

DR. STIRLING MCDOWELL  
*Foundation*  
FOR  
RESEARCH INTO TEACHING



**TEACHING AND LEARNING  
RESEARCH EXCHANGE**

Respecting and  
Responding to the  
Voices of Aboriginal  
Students

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# Summary of the Project

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The major purpose of this study was to document the views of two discrete groups of Aboriginal students with respect to their experiences associated with the educational system. This study was largely qualitative in nature, and employed focus group discussions (i.e., talking circles), coupled with a series of in-depth interviews with individual students. The research team was comprised of two Aboriginal teachers and one non-Aboriginal university professor from the University of Saskatchewan.

There were a number of significant components to this study. First, we hoped to inform the community of scholars about the delivery of education from the Aboriginal perspective. Second, we wanted to see if the findings were consistent with similar studies. Third, the study intended to provide data on what some Aboriginal students considered important or detrimental in our school environment. Fourth, we hoped that the study's findings might inform the various levels of governments about ways to strengthen their collective incentives to "promote anti-racist programs". Last, as educators, we need to constantly improve the quality of education for all students, and especially for those who have been historically neglected, exploited, or marginalized. This study was a modest, but important, effort in promoting positive educational change with respect to Aboriginal students.

# Research Question

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How do Aboriginal students, both in the mainstream and “alternative” programs, identify factors which contribute to their success, or lack of success, in the school system?

## Some of the Specific Objectives of the Study

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The study aimed to:

- document how some Aboriginal students (enrolled in public school classes, as well as those in an “alternative program”) view the role of school in their lives;
- document how Aboriginal students view the notion of “success” per se;
- determine which factors contribute to their academic and personal success;
- determine which factors (or obstacles) hinder their academic and personal success; and
- develop some suggestions which would enhance the learning environment for Aboriginal students.

# Gathering and Analyzing Data

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It should be noted that given the nature of the study, the research team was comprised of two Aboriginal teachers and one non-Aboriginal university professor. Originally, Dr. Lenore Stiffarm, a university professor specializing in Aboriginal pedagogy, was part of our team. Due to medical reasons, however, she was unable to be involved in the project.

Data for the study were collected through audio-taped conversations emerging from talking circles, a series of in-depth interviews with individual students, field notes, and general observations. The on-site interviewing was conducted by the two Aboriginal teachers, but all members of the team were asked for their input regarding the analysis of these data.

The data collection process was designed so that participants could feel free to express their candid feelings by sharing stories of their experiences. In the initial stage, using the format of “talking circles”, we collected students’ stories and feelings vis-à-vis their educational experiences. In the second stage, salient themes which emerged from the talking circles, in tandem with a series of predetermined questions, were used for the personal interviews. The interviews were audio-taped and lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. Where necessary, clarification of students’ opinions was sought. In the third stage, field notes, general observations, and recorded interview data were used to corroborate students’ stories. The fourth stage of the study was an analysis of these data, a refinement of the study, the formulation of recommendations, and the dissemination of the study’s results.

# Innovative Ideas, Approaches or Methodologies

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There are many studies that focus on the reasons why marginalized peoples such as Afro-Americans, Aboriginals, and others do poorly in the public school system. Historically, there is a litany of factors cited to explain the poor academic performance of Aboriginal students in the school system. These factors include: class inequality, poverty, systemic racism, substance abuse, truancy, adjustment to urban life, criminal involvement, family instability, euro-centric curricula, and so on (Anyon, 1994; Freire, 2000; Giroux, 1981; Williams, 2001; Henderson, 2000).

Instructed by these studies, we wanted to investigate what some local Aboriginal students saw as fundamental obstacles to their success. Equally important, we wanted to identify factors that motivate Aboriginal students to succeed.

# Methodology

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## OVERVIEW

The methods of investigation for the study included a summary of some of the relevant literature regarding Aboriginal education, consultation with a target group of Aboriginal students, and an analysis of the interview data.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Approximately 30 Aboriginal students were initially interviewed (15 from the public system and 15 from an “alternative program”). It is important to acknowledge that it is always difficult to predict how many interviewees might withdraw from the study. We ended up with the personal views of 14 students from the public system, and five students from the alternative program.

Trustworthiness was emphasized in the personal interviews. Students were contacted, and later interviewed, by our co-researchers/teachers who are also Aboriginal. Specifically, the students and their parents/guardians (if under the age of 18) were informed:

- about the purpose of the study;
- about how the focus groups would be conducted;
- about the benefits of the study;
- that the researchers were committed to following ethical procedures of the University of Saskatchewan; and
- that the participants had a right to withdraw from the study at any time and for whatever reason which did not have to be explained to our research team.

The interview data were reviewed for emergent themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 343). The interviewer facilitated, through probing, clarifying, extending and reconstructing, the interviewee input so as to discover the “clearest” possible interpretations from the students. Verbatim transcriptions of in-person interviews were subjected to manual analysis. The open-ended questions were subjected to a structured analysis of data consisting of a determination of themes of response and the assignment of all individual responses to theme categories by a multiple-rater protocol. Techniques used were constrained by the specific questionnaire design (Singleton, Straits & Straits, 1993). Hunches, tendencies, frequencies, significant relationships and significant interpretations were synthesized to present a reader-friendly profile of the problems, pressures, and issues encountered by the students.

# Significance of Project

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This study could have significant relevance in the academic, pedagogical, government policy, and other domains. Academically, it could inform the community of scholars about the delivery of education from the perspective of some Aboriginal students. Specifically, the study provided data on what Aboriginal students considered important or detrimental in our school environment, as well as their views towards academic success.

From a policy point of view, a recently published Saskatchewan Government document stated “That school divisions [should] endeavour to create joint-venture schools, with Tribal Councils and Indian Bands, which strongly reflect and support Aboriginal children, their languages and culture” (Task Force and Public Dialogue on the Role of the School, 2001, p.126). In the same vein, this study (albeit based on a small sample) could inform the various levels of governments about ways to strengthen their collective incentives to “promote anti-racist programs” (Ibid, p.125). Last, as educators we need to improve the quality of education for all students, and especially for those who have been historically neglected or marginalized. This study might be a modest effort in promoting positive educational change with respect to Aboriginal students.

## PERSONNEL, ROLES

The research team consisted of: two Aboriginal school teachers and one University professor and one secretary. The two teachers were responsible for all the interviewing; the university professor was responsible for the preparation of the interview questions, supervision and the writing of the finished study. All three were involved in the interpretation of the data, and the study’s findings. The secretary was responsible for the secretarial works, as well as for the transcription of the interview data. (It should be noted that because one of our co-researchers was the teacher of the “at risk” group, there was a concern from the University ethics committee that he was in a conflict of interest situation. Therefore, we engaged another Aboriginal professional to conduct the personal interviews.)

# Dissemination of Results

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We plan to share our study results with the Public School Board and Tribal Council involved in the study. Further, we have presented our research findings at the annual 2003 McDowell conference and hope to share our results at other conferences. Also, we plan to submit our findings to a research-oriented journal.

## GENERAL OVERVIEW

The twin purposes of our study were to document the views of two discrete groups of Aboriginal students, with respect to their experiences within the public educational system. Both groups (a group of so-called “at risk” Aboriginal students, as well as another group) attended different schools in an urban setting in Western Canada. In particular, we wanted to document how they viewed success in school, and in their lives in general.

For both groups, we employed a talking circle, focus groups interviews and personal interviews. But, for the sake of clarity, we will talk about each group separately.

# I. First Study: Group of “At Risk” Aboriginal Students

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## INTRODUCTION

The Canadian federal government, through Human Resource Development, provides funding for an Alternative program for the purpose of assisting Aboriginal youth to improve academic skills and to develop their employment skills. In this particular study, the Aboriginal youth are characterized as at risk. (This is the term which recurred in the literature.)

## GROUP PROFILE

This study took place in an urban centre in Western Canada (1999-2002). During this time period, approximately 200 Aboriginal youth attended this program. The students were registered status Indians, between the ages of 15 and 18, and the average group enrolment was 15 students at a time.

Most students had the ability to read and write, but for a number of reasons, these students were not able to continue in the public schools. Some of the major reasons cited included: academic failure, truancy, school violence, criminal involvement, teen pregnancies, difficult home environment, and alcohol and drug abuse.

## PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS AND ACADEMIC LIMITATIONS

The program lasted 12 weeks. The recruitment for this program was achieved through referrals from various workers in social services and school agencies. Administratively, the local Tribal Council was responsible for the day-to-day operations of the program.

There were no written aims or goals for this program made available to the Director of the program under study. But, an interview with the Director indicated that most students planned to return to mainstream schooling after working on some basic academic and other life skills. Likewise, the individual interviews with the students suggested that most of them expressed an interest to return to the mainstream schools in order to get their high school diploma, or to get a job after the program.

It was desirable, but not required, for the Director of the program to have a teaching certificate. The program also had a history of a high turnover of directors and other personnel. According to the Director (in this study), during a one-year period there was a turnover of eight Directors. Only two of those Directors held teaching certificates. In addition, employees were hired to assist the Director. In this study, there was an employee who was hired to assist the Director; and occasionally, there was some help from others (e.g., social worker interns).

There was an emphasis on attendance, and participation in all activities (academic lessons, physical fitness activities at the local Y.M.C.A, reading at the library, etc). While there were some teaching materials available, there were NO required course texts, nor a compulsory course of studies.

In essence, there was a focus on teaching some basic math and reading skills, as well as developing practical knowledge such as food preparation, cooking, and the management of a basic family budget. Additionally, there were a number of regular guest speakers such as Native elders, and other educators.

There were no evaluative measures such as grades, tests or exams. However, students were asked to write a brief self-assessment report of their progress.

## INTERVIEW PROCESS

While 15 students were enrolled in the program during the period under review, only five students agreed to participate in the talking circle, as well as in the personal interview process.

The first part of this project involved the talking circle. At first, the interviewer went with the general questions (See Appendix A), but soon found that he needed to ask more specific probing questions. The same was done for the in-depth interview questions. (As noted earlier, the same questions were used for the “at risk” students as for the Aboriginal students in the public school system.)

Prior to the talking circle, the interviewer reminded the students of the rules and method of conducting a talking circle. Basically, the reminder was to respect one another by being quiet unless he/she held the “rock”, share ideas freely, and not to talk about what was said in the talking circle. Confidentiality was a critical component to facilitate a sense of trust.

The interviewer asked a question, then he would pass the rock and students would share their views. Some responses were not audible on tape as some students spoke very quietly. Most students responded to the questions.

A summary of general themes that emerged from the talking circle and the personal interviews follow. These themes are the result of a manual review of the data by the research team, and in particular, the Aboriginal Director of the program. (A more detailed analysis of the data vis-à-vis the research literature will be elaborated in a future article. For more information re the proposed article, please contact the principal researcher of this project).

It should be noted that the research data for this group must be seen in light of two important influences. First, the Director of the program conducted the talking circle, but he was not involved in the personal interviewing. This was done by another Aboriginal male. This decision was at the request of the university ethics committee because of a “perceived ethical conflict”. Second, a group of five students was reticent to speak. In many cases, single-word answers became the modus operandi. Unfortunately, additional questioning did not generate much more elaboration. Because of the paucity of data, we have collapsed the recurring themes from the talking circle and interviews into the following list. Most students:

- joined this program in order to upgrade their schooling, coupled with the opportunity to receive a small living allowance;
- wanted to socialize with other Aboriginal students;
- stayed in school because of their involvement in sports and socializing;
- indicated that some teachers encouraged them to do well in terms of school and life;
- defined success in the usual sense of getting an education whether it be a high school diploma (grade 12) or university;
- viewed success in life as having a good job (However, one student viewed success as having a family);
- indicated that transportation was an obstacle to getting to school. Either their parents or guardians did not have a vehicle, or there was a lack of bus fare;
- felt mathematics was considered a difficult subject;
- indicated that Aboriginal students were not necessarily more helpful than the non-Aboriginal students;
- indicated that Aboriginal teachers were not necessarily more effective (or understanding) towards Aboriginal youth;
- mentioned, however, that they would like to have more Aboriginal teachers as role models;
- said that getting up early in the morning was difficult.

## OVERALL OBSERVATIONS

1. The research team felt that the engagement of another Aboriginal professional to conduct the personal interviews was problematic. While it might appear that this procedure would be more objective, the students (in some cases) seemed reluctant to talk to the outside interviewer. Conversely, given the strong personal rapport of the Director with the students, it was felt that more elaboration to questions would have been given if he had been the interviewer.

2. The notion of academic success or success in life seemed consistent with mainstream views of success. A high school diploma, or even university education, were considered extremely important.
3. The lack of financial resources and a stable home environment were recurrent themes.
4. Caring, involved teachers were factors for encouraging students to stay in school.
5. Because a teacher was Aboriginal was no guarantee that he/she would be any more caring or helpful (than non-Aboriginal teachers) towards Aboriginal students.
6. The need for more Aboriginal teachers was, however, considered important.

# II. Second Study: Public School Setting

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## INTRODUCTION

There were 14 Aboriginal students interviewed. The first part of this project involved the talking circle. The girls had a talking circle with the girls in the morning and the boys in the afternoon. (The reason for this separation was based on the assumption that the female students might be more candid if boys were not included.)

Prior to the talking circle, the interviewer reminded the students of the rules and method of conducting a talking circle. Basically, the reminder was to respect one another by being quiet unless they held the “rock”, share ideas if you wanted to, and not to talk about what was said in the talking circle. Confidentiality was a critical component to facilitate a sense of trust.

The interviewer asked the pre-arranged general questions, and asked more probing questions as the talking circle continued. The interviewer asked a question, then she would pass the rock and students were encouraged to share their views. Most students responded to the questions. In the second phase, the interviewer was able to secure more elaboration during the in-depth interviewing.

A summary of general themes which emerged from the talking circle and the personal interviews follow. As in our study of “at risk” students, these themes are the result of a manual review of the data by the research team, and in particular, the Aboriginal teacher who conducted both phases. Likewise, a more detailed analysis of the data vis-à-vis the research literature will be elaborated in a future article.

Given the greater number of respondents, the research data were more diversified. The recurring themes and comments from the talking circle and interviews follow. Most students:

- felt that success or failure in school was specifically perceived from a strictly academic perspective (i.e., passing or failing grades);
- felt that success in life was viewed as attaining a high school diploma, technical school certificate, university degree, or a “good job”;
- said that the greatest factors for them staying in school were their parents or close relatives. Interestingly, most boys stated that their teachers were a strong influence for them staying in school. In turn, the girls cited their peers as a strong influence for staying in school;
- considered extra-curricular activities important. Many students were involved in some kind of sports (e.g., hockey, soccer, karate);

- felt there should be more Aboriginal content in their courses.

**Also:**

- Many of the boys indicated that going to school helped them to stay away from substance abuse.
- Many of the girls cited the opportunity to socialize and be with their friends.
- Most of the boys stated that they knew what they wanted to do when school was completed; whereas none of the girls were sure.

## OVERALL OBSERVATIONS

1. Whenever a question was asked that required the interviewer to give an example, the students had a tendency to use that example as their response. Students were encouraged to give their own examples, but most tended to stay with the interviewer's example.
2. Most of the students attended school on a regular basis with support and encouragement from home.
3. Extra curricular activities, whether after school or within school hours, is considered very important for students.
4. Aided by government subsidies, affordable housing and low rental units were available in the community.
5. Most students reported a stable family environment. Students cited parents and family members as role models. Students considered support from family members to be crucial to education.
6. Most of the student's parents had employment and had completed some form of formal education themselves.
7. Perceptions of success included completing high school, continuing to university, or getting a well-paying job. However, one student suggested that success was "staying off the streets and out of jail".
8. More Aboriginal content in the curricula is considered essential to making Aboriginal students feel included.

# Concluding Comments

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As stated earlier, the “at risk” Aboriginal students had collectively experienced a number of problems including: academic failure, truancy, school violence, criminal involvement, teen pregnancies, difficult home environment, and alcohol and drug abuse. Further, they could not continue in the mainstream public schools, and therefore, ended up in this 12 week program.

The implied purpose of this program was to offer a temporary refuge for Aboriginal students. Academically, the dearth of: curricula materials, evaluative tools, and criteria for trained personnel obviated any serious effort to deal with the students’ academic weaknesses.

Depending on the skills, knowledge and interests of the Director, some important life skills were emphasized (e.g., physical exercise, cooking, domestic budgeting, basic math and reading skills).

Overall, their perception of academic success, as well as success in life, reflected general societal goals. Regardless of their personal situations, getting a high school or university education, and later a good job, were considered essential (see comments listed above).

The Aboriginal students in the public school also embraced the view that acquiring a high school diploma, post-secondary degree, and later a good job, were considered signs of success. As noted above, their familial, domestic and academic experiences were diametrically different from the students in the “at risk” study.

What seems compelling, however, is that there is a need for well-developed programs that deal with a range of students’ needs. In the case of the “at risk” students, their academic weaknesses were never addressed. Second, there is a need for caring, compassionate teachers. Third, the hiring of more Aboriginal teachers would, ipso facto, increase the number of positive “role models”. Curricular materials that reflect Aboriginal epistemology would be invaluable. Last, there is a need for further research.

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# Appendix A

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## GENERAL QUESTIONS FOR THE TALKING CIRCLE

1. What information about yourself would you like to share with us?
2. Tell us how or why you came to this school (or program)?
3. What do you expect from this school (or program)?
4. How will you contribute to this school (or program)?
5. How do you define “success” or “failure” in school?
6. How do you define “success” or “failure” in life?

## IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What have been some of the major problems or difficulties for you in school?
2. What are some reasons which make (made) you want to go to school?
3. Are there any reasons which make (made) you want to quit school?
4. What changes could be made in school that would help you to succeed?
5. Describe your favourite teacher.
6. Who are the people who have influenced you to stay in school? Describe.
7. Would you like to add anything?



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