Urban Aboriginal Education Framework Research Study

Strengths and Goals: Perspectives of Students and Staff

Dr. Jessica Whitley, University of Ottawa

Dr. Edward Rawana, Lakehead University

Martha Brown, University of Ottawa

Julia MacArthur, Lakehead University

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The present study explored the perceptions of small groups of (a) Aboriginal students and (b) school staff with respect to strengths and needs as well as supports and barriers to ensuring academic success. Specifically, two student (N = 10) and two school staff focus groups (N = 5) were conducted at McKellar Park and Gron Morgan Public Schools. While clearly not representative of the larger school populations, the participants in these groups have provided some insight that may prove valuable to the development of future initiatives and practices for both teacher and student engagement and education.

Participants in all four groups described a number of strengths and competencies that Aboriginal students brought to their schooling. These strengths were felt to be valued to varying degrees. Teachers stated that all of their students had the ability and potential to be academically successful. However, they expressed concerns regarding the poor self-concept and low self-esteem they perceived in many of the Aboriginal students in their classes.

Students varied widely in their experiences at school and home. Some spoke of the support they received from their families and their long-term goals for post-secondary education and careers. Others expressed a lack of engagement with their education and confusion as to it's relevance in their lives. A few students described families who felt that education was important but were unable to provide regular academic support for various reasons.

Teachers also spoke of the heterogeneity among the Aboriginal students in their classes as well as the varying amount and type of support provided to students by their families. They felt that family members and role models in the community were key to allowing students to view themselves as capable of success in terms of education and employment. Many teachers expressed frustration at the complex needs presented by some of their students but confirmed their role in terms of facilitating academic development.

All students highlighted the integral role that peers played in their lives and the detrimental effects of interpersonal conflict. Older students described the importance of maintaining a good reputation and of the positive perceptions of teachers and community members toward them.

Several students felt that they would be more motivated in their school work if they were given more opportunities to move around and take part in hands-on activities. Others expressed a desire to engage in more meaningful and authentic lessons with real-world applications. All students felt that they would like to focus on and showcase their areas of interest, including photography, film-making, cooking, and visual arts.

School staff expressed a need for greater support of the complex needs of their students. Social workers and counsellors were suggested as examples. Many highlighted the growing academic gaps between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and felt that resources would best be focussed on closing these. Teachers also expressed the need for additional training to be able to meet the needs of their students which they felt went beyond what was typically addressed in a B.Ed. program. Finally, all participants highlighted the continuing need to work collaboratively with families and communities in ways that were meaningful and mutually engaging.

INTRODUCTION

Background

This research project is a follow-up to the school-wide anti-bullying initiative and research study being implemented at McKellar Park and Gron Morgan Public Schools and funded by the Ontario Education Services Corporation. The initiative is ongoing, and comprises a whole-school, strength-based approach to eliminating bullying and improving pro-social behaviour. A research component, running alongside the initiative, involves assessments at multiple points of students' perceptions of bullying activity as well as their self-concept, strengths in multiple domains, behaviours and academic achievement. Preliminary results from these assessments revealed two striking findings that warranted further investigation.

First, Aboriginal students reported significantly lower general self-concept than non-Aboriginal students on the Self-Description Questionnaire (SDQ-II; Marsh, 1992). This finding is in line with current research (e.g. Craven et al., 2005) and is of concern given the strong relationship between self-concept and academic achievement. Self-concept has been shown to significantly impact students' willingness to expend effort and persistence on academic tasks (Guay, Larose, & Boivin, 2004; Hoge, Smit, & Crist, 1995; Keith, 2002; Marsh & Yeung, 1997). Self-concept is also an important indicator of psychosocial functioning among individuals and those with higher general self-concept have been found to have lower rates of depression, anxiety, and alcohol and drug abuse (Deihl et al., 1997; DuBois et al., 1999; Resnick et al., 1997; Zimmerman et al., 1997).

Second, Aboriginal students reported significantly fewer strengths in the "Current and Future Goals" domain of the Strength Assessment Inventory (SAI; Rawana, Brownlee, & Hewitt, 2006). This domain includes items such as "I want very much to achieve my goals and dreams", "When I set goals, I try hard to reach them", "I work to be at a certain grade level in school", "I know how to make a plan to reach my goals". This domain reflects the level of aspiration students hold for themselves as well as their perception of the skills they possess in self-regulating their learning, particularly planning and goal setting. Students who are poor at self-regulating their learning typically hold lower motivation and report lower self-efficacy (Zimmerman, 1990). They often feel unable to actually develop and implement strategies that would enable to them to complete academic and non-academic tasks competently and generally have significantly lower academic achievement as a result.

These two findings combined evidence factors that may be negatively impacting academic outcomes for Aboriginal students. The limited research that exists investigating high school persistence and completion for Aboriginal students has focused on students in higher grades, who are involved in making decisions about whether or not to continue with their education (e.g. Craven, et al., 2005). The findings reported presently indicate that students' academic motivation, both short- and long-term, as well as the learning skills they need to be

academically successful, may be formed as early as the elementary years.

In light of these findings, a qualitative follow-up study was proposed to explore in depth the perceptions of a small sample of Aboriginal students regarding their academic self-concept, strengths, academic self-efficacy and aspirations. The perceptions of school staff regarding these areas were also examined. Findings from this study will inform interventions specifically targeted at improving the educational and psychosocial outcomes for Aboriginal students in local boards. Results can also inform future research at the secondary level aimed at finding ways to improve secondary completion rates for Aboriginal students.

Accordingly, the research questions were as follows:

1) How do these Aboriginal students view their competencies and strengths?
    a. How do they view these in relation to those that are valued by school and community?
2) Do these Aboriginal students view themselves as able to succeed academically?
    a. What facilitators and/or barriers do they identify?
3) What goals and aspirations do these Aboriginal students hold for themselves in both academic and non-academic areas?

Alignment with Urban Aboriginal Education Project

The research study aligns with a number of the UAEP Priority Description Items:
1) Professional Development: Focus groups provide a forum for discussion regarding the similarities and differences between perceptions of school staff regarding the self-concept, goals and aspirations of Aboriginal students. Through this structured discussion as well as reflection on the findings emerging from the study, school staff will build "appreciation of Aboriginal perspectives, values and cultures" (UAEP, p. 8).
2) Welcoming Environments: Drawing on student identified strengths and skills will assist in "building capacity for environments that are supportive for learning" as well as "reduce gaps in student achievement through environments and classroom resources that reflect the lived experiences of the student population" (UPEP, p. 10).
3) Appropriate Aboriginal content, resources and materials: The participation of both students and staff in the project will assist in assisting Aboriginal students in "developing a sense of pride and belonging" in their school and also "build capacity to support identity building" (UAEP, p. 10).

The research also aligns with the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework and the Lakehead District School Board's strategic plan as it is aimed specifically at identifying areas where efforts can be focused to improve student achievement and to reduce the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Findings are directly relevant to local students and will be of import to parents, educators, and administrators.

Methodology

Participants

All students in Grades 4 through 8 at McKellar Park and Gron Morgan schools who had been identified as of Aboriginal ancestry through the self-identification process were eligible to participate in the study. In total, five students at Gron Morgan (one girl and four boys) and six students at McKellar Park (four girls and two boys) were given written permission by parents to take part in the study. One student at Gron Morgan was absent on the day that the focus group was being held, therefore the final groups consisted of five girls and five boys. Students were fairly evenly distributed across the five grades.

All school staff who taught students in Grades 4 through 8 were also invited to participate. In total, two staff members at Gron Morgan and three at McKellar Park agreed to take part in the study.

Procedure

In order to recruit student participants, consent packages were sent home twice to parents. Signed consent forms were returned to the school secretaries and were collected by the research teams. Student focus groups were scheduled at the convenience of the school administration and the teachers of the participating students. Given the small number of participants, a single focus group was conducted at each school. The Gron Morgan student focus group was approximately 40 minutes in length and the McKellar Park group was approximately 25 minutes in length. The student focus group guide is included in Appendix A.

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 to attend a focus group. Given the small number of participants, a single focus group was conducted at each school at the convenience of school administration and participants. The Gron Morgan focus group was approximately 60 minutes in length and the McKellar Park group was approximately 30 minutes in length. The staff focus group is included in Appendix B.

Each of the four focus groups was recorded using two digital recorders (one as a back-up option). During the student focus groups, notes were taken as well by a member of the research team. Participants were welcome to use pseudonyms although none chose to do so. Participants agreed to keep the discussions and the identity of the other participants confidential. All were assured that what they said would not be reported back to parents, teachers or colleagues and that reports and/or presentations arising from the results would never identify them by name.

A senior female graduate student in Social Work from Lakehead University conducted all four focus groups. This individual was familiar with staff and students at the two schools as she had

participated in previous research projects there. 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 comfortable describing their thoughts and experiences. School staff also established a good rapport with the leader.

Analyses

Once focus groups were completed, digital files were transferred to a laptop computer that was password protected. All files were transcribed by a research assistant at the University of Ottawa and were verified by a second member of the research team.

Transcripts were then analyzed using Microsoft Word and the reviewing functions. The data was explored with respect to the specific research questions listed previously. Within these, specific themes (e.g. future goals, self-concept, investment in school) within three broad categories (students, school and family/community) identified within the data were organized using a colour coding process. A second member of the research team verified all analyses. In instances where disagreement arose, discussions continued until a category could be assigned to the satisfaction of both researchers.

The Present Report

For the purposes of this report, information is provided in a summary format that describes the findings within the three categories: (a) Students, (b) School and (c) Family. Student findings are first presented, followed by staff findings and finally a discussion of results and conclusion. Given the small number of participants and the possibility of identification of individual students and/or staff, quotes supporting the findings are not associated with any particular participant and are simply attributed to a student (perhaps male, or in an older grade) or a staff member.

STUDENTS

1.1. STUDENTS' SELF-PERCEPTIONS

All students were able to list a number of areas where they felt they possessed strengths, ranging from sports to interpersonal skills. Given the school context, many listed specific school subjects in which they were doing well, such as writing, art, math, drama, and gym. While students did recognize that they were succeeding in certain subjects, they did not elaborate or contextualize these subject-specific strengths within a broader self-concept or a description of personal strengths. Several students answered broadly (*"stuff"* or *"I don't know"*), or listed things like *"riding my bike"* and *"video games"*.

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"*.

While many students listed certain school subjects as strengths, some students expressed surprise about doing well in certain subjects. It seemed that some students were unaware of potential academic strengths, in that they were unsure as to whether they were currently doing well at school. This will be discussed further in Section 1.2.A.

When asked to consider their strengths in comparison to their peers, student responses were more relative, with many answers like *"sometimes [I'm better than other kids]"* or indicating that they were better than *"some other kids."* Again, one student emphatically stated that he considered himself a better support for friends than other students. Other students chose not to respond to this question, and one responded that he did not know.

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 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, as will be further elaborated in 1.2.B, 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 played an important role in terms of their self-concept.

A few students shared clear plans for the future employment. This theme of "future plans" is discussed further in part 1.2.A, as many students seemed to see a disjunction between their education and their plans for the future. Nonetheless, one participant indicated that, while there was no relevant programming for his future career in his school, he worked hard outside of school, and had been given an opportunity to show his work to his classmates – an experience that he seemed excited to share. Students, in sharing their future goals, demonstrated that they perceived themselves as having promising futures, and possessed the strengths to accomplish their goals.

1.2. STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL

A. ACADEMIC FACTORS

When asked whether they considered success in school to be important, the majority of students indicated that they did. While several students mentioned school being important in order to get a *"proper"* education or a good job later in life, a few discussed doing well in school in order to avoid going to summer school or being grounded. While some students seemed genuinely invested in the connection between school and their futures, others appeared to be repeating something they had been told: *"education is apparently like the main thing in life."*. Some students were more tempered in their endorsement of the value of school stating that it is *"kinda"* or *"sorta"* important and that they *"don't care"* about school in general.

As noted in 1.1, some students seemed unsure about how they were doing in school, or how they had come to be strong in certain subjects. This was described by one student in Grade 8: *"I got 79 in Science. I was like, what?"*. Further, while most students were able to create a list of what it takes to do well at school, a few students indicated that these techniques were not 'working' for them. Behaviours that contributed to school success included listening to the teacher, being quiet, paying attention, and doing homework. Additionally, while students largely believed their personal strengths to be relevant to academic success, they had difficulty describing how this was the case.

In addition to listing characteristics that help a student to succeed in school, students developed an even more lengthy list about the characteristics and behaviours that hinder academic success. These included not paying attention, not doing work, being careless, talking a lot, skipping school, not being smart, fidgeting with things, lack of effort, lack of caring and engagement. Again there was a minority of students who felt that their success in school in terms of grades was unrelated to their effort or investment as described by two students in Grades 7 and 8: *"I'm doing well in school, I don't care about it,"* and *"I don't care about school, and I'm, I guess I'm doing okay."*

Students had varying perspectives on the significance of school on their plans for the future. 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"*.

Others listed numerous subjects that they considered irrelevant to their future, including science, some math, history, 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 seemed disengaged from school had difficulty connecting their goals for the future with their current or future schooling.

When given opportunities to discuss what they would like to have access to in school, in order to make it more interesting or relevant to their lives and futures, students had a number of ideas. Some agreed that learning practical skills, like cooking, would be extremely beneficial. 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"*. Others expressed interest in taking classes that were offered at high school level, like auto repair.

A number of students 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.

B. INTERPERSONAL FACTORS

Students had a great deal to say about the interactions that they had every day at school. They focussed primarily on their relationships with their teachers and with their peers, relationships that significantly influenced how students felt about themselves and their school.

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.

Students described a few characteristics of their teachers that they described as impeding their learning. Some felt that their teacher spoke too quickly and too much. Another said that his teacher was not strict enough to keep him in line, which he considered to be a fault; this same student remarked that other teachers were inconsistent in their discipline and regulations in the playground.

Relationships with peers played a large role in both student groups. A number of students discussed the importance of their friends, and their desire to spend as much time with them as possible.

In one of the groups, the focus of the discussion was on a clear divide between the student population into two cliques. The students interviewed were either part of the 'less cool' clique, or reported being uninvolved in the conflict. The way that students dressed was listed as one element that separated the two groups (e.g. "*Skinny jeans and black*"). Students described a sense of powerlessness and saw similarities between their situation and the conflict in *The Outsiders*. They were able to describe how conflict undoubtedly impacted their daily life in school - both socially and academically. Students told us that "*you think about it all day long*" and "*you think they're going to come to your door, and they're just going to stand outside your door [waiting for you.]*" Although expressing concern over being victimized by other students, participants agreed that physical violence was rare. Bullying was described as happening typically outside of school. Overall, participants stated that these issues were mostly relevant to older students and that those in younger grades were more playful and less concerned with fitting in and their reputations.

A few students in Grade 8 expressed concern regarding their impending move to high school, stating that "*High school changes people too much*". Specific mention was made of the increased pressure to smoke, do drugs and have sex due to the prevalence and availability of these options. Bullying and conflict between cliques was felt to be a continuing problem into high school. With regards to the importance of reputations, one student stated "*Then when you hit high school that's gonna be mostly the main thing*".

1.3. STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FAMILY SUPPORT

Almost all of the students reported that success in school was important to their families and their communities. Only one student indicated that [their] parents did not see [their] academic success as important. Students described receiving support from their parents, in the forms of assistance with homework, planning for school, and offering advice. *"My mom is mostly telling me about stuff that I have to do, so I get prepared."*

Some students also discussed their parents' discipline (for example, being grounded for bad marks, getting yelled at, or being kicked out of the house) as proof that their parents considered school to be important. One student stated that if he didn't do well in school *"My mom would probably kick me out of the house and tell me to get a job and go to school and come back when I'm doing better"*. Another student agreed: *"Cause if I don't do well in school, I'll get grounded and I won't get to hang out with my friends and that"*.

Many of the students reported that their parents were interested in their experiences at school, and recognized their strengths. One student felt that this was not the case for his parents *"because, um, I don't know, but every time I tell them they like, they just leave... they're like [funny voice] "I'm busy!"*

Despite these assertions, a number of students also indicated that they *"never"* or *"sometimes"* discuss school with their parents. *"I can't ask my parents for help because my mom works mostly every day and my dad dropped out so he doesn't really know anything [laughs]."*

Further, with regard to assistance in interpersonal problems at school (including conflicts and bullying) students reported that they would not go to their parent to help because their parents would be unable to solve these problems, and would perhaps make them worse. As described by one student *"Cause then they'd probably call the cops and then...and then it'd just get worse"*; students felt they would generally be viewed as weak if they involved their parents in bullying issues. Again, these sentiments were largely expressed by students in Grades 7 and 8 and not by younger students who tended to report avoiding situations and/or individuals who might cause conflict.

SCHOOL STAFF

2.1. STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT STRENGTHS AND NEEDS

Staff members recognized firstly the heterogeneity of the Aboriginal students attending their schools. They pointed out that Aboriginal students had varying strengths and challenges that both contributed to and detracted from their success in school.

Staff members identified a variety of strengths in their Aboriginal students. They referred to students as *"kind"*, and *"mature"*. Staff also noted that many students used humour to build relationships, and were often part of tight-knit and supportive groups of friends and relations. Some teachers noted that Aboriginal students displayed *"resilience"* in the face of challenges; one said, *"they come to school with a lot of issues... but they still come, and they try to the best of their abilities, so I think that's probably one of their greatest strengths, their resilience."* Others noted that many Aboriginal students exhibited *"thoughtfulness,"* and reflected before speaking. Some teachers identified that this thoughtfulness is not always perceived as a strength in the classroom, where deadlines enforce a quicker pace. Further, staff noted a focus on family and community that was more evident in the Aboriginal compared to the non-Aboriginal students.

> *They come to school with a lot of issues... but they still come, and they try to the best of their abilities, so I think that's probably one of their greatest strengths, their*

Teachers listed a number of subject areas in which students were largely excelling, including sports, music, and poetic writing. While all agreed that academics, with particular attention to literacy, was an area that needed to be focussed on and improved, some also echoed students' sentiments about developing motivating classroom work and expectations. Teachers pointed to kinaesthetic learning as a strength exhibited by Aboriginal students, but noted that elementary school does 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."* Teachers also pointed out that for Aboriginal students, like all students, there was nothing inherent or unchangeable about the weaknesses that they exhibited; one teacher framed it this way: *"How to motivate them? They have abilities like every kid. I think their motivation values a little bit differently."*

Staff reported that, on the whole, they did not believe that students had positive self-esteem. Some staff felt that family life might often be a hindrance. 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 participants 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 everyday, 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 everyday. 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.'"

Staff also 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. This perpetuates 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"*.

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 a student's ideas about themselves and their successes. Again and again, staff talked 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 student's 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"*. As is further described in section 2.2.A, teachers felt that they spent much of their time in a counselling or social work role with students which they felt was unavoidable given the emotional and psychological needs of some of their students.

Several staff also pointed out that almost all of the students had career goals and aspirations for the future, indicating that students had hope and a sense that they could accomplish things in the future: *"They all have dreams. They want to be lawyers, and they want to be y'know vets, and they want to do good. And they want to do good for their communities."* One teacher disagreed and described the response of students in her class when discussion their dreams for the future as being less related to education or jobs: *"They say things like 'I want my family to be happy'"*. While teachers noted (as will be elaborated in 2.2.) that students often had trouble setting goals and establishing a link between school and their future plans, they still held that all of their students were capable of succeeding in school and life.

> *I think some of these kids, all they have is hope. All they have is hope. And we need to capitalize on that, and we need to cash that in for them, so that we can help be a part of their success and not a continued part of their failure.*

2.2. STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT AT SCHOOL

A. ACADEMIC FACTORS

While teachers listed a number of strengths that their Aboriginal students possessed, they explained that academic success was not always highest on this list. Teachers highlighted Aboriginal students who were doing well at school, but noted that, overall, Aboriginal students seemed less invested in school and school success than their peers. Participants also noted that academic expectations of educators were often lower for Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal students.

Teachers cited problems at home, cultural differences, and socio-economic difficulties as factors influencing this outcome. All of the teachers expressed the strong belief that their Aboriginal students had gifts and the potential to do well at school, but stipulated that there was a significant need for further supports, in terms of financing new programs, hiring more personnel, connecting with the community, and developing more motivating and relevant lessons.

Staff remarked 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 expressly and repeatedly show many students the connection between their current education and achieving these goals.

Concerns about motivation arose repeatedly during both focus groups. Teachers felt that their students would experience improved academic and psychosocial outcomes if their motivation was increased. As such, they reported many efforts to engage and encourage this particular subset of 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.

As mentioned in 2.1., teachers connected concerns around motivation with concerns around school attendance. 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. 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 staff member 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 running...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 IEPs, or by being pulled out for extra help, as well as in classrooms where they are not accommodated. If students feel thus marginalized, 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."*

Staff members were reluctant to make claims about "all" Aboriginal students, and commented that they had encountered students who were successful and well-rounded. Teachers also

noted some common prejudices that Aboriginal students encountered in schooling contexts. 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 which teachers felt to be 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 at 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"*. Teachers described a high level of frustration, which sometimes comes to be exhibited by teachers *"burning out"*, becoming jaded and not engaging with needy students. As one teacher expressed it: *"It's easy to have a defeatist attitude as a teacher, and as students, when you're dealing with the same, same, same. Because ... you deal with a lot of stuff that's not what you want."* While staff members understood the stress and *"burnout"* that comes with working with a *"needy"* student population, they insisted on the importance of maintaining hopefulness for students, and focussing on student success.

Teachers also remarked on the role of school as a significant support system for students. Teachers described meeting a variety of student needs, ranging from providing food and making wake-up phone calls, to giving emotional support and a shoulder to cry on. Teachers struggled with these multiple roles; as one teacher phrased it, *"It's sad, that I feel like I'm failing most of them. Academically. But socially, I think I'm providing."* Teachers emphasized their roles as *"social worker"* or *"extended parent"* in addition to educator, and felt that they needed assistance in order to fulfil these roles.

A few participants highlighted the need for remedial work for many of their students who had fallen behind their same-grade peers. They described pull-out programs that were academically beneficial for students but described the social difficulties and stigma that went along with these. *"And it's very segregated, I find, so my kids don't like it. They don't like being withdrawn."* Other participants spoke about their efforts to modify and differentiate their lessons to include all students at their respective levels.

In terms of instruction, some participants felt that including culturally relevant material, such as history and literature, was important to students and their sense of identity. They felt 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 participants 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 participants, cultural programming was valuable if it promoted academic improvement within the school context. The main role of educators and schools, then, was to educate students and to give them the skills to be successful in the broader Canadian context.

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 uninvested in and opting-out of school.

B. INTERPERSONAL FACTORS

Staff members 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."*

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 participants 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.

Teachers (from one school in particular) reported that these 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.

Despite the challenges that teachers identified in their relationships with and teaching of Aboriginal students, staff emphasized the importance of encouraging and supporting students, while providing a *"safe"* environment with opportunities for success. Teachers cited the examples of strength walls as a way of celebrating students' areas of competence. Further, teachers described how they created inclusive and welcoming classrooms and lessons: *"It's*

back to relationships, and they have to feel valued when they come here, and they have to feel, feel they can succeed. So again, it's modifying programs, or differentiating instruction, which we're doing." Another pointed to the centrality of celebrating successes: *"For me, when a kid has a success, that's a success. And the more of those they have, the better."*

2.3. STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Staff recognized that the influence of families and communities on Aboriginal students is tremendous. The themes of parental involvement, home-life and community involvement arose throughout the focus groups. Some teachers described that Aboriginal students as *"extremely family oriented"*, and interested in *"doing good"* for their communities. Staff articulated that, despite any struggles parents were living with, it is clear that *"they love their children dearly, they do. You can tell that when you call them. You can tell."* Staff recognized that, in order for all Aboriginal students to succeed, a support system that includes both home and school is essential.

Staff described numerous efforts to engage parents and communities in the school. They noted that attendance varied widely across events; nonetheless, they reported that the programs and events were important to show students that the school valued their parents and community, and is interested in reaching out to them. Teachers also reported sometimes acting as support to young parents, having personal interactions and discussions about their children and themselves.

Staff recognized that some parents had personal struggles that made the students' home-lives less stable (staff cited poverty and the history of residential schooling as two factors that impacted these struggles). They commented that these elements at home may have negative consequences on students and students' academic success, and described some incidents of students who use school as a "safe" place to go, or who talk to their teachers about the stresses they are encountering. One teacher described a recurring scenario, wherein students have a *"bad day"*, and *"I take them out, generally they cry every time. If I say, "what happened?" Y'know, and they'll tell me ... Like, this one student I'm talking to, while my other 28 are like- I'm trying to- it's too hard."*

In the staff focus groups, there was a range of responses as to whether parents were invested in their children's education. One teacher described many parents who were very supportive and involved and made sure that their child(ren) attended school. These students were typically presented as those who were doing well in school and did not need extensive support or services.

In the instances where students were struggling with attendance and achievement, participants stated that school did not seem to be important to parents. One teacher framed the problem in terms of a disjuncture between the expectations that schools and families hold: *"I see [a breakdown in communication] a lot, and I don't think it's for lack of trying. I don't think it's*

because teachers don't care, or administrators don't care, I think it's because genuinely there is a breakdown. There is a break in that communication between the expectations that their culture has and the expectations that our school culture has."   Further, some staff suggested that students lack the modelling of setting appropriate goals, or valuing education; similarly, some teachers asserted that the connection between school and students' plans for the future is not recognized at home, by parents - an attitude that becomes internalized by students.

Participants described many of the Aboriginal students they worked with, particularly at one school, as more likely to have families with lower socio-economic status than non-Aboriginal students. Parents were therefore struggling to provide basic necessities for their children and did not have the resources or formal education to participate more fully in their child(ren)'s education.

Staff also indicated some positive results that had come from community involvement in school. Inviting elders into the classroom, developing lesson plans using Aboriginal stories, and the founding of a successful drumming group, were cited as examples. Staff also discussed a desire to turn to the Aboriginal community in order to work collaboratively to support and encourage students.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

STUDENTS

Findings from the student groups will be summarized in the following themes (a) heterogeneity, (b) strengths and competencies, (c) investment in school, and (d) support for success.

Heterogeneity

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.

Strengths & Competencies

In general, students had difficulty identifying internal strengths or personality characteristics. They viewed many of their school-related strengths through external validation; if they had received high marks on their report card in a specific subject, then they reported that they were good at these. All students were able to name a subject or area where they felt they were doing well.

Participants were easily able to distinguish between the characteristics of students who did well at school and those who did not. These were related exclusively to behaviours such as paying attention and completing work. In reference to themselves, though, some students expressed uncertainly about the relationship between their behaviour, skills, attitudes and success at school. A few students admitted to often being surprised when their report cards were handed out as they had little sense of how they were doing in their classes and often felt that they were doing more poorly than their grades reflected.

Most students did not report negative views of self. Those that did made comments largely related to behaviour in relation to their school work and attendance (lazy, skipping school, getting kicked out of the house, being perceived as 'trouble' by teachers) or peer relationships (trouble maker, starter). Having a good reputation was mentioned repeatedly by older students in one of the focus groups, with respect to the perceptions of teachers, parents and most importantly, peers.

Investment in School

The majority of students in the groups appeared invested in their education and school success to varying degrees. Older students expressed greater dissatisfaction with the type of material they were learning and the ways in which they were learning it. Some students expressed an interest in more hands-on and relevant activities and in general, more movement and less sitting throughout the day.

Most students agreed that doing well in school was important. They were unsure as to specific ways that their current education would contribute to future goals but had clearly internalized the message that 'getting an education' was an important end in and of itself. Students listed many of their current subjects that they felt would not be useful in the long-term. A few appeared to have greater knowledge of required skills and competencies for various jobs and argued for the necessity of skills such as reading and math. Some expressed the desire to attend post-secondary education and had specific career goals. Others were focussed on the short-term, particularly those concerned with transitioning to high school.

Support for Success

Students spoke largely about relationships with peers, rather than teachers and families. One group focused on a division within the school and the conflict between these two groups of students. Others highlighted the support they both received and provided to their friends and their desire to spend as much time with them as possible.

Many students felt that their teachers recognized their strengths and valued them. A few were unsure or stated that they felt that their teacher did not notice them in any real way.

With respect to families, most students felt that their families valued education and their school success. The ways in which families supported their children varied widely. Some students discussed discipline and punishment for skipping school or doing poorly as evidence of their parents valuing of their education. Other described the time that their parents spend with them discussing upcoming tests and working on homework. A few students stated that their parents were too busy or that they did not have the skills or resources to help them with their schoolwork.

SCHOOL STAFF

Findings from the student groups will be summarized in the following themes (a) strengths and competencies, (b) investment in school, (c) divisions, and (d) supports for success.

Strengths & Competencies

School staff in both groups listed a number of strengths that they felt were exhibited by the Aboriginal students they worked with. Some felt that these students were resilient and more mature than non-Aboriginal students given the difficulties many faced. Others described how many Aboriginal students supported each other and maintained close ties with extended family and communities. In regards to academics and schoolwork, some participants stated that the Aboriginal students in their classes were often more thoughtful and took time to reflect before speaking, a strength that could be sometimes perceived as a weakness depending on the setting and the teacher in question. Subject-specific competencies listed included music, creative writing, and athletics. The majority of teachers felt that many of the Aboriginal students they worked with lagged behind their same-grade peers in terms of academic areas, particularly literacy, due to issues such as inconsistent attendance and varying experiences with formal education. All teachers stated unequivocally that the students in their classes had the ability and potential to be successful academically but that remediation and social supports were necessary for this to happen.

The majority of staff participants felt that the Aboriginal students that they worked with had lower self-concept and self-esteem than their non-Aboriginal peers. Possible explanations for this included academic difficulties, low expectations of educators and the wider community, a lack of positive role models, poor long-term expectations, racism in the community, and difficulties at home.

Investment in School

Following directly from the low self-concept teachers felt many Aboriginal students experienced was a sense of disengagement from school and a sense of hopelessness. Participants stated that many students felt unable to be successful at school and did not feel that what they were learning at school was relevant for their lives, either at present or in the long-term. The role of education was not always clear in relation to long-term goals. Some participants felt that students were not able to imagine themselves as pursing post-secondary education or having fulfilling careers as they were exposed to insufficient examples of other Aboriginal students who had followed such paths. Given this negative outlook, participants suggested that some students purposefully avoided putting themselves in situations where failure was a possibility; by disengaging from school they were protecting their self-esteem.

Participants also cited examples of several Aboriginal students who they felt had hopes and dreams for their future and who were working actively toward attaining these. The role of family and other support systems were suggested as playing a major role in influencing the positive outlook of these students.

Divisions

School staff participants mentioned a number of divisions that impacted the school success of Aboriginal students. There were firstly a number of cultural factors that resulted in a misalignment between schools and communities. This was described as particularly the case when students came to the participating schools from remote communities, spoke English as a second language and had experiences with education systems using different curricula. Some participants felt that the expectations and goals that families and communities had for Aboriginal students were different that those that the schools valued. A lack of understanding about these cultural differences exacerbated the feelings of alienation for some students and their families.

A second major division described by participants was related to socioeconomic status. Some of the Aboriginal students who attended the schools were living in what participants described as poverty, where resources were not always available for food, clothing or other necessities. This was also the case for many non-Aboriginal students. All participants described the range of programs available at their schools to meet the needs of these students including providing breakfast and lunch. The sense of hopelessness experienced by individuals who are struggling to meet basic needs was cited as one reason for the disengagement experienced by some Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Participants suggested that the clear divisions evident in school and community among groups of students from varying socioeconomic realities also contributed to disconnection of students from schools.

Supports for success

-Teacher roles

Participants described an incredible amount of time and energy that they expended in attempting to build relationships with their students as well as their families. They felt personally responsible for the success of their students and were dedicated to motivating and engaging students and improving educational outcomes. All participants felt that academic improvement was the key to future success; that if students could achieve at grade level and develop broad competencies, that they could continue with a positive trajectory into secondary and post-secondary education. This path, they felt, was the way forward for the majority of students. Participants described instances where they had been successful in working with students and families to promote academic improvement and engagement.

A few participants highlighted the need for remedial instruction for many of their students but were concerned that removing students from the classroom for extra help only segregated them further. Teachers spoke also of their ongoing efforts to differentiate instruction in order to more effectively include students of varying levels.

Some participants expressed frustration with the varying roles that they were called on to play with respect to high needs students. They felt that they provided emotional and psychological

support to their students, particularly for those who had limited resources at home. Participants suggested that if individuals with greater training and experience in these areas could meet these needs, that teachers would be free to focus on academic improvement, which is where their expertise lay. More information about ways in which students and their families could be referred for services was requested. Teachers also described the stress that maintaining hopefulness and optimism in the face of ongoing student difficulties placed on them and the frequent 'burn-outs' that occurred.

All participants described a need for more resources, in terms of financing for programs as well as personnel, in order to assist teachers, students and families. Several successful initiatives were described along with the hope that further funding would contribute to sustainability of these. Examples of necessary personnel included social workers and counsellors for students and families to make sure that students had every possibility of success once they arrived in their classroom. Teachers also felt that additional professional development would help them to be able to differentiate their instruction more effectively so that a wider variety of students could be included.

Participants recognized as well the 'big picture' when it came to issues of attendance and disengagement of their students. They expressed a need for greater understanding among their colleagues and the community broadly about the larger social issues that contributed to their students' difficulties.

-Family support

Participants repeatedly highlighted the role of the families and communities in supporting students. Teachers described many families who were invested in their children's education and took part in home and school activities. Participants also spoke of many others who, while interested in helping their child(ren), had limited resources to accomplish this. A lack of experience with the formalized education system, differing perspectives as to the nature of supportive activities, a history of negative schooling experiences, and the myriad of issues stemming from poverty and unemployment were listed as barriers to parent involvement.

SUMMARY

The academic success of students is clearly influenced by myriad factors at the individual, school, family and community levels. The present study explored the perceptions of small groups of (a) Aboriginal students and (b) school staff with respect to strengths and needs as well as supports and barriers to ensuring said success. While clearly not representative of the larger school populations, the participants in these groups have provided some insight that may prove valuable to the development of future initiatives and practices for both teacher and student engagement and education.

Participants in all four groups described a number of strengths and competencies that Aboriginal students brought to their schooling. These strengths were felt to be valued to varying degrees. Teachers stated that all of their students had the ability and potential to be academically successful. However, they expressed concerns regarding the poor self-concept and low self-esteem they perceived in many of the Aboriginal students in their classes.

Students varied widely in their experiences at school and home. Some spoke of the support they received from their families and their long-term goals for post-secondary education and careers. Others expressed a lack of engagement with their education and confusion as to it's relevance in their lives. A few students described families who felt that education was important but were unable to provide regular academic support for various reasons.

Teachers also spoke of the heterogeneity among the Aboriginal students in their classes as well as the varying amount and type of support provided to students by their families. They felt that family members and role models in the community were key to allowing students to view themselves as capable of success in terms of education and employment. Many teachers expressed frustration at the complex needs presented by some of their students but felt that their role was to educate students to the best of their ability.

All students highlighted the role that peers played in their lives and the detrimental effects of interpersonal conflict. Older students described the importance of maintaining a good reputation and the positive perceptions of teachers and community members toward them.

Several students felt that they would be more motivated in their school work if they were given more opportunities to move around and take part in hands-on activities. Others expressed a desire to engage in more meaningful and authentic lessons with real-world applications. All students felt that they would like to focus on and showcase their areas of interest, including photography, film-making, cooking, and visual arts.

School staff participants expressed a need for greater support for the complex needs of their students and their families. Social workers and counsellors were suggested as examples. Many highlighted the growing academic gaps between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students

and felt that resources would best be focussed on closing these. However, it was suggested that removing students from classes for extra support may be detrimental to their social inclusion and could contribute to further disengagement. Continued and sustainable funding for initiatives shown to be successful was cited as one way to promote student success. Teachers also expressed the need for additional and continued training to be able to meet the needs of their students which they felt went beyond what was typically addressed in a B.Ed. program. Finally, all participants highlighted the continuing need to work collaboratively with families and communities in ways that were meaningful and mutually engaging.

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