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Final Paper

Fostering the Educational Success of Off-Reserve Aboriginal Learners on Prince Edward Island

UAKN Atlantic Regional Research Centre

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Fostering the Educational Success of Off-Reserve Aboriginal Learners on Prince Edward Island: Research Summary

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Introduction to the Research

According to Statistics Canada (2010), 1,730 of the population of Prince Edward Island self-identified as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit. Moreover, though, according to Statistics Canada (2010), about seven out of 10 Aboriginal people on Prince Edward Island reside off-reserve. Although one known study has focused on the needs of Mi'kmaq learners in First Nations communities on Prince Edward Island (Walton et al., 2009), no known research has focused on the educational experiences of *off-reserve* Aboriginal learners on Prince Edward Island. Thus, this research, which focuses on off-reserve Aboriginal learners in this province, is timely, critical, and highly significant, because it currently exists in isolation of any other known research on this topic.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this research is *to describe the educational successes, challenges, and needs of off-reserve Aboriginal learners in Prince Edward Island*. The research questions that further defined and supported the purpose were:

1. What aspects of the elementary to postsecondary educational system promote the educational success of off-reserve Aboriginal students?
2. What aspects of the elementary to postsecondary educational system do off-reserve Aboriginal students find challenging?
3. What are the educational needs of off-reserve Aboriginal learners in Prince Edward Island?

Methodology: Qualitative Research

Sound Aboriginal research methodologies (Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2009, Wilson, 2008) focus on the lived experiences of the person and capture the views, perspectives, and narrative stories of people. In other words, a qualitative research methodology is commonly used for this people-focused way of collecting data. A fundamental assumption attached to qualitative research is that different people define and understand an experience in different ways. Qualitative researchers accept the notion that when many people live through a similar situation, each person's experience, recollection, and take-away from that particular experience are different. However, each individual experience is still as valid as the other. That is, no one type of experience is not better or worse—the experiences are just different. In line with these ideas, within qualitative research, no one, ultimate truth is found or expressed, because on ultimate truth does not exist. Data are not fixed, objective phenomena that can be quantifiably measured (Merriam, 2009). Instead, the focus of qualitative data to capture the iridescent, varied perceptions and experiences of individual people and the results represent a multi-dimensional depiction of reality.

We approached this qualitative research with the belief that each participant's views and life experiences were important, unique, and valuable. Through this research, we sought to capture the participants' subjective realities and presented their ideas through thematic explanations. In turn, within the Full Research Report, we include as many quotations as possible from individual participants. Providing the reader with participant comments that are directly extracted from the interview transcripts is a way to communicate, first-hand, the participants' views and experiences (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2014; Creswell, 2014).

Interviews and Participants

Because interviewing is one of the most powerful ways to understand the perspective of others (Barbour & Schostak, 2011; Fontana & Frey, 2005), the sources of data for this qualitative study were semi-structured focus group interviews and semi-structured individual interviews. For the semi-structured interviews, the researcher created a set of pre-determined questions, which guided the interview and kept it on focus. Within the features of semi-structured interviewing techniques, the researchers were free to ask follow-up questions that emerged from participant answers (Merriam, 2009).

Bogdan and Bilken (2007) noted that qualitative researchers often develop deep understanding of the experiences of people by utilizing a small representative, purposeful sample. Herein, we used purpose sampling (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009), where participants were purposefully selected, because they met a number of criteria. For this study, those criteria were based on two main features. First, participants needed to be an off-reserve Aboriginal person living in Prince Edward Island. Second, participants needed to be a Kindergarten to postsecondary student on Prince Edward Island, a parent/caregiver of such a student, *and/or* an Elder.

As explained above, all participants lived in Prince Edward Island at the time of the research, and participants represented three geographical counties (aka Zones), which make up Prince Edward Island. Consequently, the data were collected from Aboriginal off-reserve participants living in: (a) Zone 1: Prince County (western part of PEI), (b) Zone 2: Queens County (central part of PEI), and Zone 3: Kings County (eastern part of PEI).

A diverse volunteer population of off-reserve Aboriginal stakeholders in Prince Edward Island participated in this study, therein providing a rich data set. More specifically, there were

35 females and 20 males who were partook in the study. A total of 55 participants volunteered for 26 interviews, which consisted of eight focus group interviews and 18 individual interviews. Of these participants, eight participants gave extra time and provided individual information by participating in both a focus group and an individual interview. As well, three participants gave of extra time and information by participating in two focus group sessions. Although 55 individuals partook in this study, based on the above description of some participants being involved in more than one interview, another way to represent the data is that 67 stories, perspectives, and/or comments were collected during the 26 interview opportunities.

Specifically, with regard to focus group interviews, 49 volunteers were involved. On average, each of the eight focus groups consisted of six participants. Focus group participants represented Aboriginal Elders, Aboriginal parents/caregivers¹, Aboriginal postsecondary learners, Aboriginal high school learners, and Aboriginal elementary learners. A more detailed representation of each focus group is as follows. One focus group consisted only of Elders. Two focus groups consisted solely of Aboriginal parents. One focus group consisted of Aboriginal parents and an Aboriginal postsecondary learner. One focus group consisted of Aboriginal parents and high school learners. One focus group consisted of only postsecondary learners. One focus group consisted of only Aboriginal high school learners. One focus group consisted of Kindergarten to Grade 8 elementary learners. In total, 29 female and 20 male participants were involved in focus group interviews, which took place from September to December 2013. The average focus group interview lasted about 75 minutes. A visual overview of focus group participants is reflected in *Table A*.

¹ From this point forward, the term *parent* will be used, but the term is meant to represent any close caregiver/relative of the Aboriginal learner (e.g., biological parent, adopted parent, grandparent, uncle, aunt, and/or community member).

Table A: Overview of Focus Group Interviews

FG	Representation	PEI Zone	Fem/Mal	Tot	Date	Location of Interview
1	Elders	1, 2, 3	7(F) 3(M)	10	Nov15, 2013	Native Council, PEI
2	Parents	2	3(F) 1(M)	4	Oct 24, 2013	Native Council, PEI
3	Parents	1, 3	3(F) 3(M)	6	Dec 11, 2013	Private Residence
4	Parents (x10) & Postsecondary Learner (x1)	1, 3	6(F) 5(M)	11	Oct 26, 2013	Native Council, PEI AGM
5	Parents (x2) & High School Learners (x2)	2	2(F) 2(M)	4	Sept 24, 2013	Native Council, PEI
6	Postsecondary Learners	2	3(F)	3	Oct 8, 2013	University of PEI
7	High School Learners	1, 3	2(F) 2(M)	4	Dec 11, 2013	Private Residence
8	Elementary Learners, K–Gr 8	2	3(F) 4(M)	7	Oct 22, 2013	Native Council, PEI
		Total Number of Focus Group Interviews: 8		Total Number of Focus Group Participants: 49		

Individual interviews took place from October 2013 to January 2014. Of these 18 individual interviews, participants represented Elders (x3), Aboriginal parents (x5), postsecondary learners (x8), and high school students (x2). Two of the participants were both parents and postsecondary learners. All individual interviews took place in Charlottetown or Cornwall (i.e., Zone 2 Queens); however, the place of residences for the participants represented Zones 1, 2, and 3 in Prince Edward Island. To promote participant anonymity, specific Zones were not indicated for individual participants. In total, 15 participants were female and three participants were male. The average length of time for each focus group interview was about 60 minutes. A visual overview of these individual interview details is reflected in *Table B*.

Table B: Overview of Individual Interviews

Pseudonym	Representation	Fem/Mal	Date	Location of Interview
Betty	Elder	F	Oct 26, 2013	Native Council, PEI AGM
Heather	Elder	F	Oct 26, 2013	Native Council, PEI AGM
Lisa	Elder	F	Dec 12, 2013	Private Residence
Denise	Parent	F	Jan 13, 2014	Native Council, PEI
Jeff	Parent	M	Oct 27, 2013	Native Council, PEI AGM
Michelle	Parent	F	Oct 26, 2013	Native Council, PEI AGM
Olivia	Parent	F	Nov 28, 2013	PEI Postsecondary Institute
Theresa	Parent	F	Oct 27, 2013	Native Council, PEI AGM
Christina	Postsecondary Learner	F	Nov 26, 2013	Native Council, PEI
Gabby	Postsecondary Learner & Parent	F	Jan 9, 2014	University of PEI
Jessica	Postsecondary Learner & Parent	F	Jan 7, 2014	University of PEI
Kelley	Postsecondary Learner	F	Oct 18, 2014	University of PEI
Phillip	Postsecondary Learner	M	Oct 16, 2013	University of PEI
Rebecca	Postsecondary Learner	F	Oct 27, 2013	Native Council, PEI AGM
Sarah	Postsecondary Learner	F	Dec 13, 2014	University of PEI
Scott	Postsecondary Learner	M	Oct 29, 2013	University of PEI
Angela	High School Learner	F	Oct 27, 2013	Native Council, PEI AGM
Emily	High School Learner	F	Oct 26, 2013	Native Council, PEI AGM
Total Number of Individual Interviews: 18				

Data Analysis and Theme Creation

Each of the 26 interviews was audiotaped and transcribed. The data analysis was completed in two phases. The first phase of data analysis involved two researchers separately analyzing the data. Each researcher reviewed every transcript in isolation and extracted key ideas, phrases, and commonalities associated with each research question (Basit, 2003; Creswell, 2014). After the first four or five transcripts were reviewed, a list of bullet points emerged beneath each research question. At that time, the researchers reviewed the bullet points under each research question, looking for similarities. In other words, under each research question, further analysis of the points was done and sub-categories or themes were created. Then, under

each of these themes (i.e., categories), sub-themes (i.e., sub-categories) were identified. The researchers continued to analyze the remaining transcripts in a similar fashion—key points were extracted from the transcripts and added to emergent categories. Additional categories and sub-categories were added and/or adjusted as more data was added to the emergent themes and sub-themes. After analyzing all 26 transcripts (i.e., 8 focus groups interviews and 18 individual interviews), each research question had thematic answers and sub-themes.

The second round of data analysis involved the researchers re-analyzing their thematic results by sharing their analysis and working together to find consensus of their analysis. In other words, once each researcher completed her personal analysis of the transcripts, they convened and triangulated the two analyses (Christensen et al., 2014; Creswell, 2014; Schwandt, 2007) to create one final analyzed document. A summary of the final themes and sub-themes for each research question is displayed through *Table C*.

Thematic Findings: A Synopsis

The purpose of the research was to answer the question: What are *the educational successes, challenges, and needs of off-reserve Aboriginal learners on PEI*? Each of the three main parts of this purpose were answered.

First, the analysis of the participants' transcripts relayed a number of dominant theme related to the educational successes of off-reserve Aboriginal learners on Prince Edward Island. These themes were: (a) having solid relationships with caring teachers; (b) experiencing a caring school environment; (c) experiencing the effective delivery and communication of curriculum; (d) experiencing hands-on activities; and (e) having and using internal and external supports.

When asking participants to describe the challenges that off-reserve Aboriginal learners faced on Prince Edward Island, several key issues surfaced. In particular, participants talked about: (a) not enough social time in school; (b) a need for better delivery of curricular content in school (c) student and parent feelings of failure, frustration, and pressure; (d) the difficulties faced when students transition to new schools; (e) stories associated with racism; and (f) difficulties maneuvering within and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures.

The thematic recommendations or needs of off-reserve Aboriginal learners on Prince Edward Island are presented through six main themes. These thematic points are: (a) provide learning experiences where students feel successful; (b) use multiple instructional methods; (c) thread more Aboriginal content and ways of knowing into mainstream education; (d) promote the Mi'kmaq language, culture, and spirituality; (e) a greater Elder presence in education; and (f) promote sports, extra-curricular activities, and other such events throughout the school community.

An overview of the findings of the study, the themes, and sub-themes is displayed in *Table C*. Please see the Full Research Report, for details particularly related to the sub-themes. As indicated above, within the Full Research Report participant voice is heard. Their stories and comments are the core essence of the Full Research Report.

Table C: Overview of Themes and Sub-Themes

Educational Successes	Educational Challenges	Educational Needs
<p>Relationships with Teachers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Caring teachers ➢ Sociable, approachable teachers ➢ Humorous teachers <p>Caring School Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Promote self-esteem via student leadership ➢ Positive reinforcement ➢ Welcoming school environment for parents <p>Effective Delivery and Communication of Content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Variety of instructional methods ➢ Importance of tutors ➢ Fluid communication <p>Provision and Choice of Hands-On Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Physical activities/ sports ➢ Fine arts and hands-on activities <p>Internal and External Educational Supports</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Support from Native Council, Prince Edward Island 	<p>Social Time</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Recess and lunch ➢ More time with friends equals less boredom <p>Delivery of Content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Lack of support from teachers ➢ Not enough homework / homework issues <p>Feelings of Failure, Frustration, and Pressure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Students experiencing failure ➢ Parents and stories of frustration ➢ Pressure to communicate Aboriginal knowledge <p>Transition to New School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Intimidating transition to junior and high school ➢ Racism and academic issues linked to transitioning to new school <p>Racism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Personal stories of racism ➢ Racism through books and parents ➢ Lower expectations from teachers <p>Living Two Cultures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Withholding identity to deter racism ➢ Communicating identity and experiencing racism ➢ Reverse racism 	<p>Feelings of Success</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Internal and external motivators ➢ Good grades <p>Multiple Instructional Methods</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Multiple ways to learn ➢ Hands-on learning ➢ Real-life examples <p>Aboriginal Presence and Content into Mainstream Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Aboriginal teachers ➢ Aboriginal content ➢ University setting <p>Mi'kmaq Language, Culture and Spirituality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Language ➢ Culture and identity ➢ Spirituality <p>Elder Teachings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ The youth need Elder teachings <p>Sports, Extra-Curricular Activities, and Other</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Sports ➢ Extra-curricular activities

Concluding Remarks: Principles of Education and Learning

In 2010, the British Columbia Ministry of Education's articulated a set of learning principals that fosters educational success for Aboriginal peoples. Although these elements do not encompass the essence of quality education and learning for *every* Aboriginal person, these principles are a general reflection of what quality education and learning is for many Aboriginal peoples. As Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people work together to improve the education of Aboriginal learners, it is important to incorporate aspects of these principles into the discussions that ensue.

- The education and learning of one Aboriginal person supports the wellbeing of self, family, community, the land, the spirits, and one's ancestors.
- Quality education and learning is holistic, self-reflective, relational, and experiential.
- Quality education and learning recognizes the role Aboriginal knowledge and ways of knowing.
- Quality education and learning requires and exploration of one's identity.
- Quality education and learning is a process of generational roles and responsibilities.
- Quality education and learning is embedded in memory, history, and story.
- Quality education and learning involves recognizing that some knowledge is sacred and can only be shared with permission and/or in certain situations.

Interestingly, all of the above points were articulated or alluded to, in one way or another, by the participants involved in this study. In closing, a heartfelt thank you is extended to all participants involved in this study for giving their time and sharing their wisdom so that quality education and learning can become the experience of increasing numbers of off-reserve Aboriginal learners on Prince Edward Island.

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