

## Effects of an Aboriginal Cultural Enrichment Program on Adolescent Mothers' Self-Perceptions

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Résumé de l'article

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## Abstract

This study explored the effects of an Aboriginal cultural enrichment initiative on the self-concept of ten pregnant or parenting adolescent women, all but one of whom were of Aboriginal descent. The cultural enrichment activities were integrated into a program of support for adolescent mothers. Questionnaires were administered to the participants at the beginning and after six weeks of participating in the cultural enrichment component of the program. The Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (Harter, 1988) was used to measure global self-worth and self-perception across eight domains. Overall cultural identity, cultural identity achievement, cultural behaviours and sense of affirmation and belonging were measured using the 20-item Multigroup Ethnic Identity Questionnaire (Phinney, 1998b). Individual audio-taped interviews were also undertaken following completion of the post-tests. After six weeks of the cultural enrichment program, the participants' cultural identity achievement scores increased significantly, and participants who had achieved a strong cultural identity also had higher levels of global self-worth. Average self-concept became more positive in the specific domains of job competence and behavioural conduct. In the interviews, participants expressed positive reactions to the cultural component of the program, and attributed positive personal changes to the cultural experiences it provided. The results support the conclusion that it is highly beneficial to incorporate a cultural component into services for Aboriginal youth.

# Effects of an Aboriginal Cultural Enrichment Program on Adolescent Mothers' Self-Perceptions

Kathy Bent, Wendy Josephson, and Barry Kelly

The consequences of colonization and assimilation policies have included displacement, poverty, and disruption of families and communities among the Aboriginal peoples of Canada. Policies such as land expropriation, residential schooling, and child welfare based on assimilation into mainstream Canadian society have had direct and concrete effects on Aboriginal peoples' physical, emotional and financial well-being (e.g., Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; York, 1990; Lee, 1992). These policies have also interfered with Aboriginal peoples' enculturation, the process of learning and experiencing their cultural identities and sharing their culture with their children. The disruption of enculturation has extended the damaging effects of colonization to later generations in a variety of ways, and has been identified as a contributor to high

rates of incarceration and suicide among Aboriginal youth (e.g., Aboriginal Justice Implementation Committee, 1999; Proulx & Perrault, 2000; Strickland, 1997; Tester & McNicoll, 2004; Walters, Simoni & Evans-Campbell, 2002).

It is hypothesized that enculturation promotes the development of pride in one's heritage, which in turn can increase an individual's overall sense of self-worth. Thus, policies based on assimilation into mainstream Canadian society may systematically undermine the self-worth of Aboriginal individuals. This would compound the economic and social damage done by such policies, because self-worth can be an important source of personal strength and resilience (e.g., Berlin, 1987; Rosenthal, 1974; Schinke, 1996; Zimmerman, Ramirez, Washienko, Walter & Dyer, 1998). In recognition of this,

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*Adolescence is a time marked by identity formation. Identity formation is thought to be one of the most important psychosocial developmental processes that occur, because once identity is established, a firmer sense of self evolves.*

Aboriginal communities have successfully established a trend toward incorporating cultural perspectives into services for Aboriginal people, in areas as diverse as child and family services, health, justice, and education (see Bennett & Blackstock, 2002; Proulx & Perrault, 2000). For example, an alternative Aboriginal justice program has been developed in which Aboriginal offenders have the opportunity to participate in a diversion process that includes a retribution component made up of traditional activities (Mallett, Bent & Josephson, 2000).

Although a sense of pride in one's heritage is likely to be important during any stage in life (Kvernmo & Heyerdahl, 1996), the transition from childhood to adulthood involves social, emotional, physical and cognitive changes that can make this stage of life particularly difficult for some adolescents, even under the best of conditions (Harter, 2003). Adolescence is a time marked by identity formation. Identity formation is thought to be one of the most important psychosocial developmental processes that occur, because once identity is established, a firmer sense of self evolves. A stronger sense of self has been linked to healthier functioning (e.g., Bruner, 1997).

The most prominent identity formation theory has been that of Erik H. Erikson (1963, 1968). Erikson used the term *identity crisis* to describe the state of confusion experienced by adolescents as they grapple with the notion of who they are as a person. Erikson's theory of identity formation alluded to the existence of cultural influences on the process of identity formation but did not examine them specifically. Later research (Phinney, 1998a; DuBois, Burk-Braxton, Swenson, Tevendale & Hardesty, 2002) has found evidence of a series of stages in ethnic or cultural identity that parallels and supports adolescents' progress toward a meaningful sense of personal identity. Phinney (1998a) summarizes the process as beginning with a lack of concern

with cultural identity. At this point, the young person will be in a state of *identity diffusion*, in which there is little interest in cultural identity, or a state of *foreclosure*, in which cultural identity is merely based on the opinions of others. This is followed by a period of *moratorium*, exploration and search for deeper and more personal meaning in important aspects of the adolescent's culture. The stage that then emerges, called *identity achievement*, is characterized by a clear, confident and personally meaningful sense of cultural identity. Phinney's review of the research evidence supports the proposition that minority group adolescents who reach the stage of cultural identity achievement also develop a stronger sense of self and a more positive self-concept, compared with other adolescents in that minority group. Not surprisingly, though, there has been considerable variation from one cultural group to another in this effect, and it is unfortunate that Aboriginal peoples have rarely been included in these studies. (Phinney, 1996, 1998a).

For adolescent single mothers, the task of coping with the challenges of adolescent development and early parenting simultaneously can be daunting. Indeed, some researchers state that this can create stress levels that exceed "the additive stresses of each life phase" (Pasley, Langfield & Kreutzer, 1993, p. 329). This increased stress can lead to a multitude of serious psychosocial problems. Incidences of child abuse by the adolescent parent, drug abuse, poverty, poor educational attainment, suicide and depression are just some of the problems mentioned in the research literature (Altman Klein & Cordell, 1987; Kissman, 1990; Mylod, Borkowski & Whitman, 1997). Adolescent mothers who have a negative self-concept appear to be especially at risk for these problems, and also have more difficulties raising their children (Hurlbut, McDonald, Jambunathan, & Butler, 1997; Hess, Papas & Black, 2002; Meyers & Battistoni, 2003). The effects of all these stressors may be further exacerbated for Aboriginal

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*Regardless of culture, these social changes have made little difference to the economic disadvantages and psychosocial problems that most sole support female adolescent parents must endure.*

adolescent mothers, due to the additional life stressors that result from experiencing prejudice and discrimination in their daily lives (Dion, 2003). Enculturation could, therefore, be especially important to them.

Research reveals a steady increase in sole support female adolescent families over the past three decades (Vanier Institute of the Family, 1994). This phenomenon is reported to be largely due to a number of social and economic changes that have occurred in Canadian society since the 1960s. The most notable changes are the increased acceptance of having a baby out of wedlock and the increase in the number of women in the labour force. Regardless of culture, these social changes have made little difference to the economic disadvantages and psychosocial problems that most sole support female adolescent parents must endure. For that reason, a number of programs designed to address some of the issues faced by adolescent parents have been implemented in the City of Winnipeg (APIN, 1999).

One of these programs, Resources for Adolescent Parents (RAP), was developed by New Directions for Children, Youth, Adults and Families (formerly Children's Home of Winnipeg). New Directions is a private, non-profit organization founded in 1885. The mission of New Directions is constantly evolving as the needs of its community change, guided by operating principles based on integrity, honour, holism and respect. At the time when we became involved in this research project, the mission was articulated as being "to develop the potential of children, youth and families in their communities and to foster social, emotional and educational health" (New Directions for Children, Youth, Adults and Families, 2000; 2004). To accomplish this mission, New Directions has developed more than a dozen programs to provide services to various segments of the population.

RAP was designed to provide adolescents under the age of 18 with

services in areas that include academics, pre/post natal education, parenting education and resources, employment search, counselling, advocacy, transportation and nutrition support, and cultural programming. It was developed and implemented in 1983 in response to the needs arising from a growing number of sole support female adolescent families in the City of Winnipeg (Taylor, 1990). The RAP program changes in response to needs in the community and the individual needs of its participants, but typically includes three service objectives. The first is to provide assistance to clients in obtaining meaningful full-time or part-time employment, or developing a career plan and becoming enrolled in an educational program. The second objective is to help the client attain an increased sense of self-worth and personal empowerment in order to take control over the events in her life. The third objective is to help clients develop and enhance parenting skills, life skills and social skills.

Over the 16 years of its operation, there always has been an Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> cultural component because of the high number of Aboriginal adolescents utilizing the program. At program inception, 60% of the participants were of Aboriginal descent (Kipperstein & Taylor, 1986). Those numbers later increased to 90%. Therefore, the program has developed a more activity-based, in-depth Aboriginal cultural component. This program component consists of traditional ceremonies such as circles, smudges, feasts, pow wows and sweats. These traditional ceremonies are integrated into all aspects of the RAP curriculum so that the participants engage in these activities on an ongoing basis. As well, traditional teachings are delivered by an Aboriginal facilitator and an on-site Elder, who is also available for consultations when needed. In this manner, the participants have the opportunity to learn about and participate actively in their Aboriginal culture.

The purpose of this study was to



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*Nine of the ten research participants were of Aboriginal descent. The one participant who said that she did not consider herself to be of Aboriginal descent nevertheless chose to participate in the Aboriginal cultural component of the program, and reported personal circumstances that included extensive interest and involvement in Aboriginal culture prior to attending the program. We therefore included her in the research program.*

explore the effects of the Aboriginal cultural enrichment component of the RAP program on its participants. We investigated the relationship of cultural identity to overall self-worth and to self-perception across eight specific domains. We predicted that adolescents who had a strong level of cultural identity would also have higher levels of global self-esteem than those who had a lower level of cultural identity. Further, we predicted that participating in the Aboriginal cultural enrichment component of RAP program would lead to an increase in participants' sense of cultural identity and also have positive effects on the participants' overall sense of self worth.

### Method

Questionnaire measures of self perception and level of identification with Aboriginal culture were administered to RAP participants before they began the cultural enrichment activities of the program, and again six weeks later. Half hour individual interviews were also conducted after six weeks of participation in cultural activities. Prior to the study, all instruments were tested on a group of adult single mothers from another New Directions program, Resources for Women, to determine the appropriateness of the questions. One of the questionnaires was altered, but no items were deleted. In the questionnaire that was altered, the word "ethnic" was changed to "cultural" because it more adequately reflected the nature of the study.

### Participants

Participants in the RAP program are referred through Child and Family Services, other Social Service agencies, or through word of mouth by past program participants. Intake into the program is continuous, and participants remain in the program for as long as they choose to, up to the age of 18. After turning 18, participants sometimes make use of another New Directions program,

such as the Parent Support Program. RAP participants are unmarried and not employed. Their educational levels have ranged from grade six to grade eleven. Participants receive a weekly training allowance while attending RAP.

The sample for this study was drawn from the twenty pregnant or parenting adolescent women who were voluntarily participating in the RAP program at the time and had not yet begun the Aboriginal cultural component. Fifteen of them agreed to participate in the research project, had consent for participation from their parents or guardians, and completed pre-test questionnaires. However, five of them left the program before the 6-week post-test.

The remaining ten research participants completed pre-test and post-test questionnaires and participated in the interview component of the study. The participants ranged in age from 15 to 17 years: Seven were 17, two were 16 and one was 15. All ten were living in the home of parents or guardians, including one who was living in a foster home. Five participants were pregnant and the other five had one or more children under the age of six. Nine of the ten research participants were of Aboriginal descent. The one participant who said that she did not consider herself to be of Aboriginal descent nevertheless chose to participate in the Aboriginal cultural component of the program, and reported personal circumstances that included extensive interest and involvement in Aboriginal culture prior to attending the program. We therefore included her in the research program.

### Materials

The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Questionnaire (Phinney, 1998b) was used to measure the adolescents' level of identification with Aboriginal culture. It contains twenty items, which respondents answer on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 4, with labels ranging from 1 =

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*The Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (Harter, 1988) has participants describe their self-concept in each of eight domains: scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, job competence, romantic appeal, behavioural conduct and close friendship.*

strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. Two of the questions are worded in a negative direction and reverse scored (e.g., "I really have not spent much time trying to learn more about the culture and history of my cultural group.") Respondents' average score on the items is used to assess the strength of their overall cultural identity. Higher scores indicate a stronger level of cultural identity. Subsets of items are also averaged to yield subscale scores on *cultural identity achievement* (7 items; e.g., "I have a clear sense of my cultural background and what it means to me."), *cultural behaviours* (2 items; e.g., "I participate in cultural practices of my own group, such as special food, music or customs."), and *affirmation and belonging* (5 items; e.g., "I have a lot of pride in my cultural group and its accomplishments").

The Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (Harter, 1988) has participants describe their self-concept in each of eight domains: scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, job competence, romantic appeal, behavioural conduct and close friendship. There are 5 questions associated with each of the eight domains. Participants answer 5 additional questions about their global self-worth, how generally happy they are with themselves as a person, for a total of 45 questions. Respondents express either a positive or a negative self-perception in response to each of the 45 questions, and also report the degree to which they hold that perception. For example, one question from the behavioural conduct subscale is "Some teenagers usually do the right thing BUT Other teenagers often don't do what they know is right." Participants first decide which of the two statements is more true for them and then mark whether that statement is "Sort of true for me" or "Really true for me." Responses are scored on a 4-point scale, from 1 (a strongly held negative self-perception) to 4 (a strongly held positive self-perception).

In a second part of the Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents, there are 16 items in which participants indicate how important each of the eight specific self-concept domains is to them. An example of a question from the close friendship subscale is "Some teenagers don't care that much about having a close friend they can trust BUT Other teenagers think its important to have a really close friend you can trust." Participants used the same "Really true for me" and "Sort of true for me" response choices to indicate how important or unimportant they found each of the domains to be.

Three different raters (2 classroom facilitators and 1 case manager) each completed a teacher's rating scale containing 16 items that corresponded to the eight different domains found in the self-perception questionnaire. These ratings are included to allow for a comparison of the adolescents' self-perceptions with the perceptions of other observers of their behaviour.

An example of an item from the romantic appeal subscale is "This individual is not dating someone she is romantically interested in OR This individual is dating someone she is interested in." Raters chose the statement that they considered to be more true of the individual in question, and then indicated whether the statement was "Really true" or "Sort of true."

Seventeen questions relating to cultural identity and the participants' self-perception were constructed for the interview component of the study. Questions were open ended to allow the participants to express themselves as freely as possible. The questions addressed five areas of interest: the RAP program generally (2 questions) and the cultural enrichment program (6 questions), Aboriginal culture (2 questions), relationships with children, family and hers (4 questions), and self-perceptions (3 questions).

*The study was explained verbally to the adolescents in a group setting and their participation was requested. A written outline of the project that contained an informed consent form was then distributed to the adolescents. The participants were asked to sign the consent form and to have their parent or guardian sign the form, if they agreed to participate.*

**Procedure**

The study was explained verbally to the adolescents in a group setting and their participation was requested. A written outline of the project that contained an informed consent form was then distributed to the adolescents. The participants were asked to sign the consent form and to have their parent or guardian sign the form, if they agreed to participate. The adolescents were provided with clear instructions to read the material carefully and return the consent form by a particular date. They were told that they could withdraw from the study at any time if the presented questions made them feel uncomfortable. Upon receiving informed consent, the questionnaires were administered to the participants at the beginning and after six weeks of involvement in the cultural enrichment component of the RAP program. The individual audio-taped interviews were undertaken following completion of the post-tests. They lasted approximately one half hour. Participants were given \$10 at each testing to reimburse them for their expenses (e.g. child care). All data were coded to ensure anonymity and the recorded tapes were destroyed once the data were analyzed.

**Results**

*Cultural Identity*

Participants' average scores for the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Questionnaire are presented in Table 1. Single sample t tests were conducted, comparing participants' average scores to the scale value for "average" on the Multigroup Cultural Identity scores (Phinney, 1998a). Participants were significantly higher than this standard for affirmation and belonging, and on their overall cultural identity score, even before beginning the cultural activities at New Directions. After

six weeks of Aboriginal cultural activities, participants were significantly higher than the standard average on all of the cultural identity scores except cultural behaviour.

To see if any of these measures of self-concept had changed significantly after 6 weeks of participation in the cultural component of the RAP program, a series of one-tailed paired t tests was conducted<sup>2</sup>. Significant increases were found in participants' level of cultural identity achievement, but not in their overall cultural identity or either of the other two subscales.

**TABLE 1**

Average Cultural Identity Scores, Before Beginning the Cultural Program and Six Weeks Later

Score	Pre-Test	Post-Test
Cultural Identity Achievement	2.43 (.85)	<u>2.73*</u> (.62)
Cultural Behaviours	2.60 (1.17)	2.40 (.84)
Affirmation and Belonging	<u>2.98</u> (.77)	<u>3.06</u> (.58)
Overall Cultural Identity	<u>2.61</u> (.67)	<u>2.75</u> (.45)

**Note:** Values in parenthesis are standard deviations. Underlined values differ from the established scale average of 2.0, at the level of p<.05. All differences from pre-test to post-test were tested for significance with a one-tailed t test, df = 9, \* p <.05 for this test.

*Global Self-Worth and Self-Perception*

Participants' average self-perception scores are displayed in Table 2, which also includes the importance ratings for the specific domains of the Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents. One-tailed paired t tests were conducted to determine whether overall cultural identity and its subscales had changed significantly in the six weeks that had elapsed between the pre-test and the post-test. Global self-worth changed in a positive direction, but this change was not statistically significant.

<sup>2</sup> Because of the small sample size, a Wilcoxon Signed Rank test was also conducted to determine whether non-parametric statistics would have been more appropriate. The results were virtually identical.

*Because changes in self-perception may reflect actual changes in competence and behaviour, we wanted to see how well the participants' self-perceptions corresponded to others' observations of their outward behaviour.*

**TABLE 2**

Average Self-Perception and Importance for Eight Domains and Globally, Before Beginning the Cultural Program and Six Weeks Later

Domain	Importance		Self-Perception	
	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Pre-Test	Post-Test
Scholastic Competence	<b>3.25</b> (.54)	<b>3.35</b> (.54)	<b>2.52</b> (.53)	<b>2.52</b> (.59)
Social Acceptance	<b>2.25</b> (.86)	<b>2.35</b> (.82)	<b>2.92</b> (.53)	<b>2.84</b> (.68)
Athletic Competence	<b>2.05</b> (.55)	<b>2.30</b> (.63)	<b>2.40</b> (.69)	<b>2.30</b> (.46)
Physical Appearance	<b>2.70</b> (.86)	<b>2.80</b> (.63)	<b>2.26</b> (.41)	<b>2.36</b> (.57)
Job Competence	<b>3.20</b> (.71)	<b>3.50</b> (.53)*	<b>2.66</b> (.63)	<b>3.02</b> (.39)*
Romantic Appeal	<b>3.15</b> (.71)	<b>3.30</b> (.67)	<b>2.76</b> (.48)	<b>2.76</b> (.54)
Behavioural Conduct	<b>2.90</b> (.70)	<b>3.05</b> (.60)	<b>2.68</b> (.58)	<b>3.04</b> (.56)**
Close Friendship	<b>3.05</b> (.72)	<b>2.85</b> (.23)	<b>3.10</b> (.51)	<b>2.82</b> (1.03)
Global Self-Worth			<b>2.96</b> (.56)	<b>3.02</b> (.48)

**Note:** Values in parentheses are standard deviations. All differences from pre-test to post-test were tested for significance with a one-tailed t test, df=9.

\* p < .05      \*\* p < .001

Statistically significant improvements in self-concept were evident in two domains, job competence and behavioural conduct. The value that participants placed on the job competence domain also increased significantly over the six weeks of the study.

Because changes in self-perception may reflect actual changes in competence and behaviour, we wanted to see how well the participants' self-perceptions corresponded to others' observations of their outward behaviour. The ratings that had been provided by the three RAP staff members were averaged for each participant in each domain. These were correlated with the adolescents' self-perception scores for that domain in the post-test, which referred to the same time period that staff members' observations would have covered. The correlations are presented in Table 3.

Participants' self-perceptions corresponded very closely to their teachers' and case-workers' observations in the areas of behavioural conduct and job competence, the domains of their lives that these young women might have been most likely to demonstrate in the RAP program. A somewhat more modest, but marginally significant<sup>3</sup>, correspondence also existed between participants' self-perception and those of staff in the domains of scholastic competence and romantic appeal. Academic services are a part of the RAP program, so is not surprising that staff and participant ratings in the scholastic domain would correspond well. It is less obvious why romantic appeal self-perceptions might correspond so well with staff ratings. However, since an objective of the RAP program is to help clients develop and enhance their social and parenting skills, it seemed likely that romantic relationships

<sup>3</sup> The small sample size in this study reduces the power of the statistical tests to detect effects that exist in the population. Therefore, results that have a chance probability level of .10 to .05, usually considered to be of "marginal" significance, are reported along with those that have a chance probability of .05 or less, the traditionally accepted level for statistical significance. It is appropriate to treat marginal results with more caution, subject to replication with a larger sample of participants.



*Cultural identity achievement was significantly related to another important domain, romantic appeal.*

would have been discussed with staff, especially because of the challenges of balancing romantic relationships with parenting commitments.

**TABLE 3**  
Correlation Between Participants' Self-Perception Scores and Staff Perceptions

Domain	Correlation
Scholastic Competence	<b>.43</b> †
Social Acceptance	.07
Athletic Competence	-.24
Physical Appearance	.27
Job Competence	<b>.84</b> **
Romantic Appeal	<b>.51</b> †
Behavioural Competence	<b>.90</b> **
Close Friendships	.23

† p<.10    \* p<.001

*The Relationship of Cultural Identity to Self-Concept*

It was predicted that adolescents with higher levels of cultural identity would experience a more positive self-

concept. Prior to beginning the cultural component of the RAP program, none of the aspects of cultural identity was a significant contributor to global self-worth for these young women. On the other hand, cultural identity did appear to make a positive contribution to self-concept in the areas of relationships and social acceptance. Overall cultural identity and all of its component subscales were significantly related to self-concept in the very important domain of close friendships. Cultural identity achievement was significantly related to another important domain, romantic appeal. Overall cultural identity had a marginally significant relationship to both romantic appeal and social acceptance. It also had a marginally significant negative relationship with self-perception in the domain of job competence.

After six weeks, patterns were markedly different, as predicted. Global self-worth had a significant correlation with cultural identity achievement and marginal positive correlations with both

**TABLE 4**  
Correlation Matrix for Self-Concept and Cultural Identity Before Beginning the Cultural Program and Six Weeks Later

Self-Concept Domain	Cultural Identity Achievement		Cultural Behaviours		Affirmation and Belonging		Overall Cultural Identity	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
Scholastic	.11	.27	.14	.32	.08	.18	.21	.38
Social Accept.	.45	.34	.32	<b>.45</b> †	.40	.33	<b>.54</b> †	<b>.45</b> †
Athletic	-.18	-.11	.11	-.12	.02	-.23	-.10	-.21
Physical Appearance	.12	<b>.54</b> †	.17	.34	.12	.34	.04	<b>.50</b> †
Job Competence	-.35	.27	-.39	.01	-.37	.17	<b>-.44</b> †	.23
Romantic	<b>.57</b> *	<b>.60</b> *	.30	.41	.37	<b>.46</b> †	<b>.50</b> †	<b>.61</b> *
Behavioural	.40	.15	.26	.15	.39	.01	.42	.10
Close Friendship	<b>.58</b> *	<b>.51</b> †	<b>.59</b> *	<b>.53</b> †	<b>.63</b> *	.37	<b>.57</b> *	<b>.58</b> *
Global Self-Worth	.00	<b>.56</b> *	-.06	.28	.07	<b>.49</b> †	-.06	<b>.50</b> †

Note: N=10

† p<.10    \*p<.05

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*Participants were asked how they felt about the Aboriginal cultural activities, whether they considered themselves to be Aboriginal, whether the ceremonies and the elder had been helpful to them, what aspects of the Aboriginal culture component they found most interesting, and which they would like to see changed.*

overall cultural identity and the affirmation and belonging subscale. Physical attractiveness went from being unrelated to culture to being marginally related after exposure to the cultural enrichment program. The marginally significant relationship of overall cultural identity to social acceptance was replicated after six weeks, and social acceptance also developed a relationship with the cultural behaviour subscale. In the area of job competence, the pattern of change went from a marginally negative relationship to being unrelated or, if anything, positively related to culture. Close friendship generally retained a strong connection with cultural identity scores, although the pattern was not quite as strong as it had been at the beginning of the program.

### **Interview Results**

Interviews with such a small sample are necessarily impressionistic. Therefore dominant themes expressed by the majority of participants were identified. A content analysis was conducted to identify common themes. The results, including some direct quotations of the respondents, follow.

#### Reactions to the RAP Program.

Participants were asked what they found most interesting about the program, and what they would like to see changed. On the whole, the participants found the entire RAP program to be interesting and reported enjoying the outings most. The most frequently reported aspect of the program that the adolescents would like to see changed was the academic component, in that they would have liked to receive high school credit for the work they did in this area.

Q1. The activities that participants said they found to be of greatest interest included:

- going on field trips (e.g. Children of the Earth High School, Indian and Métis Friendship Center and Aboriginal Center, pool hall, YWCA)

- Native studies (e.g. participating in a sharing circle, sweats, sweet grass, sage)
- learning about new things (e.g. birth control, doing a resume)
- We can talk about stuff here we can't talk about in a regular classroom
- the crafts; we made bags, beading, stuff like that
- when you get to meet the people [other participants] in the class
- when Bo comes here. She's the health nurse; the activities she does, she's suppose to be doing one on Monday about the drunk Barbie

Q2. When asked what areas of the RAP program they would like to see changed:

- four participants reported they were satisfied with the entire RAP program and would not change anything
- five participants reported they would like to get high school credit for the academic work

Two other participants made the following comments, respectively:

- they say they're going to do something and they don't (e.g. resume making)
- they are not very strict here; there is like no rules here, people just sit around and socialize

Cultural Enrichment Component. Six questions were asked in this area. Participants were asked how they felt about the Aboriginal cultural activities, whether they considered themselves to be Aboriginal, whether the ceremonies and the elder had been helpful to them, what aspects of the Aboriginal culture component they found most interesting, and which they would like to see changed.

Q3. Most of the participants (seven of the ten) responded positively regarding how they felt about the Aboriginal cultural component. The positive responses included:

- I don't know much about my culture and I'm finding things out, what happened before, how our people were treated
- cause it's interesting

*9 participants said they did not know how participating in Aboriginal ceremonies might have helped them.*

- I like learning about other cultures
- because I haven't lived with my family all my life so ever since I've been here I'm starting to learn about the culture
- It's [culture is] important because it's a big part of your life

Three participants gave negative responses. At least one of the negative response appeared to be due to the respondent's father's past negative experiences with Aboriginal culture and therefore did not seem to not reflect the participant's own impressions. Indeed, she mentioned that she would like to draw her own conclusions in the future, but currently she did not think very highly of the cultural activities. The negative comments were:

- I don't really care much about it because I was brought up to not believe in it too much, my Dad says it was nothing but bad stuff
- It's fun but I don't make too much about it
- when we went to the Aboriginal Center I didn't like what the lady [elder] was saying, giving us heck for not wearing dresses
- they talk about them but I haven't seen anything yet, just went to the Aboriginal center

Q5. When asked how participating in the Aboriginal ceremonies had helped them, one participant reported that the cultural component helped her learn more about her culture.

- just to be learning about it, I didn't know anything about it before

The other 9 participants said they did not know how participating in Aboriginal ceremonies might have helped them. This may have been because the question did not refer to specific ceremonies or activities, leaving some respondents uncertain of its meaning. To the extent that participants' reactions could be assessed, there seems to have been a mixture of positive and negative reactions. Their additional comments were:

- don't know, the elder just got back so

haven't participated in too much

- haven't really done any ceremonies here, but have outside the program and it helped a lot
- don't feel it [going to the Aboriginal center] was useful, didn't learn anything
- we just did smudging, that's about it; it makes me feel closer to my culture

Q6. All but two of the participants enjoyed participating in the Aboriginal cultural activities. The activities reported to be most interesting were:

- beading, the crafts
- the outings, went to the Aboriginal center, played pool
- making posters about our culture, had to look up culture stuff on the computer; I found some stuff about how high their voices go when they sing

Q7. Six participants felt the Elder had not been very helpful. This was likely due to the fact that the Elder happened to have been away for much of the time they had spent in the program. Besides two, who simply said "no" to question 7, three mentioned that they had not had individual contact with her, or had not spoken to her

- no, she speaks to us in a group
- yes, she's the one who does all the native stuff. I have not spoken to her one-on-one

The other four participants reported positive responses to the Elder

- yeah, you can tell her anything and she'll just tell you what to do about it
- yeah, when she comes in, just her being here, and the way she speaks; she is really humble, like she's nice
- I guess so, she has talked to us in class and stuff, when she talks to us, she gives us a lot of information. She tells us about videos and we watch them. Not personal problems.

Q8. Eight participants reported that the cultural component did not need any changes. The other two gave the following responses:

- I would like to see more powwows, hoop dancing, stuff like that

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*Interview responses indicated that most participants had positive feelings towards the cultural teachings and activities. Participants reported gaining a deeper and more personally meaningful understanding of their culture, and appeared to be integrating it into their new role as mothers.*

- that they get into more detailed stuff, like this is just about a little taste of Aboriginal culture

Q10. When asked how they thought they would use the cultural information from the program, most participants (seven of the ten) reported that they would use it to teach their children about their culture.

Responses included:

- some day my child will ask me and I don't want to just sit there and know nothing
- I can teach my child about the culture
- There is too much racism out there so I'll tell my child about it
- I want my child to know as much as he can about his culture

Three participants offered other suggestions for how they would use the information.

- to educate other people who don't know
- probably just to make dream catchers and stuff like that
- so I can understand the culture

Interview responses indicated that most participants had positive feelings towards the cultural teachings and activities. Participants reported gaining a deeper and more personally meaningful understanding of their culture, and appeared to be integrating it into their new role as mothers. These results are consistent with the quantitative findings, which show a stronger linkage between cultural identity and the adolescents' self-worth after six weeks of exposure to the RAP program.

Responses About Aboriginal Culture.

Two questions were asked regarding how the participants felt about Aboriginal people and their cultures, and whether they participated in Aboriginal cultural activities outside the program.

Q9. Eight of ten respondents said they participated in Aboriginal cultural activities outside the RAP program. The other two did not currently participate in Aboriginal cultural activities outside the program, but had done so at least once during childhood.

- No; when I was 6 or 7, I went to a powwow through school
- I used to, when I was about six, my aunts and uncle took me, I haven't gone to anything else since I was six; parents don't participate

Q16. When asked about their feelings toward Aboriginal people, five participants said that they felt the same toward Aboriginal people as toward anyone else.

- It depends on what kind of people, I don't like rowdy ones [Aboriginal people], sometimes I met rowdy ones on my reserve
- I just see them as people. Before I didn't realize about the culture and now I do.
- everyone has problems, white people too
- The same as I feel toward anyone else, when people put Aboriginal people down, sometimes it's true so it doesn't bother me
- the same as with other people

One participant said she felt better around Aboriginal people. The other three respondents commented instead about how they felt when people put down Aboriginal people in a racist manner.

- The area I lived in was very bad for that, it was hard for me to go to school there, like I stuck out in a whole crowd of white kids, kids called me names when I walked down the halls at school
- It disgusts me when people say bad things about Aboriginals, I don't see why they think they are better, they are probably worse
- I get along well with all Aboriginal people that I know; sometimes it makes me feel like they are putting me down when they say bad things about Aboriginals
- I just think, it's stupid that people do that, they have a culture themselves

Overall, these adolescents seemed aware of the presence of a good deal of racism.

Relationships with Children, Family and Others. Participants were asked how their relationships with their children, friends, and other people had changed since



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*"I get along well with all Aboriginal people that I know; sometimes it makes me feel like they are putting me down when they say bad things about Aboriginals."*

participating in the RAP program. They were also asked whom they would go to if they had a problem and needed advice.

Q12. Five participants had children, and three of them said that their relationships with their children had not changed in any way since they were in the RAP program. Two participants reported positive changes:

- I am more patient with my daughter now that I am not with her all the time
- Just that he's happy when I wake him up in the morning; says "going to school Mom"

Q13. All but one participant reported that they had stopped seeing their friends when they became pregnant. Some of their responses included:

- stopped hanging around with friends because they were doing things that I didn't really do anymore
- don't see my friends as much because they want to go to parties and stuff and I don't
- I'm a lot closer to my friends here [RAP program] than my friends outside the program
- I don't stay out as late as I used to, I'm too tired to stay up late.
- I don't socialize as much with my friends, I haven't been going out very much in the last couple of years, just staying home
- I dropped all my friends because they were a bad influence so I don't have much relationships with people these days
- I really don't have much time to hang around anymore; it makes me happy because some of my friends were bad influences
- don't have any friends
- have a lot of friends; lots of them have children, not all

Q14. Four participants reported that their relationships with their family and other people in their life had not changed since starting the program. One participant reported that she talked more now to other people and wasn't so shy. Another participant said

- I guess I am more responsible and my Mom is happy about that because I'm

learning how to handle money. I used to spend my money on whatever, and now I have to spend it on my baby, try to make it last and stuff like that.

- One participant reported that she doesn't see her boyfriend as much.
- One participant reported that she tried to be nicer and was probably more patient now.

One participant said

- they're happy for me; my cousins are getting closer because they are coming here too

Another participant stated:

- they look at me more positively because I'm going back to school and I made the effort myself

Q11. Four participants reported that they would go to their mothers, or in one case foster mother, if they had a problem and needed advice. Some of the reasons for choosing their mothers included:

- because she is a good listener
- she has been down the same road as I have so she is easy to talk to
- she's my best friend
- because I trust her

Three participants reported that they would go to their best friend if they had a problem and needed advice because the friend was easier to talk to, could be trusted, or had a long history with the participant. One participant reported that she would go her sister and Dad because her Mom passed away

One participant reported that she would go to her boyfriend's mother because

- she's my spiritual guider

One participant reported that she would go to one of the counsellors at the RAP program because

- they're here and I see them every day

This data revealed that for most participants their relationship with their children, family members and others have changed to a certain degree since attending

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*Seven participants reported feeling good or happy about themselves and one participant reported feeling good about herself most of the time. One said she did not always feel good about herself.*

the program. Only three adolescents stated that their relationships had not changed. These results also show that most of the adolescents reported being disconnected from friends, which may have some negative implications regarding the adolescents' self-esteem.

*Comments About Self-Perception.*

Participants were asked how they felt about themselves, and how participating in the cultural activities had made them feel about themselves

Q17. Seven participants reported feeling good or happy about themselves and one participant reported feeling good about herself most of the time. One said she did not always feel good about herself.

Positive responses include:

- some people say that when you are pregnant you don't feel happy about yourself but I do
- pretty good
- most of the time I am happy
- I feel good about myself, what I'm doing. Once I have this baby, I'll probably go back to finish high school, then probably go to university
- good because I'm attending school, learning about my culture
- I like everything about myself. I want to finish school and get a job to support my son. I want to be a cop.
- Good; I feel fine, happy.

Negative responses:

- I could do better, I could have finished school
- Sometimes I don't like the way I look

Most participants reported feeling good about themselves, which corresponds to their average global self-worth scores both before they started the RAP program and six weeks later. Indeed, their average scores at both times, (2.96 and 3.02, respectively) are almost identical to the average for other adolescents from a main stream junior and high school sample (Harter, 1988).

Q15. Four participants said they could not articulate how participating in the Aboriginal cultural activities made them feel about themselves. One said that her feelings about herself had not changed. Two reported feeling good about themselves because of the activities.

- It makes me understand like who I am, and where I come from and proud of it.
- it made me feel better about participating in cultural activities

One participant said she felt weird at times, and another one reported that she didn't care.

### **Thematic Analysis of the interview data**

Three major themes were identified through the content analysis.

*Theme 1: Positive response to learning about Aboriginal culture.* All of these young women had participated in at least one Aboriginal cultural activity prior to coming to the program and seven of ten reported favourable responses to the cultural component of the RAP program. Most respondents found the cultural component to be the most interesting area of the entire program. It appears that the adolescents are motivated to participate in the cultural activities. Because of these positive feelings towards the enrichment program, the participants would likely accept more exposure to cultural traditions. Most of the young women have reported this part of the RAP program to be "fun" and many have articulated that it is an important part of their identity as they take on the tasks of parenting.

*Theme 2: Recognition of the Importance of Academic Accomplishment.* Most participants were concerned about their academic performance and were intent on finishing high school. Indeed, receiving credit for the academic component of the program was the response that was given most often when asked if there was any area of the entire RAP program they would change.

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*By the end of the six weeks, young women with a stronger cultural identity also felt better about their physical appearance and, most importantly, had a stronger overall sense of self-worth. It appears that the program is not only teaching the adolescents about aspects of their cultural identity but is also teaching them that their culture is a basis for self-worth. The more they embrace their culture, the more they feel worthwhile.*

*Theme 3: Pregnancy and Motherhood Disrupt Established Connections to Friends.* All participants reported severing ties with old friends since becoming pregnant and having children.

### Discussion

Both the quantitative and the qualitative aspects of the current study support the conclusion that Aboriginal cultural identity had a substantial positive effect on the self-concept of participants in the RAP program. Participants who had a strong cultural identity upon entering the program already had a more positive self-concept in some important areas of their lives: romantic relationships, close friendships and social acceptance. Although only marginally significant, there was one area in which cultural identity was negatively related to self-concept, that of job competence. Although we do not know for sure why this would be so, it is possible that these young women were responding to stereotypes in mainstream Canadian culture about Aboriginal people. Given their youth, they are likely to have had little job experience. Consequently, this may have been one area of life in which they had not yet had much direct experience to help them disconfirm mainstream stereotypes.

Fortunately, identifying highly with Aboriginal culture no longer predicted self-perceptions of low job competence by the end of six weeks in the RAP program. Cultural identification continued to be associated with positive self-concept in the domains of close friendship, romantic relationships and social acceptance over the six weeks under investigation. By the end of the six weeks, young women with a stronger cultural identity also felt better about their physical appearance and, most importantly, had a stronger overall sense of self-worth. It appears that the program is not only teaching the adolescents about aspects of their cultural identity but is also teaching them that their culture is a basis for self-worth. The more they

embrace their culture, the more they feel worthwhile. This finding clearly supports the enculturation hypothesis (Zimmerman, et al., 1998) and is in accordance with the research literature on this topic (Kato, 1997; McCubbin, Thompson & Thompson, 1998; Organista, Chun & Marin, 1998).

Phinney and others (e.g., Phinney, 1998a) have described the adolescent's journey toward cultural identity as going from a lack of interest in one's culture, or a willingness to have one's cultural identity defined by others (foreclosure), through intense and personal exploration, to the stage of cultural identity achievement. In the current study, cultural identity achievement was the only area in which participants increased their cultural identification significantly. This is the aspect of cultural identity that refers to the depth and personal meaningfulness of cultural teachings and traditions to the person, and the extent to which culture is integrated into the person's overall self-concept. It is considered to be the most mature stage of cultural identification and the one that is most likely to facilitate the development of a stable and secure identity and enhanced self-worth, even in circumstances of severe stress.

Consistent with this model, one way of interpreting the changes that were found in the relationship between cultural identity and self-perception of job competence is that participants went from a stage of foreclosed cultural identity to one of cultural identity achievement. That is, some of these young women may have had a cultural identity partly informed by unchallenged racist stereotypes about Aboriginal people when they began the RAP program. RAP program experiences that combined cultural experiences and teachings, job information, and the positive example of successful Aboriginal program staff, may have led participants to reject that foreclosed definition of their culture and replace it with a more positive one based on their own knowledge and experiences.

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*The results of the current study have shown that self-concept in the domains of romantic relationships and close friendships are closely and positively related to cultural identity, which may therefore be a source of resilience to the stress of disrupted friendships during the transition to motherhood.*

Participants in the New Directions RAP program showed significant positive increases in two domains of self-concept, job competence and behavioural conduct. That the participants perceived themselves as more competent in the area of job readiness and reported feeling better toward the way they behave (e.g. doing what they know is right, avoiding getting into trouble) suggests that two main objectives of the RAP program are being addressed -- that is, to eventually obtain meaningful employment and to develop skills to take control over the events in their lives. Moreover, the observers' ratings, which reflected changes in the adolescents' actual abilities and behaviours, show that the adolescents do not merely think they're changing in these areas, because other people have also noticed the changes.

Global self-worth at the end of the six week period was the highest among those young women who had high levels of cultural identity achievement, but the average increase in global self-worth after six weeks in the program was not significant in the group, overall. Self-perception in the areas of job competence and behavioural conduct, although somewhat more important to participants after the RAP program, apparently were not sufficiently important to have a significant impact on global self-worth. The patterns of importance ratings for domains such as romantic appeal and close friendship makes it clear that, like most adolescents, these young women have an important set of influences on their self-concept that are based on their personal lives outside the program. The impact of pregnancy and parenthood appear to have had a negative effect on at least one of those domains, as they described in their interviews. Although this small sample of adolescent mothers does seem to have had supportive relationships with family members such as their mother or father, almost all of them reported a loss of their connections with their friends as they approached motherhood. This is of

concern, since previous research has found that social support plays a significant role in helping adolescent mothers to adapt to motherhood (Dalla & Gamble, 1998; Pasley et al., 1993). The results of the current study have shown that self-concept in the domains of romantic relationships and close friendships are closely and positively related to cultural identity, which may therefore be a source of resilience to the stress of disrupted friendships during the transition to motherhood. Although average scores in those domains did not increase significantly over the six week period of the study, neither did they decrease significantly, despite the stress on their friendships that they reported in their interviews.

The current study may have underestimated the impact of the culture on self-concept because of certain limitations. Harter's (1988) Self-perception Profile has been used widely with other cultures but not with Canadian Aboriginal groups. The Multigroup Cultural Identity questionnaire has also not been used with this specific population. These instruments may not have been as sensitive to changes in aspects of the Canadian Aboriginal culture as would be desired. In addition, this study was based on the results of only ten participants which means the power to detect changes was very limited. As well, the interview results revealed that the elder had to be absent for much of the program for this group of participants. Therefore, stronger effects may be found for other future groups who participate in the program. It is important to keep in mind that the six weeks over which this study was conducted is probably too little time to assess the magnitude of the effects. A longer-term follow-up of these participants might have identified changes that had just begun by the end of six weeks, and which one would expect to see increasing over time. It is possible, for example, that the most important contribution of the cultural component of the RAP program will have been to start the process of a life-long involvement in



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*The results of the current study appear to be a strong confirmation of the importance of incorporating cultural knowledge and experience into programs for Aboriginal adolescents. The interviews revealed that, by and large, the young women in the program were hungry for knowledge of their culture, for their own personal development and in order to teach their children about it.*

their culture. Unfortunately, we do not know whether that happened for these participants, although most did report participating in cultural activities outside of the program.

Because all of the participants were in the RAP program and participated in the cultural component, we cannot be certain that it was the RAP program or its cultural component that is responsible for the changes these young women went through. Other things, of course, were happening in the participant's lives, which may have contributed to the changes that were found. Although the design of the study does not allow us to be absolutely certain about the causes, the nature of the changes and the participants' own remarks in the interview support the conclusion that it was the cultural component of the RAP program that caused them.

The results of the current study appear to be a strong confirmation of the importance of incorporating cultural knowledge and experience into programs for Aboriginal adolescents. The interviews revealed that, by and large, the young women in the program were hungry for knowledge of their culture, for their own personal development and in order to teach their children about it. Furthermore, the progress that they made in achieving the objectives of the program appears to have been closely related to the achievement of cultural identity, which they frequently attributed to the cultural component of the program. Although learning about their culture in a more natural setting might well be a better way to learn, many young Aboriginal people have not had the opportunity to live in a natural setting that reflected the traditions and knowledge of their culture. This study supports the conclusion that, if cultural teaching and experiences are systematically incorporated into a service program, young people will benefit from those experiences and teachings, and may not benefit from the program if the cultural component is not there.

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