The Wicehtowak Partnership: Improving Student Learning by Formalizing the Family-Community-School Partnership

SCOTT TUNISON  
University of Saskatchewan

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which formalization of the family-community-school partnership through the Wicehtowak Partnership influenced educational outcomes for Aboriginal students in one urban school district. It finds that the community engagement process employed by the school district for creating the partnership itself led to stronger and more positive relationships between the school district and the community organizations representing Aboriginal families. While the stated purpose for creating the partnership was to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students, school district statistics did not point to a significant improvement in student learning outcomes. There was, however, positive feedback from Aboriginal students with regard to their learning experiences.

Aboriginal students,1 both in the United States and in Canada, are far less likely to graduate from high school and college and far more likely to achieve low grades in the classes they do complete than is typical for their non-Aboriginal counterparts. The factors that account for these gaps are widely documented, and it is beyond the scope of this article to chronicle them. However, as pointed out by Birchard (2006), a major hurdle in fostering success in formal educational milieus is the feeling among many Aboriginal families that traditional practices, languages, and ceremonies are threatened by formal schooling as it exists both now and in the past. In other words, “the biggest obstacle to [Aboriginals’] educational success is a widespread suspicion of the ‘white man’s’ educational system” (Birchard 2006, 46).

The “wide-spread suspicion” described by Birchard presents a significant challenge to school districts in terms of eliminating the achievement gaps between Aboriginal children and their non-Aboriginal peers. On the one hand, “teaching [and learning does not] happen in a vacuum” (Littky and Grabelle
Epstein and Sanders (2006) have observed that “students learn more and succeed at higher levels when home, school, and community work together to support students’ learning and development” (87).

On the other hand, Friedel (1999) found that Aboriginal parents are typically not made to feel welcome in their partnership role in schools. She concluded that “[Aboriginal parents] believe that achievement expectations for students are low and that the administration’s paternalistic attitude explains their unwillingness to include [them] in decision-making at the school” (143). Nevertheless, “despite the painful experiences Aboriginal people carry with them from formal education systems, they still see education as the hope for the future and they are determined to see education fulfill its promise” (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996, xi).

Acknowledging the learning disparities that existed between Aboriginal students and their non-Aboriginal counterparts and the potential role of parents and the wider community in ameliorating these disparities, one Canadian urban school district established a tripartite formal partnership with (a) an organization representing seven rural First Nations reservations surrounding the city (while most of these reservations have on-reserve schools, many of their youth attend school off-reserve) and (b) an organization representing urban Aboriginal peoples. This partnership, called the Wicewtoak Partnership (a Cree phrase meaning “they have a friendship or partnership”), was established in response to the moral imperative to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students through a formalized family-community-school partnership.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which formalization of the family-community-school partnership through the Wicewtoak Partnership influenced (positively or otherwise) educational outcomes for Aboriginal students in the local school district.
Conceptual Framework

This study uses a theoretical framework borrowed from two research traditions: school effectiveness literature and family-community-school partnerships research. Researchers have identified common characteristics of schools and school districts that are unusually successful in facilitating high achievement gains for disadvantaged students. For example, Edmonds, in his landmark 1979 school effectiveness study, identified what he called the five-factor model of school effectiveness. It included strong leadership, emphasis on basic skills achievement, safe and orderly climate, high expectations of pupils’ achievement, and frequent evaluation of pupils’ progress.

In this research, Edmonds (1979) also opened the debate about both the potential impact of parental involvement and the nature of that involvement in effective schools. He posited that school-initiated parental involvement tended not to significantly affect student achievement, whereas parent-initiated involvement tended to be present in instructionally effective schools.

Three decades of research related to the nature and processes of parental involvement in schools have put a much finer point on Edmonds’s findings. Of particular importance in this regard is the work of Epstein and her colleagues. Through their extensive research with the National Network of Partnership Schools, they identified six types of parent and community involvement in schools that lead to improved student achievement. The six types of parental involvement were delineated by Epstein (2007, 19–20) as follows:

1. **Parenting.** Activities focused on strengthening parents’ skill in relating to their children, such as parenting workshops and seminars about how they can engage their children in age-appropriate conversations about learning.

2. **Communicating.** Activities that establish clear lines of communication between the school and parents, such as newsletters, student-led three-way conferences, and seminars about state/provincial achievement standards or graduation requirements.

3. **Volunteering.** Activities that promote both parental engagement and enhanced efficacy of parents and other community stakeholders volunteering in various capacities, such as (a) mentoring, tutoring, or coaching, (b) assisting in organizing career fairs and other special activities, and (c) liaising with local organizations.

4. **Learning at home.** Activities that enhance the learning relationship between parents and children, such as interactive parent-child homework opportunities designed by teachers to align with curricula and guidelines for parents about how to help children who require additional support.
to be successful with local and state/provincial standards.

5. **Decision making.** Activities that invite and honor families’ and community stakeholders’ input into school and district mission and vision statements and engage them in developing school-learning improvement plans.

6. **Collaborating with the community.** Activities that draw upon the resources of community organizations (e.g., service clubs, churches, seniors’ centers, chambers of commerce) to strengthen school programs and enhance student success.

Extrapolating from both Edmonds’s and Epstein’s research, then, it could be said that schools should foster a climate in which parents feel comfortable to initiate involvement in their children’s education and provide them with avenues to do so. However, while there appears to be little debate about the value and importance of parental involvement in schools, it cannot be overlooked that the nature of that involvement is also important. Sheldon and Epstein (2004) have argued: “Schools must advance beyond a belief that any parent involvement activity will produce important results. We found that rather than use of an activity, the reported quality of implementation was strongly and consistently associated with changes in levels of student . . . achievement” (204).

Significant positive effects have been consistently found when schools and districts foster Epstein’s six types of involvement effectively. Three broad areas of findings are of particular importance to this study. First, student achievement—particularly in mathematics—has improved (e.g., Sheldon and Epstein 2004; Sheldon et al. 2010). Second, parent and student social capital and perceptions of the school and schooling have improved, especially in communities with high representation of low-income and minority families (e.g., Lee and Bowen 2006). Third, student attendance has improved, which is a major challenge in schools located in urban settings with high family-mobility rates (e.g., Epstein and Sheldon 2002).

While the Wicehtowak Partnership was not deliberately founded upon either the correlates and processes of school effectiveness or the six types of parental involvement, there are many similarities between these research traditions and the purpose for which the Wicehtowak Partnership was created. For example, the Wicehtowak Partnership’s setting was very similar to the settings in which most of the effective schools research has been conducted. For both, the schools were in settings marked by high-minority populations and a high incidence of poverty (a detailed description of the research setting is provided later in this article). Furthermore, both the school effectiveness and the parental involvement literature identified schools that were highly effective in improving educational outcomes for students in poor neighborhoods; the stated intent of the Wicehtowak Partnership was to improve school learning success for Aboriginal children, many of whose families live at or below the poverty line.
Given these similarities, a composite of the bodies of research on effective schools and parental involvement provided a foundation for the conceptual framework of this project. Notwithstanding the similarities in research settings, there was an important distinction, namely, the definition of success in the typical school effectiveness and parental involvement research tended to be relatively narrow, that is, students’ performance on state-administered or other standardized tests and, perhaps, high school graduation. While these benchmarks are critically important for all children, since the objective of this study was to examine the extent to which the Wichehtowak Partnership influenced Aboriginal students’ learning, it was necessary to view this picture of success through the unique epistemological lenses held by Aboriginal peoples.

Success Defined

Formal education has long been viewed through the looking glass of the factory or systems engineering model. Seen through this lens, learning becomes a simple matter of inputs and outputs, and, in a way, children become “products” of the system. However, as pointed out by Villegas and Prieto (2006), “any set of measures will never be meaningful or complete [for North American Aboriginal peoples] unless . . . parents, students, leaders, and community members have a role in defining these measures and in working to support student success” (5). In other words, when defining success for North American Aboriginal peoples, these common measures, while important, do not paint a complete picture of success. Instead, learning success and success in life are usually conceptualized far more holistically. The Canadian Council on Learning (2007) pointed out that, for Canada’s First Nations peoples, “the purpose of learning is to develop the skills, knowledge, values and wisdom needed to honour and protect the natural world and ensure the long-term sustainability of life” (18). Similarly, Villegas and Prieto (2006) observed that, for Alaskan Native peoples, a successful student is “one who can set and achieve goals because he knows his own worth and value, understands his responsibility to his community, and is prepared to pursue whatever life part he chooses . . . a student who is confident and secure in who he is will be able to succeed in any life challenge” (4).

Brendtro et al. (2002) observed that North American Aboriginal peoples naturally adopt a philosophic stance that sees the “central purpose of life [as] the education and empowerment of children” (44). Empowerment, in their view, was focused on fostering in all children a sense of self-worth through an epistemological frame based on the traditional Medicine Wheel. Central to the Medicine Wheel frame is the concept of balance among four quadrants. “The number four has sacred meaning to Native people (sic) who see the
person as standing in a circle surrounded by the four directions” (Brendtro et al. 2002, 45). Through this symbol, many different concepts can be represented. For example, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples from across Canada, through an extensive consultation process facilitated by the Canadian Council on Learning (2007), each identified a holistic learning model consisting of four components.

For First Nations peoples, the learning model is based on a metaphor of a living tree with (a) sources of knowledge: roots, (b) individuals’ lifelong learning cycle: growth rings, (c) individuals’ personal development: branches, and, (d) community well-being: leaves. Métis peoples also used a tree metaphor to describe successful learning. For them, the four main components of learning are (a) the determinants of community well-being: roots, (b) the stages of lifelong learning: growth and learning rings, (c) the sources of knowledge and knowing: branches, and (d) the domains of learning: leaves. Inuit peoples used the metaphor of the traditional Inuit game of the blanket toss to describe successful learning. In this case, the four main components are (a) the determinants of community well-being, (b) Inuit values and beliefs: the 38 community members, (c) the sources and domains of knowledge: the learning blanket, and (d) one’s journey of lifelong learning: the pathway.

Whether one is Aboriginal or not, culture is the lens through which all knowledge is viewed and is the foundation for all learning. However, for Aboriginal peoples, culture defines not only knowledge but also the means by which that knowledge is acquired. For example, Battiste (2002) pointed out that, for many Aboriginal communities, cultural norms dictate that learners learn by doing or seeing, usually without asking questions. Learning is guided by culture as it is lived through experience. In other words, according to Wilson and Napoleon (1998), a key indicator of success in Aboriginal education is that the educational system reflects a strong understanding of the role of culture in defining meaning and building a strong sense of self. Furthermore, “particularly for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit learners, the learning palette is incomplete [and the whole child’s learning needs are not fully addressed] without some consideration of the importance of experiential learning via interaction with elders, other members of the community, and the land” (Tunison 2007, 5).

The epistemological assertion that preservation, revitalization, and use of traditional languages among all Aboriginal learners is closely linked to successful learning (Kipp 1999; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000) and well-being (Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs 2006) has been widely documented. Paulsen (2003) has suggested that language is important because language is not restricted to the written word. Language also includes the “intergenerational [oral] teachings” (23) that are so vital to indigenous epistemological and ontological perspectives.
Questions That Remain

We are left with the definitional question of success. Specifically, should academic achievement trump the broader sociocultural objectives of culturally responsive programming? Or is learning about one’s culture and history so important that formal educational institutions simply must identify and implement effective means to facilitate students’ efficacy in both areas? Perhaps this is simply a “chicken or egg” conundrum in which it is not possible to bifurcate the importance of culture and epistemology from academic achievement. Certainly, “any discussion of effective schools [and learning] . . . must be framed by a dialogue about the broader goals and definitions of student success, as well as the roles and responsibilities of both schools and communities” (Villegas and Prieto 2006, 4).

Finally, Elder Danny Musqua, in his opening address at the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre’s first national conference (2007), observed that our spirits are put in the physical plane by the Creator to learn. Learning is what it means to be a human being, and successful learning is simply following the path to achieving and, perhaps, discerning what the Creator intends for us. Put another way, the learning is less about the student’s relationship with the teacher and more about the student’s relationship with the learning itself.

Setting

This study was conducted between April and June 2009 in Pleasant View, a mid-sized Canadian city with a population of about 225,000. At the time of the study, the Pleasant View Public School District (PVS) served approximately 22,000 students from prekindergarten to grade 12, in 43 grades K–8 schools and 10 grades 9–12 secondary schools. At that time, approximately 17% of PVS’s total population was Aboriginal. Furthermore, just over one-half of PVS’s Aboriginal student population was concentrated in 12 inner-city schools (10 grades K–8 schools and two grades 9–12 schools) located in neighborhoods characterized by high poverty rates, highly mobile families, and low levels of adult literacy and educational attainment.

There were also seven First Nations reservations surrounding the city. These reservations were autonomous and situated in rural areas. Each of these reservations had its own chief, council, and governance structure; however, they also had a formal alliance called the Willow Creek Tribal Council that allowed for economies of scale in areas such as education and health service delivery. In addition, the often spoke on behalf of the member First Nations in certain political arenas, especially in urban contexts.

Each First Nation also had its own band-operated school, most of which
offered educational services for children in kindergarten to grade 8 or grade 9. Thus, students from these reservations were required to attend off-reservation schools for their secondary school education. Many of these rural-based students attended PVS high schools. Furthermore, many First Nations families, while members of these reserves, chose to reside off-reserve in the urban setting served by PVS. Thus, their children attended PVS’s prekindergarten to grade 12 schools.

There was also a significant population of Aboriginal people living in Pleasant View, who, for a variety of reasons, were not directly connected to a reservation. An organization called Urban Aboriginal Congress had formed to represent these people. The children from many of these families also attended PVS’s schools.

Student Academic Achievement

In 2002, at the time the Wicchtowak Partnership was formed, the provincial government did not administer a province-wide achievement test nor did it disaggregate other student achievement statistics (e.g., final grades) publicly. In the intervening years between the formation of the Wicchtowak Partnership and the time of study, the ministry instituted a provincial student assessment program in mathematics, reading, and writing. School districts began receiving disaggregated data for the provincial student assessments in 2009, and PVS made those results public. However, the test protocols used in any given year at any given grade were unique to that round of assessment and have been distributed publicly by the ministry for use as teaching materials. Consequently, the reliability and validity of any longitudinal study are problematic both for the total population and for Aboriginal students. While the statistics from these assessments may be useful at the district level as snapshots of student performance in any given year, they cannot be used as indicators of improvement or decline over time. Consequently, they were not used in this article.

Graduation Rates

At the time the Wicchtowak Partnership was formed, the government did provide disaggregated statistics for graduation rates at the provincial level, perhaps as a proxy measure for other student academic success factors (e.g., if students were completing the requirements for graduation, they must be achieving at least passing grades in their courses). In any case, provincial graduation rates were measured by following individual students from the time they entered grade 10 until they either completed the requirements for grad-
uation or dropped out of school. There are two potential indicators for success when graduation rates are measured in this way: (a) the percentage of grade 10 students who graduate within the traditional 3 years or less and (b) the percentage of students who graduate eventually (the ministry follows students for up to 8 years after they begin grade 12). Please note the following limitations in these statistics. First, the statistics for “all” students include results for Aboriginal students, making the comparisons between the two groups artificially narrow. Second, the statistics reported for Aboriginal students are based on self-declaration; the province does not require Aboriginal students to identify themselves as Aboriginal. This may affect the statistics, considering that some highly successful or unsuccessful Aboriginal students may not be included in the Aboriginal student statistics.

For Aboriginal students, the statistics have been substantially lower than for the general population of students in both indicators for the 7 years for which complete data are available (see table 1). For example, provincial education reports for the 1996–97 grade 10 cohort showed that 72% of the total provincial population graduated from grade 12 within 3 years (by the end of the 1998–99 school year) and 81% completed grade 12 eventually. In contrast, 26.5% of the Aboriginal population completed grade 12 within 3 years of entering grade 10, and 55.7% of Aboriginal students completed grade 12 eventually. Longitudinally, figures fluctuated from one cohort to the next, but for the most part they were fairly consistent.

If we extend the indicator measuring the percentage of students who graduated within 3 years of entering grade 10 through the time at which this study was conducted into the present, we see that the percentage of the total population completing high school remains largely unchanged. We do, however, see an improvement in the statistics for Aboriginal students. Of the 1996–97 grade 10 Aboriginal cohort, 26% graduated within 3 years, whereas 32.5% of the 2007–8 grade 10 cohort did so.

Graduation rates for PVS were made public only for the entire student population. At the time of this study, disaggregation of student learning outcomes was a relatively new practice in the province. The ministry provided districts with disaggregated statistics for a limited range of educational indicators, and districts were not required to disclose all of them publicly. School district-level graduation rate statistics were not made public, so it was not possible to review them directly. However, district staff disclosed anecdotally that Aboriginal students’ graduation rates were roughly one-quarter completing grade 12 “on time” (within 3 years of beginning grade 10) and about one-half completing grade 12 eventually, but that both percentages—and particularly those of who graduate “on time”—were improving slowly.

Ostensibly, then, the Wicchtowak Partnership was formed largely as a response to the opportunities and challenges implied by the statistics on educational
### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of Entry to Grade 10</th>
<th>Graduate Within 3 Years (%)</th>
<th>Graduate Eventually* (%)</th>
<th>Still Enrolled† (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Aboriginal</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996–97</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>81.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997–98</td>
<td>73.6</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>82.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998–99</td>
<td>73.9</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>82.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999–2000</td>
<td>74.0</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>82.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000–2001</td>
<td>73.1</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>82.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001–2</td>
<td>73.2</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>81.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002–3</td>
<td>73.9</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>82.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003–4</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004–5</td>
<td>75.6</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005–6</td>
<td>73.8</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006–7</td>
<td>74.5</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007–8</td>
<td>74.1</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.**—The Ministry of Education tracks individual students for at least 8 years after they enter grade 10 until they either graduate or drop out of school. Complete data are available for the 1996–97 to 2002–3 grade 10 cohorts inclusive. Data for more recent grade 10 cohorts are provided here to illustrate trends in graduation rates within 3 years of entering grade 10 into the present. Students are considered to be in grade 10 in the year that they complete at least two grade 10 courses. At this point, they are identified directly with the school/district at which those credits are completed and are counted as having graduated from that school/district regardless of the school at which they are attending when they actually complete the requirements for graduation. For example, if a student identified with a PVS grade 10 cohort but completes the requirements for grade 12 after having moved to another school district’s jurisdiction, he or she is still considered to have graduated from PVS. The converse would also be true.

* These students have completed grade 12 sometime between 4 and 8 years after entering grade 10.

† These students are still enrolled in a provincial school after 8 years of entering grade 10.

outcomes of Aboriginal students who lived both on and off the reservations and attended PVS schools. As it became clear that there was a willingness among the community and the school district to look for ways to collaborate in support of Aboriginal students, the Ministry of Education agreed to provide funds to create a team to implement specific initiatives to support Aboriginal student learning and to strengthen further the newly formed Wicchtowak Partnership (PVS also provided funding for this initiative). Further details of the structure and formation of the Wicchtowak Partnership emerged from interviews and are
provided in the results section of this article. The Wicehtowak Partnership signatories believed that formalizing the family-community-school partnership would have a positive impact on student achievement. This study was conducted to test that belief.

Method

Given the purpose of this study and the setting in which it took place, it was framed as an intrinsic case study. Stake (2005) pointed out that the intrinsic case study is appropriate “if the study is undertaken because, first and last, [the researcher] wants better understanding of this particular case . . . so that the stories of those ‘living the case’ will be teased out” (445).

In considering the methods for data collection and analysis that would best illuminate this case, Yin (2006) advised that “good case studies benefit from having multiple sources of evidence . . . [because] the main idea [in collecting case study data] is to ‘triangulate’ or establish converging lines of evidence to make [one’s] findings as robust as possible” (115). Yin further suggested that case studies often include both qualitative and quantitative evidence.

Quantitative data for this study were gathered through a survey conducted with teachers and administrators from 11 schools from both PVS and schools that had experienced direct support in the form of workshops, traditional ceremonies, and other cultural teachings from Wicehtowak Partnership consultants. The entire teaching staff of each school was invited to complete the survey. A total of 234 surveys were distributed and 107 surveys were returned, for a response rate of 46%.

The survey consisted of 12 defined-response statements that asked respondents to rate their level of agreement with each item according to a four-point Likert-type scale (i.e., strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree); respondents were also given the option of responding with “don’t know.” The statements were developed in collaboration with Wicehtowak Partnership staff (who also had input on the research questions) and focused on assessing the extent to which their efforts in those schools had led to greater understanding of Aboriginal culture and traditions, which they hoped would lead to improved student learning outcomes and greater support of the cultural, social, and emotional needs of all students in those schools and of Aboriginal students in particular.

In addition, each survey item provided respondents with an opportunity to elaborate, in writing, on their ratings for each question. Finally, respondents were invited to offer further observations or comments about survey items or topics not necessarily covered but which they thought were important to share.

Qualitative data were garnered from numerous sources, including responses
to open-ended questions on the teacher survey, semi-structured personal interviews with five adults (two teachers, one in-school administrator, and two PVS senior administrators who had direct responsibility for the Wicehtowak Partnership), group interviews with students at three schools, review of school-district documentation on the progress of the Wicehtowak Partnership, and the perceptions of the parents of students in the Cree Language and Culture Program.

The adults were selected purposively. The senior administrators had been instrumental in conducting and facilitating the community consultations that led to the formation of the Wicehtowak Partnership. They also retained direct responsibility for overseeing and cultivating the ongoing activities of the partnership. The principal was from one of the 11 schools that had accessed the instructional and cultural supports offered by Wicehtowak Partnership consultants and was the sole volunteer to participate (the research was undertaken in the midst of a student reporting period, and the other principals indicated that they did not have time in their schedules to participate).

The district policy with respect to research at schools was a two-step process: first, district administrators reviewed and approved research applications; then, principals were ultimately responsible for authorizing the research in their individual schools. A request at the 11 schools whose staff participated in the survey was made for permission to conduct interviews with students. Three principals agreed to allow student interviews. In two of these schools, the principal and the researcher invited students in grades 7 and 8 to participate in a group interview during class one day (seven students and nine students participated at each school, respectively). In the third school, the principal and I (the researcher) walked through the school hallways during a mid-morning break and selected the first 10 students from grades 7 and 8 we met to participate in the group interview.

I myself independently and thematically analyzed all of the qualitative data. The senior administrators who participated in this research also reviewed the data for information that would inform their work, and their perceptions of the data and their observations largely agreed with mine. It must be acknowledged that involving research participants in the theming process introduced some potential limitations in terms of bias. However, it seemed appropriate to engage them in collaborative data analysis, since the Wicehtowak Partnership was founded on community collaboration for the improvement of student learning. Descriptive statistics were derived using SPSS.

Evidence regarding student achievement was focused on documentation already made public by the school district as well as anecdotal observations by PVS staff; this is an acknowledged limitation to the study. Nonetheless, student learning data—both direct and anecdotal—are presented as an amalgam of the data sources available for this study. In some cases, par-
specific pieces of evidence supported observations regarding both direct and indirect impact on student learning. In these cases, those data are referenced in both sections.

Findings and Discussion

The findings from this study are presented in two sections. First examined are the findings related to the actual process of formalizing the family-community-school partnership at the heart of this research. While not specifically related to the central purpose of the present study, these findings are reported here because they speak to the objectives the signatories to the Wicehtowak Partnership had in establishing the partnership. In addition, these data provide context for the findings directly related this study’s central purpose.

The remaining section reports findings framed according to our research question: To what extent did the formalization of the family-community-school partnership through the Wicehtowak Partnership influence (positively or otherwise) educational outcomes for Aboriginal students in the local school district? At the start of these two sections, a brief review of literature related to that section is provided.

Formalizing the Family-Community-School Partnership

According to school district documentation, the Wicehtowak Partnership was the result of an evolutionary process that began with the formation of a strategic alliance between Pleasant View School District and Buffalo Trail Cree Nation (one of the First Nations reservations in close proximity to Pleasant View). Recognizing the academic achievement gaps between Aboriginal students and their non-Aboriginal peers and that nearly all children from the reservation attended grades 7–12 schools off-reserve in PVS, both entities felt compelled to work together to support the students from the reservation as they transitioned from their rural on-reserve school to the urban context of PVS schools. (Note: K–6 schooling was provided on-reserve; students were free to attend grades 7–12 in PVS or other area school districts.) To formalize this alliance, the Buffalo Trail Cree Nation and PVS enacted a memorandum of understanding that framed the terms of this alliance.

Honoring the critical role of families and communities (both on- and off-reserve) in children’s education, the Buffalo Trail Cree Nation and PVS conducted a broad-based community consultation process forum to guide the formation and direction of the alliance. A series of town-hall meetings were held with parents and caregivers, community members, elders, and officials...
from both PVS and the Buffalo Trail Cree Nation. A number of recommendations emerged from these meetings, including the need to create a steering committee that allowed for ongoing and consistent communication, meaningful partnerships with First Nations’ organizations, curriculum materials that addressed First Nations’ epistemologies and styles of learning, more emphasis on students’ career planning and transition to work or to postsecondary institutions, and a tracking system for First Nations students who were mobile.

In response to these recommendations, another memorandum of understanding was enacted 1 year later, in 2003, between PVS and the Buffalo Trail Cree Nation (one of the seven First Nations in the Willow Creek Tribal Council) to create an entity that was referred to at the time simply as “The Partnership.” The signatories to this memorandum of understanding acknowledged that the core purpose of the partnership was to promote, strengthen, and facilitate First Nations students’ educational outcomes in schools and communities both on-reservation and off-reservation.

A renewed memorandum of understanding was signed in 2006, which added to the partnership the Metropolitan Métis Assembly, a local organization representing urban Aboriginal peoples. Local elders gave the partnership the name of Wicehtowak Partnership to honor this enhanced alliance.

According to one of the senior administrators, during its existence, the Wicehtowak Partnership has collaborated to do the following:

1. Develop guiding principles reflecting the spirit of equality and encouraging cooperation and loyalty to one another including:
   - Learning opportunities and contexts consistent with the spirit and intent of the treaties;
   - Life-long learning opportunities within holistic teaching and learning environments that are spiritually, emotionally, academically, and physically safe, secure, and positive;
   - Communication that is open, honest, timely, and effective; and
   - Culture of mutual respect that is supportive, positive, and affirming and that values the unique contribution each person can make.

2. Declare several goals and action plans including:
   - Developing a workforce that is representative of the cultural demographics in Pleasant View and the area;
   - Developing and launching a series of culturally appropriate curriculum resources and anti-racism training sessions for all grades;
   - Instituting language and culture programs and activities (e.g., sweat lodge ceremonies, smudging ceremonies, and feast and round dances);
   - Developing and implementing comprehensive policies ensuring the eradication of racism in all Wicehtowak Partnership schools; and

578 American Journal of Education
• Developing and maintaining a respectful and equitable co-governance structures and process for the operation of the Wicehtowak Partnership.

While PVS already employed a small Aboriginal Educational Resource Team, consisting of an administrator and an instructional consultant with responsibility to enhance Aboriginal education, the team was expanded following the community engagement process. Supported, in part, by funding supplied by the provincial Ministry of Education, the signatories to the Wicehtowak Partnership hired two additional personnel: (a) a community-based “traditional knowledge keeper” to inform ongoing Wicehtowak Partnership activities by, for instance, leading cultural ceremonies and educating and engaging the community in the traditions and practices of those ceremonies, and (b) a “student-success coach,” with responsibilities ranging from leading in-services for school staff to working directly with students. Schools were also provided with access to elders and other community-based cultural experts to enhance staff knowledge of Aboriginal epistemologies and to support instruction.

To What Extent Did the Wicehtowak Partnership Influence Educational Outcomes for Aboriginal Students?

As stated earlier, the Wicehtowak Partnership was formed, in large part, on the premise that student achievement would improve if the contextual aspects of the school environment were addressed. Data presented in the following sections are organized according to the three key processes of highly effective schools identified in the conceptual framework: pervasive focus on learning, producing a positive culture, and involving parents (and the community) in positive ways.

Pervasive focus on learning.—Ordinarily, school effectiveness and improvement research literature conducts analysis at the school level and considers primarily the principal, the vice principal, and the teachers (Tunison et al. 2006). However, in recent years, there has been a movement to also consider the district level as important to the development of highly effective schools. While the nature and initiatives of the Wicehtowak Partnership appeared to make it well suited to play a more centralized role in promoting a strong focus on learning, data revealed considerable variability from one school to the next regarding its success in doing so. The Wicehtowak Partnership was active in several arenas that focused on learning. These included promoting the inclusion of Aboriginal epistemologies into instruction, developing and facilitating staff development initiatives, and encouraging high expectations for student achievement.
Aboriginal epistemologies.—One of the clear messages that emerged from the community consultation process was the importance to families, first, that Aboriginal epistemologies be embedded explicitly into instruction, and, second, that Aboriginal languages and culture be emphasized and cultivated. Several survey questions spoke directly to these issues. The Wicehtowak Partnership invested significant energy and resources in the development of curricular materials to support teachers’ incorporation of Aboriginal epistemologies into their instruction. A First Nations cultural resource and curriculum specialist was hired to develop these resources and vet them through elders, representatives from the Willow Creek Tribal Council, the Aboriginal Education Resource Team, and the Wicehtowak Partnership cultural resource committee to ensure that they reflected accurately the epistemologies held by tribes.

These materials, referred to as Harmony Cultural Resource Binders (HCRB), were launched in stages. The resources for the primary grades (K–3) were made available in October 2004, middle-years resources (grades 4–8) were launched in October 2005, and secondary resources (grades 9–12) were launched over several months between January and June of 2006. Throughout this period, Wicehtowak Partnership personnel and other community experts provided numerous in-service sessions for teachers and administrators to enhance their capacity to implement the HCRB materials. In addition, the Wicehtowak Partnership sponsored regular cultural ceremonies for staff, families, and community members (e.g., pow wows, sweat lodge and smudging ceremonies, feasts and round dances) to honor local traditions and to provide opportunities for families to share their cultural heritage with both school staff and non-Aboriginal community members.

While HCRB materials were indeed developed and distributed to each school, there was not widespread awareness or use of them. For example, when asked about the extent to which they were satisfied with Wicehtowak Partnership efforts to produce and support teacher resource materials related to Aboriginal peoples, 61% (65 of the 107 survey respondents) expressed some level of agreement (either agree or strongly agree); only one person indicated disagreement, while 38% (41 respondents) indicated that they did not know. Open-ended responses tended to follow two main themes: recognition of the value and potential of the resources and lack of awareness of the existence of the resources. The following comment from one survey respondent illustrated these two parallel themes: “Teachers appreciate high-quality classroom materials . . . [but] it is important to be aware of the resources and how to use them.”

When asked whether they made regular use of the Wicehtowak Partnership resources to support the inclusion of Aboriginal content and perspectives in their classrooms, 50% agreed or strongly agreed, 30% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 20% did not know. Two themes emerged from the open-ended
comments related to this statement. First, while a few respondents valued the resources a great deal and used them regularly in their classrooms (e.g., the respondent who exclaimed, “The HCRBs are a great resource!”), most respondents were either unaware of or had made limited use of the resources. For example, one respondent opined: “The HCRBs were introduced, but [they are] not widely used. . . . More information [and direction] is needed for wider usage.” Another respondent said: “I don’t know what is available [i.e., the teaching resources/HCRBs]. . . . [They] have never been shown to me. I have no idea how to access [them].”

Data from group interviews also showed that the HCRBs were not in wide use. When students were asked about the frequency of learning activities that incorporated Aboriginal content and ways of knowing (i.e., activities that would be typical if the resources were used in class), students were usually unable to cite a specific example of this type of inclusion. Furthermore, those students who were able to identify examples of the inclusion of Aboriginal content and epistemologies typically pointed to activities that reflected a surface-level use of HCRB materials, for example, to a story or poem that had been studied in English language arts class or to a conversation that had taken place in science.

Survey respondents were also asked whether the Wicehtowak Partnership had successfully promoted the inclusion of Aboriginal languages in PVS schools. As with the other questions related to this theme, respondents were generally positive. In this case, 57% expressed some level of agreement, 6% indicated disagreement, and 37% did not know. At the time of the study, PVS had only recently begun a grades K–3 Cree language and culture immersion program in one school.

Staff development.—A major focus of the Wicehtowak Partnership had been to promote use of the HCRBs and to provide staff development both to enhance staff knowledge of Aboriginal epistemologies and to incorporate those worldviews into instruction. Nevertheless, despite the numerous ceremonies and in-services offered by the Wicehtowak Partnership, there was a widespread lack of awareness and understanding among survey respondents of the professional development activities provided by the Wicehtowak Partnership.

When asked whether the Wicehtowak Partnership had provided satisfactory opportunities to enhance staff knowledge of Aboriginal cultures, 54% of respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed, while 12% disagreed or strongly disagreed and 33% indicated that they did not know. Open-ended responses to this item revealed a strong appetite among respondents for additional professional development opportunities. Along similar lines, 50% expressed some level of agreement, 12% indicated disagreement, and 38% did not know whether they were satisfied with the number of professional development opportunities regarding the inclusion of Aboriginal epistemologies.
into instruction. Several open-ended comments expressed appreciation for the work of PVS’s Aboriginal Education Resource Team in providing leadership in this area. Some respondents indicated that while they were aware of the professional development opportunities and had heard positive comments from colleagues, they had chosen not to take advantage of them. One respondent observed: “I have not had the opportunity to work with the Wicehtowak Partnership, [although] I have [heard about] some staff development activities that I am assuming is part of this Partnership.” Others indicated that the level of professional development support had been a good start but more was required. According to another respondent, “I am not sure what [professional development] programs are actually promoted by the Wicehtowak Partnership, but the programs that have been initiated are a great start.”

High expectations.—The survey did not address the issue of expectations directly. Anecdotally, the adults indicated that they and other PVS staff had high expectations for all students. One of the senior administrators stated that some of the schools had done considerable work in surfacing beliefs about student learning capacity and making commitments to find multiple ways to support all students in their learning, with a particular emphasis on Aboriginal students. She acknowledged, however, that there was considerable room for improvement in this regard, both in those schools that had begun this work and in those that had yet to embrace it.

Given the limited body of student achievement data available for this study, there was no direct evidence of high expectations for student learning or of improved achievement. Over the time of the Wicehtowak Partnership’s efforts, graduation rates for PVS’s total student population moderately improved, and there was anecdotal evidence that Aboriginal students’ graduation rates had likewise improved mildly. However, given the lack of independent evidence, it was difficult to conclude whether high expectations for all students were truly held by teachers and administrators.

Promoting a Positive Culture

A supportive and positive atmosphere is critical for ensuring high levels of student achievement (e.g., Epstein 2007; Knoff 2009; Reynolds and Teddlie 2000; Sheldon et al. 2010). Several survey items probed respondents’ opinions regarding this important Wicehtowak Partnership objective. These items followed three themes, which will shape the discussion below: (1) supporting student transitions, (2) promoting ceremonial practices, and (3) promoting traditional languages and epistemologies.

Supporting student transitions.—Recognizing that the families of some Aboriginal students move regularly, the Wicehtowak Partnership has advocated for
a system that streamlines the process of transferring student records as students move from one school to another, particularly when transitioning back and forth from rural to urban locations. In response to this challenge, the Wicchtowak Partnership sponsored a series of meetings that brought together representatives from Willow Creek Tribal Council, all local reservations, staff from PVS, and the provincial Ministry of Education to discuss the ways in which student information could be shared more effectively. Survey responses suggested that this objective had not yet been achieved fully. When respondents were asked to indicate whether the Wicchtowak Partnership had made satisfactory progress in finding ways to support student transitions, 70% indicated that they did not know, while 26% expressed some level of agreement and 5% disagreed. In the open-ended responses, one respondent observed that “transfer of information is still slow and sometimes never happens.” Another stated that “support of student transitions [between urban and rural] might be happening [in some schools] but we haven’t seen this type of support in our school.” Yet another acknowledged that while there had been recent improvements with respect to the transfer of student information between the rural reservation schools and PVS’s schools, “most students still arrive in schools without documentation.”

Creating a respectful environment.—In a sense, all the objectives identified by the Wicchtowak Partnership speak to this goal. Theoretically, high-quality cultural programming should lead to greater levels of understanding, mutual respect, and trust. Aside from the numerous cultural activities sponsored by the Wicchtowak Partnership, this aspect of its activities focused on anti-racism training for staff members and students and on implementing the materials in the HCRBs. In addition, many schools actively encouraged parents and caregivers to engage in their children’s learning and in the culture of the school. Schools in neighborhoods with high Aboriginal populations and high poverty rates hired community-school coordinators to foster parent and community involvement. Community-school coordinators visited students’ homes, conducted community engagement forums, and worked with students directly to monitor and support their learning. Schools also held events such as “book and a bagel,” community talking circles, and family literacy nights to encourage families and community members to visit the school and support student learning.

Respondents were asked whether Wicchtowak Partnership initiatives helped schools develop respectful atmospheres free of racism. Approximately 50% of respondents expressed either agreement or strong agreement with this statement, 38% did not know, and 4% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Similarly, when asked whether they felt that the Wicchtowak Partnership had promoted activities and programs aimed at enhancing acceptance and mutual respect, 54% of respondents agreed, 38% did not know, and 4% disagreed. The term
“cultural responsiveness” was used by one survey respondent to describe the supportive and positive atmosphere being cultivated in the school. While not offering further clarification on the meaning of the term, this respondent stated: “Overall, I definitely think we are moving in the right direction with cultural responsiveness, as we move from awareness to ‘action.’” Also reflecting positive opinions, many of the interviewed students spoke highly of the efforts made by their teachers to create a positive and welcoming atmosphere, with several teachers being mentioned specifically by name. Other students pointed to specific programs at their schools, such as cultural events, sporting activities, and field trips, that made them feel welcome and motivated to come to school.

Ceremonial and traditional practices.—While the HRCBs provided a wealth of knowledge about Aboriginal content and perspectives, the Wicehtowak Partnership also provided schools with access to a “traditional knowledge keeper,” whose twofold role was, first, to guide schools in their efforts to incorporate ceremony and traditional practices into their programs and, second, to conduct many of the ceremonies. In addition, the Aboriginal Education Resource Team actively supported staff development and student learning however possible, for example, by teaching traditional beading, hosting seasonal sweat lodges, and facilitating pow wows and round dances.

Again, there was considerable variation from one school to the next in survey respondents’ awareness of the traditional knowledge keeper’s and the Aboriginal Education Resource Team’s roles and the opportunities to incorporate ceremony into their school programs. Just under half of respondents (48%) agreed or strongly agreed that the Wicehtowak Partnership had assisted schools in securing elders and traditional knowledge keepers to support school programs and activities, just under 10% disagreed, and 41% did not know. Open-ended responses expressed appreciation for the traditional knowledge keeper and the members of the Aboriginal Education Resource Team for their depth of knowledge, guidance, and willingness to provide assistance.

Involving Parents and Families

As was pointed out earlier, one of the foundational objectives of the Wicehtowak Partnership was to foster a co-governance model including individuals and representatives from the organizations who were the largest stakeholders in fostering the success of Aboriginal students. Representatives from the Willow Creek Tribal Council, PVS, and the provincial Ministry of Education, as well as elders, parents, and others, held a series of community consultation meetings to explore the ways in which Aboriginal students could be better supported in formal educational settings. These meetings led to the formation of the Wicehtowak Partnership. Several survey questions inquired about the extent
to which the Wicchtowak Partnership continued to be successful in fostering and utilizing the co-governance structure as programs and initiatives were developed and implemented. When asked whether the Wicchtowak Partnership had assisted schools in creating welcoming environments for parents and caregivers, approximately one-half of respondents expressed some level of agreement, 7% disagreed, and 42% were unsure. Similarly, the co-governance model recognized the pivotal role played by elders and traditional knowledge keepers in supporting children’s learning.

One challenge encountered in this study was determining the extent to which families and community members actually engaged in their partnership roles with the schools. Certainly the Wicchtowak Partnership itself formalized the school-community partnership and raised the profile of the potential of that partnership. However, the partnership took place largely at the macro level between the school district and the two organizations representing Aboriginal peoples. While this was important, we also wanted to assess the effects on the micro-level partnerships between the individual schools and their communities.

At the time of the study, the provincial Ministry of Education had recently legislated that all schools create school-community councils. These councils—made up of school staff, parents/caregivers, community members, and also, ideally, students—were to focus on the student learning agenda at the school and to collaborate in developing and monitoring schools’ annual improvement plans. The legislation prohibited the councils from engaging in roles such as fund-raising, which were more common to such organizations. Given the low level of trust between Aboriginal families and schools, documented by Birchard (2006) and others, it seemed reasonable to posit that it would be difficult for inner-city schools serving large Aboriginal populations to recruit parents and community members for these councils. The principals who were interviewed indicated that, while it was challenging to recruit parents/caregivers for membership on these councils, participation was gradually improving. They attributed this improvement, at least in part, to the community-building, culturally affirming activities conducted by the Wicchtowak Partnership, such as pow wows, round dances, and feasts.

Reflections

To reflect on this study, I return to the primary research question: To what extent has the formalization of the family-community-school partnership through the formation of the Wicchtowak Partnership influenced (positively or otherwise) Aboriginal student achievement? Results of this study suggest that, since the inception of the Wicchtowak Partnership, some of the characteristics of effective and improving schools have been enhanced in the Pleasant View...
Public School District, particularly the fostering of positive and supportive environments within individual schools, the school district, and the community at large. The Wicehtowak Partnership signatories and their representatives developed instructional resources aimed at this purpose.

Evidence also suggests that the Wicehtowak Partnership have made progress in creating conditions for the effective incorporation of Aboriginal epistemologies into classrooms by creating and promoting instructional materials, such as the Harmony Cultural Resource Binders. Through workshops, the Aboriginal Educational Resource Team staff have provided schools with direct support to implement the instructional resources. However, there has been a fairly widespread lack of awareness about the HCRBs. Consequently, these resources have not been widely used. Schools did have access to traditional knowledge keepers, elders, and other individuals to provide cultural teachings and conduct ceremonies.

While there appears to have been recognition of, and appreciation for, the Wicehtowak Partnership, it is also clear that the partnership has not yet been entirely successful in making its existence and initiatives widely known. For example, for nearly all survey questions, a large proportion of respondents—between one-third and one-half—indicated that they did not know how to respond to the questions. This finding is perplexing given that the data informing this study were collected in schools that had actually accessed the resources and supports offered by the Wicehtowak Partnership. Perhaps the staff at these schools participated in the workshops and other supports offered but simply did not connect these directly with the Wicehtowak Partnership. Alternatively, they may have had the impression that the supports were merely part of Pleasant View Public School District’s staff development plan. In any case, at the time of this study, the Wicehtowak Partnership was experiencing an identity crisis of sorts. On the one hand, it may not be important whether the Wicehtowak Partnership is recognized for its work as long as the intended outcomes of building trust among stakeholder groups and improving student achievement are realized. On the other hand, the Wicehtowak Partnership was an explicit attempt on behalf of the school district and the Aboriginal community to show the importance of learning from, and collaborating with, each other to improve both stakeholder relationships and student achievement. In the future, then, the Wicehtowak Partnership must reengage its constituents to raise its profile. Given Aboriginals’ deeply held distrust of formal Eurocentric education, the Wicehtowak Partnership plays an important role in showing the broader community that its signatories are serious about building trust and improving outcomes. Future iterations of the Wicehtowak Partnership will need to be more explicit in advertising its initiatives as well as more deliberate in creating a public profile.

The Wicehtowak Partnership’s success was largely political and relational. Its political success centered on bringing to the table the elected officials from the...
various First Nations, the Willow Creek Tribal Council, and PVS, as well as members from the wider community to collaborate on a common vision for local Aboriginal education. The Wicchtowak Partnership signatories had, up to the time of this research, focused most of their energy on developing a spirit of trust and building relationships. These relationships were critical to the founding of the partnership and the success of its broad aims. Perhaps, given Birchard’s (2006) assertion that the most significant barrier to improving Aboriginals’ academic outcomes is a lack of trust in the Eurocentric structure of public educational program delivery, developing these political and relational connections was the appropriate place to start. Certainly, one cannot be educationally successful when one does not trust the structures that are providing the educational experiences. Schools had not yet reached Edmonds’s (1979) goal of high levels of parent-initiated school contact. However, the schools had used community-school workers and cultural activities to actively invite family involvement and had seen gradual increases in their participation in activities aimed at improving student achievement through school-community councils. In light of the progress made and the ground yet to be covered, if improvements in student achievement are truly to occur, the Wicchtowak Partnership must deepen and broaden its efforts.

The results of this research suggest that, in the near future, the member organizations of the Wicchtowak Partnership embark on a new visioning and missioning process to guide the next steps in the evolution of the partnership. The signatories have reached a crossroads, and perhaps the most challenging decision to be made at this juncture pertains to the philosophical conundrum of the partnership’s core purpose. That is, the central issue appears to be coming to terms with the “means versus ends” question: Does the alliance among the partner organizations exist as a means through which students become more successful both in academic learning and in life? Or does it exist simply as an end because of its inherent political and relational importance?

While concern for means and ends need not be mutually exclusive, the Wicchtowak Partnership has, thus far, largely been an end in itself. At the time of this study, there was nothing found to be inherently wrong with this; in fact, it seemed to play a critical, intermediate role on the path to improved Aboriginal student learning. Looking to the future, however, the Wicchtowak Partnership must decide how to fulfill its potential as a means for furthering Aboriginal student learning and achievement.

Although the nature of the research did not allow for a direct, causal study of the tie between the Wicchtowak Partnership initiatives and specific student learning outcomes, students interviewed for the study appeared to be positive about their learning experiences. Unfortunately, the extent to which these positive attitudes led to improved learning outcomes could not be definitely concluded given the limited availability of student achievement data. As such,
a great deal of additional research is required to explore the extent to which initiatives like those implemented by the Wicehtowak Partnership affect student achievement. One avenue for further study is the examination of achievement related directly to particular Wicehtowak Partnership initiatives, especially those connected in an explicit way to provincial/state curricula. For example, the province in which this research was conducted requires all students to learn key aspects about the treaties signed between First Nations and the Canadian government, and it has recently instituted an assessment of this learning. The Wicehtowak Partnership, along with the Aboriginal Educational Resource Team, has taken a leadership role in training treaty catalyst teachers, whose role is to provide their colleagues with support and guidance on teaching treaties more effectively. Research aimed at connecting the work of the newly trained catalyst teachers and student achievement on the provincial treaty assessment may shed light on the effectiveness of the Wicehtowak Partnership. The Wicehtowak Partnership is relatively new, and its initiatives may take time to bear fruit. Longitudinal research is needed to track students from the lower grades, along with their families, because their sustained contact with Wicehtowak Partnership initiatives helps assess its impact. Central to the effective design of future research is access to a broader range of disaggregated assessment results specific to the school district. In sum, the partnership appears well positioned to initiate further promising practices and to become the means through which Aboriginal students’ achievement improves.

Note

1. Marie Battiste (2008) handles the terminological issue as follows: “[The term] Aboriginal is local to Canada and Native American local to the United States” (90). Further, it is also common to refer to Canadian Aboriginal peoples by the three broad categories suggested by their nationhoods: First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. Nonetheless, because this research was conducted in Canada, this article uses the term “Aboriginal” throughout.

References


Tunison


Sheldon, Steven, Joyce Epstein, and Claudia Galinda (2010). “Not Just Numbers:
Creating a Partnership Climate to Improve Mathematics Proficiency in Schools.”