

Journeys to Success: Perceptions of Five Female Aboriginal High School Graduates

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This article outlines the results of a qualitative research study of five Aboriginal girls in grade 12 at a Catholic high school in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Using a discursive narrative method in the form of sharing circles, the researcher identified factors that contribute to the success of Aboriginal students in high school. The sharing circle format provided an appropriate cultural method of collecting data, which over two group sessions offered rich stories and experiences of the participants. Their collective voice identified several features as sources of success including family support, teachers' expectations and support, engaging curriculum and cultural relevance, and others.

In the Plains Cree culture, Weesageechak, the trickster, is a manipulative mythical character who causes chaos in human beings and other characters' lives. Though Weesageechak's folly most often ends in roadblocks, it is through the story of chaos that the story teaches that humans can learn how to restore balance to their lives. Weesageechak plays the dual roles of the trickster and the fool, but in the end he also offers a solution to the problems he creates. The lessons of Weesageechak provided insight into the plight of Aboriginal students in secondary schools, who when faced with many obstacles in their lives can find a way toward their own transformation and growth. Weesageechak, and his challenge to educators, is to find in chaos a balance and harmony that could be effectively used as a source of strength and inspiration. In my subsequent study leading to my thesis (Bazylak, 2002), Aboriginal students in high school who were characterized as at risk presented just that challenge.

Aboriginal students leave school before graduation at a higher rate than non-Aboriginal youth (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Brady, 1996). The Auditor General of Canada's (2000) report confirmed a number of the RCAP's findings. In 2000 only 37% of First Nations students completed high school compared with 65% of the general population. According to the Commission, only 9% of these students would enter university, and only 3% would complete their university degree program. In Saskatchewan the situation is demonstrably acute. The Aboriginal student dropout rate peaked at 90.5% in 1981, but despite various interventions the rate among Aboriginal youth at age 15 remains at over 60% (Melnechenko & Horsman, 1998).

Seeking to address the dropout rates, much of the earlier literature focused on Aboriginal youth's difference (culture, language, community life, literacy level, etc.) as sources of problems that suggested the reasons for their leaving school. More often the schools were found negligent in addressing levels of perceived difference, and an array of programmatic changes included finding new approaches to learning styles, language use, motivational triggers, historical content,

and methods of teaching, among others. However, few studies focused on Aboriginal students' perceptions of their own issues, and in particular on how they perceived success and reasons for it. Researchers (Bowker, 1993; Brady, 1996; DuFour, 2002; Freire, 1970; Graveline, 1998; Hoover, 1998; Illich, 1970; Ledlow, 1992; MacKay & Myles, 1995; McInerney, Hinkley, & Dowson, 1997; Melnechenko & Horsman, 1998; Senge, 2000) have addressed changes to education through a critique of a number of processes in schools. The policies developed out of their research have contributed to educational decision-making through many kinds of interventions and teacher training and inservice, but few studies have sought Aboriginal students' attitudes and perceptions of what works for them. Many students, as earlier statistics indicate, do not continue their schooling through grade 12. The purpose of this article is not to belittle the negative elements addressed in earlier literature; rather the purpose is to highlight Aboriginal students' perceptions of their own success as a feature of problem-solving that focuses on positive factors with a solution-based philosophy driving educational transformation. Educators concerned about Aboriginal education might well look for factors that cause success rather than continue to focus solely on the failure of students in high school.

The Role of Voice

The study was built on the foundation of Aboriginal high school students' voice. Individually the voices were but a whisper in the wind. As a collective the voices offered support and strength for each other. The strength of the collective increased into a whirlwind where the girls were able to share their stories and experiences safely with the others in the group. The participants were not merely sharing interesting anecdotes. They were sharing their inner thoughts, feelings, and experiences throughout their lives. James and Mannette (2000), quoting Mohanty (1993), describe the voice as "the sort of voice one comes to have as the result of one's location—both as an individual and as part of collectives" (p. 87). The participants' stories and experiences provided rich data for the study and afforded them an opportunity to express their thoughts about home, school, and life, and for many it was a first-time exploration of their own motivations, inspirations, and future planning.

In planning for this study, as a male Metis teacher in the school system of Saskatoon, I did not plan to conduct sharing circles with only female Aboriginal students, but when the day came to meet, I had only five female students for the group dynamic. Some of the best experiences are unplanned, and the sharing circles were a prime example. The sharing circles were among the most rewarding, exhausting, and fulfilling experiences of my years as an educator. Two separate sessions were organized, the second building on the themes introduced in the first. Pizza provided some informality and acted as an icebreaker for the initial meeting. From my perspective, the students longed to be heard, to be listened to, and appreciated having their opinions and thoughts sought and valued. The group bonded immediately although the girls were mere acquaintances at the beginning of the study. The level of trust and comfort in the circles emerged early, and in the end I am confident that the circle approach and the all-female dynamic provided richer interactions than that of a mixed group.

In my experience at an inner-city Aboriginal high school, I participate in and often lead talking circles with students. I refer to traditional talking circles as sharing circles because for me the word *talking* does not fully encapsulate the role of *listening*, which is so crucial in an interaction of this type. The term *sharing* captures the essence of both talking and listening and is a more accurate description of the interaction desired in this study. The sharing circles were a form of focus group methodology wherein students were provided with open-ended questions so that they could explore and share their personal experiences. After introductory protocols and relating the study's purpose and sharing circle protocols, I opened with a question in which they each took turns, taking as much time as necessary to answer. The person talking held a rock, and the others listened. Once all participants had an opportunity to share fully, we moved on to the next question. The students were free to veer off the original question if they felt they had something to say to the group. The stories and experiences were recorded and later transcribed. The data were then analyzed using a medicine wheel format of four directions in which relevant themes were identified as necessary for encouraging educational success.

Selection of the students was initially based on the criteria in the literature for identifying at-risk students. To maintain confidentiality, the school secretary was enlisted to identify and approach the grade 12 Aboriginal students who were to graduate in June 2002 and matched the criteria of having had attendance difficulties, having been enrolled in several schools over their years in school, and having been placed in a remedial or alternate educational program at some point in their schooling. The five students selected fictitious names for themselves for the reporting of the data, enjoying the prospect of having the choice of a new name, such as Trisha, Nikita, Sici, Shelly, and Zeara. The expression of voice is a necessary step toward emancipation (Noel, 1994). The stories, reflection, and expression of their inner voice allowed the students to question more fully their educational success and environment. Shelly provided a concrete example of the power found in sharing circles that led her to renew her relationship with her mother.

The circles made me think a lot harder about my family. And actually I talked to my mom the other day about some of this stuff, and I never do—I can never talk to my family or friends about this, but I did. And it just made me feel good. So it helped me.

The Medicine Wheel:

A Framework for Analyzing Aboriginal Educational Success

The traditional medicine wheel offered a framework for organizing the stories, experiences, and lessons of the participants. The data were organized into seven elements. These included an ecological center and volition at the core. The spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental realms surrounded the core and the last crucial element—teachers—completed the medicine wheel as a final ring surrounding the whole.

Ecology: A Center

Ecology is the center of the medicine wheel and acts as a catalyst to achieve interconnectedness. Ecology encompasses and fuels all realms of the medicine wheel: spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental. Cajete (1994) elaborates on the

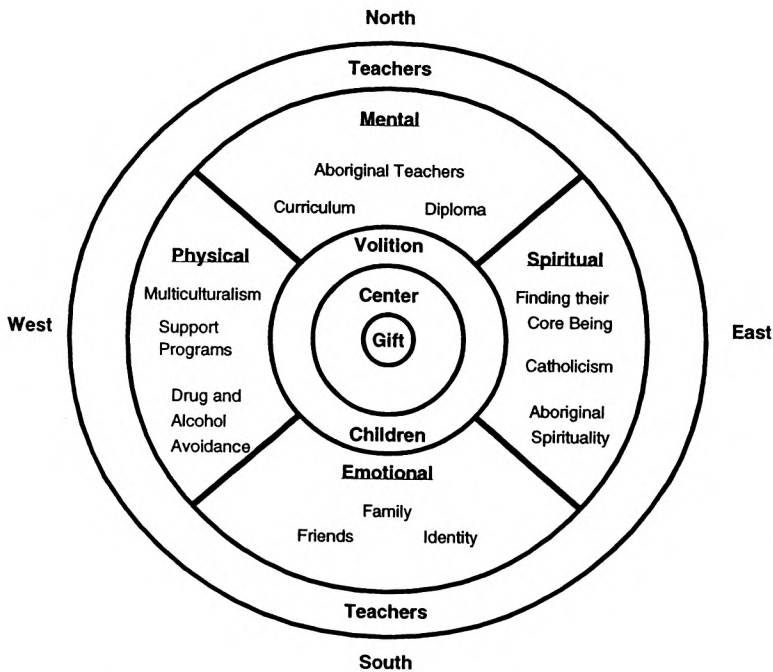


Figure 1. *The Medicine Wheel: A framework for analyzing Aboriginal educational success.*

concept of center in traditional tribal education. “Learning happens of its own accord, if the individual has learned how to relate with his/her inner center and the natural world” (p. 211). The students demonstrated a sense of awareness of their inner self in their stories and experiences. Sici, looking inward, contemplated the path she chose to follow in school and described how it affected her relationship with friends. “I personally don’t think I’m the person I want to be in grade 12. Personally I’d really like to be friends with the people that are sitting beside me, the way it was in grade 9, 10, and 11.” The ability to examine herself in relation to family, friends, and teachers allowed Sici to strengthen her values and beliefs. This strength provided a foundation for her success.

Nurturing a Gift

Part of the search for a strong center involved finding the gift or talent provided by the Creator. The gift, if discovered and nurtured, assisted in challenging the roadblocks of life. These students became special as they searched for their gifts, and as those gifts became a reality, they supported them on their journey in school. Sici’s experience in life emerged with a gift for teaching others that helped her succeed. “Success to me would be to get out of this school and into university, either Saskatchewan or Regina. I want to be a teacher. I would love to become a teacher, that would be my success.” Zeara described her singing as contributing indirectly to her success in school, a gift she proudly announced was self-taught. The core and four realms of the medicine wheel are supported by a gift identified

from within our being. The search for a stronger core supports the development of volition.

The Development of Volition

The strength of the ecological center allowed the participants to develop volition. Bopp, Bopp, Brown, and Lane (1984) define volition and describes its role in the medicine wheel.

We can use our volition (i.e. our will) to help us develop the four aspects of our nature. Volition is the force that helps us make decisions and then act to carry out those decisions. Since volition is a primary force in developing all of our human potentialities, it is placed at the center of the medicine wheel. (p. 14)

The stories and experiences of the participants identified a volition that inspired them to succeed. Their volition was also characterized by personal goals in life and education. For Nikita it was described in her goals and the expectation that she go to college and an expectation of having a good job later in life. "This school is going to help me do that."

Shelly discussed how she reached a point in high school where she needed to take control of her educational path and work harder to achieve success. Finding herself changed after grade 9, she lost interest in school and in anything else. But as quickly as she lost it, she found it again. The development of volition allowed the participants to examine themselves in relation to the world. This examination led to the self-realization or decision to change the direction of their lives. The difficulty lies in teaching students to develop their volition.

Volition: Children

Aboriginal women are often caretakers in their families who develop nurturing capabilities. Although one of the five already had a baby, the others saw themselves as mothers and found inspiration in this prospect. The consequence of having children early or wanting children was related to educational success as it encouraged the participants to succeed to create a better life and upbringing for their children than the one they had experienced. For Sici education was part of this equation. "Success would be to get married to someone that is not like me, but completely different. To have a family, raise them a little bit better than maybe I was raised, and the way my parents were raised."

The desire to bear children in future years was a factor in the development of volition that in turn encouraged educational success for the students.

East: Spiritual Realm: Catholic and Aboriginal Spirituality

In the East the spiritual realm examines the role spirituality plays in the educational success of Aboriginal high school students. Some educators believe Catholic schools offer an enhanced environment for the educational success of Aboriginal students. Citing Groome (1998), Bempechat (1998) maintains that the spiritual foundation of Catholic schools helps students to achieve educational success by their twofold reliance on academic distinction and "relatively straightforward doctrine of excellence, rooted in profound faith and a covenant to both educate and elevate the poor and disadvantaged" (p. 55).

Aboriginal Spirituality

As youth the participants had not separated Aboriginal spirituality from Catholic spirituality. Their Aboriginal Elders, like Nakita's grandfather, offered them some guidance on the role spirituality plays in life. The students in this study discussed Elders in general terms for all those older than themselves. Zeara shared her beliefs regarding Elders in school. "I look up to older people and for them to give you wisdom. And to teach you right from wrong, your education and stuff."

Some of the participants are a product of both Aboriginal and Catholic spirituality and culture. This type of upbringing caused them to redefine spirituality as a combination of Aboriginal and Catholic values and ideals. Sici's personal life experience shed some light on how the redefinition of spirituality occurred in her life.

When I was little, there were no questions, I'm white—that's the way it was left. Most of the things that I've learned about my culture has been through—I'm dating a Native individual, right? My dad is angry right now for how I'm in between the Christian religion and following the Native. He doesn't want me to be doing the Sweetgrass, be doing the healing circles. I should be going to church, I should be down on my knees praying to something that I don't believe in, and that's the way he sees it and I don't want my children to be raised like that.

Aboriginal spirituality is characterized by ceremonies and renewal celebrations. Sici described a pow-wow at her school and explained how ceremonies and celebrations in her school bridged the gap between Aboriginal and Western world views and improved her chance of success in school. The participants redefined and developed a new age of spiritual understanding. Their understanding of spirituality was a result of their present reality in a school that acknowledged and respected both Catholic and Aboriginal spirituality.

South: Emotional Realm—Family, Friends, and Self-Identity

In the South family, friends, and the development of self-identity are features of the emotional realm that provide the needed interconnectedness to help one to define oneself. McInerney et al. (1997) summarize the importance of relationships and family in school for Aboriginal students. "It is clear from the interviews that the most important influence on school motivation was the family. Teachers were rated second most important, and peers were the third" (p. 14).

Family

Family involvement in school increases Aboriginal students' chances for educational success. Melnechenko and Horsman (1998) identify family influence as one of the major factors contributing to the success of Aboriginal student at school. "Educators have come to know that there is a positive correlation between success at school and positive family influence, support, and relationships" (p. 9). Without family involvement Aboriginal students are less likely to succeed in school.

Although researchers and Aboriginal students agreed that the family plays an important role in the educational success of students, educators must be careful not to view family as the only factor needed for success in school. Mackay and Myles (1995) warn of a misguided notion regarding the role parents should play in school.

Many educators used the presence or absence of parental support to explain a student's decision to remain at or drop out of school. In homes where graduation and education is stressed and valued by parents, kids graduate; otherwise they rarely do. Such an apparently cogent explanation can enormously comfort educators because it places responsibility for a student's behavior firmly with the parents and releases the school system from both blame and remedial action. (p. 166)

Educators must realize the important, yet limited, role parents play in fostering success for Aboriginal students in schools. Placing too large an onus on parents in education would not bring balance to the medicine wheel of Aboriginal education; rather it would perpetuate disharmony. The extended family members of the participants sometimes acted as positive and negative role models, but either way it had an effect on students' perceptions of success. As they observed their family succeed or fail, the participants were able to search for their own path in life. For example, Zeara discussed her strained relationship with her mother and explained how a lack of love and affection was detrimental to her childhood development. Zeara's experience with her mother demonstrated to her the role love and affection must play in the development of a child.

These students were special in their ability to see what their family was going through, and rather than fall into the cycle they decided to stay in school. Shelly explained how her family's negative example encouraged her to remain in school.

I know this isn't the same for everyone, but the reason I want to succeed is because of my mom and my past. Like I don't want to turn out like her, how she's doing. Because she's on welfare, you know.

Nikita described how her grandfather's message urged her to be successful in school and life. "My grandpa would say, 'My grandchildren, don't be like your mother and don't be like me.' Because he used to be an alcoholic and that's where my mother got it from." The tragic death of her grandmother due to drinking and the passing of her grandfather encouraged Nikita to break the cycle of her family's past by going to school.

Family was a major factor in promoting educational success for the participants. In Aboriginal families the crises caused by a long history of residential schools and the loss of nurturing families and communities had placed many traumatic challenges on students, even in the urban area. These events encouraged some students to work harder in school.

Friends

The participants did not separate family and friends as two discrete entities. Many of their friends were part of their extended family. Sici described this overlap in a discussion of high school peers as family. "Sometimes I wish that the school wouldn't be separated so that they actually could be a big family and say they are a family." In McInerney et al.'s (1997) study, Navajo students identified peer relationships as having a direct effect on their success in school. "In general, it was thought that students who were located within a peer group which espoused the importance of learning at school were advantaged in their own motivation to learn and to succeed at school" (p. 10). Aboriginal students are influenced both positively and negatively by their peer support in school. Zeara described her experiences when beginning high school and making new friends. She loved meeting people

like the other participants in the study. This was a major part of the high school experience for Zeara. Although friends were identified as important in school, Nikita was the only participant to describe how a friend dragged her out of bed in the morning to get her to go to school. This was the only example of direct positive influence provided by a friend.

The participants discussed many examples where the negative experiences of their friends provided motivation to succeed in school. Sici described how her choice of friends led her on the path to failure until she decided, with the help of a specific teacher, to change the direction of her life. Zeara shared a similar story of experimentation with drugs and partying with her new friends until she realized it was leading her to failure in school.

Like I mean we all go through that stuff [drugs] and I just, well I mean some of it's different but it's pretty bad. And I kind of—I would [get stoned] and I'd have homework and I'd just kind of whatever who cares and it was the wrong crowd that I got with.

Zeara agonized over her best friend, who needed to change in order to succeed in life. They had been friends for four years until the girl chose drugs over their friendship. Zeara recognized that she could not influence her best friend to abandon the negative path she was taking and decided to refocus her energy on school in order to achieve personal success.

Development of Self-Identity

The development of identity played a role in the participants' journey to success. The participants came from varied Aboriginal backgrounds, from being Metis or First Nations, and had had diverse experiences with traditional ceremonial life. They were not clear as to what an Aboriginal identity meant for them. Nikita and Trisha were proud First Nation women. Sici was a proud Metis woman, whereas Zeara and Shelly were just beginning to understand and accept their Aboriginal ancestry. Zeara best described the development of identity as she struggled with recognizing herself as Metis.

I was always ashamed and scared to say that I was—I had Metis in me. And I'm sorry, as harsh as it sounds, but I just—just because—well I was always scared in what people thought, just the way society views Aboriginal people sometimes, it's just bad.

Although not all the participants were comfortable with their ethnic background, they were beginning to question and understand their heritage. An internal examination of this type was a critical step in achieving success.

West: Physical Realm—Multiculturalism, Support Programs, and Drug and Alcohol Avoidance

In the West the physical realm examines three elements identified by the participants—multiculturalism, support programs, and drug and alcohol avoidance—that contributed to their educational success.

Multiculturalism in schools is often seen as a positive step toward equity for all students. The participants viewed multiculturalism policies as both positive and negative in their educational success. Sici was attracted to her high school because of the acceptance of various cultures in the environment. "One of the reasons I

came here was the acceptance of everybody in this school, different cultures and everything just brought me right to it."

The fact Sici recognized that there was more than one culture in the school did not mean respect was attached to each ethnic group. She hinted at the breakdown of multiculturalism as a positive factor in a discussion of expectations for her high school. "What I was expecting when I came here [school] was an abundance of people that were accepting your kind [Metis] and completely understanding of who you were and what you wanted to do." The reality of multiculturalism for the participants was that it was yet another tool for separating students into groups. Nikita shared her school experiences of cultural separation. Students remained in their ethnic groups. Group dynamics were also based on students' popularity. Both separations served to inhibit educational success. Zeara elaborated on the cultural separations in the school and how this affected Aboriginal students, particularly First Nations students.

When you first start off, you know you meet your friends and stuff and everyone gets to know each other, but then as you gradually move on, you get into your own groups, and like I said, in our group there's no Aboriginal, like full Aboriginal person. Like, well there are a couple of guys but that's it.

Multiculturalism as a concept of harmony was valued by the participants, yet their cultural differences led to the creation of groups that were marginalized. Multiculturalism as a tool for achieving equity often falls short of its objective. Multicultural initiatives often serve to perpetuate differences among racial groups as the participants discovered in their high school.

Support Programs

Support through programs in and outside the school assisted the participants to succeed in high school. Nikita talked about her financial needs as provided by social services. "I can barely make it through a month. My family has to help me through the month. I hate being on welfare, that's why I want to graduate and get off of it as soon as I can." Although Nikita did not want to be labeled as a welfare recipient, she knew it was a necessary step for her to graduate.

The students identified counseling as a major support in the school. The support of the counselors helped the participants to deal with personal issues such as sexual and physical abuse, which were identified by one of the participants. As the study began, the counseling unit had been advised of the study and of the potential that it might aggravate further need of counseling. Advertised statistics offer that one in three women will have experienced sexual abuse in her lifetime. Sexual abuse in a student group of five randomly picked students suggests that these are real and horrific stories among youth. The need for professional help in schools beyond academic counseling seems warranted.

Nikita related an abusive childhood and also identified the school counselor as someone who helped her to face the abuse.

I was raped three times [tears] and she [mother] said it was my fault every single time. And she said I shouldn't have been looking for her. That was when I was six years old. She was missing for two days. And I said I will go look for her, I know one of her friends and he said she is not here. I said well I am going home now. [Pause] And he grabbed me and he raped me. [tears] And I was only six years old. At school I talk to Miss Bruce about it.

The support offered in the school counseling unit were identified as ways that helped them to heal and concentrate on the academic requirements of school. The participants were faced with many potential roadblocks on their journey toward educational success. Abuse for some was something they would deal with for the rest of their lives.

Trisha discussed her past year and the difficulties she had with her parents. Her experiences prevented her from developing trusting relationships in school. School support programs such as guidance counseling assisted her in developing relationships based on trust. The school support programs provided the participants with tools to deal with their abuse.

Drug and Alcohol Avoidance

The participants identified drug and alcohol use as a factor that affected their educational success. They talked openly about the availability of drugs and alcohol in high school and its effects on all students. Zeara discussed her journey through drug and alcohol use. In the first two years of high school, her attendance and grades were excellent, but as she experimented with drugs and alcohol in her social group her desire to maintain good grades dropped off. Nikita told a similar story about being away from school and using drugs and alcohol.

I had a lot of struggles because I forgot everything I learned. All I thought about was partying and drugs and alcohol and smoking. But then I realized that after a while that it wasn't the big thing that I wanted in my life.

Sici identified drugs and alcohol as factors that caused her failure in school. She tells a touching story of her journey into and out of the world of drugs and alcohol.

When you get into high school you do your thing, you do your drinking, you do your drugs or whatever, for a lot of people it came maybe earlier for them, like in grade 9 and 10 and stuff. Mine came in grade 11. And I think that one of the reasons I failed was because I was the only one [in my grade]. They [participants] did marijuana and stuff like that, I crossed the line passed marijuana and many other lines like that. Drugs and alcohol was one of my biggest pressures in this school. And I think that was my serious downfall, was giving into it and just keep giving into it.

Drug and alcohol use provided a challenge for the participants. The lure of substance abuse or self-medication proves to be too much for many students.

North: Mental Realm—Aboriginal Teachers, Diploma, and Curriculum

In the North the participants identified Aboriginal teachers, attaining a diploma, and a curriculum that engages the interest of students as factors that foster educational success.

Aboriginal teachers play an important role in the educational success of Aboriginal youth. Mackay and Myles (1995), in a discussion of Aboriginal retention and dropout rates, identify Native teachers and/or assistants as an important support for Aboriginal students in high school.

Schools in which Native students enjoy a high rate of success are those with principals who actively promote strategies for maximizing the academic success of all their students. The principals of such schools have successfully recruited Native teachers and/or assistants. (p. 174)

The participants recognized the need for more Aboriginal teachers in the school, but did not associate a specific Aboriginal teacher as contributing to their success. Rather Zeara, in a discussion of the need for more Aboriginal teachers, identified another problem in the school. She noticed a lack of Aboriginal teachers in her high school, and among those present she noted that the Aboriginal teachers in the school hung around together and did not seem to associate with the other teachers. Zeara wondered whether this was a form of racism, a consequence of their being Aboriginal. There is an irony in her discussion regarding teacher groups and student clichés as both serve to marginalize a group.

Transformation in Aboriginal education cannot take place while Aboriginal teachers are marginalized. St. Denis, Bouvier, and Battiste (1998) in a report on Aboriginal teachers elaborate on teacher marginalization in schools. In a discussion of Aboriginal teachers' relationships with colleagues, the researchers found "having more than one Aboriginal teacher on a staff is a valued experience for Aboriginal teachers. It enabled them to feel connected, relaxed and confirmed" (p. 49). The need for comfort in the school parallels that of Aboriginal students in the classroom. The Aboriginal teachers experience racism from other teachers in their schools. "Despite the well meaning and the good-heartedness of some colleagues, teachers feel that racism remains invisible to them, manifested in their negative comments about Aboriginal students, families or other teachers" (p. 52). The researchers' findings led to a recommendation for school boards to provide networking opportunities among Aboriginal teachers and for schools to recognize how to address racism.

Graduation Diploma

The participants set educational goals. One was to receive a high school diploma. The diploma was a concrete measure of their success, but this realization did not come automatically to the participants. Zeara's story of her early high school years rang true with several of the other participants. In grade 9 she did not care about grades and was a bit of a brat. Only in her later years, when she made the decision to focus on school, as opposed to partying, did she realize how important it was to graduate with a grade 12 diploma. Shelly was much more concise when discussing a diploma as a factor that pushed her to complete high school. "I just don't want to return here and be an upgrader. I don't know. I just want to graduate." The drive to graduate and have the opportunity to gain employment was a factor that helped these participants to succeed in school.

Engaging Curriculum

The participants identified curriculum as a factor that contributed to their educational success. For these students curriculum was not only course content, but included recognition of varied learning and teaching styles. Nikita talked about her learning style and the dedication of a teacher as two elements that helped her to grasp the course content and succeed in English. One teacher recognized Nikita as a concrete learner and adapted the lessons to give her a better chance of grasping the concepts. He was also flexible with assignment due dates in recognition of the time Nikita needed to balance motherhood and being a student. Finally, her teacher spent extra time with her after school, at lunchtime, or during his prep

period to explain the material to her. Relieved, she added “And he would not get mad at me.”

The curriculum the students discussed was not about the Aboriginal content itself, but rather its effect on their insights about themselves. Zeara was clear that the Native studies course available to her was not a factor contributing to her success in high school. “Like, I mean, I take Native Studies, but I honestly didn’t care and I didn’t want to know about it and I just—it’s not important to me.” She identified student communication as a key to success.

I think with learning about Shakespeare and, like, 1920 wars and stuff like, well we don’t need to know it. That’s really junk, it’s junk. I think that I wish they [school] would do more about communicating. Because that’s what a lot of people need.

Natriello, Pallas, McGill, and McPartland (1990) support Zeara’s claim and maintain that one method of building necessary peer relationships in schools is to “develop ways to promote peer networks which provide support and attachment” (p. 190). This study itself offered such an enrichment of communication, an approach that might be useful for administrators and teachers charged with the task of creating a curriculum that promotes peer communication.

Teachers: A Necessity for Success

Strong, healthy relationships built on trust and mutual respect contribute to the educational success of Aboriginal students. The strength of the student-teacher relationship often dictates the level of success the student achieves in school. Melnechenko and Horsman (1998) studied factors that contributed to Aboriginal student success in school in grades 6-9. They maintain that “relationship-building is a prerequisite to a positive classroom environment” (p. 12). In their study, the participants identified healthy student-teacher relationships as a factor contributing to their success in school.

According to middle years students the best teachers are strong classroom leaders who are friendlier and more understanding and less uncertain, dissatisfied, and critical than most teachers. Setting standards and maintaining control while allowing students responsibility and freedom to learn are also essential. (p. 12)

Teachers surround the spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental realms of the medicine wheel. The participants identified teachers as the most important factor contributing to their educational success.

Spiritual Support

Spiritual guidance, not necessarily ceremony, was essential in the journey to educational success. The teachers at this Catholic high school provided spiritual guidance for the participants. Bempechat (1998) analyzes why a strong student-teacher relationship as seen in a Catholic school promotes educational success.

Indeed, it could be that, in their deliberate attentions to students’ academic, spiritual, and personal growth (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993), teachers in Catholic high schools may provide the kinds of feedback that encourage positive attitudes about learning. (p. 93)

Zeara outlined the role Christian ethics teachers played in her spiritual development. “With teachers I think it’s a good thing for going to a Catholic School because it—Christian ethics especially—it makes you take part in spirituality and what I

need to know and what would guide me through life." Sici discussed the importance of tolerance of Aboriginal spirituality in her school.

Christian ethics teachers if you don't believe what they're talking about, they still try to respect what you're saying. And they'll try to understand, like how I talk about, when I talk about my sweetgrass and healings and stuff, they listen and they think it's interesting or at least they act like it is.

The tolerance exhibited by the teachers and administration allowed the students to explore Aboriginal culture in a Catholic setting and consequently develop a stronger evolving spiritual base.

Emotional Support

Teachers provided extensive emotional support for the participants. Phelan, Davidson, and Cao (1992) turned directly to students to seek information on the importance of student-teacher relationships. Their interviews revealed a definite need for positive student-teacher relationships in school. "Students want to feel connected personally to their teachers ... they want to know that teachers have thoughts, feelings, and experiences that both enliven and go beyond the academic content of the classroom" (p. 699).

Sici talked about the emotional support she received from teachers throughout her high school years.

In grade 11, I met a teacher named Miss French. She's been like a mother to me. She's there through everything I do. She's made me understand that the people I was friends with can still be my friends and still be the people I appreciate and care about.

Sici continued, "I can talk to my art teacher with more things than I can with my mother and father." This was an amazing compliment for a teacher. It shows the level of trust and admiration the participants had for them. As with any trusting relationship, the admiration did not develop overnight. Zeara discussed her relationship with Mrs. B as one that took time to develop. In grade 9 Zeara was called into the halls and disciplined several times. Mrs. B would talk; she would listen. After a time Zeara looked on Mrs. B as a mother. In fact she fondly remembered the day Mrs. B said, "Oh all right I'm going to adopt you." Their relationship was characterized as one of trust and mutual respect. The participants required plenty of emotional support from their teachers in order to succeed in school. Trust and respect in a teacher-student relationship is a necessity for achieving success in the classroom.

Physical Support

The participants identified physical safety as a basic need in school. If students experienced situations where their safety was compromised at some time in their life, they became conscious of the level of safety in their environment. For many Aboriginal people, physical safety is a concern because of past abuse. Trisha discussed the emotional and physical support provided in the school. She believed that teachers and counselors allowed her to deal with her abuse and consequently work to be successful in school. "Miss S and Miss B have been there for me since like grade 10 or grade 11. They are the ones I discuss most of my problems to." It

was a necessity to heal the heart before academics could be a priority. This is a valuable lesson for educators.

Physical health was a concern for Zeara. She talked about the support she received from a teacher who encouraged her to live a healthy life and eat nutritious food. Mrs. B would check to see if Zeara was eating properly. On more than one occasion Zeara would quiz Mrs. B on whether it was appropriate to eat or drink something. Zeara also pointed out, "Mrs. B doesn't drink alcohol lots. I don't drink any more." The teacher was a positive role model for Zeara and this translated into educational success.

Mental Support

Low teacher expectations have often been characterized as affecting the level of educational success among Aboriginal students. All too often low teacher expectations of Aboriginal students result in their failure. Dingman, Mroczka, and Brady (1995), following Bowker (1993), support the need to challenge low teacher expectations of Aboriginal students. "Obviously, the academic pipeline for the American Indian people is leaking badly. Low teacher expectations and counseling of Indian students into vocationally orientated curricula have been identified as among the factors contributing to this attrition" (p. 10). Cleary Miller and Peacock (1998) add to the discussion of low teacher expectations for Aboriginal students.

Teachers talked about the fear of getting children's hopes up when experience had taught them that dreams are often smashed. But teachers should not cut off possibilities on that basis, nor should they be discouraged when their hard work does not pay off on graduation. (p. 220)

The participants revealed high teacher expectations as a factor that encouraged their success in school. Sici talked about her expectations of teachers when she first came to the school.

I expect them [teachers] to be there to show me what to do, how to do it and when to do it. I expect them to be there to let me know about the universities, about the classes, about my choices—I expect them to stand behind me in my choices, not to try and lead me to something different that I haven't spoken about.

The mental and emotional support provided by teachers was evident in Zeara's desire to take multiple classes from the same teacher. Mrs. B's support "changed me to become more of a positive person and I will always thank her for that." Sici talked about the various feelings teachers caused in her. Even if she did not always agree with them, she realized teachers were doing their part in helping her to succeed. Although teachers had consequences for lack of work, it was the moments when they listened that she remembers most vividly.

Shelly identified humor as an important characteristic for a teacher wishing to encourage success. She talked about her favorite teacher and how he used humor to promote success. "He treats me funny, I don't know. He just makes jokes with me all the time." Shelly realized that the humor helped her to learn in his class. Humor was a valuable tool used by the teacher to gain her interest.

Academic expectations were essential for the participants to experience success. There was, however, room for flexibility in the expectations. Nikita discussed how the flexibility of teachers when her child was born helped her to pass her

courses. She was given extra time to complete her assignments, and notes were photocopied for her. This encouraged her to continue and return for her final year.

Teachers approached the participants with a genuine sense of caring and recognized that conventional methods of teaching did not achieve success for the students. The teachers allowed their hearts to guide them in their teaching, and this made all the difference for the participants.

Summary

Weesageechak represents the folly of perception and greed, the white man's colonization of Aboriginal people, and the continued effect this has on the education of Aboriginal children. Weesageechak has upset the balance of Aboriginal education. Through European assimilation, Aboriginal education has been challenged to survive in the conventional structure of the educational system. In keeping with the stories told by Elders, one way to overcome the hold of Weesageechak is in following the teaching of the medicine wheel. Balancing the four realms of life—spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental—will restore harmony to Aboriginal education. The medicine wheel worked well as a framework for organizing factors that foster educational success for Aboriginal high school students.

Ecology, the center of the medicine wheel, acts as the bond that holds the four realms of life together. The ecological center comprises volition to succeed in life. It is characterized by a special gift each person possesses. The spiritual realm to the East focuses on the participants' redefinition of spirituality that comprises Catholic and Aboriginal beliefs. The emotional realm to the South includes family, friends, and the development of self-identity as factors in the educational success of students. The physical realm to the West examines the roles of multiculturalism, drug and alcohol avoidance, and support programs in creating a successful educational environment for students. The mental realm to the North examines Aboriginal teachers, a grade 12 diploma, and curricula as factors that promote educational success. Teachers acted as the final element necessary for Aboriginal youth to achieve success in school. In the medicine wheel teachers were symbolized as the band surrounding the rest of the elements. Without the strength of the band everything would fall apart and there would be no success for Aboriginal youth.

The inclusion of only five female students as participants limited the scope of the study. On the other hand, the participants offered much valuable information regarding issues that face Aboriginal women in education. They discussed the roles of family, children, and welfare in their lives at present and in the future. Although these elements are identified as factors that lead to their educational success, they also limit their opportunities in society. Although I did not intend to study Aboriginal women, the data gathered offered interesting directions for future study. The participants defined success as more than a grade 12 diploma. Children, family, and friends are signifiers and motivators for success in life. Breaking the cycle of dysfunction in the family is also a strong motivator for success.

In comparing the factors that perpetuate failure and factors that encourage success, it is obvious that educators, administrators and parents must work together to accommodate and accentuate the factors that lead to success for Aboriginal

youth. Table 1 offers an illustrative summary of the factors that contribute to success or failure in my study and in the relevant literature.

A comparison of the two sets of factors shows that they are quite similar. This may be why researchers have focused almost exclusively on factors that lead to failure rather than examining success stories. With a small but crucial change in the point of view, educators can approach educational change from a new perspective. Unfortunately, the students cannot make the changes necessary in the educational system. Their job is to share their stories and experiences and to guide educators in the transformation of Aboriginal education. The work now lies in the hands of educators, parents, and administrators.

What did I accomplish in this study? How is this going to help students in the future? What did the study teach me? These are some of the questions I consider. In the end I believe the study revealed two important findings, one more important than the other.

The first finding is a framework that outlines factors that contribute to the success of female Aboriginal students in high school. My hope is that the factors that contribute to their success will assist other Aboriginal students in attaining success in school. This means that teachers, administrators, and parents need to implement programs that develop the factors outlined in the medicine wheel framework. Although the framework of success factors is key to the study, another finding stands out in my mind as the most important.

On reflection I realize that the process of the sharing circles was paramount in the study. The students embraced the opportunity to share their stories and experiences. They wished to be heard. I believe all students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, would benefit academically and emotionally from the opportunity to share their stories and experiences throughout their high school years.

My study suggests several areas that serve as a basis for those interested in challenging and transforming the educational system. Educators need to design and implement programs to direct and monitor teachers to be more supportive of

Table 1

<i>Factors that encourage success</i>	<i>Factors that encourage failure</i>
a new understanding of spirituality	contrasting world views
family involvement	lack of parental involvement
friends	lack of an engaging curriculum
development of self-identity	schools are goal-oriented
multicultural environment	lack of cultural content in school
support programs	low teacher expectations
drug and alcohol avoidance	drug and alcohol use
Aboriginal teachers	loss of Native language instruction
grade 12 diploma	placement into alternative programs
relevant curriculum	lack of career counseling
supportive and flexible teachers	lack of teacher flexibility
nurturing a gift	

marginalized students. It is also important that teachers, administrators and parents create programs that promote the factors that lead to success as identified by Aboriginal students. The educational system would also benefit from an examination of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers in a school. Educators, administrators, and parents should create more opportunities where all students can share and learn from one another. Perhaps leading sharing circles is the role Elders need to play in the education of our children. Perhaps this realization was the Elders' purpose in telling the story of Weesageechak and the educational system. Now I understand.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Marie Battiste from the University of Saskatchewan for her encouragement and assistance in preparing this document for publishing.

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