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Identifying Consistent Supports for First Nations, Inuit and Métis Adult Learners at Royal West Campus

Kim MacLeod, Cody Dill, Deidra Evans

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Research Coordinator
Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation
2317 Arlington Avenue
Saskatoon SK S7J 2H8
Telephone: 1-800-667-7762 or 306-373-1660

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"It is questionable whether the education received by Indian students meets their cultural needs. In our view, this picture reflects a Canadian tragedy" (Auditor General of Canada, 2000).

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Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to learn from our First Nations, Inuit and Métis (FNIM) adult learners at Royal West Campus who have taken a non-traditional path through education to be where they are today. Royal West Campus is an adult education facility on Saskatoon's west side for students wanting to upgrade Grade 12 classes and for those aiming to complete Grade 12. A significant cohort of students come to us with no or few credits and take the Adult 12 program (seven credits that result in full Grade 12 status). We operate on a continuous enrollment basis, with students beginning classes until the end of March. As of February 2015, 41 percent of our students were self-declared First Nations or Métis, as were 48 percent of students working towards their Adult 12. Of these students, fewer than half (45 percent) are finishing. Sixty-four percent of students in the Pathways program – a transitional educational program for students who have been away from school for a significant amount of time (many of whom have no high school credits) - are of Aboriginal descent.

Students of First Nations, Inuit and Métis descent continue to be over-represented among those not succeeding in or completing school in Saskatchewan. Our research objective was to learn from our students of Indigenous ancestry what specifically has and has not worked for them throughout their years of school experience, and to use this information to support student success at Royal West. Our data was collected through interviews, a focus group discussion and, while writing the report, discussions with two high school principals (one in Saskatoon and one in Regina). Also, during the writing of this report, I spoke with Tim Caleval, Executive Director of the Priority Action Team with the Ministry of Education, and Rick Johnson, Director of the Data Value and Interpretation Unit, Information Management and Support Branch, Ministry of Education.

When we consider that currently 16 percent of the population of Saskatchewan is First Nations, we begin to understand just how over-represented First Nations students are among students who are taking longer to complete, or who are not completing high school. According to CTV Regina, "the C.D. Howe Institute study found 52.6 percent of Saskatchewan First Nations people between the ages of 20 and 24 haven't completed Grade 12" (2013). This data is supported by the Ministry of Education in Saskatchewan whose current data suggests that one in two First Nations students in our province will not graduate (Caleval, telephone interview, 2015).

This report identifies themes associated with students' educational experiences, specifically in regard to supportive and non-supportive environments and situations. We identified

supportive situations as any person, school, resource or other factor that has had a positive impact on students' educational experience. Non-supportive situations were those that were non-existent or detrimental to students inside and outside school. Unsurprisingly, most of the themes that we identified as being non-supportive can be linked to the historical and ongoing effects of colonialism, such as racism, poverty and disassociation from culture.

Self-Location

It is “difficult to talk about ourselves and our presuppositions, choices, experiences, and actions during the research process in a sufficiently precise way so that it allows others to follow what we mean and did” (Mruck & Breuer, 2003), but qualitative research is inherently subjective and it is essential to identify the lens through which we have gathered and analyzed our data. I am white and middle-class. I am aware that these factors affect my worldview and, therefore, my interpretation of participants’ experiences. However, I have also tried to maintain a critical, anti-oppressive lens in my analysis. Many of the stories students shared with me were beyond my realm of experience, and by honouring me with their stories these students taught me a lot - not just about themselves but also about other students who share, in part, similar experiences. For that I am incredibly grateful.

I have been assisted throughout the data interpretation and writing process by Royal West teacher and student ally, Cody Dill. Cody is bi-racial (black and white), male and middle-class. Cody’s educational background in anti-racist and anti-oppressive education, combined with his personal experiences of racism, allow him to bring a critical and empathetic lens to interpretation of the students’ stories.

Deidra Evans, a recent graduate of Indian social work who completed her practicum at Royal West, also contributed to the analysis of interview data. Deidra is white and middle-class. Her educational background in social work with a specific First Nations perspective effectively enabled Deidra to inform the analysis of our data in a culturally appropriate and positive way.

Methodology

Our research took the form of a qualitative set of eight interviews and a focus group discussion with some of the students who had been interviewed, along with two other First Nations students who hadn't participated in an initial interview but were interested in participating in the small-group discussion. An Elder was present at a lunch we had with participants to mark the commencement of the project and she also attended the focus group as a support for the students involved. The aim of the interview questions was to find out about the students' educational experiences thus far, to find out what circumstances in and out of school have led to educational success, and what circumstances have limited or negatively impacted students' educational experiences. With this in mind, the questions and the students' responses focused our attention on our educational institutions themselves as we began to reflect on how difficult it is for many students of First Nations ancestry, especially students who have spent a lot of time on their home reserve and at a reserve school, to make the transition to the urban school setting. During the report-writing process, I also spoke to a principal of a predominantly white, upper-middle-class high school about interviews the educational assistants at his school had conducted with their FNIM students. I contacted Tim Caleval, Executive Director of the Priority Action Team with the Ministry of Education, who shared with me information and statistics relating to the effects of transience on student graduation rates. He put me in touch with Rick Leciuk, Principal of Thom Collegiate in Regina, who shared with me details about his school's programs that support the success of First Nations students.

As the project began to take shape, limiting factors to the research became evident. The high level of transience amongst our students of ancestry often presented us with a challenge when it came to having a group of students signed up for an interview. I talked to many interested students who, before the opportunity for an interview had come, were not living in the city any longer or whose responsibilities outside of school had to be prioritized. Therefore, the age of our students became another limiting factor. Because our students are adults, many have full-time jobs and families. This fact itself offers a reason why many of our students are unable to consistently commit to completing credits at Royal West. Furthermore, our initial intention was to have students who had participated in an interview come together for the focus group discussion. It was evident after several interviews that certain students were not comfortable with the idea of the focus group. Also, when we were ready to move on with the focus group, several students who had been interviewed and who had stated a willingness to participate had stopped attending and communicating with their teachers. Therefore, the need arose to find other students willing to participate in the focus group.

An ethical issue that arose at the time of the final two interviews was the realization of the need for support to be available to students who had been interviewed. The students interviewed prior to this realization appeared to see the interview as a positive experience. I even had one student say "That was fun" when we were finished. Another student remarked that he really appreciated the opportunity to be heard. Through the white, middle-class lens with which I was analyzing the interview experience and, more importantly, the students' responses, all seemed to be going well. It wasn't until the penultimate interview that I realized that follow-up student support was something I had not considered a need for but which was clearly essential. Fortunately at the time, we had a social work practicum student working at Royal West who was available to the students. Her support was offered but in neither case was it accepted. I felt quite uneasy as the final two students left after their interviews; for them the interview process was an emotional experience. I was only able to follow up with them in an informal way. Therefore, it was through the students' reactions to the interview process and through non-verbal cues, not directly from students' responses, that we identified the need for more consistent social support in the form of a social worker or counsellor at Royal West.

Results

As a result of interviews and discussions with our adult students at Royal West, we have learned a lot about experiences that have negatively affected the education of the interviewees and what, throughout their years of education, has resulted in success. The themes we identified in students' responses are rooted in complex social issues and, therefore, many intersect. As much as possible, we have attempted to isolate themes and address each individually without decontextualizing them. The main themes we identified are community, culture, racism, transience and urbanization, poverty, teachers and schools, grief and trauma, mental health and addictions, and resilience. It is worth noting that we had originally thought of including a section on colonialism but quickly realized that most of the themes pertained to historical and ongoing effects of colonialism.

Community

Community is a broad idea which many students identified as having great significance to their lives and also, specifically, to their educational experiences - both positive and negative. Community was defined in many ways throughout the student interviews and the importance of community was raised by many of the students. Students talked about the school community, the broader Saskatoon community, the communities where they are from, the community of family and their cultural communities. In every instance, the importance of feeling a sense of belonging to a particular community was identified as a significant contributor to previous success and in some cases, as an indicator of the potential for future success.

In the first interview, the student spoke joyfully about her elementary school experience at a small town school - a 20-minute drive from her First Nation. She said "I loved elementary school. Like if I can go back, I'd go back ... they used to make teaching so fun ... Plus you know I grew up with those people and ... 'cause you grew up with those people and they're like around you." The student moved with her family to Saskatoon in her Grade 7 year. Her recollections of her small-town, close-to-home school experience contrasted dramatically to what she said about how she felt about school after moving to the city. She told me "I didn't know anybody ... I didn't have anybody. And I felt alone and I didn't feel like going to school. And I felt like an outcast when I was like younger." Nelson Yarshenko (2010) describes how, for her adult learners, "many students felt pushed out of school" and she mentions students' impressions of feeling unwanted at school. What my student said really reminded me of this notion. The experience of urbanization and the move away from

her culture/family and school communities had a clearly negative and alienating effect on her feelings about school and, ultimately, about herself. After this move, her love of school died. The caring, supportive and familial school community she thrived in was replaced by an environment where she felt like an “outcast.”

Another student described an almost lifelong disconnect from family and community, having been raised in the foster care system from the age of nine. She described a disconnect from her family but also a strong yearning for family. She said “I was fully aware that I wasn’t with my family ... I knew something was different, like not right with me. I lived with people who were different than me.” She describes herself as having “severe abandonment issues,” and ran away from foster homes regularly in an attempt to be with her mother. Her experience at a small-town elementary school only served to heighten her sense of isolation from her family and the community that she was forced to be part of. She said “people were being racist to me. I didn’t quite fit in ... people looked at me and said ... there’s that little kid who lives in a foster home ... people looked down on me there. And the teachers did not help me whatsoever.” She went on to say “I acted out a lot at that school because of how I was treated ... They just thought I was another Native that was no good.” So, her feelings of isolation were, not surprisingly, exacerbated by the negative treatment and, more specifically, racism she experienced at school. She felt labelled and alone. Under such circumstances, in the absence of any sense of community or belonging, it is not surprising that she struggled in school.

This same student has embraced opportunities to be part of the school community at Royal West. She has, in many ways, thrived at our school and this could be in part due to the fact that at our school she has found, to some degree, the sense of community and, therefore, belonging that she has stated was so absent throughout her childhood. Of course a school cannot replace family but regarding Royal West she said “I just like ... how everybody supports me and wants to see me succeed here ... Like I’m important and I matter and my education matters. That’s how it feels. It’s really good.”

Culture

During the interviews, students were asked about their cultural communities. Some were raised in culturally traditional families while others demonstrated a significant disassociation from their culture. For some students, ties to culture were a source of pride. They spoke about the significance of seeing First Nations cultures genuinely represented and valued in schools and of the positive impact this sort of cultural responsiveness and acknowledgement has on their comfort level at a school.

One student talked about an opportunity she had to share her culture at school. She said “we had a talent show and me and my cousin danced a Jingle. And even that, all my family like choked up and I was ... real proud ... That was, like, a good day.” A factor that stands out in this memory is that she was able to share the experience with family. We see, for this particular student, the strong link between culture, family, community and education. She does not view the school community as totally separate from her cultural/familial community. Incorporating culture and family into the school setting in a meaningful way might create a more natural fit for some Indigenous students.

Of course, not all FNIM students have been raised in culturally traditional ways. Some students in their interviews expressed a clear disconnect from their culture. Others seemed

to be very conflicted about their culture. This appeared to be the result of many different situations. There was very much an “us and them” attitude expressed by a few of the interviewees. One student said “I’ve never seen racism towards Native students ‘cause the elementary school I went to was full of *them*” (emphasis added). When asked about connections to culture, another student who was raised Catholic and seems conflicted about his traditional culture said “I know the stories and stuff. But I’m not that guy. I call them hippies ... No, I don’t like to smudge or pray or any of that crap.” He did not see the unique value of recognizing and promoting First Nations cultures over other cultures, saying “Say we do the smudging thing. There has to be a couple of foreigners saying what the hell is this? So like I don’t know ... they’re going to be like why can’t we do something that we do back in our country.” Whether or not these responses are examples of internalized racism is difficult to say; however, the possibility cannot be ignored. In a publication from Kansas University, internalized oppression is described in the following way: “When people are targeted, discriminated against, or oppressed over a period of time, they often internalize (believe and make part of their self-image – their internal view of themselves) the myths and misinformation that society communicates to them about their group.” Worryingly, during the interviews several students made deprecating comments about their cultural group.

Another student discussed the very positive, motivating impact of being able to practice culture in a genuine way at school. She said “the culture in this school is really amazing. We are allowed to smudge, we have a culture room which we’re sitting in right now with just like traditional Native stuff. Like the Native culture in this school here – I love how it’s part of it. Because I’m First Nations and it makes me feel connected into my school and my culture.” In the focus group, one student said that at Royal West “they not only help you succeed in your schooling but they also help you get reacquainted with your culture; like they have the culture room here and having Elders come in.” This all speaks to what Richard Sagor (2003) says about belonging which he believes is absolutely essential to students’ motivation to learn.

Racism

It was not until the focus group discussion that I asked student participants directly about the impact of racism in their lives. Most of the students who participated had directly experienced racism. In the final report of the Government of Saskatchewan’s *Joint Task Force on Improving Education and Employment Outcomes for First Nations and Métis People*, Verna St. Denis was quoted as saying “Far too many Aboriginal youth and adults have had to learn how to live in and with racism, often without support in naming this ‘Elephant in the room’” (2013). One student who previously attended an eastside, predominantly white Catholic high school shared his method of learning “how to live” with racism at his previous school. He talked about his friends, saying “they knew I was Native and sometimes you know if they’d say a joke or remark I would just kind of laugh with them and not let it bother me That’s how I responded to anything that came close to racism ... then once people realized that stuff like that didn’t really bother me, it just kind of went away ... Sometimes it bothered me and sometimes it didn’t.” It is significant that prior to sharing this he had said “I haven’t really experienced any racism or anything like that cause, I don’t know, I guess it was easier to make friends with the people at school.” Whether he identified his friends’ comments as racist or not, this student took away the power of the racist jokes by pretending they did not bother him and in this way avoided becoming more of a target. This type of coping mechanism may be immediately self-preserving but it is

hard to predict what the long-term impact of this would be on somebody who is regularly subjected to bigotry.

I spoke to the principal of a predominantly white, middle-class school about interviews that had been conducted at their school with FNIM students to find out if the experiences of the student I interviewed would be similar in any way to theirs. The school currently has 1,018 students on roll and 41 of them (four percent) are of First Nations or Métis ancestry. Educational assistants interviewed students and the results of these interviews were shared with all staff. Several students reported being the target of or hearing racist comments in school. One Métis student in particular, who presents as white, said these comments were very hurtful to her. She explained how she had moved from a British Columbia school that had a strong cultural presence to a Saskatoon school where First Nations cultures were not represented anywhere within the school. She described how she had to blend in. The principal said she had to “put up a good front” in order to succeed at the school. She only self-declared her First Nations ancestry in Grade 12 in order to be considered for certain scholarships. Therefore, her success at this particular school seems to have been at least somewhat dependent upon her ability to pass as white. This would suggest that the high school experiences of the student I interviewed are not uncommon. He too had to stay silent and downplay his Indigenous identity as a survival tactic.

When asked in the focus group if racism had impacted their lives and/or educational experiences, one student said “Yeah it had a really big impact on me going from grade 8 to grade 9 ‘cause I used to have long hair, braid in the back. And I just felt really uncomfortable ‘cause everyone would point at me or something or stare at me. Then I cut my hair off. And it was really like, it put me back in a sense ... I cut my hair off, changed my personality ‘cause everyone made fun of me. Teachers would send me home ‘cause I smelt like smudge and they thought it was pot. So really sad life.” He went on to say “I came from Caswell. I was at Princess Alexandra so there they smudge, learn Cree and at Caswell - French and you know, it’s really different. And then when I went to high school, the racism was just really high.” The high school the student previously attended is in a working-class Saskatoon neighbourhood and has a significant FNIM population. His comments about elementary school suggest that some schools are trying to be culturally responsive for FNIM students. The school he mentioned, Princess Alexandra, has a significant Aboriginal population. The student describes his experiences there as positive, but the move from a culturally nurturing and supportive environment to one where it seems he felt embarrassed and uncomfortable as a First Nations person resulted in disengagement from school. This student experienced a significant difference between his elementary school experience and his high school experience. Therefore, it seems fair to say that more genuine, culturally relevant experiences need to be in place for Indigenous students who are entering our high schools.

Transience and Urbanization

During their interviews, many students described periods of transience throughout their years of school. For many students, transience means the movement between the city and their First Nation or other communities. For many, the transience they described was characterized as movement between schools, between school divisions and also going through sustained periods of absence and then returning to the same school.

I spoke to Tim Caleval, Executive Director of the Priority Action Team with the Ministry of Education, regarding the effects of transience on student success. Over the past nine years in Saskatchewan, 64 percent of students who had three enrollments during their schooling graduated on-time compared to 85 percent on-time graduation rate of students with two or fewer school enrollments. As transience is a part of life for many FNIM students, there is a need for schools to develop transitional systems and programming for these students. Tim Caleval discussed the fact that moving between school systems is hard and the likelihood of not graduating is higher when transitioning between First Nation/ Reserve schools and non-First Nation schools. He went on to say that every time a student transitions between systems or schools there is a significant reduction in the likelihood of success (acquiring Grade 12). The more they transition, the higher the likelihood they won't graduate. With three or more transitions in a student's schooling, chances of graduation diminish significantly. Much of what he said resonated with me in light of the stories that many students shared with us in their interviews.

One student who had been out of school for a couple of years before coming to Royal West described the impact on her that transience has had. She stated "I just kind of feel dumb like when you're not in school for so many years, like in and out of school for so many years. And then you come back and ... look at high school work and it's like holy crap – like I missed a lot." So many of our FNIM adult learners at Royal West are in the same situation as this student, and I had never really put myself in their shoes before I heard her say this. She also said "I feel embarrassed to ask questions" which we can assume stems from the fact that she feels "dumb" and does not want to draw attention to class material that she might be struggling with. When we do not fully understand and appreciate what students who are returning to school after prolonged lapses in formal education are dealing with, it is not surprising that the dropout rate of these students is significantly higher than for other students.

Another student identified "moving around a lot and not having stability" when she was younger. Despite this, she always maintained a strong belief in the importance of education. She said "no matter where I was or what I was doing, school was gonna always be there and remain the same for me." As disjointed as her education was, it offered her a form of stability which she valued.

One student attended two different elementary schools and seven different high schools, thus a total of nine enrollments including Royal West. Rick Johnson with the Ministry of Education stated that according to their nine years of study, for students who had nine enrollments (i.e. at least eight transitions): 10 percent graduated on-time and 31 percent graduated (21 percent more graduated in subsequent years). With this bleak statistic in mind, our challenge now is to look into ways of supporting students who have the statistical odds stacked against them.

We have already discussed the alienating experience of the student who moved from a small-town elementary school near her First Nation to Saskatoon where she very quickly lost her motivation and love of school. So what changed for her after the move? She moved away from family and away from a place where "you could just roam and you know like get along with the other kids ... you had your family there and you could always go visit your grandma, your grandpa, and I don't know, you could just do anything." She talked about the land and about a kind of freedom that she lost with the move to the city. I learned a

lot from this student when she shared her story about moving away from a school and a place that she loved - to a place where she "felt alone." Obviously, everyone who shares this experience has a unique story, but we can now begin to understand what students who undergo this process of urbanization feel and why they often struggle academically in new schools.

Poverty

Several students identified that financial stress has been, or continues to be, an ongoing reality in their lives. One student said "I'm on social assistance so I can live on my own. I use the food coupons that Healthy Mother Healthy Baby give to me. And 'cause after I pay for my bus pass and I have to give another \$50 of my basic allowance for food away to rent, and then I have to buy a bus pass which is like \$86, so it leaves me with like \$120 for food ... For a whole month. So I have to sometimes use the food bank." Making school a priority when you do not know if you are going to be able to eat is clearly going to be difficult for many students.

Another student alluded to childhood poverty and its impact on his and his siblings' schooling. He said his attendance at school was often poor and "it was the same thing with my siblings, like sometimes they wouldn't have lunches to go to school and so they would stay home. And that was the same for me as well." When asked about his idea of the perfect school, he said "if the school ... has hot lunches like this one does for people who maybe don't have a lot of food and stuff like that. That's excellent." Although currently working and effectively supporting himself, this student has apparently not forgotten what it is like to go hungry.

Another student shared that "my family lived in poverty, lived on welfare" Although currently living in a "My Homes" that she calls "the only place that's ever been home to me since I was 14," she also voiced a great appreciation for the nutrition program at Royal West. She said "the food here is great. I love having the food 'cause I like having lunch and eating and stuff so when there's food here, that's huge." This student is living in a stable, supportive environment where her basic needs are being met but her comments suggested to me that this has not always been the case. At Royal West many students talk about their financial struggles and how difficult it can often be to have basic needs met. Coming back to school as an adult with adult responsibilities often increases the financial burden on many students. Therefore, it is imperative that social supports be made available to our students. Many students at Royal West, not just some of those interviewed, have talked about the reality of struggling to make ends meet and it comes as no great surprise that many of our students have to prioritize an income and, as such, work over school.

Teachers and School

Students were asked to describe memorable school experiences, both positive and negative. Many also discussed favourite teachers and memorable interactions they had with teachers in the past. Their responses were strikingly similar with regard to teachers. One student said he valued the opportunity "to know them, instead of just see them every day ... Yeah like a friend or something." Another student had a similar feeling about teachers, saying "I never really had a good relationship with any teachers besides the

ones I had something in common with ... I enjoyed coming more ... 'cause like you could relate to them ... and like talk with them and stuff." One student said "I remember there was one cool teacher there and she actually picked me up from home." More often than not, students' comments about good, memorable teachers focused on having a positive relationship with the teacher on a more personal level. Getting to know teachers and having teachers show interest in their lives in and out of school mattered to the students we spoke to. A teacher remembered by another student "had a foosball table in his classroom, and my friend and I loved foosball so much we'd stay after class and we'd play it as long as we could ... I really liked that teacher, and he gave me books to read like *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*." What makes the difference for many students is "building strong relationships with the right people at the right time" (Caleval, personal communication, June 2015). Positive comments about teachers almost always identified teachers who saw students as whole, rounded people, rather than just as students in their classrooms. What ties these stories together is the importance of relationships and the idea of school as community.

One student, when explaining why big schools with large classes don't work for him, said "they were kind of bigger schools so they were dealing with little pests all day so how do you expect them (teachers) to be nice to just one person? They're getting frustrated with all these other people." He went on to say about his teachers in those large classroom settings "I didn't wanna bother them." He didn't seek support from his classroom teachers because he felt they simply didn't have time for him. He is surely not alone in what he feels about this type of school and classroom setting. In light of this information, we begin to see how so many students like him might easily slip between the proverbial cracks when it comes to their education.

A few students spoke about the need for teachers to challenge them and not to assume their silence in the classroom equates to understanding. They identified a need for teachers to care about what is going on with them outside of school. A student said "I want to be involved in what I'm doing. Even though I don't ask for help, I still want like checking up on me, I guess." Later she went on to say she appreciates "someone who likes what they're teaching and like wants to be there, who's really jolly ... some teachers wanna do it their way. And they never wanna see like what the student has to say ... sometimes I'd drop out of class because of that. Like they wouldn't hear what I had to say." Many students interviewed alluded to the value of student voice, being heard in the classroom and of the lack of success they have had in the past when put in the position of the passive learner. Another student said good teachers "need to have the ability to talk to the students, and have them feel like they can talk to you. 'Cause a lot of them don't like opening up to people." Then, speaking of students who have come into the city from the reserve, he said "it's gonna be hard for them ... to adapt to city life. To adapt to just having a conversation like this with someone, you know. It's a scary thing for some people. And you just have to be able to talk to them, and have them feel like they can talk to you ... with someone who sees them and sees where they're going and is like, 'Hey man, I can see where you're going, and it's not a good place. I'll give you an alternative.'" This student identified a need for teachers to not only want to get to know their students, but also to know how to help their students. There is a need for teachers to be knowledgeable of supports available in schools and in the wider community, and it is helpful when teachers know how to help students access appropriate supports.

Students also described good schools as environments in which they felt welcomed, and where they did not feel rushed through their school work. One student described a good school as one where he can “come and hang out and do your work. No deadlines so you can take your time and actually put some thought into your stuff.” A similar view of an ideal school environment was expressed by a student who said “I like the kinda like work at your own pace idea.” Another student said about her teachers at Royal West “You guys don’t freak out that I can’t be here every day. The work is nice, I really like the teachers, and I just like being here when I come here.” She went on to say that good teachers are “People who care.”

Hands-on learning was identified by many students as their preferred and most effective learning method. Being in classroom situations in the past that supported their learning styles was identified as positive by several students. One student stated “I learn from like watching and then doing ... like a lecture it goes in one ear and out the other.” He went on to add “when you’re actually doing something then you’ll learn.” Another student voiced a similar preference, stating “I do like hands-on things ... I like working on machines, too. Like I understand computers fairly well, and I had a job at a laundromat where I got paid to fix machines.”

Often there was a link between a preference for hands-on learning and creativity. A student who identified as a hands-on learner also talked about his problems with communicating his feelings about difficult events in his life. He said “I don’t talk about this stuff hey, so I draw it.” As an aside, he plans to eventually work in construction until he has saved enough money to open his own tattoo shop.

Overall, hands-on learning was mentioned as the preferred learning style of many of the students and several of those who had mentioned it also alluded to a desire to be able to incorporate creativity across the curriculum. One student stated that “In history class, instead of just doing stupid boring paper work and stuff like that we actually got to use a big sheet of paper and put pictures on it and use colourful markers and make it look nice. And when I can do things that when then it’s fun to look up the information to put on it, and it’s nice to write it out, and then you can remember it after that.” Another student talked about how for her art is a coping mechanism that helps her to stay focused on what is important to her. She said “Art is the way I express myself. Art helps me cope with the world around me.” Another student talking about previous school experiences said “I didn’t really care for school. I was good at drawing so I was working on that.” He added that a teacher he remembers as “a really nice lady ... told me just do your work and I’ll let you draw.” Later, about his drawing he said “it’s just how I keep balance ... I don’t talk about this stuff hey, so I draw it.”

At the Think Indigenous conference held in Saskatoon in March of 2015, artist, educator and activist Lindsay “Eekwol” Knight talked about the idea that all people are inherently creative, and how this begins not long after conception when we are introduced to rhythm through the maternal heartbeat. She talked about how creativity is woven through all aspects of First Nations culture and that compartmentalizing creativity into specific classes is a very western, colonial idea. We contacted her during the writing of this report to find out more about the importance of creativity in First Nations culture and she added “Based on my research, personal life history and experience as an educator, creativity is essential and should be embedded within every aspect of learning because it is the foundation of

our being. We see the results of this type of learning in the positive and active response of the students time and time again" (Lindsay Knight, personal communication, June 2015). Several of the students who participated in this project definitely exemplify this sentiment.

Several other students talked about the importance of relevance in what they learn at school. One student said "I think school is bullshit ... You learn a bunch of random stuff and most of it doesn't even matter in your life ... I don't sit there and be like, 'Hey, so what about Napoleon?'" She was not the only student to express the need for relevance in content. A similar comment was made by a student who said "when is a person that wants to do you know like graphic design really gonna need History?" Prior to this he had said about school "I think it's really like forced upon people." If this is the reality for many students, then the challenge arises for schools and school divisions to create and deliver more relevant and differentiated learning to students.

Grief and Trauma

Many of our participants mentioned grief and personal trauma in their interviews. The Aboriginal Healing Foundation states that "Psychological trauma is understood as an affliction of the powerless. During the traumatic event, the victim is made completely helpless by an outside force ... The root word of trauma means 'to wound.'" When we think about a lack of power and control being a key factor in trauma, we understand how essential it is to empower students who, to varying degrees, have had little control over events in their lives. Some of the trauma mentioned by our students pertained to negative past and family experiences of school. It is worth noting that several of the participants cited residential schools as having had a direct traumatic impact on their families. Here, we cannot ignore the known intergenerational effect of residential school trauma, its roots in colonial racism and its connection to cycles of addiction, poverty and school failure. From one participant: "... a lot of teachers don't understand why First Nations kids are the way that they are ... because it's just the cycle of addiction and the generational impact of residential schools ... it's just hard for students to come to school and try to learn when the people don't understand their background ... and the stuff they've been through." This student also stated that grief associated with her mother's passing, along with the ills of the foster care system, invoked a lengthy struggle with substance abuse. She shared with us that "... I started using to cover up the pain ... And that's the only way. And that's all my family did."

The same student, among others, cited her past school experience as a source of trauma. "I was just really looked down upon" she said about her elementary school and "... nobody was there to help me and support me." About her teachers, she stated "... they didn't really want me to succeed" and mentioned perceiving racism as an underlying attitude in the way she was treated. It is worth mentioning that another participant directly stated "I never had teachers actually help." These students' experiences of racism and exclusion in school were not uncommon. Other participants mentioned more of their own and their families' experiences with the same. One of the students said plainly that her mother had been bullied "'Cause she was Native in a white school." When asked about her own experiences in school, this participant recalled having a kindergarten teacher who would "pull you by your ear or make you sit in class till you peed yourself ..." Although she did not directly name racism in this recollection, what is reinforced is the predominance of school as a source of trauma for Aboriginal students. Given this situation, it is difficult

to expect students who experience this trauma to remain engaged with our institutions in their current state. The participant went on to explain "I hate [school] with all my might. Because I find it's a form of control for the government to pretty much teach kids to shut up and listen."

For one student in particular, bringing up the past seemed very difficult which I perceived especially from his tone and body language during our interview. I can only infer that his non-verbal communication indicated some difficult past experiences. When asked about his past experiences he would often place his hand to his chest and hesitate before speaking, and when he did speak he'd say very little. He did describe being a "mean kid" and "acting out" a lot during his time at several different schools. Regarding one of these schools, he said, "I was doing good there and then some bad stuff started to happen so I ended up at [another school]" He admitted later that he didn't seek available help because "I was lost. I didn't care about [getting help]. I sure as hell didn't care about myself." It is worth noting that the student said he now relies mostly on friends to help him "outside of school"; therefore, he does not necessarily see school as a supportive environment.

For another participant, it was his kookum who had difficulty sharing her past experiences. "... my kookum was a part of [residential schools], definitely. She doesn't talk about it much ... you can just notice it's something she doesn't like talking about, doesn't like hearing it brought up" he shared. He went on to describe his own personal struggles with poverty and substance abuse. In this case, he seemed to recognize the generational and structural effect of both. He stated "Some people are given such bad hands that they were never given the opportunity to work hard enough, right? ... the only way is to break away from those bad influences, and when you're a 7-year-old kid, how can you break away from those bad influences? That's all you know." This student also seemed to suggest that the grief associated with his parents' divorce was a defining moment in his life: "... my brother and I, it's a good thing we had each other. I'll just put it that way."

Addressing grief and trauma, as it was described by the students we interviewed, clearly overlaps with the issues of poverty and substance abuse, but as mentioned earlier, these issues are complex and interconnected. Many traumatic events and situations in our students' lives were experienced in family environments of addiction and poverty.

I'll end this section with a powerful quote from another participant:

A lot of people have grief and that's also a big barrier to succeeding ... Mine, I didn't deal with my grief. I didn't know how to grieve ... People have grief from where they grew up. Like seeing their mom drunk and their dad drinking. And grief like losing a pet. Or just like their family having to move constantly. Or like being taken away and getting put into foster homes. Like there's a lot of grief – so many different kinds. Losing aunties or uncles or someone else who's close to them. Not just losing someone but just life changes and stuff like that. As First Nations we just kind of have to stuff it down and, you know, we don't deal with it and that's what leads us to drugs and crime and other things to cope

Mental Health and Addictions

Mental health and addictions were mentioned as issues for some of our students. One student identified the cycle of addiction in her family and said she wants to be the one to break the cycle. She said "one thing [that held me back] would be the way I grew up with my family. That's huge, 'cause the drugs, the addiction – all that just held me back from getting my Grade 10 and being able to focus on school ... I'm gonna change the cycle. That's what I'm gonna do." She talks about how her addiction issues were brought on by her sense of grief and loss and added "I just wish sometimes that my mom could've been there for me and I didn't grow up with abandonment issues. 'Cause it makes it hard trying to pursue all my goals but having that empty spot inside me makes it hard." She talked about the negative impact of having no support system and no role models while growing up. Remarkable experiences like hers were not uncommon amongst our participants and this is one of the most important things that the students I interviewed taught me.

The majority of participants interviewed directly expressed that substance abuse was prevalent either in their own lives or the lives of close family members. In one case, family was motivation enough for a participant to work on his own recovery in earnest. He stated "... it came to the point where I didn't want to see my sister and stuff like that ... You want to be able to talk with your sister sober ... 'Cause they learn off of the people in their lives, right?" Another participant stated that school was her main motivation for getting clean, even if drugs had long held her back from succeeding there: "... the addiction – all that just held me back from ... being able to focus on school ... Something that really helped me was my goal, my dream. I always dreamed of graduating and finishing school and going somewhere in life." At interview time, this student was also working with a counsellor to work through her past and her grief, but she was finding it hard to recover from her addiction in light of the prevalence of substance abuse in her extended family: "I wish they weren't all on drugs either 'cause then I'd have support from my family. And all their lives are gone to nowhere. And there's just nobody for me to lean on when I need somebody. And family is important." I am happy to report that this student did in fact achieve her Adult 12 status this year and will be walking across the stage at the Royal West graduation ceremony in June.

Drugs and alcohol were also a barrier for another student who said "... since Grade 9 ... that's when I started meeting people, like getting into drugs and alcohol. And I never really went to school for a while." This participant also mentioned that alcoholism had been in her family, but went on to say "That's not really ... my thing anymore." At interview time, she was also working with a mental health professional to help her control her anger.

Resilience

With all of the institutional violence inflicted upon our students, one might be tempted to propose resiliency work as an intervention. However, that strategy places the onus on the students to change or adapt to a system that is inherently oppressive. Therefore, a more long-sighted and compassionate strategy would be to affect deep systemic change. While the system continues to evolve, teaching resiliency is a potentially viable short-term option. One student told us "I wanna be living proof that no matter what you been through what you saw in your life, you can overcome anything and come out on top and like graduate

and make a life for yourself." She went on to say "So that's what success is is that no matter what you do in your life, you overcome it and you strive – you persevere." Another student said "You need to know that don't make anyone feel less than what they're worth sort of thing. You know, try to get through life – I don't wanna say get through life with your head down, but sometimes I look at it that way ... always striving toward your goal."

Many students expressed a belief in the importance of personal resilience. However, as educators the question becomes whether it is better to encourage this type of perseverance in the midst of a system that is rooted in colonial oppression or to work toward changing the system. The first step in changing a system that has existed almost since colonization is to support students' understanding of the oppressive history of education. Conscientization is essential to breaking the cycle of oppression. The Freire Institute states that conscientization is "the process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action. Action is fundamental because it is the action of changing the reality ... Learning is a critical process which depends upon uncovering real problems and actual needs." What is important to the concept is changing one's reality and environment, not oneself. In this light, we make the following recommendations.

Recommendations

The Government of Saskatchewan's *Joint Task Force on Improving Education and Employment Outcomes for First Nations and Métis People* highlights three foundational understandings or areas where changes need to be implemented. These include relationship building, poverty reduction and racism, and culture and language (2013). These findings align with our own conclusions. While our study focused on our adult learners at Royal West, it is safe to conclude that our recommendations could be transferrable to other educational settings, especially where young adult FNIM learners are present.

Based on our specific data, it is safe to say that we are doing some things right at Royal West. Several students mentioned that individualized instruction and self-paced learning work well for them. Also, many students identified that opportunities to participate meaningfully and genuinely in cultural activities at school create a positive environment and motivate them to attend regularly. Overall, at Royal West we strive to create a "culture of community" (Girolami, personal communication, 2015) in support of our students' journeys toward credit attainment and graduation. This study clearly identified a number of areas where FNIM adult learners at Royal West would benefit from the continuation of existing supports and the implementation of several additional supports as summarized below. We understand the funding implications involved in the recommendations but we hold strongly to the belief that without the appropriate investment in the education of FNIM students, nothing will change.

Need for Role Models/Mentors

Based on our research, we have identified a need for more positive role models for FNIM students. One of the project's student participants shared with us that "... my brothers, both of them didn't graduate, my mom didn't graduate, my auntie's and uncles on my mom's side didn't graduate ... And then my dad also didn't graduate." This student's story was in keeping with what several other students told us about their family members' experiences with school. Therefore, we identified a need to bring more Aboriginal role models into the school on a more regular basis. Many students identified a preference for learning about First Nations languages and cultures from First Nations teachers. This

fact strongly suggests the need for an enhancement of collaboration between teachers and the Saskatoon Public Schools' First Nations, Inuit and Métis Unit, including Traditional Knowledge Keepers, Elders and consultants.

Most student participants expressed that authentic relationships with certain teachers significantly contributed to their success, engagement and happiness at school. These relationships were, unfortunately, few and far between. The students who mentioned specific teachers who had a positive and supportive impact on their lives noted that these relationships were crucial at difficult periods in their lives when support was often lacking elsewhere. These teacher role models had long-lasting, positive impacts on these students. Similar positive student-teacher relationships can be nurtured more likely when the importance of smaller class sizes is recognized. We strongly recommend a move back to lower student-teacher ratios and more meaningful, non-curricular student-teacher contact time.

Need for Social Worker and Career/Guidance Counsellor

Along with the need for improved teacher-student relationships, we also identified a pressing need for a social worker and a career/guidance counsellor. Most students discussed areas of their lives where having a reliable and readily accessible support system available would benefit them. For example, students expressed struggles with everything from addictions, grief, housing, employment, vocational planning, racist bullying and family and relationship turmoil. In the midst of all of this, many students expressed uncertainty about how and where to access available supports. We should also point out that for more than half of the 2014-15 school year, we had a social work practicum student on staff at Royal West whose support, knowledge and resources were invaluable and in high-demand by our students. Her absence since the completion of her practicum has been deeply felt by both staff and students at the school. Therefore, we recommend that a social work position be created at Royal West in order to effectively support our students. In this same vein, there is also a strong need at Royal West for a guidance counsellor; many of our students struggle with long- and short-term goal setting and planning.

Community Building

Most students identified an affinity for feeling part of a community at school. As a result of the one-on-one delivery and self-paced programming at Royal West, two students acknowledged that they missed the more social environment of a traditionally structured collegiate. These students still found great value in Royal West's learning model. One stated he would like to take this model and put it in a "regular" school. In their past school experiences, students implied that a strong sense of community within a school led to increased engagement and, therefore, academic success. Therefore, we recommend actions be taken to further increase students' interactions with their peers and staff at Royal West in the classroom and the broader school community. For example, field learning experiences, guest speakers and presenters, whole-school celebrations and gatherings, sharing circles and ceremonies, fitness and gaming opportunities would all encourage and support community building. Within the classroom setting, difficulty arises in promoting

social interaction in light of Royal West's individualized programming. For instance, students are often/usually working on different assignments and different subjects at the same time. However, every opportunity for peer discussion and collaboration should be optimized and staff should seek new ways of creating and providing these social experiences for students.

Another way to build community at Royal West would be to promote the use of common spaces through the provision of non-curricular group activities. The gym, study centre/ student lounge and culture room are communal areas that all have the potential to foster enhanced relationship building. Rather than simply letting the spaces exist and hoping for community to happen, we feel there is a need to provide concrete opportunities for interaction (e.g., board games, video games and special events on a more regular basis).

Early Intervention

This recommendation was inspired by a conversation I had with Rick Steciuk, Principal of Thom Collegiate in Regina. At his school, Grade 10 students who are failing two or more classes in a semester are referred for intervention. This intervention relates specifically to academic support and goal planning. They also have shifted their school goal from a focus on graduation to a focus on career planning and goal setting. Steciuk asserted that this strategy was aimed at breaking the cycle of poverty that many students have lived with all of their lives. At Thom Collegiate they have found that having a plan in place for life after graduation helps students to succeed at school.

Despite our significantly older student population and the fact that our students have already not graduated "on time" (excluding upgraders), we can see how implementing similar strategies at Royal West would benefit many of our students. We recommend improved, formalized, school-wide tracking of individualized student progress plans in the form of negotiable timelines and completion dates. By referring students who are off pace to the existing student ally or, ideally, a newly staffed career/guidance counsellor, we could ensure that students are receiving necessary support.

Enhanced Nutrition Program

Many participants mentioned the importance to them of the nutrition program at Royal West. One student implied a strong connection between the benefit to him of food being provided at school and many experiences throughout his childhood when he and his siblings had no food. Royal West currently provides a daily breakfast program (which also serves as many students' lunch), along with one soup/chili day and one salad day each month. We also have a meal for students and staff at Christmas. We propose that a significant number of students would greatly benefit if our current nutrition program were expanded. A meal at lunch time once a week, while supporting our students' basic needs, could also serve to improve attendance for some of our students.

When a student's basic needs are not being met it is not surprising that, particularly for the adult population we serve at Royal West, the student does not prioritize school. An extended nutrition program would make it easier for some of our students who might not always know where their next meal is coming from to focus more on school. Often work takes precedence for our students, particularly those with children. This is understandable,

but system-wide and province-wide, more needs to be done to level the educational playing field for all students. Pasi Salsberg states that “equity in schooling ensures that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions” (2013). We suggest that if this sentiment could be embraced in a more concrete way, in the form of an enhanced nutrition program, our students would reap the benefits.

Anti-Oppressive and Decolonization Education

In light of the stories we heard from the student participants, in addition to the historical and ongoing effects of oppression and colonization we recommend mandatory teacher and student education in anti-oppressive, anti-racist, decolonizing learning. Many students shared experiences of racism at the hands of their peers and also, tragically, at the hands of their teachers. According to The Joint Task Force on Improving Education and Employment Outcomes for First Nations and Métis People “Critical anti-racist education is important to understanding the dynamics in operation; cross-cultural training and awareness may only serve to reinforce the belief it is cultural differences that are the problem. Racism is a deeper systemic challenge rooted in the history of colonization and it affects individuals and communities in real ways. It affects the sense of place and belonging” (2013). There is a pervasive lack of knowledge in Canadian society of the historical roots of social issues affecting race relations in Saskatchewan today, including the history of residential schools and racist government policy. Nothing is going to change without countering the erasure of First Nations history from student and teacher learning.

Several students addressed the benefits of attending a school with a culturally responsive ethos. While we acknowledge that cultural responsiveness may be a step towards the empowerment of First Nations students, the practice of culture in schools, even in appropriate and meaningful ways, does not necessarily result in anti-racist outcomes. According to Ph.D. candidate, Saskatoon teacher and Idle No More co-founder Sheelah McLean “There is a massive body of research that states that cultural responsiveness does not address inequality or unequal power relations, or disrupt how particular groups are constructed as inferior.” As a result, we propose that cultural responsiveness cannot stand alone but rather must be paired with a sustainable program of anti-oppressive training for teachers as well as students. An important aspect of this type of learning would be to promote student voice as a means of empowerment. One of the other benefits of such a practice would be to humanize seemingly intangible social issues for the learners.

More Hands-On and Creative Learning Opportunities

Many student participants voiced a preference for hands-on, experiential learning opportunities in school. As mentioned earlier, one student identified her heightened ability to retain information when given the opportunity to research and present in a creative way. Another participant expressed an interest in pursuing construction as a career and that he would have benefitted from more trades-based learning opportunities in school. Overall, based on students’ strong preferences for hands-on and experiential learning, we recommend that teachers provide students with regular opportunities to choose their own methods of learning and presenting and provide options in this vein.

Along with these opportunities, we also recommend the expanded practice of learning outside of the classroom, especially opportunities for students to learn on and from the land. With relation to experiential learning, a couple of participants expressed a desire to get out of the classroom, connect with the land and to “roam.” It is difficult to describe the impact of these statements on me during the interviews, but I can honestly say that I had a profound feeling of the sense of loss inherent in the stories where students identified a yearning for freedom and space. By literally deinstitutionalizing the learning, educators could have the potential to decolonize education and to empower students.

Need for Educational Assistant(s) and Scheduled Resource Room

Many students arrive at Royal West after having had the support of educational assistants available to them throughout their schooling. Currently, at our school we do not have an educational assistant on staff. The need for the support of an educational assistant at Royal West is evident and many student participants drew attention to this fact through their comments. As already mentioned, one student talked about never asking for help in a previous school because the teacher was always too busy with “little pests.” Another student mentioned “the resource room and you could take it as a class. They’d always help you out with anything you want.” He, like other students who come to Royal West, has gone from high school with resource room as a scheduled class to Royal West where we have neither an educational assistant nor scheduled resource room periods. While we do have one designated hour in the day where a teacher is available to provide academic support to students, the status quo lacks consistency and, due to time constraints, accessibility.

Also, it is important that a true resource room be staffed by a qualified special education teacher which is not currently the case at Royal West. Where deemed necessary and appropriate for specific students, we recommend scheduled resource periods to support the transition of students to our school and to support their success. Some students are transitioning from school environments where they have had significant academic and resource support and others are transitioning from long periods away from any formal educational environment. As mentioned earlier, one student talked about returning to school after a long time out of school. She shared with us that “... you come back and it’s like look at high school work and it’s like holy crap – like I missed a lot.”

Enhanced Transitional Supports

Apart from the transitional support that would be provided by a scheduled resource class, we also recommend the enhancement of existing supports. One such support is the blocking of classes with the same teacher whenever possible. A lot of our students mentioned an affinity for a sense of community which would include strong relationships with teachers. As mentioned by many participants, a positive relationship with a teacher in a school was a motivating factor to their attendance and learning. Along with supporting teacher-student relationships, blocking classes would also encourage a more consistent development of peer groups, further adding to the sense of community at Royal West.

We also recommend enhanced and consistent use of diagnostic pre-assessment tools by teachers as a differentiation strategy especially for students who have been away from

formal education for a significant amount of time. In this way, teachers would be able to more readily identify students' learning gaps and a better plan for instruction. Carol Ann Tomlinson asserts that "The idea of differentiating instruction is an approach to teaching that advocates active planning for and attention to student differences in classrooms, in the context of high quality curriculums" (2013). Tool selection should be relevant to specific teachers' subject areas and styles.

Culture and Family in School

Several participants addressed the importance of seeing their culture meaningfully represented in school. We have discussed the importance of culture in schools to many of the participants in this project. The importance of seeing culture represented and practiced in meaningful ways at school was often connected with the idea that for many First Nations students, the idea of family and school being completely separate entities is unnatural and potentially alienating. Therefore, we recommend that more opportunities be created for students to involve and include their families more often in their learning environment. This could take the form of students' families being present at more frequent school-based social events. This family involvement should also include bringing family into the classroom to share expertise and experience. With a focus on experiential learning, students could also leave the classroom to learn from family and community members. Overall, a move to a more open school environment where family is valued and included in students' learning on a more regular basis would benefit our FNIM students, as well as others, and has the potential to be a school priority that empowers students at Royal West.

Conclusion

This project turned out to be much more than I thought it would be. As we began the research process, I thought we would ask some (hopefully) pertinent questions and get responses from our students that confirmed, to some extent, existing beliefs about what needs to be done differently and better to support our First Nations, Inuit and Métis students at Royal West. To a degree this is what has happened throughout the course of this project. What I was not prepared for was the impact that the students and their individual stories would have on me. The purpose of this research was to learn from our students, and teach us they did. I came across a quotation during my research for this project that really sums up its impact on me. In Sean Lessard's Master's thesis he says of the students he interviewed "They have helped me as an educator to become a little more wakeful to what I cannot see" (2011). For me personally, this project has had the effect of humanizing social issues and, as a result, I am changed as a teacher and as a person.

What stands out in all of this information and analysis for me is the idea that although many FNIM students at Royal West would benefit from the supports discussed, this confirmation in itself is not enough to address "inequality or unequal power relations" (McLean, personal communication, 2015) that exist for people of Indigenous ancestry. Cultural responsiveness is only the first step in addressing the huge power imbalance that exists between First Nations people and the rest of the population of Saskatchewan and, indeed, Canada. Student participants spoke of a comfort and sense of belonging that is achieved when Aboriginal cultures are acknowledged and honoured in schools. From this level of comfort needs to stem empowerment and, ultimately, systemic change. This will not happen if educators, students and the general population remain relatively ignorant of the history of colonialism that has led to our modern reality.

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2317 Arlington Avenue
Saskatoon SK Canada S7J 2H8
Phone: 306-373-1660
Toll Free: 1-800-667-7762
Fax: 306-374-1122
Email: mcdowell@stf.sk.ca
www.mcdowellfoundation.ca