

Building Relationships through Reciprocal Student Exchanges

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This participatory action research study describes a reciprocal exchange between two First Nations schools, one in Northern Ontario and one in urban British Columbia. The study participants were 12- to 14-year-old students who were involved in the exchange. Photo-story and sharing circle methods were used to elicit their perceptions of the exchange experience. The four themes that emerged were community and relationships, connections to place, confidence building, and culture and ceremony. This study asserts that experiential educational practices that focus on building relationships and enhancing existing strengths could benefit many First Nations youth.

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I learned about another culture, it made me want to learn more about my own. (a Grade 8 student)

This research shares stories of journeys taken. As the primary researcher and a non-Aboriginal person, I (Judy) lived on a Northern Ontario First Nations reserve and taught in the reserve school while observing and researching with the staff and students of the school. These experiences were reminiscent of my childhood growing up and attending school on a First Nations reserve in Northwestern British Columbia (BC) where my dad was a teacher. This study highlights the stories and pictures of students who participated in a First Nations reciprocal educational exchange. Through their journey they built relationships and gained confidence. The school has since participated in another exchange with students from Quebec, continuing to expand students' horizons.

There has been a resurgence of interest in creating relevant educational opportunities for First Nations students. Many hope that a reconnection with culture will help to restore pride and bridge the achievement gap. This study suggests that relationship building is equally important to fostering pride and achievement for First Nation students and that the voices of First Nations students are essential when examining such practices. This article shares findings from the photovoice stories of grade eight First Nations students involved in a reciprocal exchange with First Nations students from another region of Canada. This research examines how such experiential educational practices can engage and empower First Nations youth.

The state of education for First Nations students is an issue of concern for all levels of government and, particularly, for First Nations communities (Atleo, 2010; Cherubini, Hodson, Manley-Casimer, & Muir, 2010; Ontario Education Research Symposium (OER), 2009; Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC), 2009; Richards, 2008; Richards, Vining, & Weimer, 2010). Academic achievement for First Nations students, as measured by enrolment in post-secondary education, high school graduation rates, and provincial test scores, is well below the levels of non-First Nations students in most jurisdictions (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; Statistics Canada, 2007; Wotherspoon, 2007). Governments have attempted to address the achievement gap of First Nations students in various ways, reflecting their different understandings of what causes this gap. A commonly cited reason for First Nations students' low level of achievement is the lack of cultural congruence between Eurocentric schooling and First Nations cultural knowledge, learning styles, and teaching practices (Ledoux, 2006; Ontario Ministry of Education (OME), 2007; Powless, 2004). As a result, government policies have advocated for the inclusion of First Nations content, pedagogy, and learning styles in the classroom (Cherubini & Hodson, 2008; OME, 2007). For example, Ontario developed 10 Native Studies courses for secondary schools (Godlewska, Moore, & Bednasek, 2010) and published an Aboriginal toolkit (Toulouse, 2008) to help teachers integrate Aboriginal content across the curriculum. Other provinces show similar initiatives (British Columbia, 2006; Saskatchewan, 2005; Nova Scotia, 2008).

Foundations for this Research

First Nations researchers are focusing on resilience and strengths (Feinstein, Driving-Hawk & Baartman, 2009; Andersson & Ledogar, 2008) as a foundation for education. Battiste (2009), writing on the notion of "nourishing the learning spirit," shares this goal: "We have studied and know much about what happens when people fall off the good path but few have studied the *learning journey* [italics added] that youth engage in." Our study captures students' stories of a reciprocal exchange, adding to our understanding of their learning journeys and serving as encouragement for others. Although each person walks their own path, the stories and lives of others often guide them on their way (Archibald, 2008). As non-Aboriginal people, we approached this research by basing it upon the work of First Nations researchers. Their research, cited throughout the paper, forms the theoretical foundation and analysis for this study.

In "The Seventh Generation, Native Students Speak About Finding the Good Path", Bergstrom, Cleary, and Peacock (2003) interviewed 120 Native American and First Nations students across North America about their educational experiences. Cleary (2008, p. 97) uses the data to highlight the need for holistic education congruent with students' experiences and

shares a comment from an elder that, "often the more emphasis there is on testing and achievement, the more native students fall behind." She argues that the continued emphasis on Eurocentric methods and standardization continues to disadvantage Native youth. Their research emphasized the value of First Nations students' perspectives and the need for a culturally relevant and strengths-based pedagogy. Crooks, Chiodo, and Thomas's (2009, pp. 12-13) Canadian resource, "Engaging and Empowering Aboriginal Youth: A toolkit for service providers", features four principles for designing programs for Aboriginal youth: (1) understanding and integrating cultural identity; (2) increasing youth engagement; (3) fostering youth empowerment; and (4) establishing and maintaining effective partnerships.

Place-based and experiential education have also been shown to be congruent to the goals of successful First Nations education. Some communities have turned to experiential education (Aylward, 2007) to engage the hearts and minds of their students. Roue (2006) reports on how Northern Cree are taking at-risk and troubled students back to the land with Elders, to restore their learning spirit. Other studies looked at the teaching of science in holistic ways, engaging students with the environment to learn about science as well as traditional teachings and history (Hindelang, 2004). Bissett (2009) argues that opportunities for experiential education that engage the hearts and minds of students should be created and sustained. We would also assert that successful practices should be examined and shared with other First Nations schools so that a wide range of possibilities are available to students.

Hern (2009) researched reciprocal exchanges between young adults from East Vancouver and Fort Good Hope, Northwest Territories. The exchanges were designed to provide opportunities for Native and non-Native youth to build relationships. Hern's research explored whether students involved in three reciprocal exchanges between East Vancouver and a Native community in the Arctic were able to move beyond tolerance to build lasting relationships (2009, p. 322). He conducted exit interviews with participants from the 2007 exchange as well as with members of both communities who had been involved in previous exchanges. He found that, although the exchanges increased awareness and understanding among the students, few lasting relationships were formed. Hern noted that the northern participants from isolated communities, who tended to have smaller circles of friends, had hopes of continuing the relationships formed during the exchange but, even with the availability of Internet contact, few of these friendships endured (2009, p. 330). Though this seemed surprising to Hern, the context of youth is one of fleeting friendships. Considering the distance between parties it would be surprising if the relationships formed during short-term exchanges were lasting ones.

The benefits of reciprocal exchanges are also seen in Saitow's (2009) research, "Educational Travel and Adolescent Learning." She studied sev-

eral types of educational travel experiences to develop a theory of the learning processes involved. She also reviewed the literature on experiential learning and the benefits of exchanges for at-risk populations. Relevant to this research were Saitow's (2009) comments related to at-risk and Native American youth:

Educational travel may introduce positive experiences to at-risk students, and diminish the influences that negatively impact their abilities to succeed in school. (p. 4)

Educational travel may address some of the learning needs of Native American adolescents because part of the immersion process involves reinforcing one's own culture through a developing awareness for other cultures. (p. 26)

A significant finding from Saitow (2009, p. 243) was that those students with limited experiences outside their own communities benefitted the most from educational travel.

The research related to student exchanges, resilience, and place-based education was the impetus for the exchange and the focus for this study. Rather than focus on the problems and seek remediation, the school staff (of which Judy was a member) sought to enrich the lives of the students through a First Nations to First Nations exchange experience. As a parent and teacher, I (Judy) was aware of the Society of Educational Visits and Exchanges Canada (SEVEC), which facilitates educational exchanges (using government funding) within Canada. The research component was undertaken to examine student perceptions of the experience and to add the voices of First Nations students to the literature in this field.

Purpose of the Research

The research was designed to elicit and explore the meanings of a reciprocal inter-community exchange between two First Nations schools by having student research participants from one of the schools share their pictures, stories, and memories of their experiences. The research questions guiding the study were: What would First Nations students share about their participation in a student exchange? How did their perceptions match the goals of the stakeholders, school, community, SEVEC, and Assembly of First Nations (AFN)? Could a small qualitative study speak to some of the broader issues in First Nations and Indigenous education and, if so, how?

Research Setting

The research involved students in a Northern Ontario First Nations community. Though this community is near a major highway, it requires several hours of driving to reach larger centres where there is access to an airport, shopping, movie theatres, post-secondary education, and such. The community has positive features, such as many new houses and a Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) school, which is less than six years old. Most of the teachers and staff at the school are from the community and are of First Nations descent. The band council is working to attract eco-

conomic development and has focused on improving housing and infrastructure in recent years. Some of the children and youth are struggling, which has manifested in school attendance issues, emotional and behavioural challenges, and parental disconnection from the school. The school and community applied to participate in the student exchange as a means to encourage and engage the Grade 7 and 8 students. These youth, many of whom were considered *at-risk*, were also affected by challenges facing the school, such as a high turnover of teachers, resulting in limited academic achievement (based on personal conversations with the Principal, Spring 2009). The exchange was only one facet of the school's focus on promoting positive classroom environments, increasing academic achievement, and providing emotional support to all students. The school and community viewed this exchange as an opportunity for their youth to expand their horizons, travel, and enjoy new experiences.

The school began the application process for funding through SEVEC in July 2009 and received notification that their application for an exchange was accepted on the first day of school. The Grade 7 and 8 students, the Grade 8 teacher, the child and youth worker, and I, the special education teacher, were involved in the planning, prior to the exchange visits. The upcoming exchange with BC First Nations students was used by the teachers to shape teaching and learning experiences. For example, the teachers gave students a purpose in learning to write a proper letter, as they wanted to correspond with the students from the exchange school. In geography, they explored "how where you lived influenced how you lived" and, in history, they studied the history of western Canada. The exchange visit to the community from BC First Nations students took place in early March 2009 and the visit to BC took place in April 2009.

Methodology—Research Design

This study was designed according to Participatory Action Research (PAR) principles (Riecken, Scott, & Tanaka, 2006) using two promising qualitative methods employed in other research involving First Nations communities and youth: (1) photovoice, which uses participant photography to reveal realities and share stories (Truchon, 2007; Ip, 2007); and (2) a sharing circle (Lavallee, 2009), similar to a focus group where participants share their understandings in a small group format. Observational field notes were taken during all of the exchange experiences. Specifically, data from four Ontario Grade 8 students (two male, two female) who had agreed to participate in the study by volunteering to share their experiences was collected. The Ontario chief and council, school board, principal, and school staff all gave their consent for the research during the exchange. The four students and their parents provided written consent prior to the first sharing circle. Consent was also obtained from subjects in photographs. Once the data was analyzed, it was presented to the cultural coordinator

and language teacher for further discussion. A final written report was shared with the students, school staff, chief, and council of the Ontario community.

During the exchange experiences all students took pictures. The research participants created PowerPoint® presentations from the photographs and then shared these with their peers and me in a sharing circle facilitated by the child and youth worker. In addition to sharing ideas and opinions, a sharing circle offers a space for the sharing of emotions and spiritual insights (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2005). The community and school used sharing circles to discuss important issues on a regular basis. The students understood the protocols of speaking and listening respectfully. The photo-story method (Castleden, Garvin, & Huu-ay-aht First Nation, 2007; Truchon, 2007) allowed the participants to direct the gaze of others at images they had chosen as representative of their experiences. Other researchers have used methods such as journals, photo captions, one-to-one interviews or conversations, and focus groups to capture participants' perceptions of the messages in the images (Truchon, 2007; Ip, 2007). The juxtaposition of pictures, captions, and conversation provided multiple data sources for this study.

Findings

Each participant created a photo-story by juxtaposing the visual, textual, and oral narratives, rather than using photo elicitation, where pictures are used as an opening for discussion between the participant and the researcher. Although each participant's photo-story revealed their unique vision and understanding, some of the photos chosen were identical or similar and the narratives overlapped. Together, the participants' presentations displayed the experiences of their shared journey. Their quotations and pictures allow us to share their perspectives of their experiences. However, as Ellis & Scott-Hoy (2007, p. 134) have said, "I am fearful of inadvertently hurting my participants by what I write about them. I know that they, like I, will change over the time their story is told." The students' understandings may have changed since they shared their stories.

The stories shared through the presentations were counterpoints to the thoughts disclosed in the sharing circle. Different layers of meaning relating to the same phenomenon were revealed by the different data sources. The pictures portrayed what was seen; the text and oral narrative disclosed events and feelings that were remembered; and the sharing circle exposed the underlying significance of the exchange experiences. In the sharing circle, with the focus on meaning and learning, the students revealed deeper connections and understandings than was seen or heard during their presentations. They discussed friendship, culture, and dreams for the future. This study demonstrates that the multiple methods used did not replicate information but rather created a space for thoughts and feelings that may

have been hidden or ignored with only a single method. If the participants had only participated in a sharing circle would their strong affinity for gazing at and remembering nature have become visible? If the participants had only created PowerPoint® presentations would we know that making friends and learning about another culture were highlights for them? Together, the different sources of data provide a more complete understanding of the exchange experiences for these First Nations students.

Themes

After repeated readings and reflection on the data four broad themes emerged. These themes reflected the representations of the research participants and also spoke to the goals of the exchange activities. The themes are not easily compartmentalized because they intersect, overlap, and seamlessly flow into each other.

The four themes (see Figure 1) of: (1) community and relationships; (2) connections with place; (3) confidence building; and (4) culture and ceremony are themes which are related to a positive model of First Nations education and are congruent with other researchers' understandings of First Nations education (Aylward, 2007; Bergstrom et al., 2003; Gruenewald, 2003; Redwing Saunders & Hill, 2007).

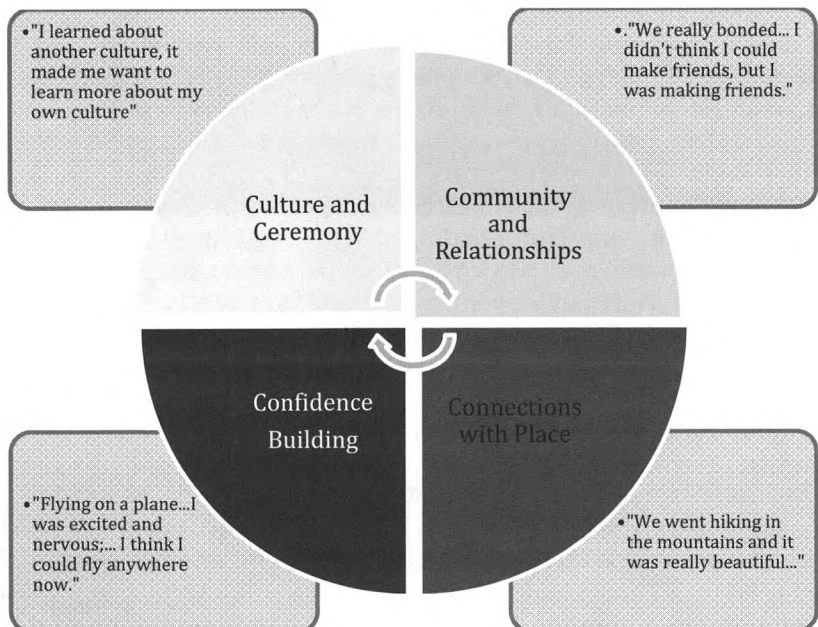


Figure 1. Findings from the Journey

Community and Relationships

This theme speaks to the importance of family, community, and relationships for many First Nations people. It includes the relationships that the students shared with their classmates and teachers, and the community involvement in planning for the exchange activities. It also includes the theme of making friends with the students from BC. The teachers involved in the exchange activities and the trip to BC all noticed change in how students treated each other. The students were much more supportive of each other and there was no evidence of arguing, fighting, or teasing during the trip. One teacher noted that “the students bonded as a group.” There were many instances of students encouraging each other and helping each other during travelling and while in BC.

When the students shared their PowerPoint® presentations, this feeling of community with their peers was evident. Their texts and presentations were written from the point of view of *our class* and *we*. As they shared their PowerPoint® presentations, there was a sense in the group of reliving the experiences together; they laughed, commented, and reminisced. Out of the 24 pictures shared, 14 of the pictures included people. Most of these pictures were of Ontario students, while only 6 of the pictures included BC students, and none were of only BC students.

In the discussion, all students mentioned that the highlight of the exchange was “making friends” and this was part of their learning: “... made new friends, like happy to see them again.” The students’ narratives



Figure 2. *Community and Relationships*

also included references to friendships with BC students: “Our class made lots of new friends and we really bonded.” A picture from a student’s PowerPoint® presentation (see Figure 2) of the two groups talking shows this friendship.

Friendship was spoken of in general terms. The students did not use names of specific individuals or share details of their personal relationships. They recalled the depths of emotion shared when goodbyes were said in Ontario and in BC. They all mentioned that they were still in touch with their BC peers via the Internet and that, perhaps when they finished school, they could go back there. The opportunity to make these connections opened up their world. Even if the friendships were short term, these connections enlarged the students’ capabilities.

Connections with Place

Place, culture, and identity are strongly connected. Where you live influences the stories you tell and the culture and identity you create (Archibald, 2008; Shultz, Kelly, & Weber-Pillwax, 2009). Writers, researchers, and Elders have noted the connection that First Nations peoples have with place (Guilar & Swallow, 2008; LaDuke, 2005; Wildcat, 2009). First Nations identity was, and often still is, tied to location.



Figure 3. Connections with Place

The place-based identity of the First Nations students in this study also appeared to influence what they observed during their journey to BC. Their PowerPoint® presentations highlighted nature. They directed their gaze toward landscapes and creatures. The photos of sea lions, a sea anemone, a starfish, a crab under a rock, and a pretty little stream portrayed what they noticed. Two students' PowerPoint® presentations included a picture of sea lions taken while on a visit to a marine centre.

One of the volunteers at the marine centre in BC commented on the enthusiasm of our students to spend time touching the marine creatures, such as sea anemones, in the experiential part of the exhibit. This was in contrast to the students from BC's reluctance to touch, discuss, or participate in skinning the snared rabbit when they visited us. This may have been related to the fact that the students from BC lived near a large urban centre and may not have had the same day-to-day experiences with hunting and fishing as did the students from Ontario.

Nature was a focus of their PowerPoint® presentations but was not mentioned by any of the students during the sharing circle. If the presentations were the only source of data, it would appear that nature and seeing unique creatures and landscapes were the highlights of their trip. As we reviewed their presentations, we considered that perhaps their strong connection to the outdoors and nature at home led them to connect with these elements at their destination. This was corroborated in a discussion with a community member. She remembered all of the students' (BC and Ontario) strong interest in the outdoor cultural activities during the exchange activities. These pictures may also have been shown to contrast with the nature in their home environment. Others in the community would be interested to see them.

Confidence Building

This theme encompasses a diversity of subjects, such as expanding horizons through the experience of travelling, participating in new activities, seeing other parts of Canada, and learning social skills before and during the exchange activities. Taking part in an exchange with the opportunity of travelling across Canada by plane, going to restaurants, museums, malls, and movies, and also planning and hosting a group of youth in their own community provided many opportunities to develop the skills they need to succeed in life and to expand their dreams for their futures. All of the PowerPoint® presentations had pictures of students engaged in activities that were not possible on the reserve. They showed pictures of travelling on a plane, eating at a restaurant, going to the movies, and playing at the arcade. Their narratives mentioned the activities they participated in each day. During the discussion, one of the students mentioned, "over there they were positive and here they are so negative and I became confident."



Figure 4. Confidence Building

Living in a small and isolated community limits the opportunities to participate in activities taken for granted by most Canadians. Although television and the Internet exposed the youth to mainstream culture, it was a challenge for some of them to feel comfortable outside of the reserve community. For example, in order not to be exposed as not knowing social conventions, one of our students did not order his meal at Subway® and said he was not hungry. During the trip to the movies, some of the students did not understand how to navigate the ticket, food, and lineup process. They relied on the school staff to support them during the process. On the flight to BC, the students were nervous and apprehensive but on the way home, they were relaxed and confident. After we returned to the community, one of our students told me that now he felt that he could fly anywhere, even by himself stating, "Now I can go anywhere."

One of the teachers said, "Now that we have come across Canada, I think that I would like to take a group of students to a different country." In fact, since this exchange, the school has participated in an exchange with students from Quebec who speak French. Before the students from BC came to our community, we held many class meetings and planning sessions. The exchange experiences gave these 12- to 14-year-old students opportunities to develop their leadership skills in a supportive setting for a meaningful purpose.

Culture and Ceremony

The theme of culture and ceremony was a topic of discussion during the sharing circle. All four of the research participants mentioned “learning about another culture” when asked, “What did you learn through these experiences?” One of the students went into a detailed explanation of some of the stories and art experienced in BC:

... over there what I learned about their culture is their stories about the big people and how they stick to the ground ... and how they respect their animals, whatever and their culture about their spirits whatever, compare our drawings, our drawings are like way different, each animal in theirs if it is an upside down face someone passed away and if it's a straight up face it's still with them or something, but their culture is different it's not really similar to ours so I just learned a new culture.

Culture was also seen in the texts and pictures of the PowerPoint® presentations. Student C, in particular, focused on remembered cultural activities: “We went for a trip up the mountains and the elder was telling some legends of the trees there.” His pictures of a tall tree and a totem pole illustrated his narrative. In his PowerPoint® presentation, he discussed culture while showing this photo of a totem pole taken on the visit to the BC museum, saying, “Their culture is different. The pictures on the totem poles mean different things.”



Figure 5. Culture and Ceremony

Student A's recollections of cultural teachings were of stories shared during these experiences. Student B included "smudging before we left; we went to their lodge and they were singing and telling us stories." It was surprising that all of these students highlighted the importance of culture because, at times during the exchange experiences, some students were talking among themselves and did not appear to be engaged during the cultural activities.

The AFN's "Rebuilding Our Nations Youth Accord 2008-2012" (presented in November 2007) includes "intercommunity exchanges of youth to promote traditional culture, practices, healing" as one of the keys to social development. One of the key findings of this research was that all of these participants highlighted discovering another culture, as exemplified by one participant: "I learned about another culture and it made me want to learn more about my own." This statement was significant as it shows that the exchange experiences in BC also fueled the participant's desire to expand their own cultural knowledge. Strengthening ties between First Nations communities across the country would not lead to a "pan-Indian" culture, but could increase students' understanding of the cultural identities of their own communities. Building relationships among diverse First Nations communities could create space for addressing critical concerns, such as dealing with intergovernmental issues, and lead to other economic and educational ventures.

The BC students displayed pride in their culture when they were in Ontario: singing their songs, speaking their language, and talking about their *big house* (this was the term used by the BC students; the usual term found in the literature is *longhouse*). Both of the exchange experiences included cultural activities each day. In Ontario, the Cree language teacher had Elders help her translate the students' names into syllabics. She shared not only language lessons, but also cultural stories. The outdoor cultural coordinator took the students on a snowshoe walk in the bush and showed them how to snare a rabbit. In BC, an Elder went on hikes with the students and shared cultural stories connected to the places. Traditional food was also shared in both locations: moose and rabbit in Ontario and seafood in BC. Both communities were involved in this cultural sharing. In Ontario, the Ministry of Natural Resources Rangers contributed by cooking and preparing outdoor activities, and community members presented songs and dances at the talent show. In BC, community members shared stories, songs, dances, and ceremonies, and led workshops teaching traditional crafts. The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) goal of sharing cultural practices and traditions could only be realized by the participation of the communities, particularly the Elders. The research participants' focus on cultural understandings that were gained showed that these exchange experiences provided the opportunities for cultural sharing and social development that the AFN envisioned.

Both schools and communities hoped that the exchange experiences would be a transformative learning experience for the youth. Both communities planned activities that would allow Elders and community members to share language and cultural activities with the students. The presentations and discussion with the students revealed that the students grasped the significance of these events. During our visit to BC, one of their Elders told stories of their history and culture to the students within the environment, while on a walk beside an ocean stream and on a hike to big trees on a mountain. Some of the research participants shared these lessons in their PowerPoint® presentations and during the discussion more than six weeks later. Though it was not always apparent by observing their behaviour during the exchange, the information students shared during the presentations and the sharing circle showed that these students remembered the teachings and discovered much about culture and history during the exchange. These 12- to 14- year-old students experienced more than just friendship, travelling on a plane, and enjoying activities in another province; they also appreciated the cultural significance of the trip.

This identification with culture could have broader significance. Chandler and Lalonde (1998, 2008) studied the high rates of suicide among First Nations youth in BC. They concluded that even though the suicide rates were alarming, the distribution varied among communities. Those communities that had stronger ties to their culture and language showed lower rates of suicide. Youth with a connection to their cultural identity were less likely to commit suicide than those youth with weaker ties to culture. Culture may not be the only reason for Chandler and Lalonde's findings; the results could also speak to the stronger relationships with Elders and community members than youth with stronger connections to culture may have had. The research participants' photo-stories and discussion reflected the stakeholders' goals for the reciprocal exchange, but this research could also have a wider significance.

This qualitative study, involving First Nations youth from a remote Ontario reserve, can also speak to some of the current issues in First Nations education in Canada. Educational research of significance to policy makers is often quantitative and based on statistics related to achievement. "Hope or Heartbreak: Aboriginal Youth and Canada's Future" (Government of Canada, 2008) is a collection of research briefs which presents research related to the education and labour trajectories of Aboriginal youth. The research in the issue is informative, but the portrayal of the thoughts of youth is limited.

To understand the broad representations of the educational and social issues of these youth, we need to hear their stories. The perspectives of the First Nations youth in this research study could add to the understanding of the educational and career aspirations of First Nations youth. The exam-

ple of a practice such as a reciprocal exchange that encouraged and engaged these youth could stimulate other communities to seek out similar educational practices that would benefit their youth. The insights shared by the participants in this study showed maturity and a depth of insight not often attributed to young adolescents. Listening to these students share what was gained through this exchange and their dreams for the future revealed their hope and persistence in spite of many challenges.

All of these participants' visions for the future included finishing school. Two of the students also mentioned starting businesses in the community. Their revelations were in sharp contrast to statistics that highlight standardized assessments and achievement (Cowley & Easton, 2004). Their desires to benefit the community were at odds with the media's continual focus on achieving personal success or its negative portrayal of First Nations communities (Cazabon, 2010). Their strong desire for cultural connection could also inform the content and focus of First Nations schooling.

The students were very interested in meeting other First Nations students. During the sharing circle, all participants said that they preferred a First Nations-to-First Nations exchange. I observed that when the BC students arrived in the Ontario community, there was an affinity between the two groups of students; once they got past the initial nervousness, they were comfortable with each other. Student A mentioned during the sharing circle that he felt that the other First Nations students understood them. He explained that this meant that they understood the social issues, such as family problems, poverty, drug abuse, and discrimination. He also disclosed personal and family stories of prejudice and racism. He related how he felt that students from the school in town "stared down" those from the reserve and that they treated them as if they were going to steal or were involved in drugs and prostitution. The journey to a First Nations community thousands of kilometres away may have been closer for these students than a journey to a mainstream school less than a hundred kilometres down the highway.

Racism and discrimination continue to be experienced by many First Nations students in Canada (St. Denis & Hampton, 2002). However, when addressing the achievement gap, these issues often are not part of the discussion. Governments prefer to address assessment, resources, and cultural teachings in their policies relating to Aboriginal education. The academic achievement gap between First Nations youth and mainstream students does not reflect the capabilities of students, families, and communities, but may be indicative of systemic problems and the lack of opportunities caused in part by continued racism and discrimination. Student A's raising of this issue during the sharing circle showed that young adolescents could relate to, understand, and would benefit from confronting these topics. Cultural activities, such as stories, songs, dances, and crafts, are beneficial, but it is also necessary to spend time focusing on critical social issues with First Nations youth.

Discussion

This reciprocal inter-community exchange enriched the education of these First Nations students and similar exchanges could have the potential to benefit many First Nations students in Canada. This study showed that it was viable, accessible, and valuable. Currently, the travelling expenses during a reciprocal exchange for accepted groups are funded by the Canadian government, through agencies such as SEVEC. Underfunded and isolated First Nations communities could take advantage of such opportunities for expanding the educational opportunities of their students. Increased experience with these exchanges could forge connections between First Nations communities across Canada, rural and urban, and also those from diverse geographic, cultural, and linguistic regions. Developing networks among First Nations and Indigenous groups are important for building strong First Nations leaders for the future.

First Nations leaders across Canada should continue to collaborate to share positive and proven initiatives. The lessons learned by the staff that planned this exchange would be useful for other First Nations schools planning a similar exchange. The photographs and ideas shared by these research participants could inspire other First Nations youth to participate in an exchange, and to expand their dreams and possibilities. We believe that students will be engaged with school when school is an engaging place to be. To raise academic achievement levels, perhaps an experiential education practice, such as a reciprocal inter-community exchange, would help school to be more relevant and engaging for many First Nations students.

Further research could be carried out to expand our understanding of reciprocal exchanges for First Nations youth. It would have been beneficial to gain the perspectives of the students from the urban reserve in BC. What did they gain from travelling to a remote First Nations community? Their viewpoints would have provided a broader understanding of the impact of reciprocal exchanges across urban-rural dimensions.

This study demonstrates that listening to the voice of First Nations youth enhances our understanding of the effectiveness of a program or practice. The students shared a depth of understanding of core issues, such as the importance of building relationships, connecting with culture, expanding horizons, and combating racism and prejudice. The value of educational experiences and programs should not be measured solely by looking at numerical results, such as grades or days in school, but rather equally by measuring the effects on students' confidence and dreams for the future.

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