Motivators of Educational Success: Perceptions of Grade 12 Aboriginal Students

Jane P. Preston
University of Prince Edward Island

Tim R. Claypool
University of Saskatchewan

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify motivators that support educational success, as perceived by Aboriginal high school students enrolled in two urban Saskatchewan schools. Twelve semi-structured individual interviews revealed that students were motivated by a hospitable school culture, relevant learning opportunities, and positive personal influences outside the realm of the school (e.g., family role models and Elder influence). Utilizing an Aboriginal worldview lens, student motivation stemmed from experiencing four quadrants of learning—awareness (physical), knowledge (mental), continuous improvement (emotional), and perseverance (spiritual). An implication is that educators need to incorporate features of Aboriginal pedagogy when teaching.

Keywords: motivational learning, Aboriginal high school students, Aboriginal worldview

**©2013 Canadian Society for the Study of Education/
Société canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation**
http://www.cje-rce.ca

Précis

Cet article vise à identifier les facteurs de motivation qui soutiennent la réussite éducative, selon la perception d'étudiants autochtones de niveau secondaire, inscrits dans deux écoles saskatchewanaises situées en milieu urbain. Nous offrons une revue de la littérature axée sur l'apprentissage motivationnel et actif. Une douzaine d'entrevues individuelles semi-structurées ont révélé que les étudiants étaient motivés par une culture scolaire accueillante, des possibilités d'apprentissage pertinentes et des expériences personnelles vécues à l'extérieur du milieu scolaire. Lorsqu'on utilise une vision du monde autochtone, la motivation de l'étudiant découle alors des quatre quadrants d'apprentissage—la conscience (physique), la connaissance (mental), l'amélioration continue (émotionnel) et la persévérance (spirituel). Conséquemment, les éducateurs doivent incorporer des caractéristiques de la pédagogie autochtone à leur enseignement.

Introduction

One of the latest reports to surface from a federally appointed Canadian panel of policy experts provides a clear message—the quality and provision of education for Canada's Aboriginal peoples requires vast improvement (Haldane, Lafond, & Krause, 2012). Many additional Canadian reports have made a similar point (e.g., Howe, 2011; Mendelson, 2008; Richards & Scott, 2009; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Sharpe & Arsenault, 2009). The changes needed to improve Aboriginal education require urgent political, financial, curricular, and pedagogical attention, a process that necessitates collaborative efforts among Canadian leaders and educators. Interestingly, though, as government leaders, policy makers, school administrators, and classroom teachers attempt to ameliorate the educational experiences of Aboriginal students, a key group of Aboriginal stakeholders whose voices are muffled is the Aboriginal students themselves. Through this paper, we attempt to address the lack of attention given to Aboriginal students and their perceptions about education.

The purpose of this paper is to identify motivators that support educational success, as perceived by 12 Aboriginal high school students enrolled in two urban Saskatchewan schools. Analyzing the findings through an Aboriginal worldview, we found the students' motivation to learn was enhanced through experiencing four quadrants of learning—awareness (east, physical), knowledge (south, mental), continuous improvement (west, emotional), and perseverance (north, spiritual). The findings of this study may be of particular interest to educational policy makers, senior educational leaders, principals, and educators who promote the educational success and well-being of Aboriginal students.

Before we present the details of our research, the significance of the study warrants explanation. Regardless of whether students are Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, it is important to address the question "What motivates students to learn?" When that answer is implicit, educators are better able to infuse motivational types of learning into school and classroom environments. In turn, a student's learning journey becomes an enticing, natural, and personally relevant experience. Studies have shown that high motivation to learn is directly related to cognitive engagement, enjoyment of the learning experience, and increased achievement in the classroom (Areepattamannil, Freeman, & Klinger, 2011; Metallidou & Vlachou, 2007; Pajares, 1997). These findings highlight the potential and positive impact of our research with regard to Aboriginal students. In sum, educators

need to understand what motivates Aboriginal students to succeed in school and use this knowledge to promote increased educational success for Aboriginal students.

Background: Motivational Learning

There are a number of studies pertaining to learning and student motivation. For example, two studies (Assor, Kaplan, Kanat-Maymon, & Roth, 2005; Reeve, 2002) have revealed that students are less motivated to learn if their teacher exhibits controlling behaviour such as regularly giving rigid directions, monitoring students too closely, not giving students choices, and not providing opportunities for students to voice differing opinions. Elliot (2006) claimed that an individual's cultural values and traditions serve as motivation if classroom dynamics and learning are aligned with these cultural features. Liem, Martin, Porter, and Colmar (2012) found that students were motivated to do well in an attempt to meet parental and teacher expectations. This research highlights that a student's motivation to learn is influenced by sociocultural components such as classroom dynamics, individual expectations, and home life.

In attempting to locate research that specifically addresses the contextual realities of Aboriginal students and motivational grounds for succeeding in school, we had limited success. Nonetheless, the few studies we did find spotlighted interesting results. McInerney's (1995) research, involving American Navajo and Australian Aboriginal students, showed that students were motivated by a desire to graduate from high school so that they could obtain satisfying careers. McInerney's study also highlighted that participant Aboriginal students were not motivated by teacher recognition or by peer competitiveness. In a second study, McInerney, Hinikey, Van Etten, and Dowson (1998) found that, for Australian Aboriginal students, mastery goal incentives were a significant motivator for learning, and, in turn, performance-related incentives were of little importance. In Hare and Pidgeon's (2011) Ontario study, First Nation high school students explained that close family and community connections provided support and motivation for them to succeed in school. In analyzing these results, a conundrum emerges. Although these Aboriginal students placed little value on marks (i.e., performance incentives), simultaneously they wanted to graduate and obtain satisfying careers, which can be contingent on high grades.

Research Methodology and Research Method

In what follows, we describe our research paradigm and the conceptual framework used to analyze the data. The procedures for site and participant selection and our thematic analysis of the data are also explained.

Features of This Qualitative Study

Through this qualitative research, we attempted to construct a description of the motivators that support the educational success of Aboriginal high school students. In setting up the research, we acknowledged that the findings of the study represent not only the participants' perceptions but also the researchers' understanding of these perceptions. Thus, this qualitative research is located within the interpretive paradigm, where the concept of *truth* reflects the participants' and researchers' human experiences, and this concept of truth is multiple and bound by time, space, and context (Chilisa, 2012).

In further contemplating the dimensions of the study, we recognized the need to choose an appropriate research method, one that aligned with an interpretive research methodology (Lincoln, 1995). Hay (1999) reminded researchers that there is no such thing as *one* correct research method for a study; instead, the most appropriate design is dependent upon the methodology and purpose of the study (Stake, 2005). In considering our methodology and purpose, we chose case study as our research design.

Stake (2005, 2010) recommended that case studies focus upon a particular situation or setting. As well, Stake indicated that case studies should depict a social activity or experiential event bounded within a situation or setting. Aligning Stakes' recommendations with our research, the setting under scrutiny was two Saskatchewan schools that had a sizeable population of Aboriginal students; the social event was the experience of high school Aboriginal students with regard to learning and motivation. It is important to note that, due to the limited number of participants, we did not compare and contrast the experiences of students across the two schools. Rather, we amalgamated their experiences into one case study.

Another core aspect of this research was that it focused on Aboriginal issues. Many Indigenous scholars (e.g., Battiste, 2008; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 2012) have asserted that Aboriginal peoples need control over their own

knowledge. These scholars explained that Aboriginal peoples have the right to do their own research, and, if non-Aboriginal researchers choose to assist Aboriginal peoples in conducting Aboriginal studies, ensuing projects should empower and benefit Aboriginal communities and cultures, not just researchers, university communities, and Canadian society at large. Mindful of these aspects of Aboriginal research, we contacted an Aboriginal senior educational leader (i.e., a superintendent) within a public school system in Saskatchewan (Canada). We explained our tentative research purpose and asked if the research and its findings could potentially prove to be of benefit for Aboriginal students within their schools. Together with the Aboriginal superintendent, we fine-tuned the purpose of the research. After the research had been completed, the findings were presented to the superintendent and also to the principal and teachers in both Sun School and Moon School (pseudonyms). During our data collection mode, we also worked with an Aboriginal graduate student who assisted us in the collection of data.

Conceptual Framework: Aboriginal Worldview

For this research, we chose to analyze our findings through an Aboriginal worldview. For the most part, Westernized educational systems focus on the mind (academics) and, to some extent, the body (e.g., physical education, diet). In turn, North American educational systems commonly acknowledge that the spirit and the heart are within the purview of the church or some religious affiliation (Laframboise & Sherbina, 2008). When involved with mainstream education and conventional academic research, Aboriginal peoples sometimes grapple with "the effects of only having 50% of them taken into consideration" (Laframboise & Sherbina, 2008, p.18). In an effort to partially address this point, we chose to analyze our finding through an Aboriginal worldview.

Having stated the above, we realize there are many and varied Aboriginal worldviews. Kovach (2009) reminded researchers, "Indigenous people have never been appreciative of a pan-Indigenous approach that attempts to homogenize our tribal practices" (p. 37). Indeed, it is not our intent to downplay the brilliancy of diverse Aboriginal epistemologies with one stroke of a brush, so to say. However, as Little Bear (2000), a North American Indigenous philosopher, explained, Aboriginal people tend to understand each other because they share a worldview that holds many common enduring beliefs about the world. For our conceptual framework, we will attempt to utilize these common Aboriginal

world perceptions by analyzing our findings through a balanced emphasis on the mind, body, emotion, and spirit. To accomplish this, we present our understanding of the Medicine Wheel from both book knowledge (e.g., Brendtro & Brokenleg, 2001; Laframboise & Sherbina, 2008; Walker, 2001; White, 1992) and from oral personal teachings we heard from Elders living in the Prairie and Atlantic provinces of Canada.

Site and Participant Selection and Data Collection

As mentioned previously, a successful research partnership was established with one Saskatchewan school division and, when senior educational leaders were approached with the tentative goals and objectives of this study, a positive response was received. The superintendent of this school division identified particular schools that might be interested in our study. We contacted the administrators within these schools, inviting students to participate in the research. Administrators and/or teachers within the school spoke to several students, explaining the purpose of the study, and invited the students (on our behalf) to participate in the study. In the end, 12 Aboriginal high school students aged 17 to 19 years volunteered to participant. Seven students (four female and three male) represented Sun School, and five students (two female and three male) represented Moon School. Individual interviews lasted from about 20 minutes to 1 hour, and the average interview lasted 35 minutes.

At the time of the study, all participants were enrolled in Grade 12 in either Sun School or Moon School. During the time of this research, these Saskatchewan urban schools had corresponding enrolments of about 200 (Sun School) and 500 (Moon School) students. To maintain the anonymity of these schools, we provide a general description of the mission statements of the two schools. We point out that, although these mission statements were quite different from each other, one mission statement was not better than the other; they were just different. The mission of Sun School was to provide a safe, stable environment fostering academic success and healing, both maintained by balance in mind, body, emotion, and spirit. The mission of Moon School was to provide a welcoming community where faith and learning inspire students to serve others, making the world a better place. In sum, Sun School promoted a four-way Aboriginal worldview highlighting the importance of possessing a balance of mind, body, emotion, and spirit; Moon School promoted the idea that learning is intimately connected to nourishing and serving the entire community.

As mentioned previously, the dominant form of data collection within these two schools was 12 individual interviews. To augment the interview data, the researchers maintained a personal journal, where reflections were written shortly after each interview. Schwartz, Lederman, and Crawford (2004) claimed journal writing is a powerful way to explore, connect, and deepen an individual's understanding about the research. Fischer (2009) maintained that journal writing is one way of becoming aware of personal assumptions and feelings and striving to put them aside, or bracket them, in order to be open and receptive to intricacies of the topic at hand. In keeping with the suggestions of these authors, our journal writing documented such things as the researcher's general thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of the school, thematic interpretations of the interviewee's comments, and any other dominant issues that surfaced during the interview. In the presentation of the data results, we include a number of journal excerpts. These passages predominantly served as a reinforcement of the dominant themes that surfaced from the interview data.

Data Analysis

After student participants had been interviewed, the content was transcribed. Students were provided with a copy of their interview transcripts and asked to perform a member check "to ensure that the meaning the participants intended to convey was accurately understood and translated by researchers" (Imman, Howard, & Hill, 2012, p. 196). Upon the participant's written assurance that the transcripts reflected a realistic representation of his or her intended meaning, we reviewed the final transcripts to create a preliminary list of key ideas, commonalities, and differences, which converged into larger themes in response to the study's purpose (Creswell, 2012; Stake, 2005). Then transcripts were reread to ensure that the data representing the themes were accurate.

Thematic Results

As perceived by 12 Aboriginal high school students enrolled in two urban Saskatchewan schools, what are key motivational supports for educational success? In addressing this question, three dominant themes surfaced, each of which is described below. To assist in ensuring the credibility of this research, the following description contains direct quotes

originating from the participants' transcripts and the researcher's reflective journal. All students' names are pseudonyms.

Generous and Hospitable School Culture

When asking students what motivated them to come to school, many answers referred to the caring, supportive relationships they experienced with teachers, counsellors, and other educational workers within the school. Amy said, "If I have [an after-school activity], they'll [the teachers] say, 'You just tell me when your next match is, and I'll come watch it.'" Bob[1] was grateful for the verbal support her teachers supplied to her: "They give me support. They encourage me to come to school every day." Sunrise Woman talked about the positive, open communication she enjoyed with the social worker and a teacher. She said:

> Whenever I have struggles or whatever, when I come to school and I'm really upset, there's always someone here to talk to. They're really trusting as well. I have a good support system like with [name of teacher], the social worker, and [name of another teacher]. I have a good relationship with them.

Megan spoke of the trusting relationship she had with the counsellor. "I also talk to [the counsellor] . . . I don't have to tell her a lot of my background stuff. She knows what's going on. She understands me. She knows what I have gone through." Junior summed it up by saying, "There is a lot of support from teachers here, and it motivates me to come to school." In general, students were motivated to succeed due to the positive, trusting relationships they experienced with teachers who helped them with personal and academic challenges, while constantly encouraging them to do well.

Another motivational aspect for students was the hospitable school culture in which they were immersed. Their school environment provided them with a pervasive sense of hope, success, belonging, safety, and self-confidence that enticed the students to come to school and do well. David articulated this point when he said,

> I like this school. It's really helpful. They don't quit on you, like any kind of other school. They just keep asking how I am, wondering if I am going to come to school tomorrow. I never had that before. That kind of motivates me to come.

1 For this research, most participants chose their pseudonyms. Note, Bob is a female participant.

Seanna explained how the Aboriginal focus of the school evoked a family-like feeling of belonging: "I feel comfortable here . . . I can be myself, and I feel like we're a little family, because it's small." Junior and Amy's comments conveyed a similar point: "It's just like family here at the school. I am used to seeing everyone here. There are a lot of friendly faces" (Junior), and "It's more like family here [as compared to other schools]" (Amy). Jacob talked about how the school provided him with experiential opportunities for international travel and external awards, both of which gave him a sense of accomplishment. Sunrise Woman explained that the school made her culturally stronger, and, as a result, she said, "I'll never be staring at the ground and be ashamed of who I am." Zack was appreciative of the safety the school provided. He said, "It's all safe and secure and the staff is good. The principal is good. It's a nice enjoyable environment." Similar comments were documented in the researcher's reflective journal. For example, when the researcher walked into Sun School, she felt warm and welcomed as a staff member smiled at her and asked her if she needed help. A general theme surfacing from the data was that the school environment was one of acceptance and hospitality.

Many students, particularly in Sun School, acknowledged specific policy-rated supports as motivational factors influencing their educational success. Such supports included the hours in which the school was open and the educational, nutritional, and financial resources offered to students. Megan explained that although classes ended around 3:00, because school procedures allowed students to stay in school until 5:00, she could get the after-school help that she needed in order to complete her homework: "It's open until 5:00 in the evening. So if I need help, I can always ask the teachers, who are usually here until 4:30 or 5:00." Similarly, Seanna recognized that longer school hours were a motivational feature of her learning. "If I go home, I'm not going to get my work done, obviously, so they give me this room to do this work. I stay here until 4:00 or 5:00 doing [a particular subject]." Bob was appreciative of the resources the school offered. She said, "This school gives you laptops, guitars, and great stuff. They give you free bus passes . . . This school is the only school I ever went to that gives you a free hot lunch every day." The researcher noted that students walked freely in and out of the open-door "staff room." Students appeared motivated to attend school because of the accommodative learning procedures woven into the school culture and because of its learner-focused policies.

Student-Centred Curricular Content and After-School Activities

Many of the students from Sun School talked about the benefits they experienced while participating in project-based learning. Megan described this learning process as "learning on our own, at your own pace." David liked the social and communicative aspects of problem-based learning: "They put you into groups so you can discuss things. You need to discuss what you think. I think it's really good for you." Jacob recognized that this type of student-focused learning required a change in teaching style. On this note, he said, "So, it's a whole different approach on teaching. They don't just stand up there, write on the chalkboard, and we do notes. [We] like to discuss things. We do it as a group." Seanna said, "If someone is just reading to you, you're not going to get it all, because you are kind of thinking of something else or you're not in tune with it." She continued by explaining how project-based learning helped her to remain on task because, in order for her to present her project and its findings to the class, she needed to stay focused and think about the content she was presenting. Seanna believed that through project-based learning she learned more. These, and other students who participated in project-based learning, articulated the belief that their learning was facilitated through group experiences, large/small group discussion, and student presentations.

Although the students at Moon School did not talk about project-based learning per se, most of these students spoke of similar advantages pertaining to student-focused learning. For example, Frank explained that one of his teachers encouraged students to get together after school to complete homework assignments. Although Frank said that he detested homework and often did not do it, for a particular take-home math midterm, he capitalized on his teacher's advice. He phoned six of his friends and arranged that they meet at one student's house. He described the details of the ensuing three-hour homework session.

> For the most part, we kind of did our stuff alone, and then we compared answers with each other. If we were able to work it out with each other, then we just assumed it was right. Otherwise, like near the end, there were questions that a lot of us didn't really know. So, if someone got it, they explained how they got it, and everyone just kind of went with that.

Frank was pleased with the result of his group work session and indicated the extra peer help was one of the reasons he completed this homework task. Other students who attended Moon School students spoke about what type of learning activities worked well for them. Amy said, “I kind of like doing the speaking assignments . . . If I have to tell a story, it’s easy. That’s nothing, but if it’s through a paper, then people will be like, ‘What? What are you trying to get at?’” Frank spoke about his desire to write about things that were emotionally and intellectually important to him. He believed that his in-class writing assignments were often just busywork. On this topic, he said, “When you have to read something and you have to write exactly what happened . . . those are the things I don’t like. But I do like writing about what I think and how I feel.” In all of these examples, most students wanted curricular content to contain personally relevant topics and wanted to learn in social and experiential ways.

Although the majority of students showed enthusiasm when speaking about group work and other socially constructive ways of learning, one student spoke about his dislike for group projects and oral presentations. Tristan explained that in the past when he had done group work, some students in his group had not upheld their collective duty to the group. Sometimes individual students “did not show up.” He also said, “I don’t like presentations, but they say it builds a bond with the class, I guess.” Tristan’s comment reminds educators that all students learn differently and even group work and student presentations should not be viewed as an automatic panacea for motivational learning.

Participating in fine arts and after-school activities also appeared to motivate students to attend school and become excited about their learning. David enthusiastically described his passion for music and stated, “I’ve always wanted to be in a music class, and they have that here.” Within the researcher’s reflective journal, it was also stated, “He [David] took time to nurture his inner well-being through music and appeared to gain inner strength in this way.” Zack conveyed similar excitement when he talked about the after-school Aboriginal drumming group in which he used to participate. Jacob exuded a type of spiritual energy when he spoke about music and art, and he said, “I draw what I feel, and a lot of the art I do is Native art, so it’s fun.” Megan was proud of the fact that she had started an after-school, improvisational drama class that was quite popular among the students. Also on the topic of drama, Frank lamented the end of his after-school participation in the drama club, where he had found it enjoyable learning with people. “I was hoping for a drama club again. When I was in Grade 10 and 11, there was a drama club where we did plays and stuff. That stuff is not here anymore, though. Those were

fun." Sara's comments were similar to Frank's. Sara said, "I really love drama class. Like I love it so much."

Sports also appeared to be a motivational aspect of their education. Tristan said, "So my interests are just playing basketball. That's basically it . . . Sports just help me get through things." Bob, Sunrise Woman, and Sara also talked about their love for sports. "Every single sports team I take part in" (Bob). "Activities like sports are really important to me" (Sunrise Woman). "I really love volleyball a lot" (Sara). For many students, their experiences with music, drama, and sports activities helped to nurture a positive attitude about their school and learning.

Issues Outside the Realm of School: Role Model and Inner Drive

A number of issues outside the realm of the school motivated students to be successful in school. One of the most prominent and obvious motivational features was the influence of family role models. Junior explained, "My two sisters and my brother-in-law are my role models. They dropped out of school . . . then they up and decided to get their Grade 12. They finished in one year, and that is what I plan on doing." Seanna said that her mom was a teacher and had a substantial influence on Seanna's attitude toward both education and school attendance. Seanna stated that her mom's rule was "You don't miss school unless you're dying in bed." Frank described his dad as "really smart" and indicated that his grandma had taught school for 20 years. Sara said that she wanted to prove to her family that she could be successful in school. An underlying aspect of these family role models was that they were personally relevant testimonies of success. The students appeared to perceive future aspects of themselves in these success stories; therein, they were motivated to succeed in school.

Other motivational aspects influencing the students' educational success were contextualized and unique to each student's personal situation. For example, Jacob found motivation to learn from Elder teachings:

> I used to have low self-esteem, like I couldn't learn. But, you know, the more I read and the more I listened, the more I understood. That's what made me learn. It's just like listening to Elders. They teach you things and, you know, by listening to them, you learn. So my marks have improved, as I think, "I can do this."

Jacob was grateful for his grandparents' cultural teachings and believed this traditional knowledge helped him maintain his focus on schoolwork. Other motivational aspects of learning pertained to self-growth, personal enjoyment, and opportunities for a happy future career. Junior provided details around self-growth and intrinsic motivation: "I look at learning as a personal self-gaining experience. No one can teach you if you don't want to be taught." On a similar note, Bob also referred to herself and the intrinsic inspiration she felt from inside. She said, "School is very important to me. I actually enjoy coming every day. I like coming to school every day, because it keeps me grounded. It reminds me of what I want to do." Zack talked about his motivational aspects of learning when he said, "It is me pushing myself so that I can prove others wrong. I want to continue in school, pass, and get a good career." Jacob also said, "I push myself to do good in school" because "I am trying to make a future for myself before I get married, have kids, and start a family." Through the reflective journal, the researcher added, "He [Jacob] was also motivated to do well in school, because he already had a career goal in mind and was already making plans to take care of his future family, which really impressed me." Thus, it appeared that many of these students were motivated to do well in school because they viewed education as a portal to personal growth and future well-being.

Discussion of Results

The main motivational features of educational success as perceived by 12 Aboriginal high school students focused on three themes: a hospitable school environment, personally relevant content/learning activities, unique personal issues such as family role models, and past learning experiences. Utilizing Aboriginal epistemology each of these themes can be further examined by using features associated with the four components of the Medicine Wheel and its teachings pertaining to life and learning. More specifically, we reconsider our findings and ponder upon how they relate to the Medicine Wheel, which emphasizes the importance of the number four. We concentrate on aspects of the four directions and the four components of a balanced person (mind, body, emotion, and spirit) in our explanation.

Motivation began with the existence of a hospitable school culture, where teachers tirelessly gave of their time and helped to instill a sense of hope and personal pride within their students. Motivation for students sprang from teacher acceptance, which

promoted self-confidence and an inner hope or fire. In providing these students with a safe and secure beginning, these teachers were nurturing motivational "gifts from the east," (White, 1992, p. 118), which included the eminence of vision, a message of optimism, and a belief in creative possibilities. Laframboise and Sherbina (2008) indicated that the first stage of learning is awareness of the need for continual personal growth and development. Immersing students in a nurturing, accepting, safe environment was the catalyst that unleashed the student's motivation to learn. Furthermore, learner-focused school policies (e.g., longer hours of operation, free student bus passes, free lunch, etc.) enabled students to physically be at school. From this eastward direction, the students became aware of their abilities and, consequently, were inspired to learn (Walker, 2001; Yearington, 2010).

With regard to the second theme, personally relevant content, many students were motivated by the use of pedagogy that promoted mental development and social interaction among learners. Laframboise and Sherbina (2008) depicted the second stage of learning as being associated with mental challenges and teamwork. White (1992) depicted the "gifts of the south" (p. 118) as including knowledge creation through interaction with other humans, sensitivity to human feelings and spirits, and building trust between humans. Walker (2001) explained that, through the south, people become grounded (earthed) by actively doing and speaking about these experiences with sincerity and authenticity. Within this study, many students explained how project-based learning and group discussions helped them to articulate their ideas in order to communicate their thoughts to their peers. Many students found this internal search for personally relevant knowledge a key motivational feature of their learning. Another aspect that fueled the students' motivation to learn was having fun with their peers as they were actively involved in extra-curricular events.

As a part of the third theme, individual role models, students explained how family members were motivational influences. Laframboise and Sherbina (2008) indicated that the third stage of learning involves utilizing the knowledge and skills that an individual already possesses to target the continuous growth of self and others. White (1992) identified the "gifts of the west" (p. 118) as being emotional reflections summoned by experiences and learning. Bopp, Bopp, Brown, and Lane (as cited in Walker, 2001) explained that, through the west, individuals "are encouraged to go within themselves discovering what is important in relation to the connections between self, others, nature,

and natural teachings" (p. 19). Part of this waterlike or flowing introspection involved the students discovering what they valued by recognizing the successes of family members who surrounded them and anticipating a similar success for themselves.

For some students, the last theme also pertained to how difficult past experiences motivated students to do well in school. Utilizing the perception of an Aboriginal world-view, each individual comes to earth with a purpose (Kainai Board of Education, Métis Nation of Alberta, Northland School Division, & Tribal Chiefs Institute of Treaty Six, 2004), and, through differentiated learning experiences, each individual must uncover that unique purpose. Past experiences inform a high level of knowledge and spiritual learning. Individuals in this final stage of learning use their holistic life lessons to guide and support others experiencing the various stages of learning (Laframboise & Sherbina, 2008). White (1992) identified the "gifts of the north" (p. 118) as being the evaluation of past experiences and the accomplishment of goals. Some of the students in this study talked about the ethereal (air) components of the north, as they described the extreme hardships they had already encountered in their young lives. Interestingly, for these students, these experiences motivated them to graduate from Grade 12.

For the students of this study, motivation to learn stemmed from experiencing four quadrants of learning—awareness (east, physical, fire), knowledge (south, mental, earth), continuous improvement (west, emotional, water), and perseverance (north, spiritual, air). Experiencing all four quadrants in balance creates harmony of self, wellness of family, and prosperity within communities and beyond. Figure 1 provides a visual depiction of these quadrants.

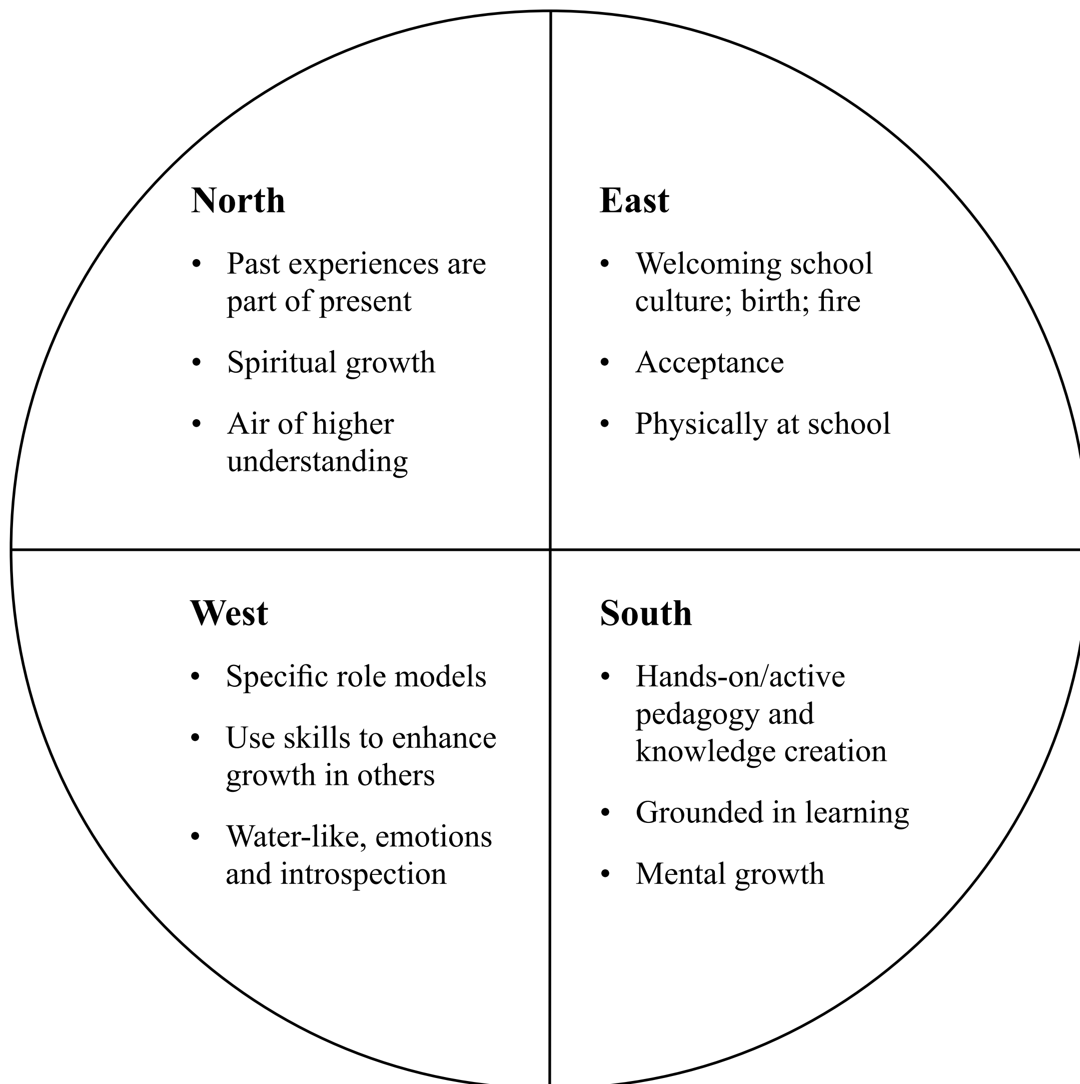

Figure 1: The Medicine Wheel and motivators for educational success.

Implications and Future Studies

A pedagogical implication arising from this study is the need for educators to modify aspects of Westernized pedagogy in greater support of Aboriginal pedagogy. The Western worldview predominantly reflects a hierarchical way of interpreting life. Classroom applications of a Western worldview are exemplified through teaching and learning that is constrained within specific subject areas, where learning is measured and represented through a final mark, and where students pass or fail. The mainstream educational

practices within public schools commonly promote learning through a focus on intellect, competitiveness, individuality, status projection, and outside judgement (Masai, Randall, Rowe, & Waring, 2004; McInerney, 1995). Although it is not our aspiration to criticize policies and procedures of the school systems throughout Canada, it is our intention to entice educational leaders to explore and incorporate values embedded in an Aboriginal worldview and its ensuing pedagogy.

In addition to promoting the intellectual capacities of students, teachers need to utilize instructional pedagogy that nurtures the students' spiritual, emotional, and social development (Brendtro & Brokenleg, 2001; Doige, 2003; Kessler, 2004; Miller, 2002; Preston, Cottrell, Pelletier, & Pearce, 2012). The social and personal aspects of teaching and learning need to be formally acknowledged. Teachers willing to "go the extra mile" with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students will encourage open communication and create an atmosphere in their classrooms that welcomes more than just the academic. Genuinely caring for students' well-being and success sometimes translates into simple yet impactful messages of acceptance, encouragement, and hope. We believe in fostering strength in mind, body, emotion, and spirit, and that if this is done, students will more likely possess an innate enthusiasm lifelong learning.

A number of policy-related implications are associated with this research. In order to support such things as project-based learning and Aboriginal pedagogy, teachers need to be supplied with quality professional development opportunities that assist in strengthening their skills in these areas. Furthermore, educational leaders need to reflect upon their school culture, policies, and procedures and consider how these factors might motivate or demotivate students. As exemplified within this study, student-friendly school policies such as bus passes and lunch programs assisted students with the completion of homework assignments and enticed students to come to school. This research also highlighted that student participation within the arts and after-school activities was a motivator for their overall educational success. In turn, educational leaders may need to reformat or create new school policies in an effort to start, continue, or enhance tutelage programs, arts-based courses, and after-school clubs and activities.

Future studies need to explore Aboriginal students' success stories and how the students' learning spirits are ignited and nurtured. In further exploring what motivates students to succeed in school, what commonalities and contrasts exist between Aboriginal students in elementary school, middle school, and high school? To what extent can

research on student motivation inform educators in creating inclusive school environments that acknowledge the importance of Aboriginal cultural values within Westernized educational systems? What role might school administrators play in promoting Aboriginal students' successful completion of their academic programs?

Results from this study reflected the perceptions of 12 successful Aboriginal high school students. Their stories highlighted important milestones they experienced while on their learning journeys. Too humble to consider themselves role models for others, they consistently acknowledged those family members, friends, and educators who helped them get to this point of significant achievement. However, the sense of pride they will experience at their respective graduation ceremonies will be just as much theirs to own as it will be to share. We congratulate them on their success.

References

Areepattamannil, S., Freeman, J. G., & Klinger, D. A. (2011). Influence of motivation, self-beliefs, and instructional practices in science achievement of adolescents in Canada. *Social Psychology of Education: An International Journal, 14*(2), 233–259. doi:10.1007/s11218-010-9144-9

Assor, A., Kaplan, H., Kanat-Maymon, Y., & Roth, G. (2005). Directly controlling teacher behaviors as predictors of poor motivation and engagement in girls and boys: The role of anger and anxiety. *Learning and Instruction*, *15*(5), 397–413. doi:10.1016/j.learninstruc.2005.07.008

Battiste, M. (2008). Research ethics for protecting Indigenous knowledge and heritage: Institutional and researcher responsibilities. In N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln, & L. T. Smith (Eds.), *Handbook of critical and Indigenous methodologies* (pp. 497–509). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Battiste, M. & Henderson, J. S. Y. (2000). *Protecting Indigenous knowledge and heritage: A global challenge*. Saskatoon, SK: Purich Publishing.

Brendtro, L., & Brokenleg, M. (2001). The Circle of Courage: Children as sacred beings. In L. Lantireri (Ed.), *Schools with spirit* (pp. 39–52). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Chilisa, B. (2012). *Indigenous research methodologies*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Doige, L. (2003). A missing link: Between traditional Aboriginal education and the Western system of education. *Canadian Journal of Native Education, 27*(2), 144–160.

Elliot, A. J. (2006). The hierarchical model of approach-avoidance motivation. *Motivation and Emotion, 30*(2), 111–116. doi:10.1007/s11031-006-9028-7

Fischer, C. T. (2009). Bracketing in qualitative research: Conceptual and practical matters. *Psychotherapy Research, 19*(4/5), 583–590.

Haldane, S., Lafond, G. E., & Krause, C. (2012). *Nurturing the learning spirit of First Nations students: The report on the national panel of First Nation elementary and secondary education for students on reserve*. Retrieved from www.afn.ca/uploads/files/education2/national-panel.pdf

Hare, J., & Pidgeon, M. (2011). The way of the warrior: Indigenous youth navigating the challenges of schooling. *Canadian Journal of Education, 34*(2), 93–111.

Hay, D. (1999). The reality of social research. In D. H. Currie, D. Hay, & B. D. MacLean (Eds.), *Exploring the social world: Social research in action* (pp. 9–24). Vancouver, BC: Collective Press

Howe, E. C. (2011). *Bridging the Aboriginal education gap in Saskatchewan*. Saskatoon, SK: Gabriel Dumont Institute. Retrieved from www.nwtopportunities.com/sites/default/files/educationemployment.pdf

Imman, A. G., Howard, E. E., & Hill, C. E. (2012). Considerations related to culture in consensual qualitative research. In C. E. Hill (Ed.), *Consensual qualitative research: A practical resource for investigating social science phenomena* (pp. 187–199). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Kainai Board of Education, Métis Nation of Alberta, Northland School Division, & Tribal Chiefs Institute of Treaty Six. (2004). *Aboriginal Studies 10: Aboriginal perspectives*. Edmonton, AB: Duval House.

Kessler, R. (2004). Nourishing adolescents' spirituality. In J. P. Miller, S. Karsten, D. Denton, D. Orr, & I. Colalillo Kates (Eds.), *Holistic learning and spirituality in*

education: Breaking new ground (pp. 101–107). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Laframboise, S., & Sherbina, K. (2008). *The Medicine Wheel*. Retrieved from www.dancingtoeaglespiritsociety.org/medwheel.php

Liem, G. A. D., Martin, A. J., Porter, A. L., & Colmar, S. (2012). Sociocultural antecedents of academic motivation and achievement: Role of values and achievement motives in achievement goals and academic performance. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology, 15*(1), 1–13. doi:10.1111/j.1467-839X.2011.01351.x

Lincoln, Y. S. (1995). Emerging criteria for quality in qualitative and interpretive research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 1*(3), 275–289.

Little Bear, L. (2000). Jagged worldviews colliding. In M. Battiste (Ed.), *Reclaiming Indigenous voice and vision* (pp. 77–85). Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.

Masai, J., Randall, A., Rowe, D., & Waring, F. (2004). Aboriginal leaders resistance and education. In F. Adu-Febriri (Ed.), *First Nations students talk back: Voices of learning people*. Victoria, BC: Camosun College.

McInerney, D. M. (1995). Achievement motivation and Indigenous minorities: Can research be psychometric? *Cross Cultural Research, 29*(3), 211–239. doi:10.1177/106939719502900301

McInerney, D. M., Hinikey, J., Van Etten, S., & Dowson, M. (1998). Aboriginal, Anglo, and immigrant Australian students' motivational beliefs about personal academic success: Are there cultural differences? *Journal of Educational Psychology, 90*(4), 621–629.

Mendelson, M. (2008). *Improving education on reserves: A First Nations education authority act*. Ottawa, ON: Caledon Society of Social Policy. Retrieved from www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/684ENG.pdf

Metallidou, P., & Vlachou, A. (2007). Motivational beliefs, cognitive engagement, and achievement in language and mathematics in elementary school children. *International Journal of Psychology*, *42*(1), 2–15.

Miller, J. P. (2002). Learning from a spiritual perspective. In E. O'Sullivan, A. Morrell, & M. O'Connor (Eds.), *Expanding the boundaries of transformative learning: Essays on theory and praxis* (pp. 95–102). New York, NY: Palgrave.

Pajares, F. (1997). Current directions in self-efficacy research. In M. Maehr & P. R. Pintrich (Eds.), *Advances in motivation and achievement* (Vol. 10, pp. 1–49). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Preston, J. P., Cottrell, M., Pelletier, T. R., Pearce, J. V. (2012). Aboriginal early childhood education in Canada: Issues of context. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 10*(1), 3–18.

Reeve, J. (2002). Self-determination theory applied to educational settings. In E. L. Deci & R. M. Ryan (Eds.), *Handbook of self-determination research* (pp. 183–203). Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.

Richards, J., & Scott, M. (2009). *Aboriginal education: Strengthening the foundations*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Policy Research Networks.

Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. (1996). *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Vol. 3). Ottawa, ON: Minister of Supply and Services Canada.

Schwartz, R. S., Lederman, N. G., & Crawford, B. A. (2004). Developing views of nature of science in an authentic context: An explicit approach to bridging the gap between nature of science and scientific inquiry. *Science Education, 88*(4), 610–645.

Sharpe, A., & Arsenault, J. (2009). *Investing in Aboriginal education in Canada: An economic perspective*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Policy Research Networks.

Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Zed Books.

Stake, R. E. (2005). Qualitative case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 443–467). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Stake, R. E. (2010). *Qualitative research: Studying how thing work*. New York, NY: Guildford Press.

Walker, P. (2001). Journey around the Medicine Wheel: A story of Indigenous research in a Western university. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, 29*(2), 18–21.

White, L. O. (1992). Medicine wheel teaching in native language education. In S. O'Meara & D. A. West (Eds.), *From our eyes: Learning from Indigenous peoples* (pp. 107–122). Toronto, ON: Garamond Press.

Yearington, T. (2010). *That Native thing: Exploring the Medicine Wheel*. Ottawa, ON: Borealis Press.