

Running head: EMPOWERING ABORIGINAL STUDENT SUCCESS

Lessons from the Guidance Counsellor: Empowering Aboriginal Student Success

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Abstract

A positive cultural identity is a significant factor in Aboriginal student success in school. Aboriginal students in public schools in Manitoba are at a disadvantage because of the lack of emphasis placed on developing and sustaining Aboriginal student's cultural identity. The author provides personal reflections and uses published literature to promote changes that would enhance cultural identity development in Manitoba's public school system.

Lessons from the Guidance Counsellor:

Empowering Aboriginal Student Success

A positive cultural identity is a significant factor in Aboriginal student success in school. The need to foster cultural identity in Aboriginal students has often been overlooked by well intentioned educators. Educational psychologists now appreciate the significant role that cultural identity plays in developing a positive and cohesive sense of overall identity and how cultural identity impacts student learning. This paper will discuss the importance of cultural identity for Aboriginal students and discuss changes that can be made within education to promote this end.

Students who are Aboriginal are the focus of this conversation about cultural identity for two reasons. First, Aboriginal students are uniquely positioned within the Canadian milieu because of their distinct history and heritage. Second, students who are Aboriginal are deleteriously affected by hegemony. This author has chosen to use the word Aboriginal to denote those who are, or consider themselves to be, Aboriginal. It is this author's intention to honor Aboriginal youth in this discussion and this author gives sincere apologies at the outset if the term Aboriginal has any pejorative connotations from the reader's perspective. We must remember that, although we are talking about a legally predefined group of people, this author asserts that it is up to the individual to decide who is and who is not subsumed into this category. Who is Aboriginal is, in this author's opinion, a matter of personal conscious choice. This is self-determination.

Many Aboriginal students in Manitoba have had a distinct and often negative educational experience in our public school system that distinguishes them from other student populations. This lack of success has been the topic of much discussion among

educators, policy makers and community members in Manitoba. Of greatest concern is the significant social and fiscal cost to society related to an undereducated and therefore disadvantaged Aboriginal population (Brunnen, 2003). This pressure has moved into the educational enterprise and has resulted in an enormous amount of stress on teachers and the system as teachers are tasked to provide opportunities for Aboriginal students to succeed in the current educational context (Stephenson, 2007). These concerns are justified given that in 2003, among the western provinces, 75% of Aboriginal students aged 17-19 did not graduate from high school (Brunnen, 2003). There is also a sense of urgency around this issue because “within 10 years about 30 per cent of the students in Manitoba schools will be of Aboriginal descent” (Stephenson, 2007, p.5). It should be noted that there is the implication in the current educational model that Aboriginal students are in some way deficient and that they need to change. It is this author’s contention that Aboriginal students are not deficient and do not need to change. It is our current model of education that does not provide for their success.

In order to support educators in the field, there needs to be professional development opportunities to increase the ability of teachers to effectively teach Aboriginal students. One immediate change would be to develop and implement a professional development workshop that focuses on Aboriginal perspectives and that works to support a teacher’s transformative journey in this area. Participation in this workshop would be necessary in order for teachers (including Aboriginal teachers) to first understand themselves in terms of their cultural identity and its relationship to teaching, and then to apply how they can be more successful teaching Aboriginal learners.

As well, there needs to be overarching changes in the field of education that shore up support for Aboriginal learners. As Neito (2000) states, this can be done “by offering teachers and prospective teachers courses and other experiences that focus on questions of equity and diversity and that challenge deficit notions about the capabilities of students with diverse backgrounds” (p.186). Traditional teacher education models have undervalued the role that culture plays in student success. To this end all teachers need to clearly understand that education is a method of cultural transmission. Teachers need to be educated to know the hidden dimensions of culture and the mechanism by which cultural transmission works. It is imperative that teachers understand the concept of a positive cultural identity and its role in developing and maintaining self-esteem (Brown & Smirles, 2005). As well, teachers must develop a clear understanding of the connection among successful academic achievement and positive ethnic identity, as well as protective family factors (Ong, Phinney, & Dennis, 2006).

Cultural identity exists as a companion to personal identity. Cultural identity can be seen in a more understandable way as ‘the other side of self’. Teachers are very familiar with the notion of improving a student’s self-esteem and self-concept because they know to do this will improve self-perception and the learning capacity of the student. The same relationship exists with cultural identity. If you improve cultural identity, you will improve the learning capacity of the student.

Self-esteem and self-concept are important concepts used to conceptualize a student’s belief about how they feel and think about themselves. One could apply this understanding to relate esteem and concept to the idea of culture. In other words, there is also culture-concept and culture-esteem. The cultural view an Aboriginal student has of

their culture and their role in it is their culture-concept. If this view is negative, students would have a negative culture-concept and may perform below their ability level in school. A low culture-concept will result in reduced learning. A low cultural-esteem, or negative feelings about their cultural group and their place in it, will also result in reduced learning. Students are not typically aware of their level of self-concept and self-esteem. Students are also not typically aware of their culture-concept and culture-esteem. It is not until student think about these terms that there is awareness and even then, it is often difficult to bring these concepts into consciousness.

Teachers affect student's self-esteem and self-concept. Teachers also have an impact on culture-esteem and culture-concept. Of the many ways that teacher's impact culture-esteem and culture-concept, most occur superfluous to the individual. Students and teachers are not aware that they are transmitting the perceived value of their own culture compared to another culture onto the other person because much of this happens through implicit learning and occurs through non-verbal and para-verbal communication. This process occurs through low-road transfer. Teachers must become aware and work through their own salient prejudices in order to ensure that they are communicating positive messages to Aboriginal students via their non-verbal and para-verbal communication. Without intending to, teachers may be creating more angst in Aboriginal students that further works to lower student culture-esteem and culture-concept.

Cultural anomie also creates internal angst and tension within the individual. This stress reduces the learning capacity of the individual. For this reason alone, we as educators must work very hard to understand how to best alleviate this anxiety by

supporting students as they move between cultural settings so that these students can perform to the best of their ability.

The solution to these issues comes from how educators, embrace the inherent strength of the individual's cultural identity so that the student will see the teacher as an advocate and not as a threat to maintaining their own cultural identity. Aboriginal students can very quickly determine who is an agent of assimilation and who supports enculturation.

There has been a reluctance to closely examine teacher beliefs about cultural pluralism. Most teachers are from the Canadian mainstream society and many are very traditional in their values. To look at the issue of how Canadian mainstream teachers affect Aboriginal student success is a very sensitive one because the examination requires that teachers examine their participation in society in maintaining the status quo.

Educators need to embrace a new and multicultural paradigm in order for Aboriginal students to succeed in our public schools in Manitoba. Educators should construct a new paradigm based on positivism; one that looks at enhancing the inherent strength and resiliency of Aboriginal students. The framework for this paradigm could be based around the dimensions of multicultural education (Banks, 1999). There is an apprehension by many Aboriginal educators and policy makers to use a multicultural model because it does not clearly deal with the unique needs of students who are Aboriginal. However, James Bank's dimensions of multicultural education provide a solid framework to support Aboriginal learners in classrooms in Manitoba.

Educators in Manitoba are eagerly working to integrate or 'infuse' Aboriginal perspectives into all areas of the curriculum in order to strengthen students' and teachers'

cross-cultural competency (Guerra & Nelson, 2007). With this in mind, one obstacle that many educators face infusing Aboriginal curriculum is the lack of access to the exceptional resources written by, about and for Aboriginal people. As well, infusing these resources often requires a master teacher to cleverly create scaffolds to support student learning. These resources usually do not come with sufficient teaching strategies to support their implementation in the classroom. Another issue is the lack of confidence and content specific knowledge teachers have in integrating Aboriginal materials. As well, there is also a considerable desire not to offend Aboriginal students by appearing as a content expert on Aboriginal perspectives (Kanu, 2005). Even Aboriginal teachers are reluctant to impart traditional teachings without the support of an elder.

Infusing Aboriginal material into the curriculum is important but it is only a small step in working to enhance the culture-esteem and culture-concept of students who are Aboriginal. To integrate and infuse still supports the idea that there is a dominant society with a dominant curriculum. Students would also benefit from a transformative and social actions approach to learning (Banks, 1999).

While integration is significant, it is even more beneficial for all students to understand that knowledge is constructed within the cultural context in which it is created and valued. Some knowledge is more valued than other knowledge, not because it is closer to the truth, but because it is more culturally congruent. It is therefore critical to teach from a constructivist perspective so that students can work to “create” their own meaning of the world around them. This is a pedagogy that is equitable for all learners and will build positive culture-esteem and culture-concept in students who are Aboriginal. As well, the co-construction of knowledge is based upon students looking at

issues and ideas from multiple perspectives and then personally and collectively making sense of the information. This facilitated and often didactic approach most closely resembles traditional Aboriginal learning and is far removed from the one way, which is the correct way of knowing, approach that has historically been a part of traditional Western styles of teaching and learning (Hankes & Fast, 2002). Learning that is transformational is best for all- including Aboriginal youth. It might be of benefit to include a course similar to that which is embedded into the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program which examines the theory of knowledge. A program of study like this would teach all students to “become aware of the interpretative nature of knowledge, including personal ideological biases, regardless of whether, ultimately, these biases are retained, revised or rejected” (*IB diploma programme curriculum, theory of knowledge.*).

Schools in Manitoba are doing a very good job of teaching to reduce prejudice. Every school works to promote an inclusive environment and staff should be commended for their efforts. Taking things further would include teaching students about hegemony and cultural devaluation.

Manitoba Education needs to continue to ensure that school divisions and schools create climates that empower students who are Aboriginal. This requires that schools examine in a systematic way the subtle systemic discrimination that supports the fact that teachers who are Aboriginal are still visibly underrepresented in school divisions (Aboriginal Education Directorate, 2006). Educators encourage Aboriginal students who are interested in becoming teachers, and yet there are still not many Aboriginal teachers working in the public school system. According to the Aboriginal Education Directorate, in 2006 the percentage of Aboriginal teachers in Manitoba public schools was 6.1%

(2006). Students who are Aboriginal would be cognizant of the duplicity between the promise of equity and the social reality.

It is important for teachers to embrace the knowledge that a positive regard to one's culture and ethnicity build self-esteem which in turn supports greater academic progress (Quintana, 2007). A positive regard for culture is important for students and offers a protective influence that insulates the student against the effects of discrimination during child and adolescent development (Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006).

Teachers need an appreciation of the diverse Aboriginal cultures and of the protective influence culture serves in strengthening an individual's resiliency (Smith, 2006). Unfortunately, learning and maintaining one's cultural identity is a challenging thing for Aboriginal students to do given the deleterious effect of hegemony. Teachers need to understand this process and how to move away from praxis that does not build protective factors and support for Aboriginal students' identity development.

Ethnocentrism is a natural part of our own cultural identity and it generally operates in our unconscious thinking. Teachers must therefore know how perceptions are effected by the culture to which we belong. To this end, we must encourage teachers to move beyond their own cultural construction zones (Allen & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2004). In order for this to occur, teachers need the requisite knowledge and understanding so that they can perceive the world in a culturally neutral manner. Teachers need to learn how to identify the subtle aspects of teaching as a cultural ritual.

Aboriginal students would benefit if all teachers would move to a strength-based approach to educating Aboriginal students and focus on the intrinsic positive attitudes that support Aboriginal resiliency. It is this psychological resiliency that is the

cornerstone of Aboriginal intestinal fortitude. It is imperative that we move forward in support for Aboriginal students with our educational eyes wide open and with clear enthusiasm for Aboriginal students who have succeeded in spite of this educational enterprise.

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