

# ABORIGINAL YOUTH RISK AND RESILIENCE

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1996, the *Royal Commission On Aboriginal Peoples* (RCAP) discussed the need for role models, mentorship, community programs and family support of Aboriginal youth. Many Aboriginal communities, both urban and rural, identified psycho-social factors (among the physical) within their adult populations that produced ability issues to cope within the family environment. In this paper I propose future exploration and research which is designed to be supportive of the notion of Aboriginal youth resilience. By investigating various psycho-social, economic, educational and environmental factors and the impact they have on the socialization experiences of Aboriginal youth, I believe that a strategy for resiliency could be implemented in both urban and rural Aboriginal youth communities. My emphasis is the socialization experiences of Aboriginal youth and examining the factors that contribute to risk and resiliency. To date, I have not found any research recorded on Aboriginal youth risk and resilience in Canada that encompasses the examination of the factors I've identified above as a whole, nor have the impact they have on youth risk been examined. I believe that it is time we consider more than individual areas of Aboriginal youth risk and embrace this circle in its entirety. Specifically, this paper asks and attempts to answer the following: *During the socialization process of Aboriginal youth, where are the risk areas, how can they be addressed and how do they contribute to success or personal resiliency in the transition to adulthood?"*

## LOOK AROUND, WHAT DO I SEE – I AM

Social factors which may contribute to Aboriginal youth risks and resiliency include the consistency of their emotional well-being; the influence exerted on them by peers and family; their participation in group activities; their home environment;

the surrounding physical environment; and the experience they have in educational institutions. These factors rarely act independently and may indirectly create risk behaviours.

For instance, Leroy and Symes, in *The McGill Journal of Education* (2001), define 'risk' as a term associated with children and youth who potentially may fail in school and in life. They further state that their research took an "epidemiological approach," focusing on multiple risk factors interacting together in correlation to youth and children within their social environment. Although Leroy and Symes' article specifically addressed education, factors of risk included: the family; educational attainment within the family; income specific profiles relating to family circumstances; single parenting; age of parent/s; mentoring; as well as neglect and social abuses.

If we seek out where Aboriginal children and youth exist in the structure of Canadian society, many are existing in a cycle of poverty. Therefore, it is imperative that research includes the community/poverty circumstance and the impact of this pertaining to Aboriginal youth.

The economic imprisonment inflicted on Aboriginal Peoples by federal agencies historically and in the contemporary context, have set in motion a series of risk factors of which Native youth are susceptible. Economic incapacitation produces suffering and restricts Native youth from opportunities in Canadian society.

Because of economic hardships, there is cultural futility within the space of living of Native youth that breaks harmony within themselves. Three generations ago, Aboriginal Peoples were once very connected to the land. Today, Native youth have to re-connect themselves with their land and Elders so that there is the transference of knowledge which our People knew intimately from time immemorial. Our Peoples were engineers, governors, doctors, healers, lawmakers, scientists, architects; we had to be everything to survive on the land, and relations between ourselves. Beyond that we knew the world of the spirits and the Cosmos. We knew things which were seen and things which were not seen. Aboriginal Peoples were true mystics of Time. What's happened today to Native youth is that this connection has been shattered between their cultural self, spiritual self, and the land.

Aboriginal Peoples are visual learners, and multilateral visual-based analysis is extremely important in identifying and establishing processes which will improve Aboriginal youth resilience and successes in the future.

We must investigate what we visually learn from Aboriginal communities. What is the shape and environment of the reserve or the urban space? What is visually communicated from the environment? Because of poverty, many Aboriginal communities consist of plank board homes with gaping holes for windows, no running water, multiple families in two room dwellings, litter, abused domestic stray animals, and junk that cannot be disposed of because of costs associated with disposal. In urban housing slums, there is the mixed urban poverty population where theft, drugs, gangs, prostitution, and other social ills exist. How is this affecting youth? How does it affect adults? What are the physical and mental ramifications of this visual picture?

In an article written by Jo-Ann Archibald for *The Canadian Journal of Native Education* (2001), "Sharing aboriginal knowledge and aboriginal ways of knowing," Archibald demonstrates how the values of visual teachings are historically related to Native cultures. She writes in a tribute to two Elders who she states "lived" the question of "Aboriginal ways of knowing" and how they "took the responsibility of teaching others through example, through their interactions with individuals" (p. 56). Most importantly, Archibald continually states how the Elders emphasized that Aboriginal Peoples' learning of lifestyle, spirituality, respect, responsibility, existence and ways of knowing, are taught visually through the connection of their surrounding environment.

In *The State of The World's Children* (Bellamy, 1999), the author discusses the necessity for encouraging children's self-esteem, nurtured through 'hands-on' teaching and learning strategies. Bellamy's research supports youth resiliency through education which clearly extends to health; safety; community; parental guidance; sanitation; nutrition; gender equality; and rights. Explicitly, this document encourages youth to be actively involved in learning, thought processes, and conflict resolution by example, and by participatory guidance from the teacher.

## WHAT IS APPROPRIATE KNOWLEDGE AND EDUCATION?

Any research definitions, when shaping ideals akin to Aboriginal world views, must deal with new conditions arising from invention in both urban and rural Aboriginal communities; namely, 21<sup>st</sup> century culture and the appropriation of it in Aboriginal culture today.

Colleen Larimore (2001) studied Native American children across different types of learning environments in same-race and mixed-race settings throughout United States. She found that Aboriginal children, regardless of whether they were on the reserve or in an urban public school system, disengaged in learning when the teacher stressed verbal instruction versus their ability to comprehend and perform under visual instruction. The children also avoided peer competition or public performance, and were uneasy when “pushed to demonstrate new skills without adequate practice”. What is even more interesting is the response that children had to a more cooperative, peer-directed and collaborative group work study facilitated by the teacher.

Larimore cautions that a balance must be held by the principal authority – the teacher – so that instructional philosophies and learning processes are achieved. Larimore also found that, while education is deemed important in the long term by Native parents, they resist educational aspects that may harm children culturally and advise their children to do the same. Thus, Larimore revealed that Native parents play a key role in the accomplishments of their children and how children adapt “differently or productively to various classroom conditions” (2001:125).

In 1998, the American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research branch published a study by Chris Fore and John Chanley entitled *Factors Influencing the Pursuit of Educational Opportunities in American Indian Students*. The study investigated the low self-appraisal experienced by 19 Native American youth ages 17 to 21 who also shared a history of academic difficulty. The study found that mentorship and family support of American Indian students gave them a more

realistic self-appraisal and influenced their decision to pursue educational opportunities.

However, while mentoring practices could be used to guide and support Aboriginal youth, it is important to hear from youth what type of mentoring is needed. For instance, Philip and Hendry (1996) discuss mentorship in relationships with Scottish youth and found that there existed five types of mentoring models. Women valued a classic form of mentoring, while a variety of youth chose a variety of styles such as individual-team mentors, friend-to-friend, peer groups, and long term relationship mentorship. Although these studies are supportive of research areas to be explored in education, again I stress the importance of producing research from an Aboriginal perspective.

Felicia Harris (1999), in her paper "Centricity and the Mentoring Experience in Academia: An Africentric Mentoring Paradigm," examined centricity within Afrocentricity mentoring relationships of undergraduate students. Harris developed a 'Mentoring Model,' describing a developmental process of empowerment for African American students. Within Harris' model are skill development, self-confidence, and the eventuality of mentoring others. Harris promotes her model to produce a "collective vision" for the African American community which will enhance affective, social, and academic success of Black youth. Through parallel investigations such as Harris', it is hoped that my research can identify Aboriginal youth risks and could eventually lead to an Aboriginal-specific mentoring model that could be utilized in the Aboriginal youth community to address risk issues.

Although I have not yet been able to find studies on Aboriginal parenting in Canada, there have been studies conducted on the parenting of minority children and youth in the United States. Okagaki and Frensch (1998), as well as Dumka, Roosa, and Jackson (1997), examined parenting of minority children (African-American, Latino, Mexican-American, Asian-American, and Immigrants) relating to school performance, conduct disorder, and depression. Both studies confirmed that parenting, either supportive or non-existent, influenced the children's perceptions of themselves in society, their abilities to cope on a daily basis, and their future educational attainment.

Shui Fong Lam (1997) studied the interactive effects of social address and the family process on children's academic achievement through an integrated paradigm of relationships in family structure, socio-economic status, authoritative parenting, and academic achievement. Lam utilized 'path analysis', facilitating a parent-child interaction questionnaire, and demographic data in his study of 181 grade 8 students in US inner-city schools. Lam claims that effective parenting includes a high degree of psychological autonomy granting, support/involvement, and monitoring of the child.

George Holden (1997) investigated *Parents and the Dynamics of Child Rearing*, through his study of a parent's effect on the development of a child. He used six approaches to studying parent-child relationships, including: social learning; social address; momentary process; child effects; and parental beliefs. In addition, his work looked at five fundamental concepts which could be applied to an Aboriginal youth risk and resilience study: The attachment process; social learning experiences; interactional processes; explicit teaching; and, most importantly, the quality of the child's environment.

Such studies, created to improve parenting skills and guide children and youth, can provide frameworks from which to address and help Aboriginal adults with youth issues in Aboriginal communities today. But outside of the family, where do Aboriginal youth find support? A recent conference I attended on Aboriginal youth examined establishing mentorship structures for youth whereby they could perceive themselves in a variety of careers. The need to be guided in their transition from the teen ages to adulthood with positive influences was discussed. In my own research on mentoring, I found very little work had been done in relation to Native Peoples. I have, however, found other cultural mentoring studies that could be utilized comparatively in establishing unique paradigms associated with Aboriginal youth and addressing risk areas that could be used for establishing methods of analysis.

## ADOPT A MENTOR, ADOPT THE ADOPTEE

Warren Skye (2002), for example, describes the Iroquois summer gathering in upstate New York where ELDERS (*Encouraging Leaders Dedicated To Enriching Respect and Spirituality*) conducted an Aboriginal youth gathering that focused on developing a “good mind” to be able to resist substance abuse. Native youth learn traditional values and beliefs and are mentored by Native Elders. They have the chance, together with their peers and mentors, to express their concerns as Native youth in contemporary society. Skye provides valuable suggestions from this gathering which support similar youth initiatives and programs for the future.

But gatherings alone will not solve deeply-rooted cultural and social ruptures of Aboriginal Peoples communities. Aboriginal societies have suffered immensely by the many historical (and current) government initiatives that implemented policies to handle the “Indian problem.”

If we examine the many voices who expressed themselves in Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), one paradigm which sticks out most definitely is the euro-centric acculturation of Aboriginal children in the last 100 years. Many Aboriginal people, adults, youth, and children, have been and still are victims of adoption policies. Adoption practices and the physical change for Aboriginal children from their parents to a new and/or foreign environment, has left many with scars so deep that the rest of their adulthood and all activities they undertake in life will be perceived through their perception of having been abandoned, and many Aboriginal people correlate this with physical and mental stresses and/or abuses (whether as active or reciprocal participants). I believe that this area should be included in the analysis and assessment of youth risks, and focused on the relationship of cultural understanding between adoption agents and families.

Creating cultural relationships and understanding to ease the transition of Aboriginal children in the comprehension of their heritage may improve their perception of themselves. Roer-Strier’s paper, “Reducing Risk for Children in Changing Cultural Contexts: Recommendations for Intervention and Training” (2001), explores and creates guidelines based on a

conceptual framework derived from the multicultural reality of Israeli society and the growing corpus of studies on cross-cultural child development in minority families. In relation to Aboriginal children and youth in Canada, Roer-Strier's work may support the examination of changing cultural contexts which produce children and youth at risk – including the examination of maltreatment; their socialization experience through socio-cultural and socio-economic change; loss of former support networks; parental acculturation stress and related dysfunction; exposure to systems with conflicting socialization goals; and contradictory definitions of desirable childcare for supervision frameworks. Roer-Strier found that clashes and conflicts between parents and socializing agents, including those where cultural differences resulting in misinterpretation of parental behaviours and misdiagnosis of abuse and neglect, produced long-term effects on children and families. Roer-Strier suggests that conflicts and misinterpretations can be avoided if both parents and social agents learn to understand and to respect their cultural differences and devise ways to create a bridge between cultures.

Additionally, in terms of those who adopt children, O'Connor et al. (1998) also found that the socialization of adopted children who were at risk for antisocial and behavioural problems stemmed from the negative parenting skills of adoptive parents and not any genotype-environment, which emphasizes the importance of investigating areas of risk pertaining to parenting skills of adopting parents in relation to cultural understanding of the adoptee.

## CONCLUSION

I maintain that the research approach should investigate various psycho-social, economic, educational, and environmental factors when seeking answers to the questions of Aboriginal youth risks and resiliency. Sara Scherr (2000) researched the link between poverty and environment whereby many observations reported a "downward spiral" leading to the marginalization of population growth, economic development, and environmental degradation. Scherr argues that local endowments, conditions affecting the adoption of resource-conserving technologies, and local institutions supportive of the poor, are key factors to enhancing the productivity of poor



communities dependent on their natural resources as an economic base. In regards to my study, Scherr, as well as many other researchers not mentioned in this paper, have produced an abundance of valuable analyses for economic and social successes derivative from sympathetic community policies.

Aboriginal communities are struggling to acquire control of their resources. They need to create economic structures within their communities that will sustain the development of their peoples in health, education, justice, and economic development. These risk factors need to be examined in order to adopt policies and procedures to rectify any further impact on Aboriginal youth. Better still, the whole scenario of economic struggle within Aboriginal communities themselves must be changed *now*, without delay, if we are to help our youth.

To accomplish social and physical environmental change in Aboriginal communities, there must be more Aboriginal people equipped with skill sets to support initiatives. Another area that has been discussed at length is having Aboriginal communities staffing their many services, business, and educational institutions with their own peoples. But in order to fulfill this ideal, Aboriginal youth must succeed academically to fill these positions. But there is great distress with the success of Aboriginal youth in education today. Many are dropping out or are having difficulties with academic studies. More attention to these education issues must be given in order to better understand why this is happening and where improvements must be made.

Jacobs and Reyhner (2002) draw our attention to the Native youth educational process. They state that, according to teachers, Native youth academic success is really only achievable through understanding the spirituality and reciprocity (giving back to others) of Native cultures. For instance, Jacobs and Reyhner (2002) believe that a teacher must only present euro-centric paradigms in correlation to Native world views "about life's complex interconnections between people and nature". In addition, Jacobs and Reyhner stress that teachers of Aboriginal students must work with their families and extended families to enlist support for literacy, academic achievement, cultural teachings, and to develop resiliency through nurturing a strong identity.

The importance of Jacobs' and Reyhner's analysis of striking partnerships in cultural relationships academically is very interesting. Partnership is a central theme in many concepts for investigation which I've addressed in my proposed study. Furthermore, partnership implicates extension to that inter-connective or secular Aboriginal way of existence, and is reflective to the whole course of action that I am proposing for as a study.

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