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Final Paper

Exploring Culturally Responsive School Governance for Aboriginal Student Success in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

UAKN Prairie Regional Research Centre

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Background and Context

This research is intended to advance community-identified educational, organizational and governance needs and aspirations of the Saskatoon Tribal Council (STC). Since 2012, STC has engaged in research and policy development relating to Education Governance, including consultations with member communities under the auspices of the “Co-Governance Project” (Henry, Cottrell and Pelletier, 2015). The goal of the research was to ascertain the nature of control within First Nation’s Education, particularly to determine a governance framework, which can improve the quality of education and retain a meaningful degree of community control and autonomy over schooling among the Tribal Council’s schools. Although not an original focus of the research, the concerns of STC school age children living off reserve and attending provincial schools were subsequently identified as an additional priority. Saskatoon is currently home to the largest number of STC off-reserve members, including approximately 1,000 school age children who constitute the fastest -growing demographic within the city’s schools. Despite some progress, these and other Aboriginal children still benefit the least from publicly funded education as provided by the city’s Public and Roman Catholic school divisions (Merasty, Bouvier, and Hoiium, 2013). Given the close relationship between educational attainment and other measures of wellbeing, achieving more equitable educational outcomes for STC learners attending Saskatoon schools is currently one of the most compelling concerns of STC leadership and parents: and this concern is shared by the leadership of the provincial education systems.

Motivated by this concern, a need was identified to document developments related to the *Mamawohkamatowin* Partnership between the Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools Division and the Saskatoon Tribal Council. This formal partnership was established in 2010 to foster closer relationships between First Nations and Metis people and the GSCSD as a means of improving educational outcomes for STC and other First Nations students attending GSCSD schools. In particular, STC personnel identified the value of analyzing recent conversations and deliberations between STC and GSCSD regarding the establishment of a “Joint Board” to facilitate “Co-Governance” of First Nations education between STC and GSCSD within the Saskatoon context, as a means of clarifying and advancing that process.

Purpose and Goals

By consulting with STC and GSCSD stakeholders, the **purpose** of our research is to document the successes and challenges encountered to date as part of the work of the *Mamawohkamatowin* Partnership. A specific focus of the case study are the discussions around educational governance structures to animate “Co-Governance” of GSCSD schools with STC within Saskatoon through a “Joint Board”. In considering the responsiveness and effectiveness of this partnership between a provincial school division and a local First Nation Tribal Council, the ultimate goal of the research is to support the efforts of both parties in creating culturally responsive innovations in educational governance and administration in Saskatoon. A significant body of academic research and public policy initiatives, including the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, (1996) the Saskatchewan Joint Taskforce

on Improving First Nations and Metis Education and Employment Outcomes (2013) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) has identified the need for such systemic changes. Specifically all of these documents have stressed the importance of shared governance to foster greater Aboriginal parental involvement in, and control over, their children's education as a means of ensuring that Aboriginal students benefit equitably from K-12 education. While responding to a variety of broad research and advocacy findings then, our research is also intended to advance specific Calls to Action articulated by the recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In particular our inquiry is designed to promote Recommendation 10(v) which calls for innovations to enable First Nation "parental and community responsibility, control, and accountability, similar to what parents enjoy in public school systems; and 10 (vi) to enable First Nation "parents to fully participate in the education of their children" (TRC, 2015).

Researcher Positionality

While the researchers adopted an appreciate lens, were committed to methodological and interpretive rigor and attempted to be as objective as possible throughout the inquiry, we make no claims to neutrality or impartiality. The research is conducted on behalf of the STC and the second author is an employee of STC and was also involved directly in some of the deliberations that are charted and analyzed here. Researchers also had more sustained engagement with STC participants during data collection, so the preponderance of the data accumulated during the research came from that perspective. Consequently the researchers

position themselves as allies of STC's efforts to formalize First Nations jurisprudence and extend First Nations' jurisdiction over its members' education into the Saskatoon urban setting, consistent with STC's interpretation of treaty and Aboriginal rights enshrined in Section 35 of the Canadian constitution. **However, we stress that any views expressed in this research are solely those of the researchers and in no way represent the opinions or positions of the Saskatoon Tribal Council or Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools.**

Structure of the Report

We begin with a discussion of methodology, including qualitative methods and case study design. Following this we provide a review of pertinent literature in the areas of First Nations education, Saskatchewan Ministry of Education partnership and school governance policy and current models, and First Nations urban governance and jurisdictional options. We then present the data gleaned from individual and focus group interviews and from documentary analysis. We follow with an analysis and discussion of that data and conclude with a description of the accomplishments and current status of the partnership.

Methodology

There are three essential purposes to research: exploration, description and interpretation. This study will be both descriptive and interpretive in nature by building on current research literature and collecting original data to document the successes and challenges encountered to date as part of the work of the *Mamawohkamatowin* Partnership's attempts to animate "Co-Governance" of GSCSD

schools with STC. The research is guided by the following over-arching research question: How has the *Mamawohkamatowin* Partnership assisted in the articulation and enactment of mutually desirable, culturally responsive innovations in educational governance and administration in Saskatoon? To address this question the study adopts a qualitative design, which engages specific features to describe, understand and interpret new knowledge. Creswell (2013) identified these features as follows: data is gathered in the setting where the participants experience the issue; the researcher as the key instrument who is reflective and collects all the data through methods that include interviewing participants, observing behaviors and examining documents; the study is emergent while the focus remains on learning the participants' meanings and acknowledging multiple perspective and views; data analysis utilizes inductive and deductive logic to derive at a holistic account of the issue under study.

Like much qualitative research, our study favors the constructivist paradigm by supporting an interactive process between participants and researchers to explore the depth, richness and complexity participants assign to lived experiences in an "attempt to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.3).

Qualitative case study is adopted as our methodological approach since it facilitates the exploration of a contemporary phenomenon within a real life setting through a variety of data sources (Yin, 2014). The aim of case study is to "thoroughly describe complex phenomena in ways to unearth new and deeper understandings of the

phenomena” (Mertens, 2015, p. 245). Our goal is to explore the depth, richness and complexity participants assign to the lived experiences of the *Mamawohkamatowin* Partnership in an attempt to make sense of, or interpret this phenomena in terms of the meanings the participants bring to it. According to Creswell (2013) the qualitative case study methodology explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) through detailed in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information and reports a case description and case themes. The qualitative case study is particularistic, descriptive and heuristic: particularistic in that it focuses on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon; descriptive in providing “thick” literal descriptions; and heuristic by bring forth new meanings or confirming what is known (Merriam, 2009).

This methodology is congruent with the constructivist paradigm in that it assumes “that knowledge is socially constructed by people active in the research process and that researchers should attempt to understand the complex world of lived experiences from the point of view of those who live it” (Schwandt, 1998, p. 221). Accordingly case studies “explicitly seek out the multiple perspectives of those involved in the case, aiming to gather collectively agreed upon and diverse notions of what occurred (Lauchner, Paterson, & Krupa, 2012, p. 5). The qualitative case study methodology provides an opportunity for participants to socially construct knowledge based on their lived experiences while providing the researchers with an opportunity to interact with the participants to gain a better understanding of the socially constructed truth that is dependent on the participants’ perspective (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

In order to ensure the intent of the study is achieved, the case study methodology will guide the identification of the case (*Mamawohkamatowin* Partnership), the case boundaries (participants from STC and GSCSD in the discussions), the multiple data-gathering methods (individual and focus group interviews and documentary analysis), the specific data-analysis techniques (inductive and deductive interpretation), and the communication of the case's findings (case study report).

Literature Review

Here we review pertinent Canadian research and policy literature in the areas of First Nations education and student achievement; recent movements towards cultural responsiveness in the areas of curriculum and governance; Saskatchewan Education partnership policy and current models, including the Battlefords First Nations Joint Board of Education; and First Nations urban governance and jurisdictional contexts.

A raft of studies over more than half a century have documented the failure of schools in Saskatchewan and Canada wide to ensure equitable educational outcomes for First Nations learners (Hawthorne, 1966; RCAP, 1996; Cowley & Easton, 1998; Government of Canada, 2002; Martell, 2008; St Germain, 2011; Gebhard, 2013; Merasty, et al, 2013; Pelletier, et al, 2013). In addition to representing a profound moral dilemma, research has also substantially documented that these extreme disparities in educational outcomes pose a potentially dire threat to the future social cohesion and economic viability of the province (Mendelson, 2006; Cottrell et al, 2011; Cottrell and Orłowski, 2014; Howe,

2011; Merasty, et al, 2013; Government of Saskatchewan, 2014). Researchers attempting to understand this phenomenon and improve the educational achievement of Aboriginal students, have highlighted the critical relationship between culture and cognition, suggesting that learning challenges arise in classrooms when there is dissonance/discontinuity between minority children's home languages, cultures and worldviews the language and culture and worldview of the schools they attend (McInerney, 1995; Barnes, Josefitz, & Cole, 2006; Kanu, 2007; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Preston & Claypool, 2013) Following this insight, a large body of research suggests that creating more invitational and culturally affirming school spaces represents the best means of ensuring that Aboriginal (including STC) children derive the same benefit from public education as all others (RCAP, 1996; Battiste, 2002; Bouvier & Karlenzig, 2006; Kanu, 2007; Grey & Beresford, 2008; Preston & Claypool 2013).

There is broad consensus among researchers that critical to the achievement of this systemic transformation towards cultural responsiveness in policy and school practices in Saskatoon and elsewhere, is the creation of innovative governance structures which foster greater Aboriginal parental involvement in, and control over, their children's education (Bell, 2003; Martell, 2008; Raham, 2010; Merasty et al, 2013). However, as Burns (1998) noted:

"Parental involvement in local control of schools are standard practice in Canada -- but not for the Aboriginal people; instead, they have long been the object of attempts by state and church authorities to use education to control and assimilate

them, during the residential school era, certainly, but also, more subtly, today. (p. 10)

Local, national and international research thus highlights the importance of “shared governance” or “co-governance” structures for Indigenous peoples to be viable and accountable decision makers in the planning and implementation of programs designed for excellence in education (Cottrell, 2010; Pelletier et al, 2013). First Nations and academic researchers have argued that without jurisdiction First Nations parents cannot determine the basic requirements appropriate for their children’s education, and suggest that ‘best practice’ requires a definitive and legal role for First Nations in the governance, decision making, planning, implementation and evaluation of education policies and programs (Burns, 1998; Bell, 2003; Lafond, 2006; Martell, 2008; Lonechild, 2010; Raham, 2010). Research by the Joint Taskforce identified post-colonial theory and Ermine’s (2009) conception of “ethical space” as frameworks for partnerships to foster greater Indigenous involvement in, and control over, education (Pelletier et al, 2013). There is general agreement that this shift offers the potential to both improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students and also provide significant epistemological benefits for non-Aboriginal learners (Cottrell et al, 2012; Cottrell and Orłowski, 2014). However the particular challenges of governance, finance, administration and management issues in provincial-federal-First Nations contexts, given the jurisdictional complexity pertaining to First Nations education, are also acknowledged (Henry et al, 2015).

Saskatchewan Education Partnerships Policy

Provincial education partnerships policy evolved in the early 21st century in the context of tripartite negotiations between Saskatchewan First Nations (represented by the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations), and provincial and federal governments. Negotiations were designed to build on existing treaty relationships to create a new relationship that would animate First Nations self-government in the province. These commitments were formalized in the *Framework for Governance of Treaty First Nations* in 2000 which outlined a plan for self-government implementation on a sectoral basis, beginning with Education and Child and Family Services. In 2003 the Ministry of Education released *Building partnerships: First Nations and Métis peoples and the provincial education system policy framework for Saskatchewan's prekindergarten to grade 12 education system*. Outlining ministry policy to align with the commitment to self-government, this document promised to “rethink and, in some instances, transform existing systems, procedures, management and decision-making processes” and to build “new and strengthened relationships and mechanisms so that First Nations and Métis peoples have an equitable voice in planning and decision making.” (Government of Saskatchewan, 2003, Preamble). The document stressed that the new authentic partnerships and collaborative arrangements envisioned among the provincial education system and First Nations and Métis peoples were qualitatively different from many traditional partnerships and public involvement initiatives since they were designed to promote “shared management and governance of the provincial education system” (Government of Saskatchewan, 2003, p.3). Other characteristics of the intended

arrangements included the following principles:

- shared problem solving, decision making, resources and accountability;
- a breadth of arrangements ranging from joint projects and cooperation on programs, through shared management of programs or schools, to shared powers articulated in formal agreements that oversee the management and control of a single school or a number of schools;
- a broad scope of arrangements covering all aspects of the educational endeavour, including governance, learning program, curricula, supports and services, staff recruitment and development, finance and capital;
- a shared vision, goals and objectives, established collaboratively;
- clearly identified mutual expectations and defined roles of partners;
- practices that reflect and nurture the values of mutual respect and understanding; and,
- a shared commitment to the well being and educational success of each child and young person within provincial and First Nations schools.
- Vision – Desired State: Saskatchewan’s provincial Prekindergarten to Grade 12 education system is managed and controlled equitably by the Aboriginal and non- Aboriginal people it serves. As full partners at all levels of education planning and decision making, First Nations and Métis and non- Aboriginal peoples share responsibility and authority for achieving goals for the benefit of all Saskatchewan students, teachers, and communities. (Government of Saskatchewan, 2003, p.4).

In articulating possible articulations of partnership, the *Building partnerships* document identified *cooperative, co-management and co-governance* relationships growing among the provincial education system and First Nations, Métis and other Aboriginal authorities and offered the following definition of Co-Governance Partnerships:

Co-governance implies formal sharing of authority and responsibilities from two or more governing authorities to a Joint Board or other legal entity. A co-governance agreement stipulates the parameters of authority and responsibility delegated to the Joint Board and may include the full range of duties and powers assigned to or conferred upon a board of education or other governing authority, such as a First Nation Council. The Education Act, 1995 provides for the establishment of a Joint Board in Sections 92 to 96 (Government of Saskatchewan, 2003, p.8).

Following the development of the *Building partnerships* policy the Saskatchewan School Boards Association (2007) enumerated the range of possible options for Saskatchewan School divisions interfacing with First Nation communities:

- a shared commitment to the well-being and educational success of each child and young person within provincial and First Nations schools.
- No special provisions. It is assumed that when a school division includes a significant number of First Nations and Métis people, some of the school board members who are elected will be First Nations or Métis. Informally

seeking advice from a Band Council, Tribal Council, or First Nations and Métis organization on school board plans and/or issues.

- Creating a formal written partnership with a local band council, tribal council, or First Nations organization and developing a formal mechanism that allows the First Nations partner to participate in decision-making.
- Providing that a representative of each First Nation within the school division's boundaries has a seat on the school board. Each First Nation is treated as a subdivision as per Section 40 of *The Education Act, 1995*
- Specifying that one seat on the school board is reserved for a person of First Nations or Métis ancestry, to be elected by voters who are also of First Nations and Métis ancestry.
- Creating a ward system or subdivisions within the school division. Candidates run in a particular ward or subdivision and are elected by people who live within the ward or subdivision.
- Creating a joint board to operate a particular school or program under sections 92-96 of *The Education Act*,
- Development of a formal service agreement between a First Nation and the school division, in which the school division, for a fee, agrees to provide educational services to students who fall under the First Nation's jurisdiction.

Engaging on the Basis of Aboriginal Rights

Despite significant innovations and improvements in the interaction between First Nations and provincial school divisions under the *Building partnerships* policy, observers such as Martell (2008) note that recent Saskatchewan educational policy

developments fall short of Aboriginal expectations. In particular, according to Martell (2008) initiatives respecting management, governance and representation on School Community Councils, fails to theorize Aboriginal representation and limits the potential of Aboriginal engagement by potentially relegating representation to debate regarding the merits of Aboriginal special status. The preferred policy, from an Aboriginal perspective, would be positioned along a continuum of Aboriginal rights dialogue and enhanced Aboriginal participation by addressing contemporary issues influencing Aboriginal rights. Martell identifies a critical connection between school governance and decolonization by suggesting that “willingness to contribute to the dismantling of colonialism is a realistic goal for policy makers. Dialogue about colonization must be brought to educational policy makers who need to understand their role within the broader context. Majority status cannot serve as a pass to avoid participating in decolonization “ (p.34). And he concludes with the following broad recommendation:

Motivated by the desire to dismantle colonial structures that deter Aboriginal participation in shaping society as should be the outcome of Aboriginal peoples unfolding their sovereignty agenda, School Community Councils policy, above all others, needs to consider Aboriginal representation in a thorough manner. All public policy, though, should defer to a requirement to ensure authentic Aboriginal participation and define the structure to accommodate this. The result would be decisions from curriculum to facilities that build Aboriginal representation in at the outset. Experience would integrate this response as routine behaviour and provide positive implications for other public sectors such as justice, health or social

services. (p. 37).

Battlefords First Nations Joint Board of Education (BFNJBE)

Martell's analysis of Saskatchewan School Community Council policy provides a convenient segue to consider an existing governance arrangement that appears to approximate the ideal state that he envisages. Often referred to as a *Co-Governance* or *Tri-board* governance structure, the BFNJBE is unique in Saskatchewan. It is a product of a historical relationship between the 13 First Nations contiguous to North Battleford and the Public and Roman Catholic school divisions in the city over a long period of time. Recognizing the benefits for student engagement and success of a designated high school for Aboriginal children with robust social supports and culturally responsive curriculum, Sakewew High School was the logical choice given its existing demographics. Consistent with a commitment to shared governance, BFNJBE was established in 2003 for the purpose of "co-governing, operating, and administering the affairs of Sakewew High School" (BJNJBE Partnership Agreement). The Board is comprised of a representative from Light of Christ Roman Catholic School Division, and from Living Sky Public School Division and two representatives from the Battlefords Tribal Council. The Board Agreement committed parties to carrying out assigned duties in a manner that "reflects a co-governance model, which incorporates First Nations' Holistic World Views and First Nations ways of Knowing" (BJNJBE Partnership Agreement). Additionally the Agreement recognized that it is "necessary and in the best interests of the students of Sakewew High school that sustainable funding be put in place so that Sakewew High School may continue to meet the needs of students..." (BJNJBE Partnership Agreement). The Agreement

establishing the JBFNIBE is authorized by section 93 of the Saskatchewan Education Act 2005 and confers powers similar to other Boards under the Saskatchewan Education Act of 1995 with the exception of 284-318, inclusive. The educational program conforms to the requirements of the Education Act 1995. Additionally the educational programming “includes an emphasis on First Nations’ content, First Nations perspectives, and First Nations Ways of Knowing and provides opportunities to students...” (BJNIBE Partnership Agreement).

Now in existence for close to 16 years the BFNJBE has experienced significant success. It was included in the “Lighthouse Programs” selected by Pelletier et al for the Joint Taskforce Report in 2013 because of its “unique governance and funding structure and a proven track record of affording academic success to First Nations and Métis students” (p.4). Pelletier et al noted that the governance structure exemplifies a strong spirit of cooperation between the Public and Roman Catholic school divisions in North Battleford and surrounding First Nations communities. An additional unique aspect of the school’s governance is that the Board and Director’s office is located on the urban reserve within the city of North Battleford. This serves to increase the visibility of First Nations presence in the city and also offers possibilities of attracting more Aboriginal staff to the institution. Pelletier, et al, (2013) concluded that the BFNJBE is:

an example of the shared governance approach ... identified as critical to the creation of postcolonial educational systems. It is also a practical manifestation of the “made in Saskatchewan” ethical space where Aboriginal and Canadian cultures

come together on the basis of equality, acknowledging the best of each other's knowledge and work for the best outcomes for all. Factors contributing to success in Sakewew ... include: culturally congruent curriculum and pedagogical approaches, a representative workforce, systematic data collection to plan for success, the integrated services model to provide for students' holistic needs, and multiple partnerships with external agencies to leverage resources". (p.146)

In its short history thus far the BFNJBE has confirmed the insight of the Government of Canada in 2002 that "...greater Aboriginal parental and community participation in educational governance is one significant way to contribute to Aboriginal student success in schools" (Government of Canada, 2002). And it has also demonstrated in practice the two main insights put forward by countless researchers and Aboriginal policy advocates over the last two decades:

- creating more invitational and culturally affirming school spaces represents the best means of ensuring that Aboriginal children derive the same benefit from public education as all others;
- critical to the achievement of this transformation is the creation of innovative governance structures which foster greater Aboriginal parental involvement in, and control over, their children's education

Urban Aboriginal Governance Models

Reports commissioned by the Governments of Canada and Saskatchewan (2002, 2003, 2006) and a 2010 MOU between these parties and STC have endorsed the

recognition of First Nations jurisdiction or *shared governance* in the area of education (Government of Canada, 2002; Saskatchewan Learning, 2003; STC, 2010). First Nations representatives, including STC, have insisted that control of education is integral to the inherent right of self-government and identify constitutional, political, educational and cultural imperatives for greater Aboriginal participation in local school governance (Henry et al, 2015; Martell, 2008). In addition to forging partnerships with provincial school divisions regarding the education of on-reserve students in provincial schools STC also seeks to advance educational co- governance into the urban realm of Saskatoon to create a context-specific approach to a jurisdictional/legal space that is unique to STC. This intersection of federal and provincial public policy and First Nations jurisprudence (Henderson, 2006) is a novel and complex space, given the multiple, overlapping and contested jurisdictional claims that are exercised (Burns, 1998; Martell, 2008). Exploring new conceptualizations of Aboriginal participation in school governance, possibly along the lines of the BFNJBE model, can address Aboriginal exclusion that has become rooted in public education and ensure the recognition of Indigenous peoples' worldviews, social structures, and pedagogy as a legitimate foundation upon which to construct new knowledge and structures alongside Western governance systems and ways of knowing.

In his overview of Aboriginal peoples in Canadian urban spaces Morse (2010) noted the "long history of Aboriginal peoples seeking to fill a critical void in the provision of important services that have been neglected by federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments" (p.2). Local agencies have been established over time to

offer a broad array of services some of which, (for example, alternate high schools and child welfare agencies) provide services that fulfill a statutory function, while others interact on a daily basis with government departments and the dominant court system. However, typically these initiatives have been delivered by independent service agencies operating strictly as non-profit corporations with no statutory base and no legal powers of a governmental nature. Additionally, provincial governments have also on occasion created frameworks that acknowledge the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in fulfilling functions that possess a formal legislative base and can exercise statutory powers. Historically Provinces have engaged with non-Aboriginal agencies – particularly those grounded on linguistic and religious distinctions and recognized the official status of schools, hospitals and child welfare services that offered an ‘acceptable’ alternative to similar government-operated institutions, while meeting all prevailing statutory requirements. More recently, local Aboriginal organizations have achieved some degree of recognition in a handful of cities.

While there is a vast literature regarding the assertion of aboriginal and treaty rights in the political and legal realms, exceedingly little of the jurisprudence has directly addressed the status of these rights within the urban context (except in relation to members of urban reserves). According to Morse it “is therefore impossible to draw upon court decisions to assert confidently that all Aboriginal peoples residing in cities possess all Aboriginal and treaty rights. Regarding jurisdiction in urban areas Morse noted it is “tied to [First Nations] inherent sovereignty as original governments and their continuance as distinct peoples from

the rest of society... with their own unique needs, interests and aspirations". In considering "potential governance futures for Aboriginal peoples operating collectively to develop distinctive approaches to meet their needs and aspirations" within urban contexts "requires having a population of sufficient size and talent that its members can be actors, rather than recipients, in the exercise of self-governance". It is obviously much harder in cities like Saskatoon, where many different First Nations, three language groups and two treaty territories are represented to develop common institutions of governance. Martin Dunn suggested over two decades ago that Aboriginal self-government in urban contexts was possible by relying upon a voluntary formation by individuals of a "community of interest" based upon shared cultural affinity through their common self-identity. Notably, this shared identity would need to be based upon *aboriginality*, not on origin from a common nation or even treaty territory.

Morse (2010) outlines possibilities for First Nations peoples that wish to carve out jurisdictional space in which to govern their own affairs while residing within the territory of an already-existing public government controlled by non-Aboriginal Canadians. These include negotiating new bilateral or tripartite agreements that could serve as catalysts for generating federal or provincial legislation providing statutory frameworks for the following:

1. Formal recognition for non-profit Aboriginal institutions exercising statutory mandates;
2. Formal recognition for Aboriginal institutions of governance that possess

specified subject areas of law-making jurisdiction;

3. A legal foundation for Aboriginal institutions with the authority to settle disputes.

These could be invoked on a voluntary basis by Aboriginal individuals and organizations seeking an alternative to provincial and territorial court systems;

4. An enabling statutory framework in which Aboriginal peoples in an urban area could choose to bring existing institutions and agencies together as the public services of their duly elected government (p.3)

Morse (2010) concludes that the opportunity to build forms of Aboriginal governance in many Canadian cities is open and that the Federal Urban Aboriginal Strategy Initiative is a strategy that might support the creation of nascent forms of Aboriginal governance in urban centers. The UAS could be instrumental in encouraging the development of urban Aboriginal governance structures. It funds community-driven initiatives to provide practical assistance to Aboriginal peoples regarding services normally available from other governments. The literature is unanimous in the conclusion that Aboriginal people must be directly involved in the delivery of services to their community; thus, it only makes sense that Aboriginal peoples would be fully involved in delivering UAS to the urban community. The strategy has helped foster the development of co-ordination and planning committees that, in many cities, draw together many of the key existing Aboriginal service deliverers. These committees could themselves become the precursor to formal institutions of urban Aboriginal governance in the future – ones that would encompass the many existing agencies within each city. Linking together all existing agencies under a single umbrella body that acquires legitimacy through direct

accountability to the urban Aboriginal population as a whole, perhaps through elections to this new entity, would lay a foundation for governance. This would not be easy by any means, as some cities possess a large array of independent entities with their own supporters and employees who could feel threatened by such a significant change in the landscape. The challenge is to move from self-administration of programs and provision of services that are controlled and designed by provincial and federal government departments to a position in which an Aboriginal government establishes the terms of these functions and provides their legal powers.

Mamawohkamatowin Partnership

To ensure more equitable outcomes from public education First Nations leaders responded to provincial partnership policy by establishing innovative partnerships and governance structures which foster greater Aboriginal parental involvement in, and control over, their children's education. One such partnership was initiated in 2005, gathered momentum over the next few years and a formal agreement was concluded between the Saskatoon Tribal Council, the Central Urban Métis Federation Inc. (CUMFI) and the Greater Saskatoon Catholic School Division (GSCS) in 2010 to create the *Mamawohkamatowin Partnership*. The primary intent of the partnership was to foster closer relationships between First Nations and Metis people and the GSCS as a means of improving educational outcomes for STC and other First Nations and Metis students attending GSCSD schools (Appendix A). It was envisaged that the partnership would extend beyond the boundaries of

Saskatoon to embrace the Saskatoon Tribal Council and its seven member First Nations, since these constitute the largest number of First Nations students attending GSCS schools. According to the original MOU (Appendix A) the Saskatoon Tribal Council and Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools agreed to the following commitments as part of the original agreement:

- To recognize, support and ensure Treaty knowledge is honored within the educational system to support healthy relations among all students
- To create an equitable governance council, to ensure that decision making is a shared process and representative of all stakeholders
- To recognize and celebrate common interests and uniqueness including the role of spirituality within the respective communities.
- To enhance and to design an array of suitable educational supports, programs and services for First Nations, Métis and Inuit education from Pre-Kindergarten to grade 12
- To develop an effective communication strategy
- To ensure the Partnership is based on respect, honesty and understanding
- To explore and to develop a mechanism for shared services, information and resources between partners
- To address the issue of equity as it relates to both education and employment aspects
- To acknowledge and honor the significance of Indigenous Knowledge as a vital component of the partnership, whereby Indigenous Knowledge will be valued and equated with mainstream teachings

- To collaboratively develop a procedure that will address the preservation, the promotion, and the revitalization of culture and languages for First Nations and Métis people

It was originally agreed that a Partnership Governance Committee would provide direction and guidance on issues of governance, priority setting and monitoring of the activities of the *Mamawohkamatowin* partnership. That committee would be convened two times per year and consist of the following representatives: CUMFI Executive Director and Board Member; STC Director of Education, Superintendent of Education, Education Committee Chair, two elected representatives; GSCS, Director of Education, Superintendent of Education, Board Chair, two elected Trustees, Superintendent, First Nations and Métis Education: Spiritual Guidance: Elder in Residence, Chaplain, Métis Elder, STC Elder. A Partnership Working Group was also established to carry out the objectives of the partnership. This includes resource procurement, planning, staffing, monitoring and evaluating the work of the partnership. The group was scheduled to meet six times a year and consisted of the following: CUMFI Executive Director; STC Director of Education and Superintendent of Education; GSCS Superintendent of Education and Coordinator of First Nations and Métis Education. (Appendix A)

Benefits of Partnership to Date

Stakeholders interviewed for this research were unanimous that the *Mamawohkamatowin* partnership has resulted in many positive benefits to both

parties and to First Nations children both in CSCS and STC schools. Regular meetings of staff at senior and middle levels through the Working group and Governance Group has significantly enhanced engagement and cooperation between STC and GSCS at all organizational levels. STC representatives generally felt that their organization is now respected by GSCS as “legitimately speaking for our own members and other First Nations students in Saskatoon and is seen by GSCS as capable of making significant contributions to improving outcomes for FNM students in CSCS classrooms” (STC Focus group). GSCS representatives agreed that a much more “cordial, respectful and authentic relationship with STC had been established through the auspices of the partnership and that a level of genuine trust was now established between our two organizations that bodes well for future collaboration” (GSCS Focus group).

At the planning level the *Mamawohkamatowin* partnership contributed to the development of a three year First Nations and Metis Education Plan in 2012 that promoted academic engagement and achievement for First Nations and Métis students through value streams, which included First Nations and Metis family and community engagement, First Nations and Metis student wellness and improved student learning outcomes for First Nations and Metis learners. That plan transitioned to align with the provincial Strategic Sector plan in 2014-15 which mandated the development of a FNM student achievement initiative (STC and GSCS Focus Groups).

A major concern of STC is the promotion of Indigenous languages and cultures and the infusion of Indigenous ways of knowing into K-12 curriculum for the benefit both of First Nations and non-First Nations students. A very significant accomplishment in this area was the establishment of a Cree Bilingual program at St. Frances School, one of the first of its kinds within the provincial system in an urban Saskatchewan context. The program began with a kindergarten class and 12 students and has now expanded to a Kindergarten to Grade 6 Cree bilingual school, with increasing enrollments yearly. In the words of an STC Elder:

When I go to St Frances School and hear the teachers and the young ones speaking our language in the classrooms and hallways and playground, it makes my heart sing. It says to me that our language is respected and valued, not just as a means of communication but as a source of knowledge and wisdom. It says that the schools are now working to ensure that our language survives and our children are proud of their Native identity and that they will grow up strong in their traditions. It also says to me that the dark days of residential schools are over. This, to me, is what reconciliation is all about. (STC Focus Group)

In addition to supporting indigenous language instruction in a number of other GSCS schools, conversations within the *Mamawohkamatowin* partnership led to a commitment from STC and GSCS to co-host the Indigenous Languages Festival in partnership with the Saskatoon Public School Division. 2016 marked the fourth annual festival in Saskatoon, and about 400 students from both the Public and Catholic system and STC schools attended. Cornelia Laliberte, Coordinator of First

Nations and Métis Education for GSCS and a member of the *Mamawohkamatowin* partnership Working Group, remarked to CBC:

"I know that the Indigenous language programs offered in both Public and Catholic school divisions started as a partnership with the Saskatoon Tribal Council, so it's a real honour for the three of our entities to get together to honour and celebrate the Indigenous languages that we offer in our schools."

The *Mamawohkamatowin* partnership also resulted in Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools and Saskatoon Tribal Council schools working more closely together to share capacity. Beginning in 2012, Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools Math and English Language Arts Consultants and Coordinators provided support to grades 4-6 teachers in STC schools at Muskeg Lake Cree Nation, One Arrow First Nation, Mistawasis First Nation and Kinistin First Nation. School to school partnerships were also established, linking Chief Mistawasis School and St. Mary's Community School around community engagement, Kinistin Education Centre and Oskayak High School around transitions and Muskoday Community School and St. Michael's Community School around assessment. A member of the STC Working Group expressed great appreciation for this collaboration:

You can have all kinds of MOU's and official agreements but when you see highly qualified professionals making the drive to your communities, putting in the time to share their expertise with our teachers and witnessing first hand both the positives and the unique challenges of on reserve education, you then believe that this is a real partnership and that your partners are genuinely committed to making things better for our students" (STC Focus Group).

Additional benefits of the partnership are significantly enhanced communication and data sharing between GSCS and STC; an agreement to share the use of facilities such as Sion School to develop STC capacity; and the hiring of a representative workforce coordinator to work at increasing representation of First Nations and Metis people within all levels of GSCS STC and GSCS Focus groups)

Co-Governance

In the 2012/13 school year the *Mamawohkamatowin* Governance Group began to have conversations regarding co-governance. (STC Focus group) These discussions were informed by previous partnerships between Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools and First Nations entities, including a long-standing partnership with Oskayak high school. For more than 30 years the school had been an associate school of Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools operating within a tripartite agreement with the *Kitotiminawak* Council, the Ministry of Education and Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools. From the perspective of STC the discussions were geared towards articulating a model of co-governance, ideally through a joint board, to "implement and operationalize First Nations jurisdiction over education within the city of Saskatoon". (STC Focus Group)

After initially exploring and rejecting a regional governance model, discussions within the Working Group and Governance Group turned to the possibility of transforming the *Mamawohkamatowin* partnership into the *Māmawohkamātowin* Educational Alliance through negotiation of the Mamawohkamatowin Enhanced Oversight and Participation Agreement (MEOPA) (STC Focus group). The purpose of

this shift was to “ deepen ties among partners, provide strategic supports for particular initiatives and set the stage for more fundamental integration of all partners in order to support First Nations and Métis students to achieve not only equity of opportunity, but outcome” (GSCS Focus Group). Recognizing that co-governance is ill defined in the Saskatchewan education sector, the MEOPA was designed to articulate an aligned framework to detail roles, responsibilities, reciprocal accountabilities, contributive commitments and timelines. The draft agreement outlined the following developmental phases from an enhanced current state to an ideal future:

1. Enhanced Oversight and Participation:

- The provision of strategic information (i.e., Aboriginal student data)
- Enhanced FNM community voice:
 - FNM community consultations
 - FNM leadership access to the GSCS Board
 - FNM representatives on CSCC’s
- FNME planning and program evaluation participation (A3 process)
- Defined roles and commitments
- Community advocate and dispute resolution process
- Standardized resource commitments

2. Project Specific Agreements:

- Project specific collaboration – St. Mary’s, St. Frances, St. Michaels, Oskayak
- Participation on a project steering committees

- Participation in project planning/goal setting, project animation, staffing, resourcing, budgeting, evaluation

3. Joint Advisory Council:

- Define membership (STC/CUMFI/GSCS/Elders/students/community)
- Define mandate (oversight for the Division FNME & FNM community voice and vision)
- Adjunct to the GSCS Board of Education

4. The Ideal Future:

- Definition of the ideal future as it relates to co-governance among the *Mamawohkamatowin* partners will be held in abeyance until such time as the organizations have had an opportunity to grow together through the first three stages of the process. This last stage must be defined by the governing entities of the respective organizations. It is believed that a strategic approach to collaboration and cooperation will result in an ideal future that serve the needs of all organizations and, ultimately, contributes to improved outcomes for First Nations and Metis students.
- The ideal future may require organizational, policy, governance or legislative adaptations as required.

The *Mamawohkamatowin* Enhanced Oversight and Participation Agreement was also intended to bring clarity on the following priorities:

- A component to support the integration of language and culture

- Information and data reporting and sharing
- Student learning program planning and evaluation
- Community participation and representation
- A FNM student graduation commitment: A journey to success
- *Mamawohkamatowin* staffing and staff roles
- A representative workforce model
- A FNM community advocate and alliances
- A dispute resolution process
- Project and initiatives resourcing
- A description of the rights of FNM students with GSCS
- Time lines for achievement

Current Status

The *Mamawohkamatowin* partnership is currently in abeyance as the STC Tribal Chief decided to not proceed with the *Mamawohkamatowin* Enhanced Oversight and Participation Agreement in February 2016. Since the ultimate goal of our research is to support the efforts of both parties in creating culturally responsive innovations in educational governance and administration in Saskatoon, researchers decided to utilize a second focus group interview with representatives from STC and GSCS to identify respective concerns relating to the achievement of co-governance. It is hoped that the identification of these concerns will assist both parties to clarify their own position and to better understand the other's positions so that possibilities for re-engagement can be entertained on the basis of deeper insight.

Concerns expressed by GSCS representatives ranged from constitutional/philosophical to practical. Beginning with an articulation of their division's constitutional right to provide education consistent with the Roman Catholic faith and values to students in Saskatoon, GSCS representatives remain unconvinced regarding the divisibility of their organization's jurisdiction. In particular, it is not clear to GSCS representatives how its constitutional mandate to govern a faith-based system can be shared with a secular non-profit organization like STC. A second concern expressed by STC was articulated in the form of a question: "What is wrong with current system?" GSCS representatives noted that their organization currently has a number of governance/management instruments available, including a Board of Education, School Community Councils, Parent Committees etc. From their perspective, these instruments, could be better utilized by First Nations people to exercise influence over the governance and management of schools. Their preference is to explore possibilities for greater engagement of First Nations people in existing mechanisms in advance of considering new or alternative governance mechanisms. GSCS representatives also expressed reservations regarding the current capacity of STC to actually exercise co-governance and specifically to assume responsibility for the management and day to day operation of four schools within Saskatoon. Related to this were concerns about the potential risks students would be exposed to if sufficient capacity was not in place. (GSCS Focus Group)

Concerns expressed by STC revolved primarily around frustrations regarding the unwillingness of GSCS to accommodate what STC considers to be legitimate

aspirations. STC insists that control of education is integral to the inherent right of self-government and identify constitutional and political imperatives for greater Aboriginal participation in local school governance, both on and off reserve. (STC Focus group) From this perspective STC believes that its interests and those of Metis people are incongruent, rendering the *Mamawohkamatowin* partnership an inappropriate vehicle to realize STC's co-governance aspirations. While STC is advancing a position based on First Nations sovereignty it also believes its aspirations align with "the best interests of children" as evidenced by a large body of educational research. Based on this, STC believes that assuming responsibility for the management and operation of four schools currently within the GSCS system would significantly improve educational outcomes for the largely Aboriginal student population of those schools. Ultimately, STC believes that GSCS is unwilling to engage in meaningful discussions around co-governance on the basis of Aboriginal and treaty rights. In this respect STC representatives expressed the opinion that GSCS is falling short of its obligation to support the elaboration of self-government, decolonization and reconciliation mandated by federal and provincial policy, and recent initiatives such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Moving Forward

The purpose of this research was to explore the evolution of an educational partnership between a provincial school division and a First Nation Tribal Council. The ultimate goal of the research was to support the efforts of both parties to create culturally responsive innovations in educational governance and administration in

Saskatoon. A significant body of academic research and public policy initiatives synthesized in the literature review identified the need for such systemic changes. Specifically research stresses the importance of shared governance to foster greater Aboriginal parental involvement in, and control over, their children's education as a means of ensuring that Aboriginal students benefit equitably from K-12 education. Those findings are also reiterated in Calls to Action articulated by the recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, 2015).

An overview of policy contexts for Urban Aboriginal Peoples highlights the jurisdictional complexities of those spaces, but initiatives such as the Battlefords First Nations Joint Board of Education confirms the possibility of crafting innovative arrangements capable of meeting the governance and service provision needs of Aboriginal peoples in particular urban contexts.

Data collected for this research indicates that the *Mamawohkamatowin* partnership between STC and CSCS evolved over the past decade within a provincial policy context prioritizing collaboration between Aboriginal peoples and provincial schools as a means of achieving more equitable educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. Participants from STC and GSCS were unanimous in their evaluations of the multiple benefits of the partnership to date, both from organizational perspectives and in terms of improving educational experiences for First Nations students, and indeed all students, attending GSCS. However, the research also confirmed that, to date, the *Mamawohkamatowin* partnership has been unable to realize the aspirations of STC to achieve co-governance of education in partnership

with GSCS within Saskatoon. In delineating the concerns of both parties, clarifying motivations and calibrating expectations, it is the hope of the researchers that this study will facilitate the continuation of meaningful dialogue between STC and GSCS leading to governance arrangements which ultimately will enable First Nation “parents to fully participate in the education of their children” (TRC, 2015, 10 v).

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APPENDIX A

Memorandum of Understanding Between The Saskatoon Tribal Council and Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools .

On this fourth day of February, 2010, in Saskatoon, the Saskatoon Tribal Council and Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools agree in principle to collaboratively develop an Education Partnership. This partnership will be a collaborative design, whereby First Nations, Métis, and Inuit education will be promoted, strengthened, and facilitated through the development and implementation of enhanced services, programs, and curricula. The partnership will extend beyond the boundaries of the Saskatoon city limits and will embrace the Saskatoon Tribal Council and its member First Nations: Kinistin Saulteaux First Nation, Mistawasis First Nation, Muskeg Lake Cree Nation, Muskoday First Nation, One Arrow First Nation, Whitecap Dakota First Nation, and Yellow Quill First Nation.

The Saskatoon Tribal Council and Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools agree to the following:

To recognize, support and ensure Treaty knowledge is honored within the educational system to support healthy relations among all students

To create an equitable governance council, to ensure that decision making is a shared process and representative of all stakeholders

To recognize and celebrate common interests and uniqueness including the role of spirituality within the respective communities.

To enhance and to design an array of suitable educational supports, programs and services for First Nations, Métis and Inuit education from Pre-Kindergarten to

grade 12

To develop an effective communication strategy

To ensure the Partnership is based on respect, honesty and understanding

To explore and to develop a mechanism for shared services, information and resources between partners

To address the issue of equity as it relates to both education and employment aspects

To acknowledge and honor the significance of Indigenous Knowledge as a vital component of the partnership, whereby Indigenous Knowledge will be valued and equated with mainstream teachings or universality

To collaboratively develop a procedure that will address the preservation, the promotion, and the revitalization of culture and languages for First Nations and Métis people

Saskatoon Tribal Council

Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools