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Supporting Educational Success for Aboriginal Students: Identifying key influences
Soutenir la réussite scolaire des étudiants d'origine autochtone : identifier les influences-clés

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Résumé de l'article

Les difficultés académiques vécues par plusieurs étudiants autochtones (Premières Nations, Métis, Inuit) au Canada ont été bien documentées. Des indicateurs tels que la persévérance scolaire et les inscriptions post-secondaires sont habituellement beaucoup plus faibles pour un groupe d'étudiants d'origine autochtone que pour un groupe d'étudiants non autochtones. Identifier les éléments facilitant leur succès est essentiel à l'amélioration de l'expérience scolaire des étudiants autochtones. Par conséquent, le but de cette recherche était d'identifier les facteurs favorisant le succès académique des étudiants autochtones en se basant sur les points de vue des étudiants et des enseignants et en utilisant le modèle bioécologique de Bronfenbrenner (1995). Les observations formulées par les participants soulignent l'importance des relations, du concept de soi et des attentes académiques, de la pertinence des programmes ainsi que des aspirations scolaires en tant que facteurs influençant la réussite en éducation.

SUPPORTING EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS FOR ABORIGINAL STUDENTS: IDENTIFYING KEY INFLUENCES

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ABSTRACT. The academic difficulties experienced by many Aboriginal (First Nations, Métis, Inuit) students in Canada have been well-documented. Indicators such as school persistence and post-secondary enrollment are typically far lower for Aboriginal students as a group compared to non-Aboriginal students. Identifying facilitators of success is key to improving the academic experiences of Aboriginal students. Accordingly, the objective of the current study was to identify influential factors related to the educational success of Aboriginal students, from the perspective of students and teachers, through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1995) "Bioecological Model." The insights of participants spoke to the importance of relationships, self-concept and academic expectations, the relevance of the school curriculum, and academic aspirations as factors influencing educational success.

SOUTENIR LA RÉUSSITE SCOLAIRE DES ÉTUDIANTS D'ORIGINE AUTOCHTONE : IDENTIFIER LES INFLUENCES-CLÉS

RÉSUMÉ. Les difficultés académiques vécues par plusieurs étudiants autochtones (Premières Nations, Métis, Inuit) au Canada ont été bien documentées. Des indicateurs tels que la persévérance scolaire et les inscriptions post-secondaires sont habituellement beaucoup plus faibles pour un groupe d'étudiants d'origine autochtone que pour un groupe d'étudiants non autochtones. Identifier les éléments facilitant leur succès est essentiel à l'amélioration de l'expérience scolaire des étudiants autochtones. Par conséquent, le but de cette recherche était d'identifier les facteurs favorisant le succès académique des étudiants autochtones en se basant sur les points de vue des étudiants et des enseignants et en utilisant le modèle bioécologique de Bronfenbrenner (1995). Les observations formulées par les participants soulignent l'importance des relations, du concept de soi et des attentes académiques, de la pertinence des programmes ainsi que des aspirations scolaires en tant que facteurs influençant la réussite en éducation.

The academic difficulties experienced by many Aboriginal (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) students in Canada have been well-documented. Indicators such as school persistence, graduation rates, and post-secondary enrollment are typically far lower for Aboriginal students as a group compared to non-Aboriginal students (Kirmayer, Boothroyd, & Hodgins, 1998; Levin, 2009; MacIver, 2012; Malchy, Enns, Young, & Cox, 1997; Richards, Vining & Weimer, 2010). Longer term effects of these include lower employment rates and lower income levels (Luffman & Sussman, 2007). Research that uncovers the mechanisms which lead to the ongoing disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students is necessary in order to effect change. As the review of literature will demonstrate, however, research in this area is scarce and explanations for the relative academic difficulties experienced by many Aboriginal students often fail to include the perspectives of the primary experts — students themselves. Accordingly, the current study adds to the literature by applying the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1995; 1999) bioecological model to an exploration of the perceptions of small groups of Aboriginal students and their teachers regarding barriers and facilitators to educational success.

There are many explanations for the "gap" that exists between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in Canada. One of these is the mismatch or poor fit between elements of the mainstream, formal, off-reserve school environment (pedagogical approaches, curriculum, assessment methods), and the particular learning needs, interests and values of Aboriginal students and their families (Brady, 1996; Kanu, 2002; Neeganagwedgin, 2013; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2002; Snively & Williams, 2006; Toulouse, 2010). For example, while some educational settings might value the holistic (intellectual, spiritual, emotional, physical) development of students as paramount, others may focus more narrowly on traditional measures of achievement. According to Redwing Saunders and Hill (2007), "...the largest problem lies in teachers locked by pedagogies of practice that simulate past unsuccessful methods" (p. 1016). Given the intergenerational effects of the residential school system, where Aboriginal students were stripped of their language, cultures and communities, many families may continue to fear an agenda of assimilation for their children and view educational institutions as perpetuating colonization, making the development of collaborative relationships with teachers and administrators even more challenging (Battiste & McLean, 2005; Brown, Rodger & Fraehlich, 2009; Goddard & Foster, 2002). These issues are exacerbated by the fact that few teachers in off-reserve K-12 settings are Aboriginal and consequently the availability of staff with in-depth understanding of Aboriginal cultures may be limited, also presenting the issue of few school-based role models for Aboriginal students (Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009; St. Denis, Bouvier, & Battiste, 1998).

Another related explanation for the difficulties experienced by some Aboriginal students in mainstream school settings is the racism and prejudice that

may exist where Aboriginal students are viewed as less capable and lowered expectations of their success are held by their teachers and other members of the communities (Battiste & McLean, 2005; Brown et al., 2009; Richards et al., 2010; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000). According to Battiste and McLean (2005), "these developmental issues are not intellectual capacity or inferiority of First Nations students, they are systematic discriminatory educational systems and bias against them and their achievement" (p. 2).

While many Aboriginal students struggle to achieve academically at levels similar to their non-Aboriginal peers, there are of course many who are very successful in this area. Aboriginal students, as with non-Aboriginal students, comprise a heterogenous group in terms of, for example, background experiences, living in urban or more remote communities, first language, cultural identity, academic abilities, strengths, family support, academic motivation and self-concept. All of these elements influence students' academic persistence and achievement (Areepattamannil & Freeman, 2008; Boon, 2008; McInerney, 2001). For students experiencing academic difficulties, the identification of influential factors such as these can lead to the development of better-informed programming and ultimately more successful outcomes.

A bioecological model, provides a lens through which to view and explore the academic success of students. This perspective proposes that a child's development is influenced by the dynamic, reciprocal relationships that exist in the environments in which he or she is situated. Those enduring, repetitive interactions that are most powerful are found in the immediate environment and are referred to as proximal processes. These would typically include interactions between, for example, parent and child or peer relationships or in the interactions between a child and academic work or tasks. The current study will focus on interactions within one the most immediate environments to the student, namely their school. Rather than viewing the gaps between groups of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students as static phenomenon, understanding the dynamic influences of factors in students' environments, including the perceptions of teachers, provides insight into areas where change can be made.

Influences that have been identified as particularly salient to academic achievement include those more proximal to the student (self-concept, academic motivation), as well as those further removed or more distal including family, peer and community factors as well as those related to classrooms and schools.

In the general literature, there are a number of student-level factors that have been explored with respect to achievement. These typically include student demographics as well as social, behavioural, motivational, affective, and cognitive characteristics and competencies. Reviews of literature focused on diverse groups of students have confirmed the moderate to large significant influence of these types of factors on academic achievement (e.g., Hattie, 2003; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993).

There have been a number of studies, largely taking place in Australia and the United States, that have explored the self-concept of Aboriginal students and the relationship between this construct and academic achievement (e.g., Bodkin-Andrews, Rourke, & Craven, 2010; Purdie & McCrindle, 2004). It has been hypothesized that children belonging to a minority cultural or ethnic group with attributes that may not be viewed positively by the majority cultures may have low self-esteem (e.g., Annis & Corenblum, 1986). In research using varied measures, findings reveal that the self-concept or self-esteem of Aboriginal students may be higher (Bodkin-Andrews, Craven, & Marsh, 2005; Craven & Marsh, 2004; Purdie & McCrindle, 2004; Purdie, Tripcony, Boulton-Lewis, Fanshawe, & Gunstone, 2000) or lower than non-Aboriginal students (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2005; Craven et al., 2005; McInerney, 2001). However, this research highlights the importance of drawing on multidimensional perspectives of self-concept. For example, studies in Australia have found that Aboriginal students reported higher self-concept in physical, art or family domains but lower self-concept in areas of academics including math and reading (Bodkin-Andrews, et al., 2010; Purdie & McCrindle, 2004).

With respect to relationships between self-concept and academic achievement for Aboriginal students, academic domains of self-concept (e.g., math, verbal, general academic) have been found to explain significant variation in student grades (Bodkin-Andrews, et al., 2010; Brickman, McInerney, & Martin, 2009; Purdie & McCrindle, 2004). General self-concept has also been found to significantly predict school aspirations (Bodkin-Andrews, et al., 2010).

Findings from qualitative explorations also shed light on the views of students with respect to their own academic success. Craven et al., (2005) interviewed over 100 Aboriginal secondary students in Australia who described holding lower educational aspirations and having less of an understanding of the education required for them to attain chosen occupations compared to their non-Aboriginal peers. Students in studies conducted in Australia and Canada also described the low expectations they faced with respect to academic streaming and the beliefs of teachers and peers (Purdie et al., 2000; Walton et al., 2009). Students described how the decisions made by school staff early in their school careers (e.g. grade 8 or 9), namely that they belonged in lower-level courses, affected their academic self-concept and preventing them from possibly improving or excelling in various subjects. Students highlighted feeling disengaged and unmotivated as a result of the low expectations and lack of support they experienced at school.

Similar findings were reported by Toulouse (2010) in her exploration of perceptions of Aboriginal post-secondary students in Ontario. Students listed motivation and self-esteem that was reinforced both at home and school as key to their success. They also described the need for clear career pathways, beginning early in their schooling, that highlight and align with their strengths.

In addition to student-level factors, the experiences of students at school clearly influence their achievement as well. For example, drawing on focus groups with Aboriginal students in Saskatchewan middle schools, Melnechenko and Horsman (1998) identified family influences, healthy relationships with teachers, and peer relationships as key to success, which they defined in both academic and non-academic terms.

With respect to teachers, student-teacher relationships have been found to have a significant impact on student engagement and achievement, with medium to large effect sizes (for a review, see Roorda, Koomen, Spilt & Oort, 2011). As an element of student-teacher relationship, teacher expectations in particular have been found to be related to academic achievement and self-concept among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (Bell, 2004; Cook, Herman, Phillips, & Settersten, 2002; Lan & Lanthier, 2003). Concerns have been expressed regarding the potentially lower expectations of teachers with respect to students of visible minorities, including those who are Aboriginal, although little empirical evidence has been presented (Burgess & Berwick, 2009; Richer, Godfrey, Partington, Harslett & Harrison, 1998). In characterizing schools in British Columbia that were the most successful in terms of promoting success among Aboriginal learners, McBride and McKee (2001) listed key factors such as holding high academic expectations for Aboriginal students, making extensive efforts to include Aboriginal staff and creating a welcoming environment for parents and children. Similarly, Bell (2004) in his richly described case studies of 10 on and off-reserve schools, listed high expectations for students, a secure and welcoming climate and respect for Aboriginal culture and traditions to make learning relevant as essential to success.

Given findings reported in the small body of extant literature, it is evident that individual student variables such as self-concept, motivation and academic aspirations are likely as influential on academic success for Aboriginal students as they are for non-Aboriginal students. More distal influences, such as school experiences, also play significant roles in student success and clearly these two groups of influences are strongly related. However, most of the limited research that exists has been conducted outside of Canada with students enrolled in higher grades. As well, little research has been conducted that explicitly explores the perceptions of teachers regarding the facilitators and barriers to success for the Aboriginal students that they teach. In order to develop a deeper understanding of the self-views of Aboriginal students in Canadian classrooms with respect to academic competence and motivation that may potentially shed light on the achievement gap and avenues to it's narrowing, it is important that their voices be heard. It is also essential that the views of their teachers be explored, given the documented links between school climate (including teacher expectations and relationships) and student success.

Accordingly, the present study focuses on a qualitative exploration of the perspectives of small groups of Aboriginal students (Grades 4 through 8) as well

as teachers at their schools, regarding facilitators and barriers to school success, including self-concept and academic aspirations. Although this is a small study, capturing the views of a few students and teachers, it is novel in terms of its multi-reporter approach as well as its focus on the voices of Aboriginal students that are rarely heard in the research community. This type of study represents a move towards documenting contextualized, first-hand accounts of student and teachers experiences rather than relying on deficit-based explanations of the academic disparities that exist in Canada.

METHOD

Context

The study took place in two K-8 schools in an urban setting in northwestern Ontario. Approximately 30% of students at the two schools self-identify as Aboriginal (First Nations, Métis or Inuit), and the number of Aboriginal students (largely First Nations) in the community continues to grow. A very small number of students at the schools have arrived at some point from on-reserve schools and from more Northern and remote communities. The majority were born and had received all of their formal education in the city in which the schools are located.

The school board has an Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee, a full-time Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer and the schools also have part-time Aboriginal resource personnel who work with small groups of Aboriginal students during and after school (e.g. leading a drumming group, teaching Aboriginal language classes). As well, a number of policy and resource documents have been developed to assist school staff support Aboriginal student success.

The study was conducted as part of an initiative facilitated by the school board, with the guidance, advice and direction of the Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee, which sought to provide a range of supports and interventions in local schools with the goal to increase success (e.g. academic achievement and graduation rates) for Aboriginal students. This included professional development for staff, the inclusion of Aboriginal content/resources, bringing Aboriginal role models into classrooms, increasing collaboration with parents, and including local Elders in the development and delivery of culturally-relevant content. The initiative also provided funds for small-scale relevant research, which included the current study. The study goals and procedures were approved by the committee.

Participants

All students in Grades 4 through 8 at the two schools who had been identified as of Aboriginal ancestry through the self-identification process were eligible to participate in the study. Recruitment letters, consent forms and assent forms

for students were sent home with those eligible. Contact information was provided for the researchers should parents have any questions or concerns; some did choose this option. Parents / guardians who wanted their children to take part in the study returned the envelope to the school with their child. Some parents chose to bring the form to the school themselves. The school had taken part in previous research and students and parents were familiar with the process. In total, five students at one school (one girl and four boys) and six students at the other (four girls and two boys) were given written permission by parents to take part in the study. One student was absent on the day that the focus group was being held; therefore the final groups consisted of five girls and five boys. All students gave verbal and written assent to take part in the study. Students were fairly evenly distributed across the five grades.

It is important to note that for many reasons, including those discussed in the introduction, parents of some Aboriginal students may not have felt comfortable with the research process or with giving permission for their child to take part in the study. For example, previous research has documented the negative intergenerational effects of residential schooling on relationships between families and school staff and indeed between families and educational institutions broadly (Battiste & McLean, 2005; Brown, Rodger & Fraehlich, 2009; Goddard & Foster, 2002). We would hypothesize that those who did give permission may have more positive or trusting relationships with the schools. The few parents who spoke to the researchers directly expressed a desire to have their children voice their experiences and were clearly parents who were comfortable discussing the pertinent issues and advocating for their children. Again, the group of students who did participate is not assumed to represent the much larger population of Aboriginal students in the community or beyond.

All school staff who taught students in Grades 4 through 8 at the two schools was also invited to participate. In order to recruit school staff participants, the principal circulated information regarding the study to all those working with students in the target grades. Those staff members who expressed an interest in participating to the principal were invited by the researchers to attend a focus group. In total, two staff members at one school and three at the other agreed to take part in the study. All provided written consent.

Procedure

Four focus groups were conducted altogether; one for students and one for teachers at each school. Focus groups were chosen as they are particularly appropriate for use with children (Eder & Fingerson, 2001) and are particularly effective at eliciting "respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions in a way in which would not be feasible using other methods" (Gibbs, 1997, para. 4). A senior female graduate student in Social Work conducted all four focus groups. This individual was familiar with teachers and students through previous projects and had extensive experience conducting focus

groups. She was also extremely familiar with the larger community, having worked with various social service agencies. Being a young, informal presence, students engaged quickly with the focus group leader and appeared at ease describing their thoughts and experiences. It is important to note that, while students appeared to be very comfortable in discussing issues with the focus group leader, having a facilitator who was Aboriginal may have resulted in a different relationship and potentially different results as well. For example, students may have been more or less willing to discuss culturally-related ideas with someone they perceived as not belonging to that culture. Research is mixed on whether having a facilitator who is a member of the same cultural or community group as the participants is a barrier or an impediment to full and honest disclosure (Halcomb, Gholizadeh, DiGiacomo, Phillips, & Davidson, 2007). Teachers also established a good rapport with the focus group leader.

In the student and staff focus groups, participants were arranged in a circle along with the facilitator. They were provided with instructions regarding the overall goals of the focus group and issues of confidentiality were also discussed. A few students noted that they had taken part in similar groups before. A discussion about summer holiday plans first took place in order to develop a level of comfort among the groups. The length of the student focus groups ranged from 30 to 40 minutes and the teachers from 30 to 60 minutes in length. Each of the four focus groups was recorded using digital recorders. During the student focus groups, notes were taken as well by a member of the research team.

A semi-structured topic guide covering questions about beliefs regarding strengths, academic success, academic motivation, and long-term aspirations was developed for students. A similar guide was developed for teachers.

Analyses

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by the focus group leader and verified by a second member of the research team. Transcripts of the focus groups were read and reread and explored first for initial coding categories aligned with Bronfenbrenner's model (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Vaughn, Shay Shumm, & Sinagub, 1996): namely the salient interactions within the school environment. Within these, more specific themes were identified and supporting text was coded (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). A second member of the research team also analyzed all data independently. In the few instances where disagreement arose, discussions continued until a category and/or theme could be assigned to the satisfaction of both researchers. It is important to note again the limits of the analytic process as conducted by non-Aboriginal scholars who, while very familiar with the local context as well as academic literature in the area, cannot possibly represent Aboriginal viewpoints or interpret the data through any lens other than their own (e.g. White, female, dominant culture, social workers / teachers; Halcomb et al., 2007).

RESULTS

A summary of the findings arising from both the student groups as well as the teacher groups is presented below. Findings are organized by categories (interactions with school curricula, school staff, and peers) and in some cases, themes. Given the small number of teachers and the possibility of identification of individual students and / or teachers, quotes supporting the findings are not associated with any particular participant and are simply attributed to a student or a teacher.

In all areas of discussion, students displayed a range of perspectives and opinions. Girls and younger students in both groups were generally quieter while boys and older students spoke more often. Within both student focus groups there were clear differences between students who (a) were engaged with their schooling, had goals for their future and were able to identify areas of strength and competence, and (b) were unsure about ways to succeed at school, claimed or appeared to be disengaged from their schooling and struggled to identify areas of strength or positive attributes about themselves. Categories that were observed among the student data included: Interactions with curricula, interactions with peers and interactions with staff.

In the teacher focus groups, although not asked to do so, teachers often focused on making comparisons between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. They also highlighted the heterogeneity that existed among the Aboriginal students they taught and tended to focus their discussion on those students who were struggling academically. These tendencies should be considered in interpreting the results from the teacher focus group in particular. Categories aligning with Bronfenbrenner's theory that emerged among the teacher groups included interactions with curricula, interactions with school staff, interactions with broader community and interactions with peers.

Student findings: Interactions with school curricula

Students described their interactions with school curricula as particularly important, with both positive and negative implications for school success. School curricula is intended to mean the actual provincial curriculum, which outlines the aspects of subject matter to be taught (product model), but also refers to the interactive process of engaging in learning that includes student choice, social skills, and the conditions that facilitate learning (process model) (Knight, 2001; O'Neill, 2010; Sheehan, 1986). Within the interactions with school curricula category, themes emerged from student discussions relating to perceptions of relevance, fit between curricula and interest, and student achievement self-efficacy.

Perceptions of relevance. When discussing their interactions with school curriculum, one of the issues raised most strongly and often among the groups was relevance. There was agreement about the need to "do school" as a requisite

for long-term success but also a sense of disparity or distance between the curricula that was provided and its perceived relevance.

While the majority of students deemed success in school to be important, students disagreed about what parts of school would prove relevant to their future plans. Some students indicated that everything they learned in school would benefit them in their future; as one student put it, "If you get a job, then you'll use your knowledge from school and stuff." Others felt that completing school was more of a means to an end: "Cause you need to pass elementary to get into high school, and you need to pass high school to get into college or university, and you need to take college and university courses to get a good jobs."

Other students listed numerous subjects that they considered irrelevant to their future, including science, some math, history, French, and geography. One student described this in the following way: "Cause we're forced to speak French. As opposed to speak Ojibway. As a second language, and it doesn't say French.... I don't really want to go to Quebec anyways or France."

Students seemed unsure as to what skills and competencies would be required in various jobs and professions. This issue is raised in a discussion between two students:

> Student 1: I don't think you really need to know how to divide.
> Student 2: If you're a steel worker, you gotta know how to divide
> Student 1: Just those manual jobs, not the, like... good paying jobs

Still other students felt that math may actually be of use in certain professions: "And the only basically thing you're gonna use mostly is math cause if you learn science and most people don't get a science job, they'll probably be a businessman or something." Similarly, some students who reported feeling disengaged from school had difficulty connecting their goals for the future with their current or future schooling.

Fit between curricula and interest. While relevance was the key issue raised by students when discussing school curricula, they also discussed areas where there was a poor fit between curricula and their interest, strengths, or competencies. The interactions between students and areas of the curricula where the fit was perceived as poor were identified as barriers to school success. One area of the curriculum where this was noted was with respect to options for students with respect to coursework. This was perhaps in part a function of the age of students, most of whom were looking ahead to what they perceived as the more flexible world of secondary school, where they would be able to exercise more control over the courses they took. One student stated "It would be awesome if you could choose what you want to do in grade school instead of just doing it in high school". The lack of choice was as presented as part of a more negative interaction with school curriculum and perceived by students as a barrier to success.

The fit between the curriculum and the interests or strengths of students also arose in students' discussion of the types of classes or the nature of learning that they felt would be more aligned with them, and therefore more conducive to their success. Many students discussed a need for more applied options, including cooking, auto repair, or film-making. A number of students also commented on a desire for more time spent being physically active in all areas of the curriculum as well as increased time spent on the arts. As stated by one student: "'Cause being active actually helps your brain work". Some students also asserted that they would be interested in learning traditional Aboriginal languages in school in place of French, rather than having to join after school programming to gain this knowledge.

Student achievement self-efficacy. The third theme to emerge within the interactions with curriculum category was the sense of control or efficacy that students believed they had with respect to achievement in their classes. As one indicator and predictor of student success, and as a key focus of most schools, student grades and their perceptions of these are important to consider. Student's relationships with their academic work and the messages of success transmitted through grades and assessment feedback are important influences on self-concept and later success.

Some students expressed a lack of agency with respect to grades they received in their classes and their academic achievement in general. They expressed confusion regarding the influence that they had over their grades and the relationship between their effort and persistence and recognition of success by others. This was described by students in Grade 7 and 8 who stated: "I got 79 in Science. I was like, what?" And, "I'm doing well in school, I don't care about it."

Student findings: Interactions with school staff

In addition to interactions with school curricula and peers, a third focus of discussion by students was their interactions with school staff. These interpersonal relationships within the school environment can be particularly influential to the development and school success of students.

Students had a wide range of opinions and thoughts about their teachers. A number said that they believed that teachers recognized their strengths, and one cited an example of a teacher giving him time to showcase his extra-curricular strengths to the class. Others, however, felt that this was not the case, and still others were unsure as to whether their teachers recognized their strengths.

A few students remarked that they felt ignored, saying of their teachers that, "I don't think he even pays attention," or "[I] don't think he cares." Students who discussed an issue of bullying felt that their teachers would be powerless to stop this practice, and so chose not to confide in their teachers about this matter. As in previous findings, while students spoke of the importance of

having a teacher with whom they had a positive relationship, a range existed among the groups in terms of those who believed that they had this type of relationship with one or more of their teachers and those who felt that they did not. With respect to influences on school success, the positive relationships were more likely to be highlighted by students as facilitators of this; those with less positive relationships described a discounting of this element of their school environment.

Student findings: Interactions with peers

Relationships with peers played a large role in both student groups and were raised frequently throughout the discussions. Given the developmental stage of the participants, it would be expected that peers would begin to take a primary role in terms of importance and focus. Students described the positive aspects of peer relationships, in terms of their peer self-concept and the influence that these relationships had on their sense of belonging and engagement with school.

More specifically, a number of students discussed the importance of their friends and their desire to spend as much time with them as possible. Some students did posit that they were good at spending time with peers; identifying themselves as strong and supportive friends; students thus indicated that they perceived themselves as having good interpersonal skills. One student stated that he was "good at helping people, because other people think they can just cheer people up just by telling a dumb joke, and then it's gonna be ok, instead of like talking to them."

Some students indicated, indirectly, that they had some negative senses of self, referring to themselves as "lazy" or "a starter." Negative references were largely related to behaviour and the views of others, including their peers, regarding this behaviour. One student expressed concern that he may come to be perceived as a frightening figure, saying "you don't want people to be scared of you ... and think you're going to rip them apart," based on getting into trouble in the past. Students at one school also reported being members of a school "clique" that was unpopular and picked on, and indicated that they had not chosen to be part of this group, and felt this association was unfair: "they choose what group you should be in, and then they ignore you." Students felt that reputation also impacted on the perceptions of teachers toward students "the teacher's like 'I don't like that kid'." Thus the students' sense of their reputation and place within their peer groups and school appeared to play an important role in terms of their self-concept and engagement with school.

Teacher findings: Interactions with school curricula

Fit between curricula and strengths. As with the student groups, the teachers also identified that when school curricula was a poor fit with the students' strengths, the students' interactions with the curriculum was negative. This was described

in terms of particular types of learning behaviours or characteristics that they felt were more common among the Aboriginal students they taught and / or were at odds with those valued by the school system. Interestingly, teachers also discussed the many strengths of the Aboriginal students they taught, but described these in comparison to their non-Aboriginal peers or "despite" the challenges that students faced.

One particular strength identified by teachers was "thoughtfulness," which was often observed before students spoke or provided a response to a question in class. Although identified as an important quality of all students, and influential in terms of classroom success, the teachers raised it specifically as it was noted that this thoughtfulness was not always perceived as a strength in the classroom, where pressures and deadlines enforce a quicker pace. Thus while listed as a strength in an academic context, in terms of interactions with school curriculum, this may in fact serve as a negative influence on success, as it may not be valued by the school community.

Teachers also pointed to kinaesthetic learning as a strength exhibited by Aboriginal students, but noted that elementary school did not always provide the types of courses that might draw on these strengths: "[Kinaesthetic learning] is not really the type... of thing that we benefit from in elementary school, compared to ... a high school where they could do things like shop classes." While teachers made efforts to provide this type of learning, as one teacher put it: "there aren't as many opportunities here for those kinds of things." This perspective aligns with that expressed by students and again describes a strength that teachers observed as being more common among the Aboriginal students they taught but also one that may not be valued or be integrated into the learning experiences and curricula that students engage with.

Access to curricula. One major theme that emerged when exploring the interactions between students and the school curricula was simply access to it. Staff pointed to attendance at school playing a role in low self-esteem; they noted that if students miss a significant amount of school, they trail academically and thus view themselves as less capable in school than other students. They noted attendance as playing a detrimental role in mediating the relationship between students and the school. Teachers agreed that, while students were eager to celebrate their school successes with their teachers, this enthusiasm was not continual as described in the following quote from one participant: "School as a priority is not sustained. It's like, in the moment, this is great... but then they may not come again for a week and a half." Teachers expressed concern that when students missed school it affected both their academic strengths as well as their perceptions of themselves as learners.

Teachers believed that lack of attendance perpetuated a further cycle of lower achievement, poor self-esteem and lack of attendance: "If they're not here, how do you help them catch up? And then when they do come, it's probably not

as positive, because they can see their peers can do things that they can't." Similarly, one teacher stated: "But, if you have huge gaps and you can't read, like I'm thinking of my [student], I mean he can't read. So smart, can't read. And so that effects self-esteem, that's probably why he doesn't come a lot of the time." As mentioned previously, teachers connected concerns around motivation with concerns around school attendance.

Engagement with curricula. Tied to access to curricula is another issue raised by most teachers related to the engagement of student with curricula. This highlights the belief of teachers that motivation is a major barrier to school success for students, and that many Aboriginal students in particular, exhibit lower levels of motivation.

Staff believed that many Aboriginal students did not seem to connect their schooling with future plans and aspirations. Most teachers remarked that students rarely set goals for their schooling independently, noting that this reluctance aligned with low engagement and motivation in schooling. Teachers recognized that students had hopes for the future, but felt that they had to intentionally and repeatedly show many students the connection between their current education and achieving these goals. This aligns with the perceptions of students, many of whom struggled to link specific courses and curricula with 'real-life' learning and careers.

Concerns about motivation arose repeatedly during both focus groups. Teachers felt that their students would experience improved academic and psychosocial outcomes if their motivation increased. As such, they reported many efforts to engage and encourage Aboriginal students. These efforts included developing good rapport and relationships with students, developing culturally relevant lesson plans, and trying to include families and the community within the school.

Teacher findings: Interactions with school staff

Creating conditions for success. Staff recognized that students' experiences in school and in the classroom figure prominently in their self-concept. Teachers noted that their behaviour in the classroom and their interactions with students were inextricably bound up in students' ideas about themselves and their successes. Staff repeatedly spoke about making space for students to succeed and celebrating those successes: "They have to feel valued when they come here," said one teacher, "[they] have to feel they can succeed." Others talked about "establishing a pattern of success," and making efforts to raise students' self-esteem through relationship-building and by making school a welcoming and positive place. This was described by one teacher: "Just giving them a sense of self-worth. In my room, that's what I do when they come to me: 'You're good at this! You're really good'... And that's all they need. Just a little bit." Teachers felt that they spent much of their time in a counselling

or social work role with some students, which they felt was unavoidable given students' emotional and psychological needs.

Every teacher spoke of their personal efforts to encourage students to come to school and to see themselves as capable and valuable within the school context. Teachers described welcoming and encouraging their students into their classrooms: "It's never 'Where have you been?' It's always 'Oh, I'm so glad you're here! You have to come tomorrow!'"

Another teacher described the importance of welcoming students with difficult home lives in the following way: "For some of them, it's just making sure that it's as positive as possible when they're here, so that the kids want to come. Some of them do come, not because someone tells them to go, or wakes them up in the morning, but because maybe they like school more than they like home." However, overall, teachers expressed significant concerns about school attendance as essential for school success and future goals. One teacher described the frustration that struggling students face with an analogy about running to catch a bus:

> If you run for the bus, and you see the bus just pulling in and you're behind, you start running and running, and you're willing to work hard... because it's right within reach.... But there's a point sometimes when you're run-ning... and you realize the bus driver hasn't noticed you... and you realize that "no matter how hard I run, that bus driver is not going to see me, and not going to subsequently stop".... And what's your natural thing? You just stop running. Essentially. You give up. And unlike a bus, where you know there's another one coming along, in a school grade you miss it, you don't just grab the next one and go.... It does have an impact on you... and it starts eating away at your persona.... And that's kind of what happens to our kids, they say, "Why am I going to bother? I'm not going to pass, so I might as well save my time."

Teachers described a constant struggle to counteract this impulse to "opt out" of schooling. Some teachers posited that students might not participate in school because of their self-perception as academically unsuccessful. One teacher described students as choosing not to attend events and classes so that "they don't have to fail a lot of the things.... Because they choose not to go, there's no pressure." Another claimed that "it's very disturbing for me, because I feel like they're opting out as a prelude to dropping out... Like they think that they're empowering themselves by saying, 'Pft! I can't go.'"

Teachers recognized the importance of Aboriginal students feeling valued by their teachers and school community, and made efforts to welcome and value their students. Nonetheless, some teachers expressed concerns that students who are struggling may feel a sense of "segregation" because of their Individual Education Plans (IEPs) or by being pulled out for extra help. Teachers believed that students may also feel isolated in classrooms where they were not being accommodated or receiving the help they required. If students feel thus margin-

alized, their negative sense of school is exacerbated; as one teacher phrased it, "they don't set goals because they fundamentally don't feel like they belong."

Setting expectations for success. In addition to creating conditions for success, teachers also described the key role of expectations. Teachers were reluctant to make claims about "all" Aboriginal students and commented that they had encountered students who were successful and well-rounded. Common prejudices, however, that Aboriginal students encountered in their schooling contexts were noted. Teachers remarked that the most common response to hearing of an Aboriginal student who was academically successful was one of shock or surprise; a response that teachers felt was detrimental to the school experiences of Aboriginal students: "We have a student that just came to us, Aboriginal student, straight A student, and I say 'he's a straight A student,' everyone's like 'Really!' and you shouldn't be shocked by that!"

Further, some teachers remarked on the need to encourage students to aim towards future careers that are highly respected, such as teachers, lawyers, and doctors; teachers held these high expectations in order to show their students what was possible for them in the future: "Sometimes we don't see them going beyond us. That they're never going to make it. And I think we can change that reality."

Providing culturally relevant programming. In terms of instruction, some teachers felt that including culturally relevant material, such as history and literature, was important to students and their sense of identity. They believed that by valuing the "stories" of students, they would "see themselves in what we teach and what we do, so... then acknowledging them and... their value". Other teachers felt that, although they tailored some of their lessons to include elements of Aboriginal cultures, these were discounted or looked down upon by some of the students. From the perspective of these teachers, cultural programming was valuable if it promoted academic improvement within the school context. The main role of teachers and schools, then, was to educate students and to give them the skills to be successful in the broader Canadian milieu.

Staff noted that they often had very different life experiences than their Aboriginal students, which affected what they expected and how they interacted with their students. Noting that teachers and administrators hold university degrees and tend to have a comfortable income, some teachers remarked that this "middle-class" lifestyle was extremely different from the lifestyles of many of their Aboriginal students. Teachers felt that they and their colleagues had some trouble relating to or understanding the lives of their students.

The issue of resources and financing came up in both focus groups. A number of teachers emphasized how important the funding and support that the Ministry provided for programming had become to their school, indicating that a significant number of students had "gone from 0 to 100. And [these

students] attend, and it's fabulous… They're here everyday, they're passing, they're involved." Similarly, many teachers expressed a desire for more support in the classroom; they believed that, with the proper supports, they could reach out to and engage a number of the students who were currently disengaged with school.

Interactions with broader community. Teachers reported that, on the whole, they did not believe that the Aboriginal students that they worked with had positive self-concept. Some staff felt that difficulties within students' family life, including low academic self-concept on the part of parents and other family members, might contribute to this. Also noted was the impact of living in a society in which racism exists, and in which students see few Aboriginal people involved in the power structures (for example, as teachers or as doctors). Some of the teachers felt that Aboriginal students did not have role models in the school and larger community to help propel them forward and to guide them towards successful futures. Noting hopelessness related to this perception, one teacher framed the situation in the following way:

> And every day, I'm not even worried about this in school, they have to go out in a society, a community that is racist. And when I say that I don't mean to be inflammatory, but they deal with that every day. So they think, "What's the point of even going to school? When I come out, I'm just always going to be an Indian."

Interactions with peers. Teachers suggested that Aboriginal students may feel marginalized when they came to school. As one teacher framed it, "It's tough when you walk into that school… [and] don't fit in." Some asserted a reason for this perception may be that students feel alienated by a school structure that does not reflect them, or come from families and communities that do not value formalized education. Some teachers also asserted that Aboriginal students who do not attend school regularly, and are struggling to catch-up on school-work, may perceive themselves to be lagging behind their peers, and thus

> often feel marginalized a little bit within the classroom. Even though they're welcomed, and they're open-armed every time they show up, and you try to catch them up, but they're still, they're missing some of the learning, so they they're not quite fitting in.

Teachers (from one school in particular) reported that some socio-economic factors also impacted Aboriginal students' relationships with their peers. Teachers reported that students developed a sense of themselves as "have-nots" in the face of students of a higher socio-economic status; "I don't know how else to say it but to say that they felt ghettoized. The kids were all like 'Oh, look [at what those other students have]!' and there was this sense of being beaten down." Further, teachers believed that these socio-economic realities also affected the bullying issue that some Aboriginal students were facing. However, some staff also posited that this socio-economic status contributed to the sharing and strong support system that occurred between Aboriginal

students. Overall, while relationships with peers were mentioned by teachers, these were viewed as much less influential than the interactions with school curriculum and school staff.

DISCUSSION

The findings discussed in the current study represent the views of small groups of students and teachers and cannot be viewed as typical or representative of Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal students and teachers. However, our analyses of the discussions held within student and teacher focus groups revealed several interesting findings, many of which are supported by existing literature and theory. Both students and staff identified a number of interactions proximal to students including interactions with curricula, school staff, peers and the broader community. According to Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (1999) as well as a wealth of research literature, aspects of these interactions are among those identified as contributing to the development of students and their academic success.

The first area highlighted by students and staff was the interaction with school curricula. Many similarities emerged between the student and staff findings. For example, both described the fit, or lack thereof, between the curricula and instructional and assessment approaches that was provided within the schools and the strengths, interests and preferences of students. Students described being unable to make choices in their learning and also identified the types of classes they would prefer to take, as well as the ways in which they preferred to learn (e.g. more active). Interestingly, teachers also identified kinesthetic ways of learning as a strength of many Aboriginal students that they taught but also highlighted that while a strength, it was not necessarily an approach that was reflected in the curricula available to students. Teachers also provided the example of thoughtfulness as a quality that they observed among their Aboriginal students but that was not necessarily valued within the fast-paced school curriculum.

The perspectives of students and teachers speak to areas in which interactions between students and curricula may in fact be detrimental to school success. Certainly the mismatch between elements of the school curriculum and the learning needs, interests and values of Aboriginal students and their families has been documented by researchers and has been posited as one explanation for the difficulties experienced by many Aboriginal students within mainstream school systems (Kanu, 2002; Neeganagwedgin, 2013; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2002; Snively & Williams, 2006; Toulouse, 2010). That students and teachers in the study actually agree on some of these areas of mismatch and raised similar issues independently provides further evidence that there is a gap between the strengths and interests of many Aboriginal students and the school curricula and that this presents barriers in terms of students achieving school-defined success.

A second area where similarities emerged between students and teachers was with respect to engagement with curricula. Students discussed this largely in terms of a lack of relevance that they perceived in their course work — particularly with respect to the links between coursework and future jobs and professions. Teachers discussed the lack of engagement with curricula that they observed among many of the Aboriginal students they taught; this was perceived as key to motivation and ultimately, achievement. They also described how they had to make explicit links between the curricula and students' future goals; clearly the small groups of students in the focus groups did not express an understanding or belief in these links.

That students might describe their interactions with school curricula as less than ideal and cite irrelevance as a barrier to learning and engagement is not new nor is it at all unique to Aboriginal students. Literature examining school drop-out processes has identified lack of school engagement, as defined by behavioural indicators (active participation in school, including attendance), affective indicators (attitudes toward school and belongingness), and cognitive indicators (psychological investment in learning, perceptions of competency, setting goals, etc., Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004), as a key predictor for adolescents (e.g., Archambault, Janosz, Fally & Pagani, 2009; Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 2000). Providing ways for students to see meaning and relevance in their work as well as pathways from their school curricula to future goals are often suggested as ways to increase engagement and ultimately prevent drop-out (Lehr, Hanson, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2003 for a review).

Teachers, however, perceived lack of engagement with the curricula as an issue more likely observed among the Aboriginal students they taught. They also described engagement in terms of access to curricula. While, cognitively and affectively, students may not be engaged with the curriculum and may perceive themselves as less capable than their peers, teachers prioritized behavioural engagement, which they defined as lack of attendance or inconsistent attendance. Teachers outlined a cycle including lack of attendance, poor academic self-concept, low motivation, and poor achievement. Certainly ample evidence exists to support the connections between these variables, for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (e.g., Bodkin-Andrews, et al., 2010; Toulouse, 2010). Improvements in attendance were seen as key to breaking the cycle and ultimately improving engagement and school success.

In the expectancy-value model of achievement-related choices developed by Eccles and others (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992), students' academic persistence and performance on tasks is influenced by their expectations of success and their valuing of the task which are in turn influenced by their self-evaluation of competence, goals, and socialization factors such as stereotypes. Certainly it can be expected, then, that students who are unsure of how to set goals, who are perceived as less competent by their

teachers and communities, and who are less connected to school are more likely to do poorly academically and to make academic choices that are less likely to engender success.

While interactions with curricula emerged from the data as most salient, interactions with school staff came a close second. Students spoke briefly about these, mostly in terms of describing teachers who they did or did not feel recognized and valued their strengths. From the perspective of the teachers, their relationships with students were key to success, and they described creating conditions for success, setting expectations for success, and providing culturally relevant programming. Teachers outlined the ways in which they attempted to provide largely social and emotional support within their classrooms and creating welcoming environments in order to encourage student attendance and engagement. The approaches taken by teachers are certainly those that are recommended for facilitating success for Aboriginal students. Teachers are clearly aware of the need to move beyond simply instructing students to building caring environments and adopting the role as counsellor when needed. Teachers also described the frustration and hopelessness that they experienced in attempting to counteract the negative self-perceptions of some of the Aboriginal students they taught. However they also identified the lowered academic expectations of Aboriginal students that existed within their schools. Clearly the teachers who self-selected to participate in the study may not be typical of those who hold negative perceptions and lower expectations of the academic competence of Aboriginal students. However, even these teachers reflected upon the uneven standards and expectations that they held for their Aboriginal students, while at the same time making extensive efforts to ensure their success.

Teachers also highlighted the limited understanding that they had of the lives, values and realities of the Aboriginal students they taught, particularly those who came from low socio-economic backgrounds, and how this prevented them from being able to relate to and engage many Aboriginal students. The limited cultural understanding that many non-Aboriginal teachers have about the Aboriginal communities and families they work with has certainly been posited as a barrier to effective instruction (e.g., St. Denis et al., 1998; Kanu, 2005; Ryan et al., 2009). There have been many calls for increasing numbers of Aboriginal teachers in urban, off-reserve classrooms (McBride & McKee, 2001; St. Denis, 2010), although numbers remain low. Aboriginal teachers working in urban schools also describe numerous barriers to entering and remaining in the profession, including racism, a devaluing of values and backgrounds, (St. Denis, 2010). Clearly this is an area that requires an ongoing focus.

The examples presented by the teachers shed light on the realities experienced by some Aboriginal students in schools and a board that have the success of Aboriginal students as a key priority. Certainly there has been other evidence

of the expectations of teachers with respect to the academic potential of Aboriginal students in mainstream settings (Battiste & McLean, 2005; Brown et al., 2009; Richards et al., 2010; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000). There has also been discussion in the literature regarding how key high academic expectations are for the success of Aboriginal students (e.g., Bell, 2004; McBride & McKee, 2001). However the direct and forthright perspective of teachers has been absent in much of the literature.

The views of teachers in this regard speak more broadly to the perceptions of the communities in which students live. This is not a perspective that is unique to teachers, however. Students' interactions with school staff play a powerful role in their development as competent learners who see themselves as capable of success in mainstream, minority settings. Although not raised in discussions with students, teachers described the interactions they perceived between students and the larger urban community within which the school was situated. Teachers believed that racism, lack of role models, and difficulties with students' family lives were some of the issues that further contributed to poor perceptions of competence and worth, and ultimately the lack of motivation and success of many of the Aboriginal students they taught.

While noting racism in the broader community, however, teachers did not identify racism and discrimination as key barriers to success that existed within their own classrooms and schools. Pedagogical approaches, curriculum, and behavioural expectations were all listed as areas where cultural mismatch may occur. That certain forms of these would be privileged by teachers, thus creating failure for some Aboriginal students, was not discussed. Harris (1990) described how the "hidden curriculum undermines Aboriginal values in a variety of ways.... The values held by non-Aboriginal teachers, and the values implied by school organisation... can be unconsciously imparted" (p. 8). Teachers working within mainstream schools may not recognize the myriad ways in which accepted, status quo approaches to teaching and learning present active barriers to the success of Aboriginal students. The previously-noted tendency of teacher participants to compare non-Aboriginal students to Aboriginal students in terms of their academic success also reflects a view of non-Aboriginal students and their strengths as normative. According to Hewitt (2000), "Despite increasing recognition of the importance of acknowledging the cultural contribution students bring to the school, teachers still tend to blame children for their failure to adapt to the values of the dominant culture on which the school culture is based" (p. 113).

Certainly there are many years of systemic racism that have affected Aboriginal students and families. The intergenerational effects of overt discrimination in the form of residential schools certainly still resonate within many families (Battiste & McLean, 2005; Brown, Rodger & Fraehlich, 2009; Goddard & Foster, 2002). As well, many non-Aboriginal students and community members

lack a real understanding of the deep-rooted issues facing many Aboriginal families and can challenge or resent Aboriginal-specific services or programs (St. Denis, Silver, Ireland, George, & Bouvier, 2008). As was noted by teachers, however, much broader structural factors including socioeconomic inequity also play a major role in perpetuating the division between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations (Brady, 1996; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 1998). An understanding of the multiple influences on student success, including those that exist within the broader community, is essential for school staff to truly be able to address the equally multi-faceted solutions.

Educational and research implications

The findings emerging from this study are based on the perspectives of a very small number of participants and as such major directives about changes to the state of education are clearly inappropriate. However, a few areas where future research should be focused and where current teachers and other school-based professionals may choose to explore and reflect upon their own practice can be identified. These include a focus on student strengths, the inclusion and highlighting of relevant, meaningful material, making explicit links to future education and careers, and providing support for teachers. Certainly all students, particularly those feeling disengaged from their education, could likely benefit from these strategies. Some literature has supported the importance of personally relevant curriculum for Aboriginal students in particular (e.g. Radda, Iwamoto, & Patrick, 1998; Snively & Williams, 2006; Toulouse, 2010). However, it is important to point out that a desire for 'culturally' revelant curriculum was not a dominant theme in the current study, with the notable exception of the inclusion of Aboriginal languages. Rather, students expressed a desire to have greater choice in their schooling and for coursework that reflected their interests and skills.

It was clear through the discussions with the few teachers who took part in the study that balancing the provision of social, emotional and psychological support for those students who they perceived as requiring this with an academic and curriculum-based focus was an ongoing challenge. Teachers also described the limited understanding they had with respect to the lives and background of the students they taught. Teachers may also not be aware of the myriad ways in which the education system privileges non-Aboriginal students and their role they may play in perpetuating discrimination. Prioritizing the inclusion of Aboriginal school staff as well as the contributions of parents and extended families within school curricula, who can work with teachers and also act as role models for students, should be considered by schools and boards.

It is also essential, whether within teacher education programs or professional learning events, that teachers and broader groups of school staff engage in deep reflection about the perceptions they hold for Aboriginal students. Many teachers who work in cross-cultural contexts devote considerable time

and resources to the integration of culturally-relevant materials and activities. However, the perspectives of the few teachers involved in the current study are that these efforts may not always be aligned with the needs and interests of the Aboriginal students they are working with. It is important that school, board, and teacher education staff move beyond a surface-level focus on cultural celebrations or activities, what Battiste and McLean (2005) refer to as the "add and stir" (p. 7) model of education (see also Kanu, 2005) to deeply explore the ways in which students are taught, the messages students receive within and beyond schools with respect to competence and worth, and the valuing of student interests and strengths.

Limitations

Generalization of findings from this study is limited due to the small number of participants. As well, those few Aboriginal students who took part in the focus groups likely do not reflect the perceptions of all Aboriginal students, particularly those who most struggle in school. The same is true for the few teachers who participated, whose beliefs may not align with those who did not participate. Furthermore, the experiences of students in an urban setting in northwestern Ontario may not extend to students in more rural or remote settings or in larger centres across Canada. As such, findings should be viewed as providing suggestions for potential areas for future research as well as identifying elements to explore when developing interventions for students struggling academically. Finally, the focus groups were conducted by a non-Aboriginal facilitator, which may have impacted the discussion among students in particular.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study reflects the voices of only a few students and teachers in one community within Canada. These participants clearly have varied experiences, backgrounds, and beliefs regarding the paths to school success. However, many of the key interactions highlighted by the participants are those that have been identified previously as highly impactful. Discussions regarding the interactions between students and school curricula, in particular, shed light on the various ways that students and teachers perceived a mismatch between the strengths and interests of students and the curricula provided within the schools. These conversations were not focused on culturally-specific materials or activities but were focused at a much deeper level, a level where reflection by teachers and the broader educational community is warranted. Teachers also described the many ways that they attempted to provide conditions and expectations for success, including a focus on the social and emotional needs of their students. This more holistic view of student development is key to promoting engagement and achievement among all students. However, the beliefs of the teachers in the current study indicated that this was not always sufficient to ensure academic success. Teachers will continue to require sup-

ports, in the form of human resources (e.g. counsellors, Aboriginal resource staff), authentic professional learning opportunities, and the collaboration of families and communities to truly create conditions of success for all of the Aboriginal students they teach.

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