

**An Explanation of Key factors That Prevent First Nation Mothers Participating in
Public Schools**

by

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Abstract

This was a feminist study of six First Nation women's experiences and their non-involvement in their children's public education. The purpose of this study was to identify barriers that First Nation mothers face in terms of taking a more active role in their children's school-based education. The objective was to gain a better understanding of the issues from the aboriginal mothers themselves as they are the experts of their own lives. The six women interviewed for this study are all mothers and /or grandmothers whose children or grandchildren attend public schools. The study explores the six women's feeling, attitudes, values and perceptions of the experiences in public schools.

A number of key themes emerged from this feminist qualitative study. The first theme was the lack of respect and assistance by teachers and staff from school staff. The second was lack of communication and the third theme was feelings of inadequacy felt by the First Nation women.

This study is important for three reasons. Firstly, the majority of the studies focus on why aboriginal students do not succeed in public schools as well as general parental involvement in schools. Indeed, there are few studies on First Nation mother's involvement in public schools. Secondly, to identify some of the barriers that prevent the six First Nation mothers participation in their children's schooling and thirdly, to identify some recommendations to help First Nation mothers participate in their children's public education.

Dedication

I dedicate this project to my late mother Marjorie, a residential school survivor and a mother of ten children who all attended residential and public schools.

To all First Nation women, whose voices have not been heard and/or validated in public schools, their communities and society as a whole.

To my three granddaughters, Lily, Kvai-lynn and Emma who will grow up one day to be mothers and knowingly their voices will be heard and validated in public schools.

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Chapter One

Introduction

It is often difficult for non-aboriginal Canadians who have not spent time on a remote reserve, or with urban aboriginal people, to grasp how serious our situation is.

Matthew Coon Come, Former Chief

Assembly of First Nations – 2001

Coon Come's astute words draw attention to cultural barriers and problems in society vis-à-vis First Nations peoples and the dominant culture. His statement can be equally applied to the culture of education. As a First Nations educator in public school, I witnessed First Nations and the more dominant culture of the school attempting to speak and understand each other and to try work together for the success of the First Nation students. But it is apparent that there is much frustration on both sides and I believe this problem stems from what I would call a 'cultural clash' and an inability to understand how deep the problem actually is.

As a First Nations educator, I am interested in exploring this cultural clash. I have worked in band-operated schools and public schools for the past 20 years and have experienced firsthand, the cultural conflict between the First Nations and dominant culture. I believe research in this area will provide a greater understanding of the issue.

As noted, for six years I worked in band schools. The federal government funds the band schools, however, administration is under the local Aboriginal Authority Committee or under the

guidance of the Chief and Council. The goals of the band school are to hire First Nations staff and adapt the BC curriculum using aboriginal content. This recommendation of the National Indian Brotherhood (1972) came about solely as aboriginal leaders persistently demanded 'Indian control of Indian education'. What this has meant to First Nation people is the right to control their children's education and more importantly, allow aboriginal parents more input into their child's education. But problems remain; First Nation parents continue to have low involvement in their children's public school education (Cohen-Vogel & Smrekar, 2001; Crozier, 2001). This lies in stark contrast to their active involvement at home with their children.

Indeed, the first teachers of children are their parents and most often their mothers. Children are continuously learning at home. Research shows that parental involvement is one of the most important components in a child's learning. It also indicates that parental involvement in school has a positive influence on children's learning (Macias, 1989; Hill & Taylor, 2004). If this is the case, the fact that First Nation parents, as I have frequently witnessed, do not feel comfortable coming to the school is deeply problematic for the health and well being of First Nation children and society as a whole. It is often the case that First Nation mothers are the sole caregivers of their children. The issue, therefore, of why First Nation mothers are not coming to the public schools and participating in their child's education is a problem that needs to be explored. It is certainly not the case that First Nations parents do not love their children or do not care if they succeed at school - in fact it is quite the opposite. Something else is at play and it is important that we deepen our understandings of what that something is. The question that guided this study was: What are the barriers that First Nation mothers face that prevent them from taking a more active role in public schools and their children's education?

To gain a better understanding of low involvement of First Nation mothers in public schools, I investigated the stories of six First Nation mothers of the Snuneymuxw First Nation. I analyzed their experiences to better understand the nature of a First Nation mother's perspective.

Statement of the Problem

Throughout history, First Nation people have suffered a substantial amount of injustice. Colonialism, residential schools, racism, poverty and inequalities of aboriginal women are key factors that have a negative impact on First Nation people and their education. Formal studies indicate that aboriginal women rank among the most severely disadvantaged people in Canada (Flera & Elliot, 2003; Williams, 1997). As a result, First Nation people continue to struggle to find their place in Canadian society, particularly in education.

While there is abundance of studies on why aboriginal students do not succeed in school as well as general parental involvement in schools (Kirkness, 2001; Crozier, 2001; Drummond & Stipek, 2004) there are few studies on First Nations mother's involvement in public schools. This means there is a lack in depth of understanding of the complex reasons why aboriginal mothers do not actively participate in public schools.

Purpose and Objective of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative feminist study is to identify barriers First Nation mothers face in terms of taking a more active role in their children's school-based education. The objective was to gain a better understanding of the issues from the aboriginal mothers themselves as they are the experts of their own lives. My long-term goal is to use this information in some way to help First Nation mothers and all parents feel welcome in public schools.

Through individual interviews with First Nation mothers I uncovered what 'they felt' the obstacles and challenges were to their active involvement. Based on this knowledge, I identified ways in which the education system could be improved in terms of facilitating their involvement. Adding to this, I am personally interested in exploring what I, as an educator can actually do to help.

Context and Site of the Study

The study took place in Nanaimo, British Columbia. Nanaimo is situated on the mid-eastern part of Vancouver Island with a population of 78,692 (BC Stats, 2006). Snuneymuxw First Nation mothers of children from two different schools were selected. One school is the John Barsby Community High School, and the other, Bayview Elementary School. John Barsby Community High School has a population 697 students and 25% are First Nation students. Bayview Elementary has a population of 193 students and approximately 50% are First Nation students. Bayview Elementary is adjacent to Snuneymuxw First Nation reserve and is a feeder school to John Barsby Community High School.

Snuneymuxw First Nation has a population of 525 (Statistics Canada, 2006a) band members living on reserve. The Snuneymuxw population 15 years old and over consists of 190

males and 195 females. There are 40 female lone parents and 10 female widows. The unemployment for Snuneymuxw First Nation is 17.9%.

Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

The key areas that guided this study included theories of colonialism, racism and poverty as well as the residential schools experience. Literature explored focused on parental involvement in schools and First Nation relationships with public schools today.

There are a plethora of studies of aboriginal culture prior to European contact (Dickason, 2006; Kulchyski, McCaskill, & Newhouse, 2003). Historically, the aboriginal people had their own way of life. There was a government, laws, and a structured society. Upon European contact, however, this culture was vastly interrupted. Colonialism was introduced to the First Nations people of Canada. It was a system that forever changed and disrupted the lives of aboriginal people of Canada (Miller, 2001; Milloy, 2003). Colonialism is a forced change in which one culture; society or nation dominates another through systematic policy. The British colonialists controlled Canada and claimed ownership of the lands through dishonest practices and the pretense of assimilation. As a result, there was conflict between the First Nations and colonialists and that has never been resolved.

Research on Canadian colonialism helps us to understand the unequal relationship between First Nation people and the Europeans. The British Imperialists became dominant in their control of the new country by denying and destroying the sovereignty of the First Nations people. Deculturation was a form used to assimilate aboriginal people into the mainstream European society. This method was clearly executed in residential schools (Milloy, 2003; Chrisjohn, Young, & Maraun, 2006; Cardinal, 1999). Residential schools were in existence from

1863-1984 in British Columbia. There are many testimonies of former aboriginal survivors that endured atrocities while attending residential schools (Olsen, Morris & Sam, 2001; Fournier & Crey, 1997). Canadian colonialism is still evident as “the education system continue(s) to assert that assimilation within Eurocentric thought is the best path for aboriginal people” (Youngblood-Henderson, 2000, p.59).

The relationship between aboriginal students and staff of the residential school was unequal. As a result, racism took place in these institutions and still exists today among aboriginal people with the dominant culture (Fleras & Elliot, 2003; Kirkness, 2001). Racism occurs when the ideologies assert or imply natural superiority of one group over another in terms of privileges. It also consists of the power to put these beliefs into practice in a way that excludes those who belong to a devalued group. This information is valuable to the study and helps the researcher to have a clearer understanding of the problem with First Nation parents and public schools.

Parents and poverty are studied by many researchers (Hadeed, 2005; Compton-Lilly, 2004) and is a vital area to be added to the study. Poverty is rampant among aboriginal communities. Unemployment is high among aboriginals on and off reserve. Part of this poverty stems back to residential schools. The goal of residential schools was to educate the aboriginal child into vocational or low paying jobs. To add to the problem, people who attended residential schools became alcohol and drug dependent. Therefore, due to the abuse, they could not hold a steady job. For instance, Milloy (2003) describes,

Social maladjustment, abuse of self and others and family breakdown are some of the symptoms prevalent among First Nation Babyboomers. The “Graduates” of the “Ste. Anne’s Residential School” era are now trying and often failing to come to

grips with life as adults after being raised as children in an atmosphere of fear, loneliness and loathing. (p. 295).

Furthermore, the residential school survivors lacked parental skills due the militant harshness of their upbringing. The residential school transferred the lack of parental skills onto these students, and generations that followed. As a result, aboriginal parents had difficulties raising their own children. The adults learned as children to exert power through control and abuse. As a result, in some First Nation families this abuse is carried on.

There are a number of studies on parental involvement in schools (Pena, 2000; Sarason, 1995). Educators recognize that parental involvement is very important for the success of the child in school. In fact, “the closer the parent is to education of the child, the greater the impact on child development and educational achievement” (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991, p.227). So what is the impact on aboriginal students if their parents are not involved? A few authors (Kirkness & Bowman, 1992; Adu-Febiri, 2003) provide some insight into this crucial area but more research is needed.

Methodology and Methods

I chose a feminist approach to this study because it explores and uncovers the inequalities of women, gender and other marginalized groups. In addition, the feminist researcher looks at the participant as the expert and authoritative on their own experiences not the researcher’s expertise or beliefs (Reinharz, 1992). The women I interviewed in this study were certainly the experts on their own lives and the only ones who would be able to tell me what was blocking them from more active involvement in the school.

I used open-ended interviews with the participants in their homes where the setting was more relaxed and safe for them to share the information from their perspective. According to Reinharz (1992), “open-ended interview research produces nonstandardized information that allows the researcher to make full use of differences amongst people” (p.19) and perhaps more importantly, it “maximizes discovery and description” (p.18). My aim was to uncover diverse concerns of six participants and gain their unique perspectives. As a feminist researcher I also sought to understand and capture the true meaning of participant’s experiences. An explanation of the study was provided to the parents prior to the interview. It is hoped the parents would be open, trust me and share their true stories of their experiences in public schools as a parent.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

The sample size is small and in no way does this study pretend that the six participants’ views are representative of all First Nation’s mothers’ perspectives. Their stories are individual and unique. However, “the kind of research discussed here are variants of a particular social setting (the real object of the research in question) and of the experiences arising in it” (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006, p. 493). The participants in this study share concrete ideas and represent significant knowledge they have experienced as First Nations women in public schools. It is important to validate these women’s experiences more fully in view (Maynard, 2005) because they are the experts in this area.

Significance of the Study

This particular study will have significant value to many stakeholders. They are; First Nation parents, School Administration, Band Administration, First Nation educators, and non-aboriginal educators. It is apparent there is something missing between public schools and First Nation mothers. Indeed, First Nation children need their parental support, while attending public schools to aid in their success. Therefore, the gap needs to be filled and we need to understand the whole picture and the problem.

Educators need to seek out parents, because they are the most valuable asset in improving the child's education. This study would give those educators a better understanding of the aboriginal culture and low involvement of First Nation mothers in public schools.

The interviews will help First Nations parents understand they are not alone. This study can be an eye opener for all of them, and they may move in a better direction and step out more to help their child in school in a positive way.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

This chapter presents a review of literature relevant to this study on First Nation mothers. The chapter begins by laying out the structure of colonialism, including a discussion of the impact of residential schools and an emphasis on the inequality faced by aboriginal women. I then move to an exploration of the literature on parental involvement and particularly, the relationship between First Nations students and schools. I conclude with a brief discussion of the paucity of studies on First Nations as parents.

Colonialism

Colonialism refers to a specific era of European expansion into overseas territories from the 16th to the mid-20th century. It entailed the process whereby a European power took control and exploited an indigenous sector by appropriating land and resources, extracting wealth, and capitalizing on cheap labour. Racial doctrines that reinforced patterns of superiority were often invoked to justify, explain, and promote the blatant exploitation of indigenous minorities. White settlement often accompanied the colonist enterprise; that in turn led to the displacement of indigenous populations as barriers to progress. (Fleras & Elliot, 2003, p. 377).

The foundation of colonialism of Canada was formed, after the British Empire conquered Quebec in the Seven Year War, by the entrenchment of the Royal Proclamation of 1763 and the Indian Act. These two biased documents controlled, affected and shaped the First Nation people in a disadvantageous way and was the beginning of an unjust relationship between the native

people and government. So then, whom and what did the Royal Proclamation of 1763 and the Indian Act benefit? To understand these policies, below is a description in detail.

Royal Proclamation of 1763

Indian and Northern Affairs of Canada (INAC, 2009a) states the Royal Proclamation of 1763 recognized:

- Aboriginal people lived on traditional lands
- Interest in those lands belonged to groups and nations, not individuals
- Only the Crown could buy or accept Aboriginal lands
- The Crown generally required an agreement to obtain lands from Aboriginal people
- Aboriginal people were under the Crown's protection

The Royal Proclamation specifies land was to be set aside for the tribes of aboriginal people and was to be protected from European settlers and colonists. The aboriginals were allowed to live and work on the traditional land; however, they did not own it. In fact, the Crown had power to determine what would be reserve land and enforced the Indians to relocate to these lands. Moreover, the Crown required an agreement (honourable treaties) to obtain lands from the Aboriginal people as Markarenko (2008) explains,

Central to the Royal Proclamation was the separation of Aboriginal lands from those forming parts of North America colonies, with the former being reserved for the exclusive use and possession of Aboriginal peoples. Moreover, the Royal Proclamation implemented a process by which Aboriginal lands could be

purchased for British settlement and development. An Aboriginal group could only transfer lands to the British Crown, not to European settlers or other colonial officials. This surrender process was to occur on a form nation-to-nation basis, from the Indian nation to the Crown, and was to be done in public process with the consent of the Aboriginal group involved. (Mapleleafweb.com)

Canada adopted the Royal Proclamation of 1763 from the British Empire that “had set out a three-cornered system of governance of British North America, combining the Imperial Crown, its colonies and those ‘Nations or Tribes of Indians’ (Milloy, 2008, p.2). The Royal Proclamation set the laws and boundaries with Quebec and British colonies and a guideline for relationships with Aboriginal people. In part, the document declared aboriginals to cede their land to the British Imperialists in exchange for extinguishment of Aboriginal Rights. As a result, this document caused uncertainty among the First Nation tribes.

For instance, Cardinal (1999), a First Nation lawyer expresses “our leaders mistakenly thought they were dealing with an honourable people who would do no less than the Indians were doing – bind themselves, bind their people and bind their heirs to honourable contracts” (p.24). Nevertheless, the treaties were far less than honourable since the First Nations believed they were sharing the land out of mutual respect, and the concept of land for sale was foreign to them. The attitude of the British Imperialist generated confusion among the First Nations people and upset new settlers seeking land. Adding to this, by the mid 1800’s, the British Imperialists shifted the responsibility of First Nation people to the Canadian colonies and as a result, the Indian Act was formed.

Indian Act

Prior to the Indian Act, the Canadian government passed the 1857 ‘Civilization of Indian Tribes Act’. What this meant for First Nation people were that those who received a university degree and were capable of handling their own affairs were enfranchised as a Canadian citizen and no longer had native rights. There were so many laws designed for First Nations people of Canada, that the government consolidated them into the Indian Act.

Indian and Northern Affairs of Canada (INAC, 2009b) defines the Indian Act as a:

Canadian federal legislation, first passed in 1876, and amended several times since. It sets out certain federal government obligations and regulates the management of Indian reserve lands, Indian moneys and other resources. Among its many provisions, the Indian Act currently requires the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development to manage certain moneys belonging to First Nations and Indian lands and to approve or disallow First Nations by-laws.
(<http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ap/tln-eng.asp>)

Furthermore, the document was formed by Canadian parliament and is the only legislation outlined for a specific human race with very little and no input of First Nation people. Dickson (2002) explains “the Indian Act applies only to ‘status’ Indians, that is, those who are registered and listed in the official band rolls” (p.xvi). Natives became wards of the Crown through the Indian Act thus, outlining who was a ‘status’ Indian by a patriarch system. For instance, an aboriginal woman lost her ‘status’ if she married a non-native man; however, a non-native woman gained ‘status’ if she married an aboriginal man. Clearly, this part of colonialism

was an example of discrimination among the First Nation women, until the amendment of 1985. According to Elder's Voices (2005), First Nations World War II veterans return home was disheartening due to the fact that they lost their land to non-natives for wartime crops, and they could not receive the same benefits as non-aboriginal veterans enjoyed such as educational and vocational training, housing and employment offers. It was anticipated that Indian status was considered to be temporary and the main theme throughout the Indian Act remained that of assimilation (Dickson, 2002; Milloy, 2003; Fleras & Elliot, 2003).

One main goal of the Indian Act was the protection of reserved land set aside for the aboriginals. As such, the reserves were to be temporary and eventually the aboriginals would absorb into the European culture and there would be no more need for the Indian Act or reserved lands. Furthermore, "lands held in trust by the Crown for the benefit of indigenous peoples could not be taxed, mortgaged, or seized in lieu of debt by any person other than an Indian or a band. The effect of this has been to reduce severely access to development capital" (Dickson, 2002, p.265) and further economic development on Indian land. The history concerning Crown land and native land has been ongoing issues. The Indian Act was supposed to protect human rights and lands from European settlers and colonist officials. On the contrary, it appears the non-native people prosper and enjoy Canadian life, and yet many aboriginals are actually living in poverty. Did the Indian Act truly represent the First Nations people rights and land? Cardinal (1999) argues that the "Indian Act, instead of implementing the treaties and offering much-needed protection to Indian rights, subjugated to colonial rule the very people whose rights it was supposed to protect" (p. 37).

Moreover, the Indian Act denied First Nations of the right to govern themselves. The Canadian government "took for itself the power to mould, unilaterally, every aspect of life on the

reserve and to create whatever infrastructure it deemed necessary to achieve the desired end – assimilation” (Milloy, 2003 p. 21). Unjust Indian Agents represented the government and they had full control over the native people’s lives. For example, the Indian Agent managed the reserves monies and made decisions for individuals, families, electoral chief and councils, including best decisions for land. Furthermore, the Indian Agent acted as the police, prosecutor, judge and the power to strip even the most basic rights for aboriginal women. Despite this, Indian Agents were removed in 1969 across Canada ending the government’s blatant paternalistic system on native lands.

In addition, the Act gave special responsibility for the health, education, and lands as part of the treaty policies. The aboriginals were solely under the direction of the colonialist rule and had no voice as how to govern their communities. In fact, the government also had control over the personal daily lives of the First Nations that included voting, writing a will, commerce and leaving the reserve. The Indian Act ruled how they would elect leaders and the traditional hereditary chiefs were no longer recognised. As a result, the Act predominantly tells First Nations people how to manage government within Indian land.

Cardinal (1999) argues “the history of Canada’s Indians is a shameful chronicle of the white man’s disinterest, his deliberate trampling of Indian rights and his repeated betrayal of trust” (p.1). After one hundred and forty three years of Canadian confederation, First Nation people look back on history of agonizing “conditions which can only be described as colonial, brutal and tyrannical, and look to the future with gravest of doubts” (p.1). Likewise, Green (1995) asserts that Canada has “established colonial relationships of a racist, exploitative and coercive nature” (p.1).

The Royal Proclamation is significant, still relevant and is embedded in the Canadian constitution regarding historical and modern day treaties (Milloy, 2008; Dickason, 2006). The First Nation people “entered into the treaty negotiations as honourable men who came to deal as equals with” (Cardinal, 1999, p. 24) King George’s III representatives. However, that did not happen. Despite the intentions of the British Crown’s honourable treaty negotiations, the Royal Proclamation and Indian Act of Canada, residential schools were introduced through the Indian Act, thereby; education was under the control of the government without input of First Nations people.

Residential Schools

Residential schools were established by the Canadian government and operated in British Columbia from 1863-1984 by the churches (Brasfield, 2001). The purpose of the schools was to ‘civilize’ the Indian and convert him/her to Christianity and speed up the process of assimilation (Dickson 2006). The schools had student residences and were often located many miles from aboriginal communities to keep them distant from their families. Students, ranging from seven to fifteen years old, stayed at the residential schools for ten months of the year or until they turned fifteen years old. They were kept apart from their siblings and relatives to weaken family ties and knowledge of their culture. Furthermore, the Indian Act made it compulsory for aboriginal children to attend residential school; otherwise the parents would be incarcerated if they did not send their children.

“The missionaries, in particular, introduced two critically important institutions - religion and formal education...The introduction of these institutions...drastically changing the old way of life” (Cardinal, 1999, p.44). The aboriginal culture and beliefs were replaced by European religion, values, culture and language. The curriculum consisted of European history, farming,

ranching, cleaning, cooking, sewing and other domestic chores. As a result, education in residential schools was oppressed since most students had a grade six education up to the 1940's and many never finished high school with a dogwood diploma. Thus, the students graduated, returned home and were considered 'misfits' since they felt part of neither the native nor white man's society.

Moreover, residential school survivors have shared stories of horror and all forms of abuse. The students were often punished by cruel or brutal methods and sometimes ending in death. They experienced a loss of identity, culture, relationships, and for some, their innocence. The residential school caused cultural conflict, alienation, low self-esteem and lack of preparation for life in general. They encountered family breakdown, lack of parenting skills, despising native identity, thus, all these negative impacts were transmitted from generation to generation. Assimilation was an interruption of the First Nation culture and it failed the native people. Indeed, these schools have had a lasting negative effect on First Nation people and their communities.

For some students, unresolved issues of abuse and trauma that transpired have produced psychological disorders and have left them incapable living a well balanced and contented life. The former students who experienced or witnessed abuse in residential schools have passed on the unresolved trauma from generation to generation, known as 'intergenerational impacts'. Here are some of the repercussions that intergenerational survivors face on a daily basis taken from 'Where are the Children' website (1999):

- Alcohol and drug abuse
- All forms of abuse

- Suicide (and the threat of suicide)
- Teen pregnancy
- Fear, depression, anger, rage
- Layer upon layer of unresolved grief and loss
- Educational blocks - aversions to formal learning programs that seem "too much like school," fear of failure, self-sabotage, psychologically-based learning disabilities
- Voicelessness - entailing a passive acceptance of powerlessness within community life
- Internalized sense of inferiority or aversion in relation to whites and especially whites in power

It is clear, residential schools have left long lasting results of cultural genocide that has fragmented the First Nation people and their communities. The clergy and government have failed to provide effective curriculum for the aboriginals due to the oppressive education that produced graduates with menial skills and lacked academic diplomas/degrees, thus, poverty was/is rampant among First Nation communities. The ethnocentric attitude of the churches and government had created an 'institutional racism' that inflicted European cultural norms on aboriginal students, with no regard to understanding aboriginal culture. For that reason, First Nation people continue to struggle to find justice with governments, public education, and their pursuit for a decent livelihood.

Inequality of First Nation Women

First Nation women have experienced injustice not only in education, but also within their community and Canadian society. They have experienced attacks on their status and autonomy since the arrival of European settlers. Fleras and Elliot (2003) affirm "...formal

studies and personal testimonies indicate that aboriginal women rank among the most severely disadvantaged people in Canada” (p.149). This section takes a closer look at the traditional roles along with the impact of the Indian Act and violence that has affected the First Nation women in a pessimistic way.

As part of the British colonial building, it was necessary for the Crown to create laws to establish that the land was not occupied or used by the unofficial owners. Sterritt (2007) articulates that by “removing women from the land was a key part of this project, since women in many indigenous societies were the caretakers of the territories, or maintained strong relationships with the land” (p.5). Understanding the traditional roles of First Nation women prior to colonization helps to make sense of the Indian Act that discriminates against and oppresses First Nation women.

Traditionally, aboriginal people viewed equality for all people and that made it a successful community. Historically, First Nation women were regarded with high value and held central power in family, decision making, politics, marriage and ceremonial life (Stout & Kipling, 1998; Sterritt, 2007). Adding to this, First Nation women were prominent in the economy with other tribes and the fur trade. They held equal rights to men, selected chiefs, owned property and held genuine influence in tribal affairs. Moreover, many First Nation families were traced through the mother’s lineage until the patriarchal system was entrenched by the Indian Act.

The Act has a long history of discrimination against First Nation women. It defines who an ‘Indian’ is under Bill C-31. As mentioned earlier, a native women loses her Indian ‘status’ if she marries a white man and then she is forced to enfranchise into the Canadian society. She enters into a new society where she is still not accepted as a citizen due to “racist and sexist

policy (that) served to degrade, up root and marginalize aboriginal women” (Sterritt, 2007, p.6).

Adding to this, Jamieson (1978) confirms,

The women, on marriage, must leave her parent’s home on the reserve. She may not own property on the reserve and must dispose of any property she does hold. She may be prevented from inheriting property left to her. She cannot take any further part in band business. Her children are not recognized as Indian, and therefore denied access to cultural and social amenities of the Indian community. And most punitive of all, she may be prevented from returning to live with her family on the reserve, even if she is in dire need, very ill, a widow, divorced or separated. Finally, her body may not be buried on the reserve with her [ancestors] (p.1).

Hence the punishment for marrying a non-native shows prejudice towards the First Nations women, and led to long term effects such as “homelessness, prostitution, poverty, cultural genocide, loss of family connection, and apprehension of children”(Sterritt, 2007, p.11).

Other than marriage, native women’s unequal status in Canada concludes a rise in vulnerability to violence. Domestic abuse has been recognized as one of the most significant problems aboriginal people face in Canada. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal peoples (RCAP, 1996) link contributing factors to family violence in the First Nation communities involve the breakdown of healthy family life resulting from residential school fostering, racism against First Nation people and the impact of colonialism on aboriginal values and culture, overcrowded and substandard housing. Also Statistics Canada (2000b) reveals,

Aboriginal women reported spousal assault...remains more than three times higher than non-aboriginal women or men...they were also significantly more likely than non-Aboriginal women to report the most severe and potentially life-threatening forms of violence, including being beaten or choked, having a gun or knife used against them, or being sexually assaulted (54% of Aboriginal women compared with 37% of non-Aboriginal women). These percentages remained unchanged since 1999.

As a result of the more serious types of violence suffered by Aboriginal women, the consequences of spousal violence are also more severe...suffered physical injury, received medical attention, take time off daily activities as a consequences of the assaults, experienced 10 or more separate episodes of violence from the same perpetrator, and were more likely to fear their lives were in danger.

Other contributing factors to family violence are poverty, economic and social deprivation, high unemployment and the intergenerational cycle of violence. The abuse of drug and alcohol both on and off reserve has added to family violence. Furthermore, along with the violence of women, the children witness the abuse and in turn, end up in an abusive relationship or become the abusers. As a result, the spouse is charged and/or incarcerated, and the aboriginal children are more likely to live in single-parent families headed by the mother.

In conclusion, the purpose of the Indian Act was to lessen First Nation women to a condition of reliance on their male counterparts, thus they were subjected to abuse and discrimination due to colonist rules. Nevertheless, some First Nations men and women have

internalized the arrogant paternalistic system that belittles aboriginal women. As a result, the women have lost their traditional roles within their communities and are excluded from the contemporary predominately male leadership that governs their society.

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is crucial in a child's learning and indicators prove that parent participation in school has a positive influence on children's success in school (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Macias, 1989; Pena, 2000). A key factor for continuing learning and success of children at school is getting the parents involved in their child's education. In fact, the more in-depth parents are at participating in their children's schooling, the more beneficial are the effects.

The strong indicators of the most successful forms of parental involvement are those that involve parents working directly with their child (ren) on educational activities in the home. For example, reading programs, assisting homework, and writing programs that involve parents. Indeed, parental engagement in children's education at home shows remarkable results.

Similarly, researchers have found that communication with parents increases parental involvement (Cotten & Wikelund, 1989). Positive communication through phone calls, newsletters, read and sign communication books from teachers and most importantly, attending parent / teacher interviews aids in positive results for a child's education. It is noted, that parents are educators most valuable assets for student's success, with good communications between the school and home.

Importantly, "school climate sets a strong contextual foundation for involvement, and school principals have a critical role in creating and maintaining a positive, welcoming climate.

These practices appear especially important in schools serving families of children at higher risk for poor educational outcomes” (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005, p. 111). Adding to this, individual teacher invitations about parental involvement is powerful since they are answering to numerous parents’ expressed desires to know more about how to help in their children’s education. In fact, teacher invitations also add to the progress of trust in parent-teacher relationship (Adam & Christenson, 1998). A significant finding in parental involvement is that schools have influence on parents’ decisions to be involved in their children’s learning.

Relationship Between First Nation Students and School

In terms of First Nations students and public school systems there is a disconnection. Many mainstream teachers and staff fail to understand the diversity amongst First Nation students and lack knowledge of native culture. There are numerous cultural differences of how First Nations students interact with authority. For example, it is not part of First Nation culture to have eye contact when communicating. The students often are misunderstood and perceived as not caring about their education. Mainstream staff and teachers need to take the time to identify their place in the effects of colonization and have knowledge of the local aboriginal people, to have a more successful relationship with First Nation students (T.Good, personal communication, June 5, 2010).

Apart from that, some First Nation students are often shy and avoid speaking with teachers and staff. Coplan and Armer (2007) found that shy students are anxious and cautious when faced with unfamiliar social settings. In fact, many First Nation students do not connect with the teachers or staff instantly because the aboriginal student may be studying them. In other

words, the aboriginal student is analysing the staff and teachers carefully, to see if these people actually care for them. Furthermore, some First Nations students are timid and careful with their words. It takes time to earn their trust, feel accepted and belong in their public school environment. Consequently, teachers and staff do not always make time for these children.

Another common scene among aboriginal students in public school is they sit alone or in groups at the back of the classroom, isolated from their non-native peers and ignored by the teacher. Teachers question why First Nation students are not succeeding in the mainstream classrooms? Where is the positive relationship between the teacher and student? Gazelle (2006) found that frightened loner students that were in negative emotional classrooms (irritable teacher, hostile atmosphere, loss of classroom management) were at high risk of facing peer rejection, low peer acceptance, victimization, and symptoms of depression. Despite all this, First Nation students are not ignorant; they recognize the staff and teachers who ignore them, as did their parents.

First Nations as Parents

Freidel (1999) reveals “educational researchers have validated the relationship between parental involvement and student achievement, they have not investigated these issues from the perspective of Native parents” (p.140). Often, aboriginal educators recognize that First Nation parents feel judged as not good parents, they are rarely recognized for good parenting and do not hear positive statements about their children from school staff . Paul, an elder of Passmoquachy vindicates “they didn’t learn how to be a parent, because they were raised in these [residential] schools” (Kulchyski, McCaskill, Newhouse, 2003, p. 25) and some residential school survivors were affected negatively because

the teachers were not Native. The teachers were generally of a different culture, thus, didn't have the same connection to the Earth. This is why Native people felt unfulfilled. The feelings were not there due to competition with grades; they did not tap into the real core of the individual who was there to learn (p. 87).

I have witnessed non-native teachers and principals lose the aboriginal parent(s) attention when attempting to work together for the success of the student due to educational jargon or in other words, 'formal language'. I believe a majority of First Nation parents have not seen a public school system yet that is completely free of institutional racism and for that reason, and they do not value public education. For instance,

when you have parents that do not respect teachers and staff of public schools, I believe it is because they have been damaged by it and no one was ever held accountable for the injustice. As a result, there are many First Nation parents who distrust, dislike and resist public education because of their residential school experiences and the intergeneration impact (L. Aardenburg, personal communication, November 16, 2006).

As parents, residential school and intergenerational survivors may be "convinced by administrators of the schools, began to question their own capabilities of being able to raise their children" (Friedel, 1999, p. 141) due to the judgement as incompetent parents, therefore, parents "accepted the schools and administrators do a better job – they are the 'experts' and their assumed positions of power are not to be questioned". In that case, "public schools like residential schools, tend to remain closed to Native parents" (p.141). Elder Alex Skead, an Ojibwe defends today's aboriginal parents for these reasons,

The residential schools are the reason why we are lost right now. They (residential schools) tried to make us one nationality, one people, but they cannot do that because it goes against God's will. Residential schools throw off the balance. Parents can no longer teach their children, some grandparents cannot either. They have lost their way of life (p.192)...The worst part is that these people [that went to residential schools] do not know how to be parents. The Native teachings are lost. There are now lots of single mothers, before it was very embarrassing not to have a partner or husband, but today it doesn't matter. Those things have changed. It is hard to talk to young people like that. They get mad if you try to talk to them (Kulchyski et al., 2003, p.193).

In fact, many former students share they were told they were not to follow their parent's traditional way of life, because it was seen as evil. However, First Nation parents are concerned very much for their children's education, yet there is resistance in parental involvement of their children's education. Indeed, parental involvement is important for the success of students, however, not much research has been done from the perspective of First Nation parents and parental involvement in their children's public schooling.

Summary

In conclusion, the history of Canada has been bleak, horrible, and unjust towards First Nations people. Aboriginal educators, parents and students recognize the majority of mainstream teachers, principal and staff of public schools; hold the same superior attitude as did the British Imperialists in the early years of colonization in Canada. For example, the silent

majority of staff of public schools, do not take the time or interest to understand or teach about the First Nation people and Canada's shameful history. They would rather turn a deaf ear and blind eye. Therefore, why would First Nation parents want to be involved in such a Eurocentric attitude and unwelcoming environment?

Despite this, the Royal Proclamation of 1763 and Indian Act were developed to fulfill the desired need of power, land and greed for the British colonists. On the contrary, First Nation people struggle today with those one-sided documents and colonialism that shaped aboriginal history. For these reasons, First Nation people continue to stand and find their rightful place as equal citizens of Canada.

Chapter Three

Methodology and Research Context

The chapter begins by outlining the purpose and objectives of the research, followed by a discussion of the methodology use. I then describe the participants, my method, my role in the research and my data analysis.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to understand the barriers that prevent First Nation women from participating more actively in their children's public school education. My aim was to uncover findings that could help these and other First Nation parents become more involved in their children's public education today.

The objectives of this research were:

- To interview a sample of First Nation mothers who attended public schools and whose children / grand children also attend public school.
- To discover if First Nation mothers who experienced the public schools share the same experiences as their parents and children.
- To identify some of the barriers that prevents the six First Nation mothers participation in their children's education.
- To identify some recommendations to help First Nation mothers participate in their children's public education.

Methodology

The study focuses on the lived experience of six First Nation mothers and their encounters with public schools. As an educator, I was interested in understanding the obstacles and motives that often prevent First Nation mothers from being more fully involved in their children's public education. As such, there was a responsibility to select a suitable research method that was respectful and sensitive to these participants. Indeed, aboriginals have been studied by academics and government agents and often, the outcomes were misguided or even harmful (Castellano, 2004). Therefore, I chose a qualitative approach. This enabled me to engage with the women in their natural setting. In particular, it also vindicates the First Nation women's voice, feelings, attitudes, values and perceptions (Brayton, 1997; Maynard, 2005; Sarantakos, 2005). It is a form used to gain insight of an underlying issue surrounding a problem(s). Notably, qualitative research is useful for supplying rich descriptions of intricate phenomena and in producing theories to explain those situations (Rozycki, 2009). Secondly, qualitative approach also "enables research to develop a level of detail about the individual and to be highly involved in the actual experience of the participants" (Creswell, 2003, p.181). In this study, relationships drive the core of the research and it is through these relationships, I, the researcher, gain the trust of each participant.

The aim of qualitative research is a deeper understanding of the phenomena and use of subjective data. Furthermore, this form of study extracts meaning from the participants experiences and interprets results in context. Adding to this, the focus of qualitative research is holistic. For example, as the researcher, I examine the whole picture of the phenomena in its context. Marshall and Rossman (1999) describe "qualitative approach to research uniquely suited to uncovering the unexpected and exploring new avenues" (p.38).

More specifically, I chose a feminist approach using face-to-face individual interviews to bring six First Nation women's experiences more fully into view. Reinharz (1992) identifies "feminism as a perspective, not a research method" (p.240). Feminist research recognizes in particular for this study, the lives of six First Nations women as significant and worthy of study. Indeed, the participants in this study are the experts, therefore, Brayton (1997) includes the "women's experiences in the social world from their own interpretation and using their language" (p. 6.) and ... "actively seeks to remove the power imbalance between research and subject; it is be politically motivated and has a major role in changing social inequality; and it begins with the standpoints and experiences of women" (p.1). As such, the hierarchal relationship is removed between the participant and researcher, thus the participant recognises they are the expert on their experiences at the starting point of the research. In addition, the researcher plays a significant role as to sharing a common place in the social world, gender and race of the phenomenon. In particular, Edwards (1990) believes race can be an obstacle for women seeking to do research other than their own race. For example, First Nation people have been over researched in some areas by academics and government which had lead to some inaccurate and even harmful results. Nevertheless, I have empowered the six women to be the experts on the subject, listened to their ideas on improving the problem and vindicated their experiences of the situation.

Method

I used face-to-face interviews in order to build a rapport with the participants. The researcher ought to "seek to understand the world through the eyes of the participant" (Arsenault

& Anderson, 2004, p.126). A bond is crucial between two people; the spoken and unspoken words state 'we are on the same page'. Therefore, the researcher needs to make the participants feel comfortable and accepted regardless of their gender, age, ethnic background, mood or the situation. The underlying theory of the qualitative research model is that a deep "understanding of the world can be gained through conversation and observation in natural settings" (p.119). As a result, a good rapport is an essential basis for successful communication that the researcher needs. Reinharz (1992) explains that open-ended interview research explores people's views of reality and allows the researcher to generate theory by getting as many details as possible.

I contacted each participant by telephone to set up the interviews. I allowed the participant to choose where the interviews were to be conducted and the time convenient for them. Four women chose to be interviewed in their homes and two chose to be interviewed in my home. Only the participant and I were present in the home at the time of the interview.

I began each interview by explaining the purpose of the study and all the ethical aspects necessary. The interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of each participant, and the interviews were transcribed immediately following each recording. The interviews took between 30 minutes to one hour to complete. An outline of the questions is provided in Appendix A.

Site of the Study

The study takes place in a First Nation community in mid-eastern Vancouver Island. This community has just over five hundred people, most who are of First Nation cultural heritage. It is adjacent to the city nearby of approximately 78,692 people. The relationship between the two communities is a respectful and interactive coexistence. The people on the

reserve are re-gaining control of their culture and language, for instance, renaming their community as a First Nation rather than 'Indian band' as labelled by the Federal Government. The endangered, traditional language is being restored through audio recordings, videos, documentation and archives. Adding to this, the language is being taught to the children in the community daycare and the primary school. There are currently less than ten fluent speakers living in the community. The cultural identity is significant to the First Nation people and clarifies how cultural representation is displayed and preserved.

Participants

The six women participants attended public schools as had their children and/or grandchildren. Three of the participants live in Snuneymuxw First Nation community, three live off-reserve. One of the women works in the community in the health department. One is a student. Two other women are stay at home mothers and two work in the town nearby. Two of the participants are mothers and four are grandmothers.

Researcher's Place and Role

I am a member of Snuneymuxw First Nation community, and I have lived here for over 20 years. I am 'status' Indian and did not marry my non-native husband until Bill C-31, regarding First Nation women, was amended in 1985. I am a mother of two children and grandmother of three. I am the third youngest of ten children in my family who all attended residential and public schools. We too, have our own tragic and horrible stories of our education. Likewise, my mother attended residential school in the 1930's when the abuse was at its worst. She did not share her residential school experiences, and I believe as a result, she became ill with

multiple ailments, thus, she died at 49 years of age. For these reasons, I bring my personal values, beliefs, biases and intuition into the research process.

Moreover, I have taught in the primary school in the community for four years. Some of the participant's children or grandchildren I have taught. The school consists of nursery, Kindergarten and grade one students with an enrolment of approximately 40 First Nation children. Also, I worked as an aboriginal resource teacher in two public high schools in Nanaimo for several years. Along with that position, I worked with the aboriginal students, their parents, administrators, teachers, counsellors and support staff as a team to support success for the aboriginal students. On the contrary, it was a difficult job since most staff is ethnocentric rather than xenocentric (is the preference of ideas of someone else's culture rather than of one's own).

Apart from that, the participants are either a friend or relative to me, however, I have masked their names to protect their identity. My trusting relationship was confirmed by the accuracy of the interview responses of the six women. Each participant was informed and invited to make changes or additions to the transcriptions before analysing the contents. My role in the research was to carry out the interviews, transcribe and analyse them to provide a thorough description of the perspectives of the participants with regard to how they view participation in their children's public school education and carry out their roles as parents in the public school system. I used my knowledge and experience as an educator to relate the information gathered in this study.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research data analysis aims at answering the research question and is “explicitly interpretive, creative and personal” (Walker, 1985, p.4). It is an ongoing process that

involves analyzing participant's information (Creswell, 2003). Moreover, Anderson and Arsenault (2004) describes, it is as a process that “organizes data into manageable units, combines and synthesizes ideas, develops constructs, themes, patterns or theories and illuminates the important discoveries” of the research (p.131).

Thus, the interviews were transcribed and each participant received a copy. The women were given plenty of time to review the transcriptions and add or delete information as they felt was necessary. I reviewed the transcriptions and looked for key words and ideas. I highlighted the common themes and coded them with colours. I then wrote the ideas on sticky notes and attached them to a white board in categorized units. I also underlined sections that were significant to the study to provide a clear understanding of the participants' experiences.

Chapter Four

Introduction

This chapter outlines the major themes that emerged from the study of six First Nation mothers and their challenges in terms of connecting with their children's schools. The first thematic area is lack of respect and assistance from staff and teachers. The second theme is lack of communication. The final theme is feelings of inadequacy.

Profiles of the Interviewees

The six women interviewed for this study care deeply for their children's education. They also share in common a love and determination to do what is best for their children and /or grandchildren. However they have all encountered similar negative experiences in public education as a student, parent and/or grandparent. This study allowed me to learn from these women whose voice have not been heard or validated in the public education system. To better understand the common and unique circumstances of their experiences in public education, I begin this chapter with an introduction of the six participants.

Leslie

Leslie is a soft spoken mother of four and grandmother in her early fifties. She is First Nations and very involved in her culture. She and her husband both work and live in the community. Leslie is a committed health worker and actively involved in community events. She conducts workshops and programs related to her high profile job. In relation to her work, she has been researching and reviving traditional art.

I would describe Leslie as an insightful person who views the whole picture of a problem and approaches the situation with careful thought. In addition, she is an intergenerational survivor of residential school. Along with her arduous survival, Leslie was able to surpass her chaotic life. However, she is a sensitive person, and she desires wellness for all community members.

Leslie described her elementary and secondary public education as terrible. She admitted her parental involvement was nil for her older children and lacked support from her husband. On the contrary, she was more involved with her younger children's public education because she had the support of her second husband. Although her husband helped with her younger children in their education, Leslie still viewed public education as a place in which she had no voice. Leslie divulged her perspective of non-native parents, "It wasn't important for them to have our, our input or even our, our um help with the fundraising and things like that". However, she justifies there was "change when there started to be First Nations counsellors in school" when her older children were in high school.

Lily

Lily is a beautiful and spiritual 47 year old First Nation mother of three. She has been in a troubled marriage for twenty one years that is attributed to her husband's substance abuse. Equally, she has lived on and off-reserve and faced many problems common to First Nation women in society. For instance, she was a single parent for the majority of her children's school years and encountered poverty, depression and received very little support from her husband.

She is an intergenerational and residential school survivor. Her long suffering, fear and isolation resulted in low involvement with her children's education. Lily's humour and witty personality has helped her cope with her dreadful life. Apart from that, she is a gifted early childhood educator employed by another First Nation community.

Lily describes her public education as a terrifying. She remembers "sitting in the back all quiet and scared". I asked her what she was afraid of. She said, "The teachers were mean. Every time I tried to raise my hand, she would look at me...what I wanted, was help". She described her elementary schools years frightening and she did not want her children to experience the same as she did.

Therefore, she shared, "...my daughter kept telling me that she (teacher) was hung over, she smelt like alcohol and she kept making my daughter (help other students) because she was in a higher level". I asked her if she dealt with the problem. She replied, "I did...I approached her (teacher) and I approached the principal but nothing was really done". I asked, "What made you get up and go in this time"? She responded, "I was really angry... You know, I felt I wasn't afraid to go in and stand up for my daughter". Lily told her children she cared for them, and "I've always been afraid of teachers". Nevertheless, Lily shared that she "always told them (her children) never to be afraid to speak up for themselves, in school or ask for help because that's what teachers are there for".

Dahlia

Dahlia is a 49 year old strong minded First Nation mother of five children; though one child died eighteen years ago. During the majority of her children's education, Dahlia was a

single parent. Dahlia was entangled in two painful relationships prior to her third husband. She lives off-reserve with her spouse and twelve year old step son. She is employed by a school district as a cultural worker. Furthermore, Dahlia is not afraid to voice her opinion and not easily persuaded. She carries deep rooted anger that is related to her negative experiences in residential school.

She too, is an intergenerational, residential school survivor. Dahlia has endured hardship most of her life due to self-destruction and substance abuse. She has returned to her culture and her identity through traditional songs, dance and cedar weaving. The public apology of Prime Minister Stephen Harper in June 2008 regarding residential schools made a huge impact on Dahlia for the better. She has conquered many obstacles along her way. Undoubtedly, after the majority of her healing, she is a respected woman within the community.

Dahlia described her elementary years in public education as unhappy and miserable. She shared that, “it seemed like we had a hard time fitting in as First Nations...we weren’t welcome, we were mistreated”. In particular, she recalls, “In most of my education time, it was always the other students who were um, putting me down”. She states these students “told us to go back to our reserve...you don’t belong here. You’re not like us”. She now recognises, that as a young child, “I didn’t even notice the colour of our skin. That didn’t make me think any, any different of them”. Dahlia viewed her intermediate teachers as good and respectful of everyone and “they were there to teach, there weren’t there to separate. And yet, the white kids wanted that”. Dahlia argues “there’s no way for them (white students) to understand what our people went through and they want us to learn education”. Accordingly, she is right because public education does not teach enough history of the First Nation people of Canada.

Pansy

Pansy is a quiet natured First Nation woman in her late fifties whom is a stay at home mom. Her children are grown up and she lives in the community with her 22 year old son in her home. As a residential school survivor, she has experienced adversity most of her life. She was divorced twice and a single parent to five children.

This woman, of all the participants, suffered the most. She spoke honestly and shared “not being heard” as a regular phenomenon. Pansy had experienced injustice in numerous areas of her education. She declares “been kicked out of public high school for being too talkative”. Her mother dealt with the problem. The principal apologised and asked Pansy to return to school. However, Pansy would not go back to the school because she argues “they still wouldn’t treat me any different. I just didn’t want to go back. I was hurt that they had kicked me out and I could not be able to be talking to anyone”.

For that reason, Pansy left public high school and attended residential school where she was taught by nuns. Consequently, she became homesick, could not focus in her studies and was denied to be with her relatives. She stated “we could not show emotions or cry or we’d get in trouble”. Thus, Pansy feels “We’re not worthy...or worth the time” to teachers, principals and nuns.

Jasmine

Jasmine is a quiet and timid 49 year old mother of three and grandmother of five. She resides in the community with her husband for the past twenty years. She received a grade eight education in public school and she is a stay at home mom.

She too, has suffered the negative impact of residential school. In her mid teens, she became a mother and tolerated her emotionally and physically abusive husband. Jasmine was the oldest child in her single parent family; therefore, she helped raise her younger siblings while her mother worked. It was evident, Jasmine had not experienced life on her own.

Her first year of school she exclaimed, “The teachers to be very...cruel”. She remembered her teacher “was never very kind. She hardly ever smiled”. She later attended Kuper Island Residential School and she described it “more horrifying”. She claimed the school “wasn’t...a safe place to be” and disclosed sexual abuse.

She felt the public school staff “treat the women little different, more different than they do men”. I asked, “How would you say they treated you different”? She replied, “More harsher in words. It’s like it’s their, their way...I didn’t feel like I had a voice at all. It felt like, you know, just talking to a brick wall”.

Daisy

Daisy is beautiful mother in her mid-thirties, married and has four children. Three of her children attend public school and one attends a band school. She and her family live in the community. Daisy is pursuing a Child and Youth Care Degree. She is actively involved culturally in the community.

Her mother is a residential school survivor and Daisy has felt the impact of the residue and as a result, she grew up the majority of her school years in a single parent home. She has overcome many obstacles in her life and she admits that it was her post-secondary education that

helped her move forward in life. Daisy is determined not to allow her children to have the same experience as she did in public schools.

Daisy's elementary years were mostly negative. Being the only natives in a public school, she too, dealt with the non-native students bullying her and her siblings. Not only was she bullied at school, but also in her native community, for attending a white school. She explains, "I had to become a bully in order for the bullying to stop". She admits, "That's how I made it through elementary, I just, I finally stood my ground to them. I had to...learn the mean streets of how to survive".

Other than the non-native students, Daisy too had to deal with a negative teacher. She remembers doing a career workshop in her public high school with a First Nations class. The teacher came in and answered questions regarding what to do after graduation. The teacher asked Daisy, "What do you want to do?" and Daisy replied, "I want to become a flight attendant or airline stewardess". The teacher replies, "You're not going to become a flight attendant". Daisy asks, "Why"? The teacher responds, "You're First Nations". Consequently, Daisy said, "there it was instilled in my brain that I can't...become that because I'm a certain nationality...it was my impression that I got that First Nation's lower class and we can't become any higher than that". As a result, Daisy thinks that "led into a whole lot of things, both low self esteem and not, no motivation to go through school". She was devastated.

Meanwhile, five out of six participants attended public school in the 60's and experienced segregation. At that time, racial tension was at its peak in the USA and Canada had an arrogant share of 'ethnocentrism'. Indian Affairs Minister Jean Chretien and Prime Minister Trudeau presented the White Paper. It was a document that was to do away with native rights and

reaffirmed assimilation of aboriginal people. Adding to this, the federal government awakened its' responsibility to native children and the aim was to integrate them into the public school system. Hawthorne (1967) reports that native children should receive their education with Canadian students, and believed that the native and white children would grow and play together on the school playgrounds, thus they will work together in years to come.

Five participants divulge they experienced segregation in public schools during the time of the Hawthorne report mentioned above. For instance, Lily claims "It seemed like all the little Natives were all in one corner or the back...I just stayed where all the natives were." Was it a safety issue why she stayed with her own kind? What was the reason for her not mingling with non-native students? Equally, Leslie shares, "we were separate from other people. Like the Indian girls were separate from the white girls and um we really made no friendships with each other." Did integration work with First Nation and Canadian children? Did they play together on the school ground? Segregation had set in and neither side crossed that invisible boundary that was so clear between the two parties. What was the aim of integration? Was its hidden agenda to be assimilation? In any case, Cardinal (1999) argues

It sometimes seems to Indians that Canada shows more interest in preserving it's rare whooping crane than its Indians. And Canada, the Indian notes, does not ask its cranes to become Canada geese. It just wants to preserve them as whooping cranes, but Indians are to become brown white men. The contrast in the situation is an insult to our people. Indians have aspirations, hopes and dreams, but becoming white men is not one of them (p. 2).

Despite this, all of the participants admit their parents were not involved in their schooling. Leslie explains "that my mom didn't come to the schools. She didn't like going to

the school". Why did her mother not like going to the schools? Could her mother's experiences be any different or worse than Leslie's encounter with public education? Similarly, Lily reasons her lack of involvement attributes to her mother's non-involvement of her education. She shares,

I've never was showed that. Cause I never had a mother that went to my teacher's interviews. She was never there, or even when I was in residential school. There were parent teacher reports. No one went for that. So, and I believe that because that wasn't done for me, I was never taught to do that.

Lack of Respect and Assistance from Staff and Teachers

Not only did the participants experience the non-involvement of their parents, but they also experienced lack of respect and assistance from staff at the public schools their children attended. In particular, the six women seemed to experience the lack of respect when entering the school or waiting to be assisted in the office. In addition, they felt they received little or less assistance from the teachers or principals when they came into the school to deal with a problem. In describing this lack of respect, Leslie reveals, "Sometimes it's like nobody really notices you come in...and nobody greets you...I don't know why they would ignore us." In the same way, Daisy tells a story of a son was having difficulty in his courses and behind in his assignments. She gave her son the opportunity to speak with his teachers but he did not. As a result, Daisy went to the school to speak with the teacher concerning her son's missing assignments. She affirms her entry into the school as,

Just like a fly on the wall. Just like they were just doing their own thing, and I'm like, oh my god, do they see me? ...I was like...even the secretary, it's her

job to meet and greet people...but it was really hard for her to actually do that to me...my impression is that it's first come, first serve, right? She's (secretary) busy answering the phone after I'm standing there for a few minutes...a staff member will come in and she'll meet and greet them before me.

Likewise, Dahlia also confirms her entry into the public school was not welcoming. She articulates, "Sometimes I feel like I don't belong there. Sometimes I feel like I, I'm gonna be told what to do and I have to listen. Like that authority figure." All too often, First Nation people have been told what is right and what is wrong for their child. Many non-natives are trying to aid First Nation parents, but it is evident there is a cultural clash between the two parties that keeps them apart. Similarly, Pansy's children attended Bayview School where her three children were the only natives. As she entered the school, she discloses "They don't, they don't acknowledge you". Lily adds to this by drawing attention to another aspect of exclusion when she enters the school "I didn't like to wander around because there were so many...white people...no teachers or administrators ever greeted me." But it was not just the staff that was problematic for the six First Nations women. They spoke of the lack of assistance they felt they received from teachers. For instance, Leslie declares,

We went to school on a Monday morning and um there was, you know, just the regular group of us that walked in and this boy, he just couldn't stand us, and he went "here comes those squaws" and um my friend just went over and bopped him, right out of his chair and you know (we) turned around and left...but most times teachers wouldn't say anything if we were called names... And it just didn't seem like we got a lot of help...with um projects or even you know get our grades better or encourage us to, you know move on.

In the same way, Dahlia too encountered non-natives students calling her names, yet teachers, principals, and staff did little or nothing to stop the racial slurs. Likewise, Jasmine felt the “teachers never really helped. They never really wanted to notice”. For these reasons, public education of the participants was bleak and they are aware as parents and/or grandparents, this cynical behaviour continues today.

The women’s comments beg the question: Are they experiencing racism and if so, why are the teachers turning the other way? One reason could be, as Henry and Tator (2006) claim, that “racism manifests itself not only within individuals, but also in groups, organizations and institutions...and in the value system of society” (p.16). This means that it is deeply embedded in the fabric of schools. Any prevailing social ‘ill’ such as racism is bound to permeate the public school sector. It could also be of course, that teachers have never been trained to deal with racism and so few teachers have received any kind of aboriginal education. The fact that they are totally unprepared with how to deal with aboriginal children or parents speaks volumes. Indeed, are the staff and teachers of the public schools afraid to meet First Nation parents due to their own inadequacies? The question could only be answered by further research with the teachers but it is very clear from these women’s experiences that something needs to be done to challenge racism or it will continue to affect the relationship between these women and the school and will affect in turn, the children.

Lack of Communication

A second major theme was communication. Good teams of people communicate. Moreover, parental involvement has been positively linked to student success (Cotton & Wikelund, 1989). Therefore, clear communication between parents and the school staff would

be important to help parents they feel are part of the team to improve their child's achievement (Horn, 2006). However, what I have witnessed in public schools is a lack of effective communication. Indeed, some First Nation parents are faced with language barriers and some are uncomfortable meeting with their child's teacher or principal. For example, Daisy insists

Sometimes...it's hard when I see um, a white person (at public school)...I'll look at their eyes for a few minutes, and then I'll look away. And it's in their culture. It's important to look at the eyes...and it's hard for me to do. And then once you lose that communication. They don't want to focus on you. Like you're just wasting my (teacher) time, kind of thing.

In this case, Daisy was not accustomed to eye contact when communicating with the teacher and felt very uncomfortable. This type of communication is not part of her culture. Likewise, Leslie's insightfulness explains the lack of communication between her and the non-native parents:

You know we communicate differently...and the reason I don't take part in really any of the fundraisers, or um like PAC committees is because they (non-native parents)...have their own set agenda and how they...communicate in a meeting...the language is different, verbally different from the way that I hear stuff in a meeting say, or office.

Indeed, communication is important but with many diverse personalities, ethnic groups and varying levels of understanding, communication can be confusing, misunderstood or non-existing. For instance, Dahlia's parents had no communication from her public schools. She recalls "...no letters came home like they do today. No reminders, no invitations, no telling my

parents what, what I was doing in class. There was no phone calls home, no um monthly reports from the school. Um, there wasn't even permission slips." Would it have made a difference if Dahlia's parents had communication with her teachers and principal? Cotton and Wiklund (1989) encourage educators to "communicate with parents that their involvement and support makes a great deal of difference in their children's school performance, and they need not be highly educated or have large amounts of free time for their involvement to be beneficial (p.8)." Apart from that, First Nation parents who do not have a high education, feel inadequate and pass it on to their children.

Feelings of Inadequacy

Experienced educators can identify feelings of inadequacy in a child and they understand the harmful effect it has on a child's motivation for being successful. As I talked with the six First Nation women about their experiences as a student and parent, they identified in a number of ways of feelings of inadequacy. For instance, Jasmine noted she "always felt like I was dumb from the first two years of school". When I queried why she felt that she responded it was because "they told me." Jasmine admitted that she had been told by her mother to believe everything the teacher said as true. This belief in the 'expert' has major consequences. Finders and Lewis (2002) found that children are taken advantage of in school because their parents do not fight for them and unfortunately, without them, no one else will.

Dahlia adds to this idea of education, and how intimidating that can be: "I don't have a teacher's degree, teacher certificate to prove that I'm just as smart". Pansy echoes Jasmine and Dahlia's stories,

We're not really treated right in there...I made a complaint to principal about the teacher, and the principal will cover up for a teacher because she's a very good

teacher and that's she just had a bad day...and the teacher would never apologize
...cause me being the parent...they would say that your child was not cooperating
...but a non-native parent would get an apology from the teacher, or the principal.

Caucasian parents are said to have more power to deal with the teachers and principals because they understand the process and the 'culture' and are more educated how to deal with negative situations regarding their children. Is the power really about being educated? On the contrary, Pansy feels powerless and her inadequacy is the lack of understanding the procedures in dealing with her child's problems at public school. Thus Finders and Lewis (2002) also suggests that "these parents operate at a disadvantage until they understand how schools are organized and how they can promote systematic change (p.52)." Why do First Nation parents feel inadequate in public school settings? Some of the answers to their inadequacies are discussed in chapter five in more detail.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that these women feel fear, intimidation, and inadequacy and experience a lack of respect and abuse based in and on racism. The next chapter of this project discusses the implications of the finds of this study and put forward ideas for how things could be different.

Chapter Five

Conclusion and Ways Forward

This chapter discusses the research findings in relation to the theory and the literature from chapter two. The purpose of this study was to describe and explore the perspectives of six First Nation mothers non-involvement in their children's public education. In this chapter, I discuss the issues of lack of respect and assistance from staff and teachers, lack of communication, and feelings of inadequacy and identify what I feel to be some ways forward that will enable these women to be more actively involved in the education of their children.

Links between Research Findings and Literature

All six First Nation mothers confirmed they have experienced lack of respect and assistance from staff and teachers in the public schools. They were ignored in the office and /or in the hallways. Four of the participants are residential schools survivors and all six women have experienced the intergeneration impact of residential schools. They expressed having no voice in the public schools, as well as in residential school. They did not speak up for help, and they waited for assistance. However, for some they waited too long for assistance. Is it fear in the First Nation mothers or does the same superior attitude continue in public schools today as it did in early years of colonialism? Cardinal (1999) argues the shameful chronicle of white man's disinterest of aboriginals in history. It appeared the six women were of no concern to staff and teachers in the public school. Or was it the fear of staff and teachers assisting the First Nation mothers? In any case, public schools need to ensure all parents, including minorities feel welcomed, accepted in public schools and treated as equally as any other parent.

Adding to this, the residential schools created an ‘institutional racism’ that inflicted European norms on the aboriginal students. As such, it is evident this still continues in public schools today. For instance, I entered into a social studies classroom. There on the walls were pictures of all the prime ministers of Canada, the Queen of England, the Canadian and Union Jack flags and other white leader image and symbols. Sadly, there was no representation of aboriginal leaders on the walls and yet, aboriginals are very much part and centre of Canadian history and truly this was a lack of respect to the First Nations people in general. For that reason, it is understandable why aboriginal students and parents struggle with public education today because it reflects the ethnocentric education of residential schools, thus eliminating curriculum on First Nation people. Many First Nation educators declare public schools today need to include aboriginal content across the curriculum. As Faries (1995) argues “Education needs to meet the needs of Aboriginal people, rather than First Nation people meeting the needs of the education systems” (p. 3). Therefore, the Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement established between the school districts and traditional First Nation communities needs to be taken seriously, and this document must be reinforced within the schools. Department head teachers need to check with the teachers and ensure the aboriginal content is added in the appropriate places. This agreement acknowledges the local First Nation communities and supports the preservation of language and culture of the area. The school districts and the aboriginal communities must acknowledge the common accountabilities for the success of the aboriginal students.

On the other hand, one of Maslow's hierarchies of needs is the social needs of human beings (Maslow, 1987). This hierarchy includes the interaction with others and belonging to a group. However, this is not the case for many aboriginal parents, as they felt they do not belong in the public schools, as they felt they did not belong in residential schools. Therefore, recommendations call for the staff and teachers to meet and interact with the First Nation parents on the reserve on a more informal basis. For example, the First Nation people and school district could set up a professional day together in the native community show casing aboriginal content regarding local history, residential schools and update of treaties in their areas. Another way would be to hold teacher / parent interviews with core teachers only, in the native community hall. Consequently, the First Nation people would feel more comfortable in their community and feel safe to open up with the staff and teachers of public schools.

Secondly, the six participants I interviewed felt there was lack of communication between schools and home regarding their children's education. These women recognized the difference in communication. For example, the language used by non-native parents and educators was not how the First Nation mothers spoke. The language was foreign to them, thus, the First Nation mothers lost focus or did not want to listen to a foreign language. Numerous times, I have witnessed principals and non-native teachers attempting to work for the success of the First Nation child. However, the language barrier was an issue. Horn (2006) found that clear communication helps parents feel more involved in their children's education. Are the educators aware they have lost communication with the First Nation parent after three or four sentences? Or is it deliberate in a sense of a superior attitude? It was apparent, that First Nation leaders did not understand the treaty process with the British Imperialists because the concept of selling land was foreign to them and the language of the Royal Proclamation, the Indian Act and

treaties were written in a language the First Nation leaders did not understand. As such, education jargon spoken to the First Nation parents is in itself a lack of respect especially if nothing good is coming out of the meeting. Indeed, if good teams of people are to communicate, they must clearly understand each other. It would be wise for the educators to explain in an understandable language to the First Nation mothers, or have an aboriginal support worker with the native parents while they meet with the principal or teachers. In addition, forming of a First Nations Advisory council would support these aboriginal parents and create healthy communication between all staff, teachers and non-native parents.

Furthermore, the First Nation mothers felt inadequate in a number of ways regarding public education. The teacher of one participant was told she was “dumb” and that explains her feeling of inadequacy in the public schools. For instance, her mother never addressed the issue, and at the time, teachers knew best and no one questioned them. However, today that idea is no longer prevalent, and it is the parents that know their child the best. I witness in public schools, where the aboriginal student is wrongfully accused or ignored by teachers regarding a problem. The teachers and staff are aware of which parents do not come in to deal with a problem. Finders and Lewis (2002) found that children are taken advantage of in schools because their parents do not fight for them. Or it may be that the First Nation parent could be experiencing an internalized sense of inferiority or aversion in relation to whites and especially whites in power as defined in ‘intergenerational impact’ of residential schools. The participants are aware of the differences in race. Some felt powerless and inadequate to deal with their child’s problem. They do not know the procedure to resolve the matter, however, one participant was quite aware that non-native parents understood the process in dealing with principals and teachers in public schools regarding their children and got results. Again, the inadequacy may be passed on from

the previous generation of residential school survivors, or by survivors themselves. Some recommendation for improving relations with First Nation parents would be to establish workshops for all staff on racism and/or do a walk about on the First Nation community to meet aboriginal parents informally in their own familiar settings.

Moreover, two of the six participants described fear and intimidation as one of the reasons they did not participate in their children's education. Residential schools used brutal and cruel punishment on First Nation students. In fact, these six participants described their fear in several ways. For example, Jasmine describes "the fear...you know, the way they used to treat me...They patronize you...I just had a great fear of the way they treated um natives...I think that ...as a First Nation. we should have been treated just as equal as everybody else". Fear is a huge part of the intergenerational impacts. What was her fear? Fear of authority? Fear of a superior race? Whatever the answer may be, this is common among many First Nation parents.

Adding to this, another participant felt afraid and was intimidated by teachers because of her experiences with cruel teachers in her early years of public and residential school. This parent had a low self-esteem and felt voiceless through most of her children's education. She was a single parent and had no support from her husband. In that case, Fleras and Elliot(2003) state that aboriginal women rank among the most disadvantaged people in Canada. Being in an alcoholic relationship added to her fear and she in turn, did not attend her children's parent teacher interviews. Thereupon, her daughter believed she did not care about her education. Similarly, Paul, an elder, expresses "even on parent-teacher days, people don't go. I never hardly went... I didn't feel comfortable with it out there. I didn't like what they did with kids, I didn't like the schools, the way they teach them" (Kulchyski, McCaskill, Newhouse, 2003, p.26). It is evident, the parents did not have power to express what they really felt. They were

voiceless, but they both cared deeply for their children's education. There appears to be more reasons as to why these parents did not attend their children's public schools rather than just fear and intimidation. Much more is at play here.

As a result, the findings of this study indicates that these six First Nation mothers non-involvement of their children's schools relates to the native people's bleak, horrible and sad history since the arrival of the Europeans. Racism, injustice, and unequal relations resulted from the British Imperialists and their documents of legislation regarding native rights and lands. The goal of the Crown, government and clergy was assimilation and it was attempted through education. There have been improvements in education on the reserves; however, the problem remains in public schools. More inclusion of aboriginal parents and content would help parental involvement for the success of First Nation students.

Adding to this, Faires (1995) suggests that "just as education has been used in the past to destroy culture and language, education can now be used to build, restore and revive Aboriginal culture, history, values and beliefs through the schools in which Native children attend" (p.2). Minister of Indian and Northern Development, Honourable Stewart (1998, January) addresses aboriginals in the 'Statement of Reconciliation' regarding the bleak history with this speech,

Sadly, our history with respect to the treatment of Aboriginal people is not something in which we can take pride. Attitude of racial and cultural superiority led to a suppression of Aboriginal culture and values. As a country, we are burdened by the past actions that resulted in weakening the identity of Aboriginal peoples, suppressing their language and cultures, and outlawing spiritual practices...We must acknowledge that the result of these actions was the

erosion of the political, economic and social systems of Aboriginal people and nations. (<http://www.inac.gc>)

Conclusion

Above all, the government and churches have come to terms with the cultural genocide, and they have taken responsibility for their part in the horrors and tragedies that happened in residential schools. In fact, these schools and Canada were based on Christian values, that being, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbour as yourself” (Luke 10:27 New International Version). Did these men of God and government representatives treat the aboriginals with respect and as they would treat themselves? Canadian history shows this philosophy was overlooked on First Nations people. The great evangelist Billy Graham (2002) believes “we will never build a Utopia on earth...we must do all we can do to alleviate suffering, and to strike at the root causes of injustice, racial prejudice, hunger and violence. We are to work for a peaceable life and human dignity for others” (p.153). Nevertheless, has racism been eliminated in Canada? Ask people of minority, handicapped, disabled, and any marginalized groups and you will find it securely embedded in our institutions, including schools. More needs to be done and it is the hope that this project brings to light some of the challenges mothers face, and what schools can do to change their impact.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Questions for interview

1. Can you tell me about the history of your education? Where you attended?
2. What was your experience as a child in public school?
3. Were your parents involved in your education?
4. How would you describe your involvement in your child's education in public schools?
5. Are there any reasons why you do not become fully involved?
6. How do you feel when you enter a public school? Why?
7. Being a First Nation woman, do you think this has an effect on why you do not participate? Please give reason(s)
8. As a First Nation mother, what prevents you from participating in your child's education in public school?
9. What would make your feel welcome in public schools?
10. What would help you as a First Nations mother become more involved in a public school?

Appendix B

“An explanation of key factors that prevent First Nation parents from participating in public school functions”.

Introduction/Consent Form for First Nation Mothers

Parents/Grandparents:

I am writing in request of your participation in a research study titled *Key Factors That Prevent First Nation Parents from Participating in Public School Functions*. As a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Education degree in Educational Leadership, I am doing a study on First Nation parents. The purpose of the study is to examine First Nation parent's stories and experiences in public schools.

This study comes from a need to better understand the perceptions, beliefs and experiences of First Nation mothers in public schools. The purpose of this study is to identify some of the barriers First Nation mothers face in terms of taking a more active role in their children's school-based education.

The results of my research will enable teachers and school administrators to better understand First Nation parents perceptions of schools and the public education system and enable educators to develop better means of communicating and working with parents.

Similarly First Nation parents will benefit from this study by reading and hearing in workshops/presentations, the reflections of other parents regarding the barriers they feel exist to prevent their full participation.

My study is intended to lead towards First Nation parents playing a more effective role in working with schools and improving their children's opportunities for learning.

I would like to interview six Snuneymuxw First Nation mothers. The interview will take about 30 minutes to one hour. I may do follow up questions which may take an additional 30 minutes. The only inconvenience is the time involved for you.

Your participation in this research is to be completely voluntary. Should you decide not to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or explanation. I will seek your permission to use your data gathered and if you chose to withdraw, you will have the choice as to whether the data collected can be used in this study or return your tape and typed manuscripts to you.

Your confidentiality will be protected by the use of pseudonyms instead of your name during analysis. Because we are members of a small community it is possible that some people will be able to guess that you are a participant in this study. However, pseudonyms will be used in the report and the analysis will not focus on personal

information that maybe harmful to you. You will receive a copy of your interview and you will be able to delete any statements that you do not wish to be included.

To obtain ongoing consent I will check in verbally (in person, or on the phone) with each participant when returning the typed transcripts for review. When checking in, I will remind them that their participation is completely voluntary and that they can leave the study at any time without consequences or explanation (and have their respective data not included). I will inform each that if I don't hear back from them within a week, it will be understood that they are comfortable with the transcripts as they are written, and that they are consenting to their continued participation in the research project. I may do follow up questions that may take an additional 30 minutes.

With respect to your anonymity, your name will not be used anywhere in this study. All data and any copies of it will be kept locked in a filing cabinet at the home of the researcher (myself).

Once the study is completed, all data will be destroyed. Once the perceptions, opinions and experiences you have shared individually, all data have been transcribed, you will receive a copy of your contribution in document form. It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others at academic and professional conferences and at community presentations.

There are no known or anticipated risks to you with giving consent for information to be used in my study. This project may benefit my own professional practice and provide information on First Nations parental involvement for administrators, teacher and staff in public schools. Most important, the information will benefit Snuneymuxw First Nation mothers. It is the mothers who are the sole source of information I am seeking in this study. The Snuneymuxw First Nation mother's voices will be heard and validated. This valuable information will be shared with other educators who work with First Nation parents and hopes to better the public education system for First Nation mother's participation in their children's education.

I would greatly appreciate your input and your participation in this valuable research.

I am available at your convenience to answer any questions you may have. I may be reached at home (250) 722-0023, or by email cfjones@uvic.ca. In addition to contacting myself or my supervisor, you may verify the ethical approval of this study or raise any concerns you might have by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria (250) 472-4545.

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact myself or supervisor. In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have,

by contacting the Associate Vice President, Research at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545).

Collette Jones Graduate Student Faculty of Education (EPLS) University of Victoria Phone: 250-722-0023 Email: cfjones@uvic.ca	Dr. Darlene Clover Supervisor Faculty of Education (EPLS) University of Victoria Phone: 250-721-7816 Email: clover@uvic.ca
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Name of participant

X
Signature

Date

A copy of this consent form may be kept by you and the signed, returned copy will given to the researcher.