

“Spontaneous Laughter and Good Marks:”

**Creating Conditions for Success of
First Nations, Métis and Inuit Students
in the Simcoe County District School Board.**

**Report prepared for the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project
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by

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Dedication

**This work is dedicated to all the First Nations, Métis and Inuit students of the
Simcoe County District School Board and your teachers.**

**May you travel together in good ways on your educational paths here
and
grow strong.**

Acknowledgements

Let me begin by acknowledging and thanking all my Aboriginal teachers over the years who have brought me to the place where I have had the privilege to do this work with the First Nations and Métis people of the Barrie-Midland area.

The greatest thanks go to the students, parents and educational leaders who gave their words so honestly and with continuing commitment to making schools the best possible places for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students.

Thanks to elder Ethel Chynoweth who watched over the participants in the circlework groups, started us in a good way and was there for those who needed her.

Thanks to the Simcoe County District School Board for the opportunity to do this work as part of the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project. Special thanks to Angela Bosco, Aboriginal Education Facilitator, and Lisa Ewanchuk, Aboriginal Principal for the UAEP, for encouraging me to participate and guiding me along the way. Many thanks to Sandra Sangster, Manager of Research & Evaluation Services for her gracious and helpful input into proper procedures within the Board.

I am grateful to the Barrie Native Friendship Centre for their welcoming venue in which we gave information sessions, sought volunteers and conducted our circlework.

Endless gratitude to Marg Raynor who agreed to work with me as a research associate and whose familiarity with the area gave me good introductions and proper protocol and whose poetry was with me on those long nights of reading and consolidating what they people had told us.

And finally to my family members who have helped with details when I was stuck and waited for me while I wrote these words.

All my relations.

**Celia Haig-Brown, Ph.D.
January 19, 2009**

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Executive Summary

This report was commissioned as part of the Simcoe County District School Board’s (SCDSB) Urban Aboriginal Pilot Project. The focus of the project is as a contribution to the development of sound approaches to success for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in district classrooms. It focuses on contributions made by the people most directly involved, First Nations, Métis and Inuit students, parents and educational leaders in the communities served by the board. The results have the potential to inform the development of a model which will lead to enhanced success for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students within SCDSB schools.

Methodologically, this study depends exclusively on approaches developed by Indigenous researchers and scholars locally and globally. Guided by the SCDSB Sub-Steering Committee’s goals and Research & Evaluation Services protocol, researchers solicited narratives of school success related to First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in the SCDSB. Circlework groups and individual interviews with twenty students, eight parents and ten educational leaders, most of whom were either parents or grandparents of children in SCDSB schools, form the basis of this study. While the knowledge gleaned may contain few surprises to those knowledgeable in the field of Aboriginal Education, its importance lies in the immediacy and the specificity of the stories we hear and read. These words are not from a distant school board and not from some other time: they articulate the issues facilitating successes, and sometimes lack thereof, for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students currently in the schools of the SCDSB. They are the words of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students seeking to live good lives as they strive to become thoughtful, happy adults in their ancestral lands. They are the words of First Nations, Métis and Inuit adults who continue to see education broadly defined as the key to their dreams of healthy children and healthy communities. They are the words of adults whose histories with schools and communities leads to some distrust of schools and yet whose commitment to the power and possibility of education is relentlessly driven by a love for their children and grandchildren.

The results raise a number of questions for further investigation, gesture to several courses of action for the SCDSB and provide the basis for developing recommendations for the establishment of a new model of successful education for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. Professional development initiatives and teacher education programs are two potential sites for making a difference to current programs. Participants felt that, while some changes can be addressed fairly easily, only with commitment on the part of all involved and long term planning will there be the deep changes needed to strengthen the relationships between First Nations, Métis and Inuit students and their schools. Throughout the study, participants reminded those who listened that there is no one model for all First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. As varied a group as any other, their distinctiveness comes with their ancestral ties to this land we now call Canada.

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in Simcoe County District School Board.**

Success looks like happiness in spontaneous laughter at school and good marks resulting from a nurturing, caring atmosphere.

Aboriginal¹ Parent, November 14, 2008

Children who are successful radiate their happiness with life in general. They stand tall in their positive self-esteem. They feel valued and are not afraid to take on new challenges.

Aboriginal Parent, November 14, 2008

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE REPORT

This report consists of four main sections: 1) Introduction; 2) Research Design; 3) Results; 4) Closing Comments. It also includes an Executive Summary, several appendices and a brief bibliography. The first section lays out the form of the report and outlines the research as it was proposed and progressed. Because it is based in a responsive and respectful research methodology, one that evolves with the people’s input as the study progresses, there were some shifts in design and focus as the circlework and interviews unfolded. Since the intent has been to seek deeply thoughtful, specific experiences and views of the people themselves, the usefulness of this design has been affirmed. In such an approach, researchers are seeking a saturation point as the determining moment for concluding the study. This moment is a time when each interview or focus group is yielding few or no new insights, but rather people are primarily affirming what others have said.

Subsequent sections of the report include a section on research design which outlines details of the methods used throughout the study. This is followed by a lengthy section on the results: the heart of the report. It begins by locating the research outcomes within a model derived from Indigenous Theory, specifically the circle and its focus on relationships. Summaries of circlework, extensive quotations from taped sessions and interviews are organised into a coherent representation of people’s contributions to the study based in the circle model. The final section is composed of some thoughts regarding recommendations arising from the study. The closing comments focus on some

¹While the term First Nations, Métis and Inuit is preferred, in keeping with the words of the participants themselves, other terms such as Aboriginal and Native and even Indian are used at points in the report. In addition, because of the relatively small numbers of individuals involved in the study, it was decided to use the broader term, Aboriginal, occasionally to protect anonymity. No disrespect is intended and there is no intention on the part of the author to diminish or ignore the distinctions amongst these groups of people. Finally, unless people chose to identify themselves specifically during the course of the conversations, the researchers did not ask that they do so.

next steps in enhancing the success of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in the schools of the SCDSB.

A. Research Topic

This research began with the question, “What are the major factors that stakeholders (students, parents and community leaders) see as contributing to the success of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in selected schools of the Simcoe County District School Board (SCDSB)?” Narratives from a judgemental sample (Agar 1980/1996) of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students, parents and educational leaders were gathered seeking their input into the best ways to support First Nations, Métis and Inuit student success in the schools of SCDSB. A simple survey was administered to each circlework participant at the end of their session. By drawing on insider knowledge from culturally located participants, the study provides the basis for a clearer picture of current successes and needs to be addressed in schools in the SCDSB. It also provides a basis to guide future initiatives related to the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project (UAEPP). Rather than focusing on barriers to success, this study looked for best-case scenarios to create a profile for successful work with First Nations, Métis and Inuit students.

B. Conceptual Framework

The study is based in current scholarship of Indigenous thought. It draws explicitly on teachings or concepts of the circle and implicitly honours the teachings of the Seven Grandfathers to frame the research approaches and the results of the study. In addition, as a piece of critically informed qualitative work, it employs Indigenous approaches to working with study participants. In this case the methodology becomes the conceptual framework of the study as it is based in a decolonizing approach (See Linda Tuhiwai Smith 1999). Circlework (Graveline 1998) and interviews which allow the participants to take the lead and which refuse pre-conceived notions of outcomes provide the openness for direct input from the people most directly involved, First Nations, Métis and Inuit students, parents and educational leaders.

Historical and current contextualization of the study is also integral to its conceptualization. Cognizant of the Williams Treaties (Blair 2008) which make all Canadians and First Nations peoples currently living in the area “treaty people,” recognizing the significant population of Métis people in the area, and respectful of the Inuit people as one of Canada’s founding nations, the researchers see these histories, intersecting as they do in the contemporary urban context of Barrie, as inextricably linked within this study. Many educators are familiar with the more general history and current circumstances of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students’ schooling. Whether explicitly or unconsciously, these circumstances may include effects of the on-going legacy of residential schools; the consequent intergenerational mistrust of schools; as well as deficit theorizing (See Shields, Bishop and Mazawi 2005) on the part of some school personnel. While some students have achieved considerable success through the support of family and individual teachers, far too many are not as successful as they could and should be.

This study was also modelled loosely on a number of the works of Maori scholar Professor Russell Bishop and his colleagues in their analysis of best practices for enhancing the success of Maori students in mainstream public schools in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The circlework groups, individual interviews and surveys all addressed aspects of schooling necessary to enhance First Nations, Métis and Inuit students' experiences in school. From the methodology involving narratives from those First Nations, Métis and Inuit people most intimately involved in schools in SCDSB to the analysis of these interviews, considerations of the articulation of Indigenous-focused best practices guided the design, data collection and analysis.

C. Benefits of study

The narratives, conversations, surveys and subsequent analyses offer insight into what the participants feel is important for success, their own in the case of students, and their children's in the case of parents and community leaders. Coming from the people most directly involved, the outcomes presented and discussed below have the potential to contribute to addressing gaps in our understandings of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students' and their parents' experiences of schooling. While the local focus of the data gathering determines that the outcomes are most relevant to the SCDSB, there is a strong likelihood that the results also have transferability to other similar contexts.

The results of the study should be made available to inform professional development initiatives and to offer guidance to administrators, teachers, community members and all others concerned with the success of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in schools. Through its attention to listening to and conveying the articulated thoughts of students, parents and community leaders, the study is a strong indication that UAEPP and the SCDSB is taking seriously success for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students, an often neglected group. Building on previous successes and conscious that there is more to be done, the author feels that this work contains the possibility for increasing good will from all those involved with the designated participants. Responses to the study on the part of the SCDSB have the potential to deepen good relations between First Nations, Métis and Inuit people—students, parents and educational leaders—and schools.

SECTION 2: RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Summary

In conducting this research, mindfulness of Aboriginal ways was a guiding principle. Narratives and other thoughts from the people involved were the focus of the data gathering. Through circlework (described in more detail below) and open-ended interviews, the researchers listened to what the First Nations and Métis people had to say. (It is not clear that there were any Inuit people involved in the study.) Although not in the original design, as the study design evolved, the small circlework groups were created as sources of input on the advice of people from the local community. Circlework groups draw on Indigenous teachings in their structure and for their conduct. They include the presence of an elder to guide the proceedings, beginning the work with a smudge led by the elder, individual introductions and the giving of gifts as a recognition of the contributions of the participants. Each participant has ample opportunity to contribute to the discussions. In allowing students and their parents to volunteer, self-select, these groups widened the potential participant pool and gave more people an opportunity to participate. The interviews and all but one of the circlework groups (the secondary students group) were taped and the tapes were summarized and either selectively or, most often, completely transcribed. Strict adherence to school board ethical protocol regarding research with human participants guided the work.

Once all the transcripts and summaries were prepared, the researchers began the process of formal analysis. As with all sound qualitative research, on-going analysis from the beginning of the study had served to shape revisions to the original design. Initial insights took the form of “rolling” hypotheses, which could be followed up, in subsequent sections of the study. Formal analysis consisted of reading each summary and/or transcript, identifying critical moments in the conversations and from those moments, creating lists of themes for each transcript. These themes then served as the guide for structuring the final report with recurring themes being the source of the major categories in this report. Summary charts for the surveys were prepared as additional, secondary sources of input.

B. Circlework

As noted above, talking circles or circlework provided a familiar format and a safe, supportive environment for most of those involved in the study. Circles were conducted within a well-known Aboriginal community setting, the Barrie Native Friendship Centre. The traditional circle protocols were followed in regard to having an elder open with a smudge ceremony and prayer, confidentiality in respect to linking comments to identity, freedom to speak without interruption and respectfulness. Gifts for participants served as tokens of appreciation and acknowledgement of their contributions. An elder was on hand to address the emotional aspects of sharing experiences that might be painful to articulate for some people, given the continuing intergenerational effects of the residential school system and other personal or social effects of schooling more generally.

The strength of circlework lies in allowing participants to build on each other’s narratives thereby deepening the insights offered. Especially when working with children, the opportunity to be part of a group rather than having a stranger seek input in a one-on-one interview was also deemed best research practice. The principal researcher and a Métis research associate trained by the principal researcher led the circlework groups. Additional input and participation from the supervising teacher added a dimension to a number of the groups as well as the research planning.

A number of information sessions regarding the UAEPP and specifically this research were held for community members. An outline of these sessions is included in Appendix A. Student volunteers were solicited from the schools through a letter to parents and students distributed to several schools in the SCDSB with larger First Nations, Métis and Inuit populations. (See Appendix A). It was decided to conduct the circlework groups at the Barrie Native Friendship Centre as a site welcoming to First Nations, Métis and Inuit people.

Over the course of the study, we worked with twenty students and eight parents in three circlework groups. All have experience with schools in the SCDSB. The time dedicated to each circlework group ranged from two to four hours. (See example plan for the day in Appendix A.) Participants also completed an individual survey as an additional source of information. Survey summaries are provided in Appendix B. The discussion summaries in Appendix C provide the reader with some of the data notes and a broader flavour of discussions.

**Research Model for
Students and
Parents/Care Givers**

Each circle opened with prayer and a smudge.

An Elder was part of the whole group sessions and was available at all times should personal issues arise for participants.

Participants in the circle have the opportunity to speak without interruption, e.g. passing of an eagle feather to denote the speaker.



C. Interviews

The community leaders were identified through judgemental sampling using a snowball technique. (See Agar 1980/1996). The latter simply refers to identifying participants by word of mouth, through existing sets of relations. The advantage to such an approach is that it tends to bring some preconceived trust for the researcher as it builds on established relations; the disadvantage is that some lesser-known person may not be identified. For the small scope of this study, researchers were satisfied that they had connected with a range of leading First Nations and Métis thinkers in education. There is certainly potential for building on the existing study to include more participants. The interviews for these community leaders were semi-structured and participant-led as far as possible. The assumption underlying this approach is a fundamental respect for the person's experiences and a commitment to seeking the insights arising from and available in these experiences. Interviews were approximately one hour in duration. A predetermined list of questions served only as a guide to the exchanges. (See Appendix A). Interviewers began with a broad question and continued their questioning by listening carefully to initial responses and then following up on specific areas raised by participants. Throughout the interview, the predetermined questions were available and used as a guide only when necessary. Having the participant take the lead allowed them to focus on issues of importance to them and led to revelations related to the issues at hand which the researchers may not have anticipated.

Time limits, reliance on volunteer students from the schools, and the snowball technique for soliciting participants may have created some constraints to the scope of the study. However determining the end of the study based on saturation, i.e. little or no new insights revealed in circlework and additional interviews (See Glaser and Strauss), indicated that most of the grounds for investigation had been addressed.

D. Other sources of data

Researcher notes contributed details to the study. The drawings and diagrams created by the Grade Seven and Eight circlework group were also a source of input. Documents related to the larger Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project contributed to the background for the study, as did some earlier reports such as that of the Urban Aboriginal Task Force and a draft of the Stonepath report. Importantly this study builds on the insights of the former and, in its focus on the local scene, affirms the relevance of a number of insights which the latter garners from other contexts.

E. Analysis

Analysis was based in seeking themes identified across interviews and in circlework so that the participants' words shaped the outcome of the study. Glaser and Strauss's constant comparative method (1967) served as a loose guide to the process. With this approach, themes identified in one transcript are then compared with subsequent ones. Themes that recur across transcripts are given more weight than those that appear once. At the same time, some of the singular themes are also included as they enrich the views

presented. Where possible, a distinction is made between the more frequently referenced topics and those less obvious ones. The results section is organized around major themes that occurred across the groups and in individual interviews. A final section proposes a number of recommendations arising out of those themes as well as some questions worth pursuing further. A draft of the final report was circulated to a number of those involved in the study for their comments.

The principal researcher and research associate conducted all interviews, analyzed the transcripts and created the final report. A second research assistant, also the supervising teacher for the study, helped to organize participants' attendance at the sessions. She attended most of the circlework sessions contributing to their smooth operation. She contributed notes and documents from those sessions to the final report. Her input and insider knowledge of the Board's workings were most beneficial. Three extensive appendices contain various documents relevant to the study.

SECTION 3: WHAT THE PEOPLE SAID: RESULTS OF THE STUDY

A. Introduction

Analysis of the interviews and circlework groups yields four inter-related educational areas best depicted by a series of concentric circles. In the first figure we see the locations of First Nations, Métis and Inuit student success and their nested relation to one another.

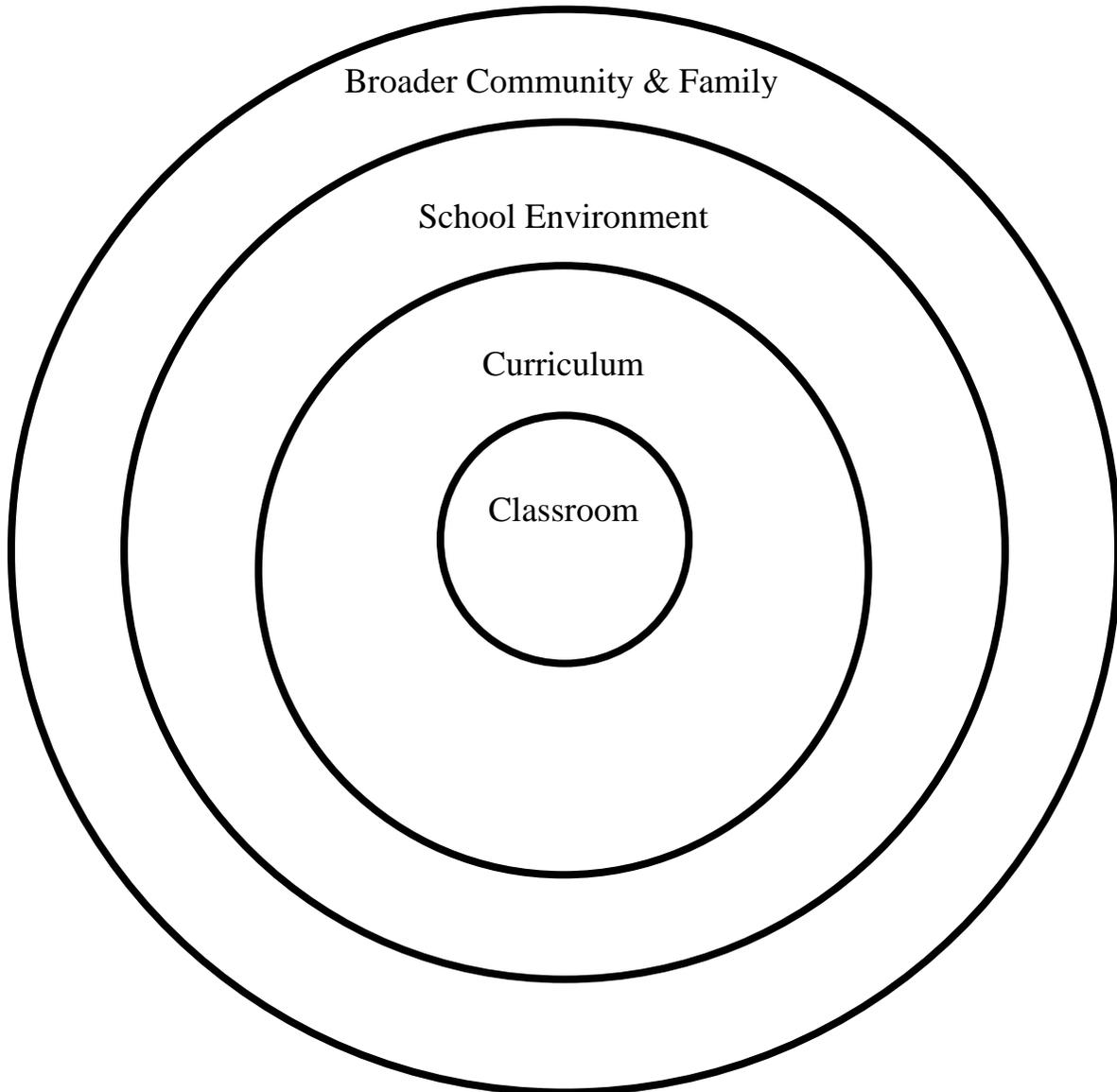
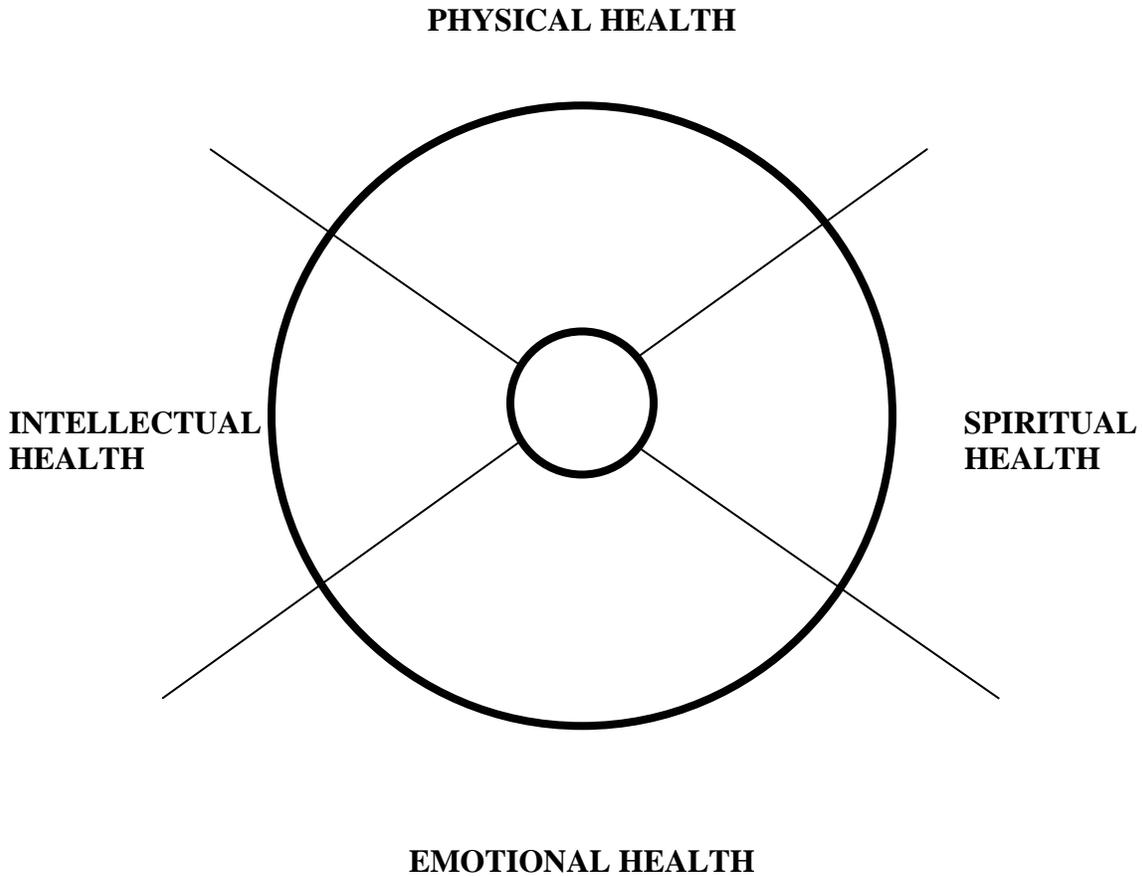


FIGURE 2: LOCATIONS OF ABORIGINAL STUDENT SUCCESS

These broad and inextricably related themes 1) The Classroom; 2) Curriculum; 3) School Environment; and 4) Broader Community and Family name four locations—each one with physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual dimensions—where the conditions for First Nations, Métis and Inuit student success are created. The research indicates that some participants see already existing successful practices in these areas. Very often their comments resonate with contrasting calls for improvement from other participants in the study. In all cases, participants' views of success, including those of the children themselves, are centered on the whole child.



**FIGURE 3: WHOLENESS:
THE GOAL OF SUCCESSFUL EDUCATION AND LIVING A GOOD LIFE**

This circle, based in a traditional teaching or what is increasingly being recognized as Indigenous Theory or Indigenous Thought, is a complex heuristic which refuses any separation of the four aspects represented, in this case, of a healthy person living life in a good way, in wholeness. The circle brings each aspect addressed into relation with every other: they are inseparable. Rather than seeing the four aspects as *points* on the circle, the viewer is invited to see that they each exist in fluid and complex interaction with one

another. The lines passing through and out of the circle do not identify points but rather leave open the possibilities of ways of relating both what is named and what is to be named in considering the subject at hand, in our case, the success of Aboriginal students in the classrooms of the Simcoe County District School Board (SCDSB). For most of the interviews and circlework participants, this representation of what constitutes success for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students was either explicitly expressed or implied in the various examples and situations presented. In what follows, a number of critical incidents, as well as the words of Aboriginal participants themselves, indicate ways people dedicated to the success of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students might take this model to heart. And here a cautionary note: there is nothing simple about this model. Because it is responsive and organic, its possibilities shift as new situations arise. That being said, the truths it holds – about interrelationships – are simple, as eternal as the sun, the moon, the earth and time immemorial.

B. The Participants

Who were the people with whom we spoke? They are all people committed to successful education for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in the SCDSB. They include strong educational leaders most of whom also spend time in their children's and grandchildren's schools giving lessons and meeting with teachers and others to ensure their children are having the best school experience possible. They include parents who responded to our call that they volunteer to participate in circlework as a way to contribute to enhancing our knowledge of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students' success. They talked of their own experiences of schooling as well as their children's experiences. Finally they are the children themselves, from elementary to secondary school, who chose to spend some hours with us thinking about the best aspects of the schools they are currently attending and about what could make their schools even better. Ultimately, all participants helped us think through the factors that contribute to First Nations, Métis and Inuit students' success in the schools of the SCDSB.

C. What the people said

We begin this reporting of what study participants had to say with a look at the ways they define **success** for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in schools. Following that, in the next two parts of this section, **Classroom** and **Curriculum**, we will make a pass through the responses of each group and the interviews to give the flavour of the conversations that occurred with each. The final two shorter sections, **School Environment** and **Community & Family**, are organized around themes which ran through all the participants' contributions.

D. What constitutes success?

Since this study focuses on the success of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in the schools of the SCDSB, it is important to start with the participants' own understandings of what constitutes success. Each of the participants added specific details to the meanings of the wholeness represented above. As the title of the report indicates,

immediate success for parents includes seeing their children experience happiness and good marks in school. “Education is the key mechanism to success in our modern world,” said one leader. For some success comes in small steps: making it to school everyday, but most saw this as the way to graduation, attending university and/or professional careers. One person commented on the success exemplified in one student’s commitment to getting to school, as he has to hitchhike everyday to get there but never fails to show up.

Students talked of personal goals and career hopes as their motivation for seeking success. One young man worried about dropping out becoming an immediate sign of being “a loser or a failure. Students need grade twelve,” he said. Other students saw their school as a place of refuge but, for those who dare to hope and dream of a future, it is ultimately the way to a better life, living a good life in Aboriginal terms. The parents pointed to positive self-esteem resulting from the respect of self and others, including peers and teachers, and a willingness to take on new challenges. A community leader posited that educational success means a healthy community with people who know who they are and have pride in that knowledge. One worried that “Many times mainstream kids are challenged more while there are lower expectations for Aboriginal students.” Another cautioned that success requires a joint commitment from both School Board and the community.

As we examine in more detail what the people had to say about schools and students, it becomes clear that there are particular sites which foster or inhibit success and that only concentrated effort on the part of all concerned will address the needs for making all classrooms and schools places of success for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in SCDSB.

E. Part One: the Classroom

1. The Children

For some Aboriginal people, the best teachers are the children. If we want to understand ourselves and the situations we find ourselves in, we need to listen very carefully to what the children are saying. They can teach us what we need to know. As Secwepemc activist and mother Nicole Manuel says, “Your kids and the babies are all in the centre; they’re right in the middle. And everything is for them. And the teachings come from them outwards. What we have to remember is that when we say we’re educating our children actually what they are doing is helping us better ourselves. We have to watch them and learn from them to know where we’re at.” Just as we began our study, we will begin our reporting of the research with the children, youngest first.

a. Grade Seven and Eight Circlework

We want the school to be more peaceful, helping others, rather than just disrespecting them.

Grade four student

To listen is important.
Grade seven student

The youngest people in the study participated in our first circlework. This group included twelve volunteers who were expected to be from Grades 7 and 8 but turned out to include a number of younger students, the youngest (and one of the wisest) being a grade two student. We met at the Barrie Native Friendship Centre (BNFC) on November 7, 2008 from 10:15 till 2:00. (See Appendix A for related documents including the outline for the day.) Also present were an elder, two researchers, one supervising teacher, and a staff member from BNFC. All introduced themselves by sharing with each other their favourite subjects: math, French, geography, drama, language, and art. Two students and three of the adults gave their Aboriginal names as well as their English ones. We asked the students to work individually and then in groups to draw or diagram a representation of their ideal classroom. Inspiration could come from their experiences and/or their dreams. They told us what mattered to them.

In two of the final pictures, surprisingly, windows were major features. They prefer classrooms with windows with natural light where students can see the world outside even as they study, perhaps an unarticulated plea that school relate to the larger and natural context. They looked to the practical and the physical both as ways to vary their time in class. While they appreciate time dedicated to sports, they wish for more opportunities for physical activity. Their huge release of sheer, overflowing energy when they had an opportunity to play outside during a break amply demonstrated their need for movement, physical freedom and some unstructured time. One child talked of the death of her father and how she wished that there were a place in school where that could be honoured so she could remember him daily.

In several of the group pictures, the Medicine Wheel appeared as recognition of the importance of spirituality in everyday life. Reporters from these smaller drawing groups talked of wanting elders in their classrooms. One boy contributed the drawing of an eagle and, when asked why, dismissed its significance saying he did it out of boredom. This child was one of those who proudly gave his Aboriginal and English names when introducing himself. We wondered if his comment on the eagle—which he laboured over for much of the time—came from an unstated worry that a deeper explanation might not receive the respect it deserved. In their ideal classroom, the students also wanted more books, “fiction and non-fiction and easy to read,” and a chalkboard, “You can put math on it and it will help you work,” art and music. The younger ones valued free time which one used for playing with trucks and roads (one proven precursor to success in math) while another played with a cash register. Clearly these primary/junior classrooms are rich with opportunities for learning.

Finally, as they reported back on the details of their drawings, some talked of the classroom and school they dreamed of:

Me and Susie² made this because we want the school to be more peaceful, helping others [rather] than just disrespecting them as [in] “I don’t want to help you” or “I’m not going to be your friend.” Being helpful and besides you have to share. Helping, empathy and respect. Caring – smile. Don’t give up. We want schools to be better with kids. Like our school is very okay, but sometimes they don’t seem to care about us. Like someone gets hurt, they won’t hardly do anything. We want them to help people.

Some sought all the comforts of home: comfortable furniture, a fridge, as well as a swimming pool, a batting cage and an aquarium.

Returning to the wholeness diagram above, what do these comments tell us? We hear of each of the dimensions of the circle: the appreciation of and the need for physical activity and access to the physical world outside the walls of the classroom; the desire for a safe place where emotions are acknowledged and respect for each other prevails; a place where intellectual engagement builds on students’ strengths and interests; and finally a place where the spiritual is assumed. As we progress through the other study participants’ words, these themes echo across them all.

b. Secondary Students’ Circle

If someone in high school, like a teacher, asks, “Are you okay?” it makes a difference to me.

Secondary Student

The secondary student circle, comprised of eight students from Barrie Central and the Barrie Learning Centre, met at the Barrie Native Friendship Centre on November 14, 2008. (See Appendix A for related documents.) Also present were a researcher, a supervising teacher, two staff members from the BNFC, and a recently hired counsellor. Secondary students’ thoughts echoed many of the comments of the younger students the week before—again there was talk about natural lighting – but they focused more explicitly on teachers and their role in creating a positive classroom environment. Again and again students looked favourably on those teachers with whom they had a strong relationship and who *demonstrated* their concern. They like to feel as if it matters to the teacher that they are in the classroom. As one of the students said, “If someone in high school, like a teacher, asks, ‘Are you okay?’ it makes a difference to me.” Another said, “It is good if a teacher asks me what I need and what they can do to help me.” Acknowledging that some teachers may “have just too many students,” another participant added, “Some teachers seem to focus a lot on only the students who do well in their class instead of helping the students who need help.” Resistance to any form of hierarchy was clearly stated, whether it was to do with the teacher being superior to the students or one student or group of students being more valued. One participant said somewhat wistfully, “Teachers don’t really care about me. It is not that I don’t do well

² All names included in the study and in quotes are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the participants.

academically...It [just] doesn't really matter if I don't come to school." One student mentioned having cousins with the same last name going to his high school before he did. Because they often got into trouble, he felt he received signals that he was automatically expected to follow suit.

While pointing to personal motivation as central to their success, students also looked for teachers with high expectations, responding well to those who are "strict in some ways, but also laid back. Then it is more relaxed for me to be in that class." A student can respond well to a teacher who is "respectful of personal space but encouraging me: there needs to be a balance," said another participant. Regarding respect, a student wanted to see "acceptance for every voice" rather than allowing argument that leads to dismissal or disrespect of some thoughts. Another wanted some leeway in classroom rules that could allow for a person needing some time to themselves manifested in sitting apart from the rest of the class. Some teachers are too strict, "If you screw up once, they wait for you to screw up again." On the other hand, the ones who "believe in us and our potential" are influential and inspiring. Respect, trust, empathy and understanding are the expressed characteristics of teachers who can make a difference to the success of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. Participants also commented on the importance of teachers understanding that different students have different learning needs. They were keen to have deeper understandings themselves about different learning styles as a way to better succeed in the classroom.

There were some cautions expressed about teachers over-generalizing about Aboriginal students. The teacher who looks to the "real person" as an individual is valued. Cultural sensitivity regarding specific behaviours was appreciated although there was a clear consensus that overgeneralizing about the Aboriginal students in one's classroom was indeed a dangerous move which can undermine both academic success and some students' desires to self-identify or be identified as Aboriginal. Returning to the Wholeness Circle above, one can see that secondary students' comments also call for a classroom where all aspects of well-being are addressed and where respect for differences is paramount.

2. Parents' Circlework

Create a welcoming place where it's okay to be Aboriginal.

*Healing needs to happen: e.g. the baggage that we carry from our parents.
We learned by osmosis we "are not good enough."*

The Parent Circle met on November 17, 2008 also at the Barrie Native Friendship Centre. There were eight parents in attendance including the elder, one of the research assistants and a recently hired Aboriginal counsellor. All participated in the discussions. Two non-Aboriginal researchers and one baby also attended. The Parents' Circle was notable in that participants drew on their lives in schools as well those of their children to respond to our research question. It is most important for educators to recognize that even as these

women (and all the parents who attended were women) see some change in current schools, their own experiences continue to speak to their current relationship with their children's schools. A number are clearly worried about what their children's experiences are and will be when they encounter people who may not be aware of or sensitive to the varied realities and complexities of what it means to be First Nations, Métis and Inuit in Simcoe County today. They all want the best education possible for their children.

Generally their comments focused on curricular and cultural issues which will be discussed in more detail in the next sections. Their thoughts with most direct relevance for the classroom included a focus on sensitivity on the part of teachers and others in schools to what it means to be First Nations, Métis and Inuit. Several spoke of their experiences related to being Aboriginal in public schools in various locations. A "visibly Aboriginal" mother spoke of her treatment in schools:

Sensitivity to Aboriginal people and their lives is very important in schools. It was very hard. I lived up here when I was a teenager and it was hard to live as an Aboriginal. As a visible Aboriginal was a little harder. I went through a lot of, I don't know how to explain that, it was very harsh to go to high school....A little sensitivity would have made it easier for me to go to school everyday because I did quit. I guess it would have been easier if school was more accepting.

On the other hand, for those not "visibly Aboriginal," growing up Aboriginal presented another struggle:

At that time, it wasn't anything that you wanted anyone to know that you had Aboriginal in you or any kind of Native blood. It was hidden for some reason. You were looked down upon. Times have changed and it is more accepted now but it took a long time. Even our great grandmother, she actually lived in Wikwemikong and lost her status by marrying a white man, my great-grandfather. And it took years to get that back.

Another participant said simply, "That's who I was: I wanted to be white." For her, not enough has changed. She recounted her current feelings about parent-teacher meetings.

I will not go to a parent-teacher interview. One reason is because my daughters are quite fair; they don't look Native; they followed more of their Scottish ancestry from my husband. And my daughter was having a problem at school and my husband couldn't go so I went. She was doing really well in school but after they found out that I was Native her marks went down and she was treated badly. As a parent with a teacher, I shouldn't have that threat within: to not go because if I go my child's gonna suffer. Because I'm Indian and I look Indian and my children, they may have the high cheekbones but the colour of their skin isn't as brown as I am. When you talk about racism, it isn't just with the children; it's also with the teachers. I think it's very important to be able to go to these

things but I don't go because I don't want my child to suffer through school. So my husband goes and my husband's white and it's acceptable. That's the concern I have. And it's pretty sad.

Another parent talked of her struggle to break a cycle of feeling lesser than non-Aboriginal people.

You carry—the children of those parents who were discriminated against—carry those seeds in themselves. You are taught that maybe you are not good enough. You are taught that you need to work twice as hard as anyone else. But it's sort of by osmosis that you learn this thing because your mother doesn't say to you, "You are not good enough." Instead she'll say, "You really have to keep up with those other people in your class. You can't be behind. You can't have any patches on your clothes. You always have to be clean and pressed and ironed when you go out the door." As we got older we started knowing that we were taking on my mother's feelings about herself. And we keep passing that on to our children and that's something that if we started this education process and sent it all the way across the board, people really would start to understand where Aboriginal people, where their problems have come from. And maybe they'd start to be more understanding.

Ultimately, the parents had strong ideas about what contributed to their children's successes in school. Their list of classroom attributes, given as added comments on the surveys, indicated that they value teachers who create the conditions to allow students: 1) to be comfortable with who they are and feel the same way about school; 2) to have good, positive experiences and relationships of trust with teachers and fellow students; 3) to feel accepted by their peers; 4) to work in a nurturing, caring atmosphere. "They need to know that learning is indeed a journey and learning allows for mistakes. Children learn differently." Children need to have a voice in the classroom, to feel that they have the right to speak and to be heard, to be listened to. The best classroom is one where "everyone diversity is taught and respected" and where "acts of kindness to students" are the norm.

3. Educational Leaders' Interviews

You have this now in modern day Canada, this bipolar view of Aboriginal people where either folks froze in time at contact as the noble savage sort of perspective or they are these mystics who are just from another place and time and will solve all the world's crises.

There are teachers who teach because they so desperately want to improve the lives of children and help children become the best possible people they can be.

Interviews with ten Aboriginal educational leaders from the communities served by the Simcoe County District School Board included their comments on classrooms as key to success of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. Conducted over the period from November 13 to December 23, 2008, most of the interviews were one-on-one with one involving a small group of three. Most of those interviewed were parents or grandparents as well as leaders in education and all had direct current experience of the SCDSB schools themselves or through their relatives.

Across the interviews and in an information session held for recruiting participants, people talked about the things that make a classroom a welcoming place: committed teacher, posters telling Aboriginal stories, the Seven Grandfather Teachings, starting with a smudge, First Nations, Métis and Inuit language posters, labels in those languages. They also focused on students' basic needs which are clearly in the purview of the classroom as this is the place needy students find themselves. They talked of the emotional and spiritual need for respect in the classroom but also for attention to physical needs such as hunger, transportation, childcare and the need to create a safe space.

Why doesn't a teacher ask, "I wonder how this child's day started?" If you've got a kid walking into class and they are already out of sorts, how did their morning begin? Have they had anything to eat? Are they living in a volatile environment in their home? Who the heck knows what's going on there?

In a related vein, nutrition programs accompanied by schools that offer only nutritious snacks so that students can see knowledge affecting practices was suggested.

On the topic of the physical space in the classroom, another person spoke at length about his concerns that schools are inhospitable places for the most part contrary to First Nations respect for the natural. Like the students above, he wanted more windows and natural light in classrooms. He went on to say,

Classrooms have everything in primary colours and plastic and it's just not the environment we want our children to be in. We sort of wanted things to be softer and more muted and more connected to nature. So, you know, a wooden desk and a wooden chair instead of laminate...I think fundamentally if you are in an environment that reflects your spiritual beliefs, then it's reflected everywhere and you don't have to think about it because it just radiates around you.

Of more concern for him were the attitudes his children encountered in classrooms.

The environment itself was troublesome in spite of the fact that the teachers were all quite interested and quite keen. But even in that we had found that when the teachers would find out that these are Cree kids and they come from a blended [First Nations-white] home, that there was sort of this odd fascination. It's a trigger, where you start getting a little

apprehensive, of a sort of mythological perspective. That Indian people are all mystics right—it's this sort of perception, I think. You have this now in modern day Canada, this bipolar view of Aboriginal people where either folks froze in time at contact as the noble savage sort of perspective or they are these mystics who are just from another place and time and will solve all the world's crises. There seems to be no real perspective. And so I didn't want that on me and I didn't want that on any of our kids because I know that relationships between children and the teacher are fundamental and if they aren't healthy and whole, where they're respectful and it's about mutual exchange of ideas then it just won't work.

Particularly disturbing was another leader's comment, echoing some of the parents, that it's "easier to exist not identifying as Aboriginal."

One person recognized that, "There are teachers who teach because they so desperately want to improve the lives of children and help children become the best possible people they can be." In contrast, another worried about what she called "pseudo-professionalism" that keeps some teachers from "being real with the students." She went on to say that most teachers have high skills and good intentions but some may lack the training and tools necessary to accommodate the range of needs of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in their classrooms. Others worried about the variation in teachers' knowledge of cultural differences: one mentioned eye contact as a source of misunderstanding between some students and teachers. They worried further about assuming particular cultural norms with incredibly diverse populations of urban and rural First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. One participant advised approaching the complex topic of success for students with the following, "We need to be cautious that we don't..." As in the statement from the worried parent above, over-zealous application of limited knowledge can be very dangerous for relationships with the range of students in SCDSB schools.

There is nothing simple about this work. And yet there is a starting point that never fails. Participants found strength with those teachers who take their relationships with students seriously. A willingness to admit mistakes was an attribute appreciated by a number of participants. Seeing each student as an individual, expressing concern for that student, and not making any sweeping assumptions, rather taking the time to come to know that student, their particular circumstances and respecting their needs to be open and to privacy are only part of the tricky balancing act that all teachers must negotiate in their classrooms if they are to contribute to First Nations, Métis and Inuit student success. Leaders also recognise the need for strong intellectual expectations for those students who are to graduate and go on to further education or demanding jobs. One leader commented on the teachers who had led him to success:

Frankly, without one of them I never would have gone to university simply because there are those who pulled me aside to say, "You know, you're really not applying yourself, you're not doing this, you're not doing that. You can do this." There were a few others who had positive

influences not by telling me they didn't think I wasn't doing all the stuff I should be doing. They just pulled me along with them and exposed me to different things.

I know that the relationship [with the teacher] is a primary one. It's profound and it also goes back to what I said to you earlier: if we are leaving our children with somebody for eight hours a day, replace the word teacher with parent because it is that kind of influence that a teacher has on a child's life. When children are awake for twelve-fourteen hours a day and eight or nine of those are spent with one adult, that one adult has an enormous amount of influence over that child and that relationship becomes paramount to them and their success throughout a day.

F. Part Two: The Curriculum

This section of the findings of the study focuses on conventional and culturally-based curriculum as discussed by the participants. There is, of course, considerable overlap with the preceding section in terms of what is called the hidden curriculum. The organization and activities of the classroom contain many implicit lessons for children. This section takes up the explicit curriculum, the one seen to be mandated by the Ministry of Education. Of course, within that mandate, there is considerable flexibility in exactly how teachers take up the requirements. Because of its importance to First Nations, Métis and Inuit students' success, cultural dimensions figure prominently in the discussions.

1. The Children

a. Grade Seven and Eight Circlework

*Help us find what we are good at.
Grade eight student*

A curriculum of relevance could be the term to encapsulate what the younger students had to say about curriculum. Some saw their interest in sports as a way to shape more interesting curriculum, math and science in particular. One grade eight girl went into great detail about how to use football as a source of math problems. Others suggested baking as an opportunity for a hands-on curriculum that could also allow a varied approach to fractions and science. As noted in their ideal classroom above, they wanted curricular decisions to take seriously free time and time beyond assigned physical education for play outdoors and physical release.

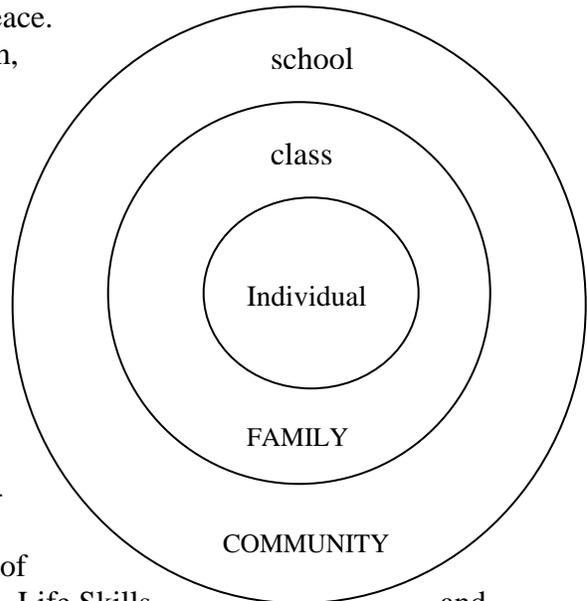
Individually and in groups, students presented a diagram or drawing of their ideas for classrooms where they could feel successful. One grade eight student talked extensively about his dream curriculum pointing to one object after another depicted in his drawing.

It's about creativity: peace, creativity. This a peace sign. Video camera. Respect for the Native/Aboriginal culture. Grassy knoll, the tree,

buckteeth, a sun. I have buckteeth. The sun is shining down because I believe in God. Medicine Wheel. A peace cloud. I am going to clap for myself.

A group of grade four students constructed a large peace sign which they attached as a pop-up to the middle of their poster surrounding it with words related to their ideas of best practices. Relationship words: friends, love, honesty, smile, caring, empathy, helping, respect, difference, importance and peace.

Explicitly curricular words: Geography, French, Chemistry, Art, Math, French. And some reminders: Don't give up; Be thankful; Listen up; Share Ideas; Treat Others as You Would Like to be Treated. Finally their teachers' names appeared – perhaps a sign that their current classrooms reflect the sentiments of these children. Another groups talked of wanting “more culture and learning from the internet.”



A grade eight group, perhaps with input from one of the adults in the session, sought “hands-on experiential learning.” Writing workshops, Printheuses and Media Arts suggested a focus of interest for this group. Science, Food/Nutrition, Life Skills and Sports added to their desired curriculum. Many of the words included on the diagram pointed to serious curricular considerations reflecting Aboriginal values: Being, Celebrating, Wholeness, Life-enhancing, Balance, Supportive. In addition the group included circle diagrams such as the one depicted above, similar to the ones that this section starts with including the Medicine Wheel with physical, spiritual, mental and emotional dimensions. Finally they called for Safety, Natural Lighting, and Open Windows letting in Fresh Air.

A second group of grade eights included the plea, “Help us find what we are good at.” This group also pined for their own lockers “for personal space” and “organizers so we never loose (sic) our work.” There were more calls for a range of opportunities for exercise – yoga, exercise balls, kickball team intramurals. They also wanted artwork on the walls of schools, media arts, a workshop, and a gift shop for fundraising.

b. Secondary Students' Circlework

It's important to have people in your life you can trust.

Teachers who only stick to one learning/teaching style don't hold everyone's interest.

The secondary students picked up the theme of cultural curriculum and programming and expanded on it in greater detail. Their primary focus was on including Aboriginal history, curriculum and materials in regular classroom activities. Most of the group saw Aboriginal topics as important to history but also thought they could and should be integrated into all subjects. They wanted to see Aboriginal authors included in their assigned work and to have the opportunity to shape their assignments with an Aboriginal focus. They felt that Aboriginal content should start in the early years and be incorporated throughout their time in schools. Students would like to see Aboriginal language classes included in their course choices.

They realised that in order for this work to be done well, there is a need to hire more teachers who are knowledgeable about First Nations, Métis and Inuit culture and language. They also felt that many current teachers interested in enhancing success for Aboriginal students would be supported in their commitment if they had the advantage of additional education in cultural sensitivity as well as First Nations, Métis and Inuit history and culture.

Some students thought better education on drug abuse as well as help for addicts and abusers of drugs and alcohol were needed. “Being too preachy about drugs is not effective.” They appreciate teachers with whom they can share their struggles.

2. Parents’ Circlework

I think the main thing for aboriginal kids in urban schools is building up and nourishing their identity. A lot of times it doesn’t have anything to do with academics.

Most parents spent considerable time focusing on the way that “the inclusion of Aboriginal culture threaded into the curriculum through crafts, music and history in all grades” would enhance their children’s chances of success in school. They felt that cultural education could start with the youngest students learning some history and the tribal areas and ceremonies of Aboriginal people as they live now. Notably, a number present had contributed to Aboriginal events in the schools. One woman said,

About teaching Aboriginal history to all the students: it really has to start at that age. And by educating the younger kids about Aboriginal culture and language they become more respectful so those Aboriginal kids who want to take the language course, they wouldn’t feel reluctant to take it.

You’d be surprised, for National Aboriginal Day, for example, I go to my daughter’s school and there might be drumming or singing and teachings for the kids. I find it very important that you’re teaching non-Native people and non-Native children Aboriginal culture, a celebration of Aboriginal culture. And you’d be surprised how many kids in grade two and three are so willing to learn and so respectful. You’d be surprised...

Woman interjects: Oh, the little ones, it's great...

...you teach them at that very young age it'll stick with them and if you continue it as they get older it'll stick with them.

The group felt that older ones could be taught about the process of colonization. As one woman commented, "It's very important to put together a program with Aboriginal history and that would be a beginning part of understanding each other.... I think if there was some kind of program in the school system, Aboriginal history, that would really help." Parents pondered what these classes in Aboriginal history would look like. One younger mother worried:

I would like to see cultural awareness, teaching the young kids about the history of this country, which tribes were in which area in Canada and the United States and each tribes' ceremonies, the languages that we speak. That would be part of history though right? And like a subject in school?

Will how the white people took over this land be part of it? Are you going to teach that?

Researcher interjects: Should that be taught? You tell me.

Yeah, I think it should be taught, but kids would have to use terms, like words that are not so harsh. Because it was harsh what people did to our ancestors. I don't know how that works.

Others suggested that a kindergarten to grade twelve program could draw on Aboriginal culture and beliefs such as the Seven Grandfather Teachings. These teachings, which are part of the foundational beliefs of Anishinaabe or Ojibway culture, are ones with which most people can easily identify. These gifts from Seven Grandfathers given to a young boy to bring to his people are Wisdom, Love, Respect, Bravery, Honesty, Humility and Truth. The values they express are perfectly at peace with values of most cultures. *The Mishomis Book* by Edward Benton-Banai was suggested as a useful resource for teachers interested in deepening their understandings of these teachings and one group of First Nations people of the area. Another participant in the group reminded us all that there are more curriculum places for Aboriginal focus. "We keep talking about Aboriginal history like it's the only subject non-Native people can learn about us. IBM has a science and technology camp during the summer and they came out with these booklets called "What IT Professionals Do." Basically it's a program designed specifically for Aboriginal youth. It's teaching them contributions Aboriginal people made to technology, mathematics, and science."

In discussing curricular issues further, one parent talked about a particular difficulty she encountered in her classrooms almost every year. Even today, some teachers may decide a good way to involve a First Nations, Métis and Inuit student in their class is by having

them teach “something from their culture.” Many teachers may be hesitant about teaching such things themselves because they lack the knowledge necessary to do it well. For some students, this well-intentioned request is a source of great angst. One parent recalled her experience as a high school student:

They’d ask me, “Do you want to teach something about [being] Native?” and I was [thinking], “I’m just a kid, I don’t know any more than you do and it’s kind of unfair that I have to teach this stuff.” It made me feel uncomfortable. And even though I wanted to help my fellow students understand that I’m Native and I’m not such a bad person, that’s a lot of pressure and I think teachers teaching it makes a lot more sense.

I’d like to give input, but to teach a whole section of history was a lot of pressure and it kind of scared me a little bit. But it never failed. Every year a teacher would ask me, “Do you wanna teach a little bit about this or talk a little bit about that?” And I was like, “No, I don’t.” But it was hard to say no because it was almost like, just because you’re the only one there, you were expected to know it. It’s like an expectation that’s not reasonable. I was just in the same class as everyone else.

Of course, teachers do not usually ask children of English ancestry to teach English history or “something from their culture.” There are at least two questionable assumptions in a request such as this one. First, it is very difficult for a person living a culture to articulate what that culture is. Asking a fish to describe water is one of the analogies used to convey this problem. Second, urban First Nations, Métis and Inuit children have varied experiences of and exposure to their heritage culture. As part of the legacy of residential schools (now, finally being directly acknowledged by the Canadian government), many parents did not live with their culture. They also learned to hide what they knew since there were times not so long ago when severe punishment could be the outcome of expressing either language or cultural proclivities. That being said, there is the on-going plea for balance in classrooms in light of the contributions students and their families might make. Some students may be fully immersed in their culture and delighted to share what they know. Overall, this example demonstrates the sensitivity that teachers need in determining the right path to take with individual First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in their classrooms.

Like the secondary students, parents expressed their commitment to offering “Native language classes for Native students.” One woman said,

I’m also concerned about the loss of language. I never learned how to speak Ojibway because my mother forgot because she went to boarding school when she was young. She had to learn a lot to become what she’s become. She’s great. She’s done very well in her life, but she lost her language early on. I wasn’t able to learn and I wasn’t able to teach my kids. I know that it’s a very big issue because at one point they were saying that the children might not learn it simply because all the people

were forgetting it too. It's just something that we have pushed out of the way because that's what society tells us we have to do in order to get a good job, in order to live well, to have money and be successful. But language is really important to me and I guess sensitivity also to Aboriginal people and their lives.

Accompanying language classes is the power of culture classes. Parents would like to see more opportunities for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students to learn about the cultural ways of each nation. "Teach my child more of the Ojibway First Nations culture so my kids can understand which culture they come from." These curricular innovations were seen to be central to students feeling good about themselves as First Nations, Métis and Inuit people. In order for teachers to be in a position to respond to their students' curricular needs and their own dreams of a culturally sensitive curriculum, parents suggested the community would need to be involved in teaching the adults, i.e. the teachers, about culture and history. The parents themselves are more than willing to be involved in the schools to begin what some called the healing process.

Well that's the thing, where do you begin? When you look at the books that are out there from long ago, we're supposed to be savages. We spent years and years to get rid of that label and it's still there but it's not out there like it used to be. I don't know where the racism began that's part of it but there's a need to change that history in a more positive way because we're not savages. So when you look at how you're going to do that I could see teaching circles or talking circles or those culturalistic pieces that we live today.

For example, I went to high school here in Simcoe County last year and I shared a story, my own life story with a group of teenagers. I made sure there was a counsellor available. These teenagers were all First Nations students: I think there were maybe two who were non-Native in the class. I talked about the eagle feathers and I talked about some really hurtful stuff for me and how I came around and healed through that and I couldn't believe how I was just giving my own personal experience but they were grasping it. There were girls in there crying because I touched something that hurt them. It may have not been the same issue that I carried but to know that I was hurting. There's a healing that needs to happen there somehow within that system.

The women in the parent group had specific ideas for curriculum. One talked of how important her culturally-based art classes had been for her and how they should be an option for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students.

Art was a big part of my accepting who I am, as an Aboriginal person. I kind of pushed it away when I was a kid. When I grew up and got a job at a Native organization, it became more of a part of learning who I was and becoming more interested in my future as an Aboriginal person. We'd

work with dream catchers and it was so simple. Like learning about the colours, how important certain colours were and the strength of the medicines and knowing what it meant. But it had a lot to do with art because I feel like Aboriginal people, a lot of them, embrace art as a very important part of daily life. I am biased about that (laughter) but I really feel like art is a very important thing and that children should learn and they can use it as a tool to learn more about culture.

Another suggestion for curriculum focused on boys and how a curriculum that incorporated some of the traditional teachings could play a strong role in their education.

Another thing that is really important to me is learning about warrior society and where boys fit in in their own culture. And how they were taught the old way. They were shown by older men this is how you're supposed to treat women and children and other beings and animals. It's about spiritual life: it's more than just being a warrior, it was about being a person and being an adult and learning to become a good person in general. And I think it's really important for boys to learn how to treat women. And having that respect for themselves as well.

Explaining her daughter's resistance to including her mother's early life in a house with a woodstove and no electricity in a biography she had to do for school, one mother contemplated what it would look like to have a school where students could be respectful of other ways of life and her own children could feel the same pride in her upbringing as she does herself.

Our wood-burning stove is a happy memory; I don't know what she's thinking. The only reason I told her because I was proud of it. My father was born on a reserve on a trail, on a trapping line, in a tent. And I'm proud of where he came from too. I'm proud of where my mother came from. I'm proud that I didn't live in the city all my life. I just think there should be a lot more pride in our culture. And coming from not just our children but from our parents as well. It has a lot to do with pride; history has a lot to do with it and honesty. Honesty gives you a sad history but I think learning the sadness gives you a lot more pride in what you have now. And how far you've come and how things can't always stay the same; things are always changing.

The hope she sees in the ways changes are coming gives hope to all who are committed to improving the success of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students.

3. Educational Leaders' Interviews

Schools need to do a better job of celebrating the contributions of Aboriginal people to education, to science, to all the things.

The educational leaders echoed many of the other participants' comments while in some aspects going a step further in their analysis of best practices and the need for change in shaping curriculum for schools within the SCDSB. A well-known community leader had this to say:

From personal experience when there is governance/control or at least input into the curriculum, it results in pride of ownership, enthusiasm for learning and a lot of success. It's the same for any student: belief in self, knowing who they are. But as an Aboriginal minority, they see themselves as not reflected in the curriculum.

Leaders also look to curriculum that focuses on the whole child, "not just the physiological, but the psychological and spiritual." For all, the intellectual dimension was assumed although more than one person worried about lowered expectations for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. Several mentioned the board's current focus on differentiated instruction. "I think we should have participatory learning in one place and for those who learn better writing down every word, we'll have a professor give a lecture." While some saw differentiated learning affirming the approaches they preferred for classrooms, others saw it as a significant innovation that deserved on-going commitment.

Incorporating a focus on specific examples involving First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples throughout the curriculum areas was one of the ways that the students could be engaged. "It matters that people come to know who they are, what Métis means," said one participant. They called for language classes, most often Ojibway and Michif: "the most crucial thing is language." A primary area of focus related to the importance of a more inclusive Canadian history as being beneficial to all students and foundational to promoting healthier relations among First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples and other Canadians. At the same time, the educational leaders also made it clear that they did not think incorporation of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples and issues should be limited to history class. Extra-curricular school-based activities that focus on First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures such as powwows, canoe expeditions and the development of culturally-based leadership skills were mentioned as possibilities for all students—a way to foster respect and understanding. Most notably, each participant also took time to talk about spirituality and the curriculum. Because of this emphasis, a separate synthesis of those comments is included below.

Overall, there was a concern that history curricula did not do justice to the contributions of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples to the development and current circumstances of Canada. One participant said:

Schools need to do a better job of celebrating the contributions of Aboriginal people to education, to science, to all the things. We have leaders in every aspect of development in North America. There are things that Aboriginal people created and are now being used in the daily lives of everyone. Celebrate those things so that those children can come there and

think, yeah, that was us and have some sense of pride. And I can relate it back to people of different cultural backgrounds. I mean they celebrate that stuff. They'll say Russian-born such and such created this and received a Nobel whatever. Aboriginal people have huge accomplishments and they are not celebrated the same way. We do [recognize] Aboriginal achievement and celebrate within our own group, within our own community. We all know who those people are, but no one else does. Schools need to incorporate more of that kind of stuff to help build the self-esteem of these kids coming into the school: to say our people have made amazing contributions to society – not just our own society, but to society in general.

Presenting more detailed, “true” history has the potential to enhance relations between First Nations, Métis and Inuit students and their counterparts. Speaking directly to Métis history, one participant emphasized it “holds value for the mainstream in overcoming ignorance of the ‘Forgotten People’, understanding Canadian history better, and increasing compassion.” Another person suggested that teaching the history of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples could lead all students to “increased sensitivity” and better understandings of “why things are the way they are today in Ontario, Canada.” The need for local history was reiterated. Making First Nations, Métis and Inuit history an integral part of Canadian history rather than hiving it off in its own compartment was deemed necessary to good relations and a more inclusive representation.

In terms of incorporating First Nations, Métis and Inuit ideas and issues into other curriculum areas, several people offered specific examples. One person was able to direct a civics teacher to a couple of lessons relevant to disenfranchised Aboriginal students and informed others of some of the complexities of First Nations governance.

I suggested that they do a comparison between the way an Aboriginal community was run way back, and how Chief and Council operates on reserve now and compare that to how the municipal government works. There are some other parallels: how parliament works. That would be civics....There are some things from the Mohawk that are still used in parliament today. Students can understand that before government was even evident here, Aboriginal people had governance. They had a system in place to run their communities on the way things were done and decisions were made.

Another leader posited a simple activity that could accompany the national anthem. He suggests teaching the students that there are three founding nations. (Interestingly historian Olive Dickason tells us there are fifty-five!)

Every single morning we sing Oh Canada in the schools. What we teach then is that Canada is a French and English confederation. I think the easiest way to deal with this is to tell the students there were three founding partners of Canada at the time of confederation. Indigenous

people contributed lands and resources to this country. It is a fabulous country and who would want to be from anywhere else? We can deal with that everyday around the national anthem. What we have taught it means is [related to] a whole bunch of white folks, white men in suits, in those great paintings of Confederation. All the men there signing all the documents: there's not a Native person in sight.

I think in many ways if we're talking positively about this country and if there's teaching around the flag and the imagery that we're showing kids everyday, we can start introducing those thoughts. That way, they're holding them in their mind everyday about how the country came to be and who contributed the land and resources that we're standing on and the resources that have made this building. That kind of meditative moment during the national anthem both creates a sense of pride in the country but is reflective of all of its founding partners and doesn't continue to erase the inconvenient stuff. I think there are very easy ways for teachers to do that. Right before Oh Canada is playing, spend some time with students on lessons around it, "Remember as you're listening to this that we can meditate on who the founding partners are and speak about that." I think for children who have come from immigrant families as well, educating them on the history of the country is important: they are new Canadians.

In direct contrast to this respectful involvement of Aboriginal people in curriculum, a leader who is also a parent talked of an incident, albeit in another district, involving kindergarten children. It is presented here because it has resonances with similar incidents over the years in many districts. (See for example Susan Dion's work in elementary classrooms in Ontario.)

There was an incident at the school where the children in kindergarten that year were going to be dressing up like little Indians. I spoke to the director of the school to say, "Not appropriate. And I'm coming in tomorrow morning and I'll be bringing my son in to school in the morning." I asked for a meeting with the teacher and the faculty chair and the director of the school. I had asked the reason [for the assignment] and the response of the teacher was "Oh this is all part of the education cycle. This year it happens to be Indigenous people, next year it's sprites, the next year it's gnomes and fairies." I had suggested at that point, unlike gnomes and fairies, our people aren't mythical, "We know this because I stand as evidence speaking to you about it. And this is not going to happen, unless you want a whole bunch of us droning outside the school, day and night until you relent." They were horrified and it was pretty clear had a difficult time understanding my position. Subsequently the teacher apologized, I said I didn't really want an apology, what I want is an understanding about whose country you are in and whose land you stand on and some respect is, I think, really due.

Fortunately there was a productive outcome to this situation and the school responded well. “We worked it out where we brought in some drummers and teachers to work with the school and change the curriculum for the kindergarten kids so that that didn’t happen again. They ended up having to take a drum making workshop, which was great, taught them how to tie tobacco and that kind of stuff.” While this outcome is an excellent resolution to a difficult situation, one is left to wonder what would have changed if there had been no Aboriginal parent involved or if there had been no response from him.

Currently there are some significant initiatives primarily related to the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project which respond to a number of the expressed concerns. One of those involved with the interviews commented on a recent symposium dedicated to Aboriginal languages and Native Studies. The message being conveyed was “that there needs to be huge shift from those traditional approaches to the transformative in how we do business in the classroom.”

Moving outside the classroom to surroundings more conducive to Indigenous thought brought one participant to the following suggestion. What he calls for are, “multi-aged learning groups and structures that actually support a connection to the land. For Indigenous people for tens of thousands of years that was the classroom and, you know, they’re still around so there must have been something right about that one.”

4. Spirituality and the Curriculum

I don’t think there is a culture anywhere that doesn’t embrace what the Seven Grandfathers teaches.

Because of the number of comments made by the educational leaders on the question of incorporating spirituality into the everyday curriculum of the schools of SCDSB, it deserves a section of its own. There is nothing simple about the place of Aboriginal spirituality in schools. One participant responded:

It depends on what aspect of Aboriginal spirituality. Aboriginal spirituality is connected to the culture. It depends on how it is viewed. I don’t think the Education Act prohibits the examination of relations. Because of the influence of the mainstream Christian religion, there are very few expressions of Aboriginal spirituality, whether you’re talking of culture and tradition, or the traditional ways of gathering and hunting. People are still very divided on that. Some will not smudge because they are Christian Aboriginal, Christian religion, and feel that has no place in their religion. It’s a tough one.

Of course, there are some cultures within First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities, for whom smudging is not practiced traditionally or, if it is, it has been adopted from other cultures. Other participants referred to being raised Catholic and having no difficulty merging their commitment to and practices of Aboriginal spirituality with their form of Christianity.

Continuing by making a distinction between religion and spirituality, one participant said, “It comes with a rule book and whether it’s written down or whether it’s just taught through classes, every religion has rules. Spirituality has none.” What is spirituality then? This participant went on to say:

Spirituality is the connectedness to the world around you. The Cree and Ojibway, we always end our prayers with the phrase “All my relations.” We say that because, as we keep teaching our children, you are related to the trees, you are related to the squirrels that are running up and down them right now and you are related to all of these other beings. That is spirituality. It’s just a way of living where you accept that there’s a universal power without a name. There is just universal energy. It is not eastern because all eastern religions have their own playbook. They have rules; they have doctrine. This is just a universal consciousness: that’s spirituality. For Cree people we also talk about our laws and I think that informs us in terms of spirituality. Our laws are love, kindness, respect, humility, bravery: who would not want to live that way? Those are universal ideologies that I think are the foundational cornerstones of spirituality. There’s a whole bunch of rules and languages and doctrines and books and other things: those are all religion prescriptions.

Another person interviewed elaborated:

Our culture is totally based on respect and on honesty. Our whole Seven Grandfathers teaching is based on being the best person you can be: Love, Truth, Honesty, Courage, all those things. It’s not god-related; we believe in the Creator. Any of the teachings you look at—when you read the language of the teaching—it’s telling you to be a good person. The Seven Grandfathers teaching, that’s the whole thing. I always say if everybody could live by these principles, there would be no strife anywhere in our schools and in our communities.

An echo with those students calling for a culture of peace sounds here. She concluded, “I don’t think there is a culture anywhere that doesn’t embrace what the Seven Grandfathers teaches.”

While acknowledging that there are tensions for some between Christian Aboriginal practices and Aboriginal spiritual values, the cultural connections blur the lines between what is acceptable, as does the distinction between spirituality and religion. For some, the controversies are non-existent: balancing Christianity and the Seven Grandfathers teachings of the Anishinaabek (Ojibway people) becomes a non-issue. “If it’s the teachings of the Seven Grandfathers, I don’t see any conflict there. I think mainstream society might be surprised that there are common grounds. There is a lot of common ground between the two cultures. They are just expressed differently.” This person saw

an easy relation between some branches of Christianity and the values of the Seven Grandfathers teaching.

While spirituality is a complex topic and one that may stimulate angst for those who recognize that public schools are not for proselytizing, there are many arguments for teaching values that lead to a strong and peaceful society. The educational leaders interviewed are clearly committed to finding a middle ground where spiritual values as expressed in teachings such as the Seven Grandfathers can be accepted – not as dogma, but as something people can accept as an opening and an invitation to “living a good life.” The following narrative provides an insight into how the teachings work at home for one of the people interviewed.

Our children don't do prayers every night, I know many in other houses they do and good on them, I think it's important to be meditative right before bed time for children and adults. There was a time when my ten year old and my seven year old were at each other every single day. And I taught them the practice that is what my people do. Every night before bed, no matter what your age, you're to ask yourself a question and the question is always the same, “Did I live in a good way today?” And just be contemplative about that and just reflect on your day. And so I had said to the boys, “When you go to bed you need to ask yourself that question and so when you replay your day and you were arguing with your brother, you need to remember, ‘Was that a good way for me to do that?’ And if you can say I lived in a good way and did the best I could, knock yourself out, go to sleep. If you can't, you need to figure out how the next day, if you get one, you're going to make that right.”

Another of the educational leaders currently working in schools commented:

You know when we talk about some teachings from the grandfathers it is as simple as when you're working with kids and they forget about one of them. Of course they have to know what you're talking about first. I used to do this all the time as a vice-principal and a principal, “Did you forget about honesty? How did you forget about honesty? And what can you do to remember to be honest next time. What can you do to remember to be brave?” How can you say no to that behaviour and being grateful? You can incorporate that and that's spirituality.

In terms of working with spirituality in the schools and classrooms, those interviewed acknowledged there were some practical issues to be addressed. As noted above, teachers may not have the knowledge to work with the teachings. Asking community people to be involved in curriculum development and presentation was one suggestion. Some of the parents and others had already been directly involved in their children's classrooms presenting cultural, personal and historical issues. Involving elders in particular was seen as a positive move. Approaching the parents of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students for advice in finding both resources and resource people was given as one way for teachers

to find people to work with them. It is important to note that such involvement should be requested in a respectful way. Recognizing appropriate cultural protocols including respectful asking as well as reciprocal response to participation in the form of payment and gifts is essential. As one parent said, the door should be open for elders to teach language and culture in the school and they should be properly paid full time employees.

G. Part Three: The School Environment

You can tell walking into a school if they are Aboriginal conscious.

For this section and the one that follows, the comments from all the groups are synthesized into one or two major topics. All participants talked of the school environment and what a difference it can make to the success of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. As with the classroom, “Make it a welcoming place where it is okay to be Aboriginal.” The concerns raised can be categorized in three main ways: 1) more First Nations, Métis and/or Inuit staff—teachers and counsellors; 2) a welcoming atmosphere, which could include positive representations of First Nations, Métis and Inuit art and culture in prominent display; 3) a dedicated space where First Nations, Métis and Inuit students can gather. All of these attributes were seen to affect the comfort both First Nations, Métis and Inuit students and their parents feel in coming to the schools. While some of those interviewed were committed to being in close touch with their children’s schools no matter what the circumstances, all would appreciate an explicitly Aboriginal presence and representations in the school environment.

One educational leader and parent was very clear:

You can tell walking into a school if they are Aboriginal conscious. You can see the Aboriginal students. You may not identify them but you can tell from the school environment, just by what the kids are learning in the classroom, by walking in and seeing Aboriginal teachers, Aboriginal support staff. An important thing for Aboriginal kids in our schools is, if they see role models, they are more likely to succeed. Personally, because I went to a reserve school, I had a few Aboriginal teachers and they made a huge difference. I saw them and I had aspirations: I can do the same thing they’re doing.

Several other people commented on the need for First Nations, Métis and Inuit staff in the school. More teachers, both those recognized by the Ontario College of Teachers as well as those recognized by their community as wisdom keepers would encourage students to take pride in who they are as well as be inspired to follow suit. “We have gentlemen and women in our community who can teach but they don’t have the qualifications. They just don’t have the paper.” More First Nations, Métis and Inuit counsellors in schools with whom students and parents could make a connection was another wish. Helping students from rural areas or smaller schools make the transition to urban high schools could be enhanced. “I think it’s great that we have our own schools on reserve but when you go to school on the reserve to off the reserve, where is the interaction? Where is the medium?”

Like who's there to greet you? Who's there to help you go to that school? Because you've been all your life on reserve going to school and all of a sudden, boom, you hit high school." Students wished for counsellors who are not "too preachy" and who show they care. They specifically talked about counsellors who are knowledgeable in career planning including the effects of choices, "mental illness and learning disabilities and better drug education such as harm reduction." Some parents saw particular value in an Aboriginal counsellor who could serve as mediator between them and their children's teachers and encourage reticent parents to see the school as a welcoming place for them and their children.

Aboriginal parents might feel more comfortable communicating with the schools if they know that they have Aboriginal staff in that school, for example an Aboriginal guidance counselor. If they know that their child is struggling in school, that their child can have an Aboriginal person to talk with or just even see in the school, and that they're seeing an Aboriginal role model, I think that's very important. Parents want peace of mind and seeing that [brings it]. Working at a reserve school, one of the main things that they had was cultural programming and language programs and their students are very successful in those things and very respectful. And if they could provide those things for our kids in the urban schools as well, maybe they would succeed. I think it's about nourishing their identities: they're more likely to succeed.

Clearly principals make a difference to the over all atmosphere of the school. Celebration of Aboriginal Day was an area where principals could take the lead. Parents commented that students needed to feel accepted both by their peers and the administration. There were also some expressions of concern around the treatment of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students within the schools. Some commented on the effect of cliques but more serious were the comments on reducing the "fear and intimidation" as "territories are staked out by Native and non-Native groups in the washrooms and smoking areas." Students are afraid to trespass into the territory of another group.

Positive images of First Nations, Métis and Inuit people in art forms around the school is one expression of the Aboriginally-conscious school called for above. Giving an example of what not to do, an educational leader spoke of a school where students and parents are welcomed at the entrance by "a mural depicting the martyrdom of the Jesuits surrounded by their Native torturers." Perhaps not the best way to represent the positive relationships we are working toward. On the other hand, "high end" inspirational art was seen as a way to encourage students to develop their own skills.

There's not a lot of inspirational art in the school. I think we end up decorating with whatever the kids themselves are producing but then how do we inspire them to reach? Maybe we have a nice big huge watercolour that's framed in the school when they come in to try to inspire that kind of "I could do that." We just don't do that. Most of the schools have art teachers, maybe those art teachers could do the high end stuff themselves

and frame and hang it, spend a couple hundred bucks on professionally hanging it. And inspiring the kids in the hallways just by walking past it. Some of the best environments we want to be in are the natural environments or ones where there's nice art or lighting.

As with the dreams for the classrooms, again and again, there was call for natural light throughout the school. Beyond the walls, one person commented on the immediate environment of the school.

I don't think there should be tarmac around schools. I think there should be lawn and trees and there should be needles that fall down and there should be stuff that happens. There should be fungus that grows on the trees. I think that's where kids should be playing. I don't think they should be playing on tarmac, concrete, cement. And no, you don't need to have a basketball net outside. You can do that in the gym. Outside, when we're going out, you should be connecting with what the universe looks like, what the world looks like.

The creation of an Aboriginal Advisory Council in the school was the goal of some students. They also called for gathering space with couches, books and a counsellor for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. Others mentioned a need for a resource room where materials specific to First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. The parents spoke of a designated resource person in each school, available in a central place where students and teachers could come to smudge or seek counsel of various sorts. Parents and others valued full school participation in pow-wows and other cultural activities including appropriate ceremonies. They felt that involving the whole school would give added credibility to First Nations, Métis and Inuit students, increase their sense of pride as well as give other students both knowledge and sensitivity to the place of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples in contemporary, local contexts.

Some students and more than one parent/educational leader pondered the possibility of a school for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students where there could be language classes, Indigenous teachings and ceremonies. After hours Hebrew schools and the soon to be established Black-focused school in Toronto were among the comparators. Importantly, a recently hired child and youth worker attended two of the sessions of circlework. Her comments indicated that the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project is already moving into several of the areas identified above. Resource rooms with cultural objects, Aboriginal art or other representations for the school foyers and help for Aboriginal students who are in need of it are planned for four schools in the district. Maintaining these initiatives beyond the life of the pilot project is a challenge to be met.

H. Part Four: Broader Community and Family

*Success requires a commitment from both the Board and the community.
Educational Leader and Grandmother*

In this final section of the results of the circlework and interviews, we switch our view to the largest concentric circle, Broader Community and Family. Although there are, of course, many overlaps with preceding sections, two themes which reach beyond the scope of the earlier sections stood out in what the people had to say. 1) Collaboration and respectful interaction between the Board and the community members, and 2) teacher education and professional development. The latter came up in a number of the exchanges between researchers and the study participants.

1. Collaboration and respectful interaction between Board and community

My biggest issue is...that school boards think carefully before implementing policies and procedures pertaining to Aboriginal kids.

Educational leader

As one of the educational leaders commented, success for students requires a continuing commitment from both the Board and the community. It is important “that the Board has an agenda like a three-year plan, a five-year plan, a ten-year plan to make sure there is a direction for positive change towards making all kids comfortable in school, in particular Aboriginal kids.” Finding additional ways to involve community members in both the planning and communicating with them as the plans unfold were two points made by participants. The kind of commitment sought can be summarized as creating good relations between and among all those involved in striving for success for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students and, indeed, for all students. It calls to mind a slogan from another context which might be paraphrased as “What’s good for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students is good for all students.” Another participant cautioned, “My biggest issue is that, especially in light of the big impetus that we have for Aboriginal education and things that are coming out of the [First Nations, Métis and Inuit] Framework, that school boards think carefully before implementing policies and procedures pertaining to Aboriginal kids. Not just look at the big dollars they can access.” This person commented further:

They need to be open-minded. They need to treat Aboriginal people as people first and foremost, not just as the latest flavour of the month. And after the money dries up, not forget about them. Don’t get lost on the vision because I think you can hurt a lot of kids if you develop tunnel vision. That’s my biggest thing—seeing Aboriginal kids as one type of learner. Looking at the kid and saying, “Oh! Aboriginal! Gotta change my curriculum this way,” without looking at the child first.

Encouraging more parental involvement in the School Board would allow Aboriginal communities to have a voice at the table. Identifying and encouraging likely candidates to run for office could have good effect. Aboriginal communities and organizations taking the lead in establishing relation with the School Board was another approach some saw as productive. One of the educational leaders, also a parent, wondered about the money designated for Aboriginal children, especially those identified as having a learning

disability and whether those funds went directly to support individual Aboriginal children or were taken into the general coffers for all students. This concern indicates a need for more effective communication to parents, including budget decisions, which might alleviate this concern.

One form of collaborative work cited as useful involves community members working in classrooms in various capacities. While this have been occurring sporadically, a more coherent and wide-ranging plan at the Board level could encourage more teachers and principals to initiate and/or increase these interactions. There was a strong sense that these interventions could contribute to the “re-education” of students leading to a shift in relations between First Nations, Métis and Inuit and non-Aboriginal students and their families. While clearly desirous of having more Aboriginal staff as principals, teachers and counsellors, participants thought this must be a long-term goal for the most part.

Parents in particular emphasized the level of expertise in culture and language within communities. “We should try and get older people who know the language and offer them jobs to teach in schools. Because language is very important for urban Aboriginal students.” In a number of examples recounted above, the willingness of community people to contribute to schools and to the education not only of their children but also of all the children is evident. Sympathetic with credentialing requirements, participants also felt a level of frustration at the waste of resources in the Board not always seeing the best ways to employ these community-based teachers with students in the schools. At the same time, some clearly indicated that payment for services and full time jobs rather than occasional invitations were goals to be worked toward. They would denote true respect for the knowledge community people could bring to schools and go a long way to healing relations between schools and community. On the other hand, one person interviewed called for grandparents being encouraged to come into classrooms as volunteers. The presence of a volunteer in her classroom, she said, had an amazing effect on children with whom she had worked, “The beauty of it was that she could fill some of the gaps in ways that I couldn’t.” Hiring a travelling resource worker who would move among a number of schools was another possibility suggested.

Clearly the current Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project, along with other recent Board initiatives, is seen as a step in the right direction. The Aboriginal personnel already hired into several positions are making a difference to the focus of the Board. That being said, the overwhelming concern is that the focus may turn out to be, as one participant said, “the flavour of the month.” One participant was particularly clear on her vision of collaboration between the SCDSB and the communities. She called for “the board to understand that collaboration fully and not see it later on as a fix-it. It needs somehow to be entrenched so that collaboration is ensured.”

Finally the Board was seen as one site for addressing the subject of the next section, teacher education. One participant commented:

I think a lot of work needs to be done at the training level and I think that the school boards....they command tremendous influence [regarding] how

the universities teach. I mean the medical profession has a lot of influence on whether too many doctors are produced. Why can't the school boards have the same kind of influence with the universities in terms of the product they want to see coming out? The school boards sit back and say, "We take what we get," but the universities won't produce teachers unless there's a supply and demand. As you employ all these people who come out of the teacher education programs, you create jobs for the universities, so you are in a position to have tremendous influence in terms of how teachers are trained at the university level.

Needless to say, this person focused on teacher education which developed sensitivity to and knowledge of the lives of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples of Canada.

2. **Teacher education and professional development.**

*The teachers are where you affect change.
Educational Leader*

Participants frequently collapsed the need for improved professional development for existing teachers with teacher education for beginners, seeing similar gaps in their education. "They really have no knowledge about anything Aboriginal," one parent generalized. Of course, there are always exceptions to the majority, but over all, the need for more education was seen as a benefit. "I think the teachers are where you start," said one leader. Good teacher education includes a time for people to examine their life experiences and the possible impact those events may have on their work as teachers. As one educational leader noted, that in order to work well with many Aboriginal students,

[Teachers] would have to be sensitized and knowledgeable about Aboriginal culture. I think one of the biggest problems too is that all of the Aboriginal-designated teacher programs like NTEP or ATEP within the mainstream haven't changed in recent years. There's no sensitivity training.

He gave an example of the kind of work student teachers need to do in examining how their upbringing may influence their relationships with students.

I've heard teachers, and these are people in their twenties, thirties, remember incidents from their childhood. Walking down the streets of Owen Sound or Parry Sound, their parents would cross the street when they saw an Aboriginal or a group of Aboriginal people. They can remember their parents doing that. It's only now that they're adults and they're in education that they're reflecting back on how that formed their opinion of Aboriginal people. And now they're teachers and it's good that they can throw out some of those negative influences they have had because of the way they were brought up. It's not a fact that Aboriginal people are bad but it is a fact that their parents crossed the road with them.

These are the same people that are going to teacher training programs and graduating and teaching Aboriginal kids. It's been ingrained in them from childhood. How do you reverse that? And there's nothing along the way that can reverse that kind of teachings that they've had. And these people are going to be in charge of Aboriginal kids within the mainstream.

Teacher education is one place to address the development of sensitivity to the role of personal histories in shaping work in classrooms. Starting there has implications for changing practices in schools.

It needs to go even higher where we are producing new teachers and new people coming on board to teach our children. For them to learn these things in teachers' college before they get to the classroom so that when they get to the classroom we don't have to have situations like we have right now where we are doing this kind of research, and we're doing preventative measures with our kids because we are trying to undo what's been done.

Professional development for those already in schools, who most likely experienced teacher education which did not address working with Aboriginal students, is also seen to be a priority. Exposure to history, philosophies, contemporary relations to Canada and major contributions to all knowledge areas of First Nations, Métis and Inuit people are all integral to deepening understandings of each other. "It's a great idea to teach the teachers the history," one parent said. Central to teacher education is developing an understanding of the need for positive caring relationships between teachers and students with teachers refusing the deficit theorizing which leads to low expectations for some students.

As noted above, teachers and teacher educators must negotiate a tricky balancing act. While avoiding what one participant called "the tunnel vision that all Aboriginals learn one way," a number of participants noted the pressure teachers feel and the level of frustration some find in trying to work in good ways with some First Nations, Métis and Inuit children. One person explicitly acknowledged the complexities faced by non-Aboriginal teachers.

I have to give you an example of the teacher I've known for twenty, twenty-five years. High school teacher, excellent teacher, he models just everything you would think of in an excellent teacher. However, he's retired and he still does not understand Aboriginal students and it's heart wrenching to him to see them fail. And yet, he has not been able to get his head around what he needs to do or even the fact that he needs to do or learn something. Even though he's an excellent teacher. So this idea of a two worlds pedagogy and view point, for teachers, there's a learning curve that's necessary. I don't think most teachers would even be able to comprehend or consider that this parent sitting across the table from me has a different worldview. What does that mean?

While there are those who would argue it is not necessary for teachers to be knowledgeable of First Nations, Métis and Inuit history and culture in order to be good teachers of Aboriginal children, for others such as those cited above, such knowledge is a sound starting place for teachers to demonstrate their appreciation of and respect for the place of Aboriginal peoples as foundational to this country. Without showing that they care for students, there is no way for students to know that they do. Observable caring behaviour makes a difference for the students we talked with. One form of demonstration of caring is to be able to present respectfully some knowledge of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples and their relation to various contemporary contexts. For both students of teacher education, and for those already in practice, the opportunity to re-educate themselves into deeper understandings of all those intricacies involved in creating good relations with First Nations, Métis and Inuit students who come to their classrooms is a privilege.

The work to be done requires always keeping in mind the cautions educational leaders raised earlier: there is no one model of an Aboriginal child. They come from urban middle class families and they come from poverty. They grow up healthy on reserve; they live in dysfunctional foster homes in the city. They are brilliant writers; they like to work with their hands. They are university bound; they decide to immerse themselves in traditional knowledge. The list of circumstances is endless; their life situations are as varied as the winds. If there is one thing in common, it is that their ancestral roots lie deep in this land that we all now call home. Our task, “should we decide to accept it,” is to find a way to create the conditions for the success of all our children and for a present and future that no longer rely on archaic understandings of superior and inferior “races” and the stereotypes and expectations that may still be affecting our internalized assumptions.

SECTION 4: CLOSING COMMENTS

The purpose of this research was to gather information factors influencing success for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in the schools of SCDSB. It has certainly done that. Rather than recommendations per se which are best extrapolated by those working most closely with the First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in the SCDSB from the details of what the people said as they are articulated above, this short final section highlights some thoughts for consideration stimulated by this research.

For immediate action and long-term planning, it seems clear that people are calling for an increased presence of First Nations, Métis and Inuit staff in the schools. These include teachers, both university and community-educated, counsellors and other support staff. All participants are looking for schools and classrooms that reflect a sensitivity to First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in all their diversity. This sensitivity encompasses all aspects of pedagogy and the curriculum, both explicit and implicit. Teachers using a range of approaches and creating positive, relationships with students including overt signs of caring are the ones most successful with the students. Curricula that not only explicitly include Aboriginal authors, scientists, artists and others' contributions but also implicitly respect and honour Aboriginal practices, histories and philosophies appeal to the students and parents with whom we spoke.

Teachers need access to initial education which promotes and teaches cultural sensitivity in their professional training and to similar on-going professional development if they are to respond thoughtfully and fully to the comments in this report. They need strong support and recognition of the extra knowledge they need to internalize in order to work with First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in their classes. This education must involve teachers, professors and knowledge keepers who are themselves proficient in cultural protocol and who have knowledge of historical and contemporary issues and situations inherent in relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Barrie, Ontario, Canada and the world.

The words of the people expressed in this report provide a tremendous source of inspiration for those charged with creating a strong model of successful education for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in the SCDSB urban schools. Some may be acted on immediately and, indeed, the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project is already allowing for several initiatives which address the points raised. At the same time, these and other initiatives also require long-term commitment on the part of Board especially terms of budget priorities. Rather than depending solely on soft money from the ministry's initiatives, recognizing that First Nations, Métis and Inuit education is the responsibility of all citizens can be an attitude that SCDSB takes the lead in promoting.

Finally, as is implied time and again by the adults and stated explicitly by one, "We need to be cautious that we don't..." Words for planners and policy-makers to take to heart not as an excuse for inaction but as a motto for carefully considered planning and implementation of policies and the changes they bring.

APPENDIX A

DOCUMENTS FOR PARTICIPANTS

Research Schedule - October 2008
Letter to Parents - Elementary Students
Letter to Parents - Secondary Students
Métis Council Mail-out
Community Information Session Poster
UAEP Research Information Letter
Informed Consent Letter - Model
Grade 7&8 outline for the day
Questions for Community Leaders

SIMCE COUNTY DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD
 URBAN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION PILOT PROJECT
 REVISED RESEARCH SCHEDULE – October 14, 2008

TYPE OF SESSION	NO. OF SESSIONS	PARTICIPANT TYPE	DATE	LOCATION
Community Information Forum	1	Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Community organizations	October 27, 2008 12:30 – 3:30	Barrie Native Friendship Centre (Gymnasium)
Community Information Meeting	1	Parents, Care givers of Aboriginal students in the SCDSB	November 4, 2008 Family Games Night	Barrie Native Friendship Centre (Board Room)
Student Focus Group	1	Grade 7 & 8 (6 Students)*	November 7, 2008 Time: 9:30 – 2:00	BNFC (Board Room/Blue Room)
Student Focus Group	1	High School Students (Grades 9-12) (2x2 student interviews)*	November 14, 2008 9:00 – 12:00	Barrie Native Friendship Centre (Gymnasium)
Parent Focus Group	1	Parents/Care Givers of Aboriginal Students (18 Parents)*	November 18, 2008 Time: 6:00-9:00	Barrie Native Friendship Centre
Student Focus Group	1	High School Students	November 21, 2008 9:30-2:00	Seventh Fire--Midland
Individual Interviews	Individual appointments	Aboriginal Educational Leaders (10 interviews)*	November 7 – 25, 2008	On-going.

*These numbers may vary depending on volunteers

**Tentative date



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**Supporting Métis, First Nation and Inuit Student Success
A Community Based Project: Stories from Simcoe County District School Board**

**STUDENT FOCUS GROUP – NOVEMBER 7TH, 2008,
BARRIE NATIVE FRIENDSHIP CENTRE.**

Dear Parents/Careproviders,

We are excited to announce that the Simcoe County District School Board (SCDSB) was one of three school boards in Ontario selected by the Ministry of Education to participate in an important project called the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project. We are writing to request your help and direction in developing this project which will be designed to improve the school experiences of Métis, First Nation and Inuit students within the SCDSB.

It is important that we have the input of First Nation, Métis and Inuit parents and children and we want to hear your stories. What do you have to say about your children's experiences of school? What do children have to say about their experiences of school?

We think it is essential to talk with those most directly involved with schools. In speaking to the people most directly involved, we hope what you and your children have to say will contribute to our understandings of students' and their parents' experiences of schooling.

The Question: The Urban Aboriginal Pilot Project will build on research already conducted within the County by other community organizations servicing Métis, First Nation and Inuit families. Our research question asks, "What are the factors which students, parents and community leaders see as contributing to the success of Métis, First Nation and Inuit students in schools of the SCDSB?" We plan to document the experiences of Métis, First Nation and Inuit students in these schools.

Focus groups. The SCDSB has hired researchers Celia Haig-Brown and Marg Raynor, both educators and researchers working in relationship with First Nation, Métis people for 30 years. They have been hired for this project to gather information from students, parents/caregivers and community educational leaders working in Métis, First Nation and Inuit organizations by conducting focus groups and interviews.

We will be seeking volunteers to participate in focus groups. Parents/careproviders who would like to have their children participate in a student focus group this Friday, November 7th, at the Barrie Native Friendship Centre can return the form attached to the school principal. We are looking for 10 student participants from grades 7 and 8. Students

who participate will be provided with lunch and a gift certificate for the Bayfield Mall for their participation.

Agenda for the day:

- 10:30 Students are picked up at their home school. Students travel to the Barrie Native Friendship Centre, 175 Bayfield Street, Barrie, Ontario.
- 11:00 Greetings and lunch will be provided.
- 11:30 Focus group session begins.
- 2:30 Students will board the bus to return to their home school.

Results: We hope that the outcome of the research will inform the SCDSB about how to create more successful schools and classrooms for all Métis, First Nation and Inuit students in this area and beyond. Upon completion of this project, a summary of this research will be made available for review and input from all participants.

Parent focus groups. TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 18TH, 2008, BARRIE NATIVE FRIENDSHIP CENTRE. We will also be hosting a parent focus group at the Barrie Native Friendship Centre on Tuesday, November the 18th, between 6:00 and 9:00 o'clock. We are looking for 20 parents to participate in this focus group. Dinner will be served and careproviding will be available for parents with children. We hope that you will be able to participate in this focus group session. To register for this focus group or for more information about the research please contact one of the following people by November 10th:

- Marg Raynor – Georgian Bay Métis Council, 705-526-6335
- Carlotta Ellison – Akwe:go Program Co-coordinator, Barrie Native Friendship Centre, 705-721-7689 X213
- Angela Bosco – Facilitator for Aboriginal Education, Simcoe County District School Board, 705-734-6363 X11214.

Further information. If you would like further information about the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project please contact Lisa Ewanchuk, Principal of Aboriginal Education, 705-734-6363, X11475.





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**Supporting Métis, First Nation and Inuit Student Success
A Community Based Project: Stories from Simcoe County District School Board**

**STUDENT FOCUS GROUP – NOVEMBER 14TH, 2008,
BARRIE NATIVE FRIENDSHIP CENTRE.**

Dear Parents/Careproviders,

We are excited to announce that the Simcoe County District School Board (SCDSB) was one of three school boards in Ontario selected by the Ministry of Education to participate in an important project called the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project. We are writing to request your help and direction in developing this project which will be designed to improve the school experiences of Métis, First Nation and Inuit students within the SCDSB.

It is important that we have the input of First Nation, Métis and Inuit parents and children and we want to hear your stories. What do you have to say about your children's experiences of school? What do children have to say about their experiences of school?

We think it is essential to talk with those most directly involved with schools. In speaking to the people most directly involved, we hope what you and your children have to say will contribute to our understandings of students' and their parents' experiences of schooling.

The Question: The Urban Aboriginal Pilot Project will build on research already conducted within the County by other community organizations servicing Métis, First Nation and Inuit families. Our research question asks, "What are the factors which students, parents and community leaders see as contributing to the success of Métis, First Nation and Inuit students in schools of the SCDSB?" We plan to document the experiences of Métis, First Nation and Inuit students in these schools.

Focus groups. The SCDSB has hired researchers Celia Haig-Brown and Marg Raynor, both educators and researchers working in relationship with First Nation, Métis people for 30 years. They have been hired for this project to gather information from students, parents/caregivers and community educational leaders working in Métis, First Nation and Inuit organizations by conducting focus groups and interviews.

We will be seeking volunteers to participate in focus groups. Parents/careproviders who would like to have their children participate in a student focus group this Friday, November 14th, at the Barrie Native Friendship Centre can return the form attached to the school principal. We are looking for 20 student participants. Students who participate will be provided with lunch and a gift certificate for the Bayfield Mall for their participation.

Agenda for the day:

- 9:00 Students are picked up at their home school. Students travel to the Barrie Native Friendship Centre, 175 Bayfield Street, Barrie, Ontario.
- 9:30 Arrival and greetings
- 10:00 Focus groups session
- 11:30 Lunch
- 2:00 Students will board the bus to return to their home school.

Results: We hope that the outcome of the research will inform the SCDSB about how to create more successful schools and classrooms for all Métis, First Nation and Inuit students in this area and beyond. Upon completion of this project, a summary of this research will be made available for review and input from all participants.

Parent focus groups. TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 18TH, 2008, BARRIE NATIVE FRIENDSHIP CENTRE. We will also be hosting a parent focus group at the Barrie Native Friendship Centre on Tuesday, November the 18th, between 6:00 and 9:00 o'clock. We are looking for 20 parents to participate in this focus group. Dinner will be served and careproviding will be available for parents with children. We hope that you will be able to participate in this focus group session. To register for this focus group or for more information about the research process please contact one of the following people by November 10th:

Marg Raynor – Georgian Bay Métis Council, 705-526-6335

Carlotta Ellison – Akwe:go Program Co-coordinator, Barrie Native Friendship Centre, 705-721-7689 X213

Angela Bosco – Facilitator for Aboriginal Education, Simcoe County District School Board, 705-734-6363 X11214.

Further information. If you would like further information about the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project please contact Lisa Ewanchuk, Principal of Aboriginal Education, 705-734-6363, X11475.



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**Supporting Métis, First Nation and Inuit Student Success
A Community Based Project: Stories from Simcoe County District School Board**

Dear Métis Citizen,

We are excited to announce that the Simcoe County District School Board (SCDSB) was one of three school boards in Ontario selected by the Ministry of Education to participate in an important project called the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project. We are writing to request your help and direction in developing this project which will be designed to improve the school experiences of Métis, First Nation and Inuit students within the SCDSB.

It is important that we have community input and we want to hear your stories.

What do you have to say about Métis students' experiences of school?

Student, parent/caregivers and community input: The SCDSB has hired researchers Celia Haig-Brown and Marg Raynor, both educators and researchers working in relationship with Métis and First Nation people for 30 years. They have been hired for this project to gather information from students, parents/caregivers and community educational leaders working in Métis, First Nation and Inuit organizations.

The Question: The Urban Aboriginal Pilot Project will build on research already conducted within the County by other community organizations servicing Métis, First Nation and Inuit families. Our research question asks, "What are the major factors which students, parents and community leaders see as contributing to the success of Métis, First Nation and Inuit students in schools of the SCDSB?" We plan to document the experiences of Métis, First Nation and Inuit students in these schools.

We think it is essential to talk with those most directly involved with schools. In speaking to the people most directly involved, we hope what you have to say will contribute to our understandings of students' and their parents' experiences of schooling.

Results: We hope that the outcome of the research will inform the SCDSB about how to create more successful schools and classrooms for all Métis, First Nation and Inuit students in this area and beyond. Upon completion of this project, a summary of this research will be made available for review and input from all participants.

We will be seeking volunteers to participate in focus groups or interviews. Student, parents/caregivers and community leaders are being asked to provide input which will guide us in developing this project and future planning at the SCDSB.

Interviews and focus groups. We will be interviewing and conducting focus groups throughout the month of November. We hope that you will be able to participate in a parent or student focus group. For more information about the research and consultation process, or if you are interested in becoming a volunteer for one of the student or parent focus group sessions please contact one of the following people:

Marg Raynor – Georgian Bay Métis Council, 705-526-6335

Carlotta Ellison – Akwe:go Program Co-coordinator, Barrie Native Friendship Centre, 705-721-7689 X213

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Further information. If you would like further information about the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project please contact Lisa Ewanchuk, Principal of Aboriginal Education, 705-734-6363, X11475.

ALL FOCUS GROUPS CURRENTLY SCHEDULED WILL TAKE PLACE AT THE BARRIE NATIVE FRIENDSHIP CENTRE.

Student Focus Group for high school students: **Friday, November 14, 2008, 9:00 – 2:00.** Transportation, lunch and a gift will be provided for each student participant. (See enclosed fieldtrip form.) We have spots for 20 students. If you wish for your child to participate please fill out the fieldtrip permission form and have your child return it to their school principal.

Parent Focus Group: **Tuesday, November 18, 2008, 6:00 – 9:00** (Dinner and child care will be provided). Please call to RSVP.



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Supporting First Nation/Métis and Inuit Student Success:
Stories from Simcoe County District School Board

“What are the major factors that students, parents and community leaders see as contributing to the success of Aboriginal students in schools of the SCDSB?”

All parents, students and families of students attending schools of the Simcoe County District School Board

You are invited to attend a

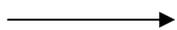
Community Information Session on the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project and Family Games Night

Barrie Native Friendship Centre

Tuesday November 4th 5:30-7:00pm

Soup - Sandwiches - Refreshments provided

CONTACT



Marg Raynor – Georgian Bay Métis Council, 705-526-6335

Carlotta Ellison – Akwe:go Program Co-coordinator, Barrie Native Friendship Centre, 705-721-7689 X213

Angela Bosco – Facilitator for Aboriginal Education, Simcoe County District School Board, 705-734-6363 X11214.

Lisa Ewanchuk – Principal of Aboriginal Education, SCDSB 734-6363 X11475





Supporting Aboriginal/Métis and Inuit Student Success: Stories from Simcoe County District School Board

We want to hear your stories. What do you have to say about Aboriginal/Métis/Inuit students' experiences of school?

The Question: As part of the Urban Aboriginal Pilot Project, the Simcoe County District School Board (SCDSB) has commissioned a community-based research project which will build on research already conducted by the urban Aboriginal community. Our research question asks, "What are the major factors that students, parents and community leaders see as contributing to the success of Aboriginal students in selected schools of the SCDSB?" We plan to document the experiences of Aboriginal/Métis/Inuit students in these schools.

Who are we? The SCDSB has hired researchers Celia Haig-Brown and Marg Raynor for this project.

We will be seeking volunteers to participate in focus groups or interviews. Students, their parents/caregivers and educational leaders will be asked what they see as integral to success in school. Rather than focusing only on barriers to success, this study will look to best-case scenarios to create a profile for sound and good work with Aboriginal students. We expect the results of the study to guide future initiatives of the SCDSB.

We think it is essential to talk with those most directly involved with schools. We are interested in what participants feel is important for their own and their children's success. Coming from the people most directly involved, we hope what you have to say will contribute to addressing gaps in our understandings of Aboriginal students' and their parents' experiences of schooling. I think this statement gives people the opportunity to outline the barriers or to talk about the barriers.

Results: We hope that the outcome of the research will inform the SCDSB about how to create more successful schools and classrooms for all Aboriginal/Métis/Inuit students in this area and beyond.

Time is of the essence. We will be interviewing and conducting focus groups throughout the month of November.

For more information about the research and consultation process, or if you are interested in becoming a volunteer for one of the student or parent focus group sessions please contact:
Marg Raynor – Georgian Bay Métis Council, 705-526-6335
Calotta Ellison – Akwe:go Program Co-coordinator, Barrie Native Friendship Centre, 705-721-7689 X213
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November 14, 2008

Dear Student:

Thank you for agreeing to contribute to our study of Aboriginal student success in the Simcoe County District School Board (SCDSB) as part of the Urban Aboriginal Pilot Project. I am writing to ask you to be involved in circle work for about two hours that looks at what success means to you and how it is best achieved for Aboriginal students in schools in this district. We will use your words and our work together to plan better ways of serving Aboriginal students in these schools.

We will make detailed notes on the circle work. If you agree to participate, your name will kept in strict confidence in the report and you may choose a pseudonym if you like. If not, I may choose one for you so that your identity will be protected. In the final report, there will be a summary of all that we learn through the interviews as well as some relevant quotes from some of the interviews.

Your participation in the session is completely voluntary. As it progresses, you may choose not to answer any questions that are asked. You may also withdraw from the study at any time. If you do decide to stop participating at any time, your contributions will not be used for the report. You will not affect your relationship with your teacher, the SCDSB or the researchers. Although we do not foresee any risks or discomforts, we do hope that the interview will prove to be useful to you as you reflect on your experiences and how they might make a difference for other Aboriginal students in schools.

If you have any questions about the research, please feel free to contact Celia Haig-Brown at 179 Glendonwyne Road, Toronto, ON M6P 3E8 or by email at chaigbrown@gmail.com. If you have concerns about the research, you may contact the Research Officer of the SCDSB, Dr. Sandra Sangster at (705) 728-2265.

By signing a copy of this letter, you are agreeing to participate in this study.

Yours truly,

Celia Haig-Brown, PhD
Principal Researcher

SIGNATURE PAGE.

I, _____, consent to participate in this study designed by Celia Haig-Brown. I understand the nature of the project and wish to participate. I am 16 years of age or older. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature _____ **Date** _____
Participant

Signature _____ **Date** _____
Principal Investigator
Celia Haig-Brown, PhD

I, _____, consent to have my photograph(s) used in the final report of this study. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature _____ **Date** _____
Participant

Outline for Grade 7 & 8 Students

Main Questions: What does being successful in school mean to you? What does it take to make school and especially your classroom a good place for you to be?

Additional Activity/Questions

1. Dream Stick

Provide a large stick.

Give each student a feather on a string.

Introduce concept of dreams, powers we have in dreams, meaning of dreams, sense of time, place etc.

Have you ever had a dream where you could fly, or instantly be somewhere else, or knew something that happened the next day?

Invite sharing of dreams.

Students add a feather to the stick for each dream.

2. Circle Discussion

We invite you to dream with us about the best classroom you can imagine... a class where you can't wait to get there, where you can be yourself, and you know you are at home.

Questions

Vision: What makes this place special? What does it look like, sound like, smell like, feel like?

Relations: Who are the people in this classroom? What is your relation to them? What's are your relationships like?

Knowledge: What are the most important things you learn in this classroom?

Action: What is your favourite lesson in this class? What happens in that lesson?

3. Closing, Gifting

Brief Questionnaire

QUESTIONS FOR COMMUNITY LEADERS

“What are the factors which students, parents and community leaders see as contributing to the success of Métis, First Nation and Inuit students in schools of the SCDSB?”

Demographics:

Name

Position

Time in that position

Children, grandchildren or other relatives in SCBSB schools? In other schools?

Community

1. What is your connection to Aboriginal education?
2. What makes schooling for Aboriginal students special? Are there distinct things appropriate for Aboriginal students that may not exist for others?
3. What do you think are the most important factors for Aboriginal student success in schools? (curriculum, resources, teachers, attitudes, cultural representation, etc.)
4. What is success? What counts as success? What are the most important things you would like Aboriginal youth to do in school? What are the most important things you would like them to achieve?
5. Would you send your kids to schools in SCDSB? Why or why not?
6. What would an ideal classroom and/or school look like for your kids?
7. When were you last in a school? Why?
8. Are schools generally welcoming places for you?
9. What was your own experience of schools?
10. Are you aware of any extra-curricular activities in the school playing a role in the success of the Aboriginal students in your classroom?
11. What are the forms of communication between the school and your community?
Other interactions?
12. Are there any specific programs that make this school special or successful?
13. Are there school wide programs designed to increase success for Aboriginal students?
14. What role do you as a teacher have in the key decisions of the school?
15. To what extent has the school generally been successful in addressing the needs of Aboriginal learners and how do you know?
16. Are there particular cultural representations you would like to see in schools?
17. Is there a place for Aboriginal spirituality in schools? For other forms of spiritual expression?
18. What should I have asked you that I didn't?

Are there any other people you think I should be interviewing who could help us think more deeply about this topic of enhancing success for Aboriginal students in SCDSB schools?

APPENDIX B
SURVEY SUMMARIES

ANALYSIS OF SURVEY RESULTS

Analysis of Survey Results

Surveys were completed by a total of 12 elementary students, 6 secondary students and 5 parents. Please note that the small number surveyed should be seen only as additional information for this study and not as the grounds for any generalized conclusions.

Questions 1-4 Respect

The majority of students reported being treated with respect by peers and teachers, as well as acting respectfully themselves. 40% of parents strongly agreed and 60% of parents agreed. 80% of parents reported that their child respects his/her teachers.

Question #5 Reflections of Culture in Schools

Most reported they feel their culture is respected. 60% of parents agreed, but only 20% said they saw their culture represented in displays/artwork.

Question #6 Support at School

83% of elementary students said they had someone to turn to for help at school. For secondary students, agreement was 84%. When parents were asked if they had someone to turn to for help in their child's school, 40% agreed.

Question #7 and 8 Support from Relatives/friends

Most students reported having a friend or relative to provide support and that they do ask for help when needed.

Question #9 Feeling Responsible for One's Own Learning

67% of elementary students reported feeling responsible for their learning, with 100% of secondary students agreeing.

Question #10 Feelings Towards Learning

66% of elementary students reported feeling good about their learning, with 83% of secondary students agreeing.

Question #11 Learning Environment

74% of elementary students said the learning environment is suited to their learning needs, with 67% of secondary students agreeing. 40% of parents agreed.

Re: Question #12 and 13 Confidence

Most elementary students expected to pass their school year. 100% of secondary students agreed. 67% of secondary students expect to graduate. 80% of parents expected their child to be successful in their year and 60% expected their child to graduate.

Question #14 Love of Learning

58% of elementary students reported feeling a love of learning, compared with 50% of secondary students.

Question #15 Classroom Organization

58% of elementary students felt their classroom was well organized, compared to 83% of secondary students.

Question #16 Family Attendance at Parent Conferences,

82% of elementary students reported that family members attend parent conferences, compared with 66% of secondary students.

Re: Question #17 Importance of Learning

92% of elementary students agreed that what they are learning is important to them, compared with 34% of secondary students.

18. Rating items in order of importance for learning

The following percentages show the items rated as top priorities.

What is most important to you?			
	Elementary	Secondary	Parents
Good relationship with the teacher	33%	67%	67%
First choice of courses/activities	25%	0	0
Classroom suited to needs	17%	33%	33%

Other items rated as most important.		
Elementary Students	Secondary Students	Parents
Liking my peers "I am being good". Big window Being organized Being healthy & strong doing athletic sports Making video & being creative with friends Having a good teacher	Good relationship with students Hands-on lessons Friendlier peers	Native language Flexibility in types of learning styles, e.g. visual

19. Re: Change

What is anything would you like to see change in your classroom?		
Elementary Students	Secondary Students	Parents
More respect More learning More choices Fun More hooks Bigger room Kids nice to each other More comfortable chairs Lower noise level & more maturity Computer as a teaching tool More grouped class Athletic things & posters Good relationship with students Friendly peers	More comfortable chairs Respect one another Not judge one another Teachers' learning methods	Learning to respect all people Native language (2) Being heard Acts of kindness to students Cultural awareness Good positive experiences Aboriginal culture threaded into curriculum through crafts, music & history in all grades More student interest in school Ideas listened to Ok to speak opinions & have a voice Acceptance by peers & administrative personnel Happiness in general Positive self esteem Confidence in new challenges Pride in history Acceptance Open-mindedness welcomed Nutrition program

Summary Elementary Student Survey November 7, 2008						
NA= No Answer	Agree	Agree	Between	Disagree	Disagree	NA
Number of Completed Surveys: 12	Strongly		Agree/		Strongly	
Note: Percentages have been rounded off.			Disagree			
1. I feel respected by other students at my class.	33%	67%				
2. Other students treat me with respect.	17%	33%		50%		
3. My teachers expect a lot from me.	33%	41%		17%		1 NA
4. I show respect to staff at my school.	25%	50%	17%	8%		
5. My culture is reflected in displays, artwork.	17%	58%		17%		1 NA
6. I have someone to turn to at school for help.	33%	50%		8%		1 NA
7. I have relatives or friends that I can turn to for help.	33%	50%		17%		
8. I have asked for help when I needed it.	17%	50%	8%	25%		
9. I am feeling responsible for my learning.	17%	75%		8%		
10. I am feeling good about my progress so far in school.	17%	50%	8%	8%	17%	
11. The environment at school suits the way I learn best.	33%	41%		25%		
12. I am confident that I will be successful in my courses this year.	33%	50%	8%	8%		
13. I expect that I will graduate from Grade 12.	50%	33%		17%		
14. I love learning at school.	8%	50%	33%	8%		
15. The classroom is well-organized.	17%	41%	8%	25%	8%	
16. My family members come to parent conferences.	17%	67%		8%	8%	
17. What I am learning is important to me.	17%	75%		8%		
18. Number what is most important to you.						
Rated on survey in order of Preference	First	Second	Third			
Taking my first choice of course or activities	25%	8%	41%			
Having a good relationship with my teacher	33%	41%	0			
Being in an organized classroom	17%	25%	17%			
Other: liking my peers, I am being good, big window, being organized, being healthy & strong by doing sports, making videos, being creative, good teacher						
19. What, if anything, would you most like to see change in your classroom						
bigger room, kids nice to each other, more comfortable chairs, lower noise level and more maturity, computer as a teaching tool,						
more hooks, more grouped class, athletic things and posters, more respect, more learning, more choices, fun						

Summary Secondary Student Survey November 14, 2008						
NA= No Answer	Agree	Agree	Between	Disagree	Disagree	NA
Number of Completed Surveys: 6	Strongly		Agree/		Strongly	
Note: Percentages have been rounded off.			Disagree			
1. I feel respected by other students at my class.	33%	67%				
2. Other students treat me with respect.	17%	50%	17%		17%	
3. My teachers treat me with respect.	33%	50%	17%			
4. The teachers expect a lot from me.	17%	67%	17%			
5. My culture is reflected in displays, artwork.	17%			67%	17%	
6. I have someone to turn to at school for help.	67%	17%			17%	
7. I have relatives or friends that I can turn to for help.	33%	17%		17%	33%	
8. I have asked for help when I needed it.	50%	17%	17%		17%	
9. I am feeling responsible for my learning.	100%					
10. I am feeling good about my progress so far in school.	33%	50%		17%		
11. The environment at school suits the way I learn best.		67%		17%	17%	
12. I am confident that I will be successful in my courses this year.	33%	67%				
13. I expect that I will graduate from Grade 12.	50%	17%			17%	1NA
14. I love learning at school.	33%	17%	17%		33%	
15. The classroom is well-organized.	33%	50%		33%		
16. My family members come to parent conferences.	33%	33%			33%	
17. What I am learning is important to me.	17%	17%			50%	1NA
18. Number what is most important to you.						
Rated in Order of Preference.	First	Second	Third			
Taking my first choice of course or activities		33%	50%			
Having a good relationship with my teacher	67%	17%	17%			
Being in an organized classroom	33%	17%	33%			
Other: good relationship with students, hands-on lessons, , friendlier peers						
19. What, if anything, would you most like to see change in your classroom?						
more comfortable chairs, respect one another, not judge one another, teachers' learning methods						

Survey Parents, Nov. 18th, 2008						
NA= No Answer	Agree	Agree	Between	Disagree	Disagree	NA
Number of Completed Surveys: 5	Strongly		Agree &		Strongly	
1. I feel respected at my child's school.	40%	60%	Disagree			
2. I feel my culture is respected at my child's school.		60%		20%	20%	
3. I see my culture reflected in displays, artwork, or activities in my school.		20%	20%	20%	40%	
4. I have someone to turn to for help in my child's school.		40%		60%		
5. I feel comfortable participating in parent activities at my child's school.	20%	60%		20%		
6. I am feeling good about my child's progress so far in school.	40%	40%				1 NA
7. The environment at school suits the way my child learns best.	20%	20%	20%	20%	20%	
8. I am confident that my child will be successful this year.	40%	40%				1 NA
9. I expect that my child will graduate from Grade 12.	20%	40%				2NA
10. My child respects his/her teachers.	20%	60%				1NA
11. The teacher plays an important role in my child's relation to school.	60%	40%				
12. What do you consider most important in your child's school experience?						
Rated in Order of preference	First	Second	Third			
	Choice	Choice	Choice			
First choice of courses, activities			100%			
Good relationship with teacher	60%	40%				
Classroom suited to learning needs	40%	60%				
Other: Native language, flexibility in types of learning i.e. visual						

APPENDIX C
DISCUSSION SUMMARIES

Circles with Elementary & Secondary Students
Nov. 7 & 14, 2008
Location: Barrie Native Friendship Centre
Discussion Summary

“What are the factors which students, parents and community leaders see as contributing to the success of Métis, First Nation and Inuit students in schools of the SCDSB?”

Discussion about Relationships at School that Contribute to Success

- Need a good teacher
- Need support system: guidance counsellors
 - Teacher
 - Counsellors
 - Peer support
 - Parents
 - Friends
 - Family
- Connections with people
- Culture of peace
- More opportunities in the school to connect
- More groups around common interests
- Trust
- Less feeling of isolation, being different
- Positive choices

- **Good teacher:**
 - Helpful
 - Respectful, allowing personal space, choices
 - Encouraging
 - Balance between “chilling out” and being too strict
 - Caring, taking TIME for people
 - Interest in individuals, not just wanting answers to questions
 - Too many students to deal with
 - Not just focus on top students
 - Meaningful communication
 - Not writing off those failing

- Drop outs due to :
 - Personal problems
 - Peer pressure
 - Undiagnosed mental/physical illness

What does it take to make school and especially your classroom a good place for you to be?

- Aboriginal topics in history, all subjects
- Aboriginal resource people
- Aboriginal materials e.g. books

- An Aboriginal centre
- LANGUAGE classes
- Authenticity
- Relevance of Aboriginal culture to society
- Diversity
- Aboriginal class
- Aboriginal culture in all classes e.g. posters promoting diversity of cultures
- Aboriginal culture built in from the ground up
- Drop-in room/meeting place where anyone as well as Aboriginal students can come, with couches, books, counsellor
- Aboriginal student advisory council in the school (most said they would join)
- Cultural events e.g. pow wow
- Ceremonies- educating rest of school
- Activities/events around Aboriginal day
- Excitement about culture
- More awareness of Aboriginal culture
- Cultural sensitivity training for teachers e.g. meaning of eye contact, asking/not asking to use the bathroom
- Module of teacher awareness

Ideal Classroom

- Believe in us, our potential
- look at real person, the individual not just a name
- Inclusiveness e.g. Aboriginal history, materials, curriculum
- Understand the individual, how he/she learns (e.g. Smart Skills Program)
- Trust- no put downs from teacher/peers
- Respect- no arguments, accepting every voice
- Equality
- Eye level i.e. no one elevated (level ground)
- No hierarchy
- Teaching to learning styles/needs
- Respect for personal choices ea say in classroom rules, class structure e .g. sitting by yourself.
- Empathy
- Understanding

School Environment

- Place to fit in
- Empowerment
- Better drug/alcohol education- harm reduction model, not preachy
- Counselling groups- education for the future, effects of choices
- Real education
- Compassion
- TIME for the individual
- No judgements/stigma

- More vibrant colours in spaces
- More knowledge of guidance counsellors, teachers re: undiagnosed conditions
- Give choices to students on what type of evaluation would be most accurate
- Question traditional exam approach vs. Smart Skills approach and actually thinking, meta cognition
- Practical application of knowledge via hands-on, learning by doing
- Balance content/process
- Why can't we build a Native school to have language, teachings, ceremony?
- What about an after-hours Aboriginal school) e.g. Hebrew school)
- Less intimidation/fear: Territories are staked out by groups, e.g. washrooms, smoking areas, non-Native, Native. Students are afraid to trespass into the territory of another group.

What keeps kids in school?

- Personal motivation
- Inspiration
- Society's rules, expectations
- Career hopes
- Personal goals

Comments

“Relationships” was a strong theme throughout the discussion. Most questions posed to the group came back to relationships in some form.

This group also had the benefit of input from two older students currently attending the Barrie Learning Centre, but who had attended public high schools in Barrie. Also present as observers were a couple staff members of the Friendship Centre and one newly hired SCDSB Aboriginal counsellor.

Circle with Parents/Care Givers
Nov. 17th 2008
Location: Barrie Native Friendship Centre

Summary of Discussion

What are some factors for the success of Aboriginal students in the school system?

- Language: Some have not been able to learn their own language and pass it on to their children.
- Language leads to good jobs, living well, being successful
- Sensitivity: It was harsh to go to high school.
- Need to be more accepting
- People tended to hide Native blood in the past. Now it's more accepted, but just starting.
- Aboriginal history classes should promote understanding each other to counteract racism.
- Story: One parent described growing up with white friends who protected her as a friend and knew who she was. She is married to a non-Native and has a daughter who looks white. When her daughter was having a difficult year with a particular teacher she attended several interviews that didn't go well. Once it was known her daughter was Native her marks went down. When she attended a later meeting with her husband, the teacher directed attention to him and the tone changed from that point on. Now, she does not attend interviews, thinking it is more productive for her daughter's relationships in the school system.
- Every student must know true Canadian history.
- Schools should be building up and nourishing identity.
- You can tell right away if a school is "Aboriginal conscious".
- When there are Aboriginal role models, Aboriginal students are more likely to succeed.
- Parents are comfortable when there is some Aboriginal staff.
- Cultural programming
- Encouraging respect
- Parents need to teach acceptance and inclusiveness at home.
- Community should be re-teaching the adults, the teachers about history.
- Some parents told about being students and being asked by the teacher to teach the class about their culture. They felt put on the spot and that it was an unreasonable request to ask them to become the authority, the teacher with their peers.
- Start cultural education with the youngest students e.g. history, tribal areas, ceremonies. Language, Aboriginal people as they live now, colonization.
- K to 12 program around Aboriginal culture and beliefs e.g. Seven Grandfathers
- Teach truth
- Acknowledge mistakes
- Get rid of labelling in books.
- Talking circles
- Cultural pieces
- Share experiences
- Healing needs to happen e.g. baggage we carry from our parents, that we learned by osmosis, like we "are not good enough".
- Acknowledge intergenerational effects of residential schools
- Annual pow wow, advertise area pow wows
- Teachers inviting cultural demonstrations by parents in the schools

- Aboriginal counsellor in the school
- Consider Aboriginal counsellor offering support to Aboriginal parents interacting with teachers

Ideas for the Classroom Specifically

- Art as a big part of becoming
- Art as daily life
- Art as a tool for culture
- Meaning of colours
- Strength of medicines
- Teachings of the Warrior Society: role of boys and men re: respect for self, respect for women, way to treat women, children, animals, how to be a good person
- Teach that things are always changing
- Mishomis Book as a resource
- Books by Aboriginal authors in classrooms
- Older speakers to teach language in schools
- Open door for Elders (Mirror of self)
- Elders properly paid
- Elders as full time employees
- Aboriginal curriculum as a thread through every subject: means revision of curriculum
- Promoting self-esteem
- Promoting self=determination
- Create a welcoming place where it is OK to be Aboriginal.

APPENDIX D

ALTERNATIVE SUMMARY OF THE INFORMATION GATHERED

1. The Classroom

“Believe in us, our potential,” is the way one student summed up the ideal classroom. It would be a level playing field, with no hierarchy. Teachers and peers would recognise and accept “the real person, the individual not just a name” and accept how each student learns best. Students would have a voice regarding classroom rules and class structure. Mutual respect, empathy, understanding and trust would be evident. The cultural norms of all cultures would be accepted, e.g. the meaning of eye contact, asking to use the washroom. Such inclusiveness would be evidenced in curriculum embracing authentic Aboriginal history and learning materials.

Parents described the ideal classroom as a place “where everyone is equal and diversity taught and respected” It would be a place where students felt they were “being heard”. One parent described her child’s expression of boredom or lack of interest and felt it would assist him to feel “that his ideas are listened to more, as long as they are school related”. It would be “a welcoming place where it is OK to be Aboriginal”. It would promote self-esteem and self-determination. Aboriginal curriculum would be “as a thread through every subject. [This] means revision of curriculum”. Books by Aboriginal authors would be available as classroom resources, e.g. The Mishomis Book. Students would understand “that things are always changing”.

There would be an “open door for Elders (Mirror of self)”. Elders could address such topics as: the strength of medicines, Teachings of the Warrior Society (role of boys and men re: respect for self and women, way to treat children, animals, and how to be a good person), and the meaning of colours. The importance of art was emphasized as “as a big part of becoming”. Art was described as a part of “daily life” and “as a tool for culture”.

Instruction in Native languages was another ingredient in an ideal classroom, with “older speakers to teach language in schools”. It was mentioned that elders should be properly compensated for services and it was suggested that elders be full-time employees.

Students described the ideal teacher as one who engages in meaningful communication, is respectful of personal space, facilitates personal choice, is helpful, makes time for individuals, and has high expectations for all students regardless of achievements levels. The ideal teacher acknowledges and encourages personal motivation and supports career goals. Students recognized the need for teachers to weigh society’s rules and expectations with personal needs and to achieve a balance between “chilling out” and being too strict.

Parents spoke of the need for “relationships of trust with teacher[s] and fellow students. Students “need to know that learning is indeed a journey and learning allows for mistakes. Children learn differently.”

2. Curriculum: Aboriginal History/Culture

Students felt that there should be more awareness of Aboriginal and all minority cultures, that it should be “built in from the ground up” and integrated across all subject areas. They would like to see an “Aboriginal class”. Authentic information is essential. A commitment to authenticity would be evident in culturally authored texts, materials and resource people. Aboriginal history is important for all students to gain an appreciation of the “relevance of Aboriginal culture to society” [as a whole].

Students suggested that cultural sensitivity training for teachers would be beneficial in interacting with minority students. Visual classroom displays should promote the diversity of all cultures. They expressed a desire to experience excitement about their culture at school. They would

welcome “cultural events e.g. pow wow” and ceremonies as a way of “educating [the] rest of the school”. They also expressed enthusiasm for “activities/events around Aboriginal Day”.

Parents said it is important to “teach truth” and acknowledge the intergenerational effects of residential schools. Every student must know true Canadian history. Aboriginal history classes should promote understanding of each other to counteract racism. The “healing needs to happen, e.g. baggage we carry from our parents, that we learned by osmosis, like we ‘are not good enough’ ”. We must acknowledge mistakes of the past.

The Aboriginal community, itself, should take the lead in re-teaching history. Some parents related that, as students, they were asked by their teachers to teach their own class about their culture. They felt put on the spot, and that it was an unreasonable request, making them the only source of knowledge among their peers. Parents felt the healthier approach would be to support Aboriginal students, by inviting parents or other members of the Aboriginal community to do cultural presentations/demonstrations.

Parents advised that the “inclusion of Aboriginal culture [should be] threaded into the curriculum through crafts, music, and history in all grades” One participant said, “Teach my child more of the Ojibway First Nations culture, so my kids can understand which culture they come from.” Cultural education should include all students and start in kindergarten. For primary students, the Seven Grandfather Teachings would be appropriate. The curriculum should include how Aboriginal people live now, in an ever-changing global society, not only snapshots of the past. In senior grades, topics such as colonization and the residential school system would be suitable.

All teaching materials must be free of stereotypes, labelling, racism and bias. Teachers can promote understanding between cultures through shared experiences. One culturally appropriate methodology for expression would be the talking circle, in which every individual has a voice, freedom to speak without interruption, and respect. In some measure, such an experience of control can serve to empower the timid and enhance self-esteem.

3. The School Environment

The importance of relationships was an ongoing theme in all circles, as well as being rated of greatest importance on all surveys. Students described a “culture of peace” characterized by respect for diversity, empowerment, “real education”, compassion, adequate time for the individual, a non-judgemental and non-stigmatizing approaches, vibrant colours, appropriate freedom of movement without “territoriality”, culturally sensitive, informed teachers, and trust. In short, it would be a place with many opportunities to connect with teachers and peers in order to develop meaningful relationships, thereby reducing feelings of isolation and “being different.”

Parents, in reflecting on their own school experience, found it “harsh to go to high school.” They described the ideal school as a place of “tolerance, respect for diversity, practice of [the] Golden Rule and the Seven Grandfather Teachings.” Students would feel comfortable with who they are and learn to respect all people. It would be a place of “good positive experiences” and “nourishing identity.” They would expect to see “acts of kindness to students.”

One parent noted, “You can tell right away if a school is ‘Aboriginal conscious’ ”. They emphasized the importance of Aboriginal staffing (as well as staffing representing other cultures), and cultural programming.

Students identified components of a support system in terms of culturally informed and sensitive counsellors and teachers, as well as peers, parents and family. They also proposed a home base

within a school, such as an Aboriginal centre, with cultural displays, resources, and a counsellor. They noted that such a room should be open to all students, not only Aboriginal students.

Parents advocated an Aboriginal counsellor in the school, offering support to Aboriginal students and “Aboriginal parents interacting with teachers”.

Students suggested an Aboriginal Student Advisory Council in their school, (Most said they would serve.), as well as an Aboriginal Centre. This would be a drop-in room/meeting place where Aboriginal students as well as anyone else could come. The centre would serve as a home base, with couches, books, and an Aboriginal counsellor. They also explored ideas about an Aboriginal school that could incorporate their own language throughout the day, in all subjects, and include ceremonies, elders, integrated cultural teachings, and a more hands-on teaching/learning approach. An alternative to an Aboriginal school might be an after-hours Aboriginal school, similar to “Hebrew school”.

They felt that guidance counsellors and teachers need more training, particularly when it comes to being alert to undiagnosed mental or medical conditions. Students suggested more effective drug/alcohol education programs, utilizing a harm reduction model that is “not preachy”. Students felt that effective counselling groups would focus more on the effects of choices on future educational opportunities.

In regard to evaluation they advocated creating a level playing field by giving students choices as to what type of evaluation would be most accurate for them personally. They compared the traditional exam approach to innovative approaches that require more “actual thinking, meta-cognition.” They suggested more balance in teaching between content vs. process.

Parents echoed many student comments about a wish list. One parent pointed out the need for a more common sense approach to restricting the times and places where food may be consumed. Eating properly is vital to attention and concentration. Older students are less likely to voice the fact that they have not eaten and teachers should accommodate special circumstances, placing rules second to individual needs. Parents also commented on nutrition. “I would like to see a nutrition program. Nutrition is pushed; however, it is not made available. Healthy food and learning is important also. Some families Native and non-Native cannot afford nutritious snacks but would NOT want to explain this.”

Summary

Most notable, is the similarity of input in student and parent circles. Both groups stressed the importance of meaningful personal relationships at school between peers and with teachers. They described a school atmosphere that embraces diversity and equity. Both called for increased support for Aboriginal students in terms of Aboriginal counsellors and dedicated space. They described similar qualities in the ideal teacher. Students and parents saw the ideal classroom as a place where self-identity is promoted and each student has a voice. Honesty and truth are valued. Teachers are knowledgeable about Aboriginal and other cultures and open to diversity in its many forms. Both groups pointed out the need for enhancing authentic Aboriginal curriculum content, visual representations of culture, and the inclusion of elders in formal educational settings. They suggested more emphasis on cultural events, such as pow wows and Aboriginal Day related activities.

A hallmark of the consultations with students and parents was their spirit of inclusiveness. In offering suggestions for ways that the SCDSB could better meet their needs, they frequently added that improved services should be open to and benefit all students.

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