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A Vision of Culturally Responsive Programming for Aboriginal Women in University: An Examination of Aboriginal Women's Educational Narratives

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Abstract

This paper explores Aboriginal women's access to and success within universities through an examination of Aboriginal women's educational narratives, along with input from key service providers from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. This research was implemented through the Wildfire Research Method, which is an Indigenous research method that involves an Aboriginal elder and is guided by spirituality and ceremony. This approach allowed the participants to engage in a consensus-based vision of accessible education that honours the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical elements necessary for the success of Aboriginal women in university. This study positions Aboriginal women as agents of social change by allowing them to define their own needs and offer viable solutions to those needs. Further, it connects service providers from the many disconnected sectors that affect Aboriginal women's education access. Drawing on the participants' narratives, recommendations for culturally responsive programming are presented.

This study reveals the educational experiences of Aboriginal women, as told through their own educational narratives, and identifies the barriers that Aboriginal women face in terms of access to and success within university institutions. An examination of the women's narratives, along with key contributions from front-line workers and cultural advocates, reveals to what extent culturally responsive programming for Aboriginal women is needed, and what an access program that is designed to meet the holistic needs of Aboriginal women and their families should comprise.

Background

The population of Aboriginal women and girls in Canada rose 20.3 percent from 2001 to 2006 compared with only 5.6 percent for their non-Aboriginal counterparts. The province-wide reality in Ontario is such that the population under

twenty-five years of age makes up 46 percent of the total population, and 70 percent of that population now resides in urban centres (Statistics Canada 2009). At the same time, post-secondary educational attainment is on the rise for Aboriginal women in Canada. The educational achievement rates of Aboriginal women in Canada, however, are lagging in comparison to their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Data from the 2006 Census suggest that in 2006, 9 percent of Aboriginal women in Canada had a university degree, compared to 23 percent of non-Aboriginal women. Data also suggest that Aboriginal women are likely to postpone their post-secondary studies until later in life. There are more Aboriginal women in the older age categories (thirty-five to thirty-nine years to fifty to fifty-four years) with post-secondary education than in the younger age groups (twenty-five to twenty-nine years and thirty to thirty-four years); data suggest the opposite trend among the non-Aboriginal population where there are more younger than older women with post-secondary education (Statistics Canada 2009).

A 1996 statistical profile of Aboriginal single mothers in Canada established that there is a tendency for Aboriginal single mothers to continue their education well beyond their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Hull 2001). It concludes that this tendency suggests that being both Aboriginal and a single mother is not a barrier to education. This suggestion, however, fails to look deeper into the statistical profiles of those women to reveal their experiences with respect to education. As Patricia Monture-Angus (2007) articulates:

When the analysis of race and gender is shifted beyond a demographic analysis to a place that gives space for the experience and meaning of socially and economically vulnerable groups, a more vibrant and reflective sociology emerges. This can be demonstrated through an examination of the life experiences, biographies and narratives of Aboriginal women. (208)

This study offers a valuable contribution to the limited body of research on Aboriginal women's experiences in universities by going beyond a demographic analysis to give space for the experience and meaning of the educational realities of Aboriginal women. Through the participants' narratives, this work demonstrates that Aboriginal women, many of whom are young mothers, face numerous barriers associated with access to and success within post-secondary education. The participants identify an immediate and striking need for university access, and culturally relevant and safe programming that responds to these barriers and honours the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of Aboriginal women and their families. That the tendency of Aboriginal single mothers to pursue university is strikingly different from the statistical pattern of non-Aboriginal single mothers only attests to the resilience, strength, and determination of Aboriginal women.

A discussion on developing university programming that responds to the needs of Aboriginal women and their families goes well beyond the mere notion of access. For Aboriginal women, access to post-secondary education continues long after those women “walk through the door.” Such programming must respond holistically and intensively to the needs of Aboriginal women and families for its entirety. This involves an integrated approach that bridges the gap between academic programming and Aboriginal student services. In this way, the proposed holistic-support model attends to the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of Aboriginal women, providing opportunity and success for Aboriginal women, families, and communities. Thus, it promotes the *biimaadiz-iwin* framework of achieving “the good life.”

The following discussion demonstrates the need for culturally responsive programming, and culturally safe spaces to promote Aboriginal women's university access and success. I begin by outlining the research project and methodology that informs this paper. I then present recommendations for the development of culturally responsive and safe programming as identified through the narratives of Aboriginal women. More specifically, the proposed vision refers to academic programming that is embedded within a holistic system of support. A discussion follows that presents the need for universities to open the door to Aboriginal women, offering not only access but also opportunities for success, and positioning language and culture as core components of the development of strong identities. Finally, I urge universities, educators, and program developers to position Aboriginal women's educational experiences within a strength-based framework that honours the participants' vision of culturally responsive programming.

The Research Project

This research stems from a larger study on Aboriginal women's access to and success within universities through an examination of Aboriginal women's educational narratives, along with input from key service providers from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. This study positions Aboriginal women as agents of social change by allowing them to define their educational needs in balance with their familial responsibilities, and offer viable solutions to those needs. Further, it connects service providers from the many disconnected sectors that affect Aboriginal women's education access, such as child care and housing, thereby providing an educative opportunity for service providers, as well as encouraging a more integrated and holistic service model. Stemming from this research is a proposed vision of a culturally relevant academic program that is infused with a variety of support services that will assist Aboriginal women in achieving their full academic potential.

This research was implemented through the Wildfire Research Method (WRM) (Hodson 2004; Kompf and Hodson 2000), an Indigenous research method that engaged participants in a consensus-based vision of accessible education that

honours the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical elements necessary for the success of Aboriginal women in university. Spiritually based and vision-driven, the WRM involves an elder, who guides the participant circle through a communal and sacred research environment. Akin to a focus group, this method resembles a talking circle, whereby participants meet to engage in a guided discussion through interactive dialogue. The strength of this research design is that it allows participants to be involved in a holistic, invitational, and comfortable atmosphere that is consistent with Aboriginal teachings and beliefs. Full details about the research design and methodological decisions can be found in Brant (2011).

Participants

The WRM was engaged through a two-phased approach involving two separate Wildfire Gatherings. Wildfire Gathering 1 (WG1) consisted of sixteen participants. The participants were purposefully selected because they identified as front-line workers and cultural advocates from areas defined as the six major elements of success for accessible education of Aboriginal women in urban settings: academic support, cultural education, cultural student support, housing, funding, and child care. These elements of success arose through an examination of my own educational narrative, which was the initial phase of the research project (Brant 2011). This group included two elders—an Anishinaabe man and a Métis woman—who were closely involved in Aboriginal post-secondary education and offered traditional and spiritual guidance throughout the sessions. The other fourteen participants included a number of prominent leaders from local Aboriginal organizations to ensure that community involvement informed research development. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women and men engaged in academic or service roles related to any of the above elements of success were also part of this participant group to contribute understandings about the needs of Aboriginal women in university and the availability and feasibility of services. The purpose of this first phase was to envision how an access program that meets the needs of young Aboriginal women might look.

Wildfire Gathering 2 (WG2) consisted of one elder—the same Métis woman from WG1—to offer traditional and spiritual guidance, and four young Aboriginal women who were purposefully selected from the surrounding urban community. Of these women, three were university students and one indicated a future goal of pursuing university. These women were selected so that their educational experiences in urban settings could inform this research. The strength in this approach is that the narratives came directly from community members who actually live the experience. As such, these young women participants were best suited to describe their own educational needs and offer their vision of accessible, culturally relevant, and safe programming.

The participants from both Wildfire Gatherings offered clear educational specifications for responsive, culturally relevant, and safe programming. Together the

women envisioned a program that will assist Aboriginal women in achieving balance between two world views—traditional and academic—through the application of traditional knowledge to modern contexts, while developing and maintaining strong cultural identities and supporting their familial needs through culturally relevant services such as child care.

To maintain confidentiality for all participants (including the elders), pseudonyms have been used and all identifiers have been removed from the data. The section that follows reveals the localized realities of Aboriginal women as defined through their educational narratives. By presenting their voices to drive the development of culturally responsive university programming, a holistic response to the physical, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual needs of Aboriginal women and their families is proposed.

Findings: A Vision of Culturally Responsive Programming

Responsive programming for Aboriginal women can be thought of from two vastly different ideological positions. One ideology stems from a deficit-based view, positioning Aboriginal women as needing assistance in terms of access to university, as demonstrated by the achievement gap with their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Because of the low representation of Aboriginal women in university, this ideological position concludes that they must need special assistance to meet university-level standards. This position favours one system of learning over another. It “problematizes” Aboriginal women, and views education as a viable solution to the “problem.”

The other ideological position stems from a strength-based view, understanding the experiences of Aboriginal women in education through the historical, political, social, and cultural contexts that shape their everyday lives. It understands the barriers Aboriginal women face in terms of access to and within education in the context of colonization and institutionalized racism. It acknowledges an Aboriginal way of being and learning as legitimate knowledge. It recognizes the need to honour the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual components of self. It recognizes language and culture as essential in supporting and encouraging the development of strong identities among Aboriginal women. Only through an understanding of a strength-based view can a discussion of culturally responsive and culturally safe programming take place.

Again, the purpose of this study is to go beyond mere demographic analysis to uncover the multiple experiences of Aboriginal women in education, and to envision responsive programming that honours their spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs. The participant narratives provide valuable insights into the realities of Aboriginal women, offering a clear vision of Aboriginal women's university access and success. The seven themes that emerged from the data are: Identity; Classroom Experiences and Implications; Pursuing Post-secondary

Education; Indigenous Ways of Being and Learning; Knowledge; Balance; and Critical Elements of Access and Success. These themes, although discussed individually, are interconnected and shape the educational experiences of Aboriginal women in complex ways (Brant 2011). I begin with Identity to develop a framework for promoting educational programming that fosters the development of strong cultural identities. The next two themes, Classroom Experiences and Implications, and Pursuing Post-secondary Education provide insights into the way identity is implicated through education, and in turn, implicates the educational desires of Aboriginal women. The themes Indigenous Ways of Being and Learning, and Knowledge set a foundation for a discussion on culturally relevant pedagogy. Balance serves as a reminder of the elements that must be honoured in Aboriginal women's education. Finally, Critical Elements of Access and Success is offered to shed light on the accessibility barriers that hinder Aboriginal women's educational success and promote the creation of culturally safe spaces that embrace Aboriginal women's realities as educational opportunities.

Identity

Identity may very well be one of the most significant issues facing Aboriginal women today. Lawrence (2003) asserts that "Native identity has for generations been legally defined by legislation based on colonialist assumptions about race, Nativeness, and civilization, which are deeply rooted in European modernity" (24). Moreover, Lawrence outlines how the regulation of identity is rooted in the colonization process by discussing the systems of classification based on racist and sexist ideas. Lawrence notes that these systems of classifying Native identity serve to divide communities, and, in turn, position colonial frameworks within the community, where Native people themselves begin to govern their own communities through colonial constructions of Indianness. According to Hundleby, Gfellner, and Racine (2007), "an awareness of the dynamics involved in Aboriginal identity and how it contributes to adaptive development is essential to aid future generations in achieving their potential" (226).

Resulting from the colonial frameworks that govern Aboriginal communities are deep-rooted issues associated with internal shame and cultural disconnect-ness. There is little, if any, research that identifies and exposes the ways in which the cycle of shame exists and manifests itself within Aboriginal peoples. The findings from the participants' narratives expose the complexities of cultural shame as it exists in the lives of Aboriginal women; however, there is much more that must be understood about this shame cycle. Greenwald and Harder (1998) explain that shame leads to conformity to gain the acceptance of a social group and to offset the associated anxiety of non-acceptance. Thought about in this way, shame is problematic for Aboriginal women in urban educational settings as it alienates us from ourselves, our histories, traditions, cultures, and world views. The further we move from our cultural selves, the more diminished the security that comes with having a positive self-identity and a strong sense of self becomes.

As a result, we become lost between two clashing world views. Likewise, the more Aboriginal women move away from their own ways in search of acceptance from the mainstream, the more alienated they become from their identities.

The findings from WG2 demonstrate how the women were affected by cultural shame (Brant 2011). The participants connected their feelings of shame with the intergenerational impact of the residential school system. Today, these women are no longer forbidden to speak their languages; perhaps this is not necessary, because many do not know or speak their language. The women are no longer physically punished for expressing themselves culturally and spiritually in class. Perhaps this is because the implicit attacks on their culture and spirituality in classrooms have become so accepted that they go unacknowledged. Yet, irrelevant and insensitive curriculum, along with ongoing exposure to negative stereotypes continue to dominate their educational experiences, fostering the cultural shame cycle. Hundleby, Gfellner, and Racine (2007) explain how Aboriginal students continue to be colonized through the lack of cultural exposure in school:

Contemporary children and youth continue to be threatened and unable to protect the self from an unsympathetic school system. In this way, they are marginalized. They are not taught in their own tradition in schools or at home, and what they are taught threatens an already fragile identity. (227)

The women, however, acknowledged a desire to find balance within two worlds, to have access to traditional knowledge in the classroom, and to have exposure to truthful histories that are relevant to who they are as Aboriginal women. The women themselves envision the very things that were forbidden and taken away from Aboriginal families in residential schools—culture, language, and identity—to be core components of a culturally responsive education program for Aboriginal women. In this way, educational programming for Aboriginal women becomes a decolonizing process in which cultural shame is addressed and the development of strong cultural identities is fostered.

As issues of identity are rooted in colonization, the strengthening of Aboriginal women's identities must be positioned within a decolonization process. While it was suggested in WG1 that Aboriginal women's programming stem from an assets-based approach—with culture and language being key assets—understanding that Aboriginal women in urban communities come from diverse nations with varying cultural and linguistic backgrounds is critical. How then are universities able to develop culturally relevant programming that encourages the development of strong cultural identities through such an assets-based approach? The answer to this question may be found within the elder's comment in WG1 that "we are like a garden with all different flowers." The elder encouraged us to look for commonalities among Aboriginal cultures, and to build upon these commonalities to encourage the women to move towards their own culture. In light of the elder's comment, responsive programming should incorporate cultural commonalities

into the curriculum and encourage the women to bring their own cultural understandings, traditions, and ways of being into the classroom. Ultimately, Aboriginal women must be empowered to develop and strengthen their own cultural identity. Understanding who they are and where they come from should become a central theme within the women's curriculum. In this way, the women are able to seek out their own identities and bring themselves into the classroom and their educational work in a decolonizing way. In honour of the above, universities and educators must foster opportunities for the women to bring themselves (their cultural selves and everything they carry with them) into classroom environments and, by extension, position Aboriginal women's education within a decolonizing context through the guidance of cultural traditions and language.

During WG1 several participants talked about the importance of a visual representation within universities that reflects positive images of Aboriginal identity. This visual representation should take place at all levels of the university. More specifically, there needs to be more representation within the staff (faculty and administration) and within the "halls" (pictures and artwork). This visual representation must be culturally relevant and reflect positive images of Aboriginal peoples at large. The importance of positive representations was also noted in WG2, where the participants noted a desire to have Aboriginal role models brought in as guest speakers.

Overall, with respect to identity, it is important that Aboriginal women are encouraged to be who they are, bring their whole selves into the classrooms (as Aboriginal women, mothers, daughters, community members, and so on), and develop strong cultural identities. As the elder in WG2 put it:

You have to be solid...and feel good about your own identity before you can pass anything out to anyone else...If you know who you are and you accept yourself, you're sailing...Nothing can possibly take that away from you or make you feel inferior, because you're safe within yourself.

Certainly, the strength that comes with having a strong cultural identity will have a significant impact on Aboriginal women's educational success.

Classroom Experiences and Implications

The theme of Classroom Experiences and Implications emerged from the disheartening realities the women shared about the classroom injustices they faced. In many ways these experiences foster the cultural shame cycle, making the need for culturally safe spaces evident. The women discussed the extent of the institutional racism that dominated some of their classes. A couple of the women shared stories about being centred out in class for different reasons associated with their Aboriginal identity, while others described the harm associated with insensitive and irrelevant curriculum. In WG1, Katherine discussed the negative effect the curriculum had on her university experience:

It is great to be welcomed by Aboriginal student services, and it is great to be having a welcoming centre, but once you walk out those doors and you walk into a classroom and you learn about Aboriginal people...that is where [students] are facing the barriers...I sat in classes and just felt angry because of what was being taught...The first couple of years [in university] I just sat there quiet.

Katherine's contribution demonstrates the extent to which universities must foster a culturally safe environment for Aboriginal women. As she pointed out, a culturally safe environment must go beyond Aboriginal student services. It must also be provided in classrooms and be supported by culturally relevant curriculum.

There is a need for the university to understand the experiences of Aboriginal women in the context of colonization and the associated issues of identity and shame. Educators, not only within programming specific to Aboriginal women, but also beyond, must understand and be sensitive to issues of identity and shame. Initiating "educating the educator" and sensitivity training initiatives will serve to prevent, and bring awareness to, some of the hurtful and shameful experiences that the participants described. For example, in WG2, one participant described her frustrations with course content concerning residential schools in one of her women's studies courses. It is extremely important that educators are aware of the harm that may occur when such topics arise. Not only is it important that the curriculum is relevant and truthful, but it is also important that when potentially harmful topics arise, the feelings of Aboriginal students in the class are considered and that these students are not subjected to further colonial abuses through inaccurate and insensitive assertions. It is the responsibility of the instructors of all courses that contain any form of Aboriginal content to consult with Aboriginal knowledge holders within the community to ensure the accuracy and sensitivity of the material and to promote a culturally safe environment in their classrooms.

Many of the experiences and relationships that occur within education are influenced by experiences beyond the educational sector and arise from the greater social and political mindset of mainstream thought. While human rights policies exist within universities to address issues of injustice, such as racism and gender discrimination, the narratives of the women speak to the fact that injustices, including experiences of racism, continue to exist and are experienced by Aboriginal women in mainstream classrooms. In light of the above, there must be consultation between administrators of programming for Aboriginal women and the institution's human rights and equity department to ensure cross-cultural understandings and appropriate protocols in response to such experiences. Relationships between staff (faculty and administrators) and Aboriginal students, including the Aboriginal women who may participate in specialized programming, must be developed and enhanced through sensitivity-training initiatives so that educators and other staff can become aware of

these issues. Further, ongoing relationships and consultations need to take place between staff (faculty and administrators) and Aboriginal education councils in response to the aforementioned issues.

Pursuing Post-Secondary Education

The forces that motivate Aboriginal women to pursue post-secondary education are, in general, different than other students (Monture-Angus 1995). Battiste (1998) advises that Aboriginal students are looking to liberate themselves through education, and to bring knowledge that will facilitate community healing back to their own communities. The women's contributions from WG2 echo the above; they explain that their decisions to attend post-secondary education involve the desire to provide a better life for their children and families, and to bring knowledge back to assist their communities. Janet noted that having her daughter at an early age was a motivating force for her to "do something with her life." Amanda talked about the desire to find employment as her motivating force, and Katherine noted her desire to bring knowledge back to her community. While all of the participants in WG2 placed value on post-secondary education, they also revealed the intersecting barriers that hindered their access to university. For example, Sherry noted:

I'd like to do something in education as well, but right now it's just kind of in the far, far distance. I can barely see it because it's so hard right now...I'm too worried about where I'm going to put my family, I'm too worried about housing (crying) and money and financial situations and food to worry about school ...but it is something that I would like to eventually, so that if there is a program that can make that easier for me then it would really be helpful.

In light of the above contributions, it is important that universities recognize and acknowledge these motivating forces and respond by offering relevant programming that will assist the women in reaching their goals. Responsive programming should provide meaningful educational experiences for Aboriginal women that provide them with opportunities to contribute to their families and communities. Finally, responding to the barriers that hinder access must include integrated solutions that offer child care, housing, and funding resources.

In WG1, Sharon noted the importance of educating potential students on the reasons why pursuing post-secondary education is important. Advisement on the benefits of pursuing post-secondary education should be incorporated into information sessions as well as recruitment initiatives. It is important that Aboriginal women understand what opportunities a university education will provide. Further to this, information on career choices and relevant program planning should be provided to potential students. Finally, career counselling and program-planning services should be offered throughout their studies on an ongoing basis.

Indigenous Ways of Being and Learning

The findings from this study position Indigenous ways of being and learning that inform, and are informed by, an Indigenous world view and related epistemic traditions as key components of educational programming for Aboriginal women. More specifically, the participants from both Wildfire Gatherings highlighted the importance of the following: bringing Aboriginal traditions into contemporary contexts; kinship and centring children in education; a paradigm shift; and honouring Indigenous knowledge.

In WG1, several of the participants noted the importance of applying traditional ways of life to contemporary educational experiences by applying cultural teachings to modern contexts. For example, Katherine noted the importance of reclaiming societal structures in which all members had a role and contributed to the overall well-being of the collective. She noted that this could be incorporated into Aboriginal women's programming by fostering a learning community that encourages all women to contribute. Likewise, Darrel spoke of the need to model the clan system by giving each woman a specific role based on the individual gifts that she brings to the classroom. The participant contributions highlight the importance of supportive learning communities in Aboriginal women's programming to foster an environment in which women have unique roles and responsibilities. Rotating these roles throughout the duration of a program will offer women the opportunity to explore different areas. This is one viable example of how to structure classes in a way that models traditional social structures and brings them into contemporary classroom settings.

Another suggestion offered by one participant was to encourage the women to start writing about the "hallmarks of civilization" in reference to Indigenous knowledge that existed long before contact. This is extremely important to a decolonizing education program and should be incorporated into course curriculum. As part of a writing or history course, for example, the women could choose an area of interest, such as traditional birthing or parenting practices, and write about these practices as they existed before contact, how they have been influenced and suppressed through contact, and how they can be reinvigorated. Assignments such as this could be very empowering for the women, contributing to the development of their overall cultural identity and strengthening their academic writing skills.

Fostering a kinship-based environment and centring children in Aboriginal women's educational experiences was another area raised throughout the Wildfire Gatherings. Several participants emphasized the need to honour all of the things that the women carry with them in their roles as mothers, daughters, and so on. Associated with this is the need for the university to recognize, honour, and embrace these roles. Perhaps, as suggested in WG1, there is a need to educate universities on the importance of welcoming parent and child bonding. As one participant noted, creating an environment that is culturally based means establishing systems of kinship. This may take the shape of welcoming nursing children into the classroom and having on-site child care or an early years centre

akin to an Aboriginal head start model. The participants in WG2 talked about the desire to have on-site child care and they mentioned the possibility for an Aboriginal head start program or similar model of care where culture would be a strong component of the child care program. Kim brought up the idea of having a space for children and their families, such as an on-site early years centre. She imagined this to be a place where women, children, and families could come together and share knowledge. Building on Kim's vision, Amanda perceived this to be a space where the women could take turns caring for the children and share responsibilities. This conversation made it clear that on-site, culturally appropriate child care that welcomes and embraces the women's participation and involvement in care was important to the participants. Fostering a kinship environment means that there is an available space for Aboriginal women and children on campus where babies can be nursed, diapers can be changed, and peers can mind children while their mother is in class. In whatever form this takes, it is important to honour "children as the gift" and provide tangible supports to the women and their families that re-centre the child in Aboriginal women's education.

Participants in WG1 demonstrated the need for a paradigm shift that honours kinship-based systems. Extending on this idea, Valerie pointed out that the recognition of the cultural differences between Aboriginal and Western ideas of education involves "a real paradigm shift for any university." Further, the participants from both Wildfire Gatherings emphasized the need to shift away from a hierarchical model of learning towards a more circular model in which everyone is equal. The need to honour circular models is evident in Carly's assertion:

The nature of provincial education...is very hierarchical; we [Aboriginal people] are not that. We are not hierarchical; we are very horizontal and so by the Western education models it teaches us to place ourselves in that vertical mosaic, so to speak, but we need...and this needs to be very much included in any kind of program...the respect for all of the individuals, and nobody is higher or lower than the others, everybody has a place, everybody is as important as the next, and I think that is a real move away from Western ideas of teaching and learning. (WG1)

While hierarchical models of education are not conducive to meeting the needs of Aboriginal women, a paradigm shift, as outlined by the participants, could promote circular models of education that encompass Aboriginal principles of teaching and learning.

The need to bring traditional speakers into Aboriginal women's programming as a shift towards culturally relevant curriculum was also made evident throughout the gatherings. One participant pointed out the importance of honouring the knowledge of "Aboriginal historians, our storytellers, our elders" (WG1), and

recognizing their knowledge as equivalent to that of other professionals who are brought into the university as guest lecturers. There are many traditional speakers available who have a great wealth of knowledge to share. Their teachings are invaluable to Aboriginal women's education. Participant contributions revealed that the role of traditional speakers in responsive programming is unquestionably necessary to the success of the Aboriginal women's educational programming.

Knowledge

Throughout both Wildfire Gatherings, the participants discussed what knowledges they considered necessary to Aboriginal women's educational success. Throughout these discussions, the interconnectedness of language, culture, and identity became evident. During WG1, for example, one participant stressed the importance of language, as it is intricately connected to culture and ceremony, revealing the importance of learning and reclaiming Aboriginal languages. Likewise, Katherine affirmed the importance of our languages as they are related to cultural protocols and ceremonies:

Language [is] one of the most important things about our cultures, because without that we lose so much. We lose those songs, we lose those forms of dance, and we lose those ceremonies that should be taught and done in the language.

She asserted that much of the meaning is lost when these cultural practices and ceremonies are performed in English rather than the traditional languages, and she therefore advised that it is important to explain and correlate those teachings. Katherine's comment reveals the importance of learning and reclaiming Aboriginal languages so that those teachings and the meanings embedded in the teachings are not lost in translation.

One space where I experienced the connection between language and culture was in the Mohawk language courses I took during my university studies. The structure of these courses served as a model that fostered the essential connections Katherine presented. In these classes, students were taught not only the language, but also the meaning behind the language. There was a strong emphasis on the ways the Mohawk language is based on relationships that derive from a Haudenosaunee way of life. These Mohawk language courses serve as honourable representations of university courses that are guided by an Indigenous world view and honour Indigenous ways of being and learning. These classes foster an environment in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students engage in a classroom community and provide a classroom spirit that I have not experienced in other university classes. Unlike any other university course I have taken, I was able to bring my children to class. This made the evening classes accessible to me, regardless of my lack of evening child care. This classroom became very much like the classroom environment Valerie described in WG1, where the presence of children changed the classroom spirit. My classmates not only tolerated and

accepted my son, but they also encouraged and assisted with his engagement in class activities. The Mohawk language classes represent the kind of “paradigm shift” that provides a model for Aboriginal women’s programming.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that programming for Aboriginal women incorporate curriculum that involves a series of lessons that will assist Aboriginal learners to develop the skills necessary to excel in the program and beyond. More specifically, participants suggested initial introductions to the “language of the university” and “navigating the library” be offered. Critical thinking, writing, reading, and numeracy skills should also be incorporated into Aboriginal women’s curriculum. The women in WG2 also offered specific recommendations for curriculum development. Suggestions for culturally relevant curriculum included: Aboriginal history, traditional teachings, women’s stories, traditional parenting, spirituality, women’s health issues, fitness and nutrition, and traditional family values. The women’s suggestions serve as valuable contributions to be taken into consideration in the development of Aboriginal women’s curriculum. These suggestions for culturally relevant curriculum cover the whole range of life components—spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical—that must be honoured in Aboriginal women’s programming.

Balance

Balance in two worlds means that students must not be expected to learn from one epistemic tradition alone. To achieve balance, learning must incorporate teachings from both Indigenous and mainstream systems. The findings from this study attest to the difficulties Aboriginal women face in achieving balance while pursuing university education. The need to find balance among the multi-faceted roles that the women carry was raised throughout the Wildfire Gatherings. For example, Irene identified her struggle to find balance when she returned to school after taking time off when she had her daughter:

I think what we struggle with, and I know personally as a single mother that has gone back to school and would like to continue her education, is that balance. The opportunity to have balance because I won’t ever stop being a daughter and I won’t ever stop being a mother and those are my priorities and they will always be my priorities, so when I make other choices they have to embrace those priorities first so I need an environment to come to that can honour that and has...tangible supports. (WG1)

Likewise, Kim mentioned the desire to learn traditional family values that may assist her to balance her roles as a mother and a daughter. While the women discussed their overlapping responsibilities as a significant challenge to their educational success, they expressed a desire to learn traditional ways of balancing those responsibilities.

The desire for the women to learn traditional teachings about balance was also expressed with reference to the intersecting world views the women faced in urban educational settings. For Aboriginal students engaged in mainstream education, there is a need to find a harmonious balance within two very different world views. During WG2, Sherry indicated that she would like to have traditional speakers come in to talk about the “walking in two worlds kind of thing: balance.” Her vision is consistent with the words of elder Elizabeth Mackenzie, who advises, “if our children are taught in both worlds equally they will be strong like two peoples” (Tlich Community Services 2007). There are many traditional teachings about achieving and maintaining balance of the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical components of self. This is what sustains well-being. The participant contributions suggest that these teachings be brought into programming so that the women are not only encouraged and continually reminded to live in balance, but the university environment can also foster this balance between two worlds and allow it to occur.

The findings from this study also identify the importance of incorporating life skills into Aboriginal women's educational programming. Life skills, as defined in this study, include survival skills, time management, and prioritization. Participants discussed the need for women to “understand the language of the university,” and gain the tools to navigate university life while being faced with multiple barriers. In response, programming should incorporate an accredited life-skills program that responds to the individual needs of the participants and instills in them the skills that will enable them to find balance among the intersecting responsibilities they carry, along with the academic expectations associated with their studies. In turn, universities (professors and administrators) must gain an understanding of the overlapping familial and educational responsibilities that Aboriginal women carry. Universities must foster an environment where the women are able to find a harmonious balance throughout their time at university and acquire the skills to maintain balance beyond their studies. The educators must be educated on the unique and specific needs of Aboriginal women for this understanding to be developed. Creating a university program that supports balance must include not only culturally relevant and safe academic programming, but also a holistic support system that embraces the multi-faceted realities of Aboriginal women. The following section provides an overview of these unique and specific needs by drawing attention to the accessibility barriers that hinder Aboriginal women's university access and success.

Critical Elements for Access and Success

The findings revealed an array of accessibility barriers that make pursuing university a difficult task for Aboriginal women. These barriers include the lack of funding, housing, child care, transportation, culturally relevant services, support systems, and space. As noted previously, WG1 brought together front-line workers and cultural advocates from areas related to the six major elements

of success: housing, funding, child care, academic support, cultural education, and cultural student support. The purpose of bringing representatives from these sectors together was develop a shared understanding and knowledge base, and to then vision accessible and culturally relevant programming for Aboriginal women and families. As my educational narrative revealed, these service areas are isolated and fragmented from one another in such a way that allows for the overlapping of criteria. This disconnection of services places women in a vulnerable position in which negotiations must be made so that they may work their way through and around these services. My story was reflected in the stories of the women participants, who also struggled with the disconnection of services such as housing, funding, child care, and education, that all have overlapping and unfeasible requirements and criteria, making it nearly impossible for students to access resources.

In WG2, I shared my story of attempting to negotiate a child-care agreement that conflicted with my student schedule as an example of my experience with the fragmentation of services. I explained that my purpose in holding WG1 was “to piece together and connect the above fragmented services as a way to begin to vision an access program that meets the needs of Aboriginal women and families” (Brant 2011). In response, the participants in WG1 recognized the need for a liaison worker to bring together all of the above services. One participant noted that “if all of these things were in order, it would be easier to go to school.” Likewise, another woman noted that she is too worried about housing, child care, and financial issues to think seriously about pursuing post-secondary education, “but it is something I would like to do eventually. So if there is a program that can make that easier for me then it would be really helpful” (WG2). The need for a liaison officer was also established in WG1 when one participant outlined the need for a support worker to not only bring together and connect the pieces for the women, but to understand their everyday realities:

Sometimes things happen and paperwork gets lost and juice gets spilled on it, so just making sure that, okay, this was the deadline, and, you know, a couple of days before the deadline you’re going to have your liaison worker give [you] a call and say we haven’t received your paperwork and we are going to have another information session on how to go through that process. (WG1)

Such a position would not only promote feasibility and connectivity among the many disconnected services, but would also serve to provide a holistic support model necessary for Aboriginal women’s access to and success within universities.

In addition to the above, the following list of recommendations, yielded from an analysis of the participant contributions from both Wildfire Gatherings, is critical to the success of responsive programming for Aboriginal women in education:

1. Ensure that bursary funding information is available to all students.
2. Source program funding avenues for both status and non-status participants.
3. Source additional funding sources to offset child-care costs.
4. Establish housing partnerships and partnerships with the university residence to secure available spaces for Aboriginal women and families.
5. Establish an on-site culturally relevant child-care program.
6. Establish relationships with the children's services division of the regional community services department to create a feasibility partnership between child-care subsidies and child-care providers. This partnership should be a feasible response to the needs of Aboriginal women in university and, by extension, must align with student schedules and allow for study time.
7. Establish a relationship with the university child-care centre to promote culturally appropriate child care.
8. Offer training for child-care providers to educate them on the unique realities of Aboriginal women and children, and encourage a more holistic child-care program that embraces the whole family.
9. Assess and respond to the transportation needs of participants.
10. Consult with the participants about their student service needs on an ongoing basis and ensure culturally relevant services.
11. Establish an elder-in-residence program to ensure culturally appropriate guidance and counselling services.
12. Engage with Aboriginal communities by establishing partnerships with local Native friendship centres and Aboriginal service providers.
13. Develop a family orientation to the program to encourage family and partner support.
14. Establish a mentorship program so that each cohort of learners can strike a supportive relationship with the subsequent cohort.
15. Bring in positive role models as guest speakers to share success stories.
16. Encourage the development of a community of learners to serve as a support circle for participants.
17. Provide a gathering space for the women and families that can be used for studying and cultural activities.
18. Provide a comfortable space on campus for parents and their young children, including a space for play, nursing, and changing diapers.

Discussion

As the participants in this study have revealed, the barriers Aboriginal women face to gain access to and succeed within post-secondary education are multi-layered, interconnected, and complex. As such, solutions responding to those barriers must also be multi-layered, interconnected, and complex. Many of the barriers stem from a myriad of intersecting oppressions, disadvantages, and misunderstandings. Those systems must be untangled so that an appropriate response can be braided together, creating a strong, intricate, and culturally aligned foundation. This discussion serves as an attempt to untangle the many interconnected barriers that were revealed by the participants. By braiding together those sections that have been untangled—culture, language, and identity—solutions for not only access, but also success, are offered. As culture and language are so intricately interconnected with identity, culturally responsive and safe programming must incorporate these dimensions so that the braid is strong and the strands are flowing as one. If any one of these strands is taken away, the foundation will begin to fall apart, much like a braid.

Providing Access: Beyond Opening the Door

While this study positions Aboriginal women as agents of social change by engaging them in sharing their vision of educational access and success, it is important to note that there are many Aboriginal women who have not yet made it through the university doors to share their stories. My difficulty in recruiting participants for this study attests to this limitation. As Riley and Ungerleider (2008) articulate, “Racism and discrimination may be the gatekeepers that keep students from fulfilling their potential, either because they no longer trust the system to provide an environment conducive to learning or because they were never even allowed through the gate” (386). While the purpose of this study is to open up those doors and create access for Aboriginal women and families, the importance of getting to the root of the problem has, throughout this research, become increasingly evident. As racism and discrimination are rooted in colonization, getting to the root of the problem involves decolonizing the educational experiences of Aboriginal women. To this end, language and culture are positioned as core elements of a decolonizing process that will encourage the development of strong identities.

Providing access goes beyond opening university doors to Aboriginal women. Providing access involves providing culturally relevant and safe spaces for Aboriginal women and their families, where educational opportunities and services can take place. The women participants in this study disclosed very difficult educational experiences in WG2, which contribute to this push for safe and responsive programming. Whether this involved irrelevant and insensitive curriculum when harmful topics arose in class, or involved incidents where women were centred out in class, the need for culturally relevant and safe educational opportunities is evident.

Overcoming Significant Challenges: Promoting Cultural Identity Development

During both Wildfire Gatherings, the Métis elder spoke about the need for women to know who they are before they can move forward. She revealed the strength that comes with being grounded within one's self and having a strong cultural identity, asserting that once we have our identity, no one can take it away.

As the women's stories from WG2 reveal, the women need, and desire, to have the opportunity to strengthen their cultural identity. While the data show that the women participants now have a solid understanding of their cultural identity, it is also evident that this was not always the case. The women came into their own cultural understandings over time and the depth of their understanding varied. Some were prompted by a negative educational experience, and others developed their cultural identities through community supports, and through their participation and involvement in local Aboriginal organizations. The women's classroom experiences, with the exception of the noted Mohawk language classes, were not conducive to their own cultural identity formation. The need for a strong cultural identity to assist them in successfully overcoming significant challenges at critical points throughout their education was very evident in the gathering.

Complementing the elder's insight into the strength that comes with having a strong cultural identity is an emerging body of research that connects access to cultural traditions with self-empowerment, strong cultural identity formation, and increased educational success (Hundleby, Gfellner, and Racine 2007; Yuen and Pedlar 2009). For example, one recent study on Aboriginal women in university indicates that the development of positive self-identities among Aboriginal women may be attributed to exposure to cultural heritage (Hundleby, Gfellner, and Racine 2007). Likewise, a recent study on Aboriginal women in prison found that through exposure to cultural ceremonies, "women experienced liberation from a colonized Aboriginal identity" (Yuen and Pedlar 2009, 547). Moreover, Yuen and Pedlar advise that, "Aboriginal women's identities and understanding of being evolved from pain and shame to pride" (547), when connected with their cultural traditions.

It is important to note that the women in both studies, Aboriginal women in university and Aboriginal women in prison, share similar life narratives involving colonial attacks on identity development. These studies, however, demonstrate that Aboriginal women in either group are positively influenced through exposure to cultural activities and traditions, and that the women's cultural identities were strengthened through such activities. The above-noted studies, along with the participant contributions in this study, attest to the value that culture has on fostering positive identity development among Aboriginal women. Undoubtedly, exposure to cultural teachings will have a significant effect on the development of strong cultural identities, and this will, in turn, assist Aboriginal women in navigating the challenges of their university experiences.

Fostering a Paradigm Shift

The previous discussion sets the foundation for accessible, culturally specific, and safe programming that responds to the needs of Aboriginal women and their families. First, the need to look backwards and uncover the past before we can look forward and recover from the past has been established by looking at complexities associated with identity and past educational experiences, both understood in the context of colonization. Second, the need to reclaim language, culture, and identity as core elements of culturally responsive and safe programming for Aboriginal women has been discussed. Incorporating these elements into a mainstream educational institution requires a paradigm shift in which two vastly different world views and epistemologies must converge.

As Taiaiake Alfred (2009) asserts, “We must reinvigorate the principles embedded in the ancient teachings, and use them to address our contemporary problems” (29). An Aboriginal women’s education program that honours the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of Aboriginal women and their families must begin with a paradigm shift. Responsive programming must be more than merely taking existing university courses and supplementing them with feathers and beads. It must begin with an Indigenous world view and honour Indigenous ways of being and learning. In other words, it must begin with Aboriginal understandings of education, and be grounded in and guided by culture and traditions. The knowledge must come from Aboriginal educators themselves and involve direction and guidance from the Aboriginal community.

As the participants’ narratives reveal, fostering Aboriginal women’s university access and success calls for an integrated approach that combines culturally relevant and safe academic programming with a holistic system of support in complementary and seamless fashion. The women in this study have shared their needs and consensus-based vision of culturally responsive educational programming. It is now up to universities, educators, and program developers to act on their vision by honouring the *biimaadiziwin* framework and embracing Aboriginal women’s realities as educational opportunities.

Conclusion

This paper has presented two contrasting ideological positions with respect to Aboriginal women’s educational access and success: a deficit-based view and a strength-based view. It is my hope that the reader will understand the experiences of Aboriginal women in university from a strength-based view. Only through this understanding will responsive programming be a holistic response to the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of Aboriginal women and their children, and, ultimately, promote the well-being of Aboriginal families and strengthen Aboriginal communities.

Key findings from the women’s narratives offer an opportunity for universities and educators to engage in responsive and culturally grounded educational

approaches. This study reveals the need for curriculum that focuses on decolonizing and reclaiming Aboriginal women's identities. In response, this vision for culturally responsive and safe programming for Aboriginal women includes learning outcomes that encourage balance between two world views—traditional and academic—and the application of cultural traditions to modern contexts with a specific focus on the immediate needs of Aboriginal women, such as child care, housing, and funding.

I encourage universities and educators to develop culturally responsive and safe educational programming for Aboriginal women with consideration of the recommendations offered in this paper. Finally, just as this study centred Aboriginal women's voices in program development, I urge universities, educators, and program developers to position the expressed needs of Aboriginal women as central to program development.

I will end with one final recommendation that was given during WG1. In the words of one of the elders: "Don't let this sit on the shelf. Use it and do something about it."

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