

# Addressing School-Community Relations in a Cross-Cultural Context: A Collaborative Action to Bridge the Gap Between First Nations and the School

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*The search for new designs for improving parent involvement is a common issue in many schools today. The notion of local control of education in First Nations communities in Canada is directly linked to the need for parental involvement in schooling. This study utilizes a participatory research approach to examine views on community involvement expressed by Euro-Canadian teachers as well as those of First Nations parents. Results indicate that for collaborative school-community relations to thrive in First Nations communities, the school must empower the community through genuine discussions that foster collaboration and respect for multiple perspectives. The perception of collaboration should depend both on the values and exigencies in the community and on the values, dispositions, and capabilities of teachers. First Nations education must therefore be reformulated in accordance with a different, non-Eurocentric referent, and the education and training of teachers for First Nations students should be firmly divorced from any association with the idea of Eurocentric schools.*

Effective school-community relations raise student persistence and achievement (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Lareau, 1996; Nieto, 2004). Nieto (2004) contends that student achievement is positively associated with parent involvement in school, and that schools that encourage high levels of parent involvement outperform their counterparts where there are lower levels of involvement. Perrone (1989, p. 19) argues that although “every community has persons with experience who could further enrich life in schools,” many schools do not utilize community resources to their full advantage. “Schools that have depended on teachers alone,” he continues, “have always been limited by the experience base that teachers bring to their classrooms” (p. 19). In the present study, I investigated community and teachers’ perspectives on community-school relations in Brown Lake, a small fly-in reserve in Northwestern Ontario.<sup>1</sup> I focus on First Nations perspectives regarding school-community relations and how both the community and teachers mobilized themselves for school improvement.<sup>2</sup> I address (a) the nature of the relationship that exists between the school and the community; (b) how parents and teachers can work together for school

improvement; and (c) how Euro-Canadian teachers can be integrated into the community.

Eccles and Harold (1996) suggest that the extent of partnerships between home and school are mostly influenced by teachers’ and parents’ practices, attitudes, and beliefs. As Eccles and Harold write, “the extent of family-school collaboration is affected by various school and teacher practices, characteristics related to reporting practices, attitudes regarding the families of the children in the school, and both interest in and understanding of how to effectively involve parents” (p. 4). Although there is increasing recognition of the specific role that parent involvement in schools plays in the achievement of students, historical analysis indicates that parent-teacher relations are more characterized as those of dissociation (Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1996; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Lareau, 1996; Rogovin, 2001). In other words, schools and homes seldom collaborate as closely as may be expected.

<sup>1</sup>Brown Lake is a pseudonym.

<sup>2</sup>The term “First Nations” refers to the Aboriginal people of Canada. *First Nations*, *Natives*, or *Aboriginal people* are interchangeable terms used in Canada to refer to Native people. In America the term “Native American” or “American Indian” are more frequently used to refer to the Natives.

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Dornbusch and Glasgow (1996) argue that structural factors such as school governance, curriculum, group-memberships, and ethnic-specific parenting styles have more serious implications for links between home and school than beliefs and attitudes of parents and teachers. These authors believe that parents are more likely to involve themselves in the primary grades than in the middle and high schools because “middle schools teachers have neither the time nor the resources to closely monitor the performance of each student *and* keep parents informed of ways in which they can assist their children” (p. 36; emphasis in original).

Lareau (1996) contends that status identities shaped by class or profession have a serious impact on links between the home and the school. She believes that working-class and lower-class parents do not usually tend to be involved in their children’s schooling. According to Lareau, “[m]iddle-class parents are much more likely to see themselves as having shared responsibility for the schooling process. Working-class and lower-class parents, however, appear to turn over responsibility for education to the school” (p. 58).

Advocates for school-community relations believe that (a) parent involvement will mobilize and create resources that schools may not be able to generate; (b) parents and teachers are willing partners in home-school links; and (c) parents and families will be able to pool together those local resources that are relevant to the education of their children. First, the assumption that parent involvement will mobilize and create resources that schools may not be able to generate implies that the community possesses a wealth of resources in the form of local traditions and customs that could be useful to students. Rogovin (2001) argues that there are vast untapped educational talents within the family and opportunities outside the traditional formal classroom structure that could be useful to schools. “Families are among the greatest resources a teacher will encounter,” she writes, “and no matter where you teach, families are guaranteed resources of human experience” (p. 40). Rogovin also believes that “[w]hen teachers establish close working relationships with a family, little by little, we get to know the whole child. Families’ observations and insights about children inform our teaching and help us better understand children’s behavior” (p. 41).

The second assumption, that parents and teachers are willing partners in home-school links, implies that parents and teachers are eager to work together as partners in education. However, teachers can be resentful of parent participation (Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1996; Lareau, 1996). For example, Dornbusch and Glasgow (1996) found that teachers “overwhelmingly said they did not want more parent-initiated contact. Indeed teachers were often resentful of parent-initiated contact,” and teachers “welcomed contact when there was a problem and when *they* asked the parent to come in for a conference” (p. 37; emphasis in original). According to Dornbusch and Glasgow (1996), parent-teacher

contacts usually “operated in a context of teacher control, with parents asked to assist the teacher” (p. 37).

The third assumption, that parents and families will be able to pool local resources that are relevant to the education of their children, implies that teachers and parents share equal power, and parents have the empowerment, information, and know-how to influence important decisions. However, Lareau argues that advocates overemphasize family-school links because they overlook the power relations that exist between home and school. Lareau believes that there cannot be real home-school partnerships because partnerships thrive on equality of power, but parents do not have a power base from which to influence important decisions. As she writes, “Working-class and lower-class parents perceive educators as ambassadors for dominant institutions and, in many instances, as a possible threat to their family. This looming and possible threat of educators creates a context within which family-school relations are created” (p. 62). In Lareau’s view, “Parents’ educational skills are often quite weak” (p. 63) and therefore, “parents, especially parents of working-class and lower-class children, are not always an educational resource” (p. 63).

#### *Power as a Contested Factor in School-Community Relations*

Power relations have a critical effect on parent involvement in schooling (Darder, 1991; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 2003; Nieto, 2004; Oakes & Lipton, 1999; Rosaldo, 1993). In particular, McLaren (2003) and Darder (1991) offer an understanding of how power relations created by the mechanisms of the mainstream North American school system work to exclude minority parents from involvement in schools. McLaren terms a power relationship as hegemony. He defines hegemony as “a struggle in which the powerful win the consent of those who are oppressed, with the oppressed unknowingly participating in their own oppression” (p. 203).

Darder (1991) argues that, for centuries, Eurocentric cultures have used power relations to achieve domination over minorities. Darder believes power relations in minority schools are in three basic forms: cultural hegemony, cultural invasion, and language domination. Cultural hegemony, according to Darder, refers to the idea of assimilating minority students into Eurocentric cultures. Cultural invasion is where the dominant group uses social practices, social forms, and social structures produced in schools and churches to generate, process, and disseminate knowledge and information to students and parents in order to socialize them into Eurocentric ways of life. This corresponds to McLaren’s notion of hegemony. According to Darder, cultural invasion is a way of maintaining continuous economic, political, social and cultural power over minority groups. Finally, language domination is where schools downplay the cultures and

languages of minority students and, further, explain minority students' failures in terms of inadequacies created by these cultures and languages. For Darder, language domination takes two forms: (a) schools increasingly reject minority languages in favor of English and teach students beliefs and values that perpetuate the inferiority of minority languages, and (b) schools adopt teaching styles that deprive minority students of critical thinking and allow them to support the ideological interests of the dominant groups.

Similarly, speaking to relations of domination, Giroux (1988) argues that the processes of traditional education do not provide opportunities for empowering students in society. He points out that traditional education does not teach important issues regarding knowledge, power, and domination insofar as education is based on "the mastery of pedagogical techniques and the transmission of knowledge instrumental to the existing society" (p. 111). Giroux further argues that "public schooling offers limited individual mobility to members of the working class and other oppressed groups" (p. 111) and that "public schools are powerful instruments for the reproduction of capitalist relations of production and the legitimating ideologies of everyday life" (p. 111).

Oakes and Lipton (1999) also attempt to locate race and socioeconomic orientations within the context of school-community relations, contending that "[u]gly racial histories in many communities make some parents of color reticent to be a visible presence at school" (p. 335). They also believe that because low-income parents do not have ready access to information about schools, these parents lack the confidence that would enable them to involve themselves in schools. "Community representatives," Oakes and Lipton suggest, "can inform discussions around curricular and extracurricular issues and in the process develop more democratic relationships with the professional staff" (p. 335).

The potential increase in school autonomy of First Nations should raise questions about school-community relations and how community resources can serve the interests of the school. The Report of the Royal Commission on Learning (1994) found school-community relations as the number one priority for school improvement, describing it as the "first engine" (p. 11). As the report states, "every school should have a school-community council, led by the principal and comprising parents, teachers, and students responsible for bringing appropriate community resources into the school to assume some of the obligations teachers now bear alone" (p. 11).

In the present study, I examined the structures and processes that shape and constrain parent-teacher collaboration in First Nations communities. The study was guided by four research questions: What were the levels of parent participation that existed in the local school before the advent of local control? What is the current nature of the relationship that exists between the school and the community? How

do parents and teachers work together for school improvement? And, how can Euro-Canadian teachers integrate into the local community?

### Methodology

A group of First Nations people and Euro-Canadian teachers residing on a fly-in reserve collaborated with me in deciding what issues of schooling to investigate, what questions to explore, how to collect data, and how to organize and use the data according to their own priorities. This project was designed for all participants to work collaboratively and, in the words of Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 9), "to transform the social environment through the process of critical inquiry—to act on the world rather than being acted on." The project helped participants learn how to generate, evaluate, select, and share vast amounts of relevant information at all social levels, from the First Nations community member to the university researcher. Maguire (1987) asserts that participatory research goes beyond merely interpreting and describing social phenomena. By using an alternative social science framework, we employed data collection processes that combined the activities of research, education, and action (Agbo, 2004).<sup>3</sup> As an educational process, the project educated participants by engaging them in the analysis of structural causes of selected problems through collaborative discussion and interaction. As an action process, the project enabled the participants to take collaborative action for radical social change in both the short and the long term.

### Interviews

I interviewed 58 community members, and all eight Euro-Canadian teachers in the school. The community interviewees were made up of Band<sup>4</sup> workers, Local Education Authority (LEA) members, parents, and students. One of the primary objectives of the interviews was to examine the perceptions of community members and teachers about school-community relations, particularly how to bridge the gap between the community and the school. Interviews were semistructured with open-ended questions to allow participants to express their individual views about schooling. The focus was on basic questions such as: How much did the community involve itself in school affairs before local control (during the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada

<sup>3</sup>Participatory research methodology uses the pronoun *we* to show that all the research activities are collaborative and that the research is not in the hands of a particular researcher.

<sup>4</sup>A Band is political unit in Canada created under the federal Indian Act and consisting of indigenous people who share common traditions, values, and practices. A Band is governed by an elected Chief and Council and in most instances has lands set apart for the use of its members. The federal government provides services and funding to support social services of the Band.

(INAC) period)? What is the nature of the relationship that exists between the school and the community? How do parents and teachers work together for school improvement? In what ways can we integrate Euro-Canadian teachers into the community?

I took field notes and tape-recorded all interviews. For the field notes, I made detailed descriptions of the dialogue I had with respondents, the events, the physical settings and the demographic information of respondents (Creswell, 2005). I also recorded reflective notes that captured the non-verbal cues that I gathered from the responses (Creswell, 2005). The tapes were transcribed verbatim as soon after the interviews as possible. The interview process revealed areas of unique participant concern or importance that I might not initially have anticipated, as well as areas of concern common to all participants. Throughout the interview and transcription process, I highlighted responses that appeared either especially relevant or that were similar to other responses (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I also reviewed those responses that were different from others but had particular intensity or relevance to specific issues.

#### *Discussion Groups and Meetings*

The discussion groups and meetings involved all teachers in the school, all seven Local Education Authority (LEA) members, Band Office<sup>5</sup> representatives, parents and interested community members. In all, there were three such discussions with membership at each time ranging between 26 and 32 participants. As this study involved the mobilization of community people to explore problems and find solutions, the discussion-group process was flexible in order to accommodate all necessary viewpoints.

During the workshops, we employed a functional approach through which participants were encouraged to present and talk about their ideas, especially in relation to changes they deemed necessary to enhance collaboration between teachers and parents. Discussion focused on overall school improvement. Special attention was given to collaboration, arising from the functional position of parental involvement as the locus of student achievement. Participants explored goals community people think desirable, the difficulties participants might encounter in achieving them, and what participants could do to find solutions. The forums were relaxed and participants appeared to feel free to speak. By sharing ideas or problems, the group discussions fostered a sense of trust, support, and cooperation among participants. We made room for disagreements, which sometimes resulted in arguments and made it necessary for participants to take votes on issues. If participants agreed, the discussions were documented by a secretary and tape recorded to ensure that important remarks were not overlooked. After the discus-

sions, the team leader produced a summary for distribution to all participants, who were then free to draw the leader's attention to any issues that were missing in the report.

#### *Data Analysis*

The initial stage of data analysis entailed the preparation of interview summaries of the 58 community interviewees and the 8 Euro-Canadian teachers for verification by respondents. First, as noted above, I transcribed each audiotape and made detailed notes of the interviewees' responses. A descriptive analysis followed, which gave a feeling for the views of the participants and sorted out the actual data that would answer the research questions. This stage of analysis included the search for patterns and themes regarding communication, perceptions about the present and past status of the school, teacher orientation and integration into the community, suggestions, and priorities. While conducting this analysis, I recorded my personal observations about what the patterns possibly meant, and any analytical insights and interpretations that emerged during the data collection. I then assigned the emerging ideas and patterns to categories. I considered groups such as the advisory committee, elders of the community, parents, teachers, and students as levels of analysis.

#### *Results*

In order to facilitate a better understanding of the context and the particular characteristics that may have influenced the results of this study, one should know something about the school and the community of Brown Lake.

#### *Community Profile*

Brown Lake is a relatively small and isolated fly-in First Nations reserve in what is termed as Canada's North. The community is accessible only by daily scheduled flights (when the weather permits) or by a winter road in February and March. The main aircraft that come into the community are Beech 99s and Cessna 180s. Community members also make considerable use of float and ski-equipped aircraft for trapping and hunting trips and traveling to other communities.

Before the advent of Europeans, people living in this region based their livelihood on hunting and gathering. There is a significant level of awareness of past traditions among the elders of the community, although the young generally, seem unknowledgeable about matters concerning past traditional beliefs, cultural patterns, and expectations of First Nations. Nevertheless, data from elders strongly confirm that even though children are raised to speak the local dialect of Ojibwe, there is a comprehensive pool of information on local traditions that is virtually unknown to the young and

<sup>5</sup>The administrative building of the community.

the Euro-Canadian teachers of the children. As an elder of the community said:

Our kids are different from us. They don't behave like us. They speak Ojibwe but don't know much about how to behave as Aboriginal people. There are many things that make you an Aboriginal person but the only thing that these kids have is the language.

As with all cultures, the culture of Brown Lake is adapting to new times. The establishment of band councils by the government of Canada to administer First Nations communities and enforce law and order has transformed life on some First Nations reserves. Brown Lake is no exception. Euro-Canadian law has replaced the values, customs and conflict resolution ideals of First Nations.

### *The Community School*

In 1973, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) took over the community school that started in 1954 as an enterprise run by a local resident. The Department provided a four-classroom block for the school to accommodate 90 students. The school has since expanded to accommodate a larger number of students. DIAND, later known as Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), handed over the school to band control in 1988.

The school with its teachers' quarters lies on a sandy, gentle slope in the northern corner of the community facing a sprawling lake to the south. A fence, which I understand was constructed by INAC to separate the school from the rest of the community, clearly defines the boundaries of the school and its elite residents within the community. Within the school and teachers' quarters are modern facilities of running water, showers, water closet toilets, and oil furnaces for heating. Until a few years ago, the school and its teachers' quarters were the only places in the community that had electricity, generated by a small diesel generator. While the whole community slept in darkness, the lights from the school area illuminated the lake to the south and the coniferous forest that borders it to the north.

Until recently, we never had electricity in this community except in the school. The teachers were the only people that had electricity from a generator that was brought here by the government. I remember kids used to hang around the school grounds at night to play because that was the only bright spot in the community. (Interview with an elder in Brown Lake)

Immediately beyond the fences are community houses with wood-stove heating systems and little out-houses at the

side of each of the homes. To the south of the community is the sprawling brown-water Brown Lake, the community's all-purpose year-round water supply. During winter months when the lake is frozen, families bore holes in the thick ice to collect water for their households.

Community people reported that during the period that INAC controlled the school, they did not have anything to do within the confines of the school fence. As a 63-year-old elder said:

In those days, we didn't get near the school because we were never invited and of course had nothing to do there.

Community people looked upon the school as an ivory tower, and whatever happened behind the fences was the business of professional teachers.

### Themes

Five main themes emerged: (a) the school as a colonial symbol during the INAC period; (b) perceptions of parent involvement in the school; (c) the condition of parent-teacher communication; (d) teacher integration into community life; and (e) suggested strategies for action projects.

### *The School as a Colonial Symbol*

The first school in Brown Lake was begun in the 1950s by a local resident with the purpose of teaching community people how to read and write the Ojibwe language in syllabics.<sup>6</sup> As a 73-year-old man recalled:

The schoolteacher spoke little or no English, I think he knew a few words in English but did not teach English in the school. The school was one open classroom for every child who wanted to learn syllabics. He did many things as you do them today in the school. For example, he had a morning and afternoon recess time and the kids went out for lunch and came back in the afternoon. My wife attended that school and she still talks about the things they used to do in the '60s.

Community people indicated that during the period that INAC controlled the school, they did not have anything to do within the confines of the school fence. Community people looked upon the school as a colonial symbol, essentially an

<sup>6</sup>Certain varieties of Ojibwe spoken in northern Ontario are written in a syllable-based orthography that employs characters based primarily upon geometric shapes. The syllabary was created in the late 1830s and spread rapidly to speakers of Cree and Ojibwe. Use of the syllabary is widespread in northern Ontario.

ivory tower, and whatever happened behind the fences was the business of professional teachers. As an elder put it:

A bus would come round to take our children to school in the morning and would bring them back after school. I knew they went to school but I didn't know exactly what they were doing there. They'll be there, behind the fence, until it's time for them again to come home.

Parents said they visited neither the school nor the teachers' homes. This was because they were never invited or they felt there was nothing they could do in those places; in either case, parents would not presume to intrude on teachers' privacy. A comment by a parent is illustrative:

When there was no bus, we dropped the kids off at the gate. There will be one or two teachers waiting for them. We never went inside the fence except there was something wrong with your kid, then the principal will invite you to the office. We had one principal here who will visit the kids' home everyday after school to talk to their parents. I think he was an Irishman. No, we never went to [the teachers'] homes.

During the INAC period, the school was a fenced-in modern quarter of the First Nations reserve—a community within a community. The in-school administrator, who would visit children's homes, was the only link between school and community. Parents generally perceived the school as a different part of the community. They believed that as soon as children entered the schoolyard, teachers expected them to become "civilized" persons and not First Nations. They could be First Nations children after school. Comments made by a parent and former LEA member were typical of how parents felt:

Teachers say children don't behave well at school. They carry their behavior at home to the school. Teachers shouldn't think children's behavior at school should be different. Does it mean they can do whatever they want to do at home but, when they go to school, they should behave as school children? Teachers want the behavior at school to be different from the community.

The above sentiment supports the perception of the school as a fenced-in enclave, with quite different expectation from the home. The present study revealed that the change from INAC to local control did not change many of the perceptions community people had about the school.

### *Parent Involvement in Education*

Results generally revealed that parents and teachers did not work together for the improvement of schooling. Teachers I interviewed indicated that the most frustrating aspect of their job was lack of parental involvement. As one female teacher commented:

I find the apparent apathy in the community towards education and providing recreational opportunities for the children and the lack of parental involvement the most frustrating aspects of the job. It appears that if the non-Native people in the community did not do things for the kids, nothing would get done. There appears to be a general expectation of the community that the teachers can do everything where the kids are involved.

Parents did not perceive that they had an obligation to be actively involved in their children's schooling. Although the school is now under local control, community people do not perceive any differences between the present school system and that of INAC. They indicated that they were not aware of any alternatives, let alone how to involve themselves in choosing among them.

Although the community members I interviewed showed considerable interest in the affairs of the school and the improvement of the school system, they accepted that there was little parental participation in school affairs. Some parents did not know that there was a Local Education Authority (LEA) in charge of the school. They still entertained the notion that the school was under INAC control and that they had nothing to do with the schooling of their children. Also, some parents did not know that they could visit the school at their own will and talk to teachers about the progress of their children.

Perhaps the comments of a community member about the seclusion of the school from the community prior to the takeover from (INAC) can provide a reason for lack of parental involvement. As a 67 year-old man commented:

The only time we saw our children during school time was at recess when they played within the fence. Sometimes I would like to speak to my children during recess time but teachers would not allow them to cross the fence. They are all over the place guarding the fence, and since I know that they don't want us to speak to the children, I don't want to offend them. Teachers know their job, and we should leave them free to train our children.

Parents felt that they were not welcome in the school and, paradoxically, teachers have also accused parents of

not involving themselves in their children's education. A Euro-Canadian teacher in her late 20s remarked:

To improve schooling for students, parents and teachers must get to know each other. Parents should feel that the teacher has the best interest of the child in mind, and teachers should feel that they have the support of parents in carrying out their programs. Parents should become involved in the daily programs of the school. When children see their parents taking an interest in school, they may begin to develop the attitude that school is important.

One of my concerns in this study was the viewpoints of community members on community-school relations, specifically their interpretation of their role and involvement, in terms of student learning and their expectations of teachers. When asked for views regarding how much involvement is appropriate or desirable, many community members pointed to a variety of factors that have hindered their participation. The first is that they wished not to interfere in the work of teachers. Like medical doctors who need to do their jobs without interference from lay people, community members have always regarded teachers as professional people who know their jobs very well and need no interference from others. As a parent and former chairperson for the LEA commented:

Teachers attend school for many, many years and know what they're doing. I can't tell them what to do. Of course, they know better than me. I only have a grade eight . . . education. I don't want to interfere with their job.

Respondents indicated that parent involvement was further threatened by the inactiveness of the LEA. According to these respondents, the LEA, which represents the people and is responsible for providing a bridge between school and community, has faltered and sometimes been subjugated to the increasing concentration of power of the Chief and Council.<sup>7</sup> Some respondents feel that the LEA is not carrying out their duty of connecting the school and the community. At the same time, however, they sympathized with the LEA. While the LEA should have control over the school, the Chief and Council often overpower the LEA's decision making. As a man in his early forties commented:

Basically, LEA has the authority to run the school. Band Council should just have ultimate control. There is no way Chief and Council can run the Band and the school at the same time. Chief and Council are there for political problems. The problem with the LEA is that board participation is not doing a good job to take total control. Most of the members are not aware of what their position on the LEA means.

#### *Communication Between the School and Community*

In our discussions regarding parental involvement in schooling, community people frequently stated there was the need for more effective communication and greater understanding between community people and the Euro-Canadian school staff. A man in his 30s, who had worked in the school a few years, stated:

Community people don't want to get involved. People are afraid to communicate. They need lot of public education. Teachers need to sacrifice their time to get to know people and try to gain knowledge from Native people. They need to establish trust and respect. Teachers should invite parents and ask them questions. They should establish friendship with parents. I have never seen a teacher going to visit a parent except on report card day. Teachers go from their houses to the school. They never bother to know what is happening in the children's homes. As I said earlier, the most important thing is getting to know people.

Many respondents indicated that it would take trust, friendship, and understanding on the part of teachers to get parents involved in schooling.

If my people don't trust you, they'll have nothing to do with you. Some of them feel that their children don't behave well at school and teachers will find fault with them so they won't get near the teachers. Teachers have to open up to parents and make them aware that they're here for the welfare of the children. As I said earlier, the only way by which to do this is . . . I guess, they should be friendly towards parents. Teachers should also learn to understand parents. (Interview with a First Nations parent.)

Achieving sustained collaboration was a widely shared objective of both parents and teachers, but strains arose when it came to communicating this objective.

The main problem of schooling in this community is lack of communication between parents and

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<sup>7</sup>Each Band has its own governing band council usually consisting of one chief and several councilors. Community people choose the chief and councilors by election or sometimes through custom. The chief with councilors has simply come to be known as Chief and Council.

teachers. All the teachers are new to our way of life. They don't know what we do with our kids at home. Ask the teachers, how many of them have ever attempted to visit a parent and spent a weekend with him, and perhaps, go on the trap-line together and see what children and parents do over there. They are teaching children whose way of life they don't understand. They are just teaching them what they think [the students] should know. It is only when teachers know about the home environment of the children that they can teach them well. Teachers and parents have to work together. (Interview with Band Office worker)

Teachers acknowledge the lack of communication between them and parents. Teachers believe that the school can build effective lines of communication with parents in a variety of ways, such as hosting school events, visiting parents at home, and attending community events. They suggested that it is necessary for the school to create venues where parents can meet and discuss school issues. Teachers felt the necessity of becoming well acquainted with parents. As one female teacher commented:

Teachers and parents can work together to improve schooling by communicating with and supporting each other. When the school plans an event, parents should come out and show their support. When possible, parents should be included in the planning process and volunteer to help. That way, they will see the effort that goes into the planning by the teacher, and not just the end result. Teachers and parents should communicate with each other, not only when there is a problem with a student, but when there is good news also. I think a PTA would help because then parents would have an opportunity to get inside look. It is good for the school to have an open door policy for parents. However, parents need to use it to come in. If an open door is not used, it only lets in the cold.

Interview results indicated that the most salient factor affecting parent-teacher communication is the sociocultural difference between teachers and parents. As a young female teacher in her mid-20s put it:

It isn't that I don't want to communicate with the parents, but it is that I don't know what they'd like to hear or not to hear. Something that may be funny with me may not be so funny in the Native culture. I am kind of afraid I don't know how to interact with people outside my own background. I need some experience in inter-cultural communication.

Do they teach that kind of thing in the university [laugh]?

Parents and teachers recommend that the first necessity is for teachers to become acquainted with parents and develop a new groundwork of trust, agreement, and cooperation. But to accomplish effective communication, there needs to be shifts in values, initially among the teachers and subsequently among community people. As a 42-year-old prominent man who worked in the Band Office points out:

Teachers should take the responsibility of opening communication lines with parents. Our community people are not used to dealing with teachers. The teachers therefore have to take the initiative to show the community people that they value them and that they are prepared to work with them. As soon as the teachers are able to open the communication lines, the community people will also change their attitude.

Community people also indicated that in order to communicate effectively with parents, teachers need to better understand the First Nations way of life. As a worker from the Band Office remarked:

Teachers are different from us, and they've got the way they do things and we also have our own way of doing things. I know parents won't come to teachers if [teachers] don't go to them. Teachers have to show understanding of our way of life and our problems. If teachers invite parents and they come late, teachers should understand that they're on "Indian time" [laugh].

Teachers indicated that the problem of communication partly lies in parents' refusal to involve themselves in school affairs. Teachers expressed that most attempts they make to invite parents to school events prove futile. In response to the question, *How can the school build effective communication lines with the community?*, a 30-year-old male teacher said this:

The onus is put on the school to build effective communication. If you look at a relationship between two people, one person cannot make it work by him/herself. If one person is a great communicator and does everything possible to make the relationship work, yet receives little or no response from the other person, the relationship will eventually die. No matter how great a communicator you are, you cannot carry on forever alone. Quite often, teachers put a great deal of work into planning events to involve parents but they receive little or

no support, and little or no turn out for their efforts. After a while, they get tired of it and they don't want to try any more because there seems to be no purpose. Nobody communicates anything good that is done, only complains when they don't like something. This is very discouraging for teachers. For a relationship to work between two people, both partners must put effort, support, and communication into making it a good relationship. Each person has an equal responsibility. I believe for effective lines of communication to exist between the school and the community, each has to accept the responsibility for making this happen. Each has to work at making it become a reality.

Even though a number of parents said that teachers are unable to communicate effectively with parents, some felt strongly that the problem does not lie with the teachers because teachers send invitation notes home with the students. However, many parents are illiterate, neither speaking nor writing English.

Some parents feel that it is the responsibility of the LEA and the Band Council<sup>8</sup> to be actively involved in school events and draw the community into being a part of the school. A community elder commented:

The Band Council should communicate effectively with the people. For example, who are the teachers? What are they doing? What have they planned for the school? How should community people support the plans for the school? The Band Council is unable to report about the school to us. They don't deal with the school properly. The Band doesn't inform us about what happens in the school. There should be a regulation that the LEA and the Band Council should report periodically to the people what the school is doing. They can communicate with the people through radio shows, community meetings, or newsletters.

While a majority of respondents from the community indicated that lack of communication was a major drawback for schooling, a few respondents also blame parents for their apathy. These respondents felt that most parents do not care about the school, and nothing could involve them in schooling matters. As an LEA member remarked:

The parents just don't care. They have other things bugging them and won't worry about school. They think of how to make some money to take care of the basic necessities of life. As you know, many parents don't have jobs and rely on a small amount of welfare money. They care more about finding money to feed and take care of their families.

What this respondent suggested was not really that parents do not care, but that problems associated with poor living conditions take their attention away from schooling.

#### *Making Teachers Part of the Community*

Teachers were integrated into the community through two orientation sessions: one prior to their arrival and one after. They felt that the first session (2 days) was inadequate to prepare them to understand the community's students and parents. As one teacher put it:

The orientation prior to arriving in the community should include suggestions as to how to 'break the ice' with the local people, what the community views as the role of the teachers both in and outside of the school environment, the duties and responsibilities of the Education coordinator and the LEA, administrative procedures/paper-work, and brief synopsis of the school board policies.

Regarding the second orientation, another teacher stated:

Once in the community, the teachers could be taken on a walking tour of the place, to familiarize themselves with the layout; they could be introduced to the families. This could be done in one morning or afternoon. The potluck dinner this year was a good idea. It would be nice to have someone tutor the teachers for about half an hour once a week in Ojibwe, so we could learn some common greetings, expressions, and phrases.

Some teachers also indicated that the second orientation should include a roundtable discussion between teachers and parents regarding education issues. As a teacher remarked:

The orientation in the community, should include a discussion of the local goals of education; an introduction to local resource people for cultural activities, traditional values, and those willing to assist in the classroom and extracurricular activities when needed; a list of community activities in which teachers could participate; and a list of band

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<sup>8</sup>The Band Council is the same as councilors or the chief's advisory body, or the cabinet, if you may. A councilor or a member of the Band Council is usually assigned to be in charge of education and reports to the Band Council (or council). The Band Council is usually the decision-making authority in the community.

officials and their responsibilities, and an introduction to these people.

Teachers suggested having volunteer families who would prepare them for some aspects of community life, such as hunting, fishing, cooking, and craftwork. These families could “adopt” teachers and help them learn about the First Nations way of life.

If possible, various families in the community could adopt a teacher and invite them to go hunting, fishing, trapping and participate in their everyday life—hauling water, getting wood, and eating with the family. The teachers would gain valuable information and understanding of local life that would benefit them in teaching their children. This adoption would create a better rapport between the parents and the teachers and would promote cooperation. Teachers would be made to feel welcome in the community and would feel as if they were part of the community. A great benefit to the teachers would be first hand experience/assimilation into the local way of life. (Interview with Euro-Canadian teacher.)

When I asked teachers about how much they knew about First Nations children before assuming their teaching positions, all indicated they knew very little and that they were not exposed to unique aspects of First Nations education in their teacher-education programs. As a female teacher put it:

It was like a cultural shock when I first arrived in the community. I didn’t know anything about First Nations learning styles. I was merely teaching the way I was taught in school, and all that I found was that my students were learning nothing. Students seemed apparently very bored all the time, and I didn’t know how to get them involved.

Another female teacher added:

I think it is important to be aware of the realities that exist both socially and culturally in the community. We need to know what kind of behavior is acceptable. Also, we should have an understanding of the general learning styles of Natives.

Community people felt the high turnover rate of teachers makes it difficult to establish relationships. As a parent in her 30s stated:

You really can’t get to know the teachers. My daughter has had three teachers last year alone.

Even before I properly learned to pronounce their names, they’re gone.

Community residents felt that teachers were not able to live in the community because they were unwilling to accept the First Nations way of life. When I asked teachers about their willingness to learn the First Nations way of life, they indicated they were willing to learn all that they could, provided that community people were prepared to teach them. A majority of teachers expressed that the community should be responsible for imparting their culture to non-Native teachers. Teachers further indicated that as part of its involvement, the community should help teachers learn the culture, language, and history of the local community.

One of the ways the community can involve itself in the affairs of the school is to teach the teachers the values and norms of the community. Sometimes you don’t know the “Dos and Don’ts” of the community. It will be nice for the LEA to arrange for community people to come and give talks to teachers periodically about community values, and especially how the community expects teachers to treat the students. (Interview with a Euro-Canadian teacher.)

Some teachers stated that they should have had the opportunity to learn about First Nations culture in the university, prior to their becoming teachers or as part of their teacher training. Teachers felt that the university should play a vital role in improving the quality of teachers for First Nations children.

I believe all education programs should include courses on Native studies. Some of these should be taught by Native people, and some taught by non-Natives who have worked with Native students. This would provide teachers with culturally relevant information, as well as information that will help prepare them for what they will face in working in Native communities.

This denied knowledge ranges from research that informs prospective teachers about conditions on First Nations reserves to information about the learning styles of First Nations students. A female teacher was asked how much teachers need to know before teaching First Nations students:

The focus of knowledge, I think should deal with psychology. How Native children think is crucial to designing approaches to helping them learn and especially for classroom management and discipline. Teachers need to know a lot about children,

their relationship with the community and how the community responds to the needs of children not as it was traditionally, but as it is today, or maybe both. (Interview with a Euro-Canadian teacher.)

Speaking to the role of universities in teacher preparation, a male teacher said:

With the help of Native organizations and committees, content can be collected and submitted to universities to use in conjunction with sociology and psychology course content. Otherwise, faculties of education should hold seminars, have presentations in classes, and hold a Native awareness day or week annually at the universities in order to kindle the interest of student teachers in Native education. (Interview with a Euro-Canadian teacher.)

#### Parent-Teacher Mobilization for School Improvement

Parents and teachers suggested the following conditions would be necessary to improve the relations between the community and the school:

- The LEA should be supplemented with a Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) to inform parents about the importance of their participation in school affairs.
- Parents (rather than the Band Council) should provide management goals for the education system and should participate in school activities (e.g., open houses, professional development days, sports activities).
- The Band Council should be involved in promoting school events to community people and should encourage them to take part in these events.
- Teachers should use various means (e.g., community radio, billboards) to inform parents of school events and encourage them to attend.
- Parents and school staff should socialize at the beginning of each year to get acquainted with each other.
- Teachers should assign family projects to students so that parents, grandmothers, uncles, aunts, and siblings will take part in completing and presenting their work in the school.

As an important part of this study, participants initiated action projects to maximize parental involvement. Having established that community people were willing to communicate with teachers and involve themselves in the education of their children, and that teachers were also willing to learn the ways of the community, participants developed specific implementation strategies that would bring parents and teachers together to work for a common goal. The following action projects took immediate effect:

- Teachers started taking turns organizing monthly parent-teacher events in their homes.
- Teachers periodically invited parents to their classrooms to teach a skill or tell a story to the students.
- The school initiated and maintained a school-community English/Ojibwe newspaper that reported both school and community news and had both teachers and parents on the editorial board.
- The school organized parent-teacher games nights, and the school staff asked parents to submit a list of skills (related to sports) that they could offer the school.
- The LEA visited the school regularly and communicated to the rest of the community how the school was doing.
- Teachers reached out into the community by visiting the parents of their students at least once a month.
- The school and community planned social gatherings that made it possible for teachers and parents to meet outside the school.
- The school designated certain days (such as Mothers' Day, Fathers' Day, Grandmothers' Day, Uncles' and Aunts' Day) for community members to make presentations about community values and norms to teachers and students.

#### Discussion

An important result of the present study was the discussion it generated around the lack of community participation in the affairs of the school. This points to a problem handed down from the INAC era. From the standpoint of the Indian Education Paper Phase I (1982), difficulties facing First

Nations education authorities were inherited from federal agencies and became more aggravated as “Aboriginal education organizations were not supported or developed to assume functions associated with provision of quality of education” (p. 3). It is clear from my interviews that local control implies continuity in the sense that certain structures (and the responsibilities that go with them) are transferred from INAC to the local community. The analogy would be changing drivers but keeping the same vehicle. This means that the school in Brown Lake continues to bear all the hallmarks of mainstream Canadian educational systems—the school’s structures, values, and symbols remaining intact even under local control.

Discussions with community people revealed that the INAC era tended to encourage puppet school committees, such as the PTA that had nominal influence in confined areas of the school programs but no decision-making authority. The concentration of ownership and management of the school was in the hands of INAC and Euro-Canadian in-school administrators and teachers. The PTA became merely a rubber-stamp. There is thus a linkage between the present school-community relations and those of the INAC era.

This linkage can perhaps best be understood in terms of the concepts of cultural invasion and hegemony. First Nations families have actively subscribed to the Euro-Canadian values and objectives without being aware of the source of those values or the interests for which they exist. Thus in accordance with the notions of cultural invasion and hegemony, one would agree that the lack of parent involvement in the Brown Lake School is causally linked to more specific value systems that crystallized during the INAC era, which the community has accepted as being good in themselves, together with some adaptation to community values. In other words, the school remains isolated from the community by both the physical and cultural fence surrounding it and the teachers’ quarters. Even with local control, the notion of school carries with it a particular characterization of Euro-centric values, goals, and norms that differ radically from those of First Nations, but which First Nations have accepted as the norm. It is therefore not surprising that interviews and observations revealed that parents still regarded the school as a “closed district.”

Parents indicated that as soon as children enter the schoolyard, teachers expect them to become “civilized” persons and not First Nations. This result supports the findings that some schools may discourage community values because such values may conflict with the school ethos (Haynes & Ben-Avie, 1996; Lareau, 1996). Haynes and Ben-Avie (1996) argued that schools are embedded in a complex social context of ethos that influences the conduct of their mission: “schools are intentional cultural communities deliberately designed by educators in order to engender a school ethos that they consider to be most beneficial to the schools’ mission” (pp. 49-50). My results also support findings from

Haynes and Ben-Avie that some schools deliberately distant themselves from the local community because “a school’s ethos is characterized by the conscious sentiment that the students need to be removed from the negative influences in their home and neighborhood environment and raised by professionals within a decontextualized setting” (p. 50).

The present data also support the importance of leadership support for parents and community in order for them to become more involved in the school. My results indicated that the support should come from the LEA and the Chief and Council. Partnership, in whatever sense we conceive it, entails power relations (Lareau, 1996). That is to say, the acceptance of individuals on equal terms of power encourages involvement. It is therefore the process of empowerment and support from leaders and administrators that culminates in the ability to overcome all the constraints that may inhibit involvement. Parent involvement cannot achieve any degree of success unless it is underpinned by support from the school and the Band.

My findings that Euro-Canadian teachers require more training to better understand First Nations ways supports the Royal Commission on Learning regarding the need to prepare teachers of First Nations children. Recommendation 127 of the Report of the Royal Commission on Learning (1994) strongly advocates the inclusion of First Nations content in teacher preparation programs. As the report states: “That the province include its requirements for pre-service and in-service education a component related to teaching aboriginal students and teaching about aboriginal issues to both Native and non-Native students” (p. 77). While many universities in Canada offer a variety of courses in First Nations studies, these courses are mostly offered to students of First Nations origin. However, the irony is that First Nations schools are mostly made up of Euro-Canadian teachers who are unable to attend to the needs of First Nations students (Canadian Education Association (CEA), 1984). In this regard, instead of blindly following the colonial heritage, First Nations need to educate not only First Nations students in Aboriginal languages and cultures, but also Euro-Canadian teachers, and even mainstream Canadian students (Agbo, 2004). The present study identifies the willingness of teachers to learn about First Nations culture at the university as part of their pre-service education. Without such a provision in our faculties of education, teacher integration into First Nations communities would still be a problem.

### Conclusion

This study went beyond simply locating problems about community involvement in schooling. Identifying perspectives and suggesting solutions for the improvement of relations between the school and the community, First Nations and Euro-Canadian teachers sent a message that there have to be shifts in values (notably by teachers) for parent

involvement in schooling to proceed. Teachers' indication of the need for prior training in order to acquire the necessary tools that would enable them to better fit into the community is a major gap that needs filling in faculties of education. But the training of teachers and their appropriate orientation into the community involves not only theoretical knowledge or teaching methods. It requires grounding teachers in cross-cultural competence—"behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable a system, agency, and/or individual to function effectively with culturally diverse clients and communities" (Rorie, Paine, & Barger, 1996, p. 93).

The case of Brown Lake shows that parent involvement in schooling may be difficult to achieve in some First Nations communities. Where it succeeds, it can be significantly eroded by the turnover of teaching staff.

The present study supports the view that the fate of a school is increasingly tied to, and powerfully influenced by, its relationships with the community (Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1996; Nieto, 2004; Oakes & Lipton, 1999; Rogovin, 2001). Effective community-school relations should help local people to pool together those local resources that are critical and relevant to school improvement. The role of the teachers becomes a very special one in that teachers act as prisms between the community and the mainstream. The Brown Lake community and Euro-Canadian teachers have identified a range of opportunities for collaborating with each other for school improvement. In general, a well developed collaborative action plan will support a positive working partnership between teachers and parents. Here too, however, the goals for action plans may remain unattainable given the turnover of teachers.

In order to foster collaborative relations between the school and the community, there is an urgent need to flatten the pyramid of power relations that exist. For collaborative school-community relations to thrive in First Nations communities, First Nations education must accordingly be reformulated in accordance with a different, non-Eurocentric referent, and the education and training of teachers for First Nations students should be firmly divorced from any automatic association with the idea of Eurocentric schools. This echoes the arguments of Agbo (2004, p. 30) that "passing First Nations culture down to Euro-Canadian teachers is more than an objective transmission of facts" and that "the integration of teachers into First Nations communities should enable the teachers to retain a full grasp of the First Nations culture and the myriad of ways First Nations live their lives from day to day" (p. 30).

Finally, we need to learn how to accept multiple perceptions and multiple perspectives (Rogovin, 2001). The perception of collaboration should depend both on the values and exigencies in the community and on the values, dispositions, and capabilities of teachers. If we want to know how best the community can involve itself in the school, we need to provide the conditions for involvement. The school

should remove the structures and symbols that inhibit collaboration—the school fence needs to come down.

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