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Sense of Belonging in the Urban School Environments of Aboriginal Youth

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Abstract

It is well established that educational attainment and social support are critical social determinants of health among Aboriginal Canadians. Still, the gap in educational attainment with non-Aboriginal Canadians continues to grow, and little is known about the role of social support as a health determinant among Aboriginal youth. In collaboration with The Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health (Ottawa, Canada), we undertook focus groups with urban Aboriginal youth at-risk to examine perceptions of their urban school environments, including access to social support. Data were analyzed using a general inductive approach. Results indicate that youths' perceived level of trust is key to the uptake of social support and vital to fostering sense of belonging. Youth identified social support as both structural and functional; the former being a symbol of the 'potential to help' and the latter representing 'actual help.' The unique challenges endured in the home environments of Aboriginal youth at-risk means that teachers and staff must be prepared to provide forms of support that are responsive to these realities. Part of the solution will come from implementing measures of cultural safety that support the resources needed for Aboriginal youth at-risk to experience sense of belonging, thereby making urban schools places where youth will achieve their educational goals.

Keywords

youth, Aboriginal health, school environment, social support, sense of belonging, urban, community-based research, cultural safety

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In Canada, rates of educational success are significantly lower among Aboriginal youth than their non-Aboriginal counterpart (Hull, 1996; Mendelson, 2006). Though measures of educational success indicate positive change more recently, particularly among Aboriginal youth in urban settings, the Auditor General's (2010) report suggests that educational success in the non-Aboriginal population is significantly outpacing gains made by the Aboriginal population, thereby leading to a widening gap in educational outcomes. This gap is a troubling one, as there is a great deal of evidence demonstrating that the health of populations is directly related to educational attainment, among other social determinants (Marmot, 2005). The gap in educational attainment experienced by the Aboriginal population is shaped by systemic inequalities related to Canada's colonial legacy, including the intergenerational impacts of the residential school legacy, and various other barriers related to curriculum design, geographic isolation, and the unique social support and infrastructure needs of Aboriginal youth (Battiste, 2000; Battiste & Barman, 1985; Silver & Mallett, 2002).

The factors that explain educational attainment among Aboriginal youth are numerous and complex. Yet few studies have examined youth perceptions of their urban school environments, and to our knowledge, no studies have explored Aboriginal youth perceptions of social supports in their school environments. Given contemporary patterns of urbanization among Aboriginal Canadians, and the educational challenges we see in the Aboriginal context, this is particularly troubling (Statistics Canada, 2008). In this paper, we draw from focus group discussions held with a group of at-risk Aboriginal youth regarding their urban school environments, including their access to social support in these places. We draw from the hypothesis that increased access to high quality social supports facilitates better learning and improved educational attainment. Our research addresses three objectives: 1) To explore at-risk youths' perceptions of their urban school environments; 2) To describe at-risk youths' perceptions of social supports in their schools; and 3) To examine the factors that shape at-risk youths' uptake of social support in their school environments. Before moving into a description of our methods and analyses, we provide a summary of Aboriginal education in Canada, and a review of the factors that shape educational opportunities in school environments.

Aboriginal Education

In 2006, 40% of Aboriginal people in Canada aged 20 to 24 did not have a high school diploma, compared to 13% among non-Aboriginal Canadians. The rate was considerably higher for First Nations living on-reserve (61%) and Inuit living in Arctic communities (68%) (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). In general, non-Registered Indians who live off-reserve, especially those in urban centres, tend to have higher educational attainment than other Aboriginal groups (Hull, 2005; Statistics Canada, 2008). Among First Nations aged 25 to 64, those living off-reserve had higher rates of high school and post-secondary completion compared to their on-reserve counterparts (Statistics Canada, 2008). Young Aboriginal people living in large cities are the most likely to have a university degree (Tait, 1999). While there appears to be some diversity in educational attainment within the Aboriginal population, and across geographic contexts, the reality is that the gap in attainment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples is widening. One need not look far for explanations about these discrepancies.

One of the darkest chapters in Canadian history relates to the residential school system, legislated in the 1880's by the federal government to assimilate Indian children to Canadian values. Supported by Canada's colonial agenda, the primary objective of the residential school system was to remove and isolate Aboriginal children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions, and cultures (Furniss,

1992). The residential school system was supported by the assumption that Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal. For over a century, 150,000 Aboriginal children aged 7 to 15 were forcibly taken to residential schools, wherein they suffered various forms of sexual, physical, and mental abuse, as well as subordinate living conditions including insufficient food and shelter. The historic trauma and intergenerational impact of residential schools extends this legacy into contemporary contexts, and strongly shapes sense of belonging and wellbeing of children and grandchildren of residential school survivors (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2005; Smith, Varcoe, & Edwards, 2005). There is also evidence to suggest that the intergenerational impact of residential schools has affected access to, and the quality of, social determinants of First Nation health; in particular, that relating to provision and seeking of social support (Richmond, 2007; Richmond & Ross, 2009).

Defining Social Support

In the most basic sense, social support refers to the supportive behaviours and resources of our social ties, including emotional support, intimacy, positive interaction, and tangible support (House, 1981). These supportive behaviours operate at the levels of individual and community (Felton & Shinn, 1992; Thoits, 1995). Since the late 1970s an expansive literature has grown to describe the connection between social support and health, the basic argument being that the care, respect, and resulting sense of satisfaction and well-being related to our social ties can buffer against health problems (Berkman, Glass, Brisette, & Seeman, 2000; Cohen & Syme, 1985).

Within the literature on Indigenous health, few authors have examined the connections between social support and health outcomes. Iwasaki, Bartlett, and O'Neil (2005) drew from a series of focus group interviews to better understand the ways in which Aboriginal peoples with diabetes cope with stress. A key emerging theme was that of interdependence/connectedness. Their results indicate that social supports provide opportunity for “sharing” problems and feelings, and for gaining encouragement and strength. In the context of youth suicide among First Nations in British Columbia ($n = 196$), Chandler & Lalonde (1998) demonstrate the protective role of cultural continuity upon prevalence of youth suicide. They found rates of youth suicide to be significantly lower, and in some cases non-existent, in communities that shared such markers of cultural continuity. Chong and Lopez (2005) assessed the relationship of social networks and social support to the psychosocial functioning (i.e., self-efficacy, self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and hostility) of 159 American Indian women undergoing residential substance abuse treatment. Their results indicated that social support and active participation by clients' families during treatment was significantly related to improved psychosocial functioning. Chong and Lopez (2005) concluded that interventions for substance abuse should aim to include family and friends in clients' treatment, and they also identified the need for further research to study other types of social networks (i.e., beyond family), and explore how different positive social networks can be developed to counteract the impact of negative social networks that represent the client's real world.

Another American study evaluated the efficacy of 15 years of a public health-oriented suicidal-behavior prevention program among youths living on an American Indian reservation (May, Serna, Hurt & DeBruyn, 2005). Over the years, the program evolved into a broad, community-wide systems suicide prevention model that solicited active involvement from key constituencies (i.e., tribal leadership, health care providers, parents, elders, youths, and clients) in its design and implementation. Results indicated a substantial drop in suicidal gestures and attempts. The authors claim that community involvement in the program was critical for developing strategies through which to address issues identified in a culturally, environmentally, and clinically appropriate manner (May et al., 2005).

Combined, these studies make the point that connections between the individual, family, and greater community – and the resources implicated by, and shared within, this social network – appear to have important protective properties for health. Notably, only two of these studies were focused on youth access to social support, and none examined the ways the school environment can foster or diminish Aboriginal youth's sense of belonging.

Aboriginal Sense of Belonging in Urban School Environments

Compared with non-Aboriginal youth, Aboriginal youth are more likely to dropout, face grade repetition and failure, and they are also most likely to experience violence and bullying in their school environments (Chiefs of Ontario, n.d.; Statistics Canada, 2008). Combined with factors such as poverty, family break-down, racism and violence, the marginalization of urban Aboriginal youth from the school environment has had significant consequences on their educational attainment (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Silver & Mallett, 2002). Many urban schools suffer from systemic racism and colonial imperatives that linger from decades past. Battiste (2000) asserts that “no force has been more effective at oppressing First Nations culture than the education system” (p. 163). She goes on to describe the school environment as places that are fraught with feelings of marginalization, oppression, and cultural loss, and lacking social support for First Nations. These feelings can be intensified by the lack of Aboriginal teachers, Aboriginal content in curricula, and awareness of the life experiences and cultural values of Aboriginal students and their families (Kitchen, Cherubini, Trudeau, & Hodson, 2009). Urban schools tend to endure other educational equity and social justice challenges as well, including exclusion of Aboriginal knowledges and languages from curricula, failure to include parents and community in school decision-making, and an overrepresentation of youth from low-income families who are highly mobile and more likely to be headed by single parents (Silver & Mallett, 2002; Statistics Canada, 2008). Because government funding and educational policy directives have traditionally focused on First Nations living on-reserve, urban-based schools serving First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples endure significant demands, but too often with inadequate funding, training and human resources (Hanselmann, 2001).

As the proportion of Aboriginal people in urban places continues to grow, there is great need for schools to become places that meet these growing cultural demands, educational priorities, and social support needs of this shifting demographic. Unlike youth in northern, rural, and remotely located Aboriginal communities, urban youth are much less likely to benefit from extended family support, informal sharing networks, and wider community support systems that may act to protect and improve health and social realities (e.g., through food sharing networks, closeness of communities, etc.) (Richmond & Ross, 2009). These social networks are vital for sustaining Aboriginal cultures and identities in ways that build positive self-esteem and creating spaces that encourage learning (Hill & Redwing Saunders, 2008). Further, it is known that students who feel the safest, most comfortable, and most enthused are those who receive some form of cultural education in school (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). The factors that explain educational attainment among Aboriginal youth are numerous and complex; yet few studies have examined youth perceptions of their school environments and the social support processes that shape sense of belonging in these environments. Here, we draw from focus groups with Aboriginal youth ($n=14$) aged 13 to 17 years old at the Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health in Ottawa, Ontario. We now move on to describe the methods and analyses of our study. We begin with a description of our community partner, the Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health.

The Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health

Recognizing the health and social service needs of urban Aboriginal peoples, in 1994, the Ontario Aboriginal Healing and Wellness Strategy developed Aboriginal Health Centres across nine major urban centres in the province of Ontario. The Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health is located in Ottawa, Canada's capital city, which is home to a diverse group of Aboriginal peoples including Inuit, Métis, and a number of First Nations groups. Currently, the Aboriginal population residing in the Ottawa region is estimated at 43,000 (Statistics Canada, 2008). It is the fastest growing and most culturally diverse urban Aboriginal population, with the highest concentration of urban Inuit in Canada.

Similar to health and social conditions that plague Aboriginal populations in other major Canadian cities (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2003), Ottawa's Aboriginal population endure high proportions of unemployment (9.2%, compared with 5.9% among Ottawa's non-Aboriginal residents), incidence of lone-parent status (7.2%), frequent mobility (25% moved in the last year, compared with 14% in the general Ottawa population), lower completion rates of university/degree (18% versus 32%), and significantly lower incomes (\$59,345 versus \$69,743). Another key characteristic of Ottawa's Aboriginal population is a high percentage of families who do not live in Census families, defined as a married couple and their children (22.1% versus 16.8% in the general Ottawa population) (Schnarch, 2008).

Wabano's mandate is to create and deliver culturally relevant health services that are rooted in clinical, social, economic, and cultural initiatives that promote the health of urban First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people in the city of Ottawa. Wabano functions as a health centre with both clinical and traditional healers, and it also provides a vast array of health promotion and social programming for people across the lifespan. Given the special socioeconomic and family-related challenges presented by Ottawa's Aboriginal population, one of Wabano's key areas of concentration is on healthy youth development. This youth programming is centred on the "Wolf Pack" program, which provides a host of socially and culturally relevant activities. The involvement of Elders and other culturally based activities (e.g., language, land-based learning) have been incorporated into Wolf Pack programming. Wabano's Wolf pack programming services a diversity of First Nation, Inuit, and Métis youth, but a special concentration is targeted to at-risk youth, defined as alienated and marginalized youth who are characterized by: adopting the street lifestyle, academic failure or dropping out of school, involvement in alcohol and/or other drug use, and involvement in illegal behaviour (Anderson, 1993).

Methods and Approach

Our relationship with the Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health began in spring 2008, when the lead author approached Wabano's Executive Director to inquire about the development of a research partnership between Wabano and academic partners at The University of Western Ontario (UWO) (London, Ontario) and Ottawa University (Ottawa, Ontario). What began as a simple telephone call quickly evolved into a larger community process that involved Wabano's Wolf Pack staff, community Elders, university researchers, and summer students in the design, implementation, and analysis of this research. As has been noted elsewhere (Castellano, 2004; Edwards, Lund, Mitchell, & Andersson, 2008; Schnarch, 2004), the use of such a participatory approach is important for ensuring that research *with* Aboriginal communities promotes a process of capacity-building and knowledge formation that benefits both researcher and the researched. Embracing these principles ensured that the research was conducted with Wabano in a culturally appropriate way to develop locally relevant data and tangible research outcomes on youth educational attainment. Despite the growing size and risk of this

population in Canadian cities, available funding for youth services is scant. As such, the pairing of university resources and an urgent community issue meant that this study was conceptualized, from the very start, through an approach designed to create a mutually beneficial outcome.

The Focus Groups

Our research design drew from a participatory approach that was centred on focus group discussions with 14 Aboriginal youth, aged 13 to 17. The cultural background of these youth represented 10 First Nation and 4 Inuit, all of whom had lived in the city of Ottawa for at least the past five years. As mentioned above, Wabano's Wolf-Pack programming centres its efforts on at-risk youth, and the participants in our study well characterized this definition. Ten out of 14 study participants were in, or had recently been in, foster care. Ten out of 14 were living below the poverty line. All 14 youth came from homes with complex family dynamics, including conflict with family, mental health issues, violence, and addictions. Seven out of 14 participants were in conflict with the law.

Focus group discussions involve concurrent questioning among a group to explore participant perceptions on specific issues. This method, as opposed to one-on-one interviews, was chosen for various reasons. First, when undertaking research with youth, the power disparity between researchers and underage youth must be acknowledged and minimized (Cameron, 2005); these discussions can work to empower youth, thereby lessening this inequality. Second, in the group setting, the security of one's peers can work to increase participant confidence as well as generate new ideas and common insights (Goss & Leinbach, 1996; Hyde, Howlett, Brady, & Drennan, 2005). Finally, many youth at Wabano had previously participated in focus group discussions. By working with Wolf Pack staff, this method enabled us to tap into pre-established social networks, trust and partnerships that had developed in this cohort of youth. The focus groups took place on an afternoon in summer 2008. The day began with a welcome lunch and an opening prayer by one of Wabano's Elder. The youth were arranged into three groups, which were developed by Wolf Pack employees to provide a balanced representation of age, grade level, and gender across the three groups. It was also important to arrange the groups in such a way that maximized on the social dynamics of the group; for example, a brother and sister were assigned to separate groups. Wolf Pack employees, who were most knowledgeable about the characteristics of the youth participants, arranged these groups.

To maximize youth confidence and to minimize the power dynamics that can result between researchers and researched – particularly in this case, with this group of at-risk youth - at least one Wolf Pack employee was assigned to each group. The close, trusting nature of the relationship between the youth and Wolf Pack employees was a strength that we benefitted from greatly in terms of co-developing this study with Wabano, and it was critical for the success of the focus groups that we integrated these employees into all stages of the day's activities. The groups were seated in a circle formation. Each group had a moderator whose role was to initiate the topics of discussion and engage youth about their ideas and perceptions of their schools. We asked youth a series of sub-questions that related more generally to: a) their feelings about their schools, including impactful experiences; and b) sources, and uptake of, social support available to them in their schools. This tool was pre-tested twice: first with undergraduate students at UWO; and second, with Wolf Pack employees. Ethical approval for the study was provided by UWO's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board.

During the focus groups, it was critical to be mindful of participation by all members of the group in the discussion. The moderator called upon those whose ideas were not being heard. The moderator also remained aware of the comfort level of youth participants as they discussed various topics. Group discussions were tape-recorded (with permission). To encourage a safe sharing environment, our Elder

circulated from room to room during the course of the group discussions, and remained present once the focus groups had ended; the purpose of this was to provide the youth, and/or any members of the research team with space for debriefing. At closing, the moderator briefly overviewed the group's discussion. Youth were provided opportunity to share any new or pertinent information and/or provide closing remarks they may wish to share. The Elder closed the day with a prayer.

Analyses of the Data

Once transcribed, the focus group data were analyzed in Microsoft Word using a general inductive approach (Silverman, 2000). The primary purposes of the inductive approach are three-fold: to identify significant themes inherent in the raw data; to establish links between the research objectives and the main thematic findings; and to develop a model or theory about the underlying structure of the processes described in the data (Thomas, 2006).

The first step of our analytical approach involved extensive readings of the focus group transcripts. This ensured a thorough familiarity with the data, which enabled the primary author to identify a number of main categories or themes present within the discussions. Once these general categories had been established, they were presented to, and discussed by the research team. Once a general set of categories had been agreed upon by the research team, the analysis proceeded through the coding of the focus group data. Coding is a data organization technique used to connect data, issues, interpretations, data sources, and report writing (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The goal of the coding process was to condense the various pages of text data into a more concise summary format (Thomas, 2006), and to establish clear links between the study objectives and the thematic categories derived from the focus group discussions (Thomas, 2003). During the coding process, various sections of text that corresponded with these themes and objectives were highlighted. The sections of text represent components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which often are meaningless when viewed alone (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Together, these pieces of text formed the basis of the main thematic findings, which when pieced together, form a comprehensive picture of the youths' experiences of belonging. As a means of establishing rigour in our research findings, significant dialogue between the first and second authors, and the community partner ensued. This process enabled meaningful participation by the full study team on the identification and interpretation of key themes.

In the section that follows, a number of unedited phrases from the focus group discussions are organized around the study's main themes to highlight youths' perceptions of their schools, their access to social support, and the social processes that tie these larger themes together. Pseudonyms have been assigned to protect the confidentiality of youth participants.

Main Findings

Youth Perceptions of their School Environments

One of the first questions we asked youth was "what is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about school?" Youth responses could be organized as being negative or positive. The majority of the negative school perceptions related to being bored ($n = 10$). Almost half of the participants described school as an uninspiring place.

I think of cubicles... I think of being stuck in cubicles and tired. Sometimes [I] feel isolated. I am always looking at the same walls. They teach same stuff over and over. (Stephanie)

In terms of the positive responses about school, three youth noted that they liked their teachers; two noted they enjoyed the subject matter, and, surprisingly, two respondents noted that they enjoyed wearing of uniforms.

I think of uniforms. I don't really like uniforms. Because you have to wear the same thing everyday. But it's also good. Sometimes... 'Cause then no one is like, um, excluding anyone based on the way they dress. (Danielle)

We then asked the youth to think more specifically about what they like and dislike about their schools. Regarding what students like about their schools, the most common response related to their enjoyment of learning and particular subjects ($n=6$):

I like my school 'cause you can - you learn new things about other people and about subjects...yeah. (Katherine)

Four students indicate liking their schools because of their friends, while others enjoy sports and other after-school activities. What is more telling about student perceptions of their schools is what they dislike. For example, what the youth most frequently mentioned disliking about school relates to 'feeling excluded' and 'teacher quality,' followed narrowly by 'violence/ bullying.' When responding to why he does not like his school, for example, Steven states that he feels excluded as an Aboriginal person:

I don't like school period so...No 'cause I find that what they'll teach me is what they want... Look, I'm not trying to be racist or anything so don't take this [the wrong way] - but the white people are just trying to make us learn what *they want me to learn*. If we went to a school without any others and we learn - as Greg was saying - a lot of stuff about natives... But [at my school] we went over it for like two days and then we switched to a different topic... (Steven)

Tori, from a different focus group, speaks about feeling marginalized as one of only a few Aboriginal youth in her school:

Do I like school? Yeah and no because um... I was like the only Aboriginal - me and my sister were the only Aboriginals in our whole school... So we were always feeling different, like left out. (Tori)

One of the major themes that recurred across youth focus groups relates to common experiences of violence ($n=10$). Experiences of violence can have long-lasting effects on student perceptions of belonging - even if the violence only occurs once:

I don't like school because I was kicked out when I beat up a girl and she snitched on me. I was frustrated and I got mad at her. The people at my school like to gossip. Things go around the school and people get to know your secrets. No one can keep stuff to themselves. (Michelle)

As illustrated in the quote above, Michelle's experience of violence at school was related to feelings of marginalization, which were compounded by lack of trust in her peers and classmates.

Best and Worst School Experiences

As another means of understanding youth's perceptions of their school environments, we asked them to describe their best and worst experiences at school. While some youth spoke about particular events or moments that defined their best and worst experiences, others focused on long-term systemic issues affecting their everyday school realities. In terms of best school experiences, three main themes emerged: travel/out-of-class activities, academic achievement, and having other Aboriginal students at their school.

Youth spoke very positively about extra-curricular activities that occurred outside of the classroom, particularly those that provided experiential learning experiences. Almost half of the focus group participants identified these activities as their best school experience. In the various examples provided, youth spoke about the excitement of travelling to a new city, the importance of meeting new people, and the sense of confidence that these out-of-school activities instilled within them. For example, Michelle speaks about a field trip to another city:

My best experience was when we went to Montreal. We visited La Ronde [an amusement park]. The roller coasters were really fun and exciting. I can also remember that we went to the Science Centre and we all sat on a chair that had thousands of little nails sticking out of it. It was fun because we learned something new and fun. (Rebecca)

Greg mentions participation in the school talent show as his best student experience:

My um best experience was actually last year. We had a talent show at the end of the year, and me and two other – no – one other friend, her name was Sylvia and we lip-synced to Grease. And, uh, yeah we had this whole dance thing and it was really fun. So we got to dress up and it was awesome. (Greg)

Academic achievements were also mentioned as positive experiences for youth. Katherine talks about how she won a flag-design competition and what it meant to her:

In grade 4 we had this competition we had to create a new flag for the school. So a lot of people tried out, and I'm the one who got their flag chosen! So, now it's the second one [flag] that hangs below the Canadian flag. It made me feel really good. (Katherine)

Students' ideas about best school experiences also related to cultural connections with other Aboriginal students at their school; the opportunity to feel sense of belonging through their shared Aboriginal identity was highlighted:

Well we just felt like they [teachers] were so racist because they didn't teach us anything about our culture or language. But we were so happy to be with each other 'cause that meant we didn't have to go there alone every day. But we still didn't get to learn anything Aboriginal. (Tori)

Students' perceptions about worst school experience detailed three key themes: 'violence and bullying,' 'failure,' and negative 'altercations with their teachers.' One of the most troubling results of this research is that greater than half of the youth indicated that their worst student experience revolved around incidents of violence and/or bullying ($n=10$). In most cases, the bullying experienced by youth extended over long periods of time. In Alex's experience, he was bullied for a full school year:

There was this kid in my class, and for some reason he just didn't like me. And he used to like bug me and tease me all the time. And there were a couple occasions where I tried to get back at him but he always got a teacher involved so – so like he would tease me and then when I wanna get back he would run away from me. It was like probably my worst school year... (Alex)

Greg describes a similar experience of long-term bullying by peers at school:

Last year there was this group of girls who really didn't like me 'cause I was always really happy and I'm was able to say stuff that was on my mind. And they just didn't like me so they kept on calling me fat. Then I really got that in my mind and I thought that I was fat so I stopped eating for a really long time. (Greg)

When prompted about how their experiences of violence and bullying were resolved, most indicated feeling quite helpless, not knowing whom to turn to for help. Youth specified that the issue was often resolved with the help of friends. When asked if they sought help from teachers or other staff, youth revealed that they would not disclose the issues to their teachers because they did not trust them. This is detailed further in the next section on social support.

Failure in school was another common response for worst school experience ($n=5$). In the quote below, Steven explains the long-term effects on his self-esteem by being held back in his kindergarten year:

I lost my kindergarten year because my parents moved us around so much...I had to re-do it. Now this means that I'm always with younger kids...I keep running into my old classmates and I know they are ahead and where I should [be]. Like that really sucks for me. (Steven)

The final common theme concerning worst student experiences related to verbal and physical altercations with teachers. These experiences were described as arguments between teachers and students, the result being that the youth would get kicked out of class, sent for detention, or expelled. In one case, however, an altercation between a female student and her teacher escalated to the point where charges were laid against the student:

Lynn: My worst experience was the day I was charged at school. All I can tell you is that the teacher deserved what she got.

Moderator: Do you think this situation could have been prevented?

Lynn: Yeah, maybe... But [I] wasn't gonna try and be nice to that teacher. She wouldn't listen anyway.

Moderator: What do you mean by that?

Lynn: Well 'cause like others have said, they [teachers] just hear what they want to hear and the rest just gets thrown out.

Lynn reflects that this experience might have been resolved with a better outcome, however, she expresses that her teacher was incapable of listening to, and understanding, her frustrations.

Sources, Meanings, and Access to Social Support

The third section of the focus group directed youth to think about sources of social support in their school environments, and to think about to whom they turn when they need help. Youth identified a number of key sources of social support: friends, family, teachers, principals, and guidance counselors. In describing what social support means, youth spoke about three key characteristics: guidance/help, belonging, and trust. The most important characteristic of social support was the ability to receive guidance or help when needed. All 14 participants spoke about the importance of having someone to talk to when needing help making decisions, or trying to solve a problem. For youth, the most important source of support comes from their peers:

Friends are there to listen and they can help with problems and to provide guidance. They can understand where you are coming from because most have been in the same situation before so they know how to see your problem and help you out... (Rebecca)

Rebecca continues to discuss how teachers and other staff can also offer help and guidance at school. However, she qualifies that this help is not always enough, as teachers cannot fully appreciate the unique support needs of Aboriginal youth:

Teachers listen, and they try to help in any way they can, like if you don't understand your work, or if you are having another problem. The guidance counselor is also an important support... But we [Aboriginal youth] just need more support all around. And we need people who are more sensitive to the issues that we are facing. Most teachers just don't get it. (Rebecca)

Youth also articulated the significance of social supports for fostering sense of belonging in the school environment ($n=8$). Not only does having a supportive friend help one to feel included, but the act of providing social support can also improve an individual's self-esteem and confidence in the quality of their friendships. This means that both giving *and* receiving social support can make one feel better. The most significant quality of a social support is level of *trust* youth have in the person providing help:

Well, yes I know they [teachers and staff] are there to turn to, but if I don't trust them, I am not going to go. And most of them, I don't trust. (Sarah)

As Sarah illustrates, while social supports may be in place, youth may actively choose not to use them because they are not perceived to be appropriate sources of support for the sort of help they need. Sadly, this means that when youth are in need of help, they may find that there are no adults to whom they can turn for help.

Help in Time of Need

The final question of our focus group asked youth who they turn to for help in their schools. The most common response was their teachers ($n=6$), followed by their friends ($n=3$), and family ($n=2$). Three youth indicated they had no one to whom to turn. There was an important difference in the

sorts of help that youth identified seeking from each of these sources. For example, only one youth identified that she would speak with a teacher about a personal issue she was experiencing. For the most part, teachers were identified as important sources of academic help. This is elucidated in the following example; Greg speaks about how he turns to his drama teacher for help because he perceives his drama teacher can understand youth issues:

Most of my teachers, I can turn to them for help. But I won't go to them for personal reasons. Well it's like they are people I don't know, that I'm not friends with. But my drama teacher... He has worked with kids all his life and he's like a very trusting person. And he knows how to like talk to kids. He knows that, like, we feel different than adults. (Greg)

In terms of more personal forms of help, youth spoke about their friends as their preferred sources:

I guess that I can rely on my friends to listen to what I have to say and not go out and like tell other people. 'Cause there are some things I can only tell my friends that I can't say to my parents. 'Cause I know my parents are gonna like flip out and try to do whatever they can to solve the problem when it won't be solved. So yeah basically that I can tell my friends when I can't tell my parents. (Alex)

As Alex hints at above, friends provide different forms of help than parents or teachers do. While youth can speak openly with their friends about a number of very personal issues (e.g., break-ups, bullying), most youth indicated that they do not feel comfortable asking their parents for help on these particular issues. Tori raises a similar point:

I feel I can tell my friends stuff that I... Well, 'cause I don't think.. Well if I have an issue with a girl at school, and I tell my Mom about things, I don't think she will listen to what I have to say. (Tori)

Clearly, the sources of help that youth turn to are very context-specific, meaning that different sources of support serve different functions depending on the situation. For example, while teachers are identified as important potential sources of social support for academic-related issues, our results seem to indicate most youth are uncomfortable seeking help from their teachers for personal issues because of a lack of trust in them. In this case, youth often turn instead to their friends, who they perceive to have a better appreciation of the personal issues they are facing.

As mentioned above, three students indicated that there was no one they could turn to for help. As articulated in the previous section, these three youth contend that they prefer to solve problems by themselves. While all three of these youth previously indicated that they do perceive they have social supports they could turn to for help, they will not seek out these sources because they have not built trusting relationships:

I do know why. It's just a complicated answer... Well as I was growing up I realized who I can and can't trust. Well most of the time I tried to trust them but then they just – stuff just happened and they - I really got mad and got in trouble. So I only tried trusting people that I've known my whole life not people I just met... Like every one at my school gives support *but I just don't accept it*. I like my self as alone in school, it's usually not to hang out with anyone... I just block everyone else out, except for the people that I like – that I trust. I choose not to accept it, but I guess it's there if I need it. (Steven, italics added)

Discussion

The main objective of this study was to understand the perceptions of a group of at-risk Aboriginal youth regarding their urban school environments, including their access to social support. As a means of understanding these factors, we conducted culturally tailored focus group discussions with 14 youth and asked them a number of questions relating to their general perceptions of and experiences in their schools. We also asked them questions related to sources of social support in their schools, and more specifically, to whom they turn when they need help.

Perhaps the most compelling, and overwhelmingly troublesome narrative, of these results is that the Aboriginal youth involved in this study indicated that they are disproportionately affected by violence and other negative experiences in their urban schools; yet, almost all participants stated that they do not seek help from social supports available in their schools, such as teachers and other support staff, because they lack trust in them. Youth participants detailed feelings of segregation across various social, cultural, and curricular lines; the outcome being that their school environments overwhelmingly foster experiences of marginalization, *not* belonging. A wider literature on school belonging among similar youth-aged populations regarding their reluctance to seek help indicate however, that these findings are not unique (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Collins & Coleman, 2008; Osterman, 2000). Rather, what makes these findings unique relates to the “distal” (historic, political, social and economic contexts) and “intermediate” (community infrastructure, resources, systems and capacities) social determinants of health (Loppie-Reading & Wien, 2009) that influences sense of belonging among this group of “at-risk” Aboriginal youth in their school environments, and disproportionately affects the quality of their home environments as well. In a recent review of the health of Aboriginal children, Postl, Cook, and Moffatt (2010) describe the various social, economic, historical, political and geographic processes that disproportionately disadvantage the health, life chances, and home environments of Aboriginal children. In the context of our own study, we argue that it is precisely this colonial past, and the ways this past has interacted to shape the current social, home and school realities, that makes their experiences unique.

In the urban context, school environments must do more to foster sense of belonging among Aboriginal learners, in particular those who come from complex home environments such as the youth-at-risk who participated in this study. As detailed here, the social supports that youth reported reaching out to vary depending on the context of their situations. Perceived level of trust in available social supports is a key factor underlying youth uptake of support. For example, youth indicated that there are various available sources of social support to whom they could *potentially* turn for help if needed; however, the reality is that youth will not seek help from these supports if they do not trust them, nor do they believe that these supports are capable of listening to, or empathizing with the unique daily challenges and needs they have, as Aboriginal youth. The sentiment that resounded from these results was “why would I ask for help from someone who does not understand me?”

In their descriptions of social support, youth made an important distinction between the types of social support available in their schools, and the factors that determine their uptake of these supports. More specifically, youth differentiated between two types of support: structural supports and functional supports. While the distinction between these two types of support may seem trivial, our results indicate that distinction in type of support is key to understanding youth uptake of support. Structural support refers to the nature and structure of one’s interpersonal relationships or social networks (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988), for example the number of friends one has, or level of social integration. Social integration can provide individuals with a high level of *perceived* support. Functional

support, on the other hand, represents the functions that a relationship or network *actually serves* the individual (Cohen & Syme, 1985), for example by providing feelings of love and belonging, advice on an issue, or material aid (Cohen & Syme, 1985).

In our study, the distinction between structural and functional supports is significant as these particular Aboriginal youth identified a need for supports who can understand the daily challenges they face, and are able to provide the social, cultural and curricular resources congruent with these realities. Put another way, the mere existence of a social support (e.g., “my teacher”) is not good enough if/when the person hired to do the work of ‘supporting’ cannot appreciate the distinct socio-economic context within which many urban Aboriginal youth navigate their daily lives, nor of the complex historical context (e.g., residential school legacy) that strongly figures in their contemporary health and social realities (Adelson, 2005). The lacking appreciation of the youth’s social and cultural context means that such supports are merely symbolic and not functional. We perceive this deficiency in the social context of the school environment to make them culturally unsafe places for Aboriginal learners such as those who participated in this study, and we recommend that by engaging with the notion of cultural safety, urban schools can become places that are supportive for all learners to thrive.

Making Schools Culturally Safe Places for Aboriginal Learners

Cultural safety is a concept that emerged from the transcultural nursing literature. It involves the recognition that each individual has a cultural identity and that in order to provide safe patient care, one must recognize the “social, economic and political positioning of certain groups within society” (Browne & Smye, 2002, p. 43). As a concept, cultural safety extends well beyond more familiar concepts such as “cultural sensitivity, or the recognition of the importance of respecting difference; and cultural competence, which focuses on skills, knowledge, and attitudes of practitioners” (Aboriginal Nurses Association of Canada, 2009, p. 24). Cultural safety is predicated on understanding the power differentials inherent in institutional contexts, such as health services or schools, and redressing these inequities through educational processes.

In the context of our study with urban Aboriginal youth at-risk, the gap between structural and functional supports cannot be accounted for solely at the individual level, but must be addressed through a widespread examination of the wider systemic discourses of oppression and discrimination that shape educational policies and school environments (Kitchen et al., 2009) and thereby reduce access to functional support for certain marginalized populations. As the National Aboriginal Health Organization (2008) describes:

Developing culturally safe learning environments benefit students, educators, educational institutions, and education systems. Students are more likely to respond positively to the learning encounter when they feel safe, respected and able to voice their perspective... High retention rates of an Aboriginal population can be interpreted as a reflection of an educational institute’s commitment to such an environment, as well as their commitment to human rights and race relations. Such institutions produce more graduates, which attracts more students and thereby increases enrolment. (p. 13)

In the context of making school environments places wherein all students can find a sense of belonging, there is a need to ensure that culturally safe social supports are in place for use by Aboriginal students if and when they choose to draw upon them. In Canadian cities, such as Ottawa, wherein the number of Aboriginal people continue to grow, there is a responsibility for schools to

ensure that the demographics of their own teaching and support staff are keeping pace. Clearly, the training, hiring and retention of greater numbers of Aboriginal teachers and support staff will be significant for making urban schools more culturally safe. However, greater efforts must also be made to ensure that curriculum is inclusive of Aboriginal ways of knowing (Archibald, Pidgeon, Janvier, Commodore, & McCormick, 2002). Across the board, Indigenous education experts agree that the inclusion of Indigenous or Aboriginal histories, languages, and knowledges is another way to foster, and improve upon, the development of urban schools as places of belonging (Bear Nicholas, 2001; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).

In meeting these recruitment and curriculum-building efforts, urban schools may find that they need to reach to the greater Aboriginal community for help. In the Canadian context, this may mean building partnerships between schools and urban Aboriginal organizations, such as Aboriginal Health Access Centres, or Indian Friendship Centres. These partnerships will be vital to the development of culturally appropriate programs, such as Elder-in-residence programs, which bring Aboriginal Elders into primary and secondary schools, or after-school programming. In many urban, rural, and reserve schools across Canada, specialized programs such as these are being incorporated into mainstream schools, and showing promising results (Bell, 2004). A note of caution must be heeded however – given the tremendous demands already placed on urban Aboriginal organizations, and the scant resources available for youth programming, additional pressures cannot be expected without coinciding material investments.

Conclusion

This research drew from the hypothesis that increased access to high quality social supports facilitates better learning and improved educational attainment. Educational success is a well-established determinant of Aboriginal well-being. It has been stated time and again by local, regional, and national Aboriginal organizations that educational attainment is the pathway to improved health and economic success.

Results of this community-based study indicate that Aboriginal youth face high rates of violence and bullying, yet most do not seek help from teachers or other school staff because they do not trust these social supports, and/or they believe that available supports will not understand their support needs as Aboriginal youth. While these findings are echoed in the wider literature on youth bullying, what makes them unique relates to the distinct colonial past that has shaped the social realities of these particular at-risk youth, and the general absence of a strong safety net at home. The youth in this study were able to articulate the important differences between structural and functional supports, with the distinction being that structural supports are symbolic of the ‘potential to help,’ while functional supports refer to ‘actual help.’

Given the particular social and historical contexts underlying the everyday realities of the Aboriginal youth who participated in this study, and the growing number of Aboriginal youth in urban areas of Canada, our results suggest that urban schools must be better prepared to provide the social supports and, cultural and curricular resources that many Aboriginal learners require to succeed. We recommend that at least part of the solution will come from adopting the notion of cultural safety in the development of socially supportive school programs, and further, that the involvement of Aboriginal teachers, parents and organizations will also be critical. The need for urban schools to become places that foster the academic and social resources required for Aboriginal students to succeed is critical not only for the health and social benefit of Canada’s Aboriginal population, but for the social and economic success of Canada as a whole.

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