

Community-Based Aboriginal Curriculum Initiatives: Implementation and Evaluation

1. Summary of Proposed Research

a) Elaboration of research problem: The primary goal of the project is to examine the impact of Aboriginal cultural instruction in selected schools in terms of learning, school attendance, and retention of Aboriginal students. The research involves assessing the effect of bringing Aboriginal artist-educators into participating schools, with particular attention to cognitive skills, cultural awareness, psychosocial development, identity, and self-esteem of Aboriginal students. The project will involve both quantitative and qualitative methods in a longitudinal follow-up design that spans five years. The hypothesis is that exposure to Aboriginal culture in the school will improve Aboriginal children's cultural awareness and identity, and that, in turn, will increase the personal relevance and importance of the school, which then will translate into positive school-related behaviors and achievement. The secondary purpose – community development – is specifically related to the enhancement of skills and talents of community members.

Culturally inappropriate curriculum, low representation of Aboriginal mentors and teachers in schools, and financial barriers to extra-curricular activities often lead to alienation among Aboriginal students and their parents. This alienation is evidenced by poor attendance and dropout at an early age by the Aboriginal student and reluctance by the parents to communicate with and visit the schools their children attend. The systemic insensitivity and discrimination has a “cumulative deficit” effect; Aboriginal children and youth develop low self-esteem and a negative cultural identity because they perceive school and society as sources of disenfranchisement rather than of empowerment.

b) Contribution to advancement of knowledge and the wider social benefit: The literature indicates that there is a positive association between cultural instruction and academic achievement. While episodic classroom visits tend to marginalize Aboriginal people and their experiences, we anticipate that ongoing integration of Aboriginal artist-educators into schools will have a positive effect on Aboriginal students in terms of improved attitudes toward school, enhanced academic performance, and desire to complete their education. The program of delivery – planned and implemented by the research team, participating schools, artist-educators, and research assistants, with input from partners, Elders, parents, and other community constituents – will be accompanied by a mentoring and a formal assessment process. Both of these processes will involve an integrative approach during which the researchers and all other constituents contribute their skills and knowledge for the benefit of Aboriginal children, youth, and communities by enhancing the education of Aboriginal students in the areas of cognitive skills and psychosocial development, including self-esteem and positive cultural identity.

This project will enhance the skills and knowledge within communities, resulting in sustainable community capacity building. Findings will provide a template for culturally relevant curricular materials and program evaluation that can be used in other schools and communities. Aboriginal artists will be supported within a network of community relationships that communicates the importance of the Aboriginal experience. People from many organizations will collaborate, “working for kids and communities,” sharing resources and expanding cultural awareness. Community-based researchers and artist-educators who have benefited from this mentoring will be able to implement grassroots educational initiatives and activities that will contribute to the growth and sustainability of their communities. This project will encourage a sense of belonging, as well as pride of identity, in Aboriginal communities. Children and parents will dream of greater achievements in inclusive, validating schools and neighbourhoods that work together, strong in the knowledge that it really does “take a community to raise a child.”