The Role of Aboriginal Parents in Public Education: Barriers to Change in an Urban Setting

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The author was invited by a group of Aboriginal parents to conduct a study exploring the conditions of schooling for their children in a specific public urban setting. Taking a holistic perspective she focused her study on examining the role of parents in that system. Specifically, the research describes the process of working with Aboriginal parents as they attempt to forge a new relationship with an existing structure. Their lack of success is evident. The research aims to provide an understanding about the process of change as it relates to Aboriginal parents and urban public school systems.

Background

A significant body of research has identified parental involvement as an important component of public schooling. Primarily, this discussion has focused on the positive relationship between parental involvement and student achievement. When families are involved through reinforcing the curriculum, promoting cognitive development at home, and volunteering in the classroom, children achieve higher grades, have better attendance rates, complete more homework, demonstrate more positive attitudes and behaviors, graduate at higher rates, and have greater involvement in higher education (Henderson & Berla, 1994).

A great deal of the research in this area has tended to focus on mainstream[1] groups, despite the fact that, "parents of ethnically and linguistically diverse students ... often fail to participate in the schools in numbers comparable to other majority group parents" (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991, p. 20). One of the outcomes of low involvement rates is that Aboriginal[2] parents, through their nonparticipation, are held partly responsible for the overwhelmingly negative statistics concerning Aboriginal education without a comprehensive understanding of the reasons for this phenomenon. As noted by the Assembly of First Nations (1991), 50% of First Nations individuals in Canada fail to reach grade 12. Generally, low achievement rates have important consequences for Aboriginal people in that education is viewed as a fundamental tool for achieving the goal of self-determination (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). However, if Aboriginal people are responsible for teaching their children values, priorities, and how to make sense of things (Tafoya, 1995), then it is imperative to ensure that Aboriginal parents are not arbitrarily assigned a predetermined role in their children's education. In addition, new gov-

ernment initiatives in Alberta, for example, suggest a role for parents that involves advocacy and co-management (Skau, 1996). In this new role, parents are to be involved not only as decision-makers or policy-makers, but also as an independent force that initiates, implements, and monitors basic changes in the school structure.

Although many educational researchers have validated the relationship between parental involvement and student achievement, they have not investigated these issues from the perspective of Native parents. Thus an assumption inherent in this study is that parental involvement as it has been identified in existing research is an important factor in student success, both from an academic and a personal perspective. Although this may certainly be true for mainstream groups, studies have not proven whether this is true for particular cultural entities.

The Setting

The path of policy discourse in the area of Native education has primarily reflected the changing relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the federal government. For Native people living in urban areas, however, the policy discourse of provincial governments as it applies to the education system is particularly important. As the focus turned to multiculturalism and human rights throughout the 1970s and 1980s, provincial governments began to implement special programs designed to meet the needs of minority groups. Urban Aboriginal education projects began to appear across Canada in elementary and junior high schools. A major goal of these projects was to better meet the cultural needs of an increasing number of Aboriginal students living in urban areas. However, despite their creation, dropout rates among Native students remain significantly higher than rates for non-Native students and Aboriginal children continue to perform below average on academic performance and standard achievement tests (*Edmonton Journal*, 1998).

Control over urban Native educational programs has tended to remain in the hands of mainstream bureaucrats and civil servants while levels of parental involvement have remained discouragingly low. One outcome of low rates of parent participation has been a proliferation of handbooks that attempt to address this issue (Butterfield & Pepper, 1992; Davis, 1988; Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms, 1986). Generally, the impact of these handbooks has been minimal and Aboriginal parent participation continues to be viewed as a problem from the perspective of many educators, administrators, and governmental officials.

In existing research there has been a tendency for educators' perspectives to be emphasized over those of parents. In a study that investigated Native students' decisions to drop out of school, MacKay and Myles (1995) found that

One indicator that educators use to judge parental interest is the extent to which parents participate in parent/teacher nights organized by the school. By and large, it was reported

that Native parents do not attend these meetings. Both Native and non-Native educators recognized that many parents are uncomfortable coming to school.… Many educators used the presence or absence of parental support to explain a student's decision to remain at or drop out of school.… Such an apparently cogent explanation can enormously comfort educators because it places responsibility for a student's behavior firmly with the parents and releases the school system from both blame and remedial action. (p. 166)

Another study that examined parental participation among minority groups explained the phenomenon of low participation as a result of the conventional avenues for involving minority parents being closed because specific cultural knowledge (i.e., power) is required in order to participate effectively (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). As Delgado-Gaitan argues, "To actively participate in the school, parents must be informed about the school system and how it functions" (p. 25). In virtually all school situations, minority group parents do not have access to the cultural knowledge (i.e., power) that would allow them to act in appropriate or positive ways. As a result, it can often appear as if they do not care.

A significant body of research supports the notion of coercive assimilation policies of the past as being responsible for many of the barriers that exist between schools and Native parents (Butterfield & Pepper, 1992; Perley, 1993). Others have explained lack of parental participation among Aboriginal groups as being related to the alienation that they feel about their own negative cultural experiences in residential or public schools and their unwillingness to support or promote the aims of the school (MacKay & Myles, 1989). Freire (1970) attributes this phenomenon to the existence of cultural invasion in education, a process whereby "the invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter's potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression" (p. 150).

Cultural invasion is an important concept when looking at the involvement of Aboriginal parents today. It is widely accepted that Native parents who experienced the residential school system as children will not fully enter into school activities once they become parents themselves (Haig-Brown, 1988). Many attribute this to the fact that residential schools assumed responsibility for educating and raising children and that Native people, convinced by administrators of the schools, began to question their own capabilities of being able to raise their children. Gradually, it becomes accepted that schools and administrators do a better job—they are the "experts" and their assumed positions of power are not to be questioned. It is more likely, however, that Native people resist becoming involved as parents because administrators continue not to ask them for guidance or advice. Public schools, like residential schools, tend to remain closed to Native parents; they continue to exist as isolated "islands" outside the community.[3] Where residential schools might be viewed as cul-

tural invasion, perhaps public schools can be seen as "cultural occupa-tion." In both cases parents remain on the outside looking in.

The Native Program at Sprucewood School[4]

Sprucewood School is located near the downtown core in an older, pre-dominantly white neighborhood of a western Canadian city. Many of the children who attend Sprucewood School come from low-income families, and at any time close to 90% of students are of Aboriginal heritage. Sprucewood School is a fairly large elementary school with an ongoing enrollment of approximately 270 children.[5]

The Native Program at Sprucewood School was officially created in 1973. The program was the concept of a civic task force that was set up in response to demands by the Aboriginal community for a program that would meet the cultural and educational needs of urban Native children. Initially the Native Program was a pilot project financed by the provincial and civic government. In 1974, however, responsibility for the program was turned over to the City Public School Board (CPSB),[6] and over the next six years it was expanded to include kindergarten through grade 6.

The Native Program is labeled *alternative* according to school board guidelines. Thus the focus of the program is to deliver curriculum in an Aboriginal context to students in grades K-6. Because the Native Program is also considered an open program, Aboriginal students come from areas throughout the north side of the city; those who do not live in the im-mediate school vicinity are brought by bus each day at the school's ex-pense. Enrollment in the Native Program is normally at a maximum, and there is a waiting list for students who wish to enter. The school board funds all the academic components of the Native Program including all costs associated with facilities, teaching staff, curriculum, textbooks, transportation, and so forth. Because of the inclusion of Aboriginal cur-riculum and a higher than normal number of special needs students, the Native Program receives significantly more funding on a per-student basis than most other elementary schools in the city.[7]

Students not enrolled in the Native Program are non-Aboriginal chil-dren from the surrounding community. One of the challenges for the program is the dual-track nature of the school—those not enrolled in the Native Program are offered the regular provincial curriculum without the Aboriginal cultural component. This requires that students take classes both separately and together. This approach has been justified by the public school board in the Native Program handbook, "Working and playing with a variety of non-Native people can help to equip them [students] with the interpersonal skills required to function successfully in the larger society."

School Administration

Provincial legislation encourages parents and administrators to work together on school councils. According to the public school board, one of the goals of the Native Program is to provide an atmosphere that "encourages a community based approach to education" (CPSB Report, June, 1980). However, some Aboriginal parents at Sprucewood School feel that the non-Native administration and some non-Native teaching staff have stereotyped themselves and their children. They believe that achievement expectations for students are low and that the administration's paternalistic attitude explains their unwillingness to include Aboriginal parents in decision-making at the school. Ongoing conflict between Aboriginal parents and school administrators created feelings of frustration among Aboriginal parents, and this was beginning to have a negative impact on parents' attendance at monthly Aboriginal Parental Advisory Group (PAG) meetings.

Negative encounters between Aboriginal parents and non-Aboriginal school staff only reinforce the negative opinions they hold of one another and provide little basis for mutual trust, respect, and understanding in parent-school communication (MacKay & Myles, 1989). A United States study of parent-school communication reveals that Native American parents often perceive communication with school personnel to be virtually nonexistent (Cockrell, 1992). Aboriginal parents believe that any communication that does occur between themselves and the school is one-way communication only and almost always concerns disciplinary matters. As Delgado-Gaitan (1991) argues,

> While teachers and administrators express the need to have parents in the schools, the reality is that they need parents only when it is convenient for them to help with a difficult child. They have not seen the value of involving parents on a continuous basis. (p. 32)

The findings of Steinberg, Brown, and Dornbusch (1996) support this view.

> Although schools pay lip service to the benefits of parental involvement, their actual behavior reflects mixed feelings about how much, and in what ways, they actually want parents to be engaged. That is, although schools insist they want parental participation—and complain loudly about the lack of involvement of parents—in actuality, schools only want parents to be involved on the school's own terms. (p. 129)

According to the Native Program handbook supplied to parents, "At Sprucewood we encourage parental involvement. There are numerous opportunities and ways for parents to assist us.... Our parents can become involved through volunteer work in the school or by serving on the School Council" (CPSB, 1997-1998).

In fact there were few recent occasions where parents were called in by school staff to participate at Sprucewood School. Comparing the Native Program's parent handbook with that given to parents of schoolchildren in Alaska,[8] a number of things become obvious. There is a noticeable

difference in terms of the willingness of Alaskan administrators to involve Native parents. Involvement also appears to be on more equitable terms in that Alaskan parents are given the opportunity to determine the nature of their involvement. Where the Sprucewood handbook offers parents what appears to be little more than token participation, the Alaska handbook seeks to make parents an integral part of the decision-making about educational programming in general.

The Aboriginal Parent Advisory Group[9]

The Aboriginal Parent Advisory Group (PAG) at Sprucewood School also contributes funding to the Native Program. Reactivated as a society in April 1996 (previously it was registered from 1974-1981), this group receives money[10] from the provincial children's services office through an existing Early Intervention Program. These funds are intended for social and cultural activities not directly related to the curriculum, implementation of a hot lunch program for students at the school, and the employment of two Aboriginal liaison employees whose task is to work with school staff, Native children, and their families.

Aboriginal parents who enroll their children in the Native Program at Sprucewood School want them to learn about, and in an environment conducive to, traditional Aboriginal culture. Native parents also choose this alternative program because they believe that an Aboriginal-based curriculum will be more beneficial to the well-being of their children in the long run by increasing students' chances at academic success.

About halfway through the 1996-1997 school term, problems began to arise in the Native Program. One that arose after the additional funding from the Early Intervention Program had materialized was ongoing conflict between the parents of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. In accordance with provincial School Council legislation, the Aboriginal PAG at Sprucewood School is considered to take the place of a regular School Council;[11] this means that all parents whose children attend the school, whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, can be involved in decisions concerning the Native Program and associated funding. This seems to have created a number of problems at Aboriginal PAG meetings. Erickson (1997) has written extensively about culture in educational practices and says,

Differences in invisible culture can be troublesome in circumstances of intergroup conflict. The difficulty lies in our inability to recognize others' differences in ways of acting as cultural rather than personal. We tend to naturalize other people's behaviors and blame them—attributing intentions, judging competence—without realizing that we are experiencing culture rather than nature. Formal organizations and institutions, such as ... schools, become collection sites for invisible cultural difference. (p. 62)

The Chair of the Aboriginal PAG told me of the aspirations that Aboriginal parents, including himself, had for the future of the Native Program. He talked passionately about how Native students needed role

models of successful Native people; not faces that merely looked out at them from posters on the wall, but people they could talk to, listen to, reach out and touch. He said Native parents want the education system to honor their children in a way that will allow them to feel good about themselves—he said this was important because many of the parents had themselves experienced an identity crisis in school. He said the need for healing among parents needed to be a vital part of any new programming strategies.

All that he said was at great odds with most of what I had read until then about Aboriginal parental involvement. The many how-to booklets that I had come across seemed to blame Aboriginal parents for low student achievement levels: they suggested that if you became more involved with your children in these specific (i.e., mainstream) ways, then your children would no longer continue to fail. Ultimately, this assignment of blame has resulted only in unfairly burdening parents with a label of failure. For those parents who were not successful themselves as students it is but another failure at dealing with the school system.

Barriers to incorporating supplementary cultural programming appeared to be a recurrent issue at Sprucewood School. A major barrier appeared to be budget constraints. Some parents believed that traditional knowledge was not valued in the same way as academic knowledge; for example, the non-Aboriginal administration seemed to feel that Elders were not worthy of expenditures given the tight budget and the many other issues that demanded their fiscal attention. A larger and more fundamental barrier, however, seemed to be the battle over who would control programming: Aboriginal parents, non-Aboriginal parents, or school administrators. This struggle appeared to be taking up a great deal of the energy of the Aboriginal PAG when I first became involved in the research.

In addition to their struggles to make cultural knowledge an integral part of the educational program, parents also have to deal with everyday concerns. Issues such as the upcoming Christmas concert, recent student behavior on buses, staff supervision at recess and lunch hour take up a significant amount of time at PAG meetings. When these items are added to the cultural responsibilities Aboriginal people have in terms of the role that they must play in education, it is no wonder that they might feel overwhelmed. Mainstream parents do not have to spend time and energy making the education system reflective of their culture, because they know the school will reflect similar values to their own. Fuller and Ellmore (1996) argue the reasons for this: "educators tend to perceive [favor] the cultural capital (system of implicit and deeply internalized values influenced by social class) of those who control the economic, social, and political resources as the natural and only proper sort" (p. 27).

Cultural awareness is a key factor for group relations and is useful for looking at the dynamics of the Aboriginal Parent Advisory Group. As Bennett (1990) states, multicultural awareness is important in terms of the awareness it gives us about our own cultural biases. Generally, Native people are expected to be more culturally aware than non-Native people, because they are forced to operate within the structures and institutions of mainstream society (Wilson, 1991). The theory of standpoint epistemology helps describe this phenomenon.

> Standpoint epistemology begins with the idea that less powerful members of society have the potential for a more complete view of social reality than others, precisely because of their disadvantaged position. That is, in order to survive (socially and sometimes even physically), subordinate persons are attuned to or attentive to the perspective of the dominant class ... as well as their own. This awareness gives them the potential for ... "double vision" or double consciousness—a knowledge, awareness of, and sensitivity to both the dominant world view of the society and their own minority ... perspective. (Neilsen, 1989, p. 10)

Sadly, Aboriginal parents must fulfill their dual roles in education in an atmosphere where those in charge may not want to listen.

Methodology

The negative view of research in some Aboriginal communities stems from the practices that have been used in past studies. Often Native people view research activities as serving only the interests of non-Native scholars. Often these individuals benefited financially and/or professionally, and in many cases no feedback or consultation was provided at the community level that would help to ensure that Aboriginal voices were heard.

Is a Native perspective in research involving Aboriginal people important? Would this type of research be seen as legitimate outside of Native communities? How would we ensure validity and transferability of the findings? Ermine (1995) addresses these issues.

> Aboriginal epistemology is grounded in the self, the spirit, the unknown. Understanding of the universe must be grounded in the spirit. Knowledge must be sought through the stream of the inner space in unison with all instruments of knowing and conditions that make individuals receptive to knowing. Ultimately it was in the self that Aboriginal people discovered great resources for coming to grips with life's mysteries. It was in the self that the richest source of information could be found by delving into the metaphysical and the nature and origin of knowledge. Aboriginal epistemology speaks of pondering great mysteries that lie no further than the self. (p. 108)

As Aboriginal researchers conducting research in our own community, we are compelled to draw on our experiences, thoughts, feelings, and spirituality as it relates to the research exercise. We see ourselves as a part of, or within, the research. Rather than thinking of research as a process of studying a particular group or community, Aboriginal research could be thought of as a community effort in asking questions and searching for answers. Perhaps we have privileged insight not available to those who

are non-Aboriginal because we look out from within our own communities as members, rather than looking in as outsiders. Although this does not mean we can speak on behalf of all Aboriginal people, it does mean that we can speak on behalf of ourselves as part of a larger group.

The justification for a shift toward an Indigenous methodology is that the phenomenon of an Indigenous world view lies outside the existing lines of social inquiry. Justification requires recognition that existing methods might not be sufficient to capture particular data. Science has not been able to deal with the things that make up, for example, Aboriginal wisdom. Science has failed in its endeavor to measure Indigenous knowledge; it has not been able to capture our emotions; it has not been able to understand the essence of our spirits; and it has no way of doing justice to our experiences. Although qualitative methods have experienced greater success in trying to explain certain phenomena, it may be that an Indigenous methodology is the only true way of doing research involving Aboriginal people.

As Freire (1970) states, the reality is that the voices of those who are oppressed tend not to be heard. He describes this "culture of silence" as a direct product of the situation of economic, social, and political domination and paternalism that makes victims of those who are oppressed. Only through an Indigenous approach is it possible to begin to present an Aboriginal perspective and an Aboriginal voice on issues that are central to Aboriginal life. This is important because, "often, theory fails to speak to the personal everyday life-worlds of (individuals) and becomes instead another set of alienating constructs" (Polakow, cited in Haig-Brown, 1988). As a member of the Aboriginal community, and not separate from it, I have a vested interest not only in the outcome of the research, but also in the process than has been used.

Data Collection Methods

My initial interest in the topic of this study resulted from my affiliation with one of the parents of the Aboriginal Parent Advisory Group in question. My responsibility, therefore, was to develop a research agenda collaboratively that would relate the identified issues to the enduring concerns in social science (Spradley, 1980). In any qualitative study the construction of meanings is important from an ontological perspective, and meanings are only available at the local, immediate level. In cases where the purpose of a study is explanatory, access to meanings becomes important as an aid in the discovery of causal patterns in various social phenomena. The goal of research is the development of "a consensus construction that is more informed and sophisticated than any of the predecessor constructions" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The role of data collection in any qualitative study is to record behavior and explanation systematically. The two purposes for using multiple methods in qualitative research are to draw out unexpected data and to

ensure transferability of the findings. The following two methods were used to collect data for this study.

Document analysis. Viewing written material related to the topic provided key background information that was instrumental in analyzing other data collected throughout the study. Official documents considered relevant to the research included the provincial School Council Act, policy decisions and other information regarding alternative programming at the City Public School Board, and the Aboriginal Parent Advisory Group meeting minutes and related correspondence.

Content analysis throughout the research process served three important purposes. First, it has contributed to knowledge about the values and beliefs of participants in the setting. Second, content analysis has provided understanding about the setting from an historical perspective. Third, content analysis has assisted in determining where the research focus should be (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) describe the process of content analysis.

The results of the qualitative researcher's analysis takes the form of interpretations and hypotheses ... these need to be weighed in relation to two different contexts—the contexts in which the documents and records were developed and the context in which they are now being interpreted for research purposes. The researcher must take into account variations in meaning as they are studied across space, time and cultures. (p. 363)

Participant observation. Major data for the study were collected through participant observation. I use the term *participant observation* to mean direct involvement in the activities that were observed. As an Aboriginal person conducting research in my own community, I felt that the tools of participant observation best suited the type of information required for the study and the process by which it should be collected.

Spradley (1980) describes the process of participant observation as having three stages. The first is a descriptive stage where observations are general in scope. Second is the focused stage where the researcher identifies features of the study and focuses on the activities that relate to those features. The third is the selected stage where the researcher focuses on observations that will deepen his or her understanding of the specific elements that emerge. Others shed light on the process of participant observation.

It aims to generate practical and theoretical truths formulated as interpretive theories. The methodology of participant observation involves a flexible, open-ended opportunistic process and logic of inquiry through which what is studied constantly is subject to redefinition based on field experience and observation. Participant observation generally is practiced as a form of case study that concentrates on in-depth description and analysis of some phenomena ... Participation is a strategy for gaining access to otherwise inaccessible dimensions of human life and experience. (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 23)

Participant observation as a data collection method differs in at least six ways from ordinary participation in a given event, activity, or situation (Spradley, 1980). First, participant observation is dual purpose; it involves

participating in a particular activity while observing that activity, the people involved, and the physical aspects of a situation. Second, the need for explicit awareness requires the participant observer to focus consciously on audiovisual details and other situational information—details that we would normally suppress as a means of avoiding sensory overload. Third is the use of a wide-angle-lens approach where we take in a much broader spectrum of information than is usual. A fourth difference to ordinary participation is the insider-outside experience. As participant observers our feelings alternate between feeling like an outsider at certain moments (sense of detachment) and at other moments like an insider to the situation. A fifth difference is introspection where we begin to appreciate our role as the research instrument. Last, the ordinary participant does not see the need to keep detailed records of objective observations and subjective feelings. This is a key component of participant observation as it provides the source of data from which analyses are made.

I observed interactions between parents and school administrators over a six-month period, beginning with my attendance at an Aboriginal PAG meeting in November 1997 and ending with my attendance at a Symposium follow-up meeting between parents and school board administrative staff in May 1998. I used descriptive fieldnotes[12] to record all observations over this period.

Along with descriptive fieldnotes, reflective fieldnotes[13] made during content analysis and during observations provided me with the basis for initially analyzing the data I had collected (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Later I coded the data to make the categories that assisted me to identify the following themes or patterns: setting or context, participant perspectives including social relationships and world view, method of data collection, and observer comments and questions. Triangulation of the data was achieved by using comparisons, considering negative evidence, and looking for alternate explanations. To ensure validity I sought feedback from Aboriginal parents and colleagues regarding the explanations I had arrived at. This has helped me to verify the conclusions I originally drew or to come to new conclusions where appropriate.

Barriers to Change in an Urban Setting

At the first PAG meeting I attended the Chair advised those in attendance that the superintendent of the public school board had agreed to fund a symposium to deal with the improvement and expansion of the Native Program. In addition to existing problems at the school, parents had been talking for over a year about wanting to expand the Native Program from grade 6 to grade 9. This was of particular interest to those parents who had children in grades 5 or 6 and were faced with having to send their children to other junior high schools elsewhere in the city.

The Chair thought it was time to try to gain more control over the school, including control over the hiring of teaching staff. He saw the

Symposium as an opportunity for parents to gain access to the resources that would allow them to learn what is possible for improving the program in the long run. He believed that bringing together parents with community members (e.g., Aboriginal Elders, parents, educators, etc.) would help parents to discover what could be done.

In January 1998 the public school board hired me as Coordinator for the Aboriginal Education Symposium. My role was to act as a liaison person between the Aboriginal PAG steering committee from Sprucewood School and central administrative staff from the public school board. As Coordinator I was responsible for helping the steering committee to identify and contact guest speakers, develop workshop themes, and write the final report that would be presented to school board trustees on behalf of the Aboriginal PAG.

The Struggle for Control

The odds are stacked against Native students and their parents in the urban public education system. Failure is a common occurrence: most Aboriginal students do not complete high school; many also fail in later attempts to upgrade. According to Ogbu (1994), the poor educational performance of involuntary minorities stems from the belief that they have little reason to excel because society has relegated them to a menial position regardless of their efforts.

Although it first appeared that the superintendent and trustees of the public school board genuinely sought to forge a new relationship with Native parents through their approval of the recommendations from the Aboriginal Education Symposium final report, it became apparent that such might not be the case. It seems clear that staff from the Monitoring and Planning Division of the school board and the non-Native principal at Sprucewood have been instrumental in ensuring that some of the report's recommendations have not been implemented. Young and Levin (1998) address this issue,

Most of the work of the [education] department is done by civil servants within the broad guidelines set by the minister [superintendent], or within agreements established by past practice. A great deal of this work is fairly routine or formalized…. civil servants are generally guided by their professional training and background. Their views of the needs of education are often similar to those of teachers in schools. They may be quite resistant to what they see as a partisan political direction taken by a government that wants public schooling to move a certain way. (pp. 34-35)

One year later, of those 30-odd recommendations that were approved by trustees, only two have been fully met including the expansion of the program to grade 9 for the 1998-1999 school year. Parents are frustrated by the lack of action on other Symposium recommendations, and involvement at Aboriginal PAG meetings has dwindled to the point where no parents attended the May 19, 1999 meeting and only three attended the previous month's meeting. Notices of Aboriginal PAG meetings are no

longer sent home with students the day before, and no meeting minutes are available from the beginning of the 1998-1999 school term.

The current Chair, elected in September 1998, claims that monies received from the Early Intervention Program continue to be used to supplement the regular education budget instead of going toward additional social and cultural programming for Aboriginal students in the Native Program as outlined in the funding agreement. She also said that few cultural activities have taken place this school year, yet some non-Native teachers have been registered to attend conferences outside the city. This parent felt that because of decreasing parent involvement in general, parents are left to react to crisis situations that result from decisions made exclusively by the school administration. Instead of being involved in planning and executing the educational program at Sprucewood School as was outlined in the recommendations that were approved by school board trustees, parents are kept busy trying to cope with everyday problems at the school. And they continue to deal with these alone instead of with the help of the Aboriginal community as was proposed in the recommendations.

Unfortunately, the situation at Sprucewood School is not new. For 25 years the Native Program has seemed to fail at achieving its goal of "meeting the needs of urban Aboriginal children."[14] Applying Haig-Brown's (1988) residential school analysis helps to explain this phenomenon:

Education, particularly as seen in the residential schools, developed by immigrant Europeans and their descendants for Native people in Canada, has typically been an expression of cultural invasion. As authors of and actors in the invasion, members of the dominating society have attempted to mold and have chosen and acted for Native people who as objects of the invasion were expected to follow the choices made for them.... this kind of domination is perpetuated through invasion whether overt and physical or camouflaged with the invader in the role of the helping friend. (p. 141)

The "friends" in this case, the school principal and employees of the public school board, continue to operate as if they know "what is best" for Native students. The awareness and sense of community that was raised at the symposium was smothered in the end by a sense of powerlessness that parents felt afterward. It is no wonder that Native parents might see public school systems as reflective of the domination that exists overall in society, despite the existence of "special" programs geared toward their "needs." As Urion (1992) states,

The hallmark term of the past 25 years is some permutation of "Indian control" and hundreds of bands have begun operating their own schools. Yet during this period of "devolution" an overwhelming majority of First Nation children have been registered in non-First Nation educational institutions. There is paradox enough in that observation. It is compounded by the realization that despite whatever non-Native governments profess about their agenda for First Nations control, the real agenda remains what is has been for the past 120 years, containment and social control. (p. 1)

Aboriginal parents and community members remain largely on the outside looking in when it comes to educational decision-making. Initiatives like the Native Program continue to operate in isolation from the desires of those students, parents, and communities they are intended to serve. This is happening more today than ever. As the struggle for control over policy continues, Aboriginal people are forced to deal with increasingly limited resources and the continued unwillingness of bureaucrats to help them put their visions into practice. A paradigm shift is crucial to changing the situation.

A Sociocultural Perspective

The idea of involving Aboriginal parents in schools requires recognition that parents by their very participation will add to and change the culture of a school (Highett, 1989). In its final report, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) elaborated on the importance of culture to Aboriginal education:

Cultural approaches start from the belief that if youth are solidly grounded in their Aboriginal identity and cultural knowledge, they will have strong personal resources to develop intellectually, physically, emotionally and spiritually. The ability to implement culture-based curriculum goes hand in hand with the authority to control what happens in the school system. Cultural programs can be added to the school curriculum, or the whole curriculum can be developed around a cultural core. The most established cultural programming can be found in school governed by Aboriginally controlled boards. (p. 478)

Hampton (1995) also stresses the importance of Aboriginal culture to the educational process: "No aspect of a culture is more vital to its integrity than its means of education" (p. 7). Cummins (1986) argues, "real changes in schools will only begin to take place when the relationships of power begin to change, that is, when the voices of parents and the community are heard and the direction of the school reflects the values of all" (p. 34). He proposes that in order to effect real change, it is critical that historical patterns be reversed and that schools begin to work in partnership with communities, promoting a respect for language and culture. Anaquod (1994) also supports this view and believes not only in community control over schools, but that Aboriginal communities be charged with addressing such serious educational questions as: What is the purpose of education? This becomes a significant issue in the case of Aboriginal people living in urban areas as they often do not have the natural cultural support found in rural communities. Native people living in urban areas are charged with convincing the mainstream system of the importance of local control without the backing of any particular community group. Delgado-Gaitan (1991) has made a case for the empowerment of minority groups in education: "empowerment is an ongoing process centered in the local community involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over

these resources" (p. 23). The concern with Delgado-Gaitan's argument lies in the fact that empowerment implies that someone will give power or allow others to do something. This creates a problem for Aboriginal people in that it presumes that the giver can take back at any time what has been given. Taylor, Crago, and McAlpine (1993) have spoken to this issue:

Empowerment of Aboriginal peoples, especially in the field of education, has become a "politically correct" way of thinking.... Empowerment is only the beginning of the process. Empowerment does not happen in a vacuum. It is implemented in the context of a long history of subjugation of Aboriginal peoples. (p. 182)

Many argue that Aboriginal peoples have never given up their inherent right to self-government and that articulating this right in the current Canadian context will certainly go beyond empowerment issues. The development of a culturally respectful dialogue and collaboration between Natives and non-Natives might simply be the beginning of this process.

Critical Findings

It becomes obvious that neither Native students nor their parents have been willing to accept the existing "cultural hegemony" at Sprucewood School. Erickson (1997) explains this phenomenon,

Cultural hegemony refers to the established view of things—a commonsense view of what is and why things happen that serves the interests of those people already privileged in a society. Students whose lives are not affirmed by the establishment seem intuitively not to accept hegemonic content and methods of instruction. They often resist, consciously or unconsciously, covertly as well as overtly. (p. 49)

Erickson argues that the role of resistance to cultures of domination and the disaffiliation and distrust that it fosters toward school learning is a fundamental issue in public education. Erickson argues, "resistance can come not only as a result of group history of oppression, but also of oppressive and alienating circumstances of teaching and learning with the school itself" (p. 50). As Hampton (1995) states, "The failure of non-Native education of Natives can be read as the success of resistance to cultural, spiritual, and psychological genocide" (p. 7).

Ogbu (1994) agrees that resistance to systems of learning by involuntary minority groups is almost inevitable because of the existence of oppression in schools. Both Erickson's (1997) and Ogbu's views are useful to help explain the lack of Aboriginal parental participation in the public education system. Perhaps the mass resistance of Aboriginal parents to being involved is the result of the existence of oppression in the system.

As Haig-Brown (1988) suggests, resistance can also be a response to the notion of cultural invasion. Perhaps low levels of parental involvement are a response to the cultural occupation that exists in public schools today. Although resistance on the part of Aboriginal parents may act as a means to preserve dignity in a situation that has labeled them incompetent, this same resistance ensures that those in charge will be rid of them. Parents

alone cannot create change. They need their community to work with them, and they require the perspective and vision of their Elders. One Elder addressed this concept at the Symposium: "Take a single stick and break it in two, it is easy. Now take a whole bunch of sticks and try to break them in two, it cannot be done." By involving only parents and excluding the larger Aboriginal community, the learning curve for the Aboriginal PAG remains virtually stagnant. Parents leave each year as their children move on in grades and are replaced by new ones who must learn the trappings of the system anew. The cumulative effects of the parent group's learning are negligible when they do not remain involved after their children have reached a certain age. Other parents whose children are still in Sprucewood stop attending Aboriginal PAG meetings because they are burned out or feel frustrated and alienated; they do not believe that anything will change by their participation. Those who were involved in the beginning (in the 1970s and early 1980s) have been shut out or purposely forgotten. Because of this their knowledge does not go to benefit the program in the long run.

Unfortunately, resistance helps to perpetuate low achievement. Resistance as a response to oppression and alienation has become a symbol of group identity for Aboriginal peoples. The inability to change probably sends an implicit message to Native students that will serve to further marginalize and alienate them and ultimately lead to further resistance. Looking at education holistically, students do not only learn what is taught in terms of the curriculum, they also learn about their role and the roles of others through the interactions they see between parents and educators. As Contenta (1993) points out,

Schools today continue the historical transformation of rebellion from an act that affirms human dignity to one that imprisons. Paul Willis argued that groups in capitalist societies develop their own ways of doing things in relation to their economic and social positions. Often these cultural expressions help maintain the status quo. (pp. 56-57)

It is apparent that resistance is a two-way street—resistance on the part of Aboriginal people to a system that does not meet their needs and resistance by government bureaucrats to change the system. Although the public school board trustees appeared to be sincere in their desire for change, the non-Native administrators employed by the board do not appear to have any interest in passing control for the Native Program over to Native people. These non-Native administrators are responsible for hiring and are continuing to work through a principal who they know is in conflict with Aboriginal parents at the school.

Conclusion

The question remains: How do we begin to move beyond resistance and resignation to a place where meaningful social change can occur? Maybe the only way to win the struggle is to alter how we do battle. Contenta (1993) argues that resistance can make a difference if it maintains clarity of

purpose. Perhaps it is time for Native parents to begin to look differently at restoring balance and harmony to the education of their children. Perhaps this will not occur by attempting to undo or redress what has been done. Perhaps it involves rediscovering what our purpose is and what we want our education system to be. The responsibilities for change are joint responsibilities. Educators and policy-makers are responsible for implementing the desires of Aboriginal parents, and Aboriginal parents are responsible for making these desires known. As Bloom (1992) argues, this is important because,

> We know that our schools need to make some dramatic changes in the way they educate our children, and we know that our children are suffering because these changes have not yet been made. But our ingrained perception of public education is that it is not our problem, or that we are not the appropriate source of the solution. (p. 15)

Similarly, Urion (1992) has spoken to this issue:

> while focusing our efforts on large-scale change and working for policy change are important in that those things contexualize our work [as educators], the changes that matter come about because of action, informed by principle, on the part of individuals in local, face-to-face interaction. (p. 6)

Despite their lack of success, Aboriginal parents continue to display a desire to move away from a relationship of dependency to one where they are able to make important educational decisions that will affect their children. Changing the institutional system of learning will be a complex task. It is important that a paradigm shift for Aboriginal peoples involve changes to the structural relationships that currently exist in education. Although resistance does assist in maintaining the status quo, defiance also serves as a means of wresting control back from a system that has excluded them. Resistance ensures subversion of the system, and in this sense Aboriginal parents are triumphant and ultimately do determine how they are involved. Resistance does serve to keep community spirit alive, whether it is groups of students or their parents. As Haig-Brown (1988) concluded, resistance is not just a means of preserving identity, but a way of uniting in the battle for control. The battle for control between Aboriginal parents and non-Aboriginal administrators in a school can be seen as a reflection of the battle for control over Native education in general.

Efforts to stimulate input at the community level must become more than an exercise that makes fools out of those who come and offer suggestions, especially when the plan is predetermined by the governmental bureaucrats to whom they speak. The key to Aboriginal input is not simply getting people to attend meetings, but exhibiting a true willingness on the part of decision-makers to listen and act on what has been said. The apparent resistance displayed by school board staff leads one to believe that ethnocentric behaviors may still flourish even where Native education programs have been in existence for many years. Although

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Aboriginal parents are seen to have failed in the roles they have been assigned by educators, one thing remains certain: they must be resolute in their dedication to try to change this role, and ultimately the system. Aboriginal parents need community support and a new approach if they are to create meaningful social change in schools.

Epilogue

Interestingly, the parents at Sprucewood School are beginning the struggle once again. Recently (summer 1999) they contacted the assistant superintendent to discuss ongoing problems at the school. They also have a meeting scheduled with Early Intervention Program (EIP) staff in the summer of 1999 to discuss EIP's growing concern over the lack of parental participation and the way funds have been used over the past school year. Where it goes from here will depend in part on the ability of Native parents to remain united and to garner the support of the larger Aboriginal community and on the willingness of public school board officials to change the structural relationships inherent in the education system. Native parents and students are commonly held accountable for their "failures"—they have been blamed over and over again for low achievement results and low levels of parental participation. However, public schools also need to become accountable for the paternalism that has been allowed to go unchecked at the school board level while dropout rates among Native students prove to be constant (MacKay & Myles, 1989).

Notes

[1] I use mainstream. However, *whitestream* as referenced by Denis (1997) and Halas (1998) may more appropriately describe that portion of Canadian society (most often European) who hold power through both assumed privilege and numerical majority.

[2] The term *Aboriginal* is intended to mean those individuals who are considered Aboriginal according to Sec. 35 of the Constitution Act of Canada—1982; for this study the terms *Aboriginal, Metis, Native, Indian*, and *Indigenous* are used interchangeably to refer to these people.

[3] I use McCaleb's (1994) definition of the term *community* to refer to the children, the families of the children, people who work in the area and interact in multiple ways with the families; people who create art and make music, and keep the neighborhoods vibrating, the people who live and care and touch the lives of those around them.

[4] Due to issues of anonymity, *Native* has been substituted for the actual name of the program and a pseudonym has been used for the actual school name.

[5] Based on 1997-1998 school enrollment figures.

[6] To ensure anonymity, I have used the term *city* to replace the actual name of the public school board that is responsible for the Native Program.

[7] Sprucewood is allocated special grants from the provincial government that are based on the enrollment levels of Native students.

[8] Taken from *Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools* published by the Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1998.

[9] For purposes of anonymity, the term *Aboriginal* has been used in place of the actual name of the Parent Advisory Group.

[10] Approximately $230,000 in the 1998-1999 school term.

[11]According to Section 17(2) of the Provincial School Act, "The majority of the members of a school council shall be parents of students enrolled in the school." In the case of Sprucewood School, the Aboriginal Parent Advisory Group society and the School Council are in effect one and the same.

[12]Descriptive fieldnotes are a written account of what I saw, heard, experienced, and thought in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in this study. I have used descriptive fieldnotes to describe physical settings, record accounts of particular events, depict various activities, and record my own behavior and that of others.

[13]Reflective fieldnotes have been used to emphasize speculation, feelings, problems, ideas, hunches, impressions, and misunderstandings.

[14]Program goal as stated in the 1997-1998 Sprucewood *Parent Handbook*.

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