

DR. STIRLING MCDOWELL  
*Foundation*  
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RESEARCH INTO TEACHING



## **TEACHING AND LEARNING RESEARCH EXCHANGE**

# Addressing Challenges That Impede the Success of Aboriginal Students at Cochrane High School

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# Executive Summary

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Students of Aboriginal heritage continue to be over-represented among those not succeeding in or completing school in the Saskatchewan education system. At Cochrane High School in Regina, approximately 50% of self-declared Aboriginal students leave school between Grade 10 and 11. Saskatchewan Department of Learning statistics indicate that approximately 50% of Aboriginal students who reach Grade 10 go on to complete Grade 12, in comparison to the completion rate for all students who reach Grade 10, which is closer to 80%.

A research team at Cochrane High School wanted to develop an understanding of the challenges faced by students of Aboriginal heritage and generate theories of why Aboriginal students are leaving school prior to Grade 11 and 12. The research team at Cochrane conducted a qualitative study with twelve students of Aboriginal heritage. The study targeted students who have dropped out of school, students who have dropped out and returned, and students who have remained in school and have been successful. The data collected from these students has served to drive school-wide action research from which a plan is being developed. The plan will outline supports that affirm Aboriginal students' culture and experiences and respond to their needs and ambitions. The research team believes that as educators, we need to re-examine our practices and challenge our existing beliefs and understanding of educating youth in our schools.

Each of the twelve student interviews was transcribed and the interview data were analyzed by the research team. As reflection on and examination of the data was carried out, commonalities and themes emerged. They included racism, knowledge, self-concept and identity, support systems, and substance abuse.

This research project was undertaken to address the large number of students who are dropping out of high school, most specifically at Cochrane High School. One of our main research goals was to look at what administrators, teachers and community partners can do to lower this high drop out rate. In addition, the project addresses the need to plan for the projected change in demographics in the province of Saskatchewan. "By the year 2016, it is projected that close to 45% of the children entering Kindergarten in the province will be of Aboriginal ancestry" (Saskatchewan Learning Projections, unpublished, 2004).

The following list of recommendations was compiled from the data collected:

1. Enhance students' sense of belonging in schools through:
  - student empowerment,
  - safe community,
  - acknowledgement of achievement,
  - spirit building,
  - facility ownership, and
  - relationship building.

2. Provide opportunities for professional development in the area of First Nations education.
3. Develop and provide programming aimed at the needs of the students as voiced by the youth and community.
4. Provide experiential learning and curricula that are both relevant and meaningful.
5. Create equity of opportunity for all students through learning and extra-curricular activities.
6. Examine the relevance of our own teaching. Use varying teaching styles to meet the needs of all learners.
7. Examine hiring practices for Saskatchewan schools with a view to making the number of Aboriginal teachers and administrators proportional to the number of Aboriginal students.

# Final Report

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## BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following facts provide some necessary background information to the research:

- Approximately 50% of self-declared Aboriginal students leave Cochrane High School between Grade 10 and 11
- 38% of the school population is of Aboriginal ancestry
- Students of Aboriginal ancestry: Grade 9 – 52.5%; Grade 10 – 47.2%; Grade 11 – 23.7%; Grade 12 – 22%

*The Auditor General of Canada's (2000) report confirmed a number of the RCAP's [Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples] findings. In 2000 only 37% of First Nations students completed high school compared with 65% of the general population ... The Aboriginal student dropout rate peaked at 90.5% in 1981, but despite various interventions the rate among Aboriginal youth at age 15 remains at over 60%. (Bazylak, 2002, p. 134)*

## OUR RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Why are 50% of Aboriginal students leaving Cochrane High School between Grade 10 and 11?
- What can the administrators, teachers, and community partners of Cochrane High School do to retain and support Aboriginal students in the school?

## OUR RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. Develop an understanding of challenges faced by Aboriginal students.
2. Listen to and value student voice.
3. Generate theories of why students of Aboriginal heritage leave school prior to Grade 11 and 12.
4. Generate theories of why Aboriginal students are successful at Cochrane High School.

5. Develop an action plan to engage Aboriginal students at Cochrane High School.
6. Encourage Cochrane staff to re-examine their practices and challenge their existing beliefs, understandings, and practices.

## GATHERING THE DATA

*Qualitative research is exceptionally suited for exploration, for beginning to understand a group or phenomenon. Such explorations often result in development of new theories. (Gay & Airasian, 2003)*

Both qualitative and grounded research methods were used throughout the study. The original goal was to conduct interviews with fifteen current and former students. These students were to include individuals from three groups:

- Group 1 – Five students of Aboriginal heritage who had dropped out of Cochrane
- Group 2 – Five students of Aboriginal heritage who had dropped out and returned to school
- Group 3 – Five students who remained registered at Cochrane throughout their high school years.

Our study sample turned out to be smaller. It included four students with the potential to graduate, three continuing students, and five students who had dropped out of school with plans to return. Contact with the students by telephone was unsuccessful. We then used ‘moccasin telegraph’ (word of mouth), which resulted in much greater success.

All interviews were completed at the school in one of two locations. Either the guidance office or the alumni room was used.

Each student signed a letter consenting to participation in the study and was advised that the interview was confidential. Each participant was allowed to leave the study at any time. At the end of each interview, each student received a gift of a food hamper.

Interviews were conducted by two individuals – a practicum student in her final semester and a teacher with a master’s degree. The original plan was to have the practicum student complete all of the interviews. However, due to difficulties in locating the students who had dropped out, this was not possible. As a result, a second interviewer was needed. Therefore, the first seven interviews differed slightly from the last five.

Two sets of interview questions were developed. Upon completion of the first two interviews we realized that the wording of the first set of questions was inappropriate. This resulted in the rewriting of the questions using a more open-ended approach to allow for further probing and storytelling.

Our team wanted to honour oral traditions and students’ voices. According to Graveline, oral traditions are sacred. She writes: “Traditionalists believe in the

power of expression through voice – words are believed to be sacred” (Graveline, 1998, p.41). Garrett confirms Graveline’s statement as follows:

*We see the continuity of the Circle of Life in stories of images and experiences that flow from the heart, and we begin to arrive at a better understanding of where we stand in relation to everything around us.*  
(Garrett, 1996, p.19)

## PARTICIPANT STATISTICS

- Twelve people participated in the study.
- One of the twelve participants graduated.
- Five participants were parents.
- Participants’ ancestry was as follows:
  - Cree – five
  - Assinboine – three
  - Saulteau – two
  - Métis – two.
- Ten participants had dropped out of school previously.
- The age range of participants was seventeen to twenty years of age.
- Six males and six females participated in the study.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND THEMES

Each of the twelve interviews was recorded and transcribed. After transcription, the interviews were analyzed and notes written. The researchers were conscious that “...data collection and data analysis are tightly interwoven processes, and must occur alternately...” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 59). Once reflection and examination of the data were completed, commonalities and themes emerged. They are described here under the following headings: racism, knowledge, self-concept and identity, support systems, and substance abuse.

*In developing a grounded theory we are trying to capture as much of the complexity and movement in the real world that is possible, while knowing we are never able to grasp all of it.* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 111)

### 1. RACISM

In the interviews it became apparent that the participants were struggling with various issues related to racism. They were unable to identify directly whether or not they were involved in a racial incident.

*... didn’t really think about it then. But I think about it now. That they either didn’t like me because I wasn’t the same color as them or I don’t know.”*

Garrett (1996) points out that: According to Little Soldier (1985), “marginal” American Indians are the ones most likely to experience a variety of difficulties resulting from cultural conflict. “They may become trapped between their birthright and the dominant society, losing touch with the former but not feeling in the latter ... {leading to} conflicts and resulting in serious identity crisis. (Little Soldier, 1985, p.187)

*... Kind of, but my dad doesn't like talking about that kind of stuff, I don't want to sound rude or anything but he just like admitting that he's got native in him and so it all comes through the genes. ... he just doesn't like to think that he's got native in him ... he tells me that he doesn't have native in him and it's all a lie and everything.*

Racism can be overt or covert in nature. It can be experienced either as individual or institutional racism. The Indian youth are most likely to experience a sense of being “caught between two worlds” as they struggle for identity and a “sense of place” (Garrett, 1985).

*... some other guys were like 'you Indian' ... I'm not sure if she heard it. I was just going to say something back, but I just minded my own business.*

As the youth struggle to deal with racial incidents that they have experienced, they second-guess their self-worth and place in society. They may recognize an experience as a racial incident, but they do not have the tools or the wherewithall to deal with it directly. Youth are trapped by the self-fulfilling prophecy. The cycle is perpetuated, they have not had their needs met, and they have acquired a negative sense of self and world.

*Deprived of opportunities for genuine productivity, lured into consumptive roles, young people come to believe that their lives make little difference to the world. Those who feel the most powerless develop distorted ways of thinking, which psychologists label as external locus of control or lack of personal efficacy. (Brokenleg, 1998, p. 39)*

## **2. KNOWLEDGE**

What makes a good teacher?

*... someone who helps you, works with you...*

*... they just help you out lots...*

*... just someone who is more thoughtful and someone you can talk to...*

*... to treat people with respect...*

*... a teacher who listens and helps you...*

*... probably their personality, they like to laugh and stuff like that...*

*... she was trying to be wicked but she couldn't...*

Students value caring teachers who build meaningful relationships with them. Students value teachers who are knowledgeable, flexible and humourous.

*Caring teachers are willing to learn about their students and their students' cultures as well as to teach students. From what they learn, caring teachers adjust their teaching to fit the cultural background of their students.* (Reyhner, 1992, p.5)

According to Akan, "A good Elder or teacher will use the four teaching principles to 'inform, teach, guide and encourage a student. It takes time, effort and care." (1999, p. 33)

*Humour is used to destabilize the individual who wishes to see her – or himself as 'better', more powerful than others. The human who wishes to forget his or her dependence on other life forms as he or she exerts 'power over' or superiority is challenged through humour. Humility is revered in a Traditional worldview. The ability to see oneself as dependent on and interconnected with other forms of life is an aspect of intertribal wisdom reinforced through humour and stories of reversal.* (Graveline, 1998, p. 214)

### **3. CURRICULUM NEEDS**

*... I would like to see some more [Native Studies] maybe show a bit more pride in the Native people around here...*

*... I think that anybody who knows lots about it, they have the right to teach it...*

*... non-native teacher teaching it, is kind of stupid, they don't know what's going on and they just read it from a book.*

*... it doesn't really feel right because they don't know the whole story...they don't know what is happening, what is going on...*

*... I kinda wouldn't believe what they are saying, because what they know is from a book. If they would just get right into it, things that are not told in books, then it would be interesting...maybe they would even learn something new themselves...*

*The Elder values perseverance in school and in life and encourages us to take the best from the 'white' teachings, or formal education, and to incorporate this knowledge into Saulteaux or First Nations teachings.* (Akan, 1999, p.28)

Students value Aboriginal educators. Students recognize the importance of learning traditional languages – making connections with culture and previous generations. Caring teachers adjust their teaching to fit the cultural background of their students.

#### 4. SELF-CONCEPT AND IDENTITY

A meaningful relationship with a significant adult is an important factor in the student's success. Students need to feel a sense of belonging – to feel a part of the school community. A sense of mastery and self-worth is needed through development of learning strengths. Developing a bicultural identity supports students as they discover where they belong within mainstream society.

*According to LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerton (1993, p.99), it is possible for an individual to have a sense of belonging in two cultures without compromising his or her sense of cultural identity. (Garrett, 1996, p.5)*

*As one Indian elder put it, 'in order to truly know your place in the Circle, you must recognize where you stand in relation to everything around you.' (Garrett, 1996, p.6)*

*The problem in schools, he says, is partly one of 'materialism without spiritualism.' Students are taught how to earn money and make a living, but not trained how to handle material success. (Akan, 1999, p. 39)*

#### 5. HOPES AND DREAMS

*... to be a nurse. University, taking upgrading and then go on. To raise my daughter, the best I can...*

*... I just like to graduate...*

*... I hope to finish high school...and become a police officer...*

#### 6. REALIZATION

*... school's good but it just didn't fit me. I think that tutoring would be good for me because [I'm] used to lesser people...*

*... know that school has to be part of their life if they want to get somewhere in life...*

*... I don't want my baby knowing or thinking that I'm on welfare for life. I want him to know me as having a job.*

*... I just had a feast for my Dad's sister, she's deceased. [I'm] paying more attention to her dream that I know every native person has a gift and they should pay more attention to that...*

*... you've gotta treat people with respect, like elders, and you gotta respect every culture."*

*Youth who have learned to expect failure seek to escape further shame and embarrassment by working very hard at avoiding work. They challenge adults, endure punishment, and even go AWOL from home or school, having learned that failure is never as bitter if one does not try. (Brendtro, Brokenleg, Van Bockern, 2002, p. 93)*

*Adults may actually believe that they are acting in the best interest of the child, but there is a quality of paternalism that borders on oppression. Human service professionals have a long history of patronizing or infantilizing or de-humanizing the very persons they are pledged to serve. While they may be unaware of their basic disrespect, young persons are not. (Brendtro, Brokenleg, Van Bockern, 2002, pp. 85)*

## 7. SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Students identified family, community and elders as playing a significant role with regards to their choices for education. The students' chance of staying in school or returning to school increased when their support systems valued education.

Support systems at the school level must be in response to the needs of the students and students need to feel they are able to access in-school support systems. Support systems need to be inclusive and student-centered. They should include access to the knowledge and cultural wisdom of the elders.

*Our Ancestors taught us that those with knowledge have a responsibility to pass it on. Teachers are individuals who have taken upon themselves to become especially knowledgeable about the world and its fundamental relationships, a knowledge they then must pass on to others. In cultures in which experience is particularly valued, elders are expected to pass their knowledge on to younger people by both word and example. The special regard for elders as teachers, historians and sources of authority underlies ethnographic accounts by 'outsiders' (Cruikshank, 1992), as well as contemporary discussion by 'insiders' – Aboriginal people concerned with incorporating Traditional values into present day life ... (Graveline, 1998, p.63-64)*

*The extended family members of the participants sometimes acted as positive and negative role models but either way it had an effect on the students' perceptions of success. As they observed their family succeed or fail, the participants were able to search for their own path in life. (Bazylak, 2002, p.140)*

*... He's at the Adult Learning Centre. He got his business certificate. Basically he's the one who encouraged me to stay in school. He always kept on telling me if you don't have a ride, I drive you to school and pick you up... for as young as he is and the kind of background that he came from, I can say he did pretty good for himself. He was in and out of jail, drugs and alcohol. [He cleaned up his life.] That's why I admire him; always listen to what he has to say.*

*... They [Grandparents] used to tell me, do what my heart tells me to do, education is not bad, it will get you from one place to another, all you need is a piece of paper...*

*... My family. They would always make sure I went to school and they would ask me why I didn't go to school...I needed them to remind me to go to school."*

*American Indian parent and community interest in education is high. Indian parents ask for opportunities for input, they ask to know about and*

*to share what they can contribute regarding the curriculum, to know about special opportunities, and to share their ways to help the children. The American Indian cultures are not cultures of apathy. 'I am important in the education of my child' was the single most consistent statement of agreement in the survey, regardless of type of school attended. Education is a strong value, and seen as a source of future hope for the children and for the communities. (Robinson-Zanartu & Majel-Dixon, 1996, p. 47)*

## **8. SUBSTANCE ABUSE**

The use of substances is a coping mechanism for students unable to deal with daily challenges of life. Problems may arise as a result of self-identity, self-esteem issues or disenfranchisement from the education system or society.

*... being on drugs and going to school ruins your life, it ruins your brain, you say you want to finish school, you say you want to do really good but if something stresses you out and you have low self esteem you go out and you do drugs and the next day you're sitting like I don't want to do this I don't want to be here, I just want to do what I did yesterday and it just destroys life when you come into school stoned and if something happens like a teacher tries to tell you to work you're just like you know flip them the bird and I don't have to be here and you walk out.*

*Sici identified drugs and alcohol as factors that caused her failure in school...*

*"Drugs and alcohol was one of my biggest pressures in this school. And I think that was my serious downfall, was giving into it and just keep giving into it."*

*Drug and alcohol use provided a challenge for the participants. The lure of substance abuse or self-medication proves to be too much for many students. (Bazylak, 2001, p.143)*

*In the matter of drugs and alcohol, the elder is specific about the dangers of their use. The use of these substances will be one of the many things that youth may bump into or encounter at some time during their lives. Society makes alcohol readily available to them and condones its use through the use of advertising and in the media. Without moralizing about addiction and/or about racial, genetic slurs related to Native people and the use of alcohol, the elder keeps the talk simple by implying that the body does not need alcohol or street drugs to survive; therefore, do not use them. Alcohol is another 'borrowed cultural product' that we should respect (fear) but we must not accept it uncritically. The use of drugs and alcohol has been killing our people and weakening our culture for a long time, and so he sees no dignity in the use of a product that is destructive to our way of life. The soundest ethical practice is total abstinence, so this elder is an abstainer by choice and sees this as the best example we can set for youth. (Akan, 1999, p.36)*

# LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

We only had one student graduate at the time of this study. As a result our research team could not assess and generate theories as to why students were successful at graduating.

Two of our tapes could not be transcribed because they were not audible for dictation.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

This research project was undertaken to address the large number of students who are dropping out of high school – most specifically, at Cochrane High School in Regina. One of our main research goals was to look at what administrators, teachers and community partners can do to lower the high drop out rate. In addition, we needed to be aware in order to plan for the projected change in demographics in the province of Saskatchewan. “By the year 2016, it is projected that close to 45% of the children entering Kindergarten in the province will be of Aboriginal ancestry” (Saskatchewan Learning Projections, unpublished, 2004).

The following list of recommendations was compiled from the data collected:

1. Enhance a sense of belonging in schools through:
  - student empowerment,
  - safe community,
  - acknowledgement of achievement,
  - spirit building,
  - facility ownership, and
  - relationship building.
2. Provide school staffs with opportunities for professional development in the area of First Nations education.
3. Develop and provide school programming aimed at the needs of the students as voiced by the youth and community.
4. Provide experiential learning and curricula that are both relevant and meaningful.
5. Create equity of opportunity for all students through learning and extra-curricular activities.
6. As teachers, examine the relevance of our own teaching. Use varying teaching styles to meet the needs of all learners.
7. Examine hiring practices for Saskatchewan schools so that Aboriginal teachers and administrators are proportionate to student demographics.

*Eddie Belleroy, a Cree Elder ... "Grandfather, what is the purpose of life?" After a long time in thought, the old man looked up and said, "Grandson, children are the purpose of life. We were once children and someone cared for us, and now it is our time to care. (Brendtro, Brokenleg, Van Bockern, 2002, p. 46)*

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