First Nations Control of Education: One Community's Experience

Mark Aquash
University of British Columbia

The voices of First Nations communities, families, and people are acknowledged and recognized in this research, along with the current tensions created by subtle and overtly imposed processes of colonization. This research uses ethnographic techniques to describe a First Nations community's experience in controlling its education, and identifies challenges related to the effects of colonization and the impacts that community control has had on its education system.

First Nations control of education is central: education systems modelled on Eurocentric paradigms have generally proven to be unproductive in First Nations communities and have undermined Indigenous ways of knowing. Efforts toward self-determination and reorganization within First Nations education in a community that the research was based on have led to a range of successes and failures, but as this study ultimately illustrates, community control of First Nations educational systems is paramount if the processes of external domination are to be eliminated.

Introduction

This paper highlights a First Nations community and its evolving education system from the perspective of First Nations control of First Nations education. For nearly two centuries, First Nations communities in Canada have resisted the message of assimilation perpetuated most recently through "Canadian" schools. One defense against this message is to address organizational processes that can reverse external political and economic pressures. In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood (now the Assembly of First Nations) presented the *Indian Control of Indian Education* (ICIE) position paper to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. The ICIE position paper has had much influence over the years and has been a motivating aspect for many First Nations communities. Indigenous education controlled locally by Indigenous people acknowledges and recognizes the unique qualities of First Nations people, communities, and families. This research examines the experience of one First Nations community while it assumed the undefined responsibility of its education system. The beliefs and values transmitted through the Eurocentric educational system, as a process of colonization, create frequent conflict with First Nations students and are often incompatible with their home culture and language (Curwen Doige, 2003). It is through acknowledging the values of the community, families, and the students that the educational system will benefit from a positive exchange of ideas. The many voices from this First Nations community provide salience and echo

the answers to many challenges, and express the essence of the struggle to overcome the confusion, loss of hope, and lack of cohesiveness that have resulted from colonization.

The often grossly unfair economic, legal, and political arrangements used as colonizing tools foisted upon First Nations over the past centuries have all contributed to the adverse circumstances so prevalent among First Nations communities today (Battiste, Bell, & Findlay, 2002; Marker, 2004;). Educational organizations and systems have been used as tools of colonization throughout the world (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2002). Although colonization has many aspects to its process, this research focuses on First Nations education as one means to overturn a long history of oppression and to provide an escape from continued economic and political marginalization. Paulo Freire (2006), speaking directly on his work as an educator in Brazil, suggested how we all benefit from life without oppression:

As the oppressors dehumanize others and violate their rights, they themselves also become dehumanized. As the oppressed, fighting to become human, take away the oppressors' power to dominate and suppress, they restore to the oppressors the humanity they had lost in the exercise of oppression…. It is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors. (p. 56)

Although the Eurocentric educational system was used to fracture and assimilate Indigenous peoples, it can also be applied toward reconstructing First Nations societies (Blackwell, 2003). Alfred (2005) challenges First Nations people to educate themselves to regain their language and their own systems of governance, faith, ritual, and ceremony. In many ways, the process of seeking out the experiences of First Nations people becomes the most significant part of the research. Such efforts increase self-esteem and pride in learning and understanding Indigenous knowledge and concepts of the land (Hart, 2002).

The *Report of the Auditor General of Canada* (1986) identifies the responsibilities of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) for the day-to-day operation, management, and administration of education of First Nations. This report goes on to recommend that, in response to the *Indian Control of Indian Education* policy:

The Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development should define 'Indian control' in order to make it clear whether the Indian organization assuming control is carrying out an administrative or a management role. The Department should develop clear policies and procedures for transferring control of education to Indian organizations. (Auditor General of Canada, 1986, para. 11.99)

The government support of *Indian Control of Indian Education* resulted in an opportunity for the First Nations community highlighted in this research to acquire responsibility for education. Their experience with addressing control of their education began in the early 1980s. At the same time, the community was working to overcome centuries of colonization, a struggle that echoes within Indigenous communities throughout the world. This

First Nations community is considered large, with over 5,000 members. Over half of the membership lives in the community with the remainder living mostly in urban areas. There is a large band-operated elementary school, an early childhood education centre, and an adult learning centre. Buildings, infrastructure, and community programming have evolved over the years through close relationships with DIAND. As the motivating theme of this article, *Indian Control of Indian Education—40 Years Later* was the ultimate motivator of the First Nations community in the early 1980s. The ICIE position paper was used as a template for the development of this First Nations community's Board of Education terms of reference.

The structure of this article addresses colonization and how it is positioned as a foundation for the assimilation of First Nations, which includes a short description of the theoretical framework. The article then moves forward to a section on research methodology, which describes the approach, the processes, and the tools employed for the completion of the study. The findings section provides a balance of quotes from research participants, a summation, and additional information. The final section is a discussion which provides concluding statements, with additional information for clarity.

Colonization

The scholarly literature is rich in information from the perspective of the colonizing forces. History, as told from this perspective, is particularly full of stereotypes and inaccuracies that either portray colonizers as superior to the Indigenous peoples they encountered or Indigenous people are not written about at all (Dickason, 2006; Zinn, 1980). Such accounts justify and support the "hegemonic" events of history: events where a dominant group exerts its cultural, ideological, or economic influence on a subordinate group (Merriam-Webster, 2013). McLaren (2003) further defines hegemony as "the struggle in which the powerful win the consent of those who are oppressed, with the oppressed unknowingly participating in their own oppression" (p. 203). We know that colonizing forces from Europe explored other continents and imposed their systems on Indigenous peoples around the world, and then elicited hegemonic support for their presence (Dickason, 2006; Zinn, 1980).

Maintaining control over people and the newly formed colonies required consistently applied political and economic systems. Darder (1991) considers this control to be cultural invasion and language domination, which "represents an anti-dialogical action that serves in the sustained social, political and economic oppression of subordinate groups" (p. 36). Colonizers asserted domination of their language by denouncing others as inferior, and by discouraging and preventing the use of Indigenous languages on the grounds that they interfered with academic achievement (Darder, 1991).

Although many theories can be applied to the process of colonization, Habermas' (1989) theory of communicative action can be transposed to the context of a First Nations community. Habermas' theory of communicative action is helpful in understanding this process and serves as the theoretical framework for this research. Communicative action theory identifies a process to resolve the crisis created when a foreign "systems world" colonizes a "life world." In this case, the Eurocentric systems of education, economy, law, and other institutions, with their rationalized, impersonal, and mecha-nistically efficient way of doing things, colonized the totality of First Nations culture—the values, understanding, and beliefs generated through years of face-to-face interaction—and the ways by which it is learned. For example, government schools forced First Nations to separate the mundane and the sacred, and they rejected traditional ways of learning through discussions, vision quests, survival training, listening, waiting, remembering, and, in par-ticular, storytelling. Stories, legends, and oral teachings have many dimensions of meaning for First Nations, making them a very important teaching instrument from the days before television right up to today (Archibald, 2008; Atleo, 2004; Beck, Walters, & Francisco, 1992). Habermas (1987) explains that in order for the crisis to subside and decolonization to occur, a process of communicative action is necessary. In communicative action, individuals seek to reach common understanding among each other and to coordinate actions by reasoned argument, consensus, and cooperation rather than pursue action strictly for their own goals (Habermas, 1984).

Although this theory of communicative action was developed from and within a European context, it fits the context of First Nations in Canada and elsewhere. Colonization resulted in the imposition of economic and political systems onto First Nations cultures, forcing these communities to adopt foreign systems in exchange for life's basic necessities of food, shel-ter, and medicine (Habermas, 1984). These pressures inevitably generated crises among First Nations peoples, eroded their Indigenous knowledge, and degraded traditional codes of conduct within their communities.

Research Methods

I am Potawatomi/Ojibwe Anishinaabe, Nimkeeg InDoDem, and a First Nations citizen. I am also situated as the investigator of this research. I understand deeply the issues that can hinder or assist the goals of this par-ticular research. This article is based on a much larger study entitled *Decolonization and First Nations Control of Education* (Aquash, 2008). My approach within this particular First Nations community, therefore, has been one of utmost respect. All communications with community members have been thoughtful and appropriate. I have lived in the community, off and on, for many years and have had a lifetime of history and positive rela-tionship with the people there. I have found that many people from outside of the community make the mistake of choosing the wrong words

when addressing community members. An example of inappropriate communication would be to address groups or individuals as "you people." Being considerate and respectful with the people of the community and those involved with the interviews has been a priority. I have been raised to put my people first and to be committed to caring. I have also had experience with sacred articles and have developed an Anishinaabe worldview that enhances my personal and professional ethics toward all First Nations communities.

The most suitable approach for the design of this research was a qualitative approach. A qualitative research design seeks to develop a more widely contextualized perception of a problem by developing knowledge that is objective about subjects' knowledge, rather than concentrating on statistically significant relations between researcher-defined variables (Spradley, 1980). Ethnography as a qualitative approach is described by Spradley (1979) as "the work of describing a culture", the goal of which is "to understand another way of life" (p. 3).

Ethnography uses such field techniques as interviewing, observing, reviewing documents, making notes, and keeping good records. These tools can be used to address and reflect the worldview and life experience required for this research (Berg, 2004).

The data collection took place during the summer of 2007. The methods used for this research included audiotaped interviews using structured questions that were then transcribed to text. Other questions were generated during the interviews to help draw out or refocus the discussion, if needed (Berg, 2004). The research site focused on a First Nations community in Ontario that met predetermined criteria for identification of potential interview participants. There are 126 First Nations communities within the boundaries of the Province of Ontario that are identified as Indian bands (Canada, 2006). These communities will be referred to as First Nations throughout this research. Indian *bands* and *reserves* began using the term *First Nations* as a result of a recommendation of the Elder's council of the predecessor of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), the predecessor of the National Indian Brotherhood (Assembly of First Nations, n.d.).

The research was dependent on access to a First Nations community and school site. Securing permission to use such a site should not be taken for granted. First Nations communities have had a wide range of experiences with researchers in the past. The importance of this research lies in the possibility of its replication and implementation at any of the First Nations communities across Canada, should they meet the predetermined criteria of having: (a) a Chief and Council; (b) an elected education authority; (c) community (band) control of education (rather than external administration); (d) a community-operated (band) school; (e) persons employed to supervise teaching personnel; (f) persons employed to teach; and (g) persons employed as non-instructional staff.

Purposeful sampling is a very common tool in qualitative research (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003). Purposeful (or criterion-based) sampling was used to identify community members that held positions of authority, both past and present, because they could respond to interview questions and address operations, departments, and the evolving education system (Crowl, 1996; Merriam, 1998). The research required participants with unique knowledge, acquired through their personal experience in specific roles and positions within this particular community, as noted in the pre-determined criteria. More specifically, who a person is and where that person is located within a group is important, unlike other forms of research where people are viewed as essentially interchangeable.

Research participants that were knowledgeable and had experience in the organizational structures of a First Nations community that administers federal funding were essential (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2010). Thus, the purposeful sampling criteria established for this research sought participants who were: (1) thoroughly acculturated or lived in the community for many years; (2) involved and active in the community; (3) available to complete an interview; (4) aware of the importance of the research; and (5) historically and technically knowledgeable of their community.

A list of names was developed with the assistance of a community directory and election result rosters. A percentage target number for each group was identified that added up to a total of 25 participants. There were 17 participants out of the list of 25 that agreed to participate in the interviews. The data collection process had to include a number of community members who could be contacted in advance, with an overall population that would be manageable (Merriam, 1998; Spradley, 1979). To address ethical processes for conducting research with Indigenous people, the names and positions of the individuals in the First Nations community are not identified and each participant was identified with a pseudonym to assure individuals they would remain anonymous. The pseudonym is a numerical reference in the Anishinaabe language, so it is capitalized and spelled phonetically. The numerical reference is used as the citation for the quotes in this section from the transcribed audiotapes of the interviews (Aquash, 2007). Additional information was gathered from observations and note-taking.

Findings

The findings are presented in three sections: *Before Community Control*; *After Community Control of Education*; and *Looking to the Future*. These sections reflect the major topics of the interview questions. The hopes and dreams of the community are addressed first. The next section provides participants with an opportunity to reflect on the challenges and changes. The final section looks to the future and addresses thoughts about how educa-

tion may evolve and unfold in the community as well as reflections on the impact to the school-community and the changes to leadership.

Before Community Control

The education program had always focused on the elementary school. Before community control, the Chief and Council had an appointed education committee. As a committee, there was very limited input as to how this committee functioned. The committee structure provided a way for information to flow to the Chief and Council, but the finances and administration were controlled and under the jurisdiction of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND). DIAND controlled educational funding in the community until 1991.

Control of education in this First Nation community meant many things to many people. The various hopes and dreams of the community became evident through participants' responses. Participants clearly stated what they wanted to see in the education system and that there was difficulty in understanding the challenges to acquiring control:

I think they thought that somebody would wave a magic wand over the community and everybody would be talking Ojibwe and doing all their cultural things. That's what I think. They didn't realize they had to work to get there. (ASHINISWI)[1]

Changes to the *Indian Act* in the early 1980s led the community to begin discussions about meeting the needs of their much larger population. There was much excitement when the community began to talk about First Nations control of education and the ICIE document was circulated. There were several key families and mothers of children that attended the elementary school that provided leadership. However, there was a feeling that the community was not headed in the right direction:

Many years ago, the community was looked at as the leader, a community that was going forward in a very fast and positive way. We've lost that. We're not in the forefront anymore. (ASHINEEZH)

When asked about specific problems before band control of education, participants described the challenges that they faced: "The behaviour of the students was out of control. And I'm not exaggerating. It was just total chaos" (ASHINEEZH). The level of success in the elementary school tended to be measured by the level of control over students' behaviour. Questions regarding curriculum and instructional systems were answered in a general way as there were no academic initiatives before community control and there was no plan on how to address hiring First Nations teachers: "I didn't think that it [the curriculum] was up to par. I don't think we had the best-qualified teachers. I always thought it would be nice if we could have had more community members as our own teachers" (ASHINEEWIN).

Interview participants focused on their understanding or thoughts on how effective the leadership of the elementary school had been before community control of education: "As far as educating their students, not

effective at all. I didn't find the school open to the community" (NEEZH). Overall, many parents of the students that attended the elementary school received no communication regarding their children and only attended meetings with administration if there were behaviour problems. The community never received information about the curriculum and never provided an opportunity for input, to review content, or participate in the classroom. Information on education was never made public, and one of the teachers at the school identified this lack of communication: "We had a principal who probably reported to Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. We weren't always told everything" (ASHINEEWIN).

Before community control of education, there didn't seem to be much concern about what was happening in the elementary school. There were those community members that had a negative experience that was never resolved, but it was dismissed because it was back when "Indian Affairs" ran the school: "Teachers were very comfortable with Indian Affairs in control, but there were considerable changes when the community acquired control" (ASHINEEZH).

After Community Control of Education
The hopes and dreams of the community were documented before community control of education. These hopes and dreams were particularly focused on aspects of language and culture. The terms of reference of the Board of Education provided the mandate that all programs initiated by the Board were to focus on language and culture. The Chief and Council developed the Board of Education terms of reference through community input; this document, along with a Band Council Resolution (BCR), provided the authority for the elected Board to be delegated to address education in the community.

Some community members responsible for making decisions and developing policy for education had internalized and held ideologies of their experience in the residential school system. Not only were there challenges in addressing control of academics, but there were also challenges from within the community itself about using Indigenous knowledge:

They (Board of Education) backed down because there was a fight that I don't think they were prepared to fight at that time because of the, I guess the Pentecost, the Christians, everything and everybody else coming and saying we don't want our kids practicing paganistic practices. (ASHINEEZH)

Habermas (1987) refers to this internalization in his theory of communicative action as the "systems world." Those community members that internalized the residential school ideology were part of the colonization process and expressed their intentions in a negative manner: "I felt bad because of the mean-spirited intent at eliminating the language, systemically depriving community members from learning it" (NINGODWAASWI). It was unfortunate that the activism in the community was not a united front. We can see

that there was resistance to language and culture while, at the same time, the entire focus of community control was to begin implementing a culturally-based or culturally-relevant educational system.

The Board of Education mandate reflected the hopes and dreams of the community by emphasizing language and culture as an important part of any program development. Interview participants observed that the Board members had to make a personal commitment. However, participants also observed that many of the elected Board members dismissed the community mandate for language and culture once they were elected to their position, and dismissed their responsibility for meeting these expectations. Habermas (1989) addresses this problem in his theory of communicative action, referring to it as a source of pressure within the community. Dismissing the responsibility for the language and cultural mandate provides an oppressive state where the focus is on assimilation. This is not difficult for community members to see for themselves and they can also see that the language and culture were not being taught or respected.

Participants focused on their understanding of the educational system that followed band control of education, and explained what community control meant to them and what was starting to happen in the community:

Now that we took over as a community, we could implement whatever we wanted to. Our customs, our Anishinaabe language, and gear it to our community rather than gear it toward external people that came in and forced their education values on us. We have the opportunity to do that. But yet we fall short because of the external intervention; I call them interlopers. (SHININGODWAASWI)

Even though there was resistance by some of the groups that attended church, the overall understanding in the community was that the elementary school would teach First Nations topics. Many people began to move back to the community and increased the population at the elementary school: "So then we got into band control and we started to see a change. I mean the atmosphere changed, people were a little bit more interested and ended up bringing students back to our school" (NEEZH).

Participants reflected on how community control of education addressed and focused on eliminating some of the challenges in the elementary school. The challenges were mainly student behaviour and communication between teachers, parents, and the community. The initial changes in education sent a clear message to the community, addressed student behaviour, and increased communication between parents and teachers in the elementary school.

The Board of Education created policies that provided a mandate for communication with parents, but this policy was set aside: "It did eliminate some problems at first when the community put their foot down. But then that foot didn't stay down. That caused a problem because our own people let the situation go" (ZHAANGASWI).

The focus on communication was right in line with the theory of communicative action. The pressure that builds from oppression cannot be released until the process of communication and action begins to occur in the community. There were many growing pains as community control evolved, the second election of Board members occurred, the Board began to take on their positions as policy makers, and the Board stopped micromanaging the elementary school. Throughout all of this, the structure of the organization began to work against the Board and the community:

> When the Board went into effect they had to hire a principal. There were three principals who had been hired by the Board and it became clear that the structure of the organization was not meeting the needs of the community. After three years of Band control, the curriculum and other aspects of the elementary program were not getting addressed, with the focus always on the behaviour and discipline of the students. (ASHINISWI)

Changes occurred in the elementary school after community control and issues of power and authority surfaced. Several initiatives were considered to address student behaviour issues. There were extreme suggestions, such as using video cameras and hiring security guards in the school: "I talked about the behaviour, and there were people always mad at the principal for trying to discipline their kids. A new structure was put in place called an elementary team to address behaviour" (BEZHIG). With new members elected on the Board, the choice was to reorganize the elementary school to address student behaviour issues as well as the growing list of issues such as teacher evaluations, curriculum, and instructional systems. The reorganization required eliminating the position of principal and redistributing the salary among the new administrative positions. A student services coordinator was brought forward from a Board member and became the key position that worked at implementing the reorganization of the school. Initially, the student services coordinator recruited community members that were existing school employees to fill the new administrative positions of the elementary team: "When the team started, that's when you talk about band control, that's when First Nations people were put in charge. It was good. I thought it was good" (NEWIN); and "They put in the management type system, team approach" (NISWI). The focus of reorganizing the elementary school was to flatten out the organization and to create shared authority: "I know they went from an elementary principal, to a team" (ASHINISWI).

The reorganization created an elementary team in place of a principal, which improved communication and increased shared responsibilities for school issues, with support from the Board of Education: "It wasn't until reorganization that there was some success in addressing these matters" (ZHAANGASWI). The parents and community members seemed to accept the team concept for many years, which was somewhat effective in addressing the many issues in the elementary school. However, some individuals in the community wanted the old system with the principal position returned, but their justification was based only on appearances:

I know there were people who didn't understand it. You know people came up to me in the community and asked me, I took the time to explain. But I don't really remember a lot of people being really upset. (ASHINEEZH)

Communication between the Board and community members regarding the reorganization of the elementary school was not without its difficulties. The reorganization plan was presented to the community in open community meetings, led by the Chief and Council and the Board of Education: "I remember them having an open house to let the people know that this was how the school was going to be operated" (ASHINEEWIN).

The concept of the elementary team was solid and the Board supported the process by creating all of the policies and procedures to support the system. Job descriptions were developed, rewritten, and justified for all of the positions in the school:

Our way was that those people would be involved because they were part of the community. There were some Elders of the community that held those positions and they had a stake in it. So it was designed after our traditional way and because this community didn't know our ways and still probably doesn't, they had a problem with it. (NINGODWAASWI)

The community both accepted and rejected reorganization. I guess basically there was some people that saw this as good and some saw it as the worst thing that could happen and again; it's just a matter of…this is the way it's always been when you bring something new. (SHINEEZHWAASWI)

The changes resulting from reorganization were immediately apparent, no students ran in the hallways when they were supposed to be in class doing their work; teachers were teaching and students were learning. The elementary team process required considerable work and was very demanding on those individuals who took on the challenge. All team members except one were from our community and all were First Nations people. Each had his/her own responsibilities and shared a vested interest in the students doing well. They worked together to address the overwhelming issues in behaviour and discipline. (ZHAANGASWI)

Reorganization, however, eventually manifested an overall regression to the rational bureaucracy that typified a Eurocentric system, even though the Board of Education intended to launch an innovative organization more sensitive to the local residents (Habermas, 1989). Another aspect to community control was administration of the funding: "With the takeover of education, I felt it was a good step for our community. One of the things that I strongly supported was being in the position we are now. Controlling the dollars" (SHINEEZHWAASWI). Another participant stated:

I think since Band control and then a change from a principal to a management team and they get the right people in, it can be very effective. It was very effective, in one year they created almost a million dollars extra for the school, just their skills and through consensus building and collaboration. It's an effective tool for Indian people. We've always known that, that we have to have consensus and we know that each person has a skill. Not one person can do everything. It has to be a team approach because we each have our gift. If they only have a gift in a couple areas we can't be as effective, but when we have four minds together, four or five minds together working towards the same thing they each bring in their talent, that's called collaboration. And that is an effective time to make progress forward. And they saw that in play the first year. It was an effective tool, it was amazing. When they use collaboration it just inspires. (NINGODWAASWI)

This team model is something that other First Nations communities may want to consider. It just makes sense for some communities, while others focus on emulating the provincial school model. Administering a school as a hierarchy can tend to be expensive. What occurred financially with this elementary team model in place is phenomenal:

I believed that we were going in the right direction. Band control of education and with the Board elections and with the management structure, it was a whole new concept, but it was a team approach. And if you read anything in the world of business, they operate in teams now, they get input from everyone. So the concept and the direction things were going, I think there could have been so many positive changes in the system. (ASHINEEZH)

Again, this community member understood the concept and was involved with the development and implementation of the model from the beginning. The team model complemented the community and certainly provided a mechanism to address educational issues in the elementary school.

There appeared to be little interest in completing the reorganization process when a Board election disrupted the progress in the elementary school. The election of new Board members and replacements within the elementary team made an impact on further progress. Problems also arose due to lack of consistent professional development provided to the team and the Board. The overall plan was to address curriculum, focus on academics (especially language and culture), and then slowly return to a moderate version of the team environment.

Looking to the Future

"I would like to see a fully functional school that can deliver a good education having a curriculum in Anishinaabe language and culture, know our history" (NISHWAASWI). This quote is a sentiment echoed by Indigenous people across the United States and Canada. There have been models of success and then they cease to exist for one reason or another. It is unfortunate that an elementary school that is governed and fully funded on a First Nations territory cannot address the needs of the community. Sometimes the community is a product of its history, as for those who attended the residential schools and having their children and their grandchildren now in charge of education

We can read the following responses and consider the participants' thoughts: "Well, I would like to see us all live in harmony with one another. I would like us to speak our Anishinaabe language again. I would like us to respect Mother Earth. I would like to see us be in total band control" (ASHINISWI).

Participants made suggestions about what the education system in the community could be like in 20 years: "My vision is to have an education system that creates, produces scholars" (NINGODWAASWI). For participants who were asked to look into the future, it was considered by many to be a unique experience, since many had not really considered that far into the future: "I think it's going to improve too, but what's really lacking

is money" (NISWI). Some participants made general suggestions: "My vision is that everybody has an opportunity to get an education" (SHININGODWAASWI). Another participant stated:

A lot of the things we confront, we confronted as a community. It has to do with policies and structures and things that have been developed outside ourselves. I think a key point in advancing and improving and restoring ourselves is to control all aspects of our lives [and that] has to do with educated, knowledgeable leaders. (SHINEEZHWAASWI)

The process of self-determination of education in the community began to wake up everyone. There were many individuals that got involved in education when they were never involved before. The interview participants described a structural reorganization intended to respond to the academic and behavioural problems in the school. According to the interviewees, some community members seemed unable or unwilling to understand what was going on. The Chief and Council held frequent consultations and many community information meetings, but those in authority were ultimately disconnected from the community at large.

During an external review of the elementary school in 2003, conducted by a provincial post-secondary institution, a participant suggested that the review itself may have been used as the rationale for eliminating the elementary team. According to the external review, the organization of the elementary school is noted for addressing administration in an innovative manner. After seven years of attempting to reorganize, a coordinator—essentially a principal—was put in charge of the elementary school and the remaining team was eliminated. Behaviour and discipline problems, among others, resurfaced among students. Because of poor community consultation and communication, the elementary school was still understood to have an administrative team. This created confusion with parents and community members that were not informed of the changes.

There is a real indication that the team structure worked very well for this particular community. The team structure was implemented in 1996 and continued for seven years. In 2003, a coordinator was hired that put an end to the team environment. There could have been a second phase to the reorganization which would then have focused on the future of the community: "The process of returning to a system that was fraught with problems, and that putting the principal system back into practice was frustrating, disappointing, destroys a person when they're working in that situation" (NINGODWAASWI). Another participant stated:

Now after two years of this new administration, all the kids are in the hallways again, so there's definitely a problem there. I wouldn't lie. I'm speaking what I see. They're all out in the hallways again. And they're all slamming lockers, and all running away and people are chasing them and that's what students like. If students are doing something to the point of where a police officer should be called, they won't call them. (MIDAASWI)

Dismantling the reorganization without continuing to move forward with community control is unfortunate. The structure of the organization has tended to work against First Nations governance and control. It does this by taking on its own path of assimilation, Eurocentrism, and hegemony. Several community members in positions as administrators allowed several issues to be addressed. There was no justification to bringing the elementary school under the control of a principal from outside the community. When the organization regressed to the hierarchical structure, it became apparent that there was another long list of issues to address, including the major issue of trying to bring the control of education to the First Nations community.

During the time that the elementary school had an administrative team, participants in this research described how the organization of the elementary school was more flexible and responsive to the community in a timely manner. These participant descriptions suggest an innovative organization. According to MacKinnon and Pynch-Worthylake (2001), an innovative organization is structured to deal with academic, social, and other issues that schools typically face. This type of organization relies on trained professionals who work together to meet the changing demands of students and problems within the organization itself. Flexibility and cooperative problem solving are its greatest strengths to gain knowledge and confront issues.

Participants were asked to use a little imagination and describe what the community and education could be. They responded with some ideas that they would like to see and were optimistic with future events, but also indicated that many experiences of the past had to be addressed before they could move on.

"I think this community is struggling right now. I think the community could be together more as a whole. They're not" (NAANAN). The difficulty with the system that is in place in First Nations across Canada is that it tends to create divisions. While the intent may be to create debate and discussion, in First Nations communities, the debate and discussion creates animosity sometimes, and the healthy discussion creates division. Continued focus on communication has been healthy for this community. The following quote is indicative of the time that it will take to make things better: "Well, I think it's going to improve, but slowly, very slowly. Things are going to keep getting better. I always have positive thoughts" (NISWI).

Some responses indicate that there is awareness of social pressures and that the community can respond in a good way: "First of all I'd like to see healing start" (NEEWIN). Healing does not necessarily mean with the individual. The community as a collective requires healing to get over old wounds and to regroup. There are continuous barrages that target the community and these take their toll on families and individuals: "I wish that

we get well and because of our illnesses and all of the social and emotional and all of the things that have been done to us, I hope we get well so they can allow this to happen" (NINGODWAASWI).

Discussion

The major focus of this research was the effects of colonization and the impacts of community control on the educational system. Participants highlighted some of the positive aspects about the team leadership of the school after community control. Through reorganizing and elevating the existing positions of the community members to administrators of the school that the *Indian Control of Indian Education* (ICIE) policy was really addressed. Participants described how reorganization and the relative effectiveness of a new team leadership structure addressed those issues that were important to the community.

Interview participants identified many challenges that they faced before, during, and after community control of education. The authority for administering the school has since moved to the Board of Education, although this may not have been the Board's intent since its role was to develop policy and hire a director to administrator and implement policy. The interviews suggest that there was a void in the leadership of the Board. The Board required a director that could provide oversight and leadership for the elementary program. By not hiring a director, other administrators and Board members assumed those duties. This made it difficult for Board members to follow their roles and responsibilities, focus on policy making, and abstain from involvement in day-to-day operations.

The first elected Board of Education organized the elementary school much like an industrial factory; the structure was outlined by Indian Affairs as a pyramid structure. The Board's personnel policies even reflected such an organization, with a division of labour into tasks and specific procedures on how these tasks were to be coordinated (MacKinnon & Pynch-Worthylake, 2001).

Colonization consists of creating pressure on a First Nations community by the imposed political and economic systems such that community members find they must then participate in them or find themselves under extreme pressure to participate. This pressure to participate in the economic or political systems, as suggested by Habermas (1989), is based on survival. Habermas (1989) goes on to describe that the pressures of colonization will create crisis within a First Nations community. This crisis is the continued chipping away of Indigenous knowledge. The loss of Indigenous knowledge has been observed to cause a negative impact on the code of conduct of the entire community. For the First Nations community to relieve this pressure, it is anticipated that communicative action will thus relieve the pressure on the First Nations community's lifeworld. Once the entire community has addressed the process of communicative action, it is

anticipated that the external pressures of colonization of the First Nations lifeworld will be addressed.

Board members realized they had to define their own roles and began by focusing only on policy making. Issues stemming from the day-to-day operations were referred to the appropriate administrator. Recognizing it was essential that everyone fulfill their designated responsibilities, the Board began a new approach to the organization. It was at that point that the Board developed strategies, both for empowering the administrators running the school and for understanding the root of problems. As part of the new strategies, the Board eliminated the position of principal and replaced it with a council of educated First Nations teachers and existing school staff.

Almost overnight, there was a change in the students' behaviour. No longer was there a principal from outside the community that they could run away from. There were now aunties and uncles, grandmas and grand-pas, and neighbours who were in charge of the school. The pride began to show as many students took it upon themselves to begin focusing their attention on school and listening to their teachers. The curriculum and instructional systems remained less than ideal, as many aspects of educational leadership had been ignored for a long time. There were no teaching evaluations or approaches to organization so that continuous improvement of academic skills could occur.

This research helps us to understand this First Nations community through the eyes and hearts of the people who reside there. Ethnography, as Spradley (1979) explains, is "the work of describing a culture" or "understanding another way of life" (p. 3). In many ways, the research process itself is akin to a vision quest, where wisdom and knowledge cannot be separated from the spiritual and the emotional. The responses by participants from this First Nations community have reflected patience and dignity despite the participants' struggles and challenges.

In conclusion, there is a need for First Nations communities to maintain local control and modify their systems to meet their own unique needs. The team model fulfilled the needs of the community (involved in the research) for seven years until it was changed. To all of those who were involved, *meegwetch* for your time and effort in making a better First Nations community, school, and education program. This team approach could work in another First Nations or Indigenous community. It could also be the leadership model for an Indigenous, culturally-based, educational organization. This First Nation community took it upon themselves to think outside of the box and to create a circle to address their educational needs.

Notes

[1] The participant interviews were conducted during the summer of 2007. The date of the interviews/personal communication will not be included in future participant quotes.

References

Agar, M. H.(1986). *Speaking of ethnography*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Agbo, S. A. (2002). Decentralization of First Nations education in Canada: Perspectives on ideals and realities of Indian control of Indian education. *Interchange, 33*(3), 281-302.

Alfred, T. (2005). *Wasáse: Indigenous pathways of action and freedom*. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press.

Archibald, J.-A. (2008). *Indigenous storywork: Educating the heart, mind, body, and spirit*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.

Assembly of First Nations. (n.d.). *Assembly of First Nations—The Story*. Retrieved from http://64.26.129.156/article.asp?id=59

Atleo, E. R. (2004). *Tsawalk: A Nuu-chah-nulth worldview*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.

Aquash, M. (2007). *Structured interviews with First Nations participants* (Unpublished audio transcripts).

Aquash, M. (2008). *Decolonization and First Nations control of education*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Toronto, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, ON.

Auditor General of Canada. (1986). *Report of the Auditor General of Canada: Chapter 11— Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development: Devolution*. Ottawa, ON: Author. Retrieved from http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/internet/English/parl_oag_198611_11_e_4202.html

Battiste, M., Bell, L., & Findlay, L. M. (2002). Decolonizing education in Canadian universities: An interdisciplinary, international, indigenous research project. *Canadian Journal of Native Education, 26*(2), 82-95.

Beck, P. V., Walters, A. L., & Francisco, N. (1992). *The sacred: Ways of knowledge, sources of life*. Tsaile, AZ: Navajo Community College Press.

Berg, B. L. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education.

Blackwell, D. (2003). Colonialism and globalization: A group-analytical perspective. *Analysis, 36*(4), 445-463.

Coffey, A. (1999). *The ethnographic self: Fieldwork and the representation of identity*. London, UK: Sage Publications.

Crowl, T. K. (1996). *Fundamentals of educational research* (2nd ed.). Madison, WI: Brown & Benchmark.

Darder, A. (1991). *Culture and power in the classroom: A critical foundation for bicultural education*. New York, NY: Bergin & Garvey.

Dickason, O. P. (with Newbigging, W.). (2006). *A concise history of Canada's First Nations*. Toronto, ON: Oxford University Press.

Curwen Doige, L. A. (2003). A missing link: Between traditional Aboriginal education and the western system of education. *Canadian Journal of Native Education, 27*(2), 144-160.

Foster, R., & Goddard, T. (2003). Leadership and culture in schools in northern British Columbia: Bridge building and/or re-balancing act? *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy, 2003* (27). Retrieved from http://www.umanitoba.ca/publications/cjeap/archives.html

Freire, P. (2006). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.). New York, NY: Continuum.

Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action* (Vol. 1): *Reason and the rationalization of society* (T. McCarthy, Trans.). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. (1987). *The theory of communicative action* (Vol. 2): *Lifeworld and system: A critique of functionalist reason* (T. McCarthy, Trans.). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (T. Burger & F. Lawrence, Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Hart, M. A. (2002). *Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin: An Aboriginal approach to healing*. Black Point, NS: Fernwood Publishing.

Hegemonic. (n.d.) In *Merriam-Webster's online dictionary*. Retrieved from http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hegemonic

Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. (2010). *Sample leadership selection code.* Ottawa, ON: Author. Retrieved from http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/DAM/DAM-INTER-HQ/STAGING/texte-text/sclsc_1100100013946_eng.pdf

MacKinnon, D., & Pynch-Worthylake, N. (2001). Leadership and organizational structure: Re-viewing the supervision of pedagogical practice. *EAF Journal, 16*(1), 1-11.

Marker, M. (2004). Theories and disciplines as sites of struggle: The reproduction of colonial dominance through the controlling of knowledge in the academy. *Canadian Journal of Native Education, 28*(1/2), 102-110.

McLaren, P. (2003). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Ponting, J. R. (1997). *First Nations in Canada: Perspectives on opportunity, empowerment, and self-determination.* Toronto, ON: McGraw-Hill.

Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., & Elam, G. (2003). Designing and selecting samples. In J. Ritchie & J. Lewis (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers* (pp. 77-108). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP). (1996). *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal peoples: Gathering strength* (Vol. 3). Ottawa, ON: Author.

Spradley, J. P. (1979). *The ethnographic interview.* New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant observation.* New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Statistics Canada. (2006). *Aboriginal peoples in Canada in 2006 (97-558-XIE2006001).* Ottawa, ON: Author. Retrieved from http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/bsolc/olc-cel/olc-cel?catno=97-558-XIE2006001&lang=eng

Tuhiwai-Smith, L. (2002). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples.* New York, NY: Zed Books.

Van Maanen, J. (1982). Fieldwork on the beat. In J. Van Maanen, J. M. Dabbs, Jr., & R. R. Faulkner (Eds.), *Varieties of qualitative research* (pp. 103-115). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Zinn, H. (1980). *A peoples history of the United States: 1492-present.* New York, NY: HarperCollins.