

# Building Leadership Capacity Amongst Young Anishinaabe-Kwe Through Culturally-based activities and Creative Arts

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## Introduction

There is no doubt that ongoing colonization has and continues to affect the overall health and wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples and women in particular. The colonial and imperial imposition of European values and ways have contributed to the decline in Aboriginal languages, culture and traditions as well as Aboriginal women's economic status, community rights, and roles in the community. The high incidence of violence against Aboriginal women is one of the most profound and tragic results of ongoing colonization. In Canada, Aboriginal women are almost three times more likely to be subjected to violent victimization than their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Brennan, 2011). As well, the Report on Stolen Sisters documents that as of July 2009 520 Aboriginal women have gone missing or have been murdered in Canada in the last three decades (Amnesty International, 2009). While Amnesty International has raised awareness of the violence perpetuated against Aboriginal women in Canada relatively little has been done to address the issue. These statistics affirm that many Aboriginal women find themselves subjected to high levels of violence at the individual and societal levels.

Voyageur (2008) in a landmark study on First Nations women chiefs notes that First Nations women "have always played a role in politics in the Aboriginal community. Sometimes their involvement has been overt and sometimes covert" (p. 10). However, it is clear that colonial imposition through the Indian Act continues to direct how community leadership is determined in First Nations communities. The Indian Act, implemented in 1876, is viewed as a forced system of leadership and governance which has resulted in a political governance system that has undermined Aboriginal women's formal leadership role in the community (Lawrence & Anderson, 2005; Voyageur 2008). In fact, as Voyageur (2008) notes, changes to the Indian Act that saw the inclusion of Aboriginal women as potential chiefs in their communities did not come about until 1951. As a result of being marginalized from key leadership positions in the community it can be said that Aboriginal women have also been excluded from major decisions that affect them, their families, and communities. Lawrence and Anderson (2005) assert that "the legacy of the Indian Act, in the form of all-male representation, has shaped the nation to nation discourse. This has set the stage for a political representation that is not shaped by women's ways of

knowing the world” (p.2). While there have been some changes and we see a number of Aboriginal women taking up key leadership positions they still remain under-represented in this realm (Lawrence & Anderson, 2005; Voyageur, 2008).

While it can be argued that Aboriginal women do take up leadership roles in a variety of other venues, there is no question that they do not have access to major decision making avenues. For example, Aboriginal women, in their daily lives, are still often found in roles as community leaders, heads of household, transmitters of traditional knowledge and entrepreneurs. However, in these roles their voice and ability to affect significant change in their lives and community is often limited by overarching systems of oppression. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) (1996) concurs that Aboriginal women are “excluded – from their home communities, from decision-making, and from having a say in their future and their children’s future” (p. 95).

While the roots of these inequities can be traced to the structural determinants of colonialism and patriarchy, the legacy of this marginalization continues to thrive to this day, in many forms including but not limited to poverty, ill-health, sexual, physical and mental abuse, and the silencing of Aboriginal women’s voices in debates over self-government, land claims, and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (RCAP, 1996). RCAP (1996) stressed the need to address the imbalance of relations between men and women in Aboriginal communities (p.77). Certainly these inequities can be addressed in a number of ways. However, as a result of their research, RCAP (1996v3) made several recommendations to increase Aboriginal women’s participation in decision-making bodies noting that one of the primary ways to address the discriminatory treatment of Aboriginal women is develop strategies to ensure that they are fully and fairly represented in all institutions of self-government and in community decision-making (p. 77). This includes the need to continue to develop the leadership capacity of Aboriginal peoples to ensure meaningful and full participation in their respective communities as well as in broader society.

In order to assist with this process the development of leadership capacity at a younger age is critical. A pilot program was designed to begin to fill this gap by contributing to building leadership capacity of young

Aboriginal women. While this was a small pilot program, the results show promise in building the capacity of young Aboriginal women by engaging them in a culturally based program aimed at building self-esteem as well as knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal identity, culture, and tradition. The literature also supports that many Canadian girls which included Aboriginal girls face gender-specific challenges that may include poor body image, low self-esteem, eating disorders, violence in their lives, poverty, sexism, racism and homophobia (Hein & Holland, 2005).

There is limited research in efficacy of utilizing creative arts in the Aboriginal population. An earlier article by Dufrene (1990) notes that Aboriginal peoples “regard art as an element of life, not as a separate aesthetic ideal” (p.122). This suggests that art is naturally viewed as part of life and an expression of life. Dufrene (1990) further points out that healing and art are not separated. More recently, Archibald & Dewar (2010) reported on the links between creative arts, culture, and healing. These researchers found that creative activities have healing benefits whether they were based in traditional or westerns forms. These activities ranged from “drawing and painting, music, dance, writing, and storytelling” (p.6). While the research did not make links to leadership capacity the researchers do discuss how creative arts combined with cultural activities can assist with the process of building confidence and self-esteem as part of a healing process (Archibald & Dewar). The use of creative arts has become increasingly utilized in a variety of settings including but not limited to children living in foster care (Coholic, Loughheed & LeBreton, 2009), health promotion for Aboriginal women in Australia (Davis, Knight, White, Bell, Claridge, & Davis, 2001) and as a decolonizing tool to assist Aboriginal women with healing from the effects of colonization (Lu & Yeun, 2012). Stuckey & Nobel (2010) completed a review of the literature on the connections between art, healing, and public health and in their discussion conclude that there are clear indications that engaging with various forms of creative arts including music, visual arts, and expressive writing can indeed positively affect overall health and wellbeing.

## **Culturally-based Leadership Program**

### **Partnership Development**

This section provides a context for understanding the importance of working with the community in the development of this pilot program initiative. It also provides a brief overview of the partners that were involved very early on in the initiative.

This program was conceived and developed in partnership with the Indigenous program lead at Laurentian University and the Aboriginal leads at the two local English speaking school boards. This partnership was imperative in ensuring that the program was developed with a good understanding of young Aboriginal women's needs. The lead at the Rainbow District School Board is the Principal of First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education. She holds responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the Ontario Ministry of Education's First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Policy Framework in the Rainbow District School Board.

The lead at the Sudbury Catholic District School Board was the Aboriginal Lead responsible for working with a local Aboriginal Advisory Committee to increase Aboriginal cultural awareness to all staff, students and families of the Sudbury District Catholic Schools. She was also responsible for advocating for effective programming to support Aboriginal students including the development of partnerships.

The lead at Laurentian University was the then Director of Academic Native Affairs who was responsible for Indigenous initiatives at the university. The Director of Academic Native Affairs worked to ensure that Native Student Affairs also participated in the program design and implementation so that participants had access to support services should they be needed. For example supportive counselling was available through Native Student Affairs. The lead at the university was also the primary lead for the program and was therefore responsible for ensuring overall program management and oversight of the delivery of the program.

The development of the partnership was critical in terms of ensuring the leadership program was both appropriate and culturally relevant. This team conceptualized the program which included setting a series of goals and

objectives, planned program activities to meet those goals and objectives, assisting with recruiting of participants and ensuring that logistical aspects were taken care of. In addition this program was designed within a research framework and therefore was subjected to the usual ethical review process at the university.

## **Participants**

In the Rainbow District School Board, the Principal of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit education met with the Aboriginal support workers from each of the secondary schools in the area. The leadership program was explained to them including the goals and objectives of the program. These Aboriginal support workers then engaged First Nation, Métis and Inuit students at their respective schools to inform them of the opportunity and provided information on how they could become involved. Interested students passed their names along to the Aboriginal support workers and they were then forwarded to the Project Coordinator who was responsible for ensuring registration. A similar process for recruitment took place at the Sudbury Catholic District School Board.

Once the potential names of participants were received, the Project Coordinator ensured all the logistics details were completed. For example, appropriate consent and health forms.

The Leadership Training was delivered to 19 young Aboriginal women between the ages 15-24 years. Due to budgetary constraints participants were limited to those from the Greater City of Sudbury. Eighteen (18) of the nineteen (19) participants were enrolled in local high schools and one (1) participant was enrolled at the local community college. The 5 day training was held during the month of August in 2009 and each day ran from 9am to 4pm. The training was facilitated by a Project Coordinator who was hired to organize the logistics of the training as well as provide facilitation of the training. The Project Coordinator engaged the services of a number of guest speakers and worked closely with one Elder who attended the full 5 day block. During the training this Elder provided ongoing support and encouragement to the young women, led opening and closing prayers for each day, and offered words of wisdom relevant to the training content. A

second Elder was also engaged with the training and provided support for specific activities by providing assistance with the activities as well as talks and traditional teachings.

### **Leadership Program Description**

In this program we developed a five day Leadership Training using a combination of culturally-based and creative arts methods to strengthen knowledge of Aboriginal culture and to build the self-esteem of young Aboriginal women. Through increasing knowledge about Aboriginal culture and building self-esteem we surmised that leadership skills could be enhanced and hopefully assist young Aboriginal women to consider taking on leadership roles in their communities.

The curricula and supporting materials for the 5 day Community Leadership training were researched and developed in detail by an Instructional Designer and the Project Coordinator, both of whom have some skill in developing culturally appropriate and relevant curriculum. The Instructional Designer and the Project Coordinator worked under the supervision of the program lead and the program partners who provided feedback and direction. A complete resource packaged in the form of a booklet was provided to each of the participants during the training. This resource package included the week long agenda, detailed objectives and activity plans as well as briefings on the traditional teachings to be covered during the training. The booklet was designed with appropriate cultural symbols and pictures and was completed professionally by a graphic designer. The training focussed on the following five thematic topic areas:

- Traditional Anishinaabe-Kwe Roles and Responsibilities;
- Traditional knowledges and Community Wellness;
- Role of Anishinaabe-Kwe in Contemporary Times;
- Addressing Racial and Gender discrimination; and
- Urban Aboriginal women's identity.

### **Delivery Process and Pedagogy**

The training was delivered in the ‘Round Room’ in the School of Education at Laurentian University. It is important to note that the ‘Round Room’ was chosen as the delivery site because this room is circular and can be utilized for smudging ceremonies. The room itself was designed as a space that would be consistent with Aboriginal worldviews and supportive of Aboriginal pedagogies. In the Anishinaabe tradition the circle represents many things: it is the place that joins the four directions (Nabigon, 2006) and “is considered the very heart and soul of who we are as Anishinaabe people” (Cote-Meek, 2010). The Round Room “is a designated and dedicated room to honour Aboriginal peoples, traditions and worldview” (Round room bookings & protocol agreement, May 19, 2010). Given how the room was designed and its purpose we all agreed that it would be an excellent site to host the one week training program. Pedagogically the room reinforced the symbol of the sacred circle which is important to the teachings of the Anishinaabe peoples (Nabigon, 2006). This is also reinforced by Fitznor (1998) who relates how the sharing circle and traditional medicines are utilized to reinforce Aboriginal beliefs, values, and ways of knowing and understanding.

Each of these thematic topic areas included sessions that were designed to build capacity of young Aboriginal women that supported strengthening culture and self-esteem, building awareness of Aboriginal women’s issues including youth concerns, and assisting with organizational and leadership skill development. The following were the primary goals of the 5 day leadership program. To provide young Aboriginal women between the ages 15-24 years with:

1. An understanding of the traditional roles and responsibilities of Anishinaabe-kwe (women) and how these can be translated into a contemporary context;
2. Beginning skills to address racial and gender discrimination; and
3. The opportunity to engage in activities which build self-esteem and strengthen one’s identity.

Each of these objectives was met through the implementation of a variety of culturally-based and creative arts methods. The design method paid attention to pedagogy, supportive facilitation, and debriefing opportunities after each activity. Methods were specifically designed to assist with reclamation and preservation of cultural identity and distinctiveness of Aboriginal women. For example, the young women had opportunities to hear and engage in ceremonies such as the traditional welcoming circle, hear and ask questions about the traditional teachings on the roles of Anishinaabe women including the responsibility for caring for water, the importance of skirts, and drum teachings to name a few. These culturally-based activities and ceremonies were carried out by the Elders using the circle format. The evaluation at the end of the training confirmed that the participants enjoyed the traditional teachings, skirt making, mask making, drumming and singing since many had not experienced any of these activities in the past.

Other activities included discussions and information on issues that related to racism and sexism in society. This objective was included because it has been identified in the literature that various forms of oppression remain a significant barrier that many Aboriginal women face on a day to day basis (Amnesty International, 2009; King, 2008; Lawrence & Anderson, 2005). In order to build leadership capacity and skill to be able to maneuver in general society we felt it was important to understand inequities and to identify strategies to promote equity.

Another important extension was racism to ongoing colonization. This was done through the inclusion of a film on the impact of the Residential Schools. This film provided an entry point for discussion on issues that relate to racism. Pedagogically the program leads and the Elders worked together to facilitate the delivery of this content. This was done with much care, respect, understanding, and support. The discussion and debriefing of this content was concluded through the use of a circle where the Elder and facilitator encouraged participants to talk about their reactions and understanding of the film.

In addition, a series of creative arts-based activities were included to supplement the cultural teachings. These activities included the actual making of a traditional skirt, mask making and painting which were

designed to assist with discussions on cultural identity, and singing hand drum songs. These experiential and creative arts-based activities were well received by the young Anishinaabe-kwe. They all participated and often there was much laughter and spontaneity in the room.

All guest speakers were Aboriginal women which also provided exposure to a range of role models. For example, one Aboriginal woman came in and spoke about her work in the film making industry. With this guest speaker participants had an opportunity to carryout some spontaneous ‘acting’ activities. Although many were quite shy to engage at first it wasn’t long before many participated.

### **Feedback from Participants**

In order to evaluate and close the training participants completed a short questionnaire. In addition a closing circle was led by the Elder. This provided an opportunity for participants to give final comments on the week. At the closing circle all participants were presented with a Certificate of Achievement during the closing circle. This was a pleasant surprise to the participants. It should be noted that attendance was extremely high throughout the training. There were only three exceptions when a participant had to be away for a short period of time for personal or medical reasons.

#### *Not enough time*

Consistent with the written feedback the main narratives of the closing circle were that participants enjoyed the training, meeting everyone, and thought it should be offered on a yearly basis. In terms of improvements to the training many commented that they would have liked more time to complete the sewing activity. In retrospect, this activity took longer than anticipated as many of the young women had little or no experience with sewing. In order to ensure that the participants completed the skirt making activity supplemental assistance was provided by the facilitator and Elders. In a couple of instances the finishing touches of the skirt had to be completed by an Elder so that the participant could wear it during the hand drumming activity that followed a day later. Despite the lack of time for the activity 66% (10/15) of the participants who completed the evaluation

noted that this was one of the activities they enjoyed the most. The skirt making activity included learning how to prepare material for cutting, cutting the material using a pattern, learning to use a sewing machine to put the skirt together as well as learning about the cultural teachings of wearing the skirt in ceremony. Many of the participants also wore their skirts, with pride, on the last day of training.

#### *Connections to identity*

Just over a third (4/15) of the participants who completed the evaluation indicated that prior to participating in the leadership program they didn't know much about their Aboriginal identity. This one week program provided an opportunity for them to connect with this aspect of their identity. One participant noted that it "got me in touch with my Native side." Another stated that it was "awesome, meeting new people and learning about my culture, I liked it". In addition 14/15 thought the training provided them with some knowledge about their culture and traditions which they could share with their family and community. One participant noted: "I've gained new traditional ways and understanding of my cultural background and have made me feel comfortable to be a proud aboriginal woman."

#### *Building self-confidence and self-esteem*

In terms of how the leadership program might assist them in the future, most of the participants stated that this program had assisted them with building their self-confidence. For example, one participant noted, "This training would help me more to speak louder and be more confident in front of new people." Another participant commented that "now I feel more comfortable talking in front of people."

#### *Learning about culture and roles of Anishinaabe-kwe*

The majority of participants indicated that they really enjoyed the Elder's teachings and getting to learn and know more about their own culture and roles as Anishinaabe-Kweok. It is significant that many also thought this type of leadership program should run on a yearly basis so that others could benefit.

Participants commented that it was important to them that the program was specifically designed for Anishinaabe-kwe and that they could be with other Anishinaabe people including facilitators. Some noted that this experience would assist them with their own personal journey, learning about the residential school, and generally the support of each other as young Anishinaabe-kwe.

Some of the participants also relayed that because this Leadership program was held at the university they felt much less intimidated by the university and that they were happy to know that there were a number of people here that could support them should they plan to attend. While this wasn't a goal of the program, this does indicate that the program itself opened another door for the participants that may not have been there prior to the training.

### **Final Reflections**

This section presents final reflections on the program and lessons learned. Lessons learned in any project are usually the outcome of overcoming challenges and/or constraints. One early constraint in getting the project started was the delay in finding out about the funding. This caused some difficulties with organizing dates for the program as ethical approval at Laurentian University was needed before proceeding. As a result the training which was originally scheduled for the month of July did not take place until the month of August. This also presented some challenges with recruitment of participants since many of the highschool students would have been finished classes for the year in early June.

Another unexpected challenge was when one presenter did not show up. In this instance one of the key organizers was able to deliver a presentation. It is important to point out that a contingency plan should always be in place when planning events such as this otherwise a ½ day could have been lost in the training. Fortunately, the primary lead has had over 20 years of experience facilitating, teaching, and developing programs. She was also involved in the conceptualization of the program and oversaw the implementation of the training and therefore had a good sense of what needed to be accomplished.

Another challenge was the unexpected time that the skirt making activity took. While this activity was planned with a seamstress who had years of experience teaching sewing we did not predict that many of these young women would have very little to no experience with sewing. As a result this activity took longer than anticipated to complete causing many participants to express disappointment with not being able to complete it. In retrospect it would have been important to ask potential participants ahead of time their knowledge level and/or ensure that this type of activity is given sufficient time. As well, additional personnel are required to assist those with no sewing experience. Interestingly, that even though this was a challenge the sewing activity was rated as one of the most enjoyable by most of the participants.

Overall the feedback on the project supported our notion that increasing leadership through culturally-based activities and creative arts was a way to engage young Anishinaabe-kwe. Despite the challenges the project lead, coordinator and partners were able to successfully address them and all agreed that this was an exciting program. The lead from the Rainbow District School Board commented that providing First Nation, Métis and Inuit youth with leadership development and cultural learning opportunities is a priority for their board. In fact, it is the youth themselves that are asking for more opportunities to learn about their culture and identity. “This program provided them with that opportunity. Building their confidence through leadership training and development will also help them to take on more active leadership roles within their schools and communities” (Dokis-Ranney, 2012).

While there is no way to measure whether these young Anishinaabe-kwe take on leadership roles in the future as that would require a longitudinal study this small pilot program does show promise that engaging with youth culturally-based and creative arts programs does have some positive impact.

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