

Community-Based Aboriginal Curriculum Initiatives: Implementation and Evaluation

1. Summary of Proposed Research

- a) Elaboration of research problem: The purpose of this project is to examine the effects of the inclusion of Aboriginal cultural instruction in the arts on the cognitive skills, cultural awareness, and self-esteem of Aboriginal students, as measured by improved student learning outcomes and interview and observation methods of data gathering and analysis. Student marks in all subjects will be longitudinally tracked and analyzed. Qualitative data will gauge improvements in cultural awareness and self esteem.

While much of the politically incorrect terminology with respect to Aboriginal people has been eliminated in current curricula, there continues a legacy of cultural stereotyping that discourages harmony among our school children and adult learners alike. We have neither done enough to actualize the elimination of bias in the curriculum, nor to implement genuine Aboriginal curricular initiatives, and thus we continue to sustain environments that violate rather than validate the Aboriginal student. In particular, the modelling of Aboriginal education in schools presents a major vacuum, especially with reference to the traditional reliance on the arts as a vehicle for cultural transmission and identity creation.

- b) Contribution to advancement of knowledge: This project will recruit Aboriginal artist-educators who will contribute to the education and social development of Aboriginal children and youth. There is a growing wealth of Aboriginal singer-songwriters, playwrights, authors, poets, and artists. Their knowledge is seldom tapped other than during one-shot “flash in the pan” classroom visits that continue to “other” Aboriginal people and their experiences. This project will develop a curricular program that encourages the genuine integration of Aboriginal educators on a continuous, long-term basis. *The program of delivery, which will be planned and implemented by the research team of director, participants, partners, and assisting students (all Aboriginal people formally involved in education), will be accompanied by both a scaffolding and a formal assessment process.* The scaffolding process involves a genuinely integrative approach during which the research director, participants, partners, and students contribute their various skills and knowledge for the benefit of the project and each other. The student assistants will continue with the program when they become teachers, school administrators, and governing administrators in their communities. In that fashion, they will support other Aboriginal educators in their communities as integral in the education of Aboriginal students toward increased cognitive skills and enhanced self-esteem as reciprocating factors with positive identity.

This project will enhance the skills and knowledge within communities to implement and sustain community-based educational initiatives. Aboriginal artist-educators will be supported with grant funding that the research team and partners will solicit and/or provide. In that fashion, Aboriginal artists of many persuasions – non-certified educators – will be honoured and supported within a network of community relationships that communicates the importance of the Aboriginal experience. Such a positive community approach to Aboriginal education will support Aboriginal students in both band-controlled and public education settings. Given that over 60 percent of Aboriginal people now live off-reserve, this project will serve as a valuable learning initiative for all Canadian communities as they work toward meeting the needs of their Aboriginal students.

2. Detailed Description

Dr. Helen D. Armstrong

- **Relevance, Importance**

The Aboriginal community is the fastest growing segment in Canadian population. Even so, Canadian society continues with systemic discriminatory practices that constrain the gifts that Aboriginal people can give to the community. The school system is no exception; research data show poor academic performance, low self-esteem, and high dropout rates for Aboriginal students. As well, youth courts are crowded with Aboriginal males. Manitoba, the location of this community-university alliance, sees more youth in court per capita, than any other province (83 out of 1000 in 1998-1999; during the same period, Quebec took 20 out of every 1000 youth to court). The new Youth Criminal Justice Act puts far more onus on communities to support their youth with meaningful consequences that keep youth out of court and out of “correctional” facilities. This initiative will allow Aboriginal (as well as non-Aboriginal) youth in reserve and non-reserve schools to access positive resources to develop a healthy lifestyle, resulting in fewer children and youth “choosing” to engage in unhealthy and/or criminalized activities.

Although we have developed a theoretical awareness of the inappropriateness of the “blaming the victim” mentality, in our practice we still create schools and communities that violate the Aboriginal experience. The many stakeholders in education perpetuate unhealthy contexts for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people by denigrating the importance of Aboriginal culture, if not purposefully, certainly by its limited inclusion within school curricula to separate theme units for elementary programs or to “native studies” high school courses. An inclusive approach will work to eliminate the practice of segregation that a separate address of “Aboriginal issues” perpetuates. The broader inclusion of Aboriginal experience will, thus, provide opportunities for identity creation that build cultural understanding and lead to school environments that reflect a community in harmony.

As well as teachers, the Aboriginal community is rich in other talented artist-educators that the school system can access as partners in curriculum development and delivery. This program, with its simultaneous study and evaluation, will encourage that collaboration by bringing Aboriginal educators and their curricular initiatives into the classroom for the benefit of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and teachers. *A program of teaching and/or artistic presentations in a scheduled series of learning experiences, well planned with learning outcomes and an ongoing evaluative process, will lead to lasting systemic change in relations, learning outcomes, and self-concept among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.* The Aboriginal educators that will be involved in this initiative will include singer-songwriters, authors, poets, artists, craftspeople, language specialists, actors, and puppeteers. As well, Aboriginal educators from a variety of other occupations will be recruited to teach the students.

The artist-educators may be supported by grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, Manitoba Arts Council, and other funding agencies. The accompanying research component requires continuous input and support from Aboriginal organizations and associations, from schools, and from the university. A Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) / Community-University Research Alliances (CURA) grant will provide the critical support for the research component: *the administration, delivery, and evaluation and assessment of Aboriginal curriculum initiatives with reference to cognitive skills, student learning outcomes, self esteem, and a sense of positive identity in relation to those Aboriginal curriculum initiatives.* Ten undergraduate students, four master’s students, one doctoral candidate, and one post-doctoral fellow would be hired as research assistants. All of these people will be of Aboriginal ancestry, all connected to the field of education, and all with a vested interest in the sustenance of this initiative in south-western Manitoba. As much as possible, then, the people involved will be recruited from the area and will have plans to stay in the area. Aboriginal people will be hired for secretarial support, as well, with the intention that this person(s) would also continue in a position relating to such work after this particular project. Thus, we would seek to realize lasting

changes in the schools that will benefit Aboriginal children and youth. There would also be a number of university and provincial educators involved as collaborators, mostly Aboriginal professors and those involved in Aboriginal programs and/or related study. As well as a research agenda in the area, the Applicant, Dr. Armstrong, has extensive experience in the area of administration, in terms of practice, theoretical study, and teaching.

- **Outcomes**

General Learning Outcomes. This community-university research alliance project will:

- 1) Enhance the capacity of Aboriginal communities to improve their own education.
- 2) Improve the appropriateness of the university's response to the needs of Aboriginal communities.
- 3) Increase the capacity of Aboriginal communities, as well as communities with a high concentration of Aboriginal students, to create and coordinate school curriculum initiatives with other community/association partners.
- 4) Provide opportunities for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to increase their ability to coordinate and administer community initiatives that benefit Aboriginal children and youth.

Specific Learning Outcomes. All participants in this initiative will:

- 1) Learn to conduct field-based data-directed educational research.
- 2) Learn to solicit and write funding proposals for research and artistic projects.
- 3) Increase their ability to use data to improve educational curriculum and delivery.
- 4) Enhance their ability to work collaboratively to improve student cognitive ability and self-esteem.
- 5) Evaluate, longitudinally, increased cognitive skills, learning outcomes, and self-concept in order to improve the curriculum initiatives.
- 6) Appreciate the importance of Aboriginal curricula as vehicles for positive cultural expression that nurture racial harmony and positive identity.
- 7) Build Aboriginal curriculum resources that can be shared with colleagues in education.
- 8) Develop an empathy and appreciation for the needs of Aboriginal learners.
- 9) Restructure social interactions and behaviours to be inclusive and respectful of cultural identity and enhanced student learning outcomes.
- 10) Enhance the capacity of Aboriginal children and youth to make healthy life-choices.

- **Methodology**

This project has already begun with the pilot project; this section will, thus, outline both the ongoing methodology in relation to that pilot project, as well as to the evolving initiative. Funding (\$3000) to Dr. Armstrong (the Applicant) from the office of the Vice-President (Academic-Research) at Brandon University has enabled Armstrong, accompanied at times by Brandon School Division representatives, to visit alternative school sites in Manitoba and in other provinces and to engage in ongoing meetings. Plans for this initiative evolved with the formation and subsequent meetings of an Aboriginal Curriculum Initiatives Committee (ACIC). Familiar with Don Freed, Armstrong introduced the artist and his work. The committee agreed to solicit Freed's participation in the project for a three month period (March 1 to May 30, 2003). Armstrong and Freed collaborated in the writing of Canada Council and Manitoba Arts applications for grant funding (the solicitation of funding is on-going). Freed's in-school work will be monitored and assessed by participating schools, with the assistance of Armstrong, other partners and collaborators in this research, and an Aboriginal research assistant. Data collection methods will include observation, as well as focus group and selected interviews with students, teachers, and administrators in the selected schools. Thus, the pilot project will inform the development of the Community-University Research Alliances proposal.

The proposed community-university research alliance grant application will provide the funds for the Aboriginal Curriculum Initiatives Committee to expand and to formalize its initiative into a systemic plan for curricular improvement. The initiative would involve a significant action research component in that 1) all participants in the project will be involved in identifying educators who may be recruited for the selected schools; 2) the Director will make the official although not likely the first contact with each educator; 3) the secretary and Aboriginal research assistants will research and solicit separate funding to support each artist-educator, leading to their growing knowledge and expertise in the area of grant solicitation; 4) the partners, collaborators, research assistants, secretary, and Director will conduct the research with a collegial approach that allows for mutual skill and knowledge transfer. All educators will be interviewed and assisted in terms of their intended curriculum and how their curriculum will become part of the larger school-based curriculum. The development and assessment of curricular materials will be included as an integral component of the research, with continuous input by all participants in the research. Those curricular materials will be developed and assessed with the assistance of the Aboriginal educators; all formal participants in this research initiative; classroom teachers; curriculum developers at the band, school division, and provincial levels; school administrators; and students within the schools. Assessment procedures will improve over the course of the research, with the leading expertise offered by certain of the collaborators in the research and the staff of the schools involved in the project. Those schools, all in south-western Manitoba, will self-select and/or be selected and approved by their communities or school divisions.

The data related to assessment of the curricular materials will be connected to the measurement of student learning outcomes. Test scores in all subjects will be collated and analyzed in a longitudinal fashion so that the research team can track the learning outcomes of the students over the span of the five-year research. As well, researchers will gather data in the selected schools with focus groups and selected interviews of teachers, students, support staff, parents, and community members that pertain to the perception of student self-esteem and increased capacity to make healthy life choices as a confident Aboriginal child or youth. The data will also include statistics concerning the number of students who have increased their attendance in school. Continuous engaged participation in the research will allow opportunities for all constituents to suggest improvements in the research methodology.

- **Partnerships, Alliance, Collaboration, Governance**

The following partners will be involved with this research initiative. Listed in alphabetical order, the contribution of each partner will be noted, with further elaboration at the invited proposal stage.

- 1) *The Aboriginal Education Directorate*, an arm of Manitoba Advanced Education and Training will lend expertise and assist with the location of relevant provincial funding. As well, one of its Aboriginal consultants, Leon Simard, is a collaborator in the research.
- 2) *The Aboriginal Languages Association of Manitoba* will lend expertise.
- 3) *The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs* will assist with expertise and overall support.
- 4) *The Brandon Friendship Centre* will assist with staff and expertise, as well as with some funding.
- 5) *The Brandon School Division #40* will assist in the area of expertise, as well as serving as a site for the research in some of its schools. The superintendent/CEO Dr. Donna Michaels, is a collaborator.
- 6) *The Brandon University Northern Teachers Education Program (BUNTEP)* will lend expertise; as well, some of the undergraduate students in that program will serve as research assistants.
- 7) *The Dakota Ojibway Tribal Council* will lend expertise and serve as a research site in its school.
- 8) *The First Nation and Aboriginal Counselling Program*, Brandon University, will lend expertise.
- 9) *The Manitoba Aboriginal Education Counselling Association* will lend expertise.
- 10) *Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth* will lend expertise and funding, where possible. As well, Dr. Ken Horton of the Evaluation and Assessment Branch is a collaborator in the research.

- 11) The *Manitoba First Nation Education Resource Centre*, as the provincial headquarters for the development of Aboriginal curriculum, will lend expertise with the initiative.
- 12) The *Manitoba Indian Cultural Centre* will lend expertise.
- 13) The *Manitoba Indian Education Association* will lend expertise.
- 14) The *Manitoba Métis Federation* will lend expertise.
- 15) The *Program of the Education of Native Teachers (PENT)* will lend expertise; as well, some of the students in that program will serve as research assistants.
- 16) *Sioux Valley Educational Authority*, as the closest Aboriginal community to Brandon, will assist with continuous advice; its school will serve as a site for the pilot project.
- 17) The *West Region Tribal Council* will lend expertise; some selected schools in the region will serve as sites for the research.

This list of partnering Aboriginal organizations/associations have direct contact with and influence on the Aboriginal communities in south-western Manitoba. All of the partners have been contacted and have expressed their interest in and agreement with the project. Nine letters of support are included with this application, with some partners needing more time to meet with their boards and constituents.

The following researchers will be involved as collaborators in the research, listed in alphabetical order: 1) *Dr. Helen D. Armstrong*, Applicant, Department of Administration and Educational Services, Faculty of Education, Brandon University; 2) *Dr. Beverly Bailey*, Department of Psychology and Foundations, Faculty of Education, Brandon University, CV to be added; 2) *Dr. Samuel Corrigan*, Faculty of Arts, Department of Native Studies, Brandon University; 3) *Professor Colleen Cutschall*, Faculty of Arts, Department of Visual Arts, Brandon University; 4) *Dr. Jean Graveline*, First Nation and Aboriginal Counselling, Brandon University; CV to be added; 5) *Dr. Ken Horton*, Assessment and Evaluation Branch, Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth; 6) *Dr. Donna Michaels*, Superintendent and CEO, Brandon School Division; 7) *Dr. Roger Neil*, Department of Psychology and Foundations, Faculty of Education, Brandon University; 8) *Mr. Leon Simard*, Consultant, Aboriginal Education Directorate, Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth; 9) *Ms Brenda Wastasecoot*, First Nation and Aboriginal Counselling Program, Brandon University; CV to be added.

The governance of the Aboriginal Curriculum Initiatives Committee (ACIC) has already begun to be established with meetings (Sept. 11, Oct. 3, Nov. 6, & scheduled Dec. 10, 2003) of a working committee, which consists of the Director of this research and members and/or representatives from the Brandon School Division, Sioux Valley First Nation, West Region Tribal Council, the Aboriginal Education Directorate, and the Brandon University Northern Teachers Education Program (BUNTEP). These meetings outlined the plans for this initiative, as well as for the pilot project with Aboriginal artist-educator Don Freed. As the Director, I solicited advice from committee members, as well as from existing and increasing contacts with the Aboriginal communities, to recruit partners for the project.

The Aboriginal Curriculum Initiatives Committee will be expanded to include a working committee and a steering committee, the latter with two members from each partnership organization/association, all research assistants, the secretarial staff, as well as all research collaborators. The original working committee may be altered; people from the steering committee who are engaged more continuously with the research will move to the working committee, with some members of the original working committee going to the steering committee. Meetings of the working committee will be held every month. Meetings/workshops of the steering committee will be held three times each year (Sept., Jan., May), and will include an opportunity for full public consultation. At each steering committee meeting, the Director will provide a written and oral report. As well, input will be solicited for the on-going improvement of the initiative. All research partners will give their continuous advice, as well, through phone calls and individual meetings. Research assistants will collect data at all meetings.

Knowledge Transfer

Direct knowledge transfer will occur primarily in the schools and communities within which the research takes place and will, thus, benefit both the students and the community, as local capacity will be expanded to meet local needs. Curricular materials will be developed for the use in all schools. The meetings of the steering committee will also include a media portion that invites local and national television, radio, and newspaper journalists who will report on the initiative. Just as our first Aboriginal artist-educator was himself highlighted on a CBC national news documentary that featured his work with Aboriginal students to create “Our Very Own Songs,” this comprehensive project will solicit ways to publicize the initiative, thus increasing the breadth of our work and encouraging other communities to contact us for information and advice.

In the third and in the final years of the project a *public symposium* will allow all participants in the study to communicate the progress of the initiative and its associated research. That *symposium will travel to a variety of communities* to allow for ease of attendance by community members. In that fashion, the communities will be honoured for their dedication and participation in the project. The *applicant, collaborators, partners, and research assistants will also deliver presentations, workshops, and/or papers*, at local, provincial, and national conferences and meetings, that will detail the initiative and its ongoing evaluation and improvement. The committee may also plan and host a *Celebrating Aboriginal Education* conference that would allow for the showcasing of this and many other local, provincial, and national initiatives in Aboriginal education. A major edited work, *in book or monograph* form, will be made available to the public; as well, *articles will be submitted* to a variety of newsletters and journals that will be accessed by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences. All research assistants will be expected, as part of their professional development, to contribute both to the book and to newsletters and journals. Research assistants will be selected who, as aspiring professional teachers and administrators, will continue their work both within and outside of their own communities. In the variety of methods thus noted, both this initiative and the communication of its results will involve knowledge transfer that will result in second-order, systemic change in the educational opportunities for Aboriginal children and youth, as well as for the communities in which they live.

3. Budget Justification (for proposal development funds)

Travel

Two Brandon meetings/workshops (spring and summer) (research director, collaborators, and all partners; mileage, per diem, hotels. The purpose is to create a genuinely collaborative proposal that involves shared ownership of the research)	\$10000
Travel of research director and collaborators to participating communities (15 consultation trips at approximately \$300 per trip; mileage, per diem. The purpose is to visit band-controlled educational authorities and public schools with a high concentration of Aboriginal students in order to solicit input for the proposal)	\$4500

Support

Secretarial/research assistant support (\$16 x 400 hours) (Significant time is required to field calls from partners and to prepare the proposal. An Aboriginal person that will continue with the project will be mentored.)	\$4000
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Supplies

Computer rental, telephone, postage, copying	<u>\$1500</u>
Total	<u>\$20,000</u>

4. Supporting Documentation (non-applicable)

5. Letters of Support Nine letters of support enclosed.