



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

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A team of teacher-researchers at Cochrane High School in Regina was aware that students of Aboriginal heritage continue to be over-represented among those not succeeding in or completing school. In their own school, approximately 50% of self-declared Aboriginal students left school between Grade 10 and 11. While 38% of the overall school population was of Aboriginal ancestry, the percentage dropped from 52.5% in Grade 9 to only 22% in Grade 12.

The researchers wanted to develop an understanding of the challenges faced by these students and generate theories of why they were leaving school prior to Grade 11 and 12. One of their main research goals was to look at what administrators, teachers and community partners can do to lower the high drop-out rate for Aboriginal students. In addition, the project addressed the need for schools to plan for the projected increase in Saskatchewan in the proportion of the school-aged population with Aboriginal heritage.

The Study and the Students

A qualitative study was developed and implemented with twelve students of Aboriginal heritage. The study targeted students who had dropped out of school, students who had dropped out and returned, and students who had remained in school and were successful.

Half were male and half were female. Five were Cree, three were Assiniboine, two were Saulteau, and two were Métis. Five were parents and they ranged in age from seventeen to twenty years of age. Only one of the students graduated during the study.

Each of the twelve students was interviewed, the interviews were transcribed, and the interview data were analyzed by the research team. As reflection on and examination of the data were carried out, commonalities and themes emerged. They included:

- **Racism**
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.
- **Knowledge**
Students value caring teachers who build meaningful relationships with them. Students value teachers who are knowledgeable, flexible and humorous.
- **Self-concept and Identity**
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.

- **Support Systems**

Support systems [at the school level] need to be inclusive and student-centered. They should include access to the knowledge and cultural wisdom of the elders.

- **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.

Directions for the Future

The research team believed that educators need to re-examine their practices and challenge existing beliefs and understandings about educating youth in our schools. The data collected from these students was used to drive school-wide action research from which a plan has been developed. The plan outlines supports that affirm Aboriginal students' culture and experiences and respond to their needs and ambitions.

The following list of recommendations to educators 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 one's 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.