide hands-on opportunities
for students to demonstrate their learning.

Mercury is a computer-based school and one of its key features was that communication
was in the form of visualized text. Students, at Mercury, instead of hearing a set of instructions,
were given a set of printed instructions and used this to guide their learning. Art, a shop teacher
in Mars, said that he found it necessary to write out his instructions on an overhead as it helped
students, who would be able to go back and check on their progress or clarify if they were doing
the task right. This process gave them more independence and greater self-confidence and in
turn, more self-esteem.

**Recommendation #5**

*Given that Aboriginal students are more successful when their learning styles
are addressed, teachers are encouraged to use various instructional strategies
(visual and kinesthetic) to ensure that all learning styles are being addressed.*

**Interpersonal relationships**

At one point, during the interviews, communication styles became an issue of discussion
with respect to getting students to turn in their assignments on time. Curt, Jupiter teacher, said
that it was a mistake to demand anything from his students, but if they felt that they were doing
you a favour, they might complete the work. It seemed that an indirect approach was an effective
way of asking for help or in this case, getting students to complete lessons (Ross 1992). In a
sense, Curt’s approach parallels the thoughts expressed by Ross (1992) where he stated that
relationships become ineffective when Aboriginal students are directed or told what to do. Ross
said that while working with Aboriginal people, he noted that it was better to not interfere with
their personal perspectives as it affected their sense of personal independence and autonomy.

Tony (Venus teacher), Art (Mar’s teacher) and Curt, felt that if Aboriginal students were placed in confrontational situations, they would close up on the teacher and stop coming to class. It was better to avoid the confrontation. Interview comments in this study confirmed that it was important to maintain positive working relationships in order to keep students engaged in the school process.

Pewewardy (2002) and Rehyner (1992a) suggested that teachers had to use a variety of strategies in order to be successful with Aboriginal students. This was evident in all three First Nation schools. Teachers, involved in this study from Jupiter, stated that they made adjustments to their teaching approaches when they taught Aboriginal students. Tamarra, guidance teacher at Jupiter, said that she never tried to centre out Aboriginal students in her classes, while Curt and Karen, Jupiter teachers, discussed the importance of developing a strong relationship with their students. Students from Jupiter stated that teachers used different teaching methods to engage them. Curt and Karen, Jupiter teachers, had successful programs although they used Independent Learning Materials where students were able to visually see the work that needed to be done. All of the teachers told us that it was important to develop positive and supporting relationships with their students and provide teaching environments that addressed their learning needs.

**Recommendation #6**

*Given that Aboriginal students are more successful when they feel comfortable in the classroom, faculties of education and teacher associations are encouraged to develop courses and professional development opportunities which outline teaching strategies that effectively meet the communication needs of First Nation students. This could involve outlining ways to develop positive relationships and create supportive and informal environments in schools and classrooms.*
Evaluation of students

Rick and Tamarra, teachers at Jupiter, suggested that as long as students came to school regularly, participated and did their work, they would be successful. Tamarra, Jupiter and Rochelle, Mars, stated that they never made Aboriginal students do presentations in front of the class as it was not culturally appropriate since the activity centred them out from the rest of the class. In acknowledging this cultural trait, Tamarra, Jupiter teacher, would allow Aboriginal students to do one-to-one presentations. Sam, Mercury principal, also stated that as part of their staff training, they discouraged teachers from singling out individual students with praise or censure as this was not culturally appropriate (Ross, 1992).

Rochelle, Eileen, Art and Tony, from Mars and Venus communities, suggested that they used a greater range of evaluation strategies that included hands-on tasks along with pen and paper tasks. Teachers, at Mercury, also used a structured approach with their students, since communication was limited to what was placed on the computer screen or what students may be asked to do by their teacher mentor. Students were asked to do different assignments that encouraged real life application of knowledge and skills. Meanwhile, Eileen, teacher at Mars, said that she used daily pop quizzes and as well, set up helping devices that students were able to use during evaluation periods. One of these helping devices was an evaluation rubric. She pointed out that rubrics were a great tool because they provided students with a structured set of expectations to use while completing their assignments. Students could see the extent of the whole project with the rubric. They knew what kind of effort that they needed to provide in order to earn a certain mark. Rubrics provided the students with an opportunity to exert some individual autonomy as they could decide on the mark they wanted to earn. In many ways, the rubric provided students with a set of standards for the completed project or assignment.
Tony, teacher at Venus, outlined how his evaluation procedures were concerned with ensuring that his students had the skills to successfully complete work at a post secondary level. Therefore, much of his evaluation focused on teaching his students on how to become better writers. Students had to demonstrate their knowledge in the evaluation tasks provided. Curt, Jupiter teacher, said that it was important for his students to have short lesson goals. He felt that students were able to complete tasks when they had a purpose. He also said that his students worked effectively when they could see that they would get something tangible or meaningful.

Varied assessment procedures enabled students to be successful in the school program. Michelle stressed that Jupiter teachers went out of their way to encourage Aboriginal students to get their work in. Teachers were willing to accommodate the student, as long as they were willing to try. Schissel & Wotherspoon (2003) and Bazylak (2002) stated that schools that used varied assessment procedures were more likely to have successful Aboriginal students. In addition, Danyluk (1998) found that students, who felt that they could be successful, were more likely to stay in school as they would have a better sense of self-esteem. Previous studies (Van Hamme, 1996; Radda et al., 1998; Bazylak, 2002) have suggested that students, who are confident about their success in the school climate, are likely to continue attending school. In this study, it was observed that students from Mars appeared to be more confident than their peers in Jupiter or Venus.

**Recommendation #7**

Given that Aboriginal students are more successful when they are evaluated with meaningful tasks, faculties of education and teacher associations are encouraged to develop courses and professional development opportunities which outline varied assessment strategies that would meet the learning style needs of First Nation students.
Relevant curricula

The interview participants outlined that Ontario Ministry of Education curricula was not really relevant to the lives of their students, who lived in Northwestern Ontario. Teachers had to modify their content to incorporate Aboriginal content within it. Additionally, at the secondary level, there were separate Aboriginal language and Native Studies courses focused on Aboriginal peoples. Ideally, if the school had an Aboriginal student population, these courses could be offered.

Teachers observed that the curricula featured in Ontario Ministry of Education courses were often focused on students living in Southern Ontario urban centres. They tried to offset this view by incorporating Aboriginal content in their school program such as using Aboriginal authored literature writings in an English course. Curt, Jupiter teacher, who was limited to the content of the Independent Learning Courses (ILC), made sure that his program incorporated numerous workshops related to Aboriginal culture. He, along with his Aboriginal Liaison Worker, Ron August [pseudonym], connected with Aboriginal community members to create workshops designed for student learning.

Teachers, who are able to use curriculum related to the students in their classroom, were more successful than those who did not (Danyluk, 1998, Rehyner, 1992a). When students see that they have some place in the school curricula, they are likely to be more successful.

Recommendation #8

Given that Aboriginal students are more successful when they can see themselves in the curriculum or when they can see how curriculum is related to their lives, ministries of education (Provincial Governments) are encouraged to develop secondary school curriculum that is relevant to First Nation students and students who are located in northern communities. In addition, Teacher Associations are encouraged to establish curriculum teams to review and revise current secondary school curricula in order to make it
relevant to the perspectives of students in the north.

Conclusion

In determining the school processes that encourage Aboriginal student success in secondary schools, this study examined the processes involved with mental health. These processes consisted of: student characteristics, teaching strategies, student evaluation and relevant curricula. Each of the schools recognized and acknowledged that Aboriginal students had different learning needs. According to some schools, Aboriginal students needed to be taught using visual and kinesthetic strategies. Along with these strategies, some teachers pointed out that they needed to be flexible and informal with their student populations. Students valued their informal relationships with their teachers. All of the teachers, in this study, acknowledged that Aboriginal students had to have varied assessment strategies that would enable them to demonstrate their knowledge of the subject. It was important that teachers adapted provincial curricula to meet the needs of their student population. Most of the academic content in Ontario Ministry of Education courses were found to be southern Ontario focused and did not relate to students living in small and rural communities of the north.

9.4 Emotional

Emotional health is a reference to those activities within the school community that affect the emotional state of their students. Teachers identified that students were often affected by issues related to self-esteem. Schools that were able to address the emotional needs of their students were often successful at keeping students engaged in the school process (Seguin Brant, 2001; Bazylak, 2002).

In the following pages, I will discuss how the following areas impact student success: expectations, teacher-student relationships, parental support and self-esteem.
Expectations

All administrators, at Mars, Jupiter, Venus and Mercury expected their students to do well in their respective school programs. Christine, Venus principal, stated that she expected her students to do well at whatever they chose to do with their life. Barbara, vice-principal of Jupiter, said that incoming students, from First Nations, were often not starting high school with the same sets of academic skills as local students. Nonetheless, she expected them to do what other students were doing in school. Sam, principal of Mercury, said that, with the exception of computer learning, there were no differences in learning expectations of students by his staff. He said that they expected their students to work hard and do well. Karen and Curt, teachers at Jupiter, expected good attendance patterns and if work was submitted, that was a bonus. Both teachers felt their students had many issues to contend with: poverty and self-esteem fueled by drug and substance abuse; being young parents; and coping with their Aboriginality within a non-Aboriginal community. In order to succeed, Aboriginal students have to overcome these obstacles and still meet the expectations of teachers and care providers. Expectations had to be reasonable and achievable (Ferguson et al., 2005). Students will come to school regularly if they are expected to do well (Rehyner, 1992a; Van Hamme, 1996; Danyluk, 1998; Bazylak, 2002; Pewewardy, 2002; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). Students floundered when teachers had low expectations of them (Danyluk, 1998; Ferguson et al., 2005).

The interview data outlined how teachers at four schools, Mars First Nation School, Jupiter Secondary School, Venus First Nation School and Mercury Internet High School had similar types of expectations for their students. They, as teachers and administrators, stated that they expected their students to do well. According to the students in all focus groups, they were willing to participate when teachers had positive and reasonable expectations of them. Students
will succeed when teachers and administrators have reasonable and high expectations of them.

**Teacher-student relationships**

Teachers stated that it was important to establish a friendly, easygoing relationship with their students (Danyluk, 1998). Rick, Jupiter teacher, wrote that he greeted his students whenever he had the chance and made an effort to check in with them while teaching them. Other teachers such as Rochelle, Mars teacher, and Tony, Venus teacher, described how students spoke to them of other things along with school related issues. Phil and John, both from Mercury, said that it was important to be a buddy, but yet, maintain the distance of a mentor.

In order to successfully teach Aboriginal students, relationships needed to be less formal. They appreciated a relaxed approach with their teachers. We know, from Art’s comments, that students quit attending school when teachers used and exerted their power too much. Each teacher in this study had found his or her own way of working with his or her students. Sam, Mercury principal, stated that successful teachers were always focused on meeting the needs of their students. Positive relationships between students and teachers are important for students to be successful in school environments (Bazylak, 2002; Danyluk, 1998; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Ferguson et al., 2005; Ward, 2005). Focus group students in Venus and Mars were very supportive and optimistic about the care and interest of their teachers. This caring attitude is important for Aboriginal students in order for them to be successful.

**Parental support and involvement**

Success within a school environment is based upon the partnership between parents, students and teachers (Danyluk, 1998; Friedel, 1999). Each partner has certain responsibilities and duties to fulfill. For example, a student is expected to do all that is necessary to succeed at school, parents are expected to support and encourage, and teachers are to provide curricula
content, methods of instruction and assessment practices that will enable students to participate
in meaningful ways in their community. Tony, (Venus teacher), Sam, (Mercury administrator)
and Michelle, (Jupiter teacher), said that students are successful when they have supportive
parents.

For many teachers involved in this study, lack of parental involvement has been stated as
an important factor contributing to student failure. This has resulted in teachers having to change
their teaching behaviour as some will take on the role of the missing parents. Curt, Jupiter
teacher, was one of these as he felt that he had to find an alternative way to get his students to
submit assignments and to plan for their future. Other teachers felt that Aboriginal parents had
abrogated their responsibility as parents, once their child had gone to school. One teacher heard
from a parent, who said that she felt powerless when her daughter had become 14. This sense of
distancing becomes more pronounced when students are expected to live in a stranger's home
and only see their parent on weekends or during long weekends or during holidays. In the town
of Copper, forty percent (Canada Census, 2007) of First Nation students were placed in boarding
homes. Since students, attending Jupiter, were moved from their parent’s household, it seemed
that parental control was diminished and Michelle (Jupiter teacher) and Hailey (Venus board
member) felt that the responsibility of getting students to complete their school work was left to
the ingenuity of the teachers.

Teachers expected parents to be engaged and directing their student’s academic life. This
contradicted Ross’s ethic of non-interference (1992), where he noted that it was rude to give
advice or tell somebody to do something unless one asked for it. They and the school did not
recognize or understand that they were violating cultural norms within their community.

The question that became apparent was how do teachers approach parents in a culturally
appropriate way to encourage them to be more engaged with their children? Melissa, guidance counselor at Venus, answered this question by saying that teachers needed to do home visits, have a cup of tea and invite the parents to offer possible solutions. This would empower the parent. On the other hand, if a teacher tells the parent what to do, it (this telling) takes away from the parent’s personal autonomy and responsibility as a parent. This would be consistent with the importance of maintaining personal autonomy ethic outlined by Brant (1990) and Ross (1992) as it would respect cultural norms.

In small schools such as Mercury, Venus and Mars, teachers still found communication with parents challenging. Kathy and Christine, principals of Venus and Mars schools respectively, were able to communicate with parents in their First Language. It provided an opportunity for parents to be more engaged in the lives of their students. Kathy and Christine stressed that it helped that they, as educational leaders, were from the community that the school served as this relationship created a sense of common understanding and respect. Parents knew that these educational leaders could see the issues with the same perspectives as themselves. Kathy and Christine would be able to involve the parent in developing a solution to any concerns that they had. It was unfortunate that there were few secondary teachers who speak the First Language of the community as it would have enhanced their relationships and success.

Students’ success is enhanced when parents are involved with their educational program. Teachers in this study were concerned about the lack of involvement of parents in their students’ life. Students were more likely to be successful when they could attend secondary school in their home community as they would have access to parental and kinship support.

**Recommendation #9**

*Given that parental support is important for student success, students need*
to stay in their home communities to attend secondary school and maintain kinship connections. The federal government and local school authorities need to reinvest in local First Nation schools. They are encouraged to create school communities which address the academic and social needs of its student population. Concern has been raised over lack of course variety to finish academic programming and lack of resources to provide diverse and rich programming. These two issues need to be addressed.

**Recommendation #10**

Given the impact of residential schools and its effect upon the parenting skills of Aboriginal parents, parents need to be reconnected and reminded of their traditional obligations for their students. Parental support training programs need to be designed, developed and implemented within all First Nation communities. Parents need to become knowledgeable about the school learning process and recognize the importance of personal connections with school practitioners. In the training process, schools can outline their expectations for parents within their school community.

**Self-esteem**

Dornai et al. (2001) stated that, “student’s self-concept is comparable to an iceberg in that the tip is exposed to us and can be imposing but yet only five percent is visible.” Interviewed teachers described how students in First Nation schools lacked self-esteem. For some schools, such as Mars and Jupiter, a low sense of self-esteem could result in students being placed in dangerous situations. Teachers, from all four schools, pointed out that low self-esteem among the student population resulted in their participation in unhealthy lifestyles. They described how students were attracted to those individuals who would provide support to them and over a period of time, these same individuals would encourage them (students) to disengage from the school process. Teachers and parents struggled with finding ways to prevent this situation from reoccurring with individual students. They stated that some students needed to be supported emotionally, as well as academically.
Low self-esteem took on another form at Venus, where Melissa, guidance counselor, observed how students, nearing graduation, would deliberately ruin their opportunities to pass. Failing was a better alternative than having to go on to the next stage of life, such as leaving the community to attend post secondary schooling. Students, from the Venus focus group, said that they were scared of going to other schools. Melissa felt that many students were not willing to take the necessary risks to leave their home community, a characteristic of a student having low self-esteem (Dehyle, 1992; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Ferguson et al., 2005).

In other schools, such as Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter), Curt and Karen said that they were providing an environment in which students were able to develop some independence and personal autonomy. Danyluk (1998) described how teachers, who went above and beyond the call of duty, were appreciated and respected by Aboriginal students and community members. Toulouse (2004) suggested that student self-esteem could be enhanced by a school’s recognition of Aboriginal culture in ways such as, incorporating the values of the seven grandfathers into the school philosophy and promoting positive images within its environment.

Yet, Tony, Venus teacher, suggested that students, who have family and parental support, are more likely to take risks and venture out of the community to participate in post secondary schooling. Although teachers addressed self-esteem issues, efforts to improve were in the forefront of teacher’s minds. They knew that they needed to find ways to make their students feel valued. The challenge for all teachers and administrators was to create other programs and opportunities within school environments that facilitate the growth of self-esteem for Aboriginal students.

**Recommendation #11**

Given that Aboriginal student success is increased when they are self
confident and willing to take risks, parents, community groups, and local
governments are encouraged to develop strategies/initiatives that will
facilitate the creation of programs that will help bolster student’s self-esteem.

Conclusion

In discovering the school processes that would encourage Aboriginal student success in
secondary school, I found that each of the schools had similar perspectives in the emotional
health area. They voiced their opinions in the following areas: teacher expectations, teacher
student relationships, parental support and self-esteem.

It is clear that teachers and administrators, at all of the schools involved in this study,
expected their students to do well. Students were expected to attend school regularly and
complete the assigned work. All interviewed teachers knew that it was important to have casual
and informal relationships with their students. They were likely to be positive about their school
environment when they had a good relationship with their teachers (Danyluk, 1998). A positive
attitude resulted in greater development of self-esteem, as students were likely to be engaged in
the school program for longer periods of time.

Many teachers commented about the importance of parental support for their students.
They told us that students were likely to succeed when they had parental support. Teachers were
concerned about the quality of parental involvement with students in general. In order for
students to be successful in the secondary school program, they needed to have a reasonable set
of expectations, good relationships with administrators and teachers, supportive parents and a
good sense of self esteem.

9.5 Spiritual

According to the teachings of the medicine wheel, spiritual health is as important as the
other aspects (Bopp et al., 1988). However, topics related to spiritualism in schools are
controversial in publicly funded schools and more so, in some northern Aboriginal communities.

Spiritually based programs are offered in Catholic schools within the province of Ontario and sometimes, are also offered in Aboriginal communities such as those found integrated within Venus and Mars First Nation Schools. In contrast, there are also other communities which follow other Christian traditions and would prefer not to be associated with forms of Aboriginal spiritualism, as highlighted by the research of Mosher-Rae (2001). I was aware of this potential conflict and focused my inquiry into examining elements that were available to address the spiritual health of the students involved in this study. This point is relevant for Mercury and Jupiter, as both schools service student populations with a diverse range of religious affiliations.

In the following pages, I will discuss how the following culturally based aspects can impact student success: Aboriginal values, images and language. These three areas reflect the importance of Aboriginal culture in the respective school environments.

Aboriginal values and images in school programs

Promoting Aboriginal values is much easier when your school is based or located within a First Nation. Teachers at Venus, Mars and Mercury acknowledged that Aboriginal culture was all around them. For example, school walls and hallways were covered with pictures of former graduates, successful school teams and paintings by Aboriginal artists. At Mars First Nation School, in many of the classrooms, there were bundles of sacred medicines (sage, sweet grass, cedar and tobacco) as well as word posters relating to the seven grandfather teachings. It was easy for students to feel connected to the school when they could see and feel their culture throughout the school environment. Researchers (Rehyner, 1992a; Danyluk, 1998; Bazylak, 2002; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003) wrote when students feel that a school respects and values their culture, they are more than likely to feel comfortable and participate in the school process.
Administrators in First Nation schools promoted involvement within community wide activities related to their culture. For example, Kathy, Mars principal, and Christine, Venus principal, pointed out that their communities continued to practice the eight seasonal feasts and their school communities often took part in both, spring and fall activities. Additionally, Christine, Venus principal, stated that her school had a ceremonial drum and Elders would make frequent visits to the school to pass on traditional teachings. Mars incorporated the philosophies of the seven grandfathers from Ojibway teachings (wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility and truth) as part of their school philosophy and guidelines. Like Jupiter Secondary School, Mars and Venus encouraged participation in full and half day workshops related to Aboriginal culture. Jupiter was taking steps to sensitize its school population to Aboriginal perspectives by blending in Aboriginal focused feasts and workshops throughout the school year.

Schissel & Wotherspoon (2003, p.121) state:

Schools that report the greatest success in terms of retention and educational achievement among Aboriginal students tend to be those that incorporate indigenous orientations across the entire range of curricular subjects, school programming, and educational activities.

What is apparent from the comments, made by the participants, is that First Nation schools were often based upon and infused with Aboriginal culture whereas Jupiter was less so.

It is also clear that there is a relationship between the degree of cultural activities integrated within the school environment and student attitudes. Students at Mars and Venus said that they were positive and supportive of their school and its teachers. In contrast, the students from the main school of Jupiter were not as enthusiastic about their school. The mood and imagery of the school can be a contributing factor in creating a comfortable environment within the school community. When students are comfortable and happy, they are more likely to
contribute and participate in the school environment (Bazylak, 2002; Seguin Brant, 2001; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Ward, 2005). This was confirmed with the interview data gathered at Mars, Venus, and Mercury, and in the alternative education programs of Urban Aboriginal Program (UAP) and Parents Attending Secondary School (PASS), when compared with the environment of Jupiter. In each of the schools and programs reviewed, students were acknowledged and respected and had a great deal of individual autonomy.

**Recommendation #12**

*Given that Aboriginal students are more successful when they know that the school supports and reflects their community and cultural values, administrators and teachers are encouraged to blend in Aboriginal values and perspectives into the daily operations of their school community.*

**Language**

Aboriginal culture and spiritualism are based upon the language of the people (Lickers, 2004). What is commonly thought amongst most traditional and contemporary groups is that Aboriginal culture will die without the language (Lickers, 2004). Randi, teacher from Mars, stated that in one of the Ojibway teachings, the Creator said that he would go away from the Anishinaabe people, if he did not hear his language being spoken. Most Ojibway speakers felt that maintaining it as a spoken language was important. English as a Second Language (ESL) authors have pointed out that knowing a second language enhances intellectual development (Ontario, 2005). As there are declining numbers of home raised language speakers, it is important to promote school-based language programs to encourage language growth (Lickers, 2004).

Randi, Mars teacher, described how conversing in Ojibway often settled and relaxed the students as it reminded them of their home and parents. In some sense, a similar attitude was
found amongst the focus group of students in Jupiter as they were taking Ojibway language courses. Mars, Venus and Mercury schools were renewing their efforts to ensure the survival of the local language. For example at Mars, plans were underway to create and implement an immersion program for Ojibway language instruction despite concerns about English language acquisition.

In this study, the value and importance of Ojibway as a First Language was encouraged. All teachers felt that strong English skills were needed for accessing post secondary schooling and employment opportunities. Schissel & Wotherspoon (2003) stated that students, strong in their language and culture, were more confident and competent to cope with the world around them. Ojibway language speaking teachers and community members felt that having students, who were able to speak their language and practice their culture, was important for their students’ success.

**Recommendation #13**

Given that Aboriginal student confidence and skills are enhanced, when schools provide First language programs, schools that have significant Aboriginal student populations are encouraged to implement, maintain and enrich existing language programs.

**Conclusion**

Aboriginal students are more successful when they know that the school that they attend is respectful of their culture (Jones, 2003; Radda et al., 1998). In order to know this, they have to see it, feel it and do it. When schools display Aboriginal images in the school environment, students can see it. Schools that use policies and practices are respectful of Aboriginal values, students can feel it. When students are able to see how Aboriginal language and values are integrated into school curricula, they are able to experience and do it. When a school is able to do
this, they will have a successful Aboriginal student population. Schools that incorporated Aboriginal values and featured Aboriginal images throughout its environment are likely to create a climate that is conducive to keeping its student population engaged in the school process (Rehyner, 1992a; Danyluk, 1998; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). Research and interview participants were in agreement that it was important to create a school climate that visibly respected Aboriginal culture, or students would not be as enthusiastic about participating. Certainly, it is evident that when a school is located on a First Nation, it is easier to incorporate Aboriginal culture within the school program.

9.6 Physical

The last aspect of the medicine wheel addresses the physical health of a school program. Physical health could be unfolded in several ways, for example, it can be a direct reference to how children eat and live, as Penny, Venus teacher, told us, or it can be a reference to how the school addresses the physical health needs of the student. In this study, teachers commented and referred to how the school promoted community and recreational activities. There were two areas that emerged from this information: school as the heart of the community and recreational programming. The following pages will discuss how these areas affect student success.

School as the heart of the community

In smaller First Nation communities of 500-1000 people, the school is often the largest building. This is the case in many First Nation communities across Northwestern Ontario. Sometimes, the school is the only place where large groups of people can gather for such events as funerals, graduations or bingos. In the cases of Mars First Nation School, Venus First Nation School and Mercury Internet High School, the school has one of the larger buildings in the community. Art and Randi, teachers at Mars, told us that their school was utilized in different
ways such as a site for yard sales, car washes, bingos and karate classes. It was seen as a community centre for all band members. Sam, Mercury administrator, stated that, sometimes, the school would serve as a drop in centre where students could come and watch a movie or have a game night and it (the centre) served as a gathering point for the youth. In this way, students considered school as a safe place where they could have fun. Bazylak (2002) and Jones (2003) acknowledged that students were more successful when school was perceived and utilized in other ways.

Research tells us that when students are comfortable with a school environment and where they feel safe, they are more likely to participate in the school activities offered (Danyluk, 1998; Swanson, 2003; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). Students, who see the school as the heart of their community, are more willing to take part in schooling opportunities and therefore, be more willing to take risks. This was noted in Mars and Mercury, and less so, at Venus and Jupiter. It is apparent that the size and location of the school and community had an effect upon the comfort level of the Aboriginal students. Jupiter was the largest of the schools involved in this study and was located in the largest town in Northwestern Ontario. Aboriginal students, going to Jupiter, had other choices and options with which they could spend their spare time. Students were less likely to participate in the recreational activities offered by Jupiter as a result of these choices.

**Recommendation #14**

Given that Aboriginal students are more likely to be successful when they are safe and comfortable with the school environment that they attend, school board officials, educational authorities and administrators are encouraged to provide opportunities for students to use the school as part of extra-curricular programming and community initiatives.

Recreational programming
Most schools offer a variety of club activities as part of their extra-curricular program: some involved the development of student leadership in student council while other activities encouraged students to participate in drama, music or sport programs. When students took part in extra-curricular activities, they were able to develop better relationships with each other and staff members involved (Whitbeck et al., 2001). Students developed a common focus as part of a unified group, whether it was aiming for the Christmas concert or playing a basketball game. In the dressing rooms, during practices and games, different individuals were sometimes the target of friendly teasing or harassment or one could simply be an observer, watching as someone else became the target of attention. This was dependent upon personalities involved in the activity. Teasing and joking were important aspects of being a teammate and a friend. Recreational opportunities, like participating on sports teams or engaging in clubs, helped create a relaxed and inviting school climate.

I discovered, in the four schools that I visited, that, two out of four schools at the secondary level had an active extra-curricular program. We observed the following:

- Jupiter did not have many Aboriginal students engaged in the extra-curricular activities however the opportunities were there for the interested student. Students from the focus group said that they were not involved, but knew the opportunities existed.

- Mars was able to field school teams in local regional organizations such as the North Western Ontario Secondary School Association (NORWOSSA) with the public and Catholic secondary schools. Kathy and Rochelle, Mars staff members, mentioned in their interviews that students were often motivated by sports to attend school. In this sense, recreational success inspired other students to become successful in sports and school academics.

- Venus Secondary, due to the small size of its secondary school population, was not able to field a sports team, although students were keen on participating in school sports. The school did have a gymnasium and over the years, would have local volleyball tournaments.

- At Mercury, school populations limited its participation in recreational opportunities and
took on a different form than what was visible at Mars. For example, opportunities to come to the Learning Centre were encouraged during the evening, sometimes as often as three times a week.

Programming outside of school hours is important for student success (Danyluk, 1998). A well-rounded school program enhances and develops the mental, physical, spiritual and emotional aspects of a student. This activity was evident in two of the four schools within the study.

What was apparent from the interviews with the three student groups was that there were different attitudes exhibited towards their school. Students at Mars were excited and enthusiastic, while students at Venus were more relaxed, laid back and casual, whereas students at Jupiter were resentful towards their school. When Jupiter students were asked about participating in extra-curricular programs, one or two responded that they did when they were at Mars but not while attending Jupiter. Active students are often the happiest and most involved with their school community (Whitbeck et al., 2001). They have a tendency to become very organized and goal oriented as they attempt to juggle school and their extra-curricular life.

**Recommendation #15**

*Given that Aboriginal students are more successful when they participate in extra-curricular programs school communities are encouraged to promote recreational opportunities for their Aboriginal student populations.*

**Conclusion**

In determining the school processes that would encourage Aboriginal student success in secondary school, I found that the schools had varied perspectives in the physical health area. They offered thoughts in the following areas: school as the heart of the community and recreational programming.

It is clear that the physical aspects were addressed in a number of ways by each of the schools. Some schools, such as Mars, were better at attracting students to after-school activities.
Sometimes, the school was the only place to go as in the case of Mars or Mercury whereas in other larger communities, as in the case of Copper and Jupiter, students had choices and places to go.
Outside the Circle: Sharing what we have learned.

Rubin & Rubin (1995) stated that a reason for conducting research was to create new knowledge through the establishment and creation of grounded theory. In reviewing what was said by educational practitioners involved in this study, I wanted to add to the growing body of literature related to understanding the processes that contribute to the success of Aboriginal students in current secondary school programs.

In the previous chapters, I collectively reviewed and organized the findings of teachers, administrators and students into inductive and abductive themes, which were guided by the medicine wheel framework. As a result of these themes, I created a list of recommendations that seemed to be appropriate and linked to the data reviewed, as highlighted in chapter 9. For example, the recommendation of improving funding to enhance salaries and benefits can be linked with community influences and the discussion around retaining experienced teachers.

Additionally, I used the framework of the Medicine Wheel, with its six aspects, as a research framework. I blended the interview participant comments with the findings from other researchers in the areas related to secondary school programming. The research was organized into the following categories-- student success (circle centre); community influences (outside the circle); mental health (East): emotional health (South); spiritual health (West) and physical health (North). In the following pages, for each area studied, I will provide a summary of the findings and discuss its implications for potential practice.
Chapter 10: **Community influences**

**Circle centre: Student success**

The primary goal of this study has been to reveal how we as teachers can enhance our learning communities to keep Aboriginal students in secondary school longer. Ferguson et al. (2005) pointed out that in Ontario, across the province, drop-out rates for Aboriginal students were lower than in past years (as compared to Mckay & Myles, 1989), but were still substantially higher than other studied groups. Aboriginal students had a tendency to disengage from the school system and program at a rate of 75%. In this study drop-out rates were lower in First Nation based schools than the public high school. Most First Nation schools pointed out that they were able to retain 60-70% of its student population, whereas provincially based schools had a 20-25 % retention rate (Ferguson et al., 2005).

An explanation for the difference between provincial and First Nation school based statistics has to be due to the fact that students, who go to school in their home community, have access to family and kinship support within their community whereas, many First Nation students, who attend provincial schools, will board out with foster families for the duration of the school year and do not have the same accessibility to them. They have to reestablish and find new supporting relationships and as a result, can be influenced by negative peers.

This study was primarily focused on the words and thoughts of those individuals who worked in the field of education, such as teachers and administrators. Student perceptions, gathered in the form of focus groups from three of the four schools, added to the clarity and richness of the context. In outlining the words and thoughts of educational practitioners, I thought that we, as readers, could benefit from their experience and perceptions. This study revealed findings, which supported previous research:
Positive relationships with teachers were important for student success
Flexible and varied evaluation assessments were needed to encourage student participation
Varied teaching strategies that address all learning styles, in particular kinesthetic and visual as they were prevalent amongst Aboriginal students
Respectful and friendly school environments are important for relaxed environment which Aboriginal students thrive in.
Continuing parental support is important as Aboriginal youth are faced with important decisions in secondary school.
Cultural and language programs help improve self esteem amongst Aboriginal students.
Opportunities to participate in recreational or extra-curricular activities increases the comfort level of Aboriginal students in school environments.
Varied program opportunities that developed skills that enable Aboriginal students to compete in non-Aboriginal societies.

If a school is able to provide all of these features, it is likely that Aboriginal students would be successful (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Bazylak, 2002).

Aboriginal students are more successful when they are in environments that are respectful of Aboriginal people and culture. It is clear that this can be found in First Nation communities. However, Aboriginal students can be successful in other urban environments where they feel comfortable and accepted.

There were two areas of discussion that surfaced in the study but were not necessarily supported by the interview comments: small schools are better; and the importance of Aboriginal education counselors. Both of these areas are important in understanding the broader Aboriginal educational picture.

**Small schools are better**

Slate and Jones (2005) pointed out that small schools had an intimate relationship with its parents and students due to its size. This was supported by some teachers who felt that in one case the local smaller Catholic high school was better at retaining Aboriginal students and in another case, one teacher stated that students did not realize that they were having more success
because teachers were able to give them much more personal time than they would receive in a larger secondary school. Additionally, students had an opportunity to engage in many more activities in a small secondary school as there were fewer students. For example, a secondary student could be playing basketball, running cross country, involved in coffee houses, and be an active in fundraising for the student council. As a result, they could develop confidence and self esteem.

The interview participants had a number of ideas that could be considered as solutions to help Aboriginal students improve their success rate in secondary schools. Bazylak (2002) and Seguin Brant (2001), in voicing student perspectives, pointed out that parental support, flexible and relevant programming and informal relationships with teachers were important for student success. These features were more likely to be found in smaller school environments such as those found on First Nation communities or in program specific classrooms such as the Urban Aboriginal Program (UAP) or Parents Attending Secondary School (PASS). Haig-Brown et al. (1997), Bazylak (2002), Jones (2003) and Swanson (2003) were reports of studies based upon specialized programs where Aboriginal students were achieving success. Students, from Jupiter's Ojibway class, stated that they felt valued and appreciated when they attended this class. In addition, students, from the Venus and Mars First Nation School focus groups, said that, "They felt comfortable in the school that they attended." Small school environments seem to have the flexibility to be less formal and more receptive to the needs of students (Dawes 2005; Dawes 2006). This would suit the needs of Aboriginal students. This was the case for the three First Nation community schools. Jupiter was described as a large and imposing environment that intimidated Aboriginal students. More effort was needed to change this perception such as providing a space for students to hang out in, as found in Seguin Brant (2001).
In order for Aboriginal students to become more successful, provincial schools need to change the way they currently practice education. The provincial government needs to encourage school communities to become more welcoming of First Nation students in a way that does not centre them out. Teachers have to broaden their “tool kit” and regularly blend in teaching strategies that address visual and kinesthetic learning styles, as well as learn how to praise students without centering them out. Additionally, assessment practices need to reflect realism and relate to current Aboriginal communities. Curriculum, as promoted by the province, must also show the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives within all curricular areas. Otherwise, it would be better off for First Nation students to attend school in their own First Nation, even though their opportunities would be limited by the size of the school. This would require additional and creative funding from the Federal governments. Perhaps, there would be additional learning/secondary school networks created in which regions of First Nation communities are collectively linked together as one secondary school, where teachers would teach using a combination of the internet and face to face instruction.

**First Nation education counselors**

Before starting this research, I knew that there were Aboriginal education counselors available in non-Aboriginal schools. Each First Nation community hired an Aboriginal counselor to help students by locating a home for them to live in, and secondly, providing emotional and financial support to their students. Tamarra, Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter) teacher, commented that students were connected to their home community and to Jupiter, through their First Nation’s education counselor. However, she pointed out that some education counselors were more visible than others. Tamarra wondered if there was a way of improving that particular feature as it seemed that communication broke down between teachers, parents and counselors.
Nobody was very clear about who to contact when student concerns arose. It seemed to Michelle that Aboriginal parents had abrogated their responsibilities as parents, when their children left for high school and that the Aboriginal Education Counselor had taken over the role of being a parent to that child. This was confirmed in research by Mosher-Rae (2001), where a parent from her study, said that it was up to the school to address school behavior issues.

As a result of the discussion, there seemed to be some uncertainty as to who was responsible for the continued guidance of the teenaged children attending secondary school: parents or educational counselor. It was evident from Curt’s and Michelle’s comments that Aboriginal parents thought the school was responsible, not them. Some clarity in this area needs to happen, given the importance of this position to the school community. For example, teachers and administrators need to know who they can contact when they have concerns related to their students. First Nation counselors need to understand their role. First Nation communities should be working cooperatively with secondary school communities and ensure that this particular position has a clear mandate within both communities.

**Outside the circle: Community influences**

This particular area emerged as the study evolved. I was faced with having to categorize a number of comments that really did not fit into any of the previously outlined areas (mental, emotional, spiritual and physical) of the medicine wheel. The inductive process was used in this review of the interview comments which highlighted: teaching experience, funding, role of the local school board and quality of local school programming.

There was some discussion related to the inability of First Nation schools to compete financially with public boards to retain teaching staff for any length of time. Taylor (1995a) told us that First Nation schools were a training ground for young teachers, who would later leave to
work in public schools. First Nation students were often exposed to teachers who were learning how to teach and this inhibited their own learning as beginning teachers experimented with new techniques which at times, were ineffective. In some sense, if First Nation schools were adequately funded, they would be able to retain their teachers for longer periods of time and enhance their success with First Nation students as found in Mars First Nation School.

Another area that emerged from the comments was related to the impact of local school officials upon the operation of the school and running of the school classrooms. It was evident that school board members or school council members had less of an impact in provincially run schools than in schools operated by First Nation educational authorities. Population size of the school community and the served community were key factors in determining the degree of impact of the local school board members and school council members. In some school communities, the school board chair would drop into the school for coffee regularly but yet, maintain a distance from the operation of the school. Whereas in other schools, the parent school council would partner with student groups to promote workshops and events to benefit the greater student population. Aboriginal students were more successful in schools where they perceived and saw the participation of Aboriginal parents in the operation of the school (Friedel, 1999) such as those found in schools located on First Nations or in elementary school settings.

Concerns were also raised about the quality of schooling offered by teachers working in First Nation schools. Some teachers perceived that First Nation schools created secondary school graduates who had lesser skills than those students who graduated from public secondary schools. In some ways, the quality of the teaching program is compounded when you consider that First Nation schools are often underfunded in comparison to provincially run schools (Canada, 1996; Postl, 2004). As a result, it is difficult to keep experienced teachers and improve
the working environment as capital and school resource monies are limited. One teacher described the disparity between his shop program and one offered by the public school. He was discouraged as he felt that his students did not have a chance to compete with those students from the public school system who were completing sophisticated tasks with equipment similar to what was found in the current workplace. And there were some administrators who wanted to see more non-compulsory courses offered but could not as they were limited by enrolment expectations, resources and costs.

It was apparent that teachers and administrators recognized their school programs could benefit from additional funding. Disparity between public and federal school funding was identified as a source of discontent because First Nation's administrators recognized that they could not do more for their students. They were limited in what they could offer by the budgets that were given to them.

As noted in a listed recommendation, the Federal government needs to re-examine and reassess its funding formula for First Nation schools. It is apparent that federal school communities are not able to provide comparable school programs (to local provincial schools) in terms of resources and experienced teachers. More monies need to be directed to Educational Authorities who must use the monies to enhance their school communities. Furthermore, Educational Authorities and administrators should expect their teachers to provide school programs that are consistent or superior to local provincial curriculum.

**East: Mental health**

In this area, the focus was directed to the school program and how it was delivered to its students. The participants outlined a variety of comments related to the following areas: student population characteristics, teaching strategies, evaluation strategies and relevant curricula. Most
of the students, involved in this study, were mainly Ojibway from Northwestern Ontario. However, the school population at Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) was slightly different as they were located further north and could be of mixed Ojibway-Cree ancestry. They still shared a similar lifestyle as the other students involved in the study.

Teachers from Mars, Venus and Mercury secondary schools described how they were more successful when they used visually and kinesthetically based teaching strategies. It was pointless to provide lectures to their students as they needed to see and feel their instructional content. Researchers in previous studies suggested that Aboriginal students were likely to exhibit certain learning style tendencies (Rehyner, 1992a; Sawyer, 1991; Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Pewewardy, 2002; Hodgson-Smith, 2000). Additionally, interviewee teachers suggested that their students needed a classroom that had a relaxed atmosphere which gave them the opportunity to work independently. Students thrived in an atmosphere that conveyed a degree of informality in respect of role relationships.

In addition, a number of teachers pointed out how they were willing to use different types of assignments to encourage student participation. Summative activities that related to their sense of knowing and environment were particularly useful. Students were successful when they could make connections with what they were learning and what they knew. The evaluation activities ranged from daily review work, checklists, project work to final tests. Students were more likely to be successful when these activities were used in the classroom.

A final point focused on the relevancy of the Ontario provincial curriculum to Aboriginal students living in the north. Some teachers pointed out that activities used by the course profiles and course expectations were not appropriate to the situations in Northern Ontario. Many of the teachers altered their curricula so that it would relate to the needs of their students. If students
could relate to their school content, they were likely to engage in the school program. It was important for students to see the school content as being a part of their lifestyle.

It was evident that teachers and administrators tried to connect and relate to their students. Many of the teachers and schools in this study had achieved some success with their students because of their efforts in these areas.

Teachers and Teacher Associations should be creating professional development opportunities in order to address the learning needs of First Nation students. Provincial governments need to provide funding support for these initiatives. Additionally, provincial governments are encouraged to provide financial and technical support for the establishment of northern focused curricula teams, where provincial curricula is “northernized” like that currently being done by the Math Association in Northwestern Ontario.

**South: Emotional health**

In this area, the focus was directed to the emotional needs of the student. The participants outlined a variety of comments related to the following areas: teacher expectations, relationships in the school, self-esteem and parental support. Students, who had their emotional needs met, were likely to be involved in the school program.

All school participants commented upon the importance of having realistic and high expectations for their students. When teachers expected positive behaviours and efforts of their students, they were likely engaged in the school program. In cases, where students perceived a lack of appreciation for their efforts, students were more likely to disengage from the school process. Additionally, students enjoyed positive and relaxed relationships with their teachers. Many of the teachers, who worked with First Nation students, believed that it was important to be informal with their students. Power struggles were avoided as students would disengage from
the school process.

Discussion was raised about student self esteem. Students, who exhibited low levels of self esteem were also students with parents who were less involved with their lives. Most teachers and administrators discussed how students with low self esteem would be coaxed and lured by other students who were involved in the world of drugs and alcohol and more than likely became disengaged from the school program. Teachers felt parents needed to be more involved with their students in order to counteract the demands of the negative peer relationships.

It was also noted that students, who were successful in the school program, had parents who valued the importance of school and were actively involved with their students as they participated in school activities. Students who did not have the support of the parents, often looked for support elsewhere. Schools, that offered a wide range of extra-curricular activities, were able to provide positive forms of encouragement to increase the self-esteem of their students.

We heard from teachers and administrators that the school community wanted Aboriginal parents to be more actively involved with their students. However, I pointed out, as the researcher, how this expectation conflicted with cultural norms of Ojibway people. Additionally, Melissa, Venus First Nation School guidance teacher, suggested informal and indirect approaches in working with parents.

Needless to say, students, who had their emotional needs addressed, were also happy and involved in the school program. When this happened, they were likely to attend regularly and complete their high school credits. The question for all parties concerned with the education of Aboriginal students is how does a school community create a partnership with its Aboriginal
parents in culturally appropriate ways? How does a school community guide its’ students’ parents to be supportive in appropriate ways? And what does the school community do to help those students who board out in foster homes? We know from research, that Aboriginal students are more successful when they have adult support. Perhaps it is necessary to create culturally appropriate training programs for parents including foster home parents, who should be invited or required to attend a “Get to Know You” program. This program would be developed by a partnership with the provincial and federal governments and they should work with the local Band Council and Educational Authority.

**West: Spiritual health**

In this area, the focus was directed to how the school program incorporated Aboriginal culture. In many cases there were two ways in which this was done: Aboriginal values and images in the school environment and Aboriginal language. Schools that addressed these areas were likely to have an actively engaged student population.

Researchers and teachers felt that having a relaxed atmosphere and mood was conducive to encouraging student engagement in the school program. Most students in First Nation schools said that they were quite happy with their school environment, while in another school, students and teachers had mixed reactions of the environment. It was noted that some students were fearful of leaving their school community, and at times, it seemed that they deliberately failed in order to stay in the community.

Three of the four schools were located in First Nation communities and the majority of its student population consisted of Ojibway students. Some of these schools blended in activities related to Aboriginal culture. One school developed their school philosophy and everyday operations around the teachings of the Seven Grandfathers (Benton-Banai, 1979). Students were
aware of seasonal celebrations as community members were involved in the school program.

Although Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter) was not based in a First Nation's community, there was an attempt to develop sensitivities to the culture of surrounding Aboriginal communities. In recent years, Nexus School Board (of which Jupiter is part of) has incorporated the Seven Grandfather Teachings as part of its school philosophy.

Aboriginal language is viewed as being important in maintaining the culture of First Nation's people. All school communities offered one or two courses in the local first language. In First Nation schools, the language of instruction was English, some students were seen as having the first language and in some cases, had to be taught as English as a Second Language (ESL) student, where written instructions needed to be explained.

It was evident that schools, located in First Nation communities, provided an immersion type of atmosphere for First Nation students. The classrooms were inundated with paraphernalia of Aboriginal culture along with Aboriginal images. This was unlike Jupiter where Aboriginal images were limited to the Ojibway classroom. Students, correspondingly, were happy to be involved within school environments that were seen as supporting Aboriginal cultures.

It would seem that in order for schools, with Aboriginal student populations, to be successful, they should ensure that the physical setting is welcoming of Aboriginal students—who need to see something visually whether it is colours related to the medicine wheel or some form of Aboriginal art in a mural. They need to know that there is a place for them (Seguin Brant, 2001). Certainly, it would help if students realized that the values influencing the operation of the school were similar to Aboriginal values. Perhaps, as Education leaders complete introductory grade sessions/forums, a link to Aboriginal philosophies would be helpful as a way to connect Aboriginal students to the school community. Incorporating Native Study
and Aboriginal Language courses are also excellent ways of demonstrating to Aboriginal students that Aboriginal culture is an important part of the school environment. These three strategies could be implemented by the local school community.

**North: Physical health**

This area addresses the concept that if students are physically involved with their school community, they are likely to be happy and successful. The interview comments, in this research study, related to the following topics: school as the heart of the community and recreational programming.

In the First Nation communities, the school building was often seen as one of the bigger buildings in the community, as in the cases of Venus First Nation School (Venus) and Mars First Nation School (Mars). The satellite classrooms of Mercury Internet High School (Mercury) could be set apart from other buildings or could also be connected to other building complexes as in the case of Mystic Learning Centre. Sometimes, as was told by some participants, the school became a magnet for community recreational activities, especially if the school had a gym. One teacher pointed out that Mars was always busy with activities such as hosting bingos, fund raising events and memorial services. In some of the satellite schools of Mercury, the classroom became a place for students to visit for movie or game nights.

Recreational opportunities were seen by teachers as being important for the continued success of students. However, one teacher noted that some students would drop out of school once the sport season ended for a particular sport. But, these same students were quite willing to come back the next season, and this was better than being permanently dropped out as it gave teachers had another opportunity to reach out to them. Whitbeck et al. (2001) maintain that engaging students recreationally is important for student success as it enhances relationships
between students and staff. School communities, Education Counselors, and teachers should encourage Aboriginal students to become active in a school club or sport team. Education Counselors should provide additional resources (such as mileage for foster home parents to pick up students) so that students can take part. For those students, attending smaller schools, it is important for teachers to create opportunities for student involvement and leadership—this could be in the form of weekly recreational volleyball games or computer gaming nights or student leadership activities. The provincial government in partnership with local school boards and educational authorities could create new staff positions which are focused on after school student engagement. This could facilitate and improve student engagement in the school program, which is what all educators and parents want.

Limitations

This study was delimited to the perspective of teachers, administrators and students located in four schools in Northwestern Ontario in the year of 2006. Two of the four schools were located on First Nation communities which had similar cultural roots. One school operated with learning centers located in a number of First Nations. One school was located in a non-Aboriginal community located near First Nation communities. It is likely that students from two of the First Nations had school experiences in the larger non-Aboriginal school.

Although the school situations are unique to each other in terms of size and location, comparisons could be made to other secondary schools located in other First Nation communities throughout the province of Ontario. Jupiter Secondary School (Jupiter) is a unique high school as it serves as a gathering point for many of the students in the surrounding First Nation and non-First Nation communities. Yet Jupiter could also be compared to other schools located in urbanized settings with concentrated populations of Aboriginal people. Mercury Internet High
School (Mercury) is unique to all of Canada and possibly North America. At one point, it was the only school that offered this educational opportunity. It enabled students, living in remote communities, to get their Ontario Secondary School Diploma while maintaining family and kinship support. Currently, there are other opportunities such as Sun Child e-learning in Alberta, District School Board Ontario North East, and Saskatchewan’s Credenda Virtual High School and College.

The findings in this study are supportive of those found in the study, *Sharing Our Values* (Bell, 2004).

**Areas for further study**

In this study, I found that I wished I had asked more questions related to parents and their attitudes. As I wrote up the results of this study, I found I had questions about parents and realized that parent input would have enriched the comments of both teachers and students. Hailey, board member, from Venus, wondered why Aboriginal parents were not as involved in the lives of their children? Mosher-Rae (2001) found that one parent suggested that he did not have the knowledge or skills to be involved in the educational process and thought it was best left to the experts. Ing (2000) conducted research related to understanding how residential school attendance affected the attitudes of Aboriginal people over four generations. She found that issues related to self esteem were the major focus of residential school survivors and affected their ability to parent. The findings of this study made me aware of the importance of parental support for the success of First Nation students. I realized that in order to have a better understanding, I needed to do more research in this area of parental attitudes towards school. In what ways, do poor parental attitudes towards school affect their parenting styles?

Another area that became important in this study was the degree and amount of
communication that existed between Aboriginal parents, of students who were billeted or boarding out in town, and the school community. I wondered what were the obstacles impeding this communication link? Was it a cultural issue, as outlined by the research of Brant (1992), Ross (1992), and Spielmann (1998)? Or was it environmental, as suggested by the work of Brady (1994) who felt that Aboriginal student success was related to economic conditions? To this end, more research would help understand these links and perhaps, a process for solving this issue might emerge.

The last area of research that could be examined is to understand how parents complete the task of parenting. Perhaps, one could make some connections to the work done by Ing (2000) and review types of attitudes that are passed down as a result of links to residential school or reserve based schooling or public schooling. I wonder if one would see gaps in the way a child is parented by products of residential school or reserve based school or from a public school? It would be interesting to find out.

Final words

What is the significance of my research?

I read a chapter on residential schools in Richard Wagamese's One story, one song (2011) and could relate to his words as he described how he was a victim of the residential school process, although he did not attend one. I could make personal connections to his words as I also have never attended residential school. I am thankful that I never experienced the physical abuse that he was subjected to by his caregivers, who were dealing with their own demons. I was subjected to my own issues, such as my own family breaking down as a result of alcohol abuse and then getting placed in foster care. Like Wagamese, I have overcome my own demons--learning to appreciate the feelings of family, something that I lost by being displaced in a foster
home of strangers. Ing (2000) talked of the residual effects of residential school, presenting itself in two or three or even four generations. I have to believe that these effects may continue for a few more generations.

I have always believed that my own success was linked to stable school and foster home environments (although both institutions were devoid of any emotional attachment) that I had from the ages of 10-18. I was also thinking of the importance of my grade 9 physical education teacher, Mr. R, who ordered four of us (students) to show up for football practice one Tuesday night. That order was my link to extra-curricular activities, which became my key motivator to participate in the school program. Without it, I am not sure if I would have graduated from high school as many of my home town peers did not graduate.

However, each high school year had its own challenges and particular issues. In the middle of my last year, in grade 13, I was struck with the realization that I had failing grades for six subjects, 35% average to be exact. Suddenly, I had to grow up or realize that I was a failure. This point is particularly relevant, as my English teacher Mr. H provided our class with opportunities to do independent research. Consequently, I was spending hours studying in the library, a place in which I had only socialized. The independent research projects became focused on issues related to Aboriginal peoples, something I had never realized was available. Needless to say, suddenly I matured and demonstrated enough effort to be granted "gifts" or passes to earn my grade 13 certification which enabled me to attend university, where I discovered a field called Native Studies.

The research that you have just finished reading is a direct result of two driving forces: firstly, my continuing effort to be successful and secondly, my concern for wanting to know and understand the factors that impede other Aboriginal students from being as successful
(completing high school credits) as myself? In many ways, my own success is reflective of the findings in this research: school has to be comfortable for students to succeed. In my case, I could count on it as a place where I was successful and at one point in my life, I regarded it like a family. When school is supportive and comfortable, students do not mind being there and look forward to coming to school. Many of my elementary school classmates did not find it as comfortable and as a result, dropped out.

Although I grew up in a foster home, I never regarded my foster parents as my parents. They could not be my parents. However, they provided me with structure, a clean bed, three/four meals, and a set of values that have been a foundation for my own family life. Students need a stable home environment to be successful. The findings in this study are reflective of this point. However, when I started this research study I never acknowledged that I had parental involvement in my high school career but in hindsight, I did, albeit with foster parents (I had 3 sets in high school) providing feedback on what I was doing. Students that are successful need to have parental involvement/support. Teachers were generally concerned with the lack of parental engagement with their student-children. My findings suggested that when schools wanted parents to be directing their student-children, it became a cultural conflict as Aboriginal parents, culturally, never directly told their children to do anything as it would retard the development of their self esteem. My foster parents were always non-Aboriginal and were always open for discussion and were involved in my decision making.

Schissel & Wotherspoon (2003) stated that it was important to have a teacher take an interest in you as a person. In my own school life, Mr. R, in ordering the four of us (the other three were non-Aboriginal) to go to football practice, changed my life, despite the fact that I had to find a ride to my home, some 17 miles away. Extra-curricular activities were important for
me. As I sit here, reflecting on my high school career, I have images of events that occurred on team travel trips for football and wrestling, not of events that happened in my class rooms. I wonder how did I make it through my different classes? Yet, here I sit, a secondary school teacher, who believes and knows the value of extra-curricular programs. In some ways, being involved in extra-curricular programs aides in the development of our self esteem, our confidence, our willingness to take risks and experience new challenges. As was noted in Mars First Nation School, students attended school as long as the sports program and season was going. It was clear, as long as there was another reason to go to school, the students would attend.

Yet, I was never a serious student until the latter part of my grade 13 year, I did what I needed to get C+/B average. I know now, that I left high school with limited skills. However, I could be passionate and enthusiastic when I had something I was interested in, like what was offered in Mr. H's English class. Somehow I got hooked onto looking at the plight of Aboriginal people, fueled in part by negative comments made by classmates and the academic maturation of myself. In this study, the participants have told us that the curriculum should relate to the students being taught. For many Aboriginal students, there are limited connections between themselves and the school curricula. Teachers that were successful with Aboriginal students altered and redesigned their curricula so that it was relevant and connected to their students. When students can see themselves in the curricula and school program, as found in many First Nation schools, they are likely to complete high school credits.

After reviewing the articles that I used earlier in my literature review, I realized that my research results are consistent with what was found earlier except that they came from the voices of educational practitioners. In some ways, it affirmed what was stated by the students of
Bazylak (2002) and Seguin Brant (2001) and confirmed earlier research findings by Rehyner (1992), and Gilliland & Reyhner (1988). Like Bazylak (2002), my findings pointed out what elements need to be in a school in order to have successful Aboriginal students. If school board officials, educational authority members, school administrators, teachers, parents, consider the findings of this study in the context of their own school, perhaps they can see how to make changes in their own school community for the betterment of the school program and its students.

I see many reasons to be optimistic about the future of schooling for Aboriginal students. Ontario’s Ministry of Education has initiated a program that provides possible links to its curriculum, and as well new initiatives have been created to implement new Native Studies courses. Resource materials, such as textbooks and lesson guides, are being developed to support curricula initiatives. Professional development opportunities are being implemented among teaching associations. All of these are steps in the right direction, and hopefully in a few more years, improvements in Aboriginal student retention will be dramatically improved.

The following list of recommendations, as presented in chapter 9, is a reflection on the ideas derived from the words of the participants who took part in this research. I thank them for this.

Che Meegwetch.

**Recommendations**

#1. Given that First Nation schools employ younger and inexperienced teachers, affecting the quality of its school programming, the Federal government and local Educational Authority are encouraged to adequately fund First Nation Schools in order to retain and attract experienced teachers to improve the quality of its school program. (Community Influences and Mental Health)

Rationale: In order to keep younger teachers longer, First Nation schools must provide
competitive, if not enhanced financial salaries and benefits to offset the opportunities available in rural and urban environments. Federal funding has to be enriched.

#2. Given that Aboriginal student populations are increasing and becoming integrated in non-Aboriginal school communities, and that Aboriginal student success is increased when Aboriginal parents are involved with the operation of the school, administrators and school practitioners are encouraged to invite Aboriginal parents to become involved in the school community and furthermore, encouraged to nurture their participation. (Community Influences)

Rationale: Research tells us that Aboriginal students are more likely to succeed when they know that Aboriginal parents are involved in the school program.

#3. Given that Aboriginal students are more successful when they are able to attend secondary school in their home community, the Federal government is encouraged to provide funding that is at least comparable to that of which is received by provincial schools. And in communities, where secondary schools do not exist, the Federal government and Educational Authority are to develop a strategy/plan that will enable Aboriginal students to remain at home and attain secondary school credits. (Emotional health)

Rationale: Research suggests that small schools are effective with the students it serves. Instead of sending students to larger school environments, where they are likely to drop out, develop and establish small First Nation schools so that Aboriginal students can return home daily. Small schools tend to provide more attention to students, increases their skills and knowledge.

#4. Given that Aboriginal students are more successful when they are taught appropriately, where appropriate teaching strategies are used for different learning styles, faculties of education and teacher associations are encouraged to develop pedagogy and professional development opportunities which acknowledge and address Aboriginal student learning styles. (Mental health)

Rationale: Aboriginal students are more successful when they taught in culturally appropriate ways. If teachers use appropriate behavioural strategies, they will keep students engaged in the learning process. For example, verbal praise is culturally inappropriate and alternative ways need to be used in order reward successful students.

#5. Given that Aboriginal students are more successful when their learning styles are addressed, teachers are encouraged to use various instructional strategies (visual and kinesthetic) to ensure that all learning styles are being addressed. (Emotional health)

Rationale: Many Aboriginal students are kinesthetic and visual learners. Teachers need to be trained to use these methods of instruction. Too often skill sets, appropriate for non
Aboriginal students, are promoted and affirmed as the only way of teaching. Teachers have to be trained to be able to adapt to the learning environment that they are in.

#6. Given that Aboriginal students are more successful when they feel comfortable in the classroom, faculties of education and teacher associations are encouraged to develop courses and professional development opportunities which outline teaching strategies that effectively meet the communication needs of First Nation students. This could involve outlining ways to develop positive relationships and create supportive and informal environments in schools and classrooms. (Mental health)

Rationale: Students enjoy learning in an environment where they have an informal relationship with teachers and administrators. When Aboriginal students have an informal and positive relationship with school staff, they are likely to be more successful.

#7. Given that Aboriginal students are more successful when they are evaluated with meaningful tasks, faculties of education and teacher associations are encouraged to develop courses and professional development opportunities which outline varied assessment strategies that would meet the learning style needs of First Nation students. (Mental health)

Rationale: Aboriginal students are wholistic learners. They like to know what is expected of the whole project in order to determine the quality of work that they will submit. It is important to provide tasks that have some connection to their lives.

#8. Given that Aboriginal students are more successful when they can see themselves in the curriculum or when they can see how curriculum is related to their lives, ministries of education (Provincial Governments) are encouraged to develop secondary school curriculum that is relevant to First Nation students and students who are located in northern communities. In addition, Teacher Associations are encouraged to establish curriculum teams to review and revise current secondary school curricula in order to make it relevant to the perspectives of students in the north. (Emotional health)

Rationale: Many curricula expectations and/or resource materials do not relate/connect with the students living in First Nation communities. Modifications of the expectations and course content need to be made in order to create meaningful learning environments and yet, consideration must be given to the development of equal skills and knowledge.

#9. Given that parental support is important for student success, students need to stay in their home communities to attend secondary school and maintain kinship connections. The federal government and local school authorities need to reinvest in local First Nation schools. They are encouraged to create school communities which address the academic and social needs of its student population. Concern has been raised over lack of course variety to finish academic programming and lack of resources to provide diverse and rich programming. These two issues need to be
addressed. (Emotional health)

Rationale: Research suggests that when students leave their home community to attend a secondary school in another community and have to board out in foster families in order to do this, there is a strong likelihood that they will not be successful. Students who attend secondary school programming in their home community are more likely to complete secondary school.

#10. Given the impact of residential schools and its effect upon the parenting skills of Aboriginal parents, parents need to be reconnected and reminded of their traditional obligations for their students. Parental support training programs need to be designed, developed and implemented within all First Nation communities. Parents need to become knowledgeable about the school learning process and recognize the importance of personal connections with school practitioners. In the training process, schools can outline their expectations for parents within their school community. (Emotional health)

Rationale: Research tells us that students are less likely to succeed when their parents are not involved in their educational program. It is important to create partnerships with parents in order to gain their involvement and support.

#11. Given that Aboriginal student success is increased when they are self confident and willing to take risks, parents, community groups, and local governments are encouraged to develop strategies/initiatives that will facilitate the creation of programs that will help bolster student’s self-esteem. (Spiritual health)

Rationale: Research suggests that Aboriginal students are more successful when they are able to develop confidence when they find success in their school programming.

#12. Given that Aboriginal students are more successful when they know that the school supports and reflects their community and cultural values, administrators and teachers are encouraged to blend in Aboriginal values and perspectives into the daily operations of their school community. (Spiritual health)

Rationale: Aboriginal students are likely to participate in a school community when they know that a school community blends in Aboriginal values into its school program. Aboriginal parents and students are likely to have confidence in a school community when they can see how a school blends in Aboriginal culture into its school environment.

#13. Given that Aboriginal student confidence and skills are enhanced, when schools provide First language programs, schools that have significant Aboriginal student populations are encouraged to implement, maintain and enrich existing language programs. (Physical health)

Rationale: Learning a second language is important for the development of learning ability and as well, it (offering the language course) shows to the Aboriginal community that it (the school)
is interested in maintaining the culture of its students.

**# 14. Given that Aboriginal students are more likely to be successful when they are safe and comfortable with the school environment that they attend, school board officials, educational authorities and administrators are encouraged to provide opportunities for students to use the school as part of extra-curricular programming and community initiatives. (Physical health)**

Rationale: Aboriginal students are likely to stay and participate in the school environment when they feel wanted and liked.

**#15. Given that Aboriginal students are more successful when they participate in extra curricular programs school communities are encouraged to promote recreational opportunities for their Aboriginal student populations. (Physical health)**

Rationale: Schools that engage students in extra-curricular activities are likely to have contributing and engaged students in its school program. Students will enjoy being at school.
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Appendix A: Teacher Questionnaire

March 2006

Please answer and respond to the following questions as well as you can. If you need clarification on any question, feel free to contact me (Rocky Landon rlandon1@cogeco.ca). Remember, your comments will be kept confidential.

1. Do you use any special teaching strategies when you teach Aboriginal students? Describe.

2. What evaluation procedures do you use with Aboriginal students?

3. Describe your relationships with Aboriginal students in your school environment.

4. In what ways is Aboriginal culture reflected in your course work.

5. Describe the mood in your classroom as it relates to:
   a) Aboriginal culture
   b) Aboriginal community
   c) Aboriginal students

6. In what ways is Aboriginal culture reflected in your classroom?

7. What do you expect of Aboriginal students in your school program/course?

8. Are Aboriginal students successful in your courses? Please clarify.

9. What images does your school reflect to the community it serves?
10. In terms of student success, what factors do you think are important?

11. Is there anything further that you would like to add?

Please send your responses to Rocky Landon via email rlandon1@cogeco.ca or c/o your principal.
Appendix B: Student Questionnaire

June 2006

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey about what makes good Aboriginal student education.

Please answer and respond to the following questions as well as you can. If you are not sure about any question, feel free to contact me (Rocky Landon … rlandon1@cogeco.ca) or respond as best as you can.

Remember that your answers will be kept in confidence. I will not say who wrote what, except through the use of a masked identity.

1. In your classroom or school experience, how have you been taught? For example, does your teacher use a lot of examples? Or does he/she make your learning experience hands on by having you do experiments and field trips?

Describe some ways/methods that teachers use to teach you.

2. Tell me how you earn your marks in your classes. What are some of the activities that you do?

How do the teachers determine your school mark? What kinds of things do you do to earn the mark?

3. What do you like best about school?

4. How do you feel about your teachers?

5. What classes do you like the best? Why?

6. How do your teachers show that they care about your development. Explain.
7. What is the mood of your school like? Is it a comfortable or happy place to be in? Explain.

8. What does a caring teacher act like?

9. Do you think your teachers expect you to do well? Explain.

10. How do your teachers show respect for Aboriginal culture in your school (KiHS as a whole)?

11. How do your teachers recognize your Aboriginal culture in your classroom?

12. How do your teachers help you?

13. How could you improve your school program?

14. Is there anything further that you would like to add or say? For example, what should be added to make schooling better for Aboriginal students?

Please send your responses to Rocky Landon c/o your principal.
Appendix C: Parent Council Questionnaire

March 2006

Please answer and respond to the following questions as well as you can. If you need clarification on any question, feel free to contact me (Rocky Landon rlandon1@cogeco.ca).

1. a) How many members does your school council have?

   b) How many are of Aboriginal ancestry or represent the Aboriginal community?

2. How often does School Council meet?

3. How do they participate in the life of the school?

4. What activities does School Council take part in?

5. What are the values reflected by your school?

6. To what extent is Aboriginal culture reflected in your school culture?

7. What is the Aboriginal culture(s) in your community?

8. Do you think your school reflects the community that it serves? Explain.
Appendix D: Administrator Questionnaire

March 2006

Please answer and respond to the following questions as well as you can. If you need clarification on any question, feel free to contact me (Rocky Landon …rlandon1@cogeco.ca). Remember that your answers will be kept in confidence.

1. a) How would you describe your student population?

   b) What are the unique needs of your students?

   c) What are the ways that your staff members use to address these needs?

2. a) What are your expectations of Aboriginal students in your school climate, and classroom?

   b) Do these expectations differ from other students? If so, describe how they are different.

3. How would you describe/characterize your relationships with Aboriginal students?

4. Describe the relationships between Aboriginal students of your school and your teaching staff.

5. In what ways are Aboriginal values and traditions reflected in your school environment?
6. How and what do you do to coordinate activities that address the needs of Aboriginal students.

7. Describe the approaches that you use when you have to confront or address Aboriginal students and parents?

8. Do you feel Aboriginal students are successful in your school? Explain why or why not?

9. What needs to be done in order for Aboriginal students to become more successful?

10. In terms of Aboriginal student success, what factors do you perceive as important?

11. Describe how decisions are made in your school?

12. a) Do you feel that your school is adequately funded?

    b) In what areas could additional funds be directed to?

Please send your responses to Rocky Landon