

# Indigenous Perspectives at the Cultural Interface: Exploring Student Achievement through School/Community-Based Interventions

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## Résumé de l'article

De nombreuses écoles, districts scolaires et autorités provinciales de l'éducation au Canada collaborent avec les communautés autochtones pour indigéniser le contenu et offrir des programmes visant à améliorer la réussite des élèves autochtones. En mettant l'accent sur la réussite scolaire au secondaire dans le domaine de l'éducation autochtone à l'interface culturelle des communautés autochtones et des systèmes éducatifs euro-occidentaux, cet article examine les efforts d'une division scolaire pour influencer sur la réussite et l'expérience des élèves. Les données des entrevues menées auprès des enseignants, des aides-enseignants et des administrateurs sont présentées et discutées, mettant en évidence les points de vue des participants sur ces initiatives. Cette étude a révélé que, malgré de nombreux défis institutionnels et non institutionnels, les efforts des divisions scolaires en matière de programmes d'éducation autochtone dans plusieurs de leurs écoles secondaires ont été florissants et ont également été bien soutenus par rapport aux autres divisions scolaires publiques au Canada.



# Indigenous Perspectives at the Cultural Interface: Exploring Student Achievement through School/ Community-Based Interventions

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## **Abstract**

Many schools, school districts, and provincial education authorities in Canada are collaborating with Indigenous communities to indigenize content and provide programming to improve Indigenous student success. With a focus on high school achievement in the area of Indigenous education at the cultural interface of Indigenous communities and Euro-Western educational systems, this article examines the efforts of a school division to impact student achievement and experience. Data from interviews conducted with teachers, educational assistants, and administrators are presented and discussed, evidencing participants' perspectives on these initiatives. This study revealed that, despite numerous institutional and non-institutional challenges, the school division's efforts in Indigenous education programming in many of its high schools have been thriving and have also been well supported compared to other public school divisions in Canada.

## Résumé

De nombreuses écoles, districts scolaires et autorités provinciales de l'éducation au Canada collaborent avec les communautés autochtones pour indigéniser le contenu et offrir des programmes visant à améliorer la réussite des élèves autochtones. En mettant l'accent sur la réussite scolaire au secondaire dans le domaine de l'éducation autochtone à l'interface culturelle des communautés autochtones et des systèmes éducatifs euro-occidentaux, cet article examine les efforts d'une division scolaire pour influencer sur la réussite et l'expérience des élèves. Les données des entrevues menées auprès des enseignants, des aides-enseignants et des administrateurs sont présentées et discutées, mettant en évidence les points de vue des participants sur ces initiatives. Cette étude a révélé que, malgré de nombreux défis institutionnels et non institutionnels, les efforts des divisions scolaires en matière de programmes d'éducation autochtone dans plusieurs de leurs écoles secondaires ont été florissants et ont également été bien soutenus par rapport aux autres divisions scolaires publiques au Canada.

## Introduction

Many schools across Canada are venturing to improve educational programming by indigenizing content, and also working to improve student success through Indigenous-focused supportive programs. Indigenizing content is approached through integrating Indigenous perspectives, cultural knowledge, and related aspects of Indigenous consciousness into teaching, pedagogies, and philosophical approaches to education. Improving student success involves the former, but it also includes connecting Indigenous students and families to supportive programs. The term *indigenize*, in turn, is used cautiously here. In the context of this article, this term refers to the appreciative inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in the educational programming of a school for the benefit of student learning and cultural revival. In an effort to realize such goals, many schools, school divisions/districts, and provincial education authorities in Canada are collaborating with Indigenous communities to develop new opportunities to improve their programming. These initiatives are thus located in the cultural interface of Indigenous communities and Euro-Western educational systems. These initiatives are important as a means of supplanting and replacing outdated (and, in some instances, assimilationist) educational programs that,

however intended, adversely affected Indigenous language use, eduction of Indigenous moral values, and sharing and survival of cultural aspects of Indigenous people across Canada.

Secondary schools play a significant role in Indigenous communities since most post-secondary institutions are in urban centres in Canada. Consequently, secondary schools may be the only opportunity to get formal education inside the community as a means of preparation for post-secondary studies. According to a Senate report, “lacking critical educational support, First Nations are the only segment of Canadian society who, today, do not benefit from a modern system of education” (Germain & Dick, 2011, p. 56). However, different institutions and programs have been working to improve the participation of First Nations in secondary schools in a manner that would help the development of those schools. To bring together students and community in a collective relationship is one of the main goals of post-secondary institutions—goals for which community empowerment and sustainability are of paramount importance (Cranston, 2014).

The relationship between Indigenous Knowledge (IK) and what may be regarded as standard educational practices in schools has become a challenge for teachers, students, school administrators, and communities. The process of integrating IK into standard curricula based on provincial requirements has been shown to be a slow process that requires multiple investments of funding and efforts of academics and community (King & Schielmann, 2004). According to the Association of Canadian Deans of Education (2010), there is a movement amongst those in the field of Indigenous education to challenge the existing curricula in a way that facilitates the incorporation of IK in a manner that represents the holistic ways of knowing of Indigenous people. Leanne Simpson (2004) argued that “Indigenous Knowledge must be lived, and so we must think very carefully about how we are preparing our children to live their cultural knowledge in the coming generations” (p. 381). However IK is manifested in school programming, it may be imperative to consider how this knowledge is not just resident in academic study, but also in how students have experiential opportunities to learn Indigenous perspectives.

It is important to emphasize that while IK may have unique influences on how schools develop Indigenous initiatives, as well as how they approach/deliver Indigenous content inside the classrooms, schools may also do well to consider how to decolonize programs, and in doing so become more sensitive toward the challenges imposed by society upon Indigenous families and communities. The focus with this caveat is its impor-

tance on hiring issues. As schools and school divisions venture to incorporate IK in the curricula of their educational systems, effective recruitment of qualified Indigenous staff might be essential toward arresting the now undesirable trend of “the assimilation of EK [European Knowledge] to Aboriginal students” (Battiste & Henderson, 2009, p. 15).

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) Calls to Action remind various levels of government about the need to improve educational levels and success rates of Indigenous students in primary and secondary schools across Canada (TRC, 2015). The current trends are alarming when considering the differential secondary school graduation rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in many schools (Government of Manitoba, 2018). The graduation rates in Indigenous on-reserve schools are particularly problematic because First Nations youth face, in large part as a consequence of these graduation rates, more difficulties entering the labour market. Chronic underemployment and low levels of education have been shown to lead individuals with such backgrounds toward states of vulnerability to serious and undesired social issues such as poor health and poverty. According to Anderson and Richards (2016), four of 10 Indigenous students on-reserve will complete secondary education (p. 3). It is also important to note that on-reserve secondary schools are experiencing significantly lower educational outcomes than off-reserve students—only about 44% of First Nations on-reserve complete high school, compared to 88% for other Canadians (Government of Canada, 2018). There are several aspects that contribute to this low graduation rate. For example:

- The lack of integration of Indigenous perspectives in school programming—without recognition of how this impacts feelings of belongingness for Indigenous students, who often do not recognize schools as being safe and respectful places.
- The gap of federal funding to on-reserve schools is considerable, as on-reserve schools are usually small and have a reduced number of students (less than 50 students).
- Literacy and numeracy have a direct association with general achievement of students. Indigenous peoples in Canada show a lower level of literacy and numeracy in comparison to non-Indigenous population (Arriagada & Hango, 2016). In addition, issues of literacy and numeracy gaps, graduation rates, secondary schools’ opportunities, and labour market access are intertwined.

The necessity of increasing teaching programs that incorporate Indigenous perspectives in post-secondary levels is urgent. Kerr (2014) points out that epistemic dominance is an important determinant in limiting Indigenous perspectives in Eurocentric educational spaces. As schools scramble to incorporate Indigenous content, pedagogies, and ways of knowing in their respective programming, students who are going to learn of Indigenous experiences in Canada should be provided opportunities to apprehend these important topics and explore “a complete picture of [Indigenous] culture and the peoples and histories that these perspectives represent” (Deer, 2014).

The necessity of understanding the relationship between community and students also appears to be a crucial point in educational institutions, and the development of strategies to approach this relationship is one challenge with which schools must deal. Family and community play a significant role in primary and secondary education and it is important to incorporate these perspectives in order to support success in integrating IK inside the classroom (Wuttunee, 2004). Scholars and researchers in Canadian institutions are becoming more aware of how this may work with different pedagogies in order to “recognize and affirm that the Canadian Indigenous experience embodies emotive, cultural, spiritual, traditional, and language-based dimensions [that] may be a crucial step for school and classroom leaders in the provision of such learning opportunities” (Deer, 2015, p. 39).

The integration of Indigenous content in the learning opportunities of primary and secondary schools gives opportunities for important cultural elements such as Elders’ participation, land-based education programs, storytelling, and holistic approaches to curriculum (Wildcat et al., 2014). The importance of creating safe spaces for learning in which cultural learnings can be adequately explored and honoured may require the participation of Indigenous community knowledge-keepers such as Elders (Davidson, 2015). The inclusion of Elders may, among other things, offer a proxy for community consciousness in the classroom through which students, school staff, and teachers may learn of IK and create a learning space that recognizes the particularities of specific communities. As Goulet (2014) pointed out, “a compassionate and respectful approach is a prerequisite to teaching students who have direct experience with the demoralizing and destructive effects of racism and colonization” (p. 86).

## **The Study**

In the autumn of 2012, the Summerland School Division (SSD) established the SPROUT programme—a secondary school educational program that was intended to support the academic journey of Indigenous students (all names are pseudonyms). This program was one of a number of initiatives developed and employed by the division’s Indigenous Education Department, in cooperation with teachers and administrators, with the intention of supporting the learning of Indigenous perspectives for all SSD students in all grade levels. In creating these opportunities for improved learning, the SSD developed policies that would govern improved programming and affect its orientation toward hiring appropriately. The purpose of this larger scale study was to investigate Indigenous student achievement in high schools of this school division in Manitoba over five years ending in June, 2019. More specifically, this study sought to describe Indigenous student achievement in SSD high schools for which formal Indigenous education programming has been established, identify trends in Indigenous student achievement over the course of this particular high school program, and identify corresponding issues or environmental factors that may be reflected in these trends.

The research team collaborated with the SSD in order to investigate student achievement over the time in which SPROUT has been active. In order to support this investigation, student achievement data has been acquired and analyzed over the period of five school years (2014/15–2018/19), resulting in 89,466 reports of 6,664 secondary school students over all available academic areas. In addition, interviews with teachers, educational assistants, and administrators were conducted with the purpose of obtaining their perspectives on SSD’s initiatives to support Indigenous students’ education. The focus of this article is on the qualitative data collected through the interviews.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Through semi-structured, qualitative interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), the research team met with 23 staff (i.e., teachers, instructional support staff, and administrators). Interviews were conducted with the principles of appreciative inquiry in mind. The researcher employed these principles by negotiating “initial intentional empathy” (Elliot, 1999, p. 12) with the participants, and attempted to establish an environment of

individual and social affirmation (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999). Because most participants were of Indigenous identity (15 declared themselves as Indigenous), the researcher employed Wilson's (2008) relationality and relational accountability to ensure that the research was commensurate with currently accepted and appropriate procedures when researching Indigenous peoples. Questions posed to participants aimed at better comprehending their perspectives on SSD's initiatives and included, for example, "How is cultural knowledge reflected in programming for which you are involved?" and "What are some of the challenges that you would identify relevant to your professional work?" Following data acquisition, data from the interviews were coded to identify emergent themes, which were then organized into a number of organizational capacities: community capacity, political capacity, human resources, and physical capacity.

## **Findings**

### **Community Capacity**

This study made clear that the dimensions of communal interface in and around SSD schools were important influences on them. There are palpable inputs from schools' surrounding communities that were respected and sought after. Indigenous parents, Elders, and community members were seen as a crucial part of the education process for SSD schools. These inputs have affected the content and quality of Indigenous programming in SSD schools and this is in keeping with the developing view that a school's community milieu ought to be regarded as an asset toward Indigenous school improvement (Deer, 2014, p. 12). In the case of SSD schools, community capacity has increased where Indigenous Education has a significant number of Indigenous students, instructional staff, and robust community interface. As one participant stated:

We really look at the whole family unit but also parent well-being, and how to support their children as well. So, it's really all aspects of parenting and one of the things that I found over the years is that people who, especially who are new to the community...often times what I was hearing is that they felt isolated. So what we looked at is building our parent group as a way of helping parents to connect to each other, support each other, and throughout we're trying to listen to what their needs are and provide support where we can.



**Cultural activities.** From students transitioning between grades to graduate Pow Wows, community has been a crucial ally and critic in continuing SSD action. One participant pointed out that:

Yes, there is something here. I think if you look to the graduate Pow Wow, for example, it isn't SPROUT only but something that came about. SPROUT students are graduating, let's celebrate them now, that's something that is not just for graduating students, not just for SPROUT students, but a place where those students are honoured and the Pow Wow being such a big event that honours culture and students' success, you know, coming out of that, I think the Indigenous leadership again, primarily made up of SPROUT students is another option that students have.

Such cultural activities have become a constituent part of the schools' ethos and demonstrate how important those activities are to Indigenous students and community. One participant stated that:

Very often I have parents who will come up to me and say: My son told me you were the Seven Teachings teacher and he just loves it. He talks about it all the time and that happens on a regular basis and it is so nice to hear that. And that it is not all Indigenous parents. These are parents who have gone out their way to say "I like what you are doing. I'm happy that my student is part of that."

Cultural activities in schools oriented toward Indigenous success is a significant aspect of how it is possible to change the perspectives of students and community. The importance of these activities can be seen in Indigenous students' achievement and participation of families in school life.

**Elder participation.** Indigenous Elder participation in school activities contributed to the cultural capacity of schools and showed how traditional knowledge may be incorporated in curriculum and classroom activities. Schools that embrace such knowledge—which may help students to engage and experience IK, heritage, consciousness, and tradition—has become, amongst many, an important institutional goal. As one participant pointed out:

There are other times where Elder Jose comes in and shares teachings with those students. This year we have taken students to Boreal Forest and did some work around, not just learning about ECOs and the western view of science, but also learning about some of the traditional uses of plants, and medicines.

An aspect of how Elders may contribute to school learning is associated with the notion of place and the way in which it is addressed in school learning (Simpson, 2002). Some emergent concern regarding how the SSD may minister to this recurrent desire for place-based and land-based education is still coming to be understood—especially in regard to how SSD schools may facilitate such learning.

In classrooms where Indigenous Elders participate, SSD students have been encouraged to learn about their culture and history. Additionally, the participation of Elders in classrooms has improved the sense of ownership of cultural identities by students. A participant commented on this phenomenon thusly:

Indigenous youth leadership is a group of students from all our high schools that meet monthly for a half day with the purpose of having opportunities to do some deeper, I don't know if it is the word, deeper cultural work, right? We annually do a sweat lodge with these students. They spend a little more time with the Elder but not just the cultural work but that whole component on finding leadership from within them, finding your voice, being an advocate for yourself and for others.

Indigenous Elders in the SSD have been helping students, particularly Indigenous students, to feel connected to their identities and develop a sense of belonging in the evolving culture of the division in a spirit where “Elders have the knowledge about traditions and culture and can share about lifestyle differences between the past and present” (Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre Inc., 2013, p. 8).

***Parental involvement.*** The importance of parental participation is growing and is viewed by SSD as an instrument to engage community and schools in an understanding that everyone is important to the development of a school where students are the focal point. As one participant stated:

The parent support group that we run is a very relaxed thing. It's run every Wednesday afternoon and it is a very relaxed setting, we have snacks and food and parents come and they can sit and talk to other parents or they can do a lot of crafts, they make a lot of different things, some of them are making star blankets, some are doing beadwork, but the whole time that they are doing this they are making connections with other parents who are there. We have seen great friendships formed and that program is growing and growing. So that's great to see.

Creating a space where community—especially parents—can come together and exchange knowledge and create relationships is fundamental to the empowerment of the parental community inside and outside of the school. Programs such as the parent support group open the school's door to create a safe and healthy environment to parents, who can build relationships with each other and thus feel connected to the school their children are attending. Although schools in Canada have historically excluded Indigenous students' parents' participation, today the landscape is quite different. Schools are looking to empower parents as an instrument of developing a sense of belonging and also increase the students' achievement. As one participant explained:

I would say probably three-quarters of the parents that we work with are Indigenous parents. We do open to anyone though, and so, we do have parents who come from time to time because they want to learn because they want to. They've heard about the teachings that we have, or they heard about some [of] the activities that we've done, and they come because they are curious in something they'd like to be a part of.

## **Political Capacity**

The budgetary constraints upon the SSD and its schools are a significant factor in all institutional considerations and initiatives, including those of Indigenous education. These constraints have a noticeable impact on human resource considerations. Notably, 84% of SSD's budgetary resources are devoted to staff and benefits. The commitment to improve Indigenous education has led to a deliberate approach of hiring teachers and staff to support new and existing programs in Indigenous education. Because this field is a relatively

new avenue of academic exploration for school divisions, its prospective and even current budgetary allocation may be critically scrutinized by administrators and teachers. In some instances, this budgetary reality led to concern and uncertainty in funding. As one school administrator noted, “What has been put in the budget...has to be approved by the board and then we have to see afterward. We still have to find out if we are going to be funded.”

Beyond budgetary concerns, there was a significant amount of data associated with the contributions of students toward discussions of institutional change. Such student contributions may be understood as curricular in nature insofar as they minister to such needs as preparation for civic participation through the exploration of leadership orientations. These contributions may also be understood as a means of contributing to the climate and culture of the SSD’s Indigenous education efforts specifically, and their schools more generally. Students’ voices have been shown in the data to be valued as a constituent part of the leadership development supports in the division. The students have been supported in their journeys to advocate on their own behalf and support the community in which they participate. As mentioned in an earlier quote, the establishment of the Indigenous Youth Leadership (IYL) was one of the main initiatives that provided opportunities to share and discuss challenges and opportunities relevant to Indigenous students. At the time of data collection, the IYL existed as a collaboration amongst all high schools from the SSD, from which students converge monthly to develop and discuss leadership issues and create a space where they actively work such that their perspectives are heard, understood, and acted upon. The opportunity for students to engage in this manner, to create initiatives and develop activities, whilst ensuring that there are opportunities for them to develop their orientations toward conscientiousness, has helped them develop a sense of leadership.

***Academic structure.*** There are two main programs focused on Indigenous programming: SPROUT and HEAL. SPROUT is a high school program that incorporates Indigenous content in terms of Indigenous academic topics, Indigenous cultural perspectives, and the affectation of classroom climate and culture that would benefit Indigenous student learning. In describing the potential of SPROUT, one participant said, “I think that to some extent and in some places to a great extent, having a SPROUT teacher has helped transform the way school communities view themselves, how they identify themselves.” The prevailing view of participants is that SPROUT programs have vital importance in regard to how Indigenous students see themselves and each other. The SPROUT

program was frequently mentioned as one that benefits Indigenous students as they go about their academic studies, but also that explores the cultural backgrounds of Indigenous peoples. The SPROUT program was cited as one that allows students to have a safe and appreciative classroom where topics and discussion are informed by Indigenous heritage and identity.

Programming in SPROUT classrooms was attested to be made more effective and authentic due to appropriate staffing, through which qualified and knowledgeable Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers have been placed. Smudging has created a sense of belonging and pride for Indigenous students and teachers when they participate in this ceremony. It may offer students an opportunity to not only feel that they are cleansing themselves, but that they are making a spiritual connection to such things as their own identity and their respective family connections. As one participant stated:

As far as smudging goes, there have been students I ask right away, there are maybe three or four students who have either participated in a smudge or have seen a smudge in the past. Now all of my students participated in the smudge for the most part and they know how to respectfully say no thanks in a circle. At the beginning I definitively had students who didn't even want to join the circle and that was never pushed. They didn't have to, but now they don't have any problem to join the circle and just not participating.

SPROUT programming was described by participants as an enrichment program oriented to Indigenous students, however it was also adduced as one that also supports the development of cultural pride. Central to its purpose has been a mission to support the development of a sense of respect and conciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Additionally, SPROUT teachers and students have been successful in incorporating Indigenous perspectives not just in SPROUT classrooms, but with students school-wide.

One feature of Indigenous education programming across SSD high schools is that such programming is generally available to non-Indigenous students who have interest. However, the HEAL program is specifically for Indigenous students due to provincial funding and purpose. As one participant described it, "The difference with [HEAL] is that students must be of Indigenous ancestry...the funding that is provided for this pro-

gram has to help increase the number of Indigenous people involved in medical fields.”

HEAL exists exclusively for Indigenous students since the objective is to increase the participation of Indigenous people in medical careers. In the HEAL program, students were introduced to various roles, responsibilities, and activities associated with the health field. From Grades 9 to 12, students’ participation in HEAL activities grows gradually with in-class learning increasingly tailored to the study of health over time as well as increased experiential learning inside Winnipeg-area clinics and hospitals. Seeing different levels of professionals working in the HEAL program during the following three years of high school provides students the opportunity to understand the medical field and inspire their paths in health-related areas. The knowledge acquired from the experiential learning in clinics and hospitals was quite specific to particular tasks: students had the opportunity to observe and perform activities in such areas as radiology, casting, and other representative areas.

## Human Resources

The relationship of human resources (teachers, staff, and principals) and students cannot be dissociated from students’ achievement and progress in academic life. Three subtopics emerged as central to this theme: Professional development, Indigenous perspectives in classrooms, and learning.

**Professional development.** Professional development in the area of Indigenous perspectives appeared important for all teachers, staff, and administrators in the SSD, including those in the high school Indigenous education programs. Participants reported professional development exercises related to areas such as language and literacy, treaty education, and land-based learning.

What is particularly interesting about what was revealed by participants who discussed the topic of professional development was the nature of how Indigenous education is developing in the SSD and in the province of Manitoba. This field is relatively new, and the manner in which schools may address it is still in many ways coming to be understood. The availability of individuals with expertise is limited in contrast to other fields. It appears that, for these reasons, qualified in-class and itinerant teachers, educational assistants, and others in the SSD who specialize in Indigenous education are principally responsible for the development and delivery of professional development opportunities. Although a school or school division relying upon its own teaching/support staff to do such work is not unique to Indigenous education, it is a noticeable addition to a teacher or

educational assistant's responsibilities. As one participant stated:

I get an extra session where I don't teach. Most teachers teach seven sessions and I teach six, so there is this extra slot. But that for me is to focus on Indigenous youth leadership, it is to focus on PD with staff, focus on changing content. We don't officially have departments but helping other teachers change some of the content and look to different ways of teaching and I think that goes to that.

Participants who offered insight into professional development did explore the emergent importance of teachers in specialized areas such as Indigenous languages and cultural knowledge/practices. This increased concern with specific disciplinary areas in a field for which teachers and staff of Indigenous ancestry have become sought after is perhaps understandable—especially in a field for which development of academic programs is occurring quickly. However, participants' reference to challenges in the recruitment of qualified teachers and staff in particular areas of specialization were noted. This challenge was especially relevant for Indigenous languages education programming. The challenge in regard to Indigenous language programming was described by participants (particularly administrators) as one in which the market availability of qualified teachers and staff who are sufficiently fluent in a relevant Indigenous language was very limited, and thus affected recruitment efforts. It was also noted by participants that numerous Indigenous language speakers who may be qualified for work in the SSD frequently do not want to move from their communities. As one participant stated: "There are some...maybe three [school] divisions approaching language teachers and...there aren't a lot Indigenous language speaking people with degree that want to move [here]."

***Indigenous perspectives in classrooms.*** The support provided through professional development sessions that are oriented toward the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in classrooms minister to, necessarily, curricular imperatives that have been a part of K–12 education in Manitoba for almost two decades. Central to these imperatives is the desire to integrate Indigenous perspectives—including history, culture, and other content that is germane to many academic subjects—into school programming. One participant was incisive about its possibilities:

Predominantly I would say in our English, in our History, Geography, Social classes where the teachers are being able to do a good job connecting cur-

riculum outcomes to...Indigenous perspectives...so I think in our English classes they really focus to use Indigenous authors more and more.

The integration of Indigenous perspective in educational programming has been beneficial to all students in SSD schools. The use of Indigenous cultural pieces such as star blanket creation and use, land-based education, smudging, and others have come to be a part of all students' knowledge and have become visible in classrooms. To reiterate, participants identified professional development opportunities in the SSD as a significant contributing factor. As one participant stated:

PD has been helpful and has helped [our school] in SPROUT. Obviously Social Studies are a pretty easy way...to integrate but you know, it has been Elders visits, work with students on smudgings, medicines, trying to have, students have opportunity to land-based learning.

The emergent (and, amongst some, prevailing) idea is that cultural activities such as those learned through professional development activities can also enhance the pedagogical dimensions of teaching and learning. Another participant noted:

I think a lot of the PDs that we do, and I think that one in particular, the blanket activity, that we do with a lot of our schools and the staff, I think that opens a lot of peoples' minds. When these benefits are extended to the class, everyone benefits.

It is clear that professional development contributes to an improvement in how Indigenous perspectives are employed to provide learning of Indigenous experiences and culture.

**Learning.** Central to the efforts of the SSD are the intended improvements that target student learning. Through the incorporation of Indigenous perspectives in SSD high schools, there is evidence that learning opportunities have become more inclusive through two main avenues. Firstly, these improvements have offered culturally relevant content for Indigenous students and, secondly, these improvements have deliberate focus on the learning of all students. Ministering to these needs of inclusivity in the SSD are the development of teaching methods that employ Indigenous cultural exercises such as the blanket exercise, land-based education, and seven-teachings approaches that affect



classroom learning in appreciative atmospheres that are safe and inclusive to all students. As one participant stated:

I think we have a really good relationship with students, and I think I know when I go into classrooms, you can feel it when I come in, they are excited, they are happy about the teachings and they have a lot of questions, and they are very open.

There were numerous comments amongst participants in regard to the benefits of Indigenous education programming specific to Indigenous students and cultural pride. The inclusion of Indigenous cultural content that explores elements of knowledge, heritage, consciousness, and tradition have provided opportunities for Indigenous students to develop and/or heighten their senses of pride and self-esteem through explorations of their own identities and those of others who are Indigenous. The evidence acquired from this study suggests that the presence of a sensitivity amongst educators, and that the process through which students are welcomed into such processes of pride and self-esteem development, is as important as the goal itself—students identifying and affirming their own backgrounds, communities, and identities. As one participant stated:

Learning the community, figuring out what relationships are like in the Indigenous community, Indigenous students and what that looks like from both personal aspects and student services aspects. This is the front-line work that helps.

The efforts of the SSD to support improved Indigenous student pride and self-esteem appear to be a logical outworking to the principal goal of curricular and institutional improvement. In addition to this emerges the additional goal of teacher/staff engagement. Thus, the pride and self-esteem of teachers, other staff, and administrators appears to be a consideration for the SSD as well. Efforts in areas such as professional development, indigenization of curriculum, and treaty education have provided valuable forums in which a community of educators may become appreciative of each other's contributions to the field and thus support the climate and culture of the SSD in this important area. Thus, content in educational programming is not the only concern. The relationships established amongst the community educators in the SSD is also regarded as very important. As one participant noted:

I'm looking at curriculum-specific and general learning outcomes, I'm looking at working as part of a team in a school where really what I teach, content-wise, doesn't matter. I'm part of sort of a larger family that's working on various initiative[s], and various things.

In order to create a well-established community of educators in the SSD, it appears that invoking the experiences and perspectives of families, students, and the larger Indigenous community in a positive way brings together an understanding of the students' position in society that supports the whole process of including Indigenous perspectives in schools. As one participant stated:

The general scope of our program [Indigenous education] necessarily brings singular thematic or objective-based learning. The best scenario is that it leads to a larger understanding of many Indigenous peoples and a different perspective on a larger scope of history.

Learning may be understood as a means to expand the understanding of content in educational programming toward the creation of new opportunities for Indigenous students to see themselves and the world through different cultural lenses and perspectives. In spite of the importance of maintaining a diversity of perspectives in the learning of others, it is important to engage in such learning using their own perspectives associated with their identities and cultures.

## **Physical Capacity**

The SPROUT program was one of the main topics invoked when physical capacity was discussed. One interviewee mentioned the necessity of adjusting classes to be more inclusive and to include the SPROUT class in a school setting where the program shows itself as a part of the school and not a specific program apart from school life. Another participant mentioned:

Move that teacher from upstairs in the corner to the first class when you walk into the building. I know in [School Name], I know the Principal made sure that [Indigenous education teacher] wasn't in the basement and that he was moving in amongst teachers.

Although the movement to include the SPROUT classes in a more integrated setting was mentioned, the buildings themselves did not represent a major concern during the interviews. However, comments were made in regard to classrooms.

**Classrooms.** The prevailing perspective amongst most interviewees was that well-developed learning spaces are intrinsically related to successful students through well-managed resources, materials, artefacts, and other related aspects of the physical spaces in schools. With such discussion emerged a perceived necessity to create spaces able to enhance Indigenous education. As one administrator said of a teacher's efforts:

Going into her classroom is so warm and inviting...she created a safe and inviting space—not all classrooms have this. You immediately got the feeling that Indigenous studies can take place here and that Indigenous students would feel enabled.

The need for appropriate space in which teachers and students are able to work well, establish connections in a classroom/school community, and benefit from and even co-create opportunities for the development of pride in their respective identities is essential in contemporary primary and secondary school contexts. Classrooms, not only in the SPROUT program, but in all the levels and grades, must have well-resourced and appropriately equipped class spaces that will serve as safe environments in which teachers are able to promote students' learning.

**Artefacts.** Numerous participants discussed the importance of Indigenous artefacts as essential resource in their schools. In many different classes and grade levels, the utility of artefacts as a resource that inspires curiosity and enhances learning was cited. In some instances, teachers had in their possession Indigenous cultural artefacts that were either the main focus of particular lessons or a supplement to a goal/outcome. In other instances, teachers would make use of centrally-managed/curated artefacts for these educational purposes. At the time of this study, the notion of Indigenous cultural artefacts as a supplementary or essential aspect of in-class lessons was still developing and, thus, interest in acquiring such artefacts as wampum belts, sacred medicines, and stuffed figures that represent sacred teachings was increasing. Interviewees stated that there was occasional difficulty in acquiring Indigenous artefacts because of the limited number available. The SSD has acquired kits that contain artefacts and other curricular resources that may be delivered to teachers when requested. As one participant stated:

We look at primary and secondary resources or sources [of] information as important so having artefacts in the classrooms is really valuable...it helps students to really envision and to feel and touch and smell, experience pieces of history and helps to really tell [a] story. I think they are really valuable for the classroom...it's just a matter of finding these artefacts—they don't all come in the kits.

The “kit” format of resource storage and circulation is not unique to Indigenous education contexts but appears to be particularly important for management of such resources involving a centralized location. As mentioned earlier, this centralized location in the SSD is the Indigenous education department. Although the efforts of an SSD cultural specialist to collect and create Indigenous resource kits for teachers has proved useful, it is challenging to provide kits to all classes that desire them. As one participant stated:

We have lots of artefacts that we have collected. We have probably over 300 artefacts so a teacher will contact me and say, “can I have an Inuit kit?” So, we put together, we have three of those, enough artefacts for three kits. Right now, there is an Inuit kit going out, it's gone out. It's sometimes difficult to do this all the time with other things we have to do.

There is a sense amongst some participants that more artefacts to incorporate Indigenous perspectives would be beneficial—especially if those artefacts are accompanied by other curricular resources such as lesson plans, stories, and other important perspectives. Some participants also reported that teachers in the SSD desire or are in need of support in understanding the nature of such artefacts and their use.

## **Discussion**

Many schools and school divisions across Canada find Indigenous education to be what may be rightfully regarded as a developing field of study and practice. Based on this study's findings, in the context of Manitoba and that of provincially governed primary and secondary schools, SSD appears to be thriving in several aspects. This statement of progress may be understood through considering student achievement and institutional initiative. In comparison with other school divisions' programming, as well as when loo-

king at SSD's initiatives across time, SSD has been yielding noticeable results. In regard to student achievement, the most recent provincial reports on Indigenous student achievement show that, as a school division, Indigenous students in the SSD compare quite well to their counterparts across the province—whereby, for example, only 50.9% of Indigenous students graduated high school in the province in 2020 compared to 90.8% of non-Indigenous students (CBC News, 2022). In regard to institutional initiatives, appropriate changes at administrative, school, and classroom levels show much promise due to comparatively significant initiative and investment.

The data collected, aggregated, and analyzed in this study also reveals opportunities for the SSD to consider further administrative and school-based initiatives that would serve the needs of Indigenous students as well as the emergent field of Indigenous education. The teachers' and administrators' experiences as captured through interviews provides further evidence of strengths and weaknesses. Within each of the institutional capacities mentioned earlier, challenges and perceived opportunities have led to an acknowledgement of the importance of Indigenous education, as well as an appreciation of the difficulties of offering such programming in an urban educational environment. Although these issues were discussed in the Findings section of this article, the efforts of teachers, non-teaching professionals, and administrators in the school division investigated in this study have led to the emergence of several issues that may be problematic for other school divisions with similar initiatives, such as having well-resourced and appropriately equipped class spaces, promoting professional development opportunities, strategic recruitment of language speakers and qualified Indigenous staff, etc.

The qualitative branch of this study lead to observations of strengths in regard to Indigenous education programming in SSD high schools. These strengths may be summarized by the general initiatives that have occurred in the SSD, such as the establishment of SPROUT and HEAL, but also by specific initiatives such as Indigenous language programming, interfaces with Indigenous community members/parents, and participation of Indigenous Elders in various activities. These initiatives not only offer evidence of commitment and desire on the part of the SSD to develop Indigenous education, but also shows a sort of political initiative and, in a sense, boldness that is necessary for institutional change in this field. Much of which the SSD should be proud of in the area of Indigenous education is indeed all of its divisional manifestations.

Finally, we recommend that schools and school divisions seeking to develop new opportunities to improve their programming by indigenizing content and working to improve student success in their programs consider: (a) how increased numbers of educators may be encouraged to envision, develop, and deliver learning opportunities that are situated within the natural environment, and that are appropriately connected with relevant aspects of Indigenous educational content; (b) recruiting qualified staff (teachers, educational assistants, and other roles) that will not only support current Indigenous education programming but that of other institutional areas; and (c) how school and instructional leadership may be developed and enhanced. A potential initiative that may be central to this recommendation is regular and critical (re)assessment of strategic plans as well as relevant policies.

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