

# Depictions of Success: Voices from Grade 12 Aboriginal Students

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The purpose of this paper is to describe how 12 high school Aboriginal students defined educational success and success in general. We focus on how success is traditionally described in education and spotlight alternate meaning of the term. The data for this qualitative study were 12 semi-structured individual interviews, where students depicted success as obtaining educational credentials and pursuing lifelong learning via spiritual maturity. The Canadian Council on Learning's *First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model* is used as an analytical framework to further analyze these findings. One implication arising from the study is that, in not already in place, educational leaders need to create school policies and programs to promote tutelage opportunities, arts-based courses, and after-school clubs and activities.

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## INTRODUCTION

Currently, there is an urgent call from policymakers and educational leaders to infuse Aboriginal<sup>6</sup> perspectives into Canadian classrooms and curricular content (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2010; Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2010; Government of Manitoba, 2008–2011; Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, 2010; Office of the Treaty Commissioner, 2012). Although there is a noticeable movement to incorporate Aboriginal ways of knowing into some school environments, this impetus is rife with challenges (St. Denis, 2011). For example, many teachers lack proper training with regard to knowledge and intricacies of Aboriginal ways of knowing. Consequently, many educators are hesitant

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<sup>6</sup> Aboriginal is a collective term for the original peoples of North America and their descendants. "The Canadian Constitution recognizes three groups of Aboriginal peoples: Indians (now known as First Nations people), Métis, and Inuit. These are three distinct peoples with unique heritages, languages, cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs" (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2010, para. 2)

to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives into their pedagogy and curriculum for fear of being culturally offensive (Aikenhead & Michell, 2011; Cherubini, Hodson, Manley-Casimir, & Muir, 2010). Furthermore, attempts to infuse Aboriginal ways of knowing into curricula have been compromised by policy demanding increased accountability and quantifiable measurement of individual student achievement (Bouvier & Karlenzig, 2006). Regardless of these challenges, Kanu (2011) viewed the call for the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives into schools as “one of the most advocated but still under-researched responses to the challenge of providing social recognition and justice for Aboriginal students in the Canadian public school system” (p. ix). Herein, we attempt to address Kanu’s articulated concerns by listening to the voice of Aboriginal students, in an effort to hear, first-hand, their views on what is working and not working for them in school.

The purpose of this paper is to describe educational success and success in general, according to Grade 12 Aboriginal students. This paper is part of a larger research project, where motivational issues surrounding school for Aboriginal students were also explored (Preston & Claypool, in press). Through semi-structured individual interviews, the 12 high school students involved in this study thematically indicated that success was a personalized phenomenon determined by past experiences and personal ambitions. We analyzed student views of success using the Canadian Council on Learning’s (2007a, 2007b) *First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model*, which depicts success as quadrilateral concept infused with a balance of academic, physical, emotional, and spiritual wellness.

Before explicating the study and its findings, it is important to acknowledge the literature associated with Aboriginal learners and the concept of success. In two pan-Canadian studies, Bell (2004) and Fulford (2007) studied 20 public and reserves schools and identified common characteristics within these schools that supported the educational success of Aboriginal students. Within 10 schools located in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and the Yukon, Bell indicated that educational success for Aboriginal students was supported by strong, tenured leadership, high expectation for students, welcoming school environment for students and families, quality professional development for staff, a range of in- and after-school student programs. Studying 10 schools located in Central and Eastern Canada, Fulford’s results reinforced Bell’s findings, plus four

additional findings. Fulford stipulated that exceptional language and cultural programs, a respect for Aboriginal culture and traditions, assessment linked to instruction and planning, and vigorous community partnerships also had a positive influence on Aboriginal student's educational success. Other research supports the idea that infusing Aboriginal language and culture into the education of Aboriginal learners is an important for promoting Aboriginal educational success (e.g., Arruda et al., 2010; McDonald, 2011; Joyce, n.d.; Nunavut Department of Education, 2008). As stipulated by the Council of Ministers in Education, Canada (2010), "Language is the foundation of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit cultures. For learners to achieve success in education, affirmation of their language and cultural identity is essential" (p. 10).

Rather than solely focusing on education to defining success, one can perceive a more holistic depiction of the term. In such a manner, success can be defined as experiencing a purposeful and fulfilled life. When success is defined in this broader fashion, research highlights that, for many Aboriginal learners, a successful, purposeful life is connected to knowledge of and or experience with one's heritage, language, cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs (Bazylak, 2002; Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012). In a study done with urban Aboriginal participants across Canada, over 2,600 people were individually interviewed, over 2,500 were interviewed over the phone, and about 180 completed an online survey (Environics Institute, 2010). This study highlighted that status First Nations and Inuit peoples were more likely than non-status First Nations peoples and Metis to associate a strong connection to their Aboriginal heritage with success in life. As well, in the Environic Institute study, most participants believed that leading a successful life involved having close connections with family. In general, these studies show that for many Aboriginal peoples experiencing a fulfilling, purposeful lifestyle is associated with connections to family and an Aboriginal heritage and cultural.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The research methodology used for this study promotes that the creation of socially-constructed knowledge is generated from the participants' and researchers' experiential, practical, and subjective understanding of life. Through this social constructivist approach to data collection, we embody

the belief that reality is the creation of the interactions among individuals and groups of people, and knowledge is filtered through the interpretations of individual people and, hence, differentially defined (Schwandt, 2007).

A central and blatant feature of this research was that it focused on Aboriginal issues. Many Indigenous scholars (e.g., Battiste, 2008; Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 2012) assert that Aboriginal peoples need control of their own knowledge and research. More specifically, these scholars explain that Aboriginal peoples have the right to do their own research, and, if non-Aboriginal researchers choose to assist Aboriginal peoples in conducting Aboriginal studies, the end results should empower and benefit Aboriginal peoples and communities, not solely researchers, university communities, and the Canadian society. Mindful of these aspects of Aboriginal research, we began this study by contacting an Aboriginal superintendent within a public school system within Saskatchewan (Canada), explaining the tentative research purpose. We asked if the research and its findings could potentially prove to be of benefit for Aboriginal students within their school. With the Aboriginal superintendent, we fine-tuned the purpose of the research. After the research was completed, the findings were presented to the superintendent, principal, and teachers in both Sun School and Moon School. During the data collection, we worked with an Aboriginal graduate student who assisted in the collection of data.

Using semi-structured individual interviews (Barbour & Schostak, 2011; Mason, 2002), we collected interview data under the conviction that a range of realities about a phenomenon, experience, or issue are equally valid. Twelve students between the ages of 17 to 19 volunteered to participate in this study. Marshall and Rossman (2011) described this form of sampling as criterion-based sampling, because all student volunteers who met the criterion of having an Aboriginal heritage and being enrolled in Grade 12 were invited to participate in the study. Each student was individually interviewed and audio-taped; thereafter, each interview was transcribed. The length of each interview lasted from about 20 to 60 minutes, with the average interview lasting about 35 minutes. After interviews were transcribed, students were provided with a written copy of their interview transcripts and asked to perform a member check to ensure the meaning the participants intended to convey during the interview was accurately represented in the written documents (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As a part of the member check,

we asked participants to change, alter, delete, and/or add anything to the transcripts as they deemed fit. After having a chance to make changes, the participants provided written assurance that the transcripts reflected a realistic representation of their intended meaning articulated during the interview. From these member-checked transcripts, we created a preliminary list of key ideas, commonalities, and differences, which converged into larger thematic patterns in response to the study's purpose (Creswell, 2014; Stake, 2005).

At the time of the study, all participants were enrolled in Grade 12 in one of two urban schools, which, for the purpose of this paper, we named *Sun School* and *Moon School*. (Both the names of these school and all student names<sup>7</sup> used in this paper are pseudonyms). The schools had Grade 9 to 12 enrolments of about 200 students (Sun School) and 500 students (Moon School). Four female and three male students were enrolled in Sun School, and two female and three male students were enrolled in Moon School. See Table 1 below for an overview of student participants, gender, and school location.

Table 1 - *Participant Description*

Participant Name	School	Gender
Megan	Sun School	F
Davis	Sun School	M
Bob	Sun School	F
Junior	Sun School	M
Seanna	Sun School	F
Jacob	Sun School	M
Sunrise Woman	Sun School	F
Amy	Moon School	F
Frank	Moon School	M
Tristan	Moon School	M
Sara	Moon School	F
Zack	Moon School	M

<sup>7</sup> For this research, the majority of participants chose personal pseudonyms. To promote clarity of some of the chosen names, "Sunrise Woman" was a student participant, and Bob was a female participant.

## DATA FINDINGS

When asking students about success, they predominantly talked about two types of success: educational success and the attainment of a fulfilling and/or purposeful life. They depicted educational success in terms of graduating from high school and acquiring sound careers; however, they also believed a successful life meant spiritual development and maturation via personal growth from experiencing life, its lessons and challenges. During their discussion of success, they also provided a number of suggestions for educational leaders about how to foster student success in school and beyond.

## DEPICTIONS OF EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

When talking about educational success, most participants spoke to the importance of graduating from Grade 12, getting high marks, and/or obtaining a future degree. Sunrise Woman said, "Success to me in school means getting your Grade 12, getting at least a degree in university, or you know, furthering your education in some way." In turn, Joe said, "Success for me means passing and getting a good career." Some students viewed good marks as an indication of educational success. Megan said, "It is important for me to attend school and get high marks, because it is my last year. I want to go to university." Tristan remarked, "I felt proud when I got my report card last semester for my [name of course] 20 and 30, and I saw that I got a 91% overall grade average." Davis explained that graduating from Grade 12 was an important milestone toward his successful career. To this point, he said, "It [graduating] means I can become an RCMP officer." While discussing the topic of educational success, Sara said, "I want to go to university, of course." Jacob wanted to go to culinary arts school and be the owner of a restaurant. He explained that in order to accomplish this goal, "School is critical to me." Megan, who wanted a future office career, considered the following:

So I thought to myself, 'Do you want to work at [name of fast food restaurant] for the rest of your life? Or do you want to have your career, like sitting in your office and answering phones, or doing something that you like?' So now my grades are getting higher.

Students perceived that graduating or getting some form of accreditation was a mandatory stepping-stone toward future career goals. Jacob and Seanna summarized the above comments when they

correspondingly said, "School is a must for me. I must have it" and "I'm in Grade 12 and I'm making my future right now."

In addition to the Grade 12 accreditation, students provided a number of smaller, but just as important, examples of educational success. Bob believed just arriving at school every day was a daily marker of success. Amy talked about her passion for a particular after-school sports club, and believed her school success was portrayed through her name on one of the school banners for a provincial award in that sport. Like Amy, Sunrise Woman talked explained how her experiences in after-school sports were indicators of success. She said, "Something I would stick with is the volleyball team. It was a real success." Seanna spoke proudly of her role on the school's student council, and, in particular, her part with the Gay and Straight Alliance school club. Joe was actively involved in the drum group at the school and excitedly spoke of its success. Megan, Davis, Sage, and Josie were enthusiastic as they described their participation with an after-school drama team. Not only did they depict the experience as successful because they put on plays for a receptive audience, but it was "fun learning with people," explained Sage. Jacob talked about his successful participation in school projects and, in turn, the awards he received. He explained, "From coming to school, good things have happened to me, opportunities like awards. The Geneva Conference, it's in Switzerland, and the National School Board Conference was in Toronto." The students' views on educational success in this broader fashion appeared to embody an intrinsic motivation to succeed.

One participant, in particular, explained how music was a focal point of his overall educational success. Davis talked about his difficult youth while growing up in an Aboriginal community and how his education success was partially influenced by the musical experiences his school promoted. Davis said, "I came from pretty much broken everything, nothing was good. I was heading down a road to nowhere. I had a lot of trouble. Then I came here, and I saw myself change." He went on to say, "I started thinking, 'What kind of person should I be? What kind of person should I turn into?' So I just turned to music. That is when I started playing guitar, and I excelled at it." He went on to explain that the school had a music program, where he was able to hone his musical skills. He also explained how appreciative he was that the school allowed him to take the guitar home with him to practice. In sum, he recognized his potential, followed his passion, and was appreciative

of the fact that his school had a strong music program, which supported this passion to succeed.

### INTERLINKING EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS WITH OVERALL LIFE SUCCESS

Participants explained how formal educational success and living a successful, fulfilling life were linked or reciprocal in nature. Davis explained that his life success was fostered through the school, its cultural activities, student-focused teaching, and teacher-students relationships. Davis claimed that this type of welcoming environment provided him with hope. He said, "There is hope here [at school]. They give you hope here. They help give you hope in yourself, and they hope you make it. I never had that before." Davis continued by explaining that this hope was the catalyst toward self-growth in other areas of his life. He explained that, once he will equipped with hope from the influence of school and its teachers, he was able to find spiritual support and fulfillment within his culture:

That is how I find support; it's through smudge. Something deep inside me tells me not to quit. Something is telling me that I have something. That I have so many things that people want, so many things in my life that can take me places.

Jacob explained that, for him, success was a mixture of reading, school work, and listening to teachers and Elders. On this point, he said:

You know, the more I read, the more I listened, the more I understood. That's what made me learn. It's just like listening to Elders. They teach you things and, you know, by listening you learn. But with school it's reading, and you learn. Or listening to the teacher speak, and you learn. So as my marks have improved as I think, "I can do this".

Joe wanted educational success formally acknowledge through a diploma or credential, because through such success, he would be empowered to help others. His depiction of a successful life was to use his education to assist him in helping his family and friends on his reserve. For Amy, success meant helping others. She said, "I want to be a paediatric nurse. I like helping kids." Amy perceived that in order to help others via being a nurse, she needed to experience educational success. In these person vignettes, educational success appeared to be a springboard toward leading a fulfilled life.

For other participants, leading a fulfilled life had little, if anything, to do with obtaining formal education. Tristan explained, "Being here doesn't mean you're going to be successful [in life], but basically [it means] graduating and having your marks up." Jacob explained that, to embody a successful life, "You have to humble yourselves. You have to follow an 'Indian Code of Ethics' in order to do good in life. That's what helps me in school and, you know, other things in life." As compared to the views of above participants, for Jacob, leading a purposeful life appeared to be a springboard toward achieving formal educational success.

### FOSTERING SUCCESS WITHIN SCHOOL

In order to promote both educational and life success, participants described what the school systems could do to assist them. Some students spoke about their desire for one-on-one tutors. To this point, Megan, Junior, and Seanna correspondingly said, "If I wanted to try really really hard and bring up my average higher, I would probably ask for someone to tutor me." "It would be a lot easier if we had more one-on-one time with teachers, but that is kind of hard to do," and "Maybe they could have study tutorials like for kids who need help and stuff, maybe like a study group. . . like one night, two nights a week for kids that want to study together or something." Other students talked about a need for teachers to change their pedagogical practices and approaches. Amy wanted step-by-step visuals to help her learn: "Like a diagram or something or point out things and show you another way. You'll have to do writing still but show you in another way so you can understand it so that you can do the writing better." Frank liked his biology teacher, because this teacher "explained things to you really well." Bob believed there should be solid due dates. She said, "They say things have to be done at a certain time, but I know they will give me more time so I won't really do it. I know that is probably not how it is in university." In this instance, Bob earned for more structure with regard to assignments. A number of students talked about the need to make topics more relevant to the students' personal interests. Sara believed that school would be more interesting if classes would involve interesting units and topics. Sara also raved about a school-exchange opportunity and said, "Right now, they have this thing where you can go and transfer to a different country for half a year. I'm like, 'Oh, my god! I want to do that.'" Tristan suggested that, in Math,

instead of doing “boring tests for every unit” that the teacher let the students create their own major assignment, based on a math concept.

Another aspect of school improvement that student believed would enhance their overall success was to have an increased focus on lunchtime and after-school activities, such as sports, music, and computers. Bob explained, “This school doesn’t have that many clubs, though. I think that would be really good if it had more clubs, because it would give you a chance to be around people who have similar interests.” She also believed, “We need more sports, way more sports. They need competitive sports, too. I want there to be co-ed sports and same-gender sports.” On the topic of sports, Junior commented, “For a while, I was on a hockey team, when they had a hockey team here. I was on the soccer team, too . . . I wouldn’t mind getting back into some sports.” Davis talked about the need for a music and computer room:

Maybe a music room. I know everyone here is really into music. Maybe for lunch because people are just wandering around or going somewhere else, maybe they could open the computer lab so that people can go on computers. Ya, that’s probably it – computer lab and music room.

As a final point, about half of the students explained that, for a variety of reasons, completing homework was extremely challenging for them. On the topic of homework, Frank stated, “I don’t do homework at all. So that kind of messes up how I do in school sometimes . . . that’s what’s dragging me down in C30 now, is not doing my homework.” Similarly, Tristan said, “I don’t do homework.” Seanna said, “If I go home I’m not going to get my work done, obviously, so they gave me this room [here at school] to do this work.” These comments suggest that educational protocol within school needed to rely less on student completion of work at home.

#### DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS: *FIRST NATIONS HOLISTIC LIFELONG LEARNING MODEL*

The Canadian Council on Learning’s (2007a; 2007b) *First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model* depicted lifelong learning as a quadrilateral concept involving mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing/success. A fulfilling and/or purposeful lifestyle is contingent upon seeking balance and maturity in these four areas, while being guided by nurturers such as mentors, counsellors, parents, teachers, and Elders. Integral to this

model, individual success and community welfare are a symbiotic concept, where one feeds the other. Furthermore, the *First Nations Holistic Lifelong Model* used the graphic of a circular living tree to show that learning is a “cyclical process that occurs throughout the individual’s lifespan” (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007b, p. 18). The Canadian Council on Learning (2007b) highlighted that, First Nations peoples, lifelong learning and success is grounded in experiences that embrace both Indigenous and Western knowledge traditions, (p. 18) and is metaphorically influenced and illustrate via the tree’s root system. That is, roots are the intertwining presence of Indigenous and Western knowledge, and any uneven root growth in one particular domain can de-stabilize the learning and life successes. In this model, there are four dominant branches (i.e., political, economic, social, and spiritual/ cultural prosperity) to depict dominant aspects of life and learning.

When students described success, many of their comments aligned with particular aspects of the mental and physical branches of the *First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model* of success. For example, students recognized that a part of success was graduating from Grade 12 (a milestone in public Westernized education). In turn, a high school graduation can be transposed upon the mental (branch of the tree) and political (leaf cluster) aspect of the *First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model*. In obtaining high school credentials, students believed that they were empowered to continue toward success in high education and a successful career. Comparing this point to the *First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model*, these aspects of success could be associated with the student’s physical and/or economic security, and, for many students, they wanted to use their individual educational and career success to better the lives of others and enhance community wellbeing, a feature of symbiosis, as mentioned above.

In addition to career aspirations and, in turn, financial security, physical goals could also be referred in terms of after-school sports. Many authors have highlighted how physical activity is often linked to increased self-confidence and, in turn, educational success. Petitpas (2009) claimed that sports and recreational activities assist in creating a positive attitude with regard to attaining educational goals and success. Martinek and Hellison (2009) stated that when young people are successful in sports, social competence, self-awareness, and self-confidence are additional outcomes. Regular participation in sporting activities is associated with social and

personal development, health and wellbeing, cultural awareness, economic development, personal prosperity, and educational success (Aboriginal Sport Strategy, 2005).

Although the majority of students did not use the specific terms of *emotional* or *spiritual* when referring to success, some students (e.g., Davis and Jacob) referred to these concepts. For example, Davis explained that the first part of success was hope, an emotional aspect of success. For Jacob, an integral first step to success was being able to listen and observe from others, an emotional and spiritual feature of maturity. Other students talked about the importance of school clubs, because these associations fed social, emotional, and spiritual components of self.

As an overview of the findings, student depictions of educational success focused on graduation rates, postsecondary credentials, and career aspirations, which align to the *First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model* of mental and some aspects of physical wellbeing. Students recognized that their public education system was the predominant influence for these successes. In contrast, students spoke less to the notion of emotional and spiritual wellbeing and success. Some students either explained or alluded to the fact that the school was providing some of these avenues toward obtaining emotional and spiritual wellbeing; however, from the most part, the importance of obtaining a balance of mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual successes was not fully articulated by these students. This point implies that a Westernized educational system appears to place excessive importance on mental and physical successes and a limited focus on emotional and spiritual success.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study reinforces the idea that the public educational system largely promotes the academic success of Aboriginal students. Although academic success is vital part of education, in reviewing the *First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model*, the intellectual aspect of success is only one of the four branches of education and lifelong learning. Claypool and Preston (2011) stated:

Educational systems need to depart, at least partially, from this zone of cognitive competence and move toward promoting an educational zone of trustful intuition. Within this *zone of trustful*

*intuition*, educators would promote a style of learning which targets student development of emotional and spiritual domains, encouraging students to acknowledge their emotional reactions and their immediate instincts when approaching learning situations and important decisions. (p. 92)

In particular at a policy level, in order to promote the emotional and spiritual aspects success for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students alike, teachers need to be supplied with quality professional development opportunities that assist in strengthening their skills in this area. This research also highlighted that student participation within the arts and after-school activities were motivators for their overall educational success. In turn, at the school level if not already in place, educational leaders may need to create school policies and programs to promote tutelage opportunities, arts-based courses, and after-school clubs and activities, which this research indicated supports educational success.

Future studies need to explore how a decolonized education system can nourish the learning spirit of students (Battiste, 2013) not only in high school, but in middle and elementary divisions, as well. Also of potential importance is the continued collection of data and/or stories that reflect how integration of Aboriginal heritage and culture into the larger school system and individual classroom environments affect the success and wellbeing of Aboriginal students. Furthermore, research pertaining to what roles school administrators and teachers play in promoting Aboriginal students' successful would be helpful.

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