

An Initial Report of a Community- University Research Alliance: Community-Based Aboriginal Curriculum Initiatives: Implementation and Evaluation¹

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The purpose of this article is to describe a process of collaboration among community groups, Aboriginal organizations, and university researchers toward the goal of improving school retention and graduation rates among Aboriginal youth. As a team, our discussions initially focused on the scope and nature of the challenges facing Aboriginal youth and their communities, and later moved onto exploring funding opportunities to support a project that would allow us to work together in a formal capacity. That search led to a successful application to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada/Community-University Research Alliances (SSHRC/CURA) for the project entitled Community-Based Aboriginal Curriculum Initiatives: Implementation and Evaluation. This article outlines the research process and initiates a progress report that will be continued in a future manuscript. We will also, for those who wish to access similar funding, discuss how our team worked together to write the proposal, the challenges we faced, and the celebrations we value.

INTRODUCTION

This article outlines and reflects on a university-community alliance research project entitled *Community-Based Aboriginal Curriculum Initiatives: Implementation and Evaluation*. The research is in the fourth year of a six-year project, with an additional year having been granted near the outset. Our current participating schools and communities are to be celebrated. They are working hard to support the change process in order to create a community-based cultural approach to teaching and learning with both in-school and after-school cultural instruction. Such an approach returns to the traditional emphasis in Aboriginal communities that “it takes a village to raise a child.”

The primary goal of the *Community-Based Aboriginal Curriculum Initiatives* project is to assess the effect of integrating Aboriginal artist-educator skills and talents into the curriculum of participating schools, particularly to assess the effects of such instruction on Aboriginal students’ cognitive skills, cultural awareness, psychosocial development, identity, and self-esteem. The project involves both quantitative and qualitative methods in a six-year cross-sequential design. The major hypotheses being tested is that exposure to Aboriginal culture in the school will improve Aboriginal children’s cultural awareness and identity; this will, in turn, will increase the personal relevance and importance of the school, which will translate into positive school-related behaviours and achievement. The secondary purpose—community development—is specifically related to the enhancement of skills and talents of community members who will be involved in creating and sustaining cultural arts programs that benefit the school as well as the entire community.

RATIONALE FOR THE RESEARCH

The Aboriginal population has the fastest growing youth segment in Canada, with almost half—48 percent—of the Aboriginal population (includes Métis, First Nations on- and off-reserve, and Inuit) being under 24, compared to 31 percent of the general population in the same age group (Statistics Canada, 2008, p. 6); the median age of Canada’s Aboriginal population was noted as 27 years compared to 40 years for non-Aboriginal people. Statistics Canada has noted a 45 percent increase in the Aboriginal population between 1996 and 2006 (p. 6), compared to an increase of eight percent in the general population. In the 2006 census, Manitoba noted 175,395 Aboriginal people or 15 percent of the population; outside of the three territories, this percentage

is equalled only by Saskatchewan (Alberta has the next highest Aboriginal population at six percent). Between 2001 and 2006 Manitoba noted the fastest increase in Aboriginal population – 36 percent (p. 12). One conclusion is clear: Aboriginal young people will play an increasingly important role in the social and economic future of the country, positively or negatively, depending on our successful attention to their educational needs (among other concerns).

In spite of current demographics, Canadian society continues with systemic discriminatory practices that constrain the gifts that Aboriginal people can give to the Canadian community. While growing in numbers, Aboriginal people continue to be the most disadvantaged minority group in the country (Comeau & Santin, 1995; Centre for Aboriginal Health Research, 1998), with unique challenges to psychosocial adjustment and identity development (Arnett, 2004). The school system is not an exception to this trend; poor academic performance, low self-esteem, and high dropout rates for Aboriginal students have been noted (Brunnen, 2003; Hawthorne, 1967; MacKay & Myles, 1995). Although we have developed an awareness of the inappropriateness of “blaming the victim” (Ryan, 1973), constituents in education continue to face challenges in finding meaningful, effective ways to restructure education to serve Aboriginal students.

Several studies support positive relations between cultural and arts curriculum initiatives and academic achievement of Aboriginal students (e.g., Barnhardt, 1999; Bell, 2004; Cornett, 1999; Deasy, 2002; Fiske, 1999; Fuzessy, 1998; Slaughter & Lai, 1994; Smith, Leake, & Kamekena, 1998; Styles, 1997; Winner & Hetland, 2000). For example, participation in heritage language and cultural programs has been associated with decreased drop-out rates (Styles, 1997), increased attendance (Smith et al., 1998), and improved academic performance (Slaughter & Lai, 1994). In a review of research on the influence of arts education on academic outcomes, Morin (2004) reported that such programs enhance spatial-temporal reasoning skills, understanding of structures and structural relations, object relations, and computer programming and planning activities. Morin (2004) also reported positive relations between participation in music classes and spatial-temporal reasoning skills, the introduction of drama and improvement in language arts, including oral understanding of stories, reading readiness, reading achievement, and writing. More importantly for our purposes, these relationships were found for

both general and at-risk student populations and, particularly, for students from low-income backgrounds.

Studies on relations between arts programs and educational outcomes compare schools with and without arts and cultural programs; few compare the impact of these programs on an on-going, long-term basis, with attention to formative curricular improvement. In our SSHRC/CURA project, academic and social outcomes are being assessed over a six-year period. This project's cross-sequential design allows new student participants entering school each year of the study to be assessed and previously tested students to be re-tested over the duration of the project. In this way, both short-term and long-term developmental changes in the child associated with exposure to a culturally sensitive arts-based curriculum can be measured.

The methodology used in this project recognizes the need for attention to community talent and community development. A program of artistic teaching presentations, integrated with the curriculum in a scheduled series of learning experiences, should lead to lasting systemic improvements in cognitive and psychosocial development and self-esteem, as well as enhanced community development and improvement in relations among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Salaried support of the community artist-educators (e.g., singer-songwriters, authors, painters, sculptors, craftspeople, actors, and storytellers) as "action researchers" is provided by the grant. The artistic cultural curriculum initiatives include a component that requires continuous input and support from people within Aboriginal organizations and associations, participating schools and their communities, and university faculty members.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLABORATION

This project has evolved as an integrated community effort in regard to the planning for and participation in learning initiatives. The proposal-writing process involved workshops and meetings that honored the collaborative and reciprocal mentoring intention of the project. Participatory, engaged decision-making included university researchers and delegates from partner organizations, many of whom became research co-investigators and collaborators. These individuals, many of whom represent Aboriginal organizations, attended planning meetings and Curriculum Vitae writing workshops and/or had individual and/or small group meetings with the principal in-

investigator to discuss the program and their participation. During the planning meetings, small group discussion ensued around each focus area of the research proposal application, followed by formal meetings with the whole assembly. Telephone calls, and e-mail messages and attachments (individually and using a list-serve) served to keep people informed and to integrate their suggestions into the proposal.

People of Aboriginal ancestry comprised the majority of our project's research team (22 of the 33 members) at the proposal-writing stage, and almost everyone who has been added since is Aboriginal. Significant changes have been made in the personnel within the initial team, with nine of the original people leaving the positions then held or moving departments with the same employer. One of our participating school divisions had five school principals and their staffs enthusiastically working for participation in the project for over a year. In June of 2006, the elected Board of that division turned down participation after many months of negotiating with divisional and school administrators, which left five more collaborators, including the superintendent, formally out of the project.

It is important to note that to date only one public school division, following the request of a First Nation whose children attend its schools, has elected to participate in the project. This lack of participation has limited the input of formal partners whose organizational role is to serve the needs of the public school system. We had not fully appreciated the political nature of the project at the time of our proposal, nor had we anticipated the degree to which our program would be perceived as challenging the status quo. We had been naïve in our expectations, thinking that the educational system would be more open to systemic change to meet the needs of Aboriginal students. We were, however, more than "adding-on" Aboriginal artists; we were integrating their skills and talents into the curriculum, an initiative that involved community members working closely within schools and with teachers. At the time of writing the proposal, everyone was speaking to their espoused theory; when the grant was awarded we found out whose espoused theory matched their theory-in-use.

There are several members of our continuing team who, from the outset, saw their on-going role as advisory, and who could not spend time on the day-to-day aspects of the project; for the most part, those people held executive positions in their organizations. The following organizations joined as

formal partners within our research initiative: a) the Aboriginal Education Directorate (AED), b) the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba (AGSM), c) the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC), d) the Brandon Friendship Centre, e) the Brandon School Division, f) the Brandon University Northern Teachers Education Program (BUNTEP), g) the Council of Indigenous Elders, h) Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism, i) Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, j) the Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre (MFNERC), k) the Manitoba Indian Education Association (MIEA), l) the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF), m) the Program of the Education of Native Teachers (PENT), n) Sioux Valley School, and o) the West Region Tribal Council (WRTC). All partnering organizations lent advice at the SSHRC/CURA grant application stage, with many having representatives attending the five team planning meetings and, if a representative joined the research team, attending some Curriculum Vitae writing workshops. Currently, the most active partner is Sioux Valley School, which is also a participant school and is the furthest along in integrating the change initiative. Beyond that, in an advisory capacity, MFNERC is the most active, as all our participating schools are the result of initiative by First Nation communities.

RESEARCH OUTCOMES AND KEY ACTIVITIES

The methods for addressing the following interrelated outcomes will be detailed in the section after their listing. The major outcomes of this SSHRC/CURA research project are: a) An increase in academic motivation, including increasing positive attitude toward school and a sense of belonging to the school; b) An increase in student retention in school, including increasing course completion rates and graduation levels; c) An improvement in student school performance, including enhancing academic achievement and student involvement in all aspects of school (e.g., extracurricular activities, musicals, governance); and d) An increase in psychosocial development and cultural identity, including attention to future goals and plans, social and cognitive development, and decision-making and problem-solving skills.

The Community-Based Aboriginal Curriculum Initiatives program involves both action research and a formalized data-collection and evaluative component. The process of the research and its methodological description follow.

Participating schools were selected from southwest Manitoba, with all Aboriginal community schools and public schools in the area invited to apply.

While within the proposal we suggested that we would select ten schools, we actually have five schools participating, all as a result of First Nation initiative, although the children from one of the communities attend school in a public school division and one school has recently changed from band-operated to public jurisdiction. All participating schools have signed a Memorandum of Understanding that outlines mutual expectations during the time of the study.

Student research assistants (RAs) are being chosen using an identification and selection process. Most RAs are being recruited and referred by one of our research collaborators in Brandon University's First Nation and Aboriginal Counselling (FNAC) program. Thus far, the RAs have primarily been responsible for the formal data collection in the five participating schools, with some office administration tasks. RAs are guided in the support they offer to the research components of the project, engaging in more complex duties as their skill level increases. Currently, one RA is participating in the design of a new course entitled Aboriginal Literature for Children and Youth.

Artist-educators are identified and selected by the participating school community. As well as being willing to share their knowledge, skills, and talents, every artist-educator must be a good role model for children and youth.

A *community-based coordinator* from each school community is required to coordinate the school-based activities, and is responsible for the day-to-day facilitation of the program in the school. Coordinators organize artists' visits to the classrooms, plan and participate in professional development in-services, and attend on-going professional development meetings throughout the year. These individuals are designated as "research personnel and support staff" and receive some compensation. As part of their role, school-based coordinators are expected to help artist-educators and school colleagues when the artist is working in the school, and to facilitate program assessments. The importance of the coordinator cannot be overstated; they must be strong people from the community who value their culture, who are committed to its integration in the school, who know and can mentor the inclusion of community artist-educators, and who are passionate agents for positive outcomes in the education of Aboriginal children and youth.

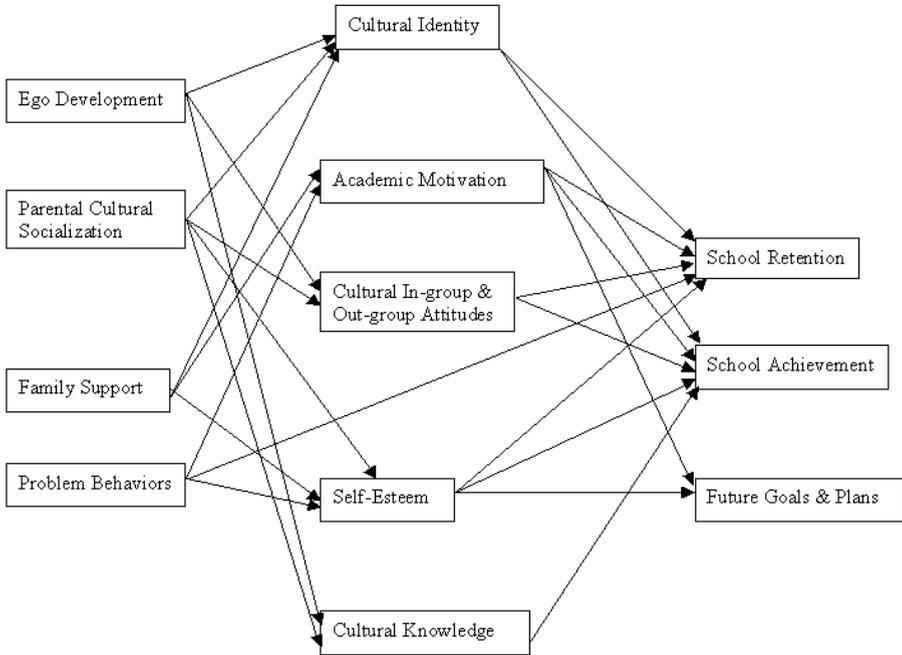
RESEARCH STRATEGIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Ongoing documentation and assessment of integrative, artistic curricular materials into the larger curriculum is an integral component of the project. Expertise is being offered by the principal investigator, co-investigators, collaborators, school staff involved in the project, the artist-educators, and community members. Although the artist-educators may be skilled in a particular medium, they are being assisted in the manner in which that medium might be developed and contributed to enhance the education of Aboriginal children and youth.

With reference to assessment and evaluation, information about students is being gathered from school records and directly from students. Attention is given to: increased cognitive development and student learning outcomes in relation to the curricular objectives; improved school attendance and retention; and positive changes in cultural identity, academic motivation, attitudes about in-group members, cultural knowledge, and psychosocial development, including self-esteem. Data related to assessment of cultural-curricular activities, as outlined above, is connected to measurement of student learning outcomes. Information from all student participants is being analyzed using a cross-sequential design. In addition to quantitative methodologies, researchers also gather qualitative data in selected schools. Focus groups and selected interviews with teachers, students, support staff, parents, and community members, most as informal ongoing processes, assess perceptions of student self-esteem and increased capacity to make healthy life choices. The principal investigator interacts continuously with the school-based coordinators. Results of data analysis, including participant observation and focus group interviews, as well as the supervision of the artist-educator, is guiding the mentorship of current working artist-educators and teachers.

Elaboration of the illustrated testing model follows. First, to assess the major hypotheses of the study, cultural identity, awareness, and knowledge are being placed within the context of developmental and social psychological distal and proximal factors known to influence, directly or indirectly, outcome variables of interest: school achievement, attendance, and hope—children's future goals and plans. Based on cognitive developmental (e.g., Loevinger, 1976, 1998; Selman, 1980) and psychosocial theories (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966, 2002; Phinney, 1992; Phinney & Rosenthal, 1992), hypothesized relations between proximal, distal, and outcome measures are given in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Structural Model Relating Distal and Proximal Variables to Outcome Measures



At the distal (more distant) stage, *level of ego development* (the degree to which an individual is developing an integrated and coherent sense of self), *parental cultural socialization* (importance parents attach to the transmission and continuation of Aboriginal identity to future generations), *family support for school-related behaviours*, and *current level of problem behaviours* serve as distal predictors of proximal variables and as possible direct predictors of outcome measures. Among African American children, Sellars and his colleagues (1998) reported positive associations between cultural identity and academic achievement, positive relations between family support and school outcomes (also see Connell, Spencer & Aber, 1994; Luster & McAdoo, 1996), and negative relations with problem behaviours (Schmit et al., 1999; Nelson & Crick, 1999). In the proposed model, distal variables are related in psychologically meaningful ways to five proximal variables: *level of cultural identity* (degree to which Aboriginal children identify with their cultural

group membership); *academic motivation* (identification with and desire to succeed at school); *attitudes toward in-group and out-group members*; *self-esteem*; and *cultural knowledge* (children's knowledge about customs and practices of Aboriginal people). As was the case for distal variables, relations between proximal (closer) variables and school outcome measures enjoy empirical support. Sellars et al. (1998) reported that adolescents who strongly identified with their African-American heritage did better at school than those not strongly identified, and Corenblum, Annis, & Young (1996) found that Aboriginal children who had more positive attitudes toward in-group than out-group members attributed the task success of in-group members more to ability than luck. While the causal role of self-esteem in facilitating school success is ambiguous, the role of self-esteem as mediating between distal variables and outcome measures is better established (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003).

To assess the impact of Aboriginal artist-educators on measures of Aboriginal children's *school retention*, *academic achievement*, and *future goals and plans*, the project utilizes both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. While the reliability and validity of measures assessing academic achievement, as well as ego development, cultural identity, self-esteem, and attitudes toward in-group and out-group members are well established (Corenblum & Annis, 1993; Gfeller, 1994; Harter, 1982; Sellars et al., 1998; Westenberg, Blasi, & Cohen, 1998) and, in some cases, used successfully with Aboriginal children and adolescents (Corenblum, 2003; Fryberg & Markus, 2003; Newman, 2004), other measures, such as those for parental cultural socialization, cultural knowledge, and family support for school-related behaviours have been specifically developed for this project.

Assessment procedures have involved the following: prior to the start of the program of artist-educator visits, children in selected schools have, as a baseline measure, completed assessment scales of the variables as listed in Figure 1. In addition, once a year quantitative measures are being used to assess both the short and long term impact of the intervention of cultural curriculum initiatives on outcome variables. Throughout the program, focus group meetings of university researchers and community-based coordinators mentor the evolution of the program and plan for supportive initiatives (e.g., professional development, university courses, community cultural celebrations, exhibit at art gallery). As well, both teachers and artist-educators

complete checklists following each in-school classroom visit that invite their input and feedback about the session. The principal investigator constantly talks to coordinators, school staff, and artists to encourage, support, and improve the program.

THE FIRST THREE YEARS: AN INITIAL REFLECTION

The purpose of this section of the article is to provide an initial reflective accounting of the first three years of our project; details regarding testing and qualitative data will be elaborated in a future manuscript to be submitted to this journal. To meet the objective of a formative program assessment, two aspects will be elaborated. The first has to do with structure: the team who originally wrote the proposal has been expanded to include more people, creating organizational changes that transform the team, initially at least, into a group. The second recognizes that a program of action research—that is, the introduction of an intervention and the evaluation of its effects—requires extensive time for readiness work, which we had underestimated, resulting in an evolving project that is not nearly as tidy as anticipated within the proposal.

We were informed of our successful grant application in early December 2004. The challenge of maintaining a sustainable team immediately became apparent as we began the project. Some participants held executive positions in their organizations that allowed time for proposal writing and advising, but little time for the day-to-day fieldwork. Several of our team members had assumed other positions, and their new assignments did not allow formal time for the project; some had moved away from the area. The knowledge that every original team member had directed toward the writing had resulted in a successful application. It became a challenge to actively engage the original team as we began the long process of school readiness, and then settled into the day-to-day work of the project initiatives within the communities.

Our first implementation meeting following the announcement, in January 2005, was well attended. We reviewed our project, focussing on the manner in which schools would be invited to apply, how our research would unfold, and the necessity for community meetings. We created sub-committees and everyone chose committees upon which to serve. Invitational letters to schools went out to all qualifying First Nation and public school divisions

in early February. We worked with the Manitoba Government Employees Union (MGEU) on campus to develop a job description for an administrative assistant, advertised, and hired a capable, talented person. Many of our team members also attended our formal announcement celebrations in April 2005, which was followed by a meeting that reviewed the progress of the project in the first few months. Since that time, the frequency of general meetings that included all initial partners have declined and, at present, are not being held. Replacing those face-to-face meetings is a process that involves dissemination of formal reports to all partners, and on-going, one-on-one meetings with partners who are more closely involved with the project (e.g., MFNERC). Most members of the revised team are from the schools and communities that are participating in the grant. Each of the current participating schools is also developing its own unique approach to program implementation that is responsive to the needs of the community. It is proving to be challenging, given geographical distance, to create an integrated team that includes regular interaction among the participants in each community.

All change takes time. With reference to our research, the program involves the integration of the work of the Aboriginal artist educator into the curriculum rather than the 'adding-on' of the activity; thus, there is significant work involved in planning for that curricular integration. All schools have progressed more with after-school initiatives, as well as with in-school 'cultural days' events. In-class artist-educator integration is successful with some teachers, but is slower to mentor overall.

At the time of writing, the initial baseline data gathering and an additional year's testing have been completed. We are currently mentoring the artist-educator work both for after-school activities and within the classrooms. While some communities are further along than others, all have found that the introducing of after-school activities is a good way to reach the children and to build awareness within staff of the importance of the program. Several staffing changes within communities have translated into interruptions in the program, and even a lack of awareness or understanding, in some instances, of the opportunities available. On the other hand, we are developing a much stronger program in each community as the schools are identifying and appointing dedicated community-based coordinators.

Recently, at a cultural day celebration in one of the high schools, the students enjoyed activities with many of the artists they had already seen in class.

They set up a teepee, learned of the significance of the sweat lodge, practiced archery, made dream-catchers, did beading and quillwork, heard storytellers (one who told of the ceremony of name-giving in the culture), played a “language bowl” game that involved knowing the Dakota language, and made and enjoyed a traditional lunch of elk stew, bannock, and saskatoon pudding. The final afternoon saw a celebration of dance and drumming. Several middle-years students, who with community-based artists had participated for several months in a drumming group, performed at the gathering. One of the young dancers had made her own dress with the assistance of another community-based artist. Everyone joined in for several of the dances. On this final day, students also received awards for attendance and for being good students. The youth who received the top award, prior to his in-school participation with cultural activities and positive community models, had made negative choices and displayed passive resistance to learning. Can we say, for sure, that it was the community itself that allowed this young man to see other and more positive choices? I believe that we can. When he received his award, along with three other students who also received awards, two of whom were also male, they and their teachers and mentors visibly glowed. Everyone in the gym lined up to shake their hands; their achievements were school and community achievements, and everyone celebrated with them.

CONCLUSION

With reference to the stated outcomes of any grant, there can be a discontinuity between what is outlined in the proposal and what can happen when the work begins. However, after carefully articulating in the proposal the manner in which the project is going to unfold, grant writers may begin to believe that things can actually happen in that manner and within the timeframe outlined, and may judge themselves harshly when the process takes more time than anticipated. While determination toward the outcomes is absolutely necessary, flexibility in discerning the way to best achieve those outcomes is equally as crucial. While flexibility in outcome—creation of a culturally relevant education for Aboriginal students—would compromise the project and trifle with the future of these children and youth, determination in thinking that there is only “one best way” to achieve that outcome would quickly destroy the collaborative nature of our research and threaten the longevity and worth of our project. The challenge is in recognizing where

one must maintain one's determination and where one must be flexible. The credibility and sustainability of our project depends on our knowing when one, or the other, is necessary. Fortunately for our team, the SSHRC/CURA midterm adjudication committee judged us with appreciation and grace; we were approved for the final three years of funding.

The difficulty with collaborative research projects, particularly those that involve research participants from diverse backgrounds and interests who are learning to work together, is that process and outcomes are both slow and unpredictable. The necessity of collaboration towards achieving a common purpose has to do with the potential for longevity of its positive outcomes, which can never really be understood, especially while in the midst of the work, let alone appreciated.

This article has involved a review of a research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), through the Community-University Research Alliances (CURA) program. It may seem, given the full three years and more, that we have accomplished more in terms of the process of our research than the product. That criticism, if it were levied, does not take into account that second-order, deeper change in the process of an education system that will serve to validate Aboriginal children and youth will take time. Our team thinks that it may even take more than six years to address the challenges and show significant quantitative statistical outcomes. But there is no doubt that we are making a qualitative difference for the children and youth who are connecting to school in new ways, for community members who are participating within the school and finding their knowledge respected and honoured, and for school staff who are excited about the opportunities to incorporate Aboriginal culture in the students' learning experiences.

NOTES

- 1 The conceptualization and writing of the proposal for our awarded grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) was a team effort that involved many people. We wish to acknowledge our research team and many others from our partnering organizations who helped to direct our purposeful writing and who provided continuous input and feedback. The stated authors are the principal investigator (research applicant) and two of the co-applicants. The contributing partnering organizations are listed within the manuscript. The full list of co-applicants and collaborators who participated

in the writing is as follows: Betty J. Abigosis, Eugene R. Blackbird, Dorothy M. Church, Samuel W. Corrigan, Erla G. Cyr, Frank Deer, Noella Eagle, Aldin R. Foy, Shelley R. Hasinoff, Kenneth J. Horton, Lorne C. Keeper, Delvina Kejick, Nellie R. Kopitz, Julie Ann Kniskern, Leah LaPlante, Sandra L. Malyon, Catherine L. Mattes, Kandy McCorrister, Gail E. McDonald, Lorraine McKay, Donna M. Michaels, Georgina Nepinak, M. Florence Paynter, Sherry L. Peden, Denise M. S. Préfontaine, Brian G. Ranville, Leon Simard, Vince R. Stoneman, Brenda I. Wastasecoot, and Jennifer J. Woodbury.

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