

## **SPECIAL INTEREST PAPER**

### **Creating Equity in a Diverse Rural School**

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McCreary School,<sup>1</sup> a rural community school with an average enrolment of 150 students from kindergarten to grade 12, provides a learning environment for a population of diverse students in Turtle River School Division, Manitoba. At the same time, the school incurs significant challenges for creating a school and classroom environment that is equitable for all students. The diverse background that makes up an individual student (including, but not limited to, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and cognitive and physical ability) contributes to the creation of a sample of minority students within the school population. School-based data have shown a relationship between the minority population and lower social and academic achievement. These barriers combine to produce learning obstacles that must be carefully considered in order to bring about change so that success for all learners may be achieved through equitable opportunities. The teachers at McCreary School have collaborated to make a plan for change at both the school and classroom level, in order to create an increase in equitable opportunities for every student. The teachers determined that change is required in three domains: meeting individual students' basic physical needs, supporting students academically at the school and classroom level, and supporting students socially at the school and classroom level. While the range of diverse students poses a challenge for creating an equitable learning environment for all learners, several solutions have been put into effect by teachers, in order to work toward creating and maintaining equity at both the school and classroom levels.

#### **The Challenges of Creating Equity**

Every student brings a diverse set of characteristics and skills, and each child should be considered unique (Katz, 2012). A number of external factors influence a child's success in school. Some of these factors, as experienced in McCreary School, are ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and cognitive and physical ability. Students who experience these factors may have more of an academic struggle because the "dominant identity takes precedent over all others in school" (Tuters, 2015, p. 693). When students have characteristics from more than one category, it becomes increasingly more difficult to create an equitable learning atmosphere for diverse learners.

Social disparity is frequently experienced by students who come from a cultural background different from the background of the majority of students in the school population. Data show that "more than one in seven children is living in poverty" (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2017, p. 1). Minority students find difficulties fitting in with peers or creating and/or maintaining friendships. They struggle to be part of the school community, and as a result attempt to conceal their minority status (Chen & Keats, 2016). Minority students often stand out socially because they are culturally different. These differences lie in their clothing, food, shelter, beliefs, and values. The struggle to meet the basic life needs takes priority over education in minority population students.

Academically, classroom assessments show a significant gap in the results when comparing students from a majority to a minority population. In McCreary School, the number of self-declared Aboriginal students is considerably fewer than those who do not self-declare as

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<sup>1</sup> This author has a letter from the Turtle River School Division superintendent, giving her permission to make specific references to her school and school division in this article.

Aboriginal. The correlation between students who self-declare as Aboriginal and scoring lower academic results is significant, and “all indicators are that Aboriginal populations have dismal educational outcomes” (Lawton, Philpott, & Furey, 2011, p. 98). School-specific data for the 2016-2017 school year show that self-declared Aboriginal students in grade 3 scored an average of 20% lower across all four sub-competencies in the provincial grade 3 numeracy assessment, and an average of 26% lower across the three sub-competencies in the grade 3 provincial reading in English assessment. Likewise, results from the provincial grade 7 number sense and number skills assessment reveal that across all five sub-competencies, self-declared Aboriginal student scores were an average of 14% lower compared to non-Aboriginal students. The grade 8 provincial assessment for reading comprehension and expository writing shows that self-declared Aboriginal students scored an average of 23% lower across all six sub-competencies when compared to students who did not self-declare as Aboriginal (Turtle River School Division, 2017, pp. 1-8). These data give substantial evidence to support the fact that there is a large discrepancy in learning achievement between majority and minority students.

Some of the causal theories linked to lower academic success in minority groups include transiency, a high rate of absenteeism, an increased rate of poverty (with contributing factors such as inadequate housing or nutrition), a lack of parental support or academic resources at home, and a lack of engagement in the classroom (Chen & Keats, 2016; Lawton et al., 2011; McIsaac, Read, Veugelers, & Kirk, 2017). Minority students experience a lack of financial resources that “translate[s] into many students having a very poor quality diet and struggling with concentration and learning” (Tuters, 2015, p. 690). Often, these students are not ready to start kindergarten because they lack the basic kindergarten readiness skills, both socially and academically. This gap in learning continues to expand into the later years of school, creating an even larger variance between the majority and minority.

### **Strategies for Creating Equity**

Creating and maintaining student success through an equitable approach to education may be a challenge; however, teachers at McCreary School have come together to produce a school plan with goals that outline the steps necessary to start the process of change. Three areas have been identified, for which support is being implemented: meeting students’ basic needs, meeting students’ social needs, and meeting students’ academic needs. Targeting these three areas increases the chances for all students to experience equity and, as a result, success in school.

#### **Meeting the Physical Needs of Students**

Before success in social or academic constructs can be achieved, it is critical that students have their basic physical needs met. For each child, basic physical needs are “inextricably linked to long-term prosperity” (McIsaac et al., 2017, p. 214). As much as possible, McCreary School strives to support students in meeting their basic needs. Every morning, a breakfast program is offered to all students. Nutritious options from all four food groups are provided. Students in kindergarten to grade 12 have the opportunity to mingle during breakfast, developing a sense of belonging with each other. Students who arrive late to school have complimentary food options available at the office when they sign in. Several times throughout the year, the school staff cooks hot meals for the students. During special occasions, such as Christmas, staff members donate food and cook a traditional Christmas dinner for all students to enjoy. The entire school comes together in the gym and eats this meal together. The older students volunteer to help the younger students. A strong sense of school community is created during these times, particularly for students who may not have this opportunity at home. The school and teachers provide daily snacks to those students who may come without. Clothing, especially in the winter, or a change of clothing for physical education, is supplied by the school

for students in need. If a family is unable to purchase school supplies, the school provides those students with supplies. The school attempts to connect families with various community agencies (such as the local church, the second-hand store, and public and mental health) that may be able to provide additional resources. McCreary School will continue to find additional ways to help children meet their everyday basic needs, so that they have a stronger chance to experience social and academic success.

### **Creating a Sense of Belonging for All Students**

Teachers at McCreary School recognize that “building a climate of acceptance and social inclusion for children is essential” (Lindsay, Proulx, Scott, & Thomson, 2014, p. 116). McCreary School is aware of cultural diversity and makes efforts to prevent any type of cultural discrimination (Goddard, Johansson, & Norberg, 2010). McCreary School strives to ensure that all students feel welcome, safe, and part of the school community. As part of the school plan, every student was asked to identify at least one adult in the school with whom they feel comfortable to confide in. The staff collaborates and works toward maintaining positive staff morale, creating an environment where respect and positivity are modelled to students through positive staff interactions. Furthermore, the staff seeks to build positive student-staff relationships. Many of the staff members, both teachers and support staff, greet students at the door every morning and at dismissal in order to encourage a sense of belonging for all school members. The belief that all children should be treated with acceptance, kindness, and respect in order to promote an atmosphere of acceptance and inclusion is a principle shared by all staff.

McCreary School encourages all students to participate in extra-curricular activities in order to become a part of the school community beyond the classroom. The school does not charge any fees for extra-curricular activities so that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status, are given the opportunity to be part of the school atmosphere. All students from grades 7 to 12 are encouraged to participate in at least three extra-curricular activities of their choice throughout the year. To meet the interests of all individuals, several options are given to students – sports teams, academic clubs, social clubs, peer advisory clubs – giving recognition to a variety of individual strengths and challenges (Brenna, Burles, Holtslander, & Bocking, 2017). Participation by each student is tracked through Maverick Points. The Maverick Points system has shown a gradual increase in student participation in extra-curricular activities over the last two years. Teachers will continue to encourage all students to take part in extra-curricular activities in order to increase the positive school community climate.

It is important for the local community to feel a sense of belonging and investment within the school. Having parents on board in order to achieve student success is paramount. The school has found multiple opportunities for community involvement throughout the school year, in both the school and community. Multiple school events are open to the public, including (but not limited to) a Remembrance Day service, Christmas concert, spring carnival, spring festival, and family game night. Students become involved in the community on various occasions, such as going to the personal care home to sing, participating in community-wide scavenger hunts, and conducting a town-wide clean-up. Creating opportunities for community involvement builds parent-teacher-student relationships that are crucial in supporting student success via a team approach.

To increase awareness and inclusion of minority ethnicities and culture, particularly the Aboriginal culture, McCreary School has applied for and received the Aboriginal Academic Achievement Grant. The funds from the grant have enabled students to participate in various Aboriginal cultural activities. Last year, students had the opportunity to participate in crafting moccasins, going to the Festival du Voyageur, viewing an interactive Aboriginal-themed play, experiencing Aboriginal cuisine, and creating soapstone carvings. The goal of having students experience Aboriginal culture is to bring a higher sense of inclusion to the Aboriginal student

population, and to increase Aboriginal cultural awareness and respect by non-Aboriginal students.

Social acceptance is crucial not just within the school but also within each classroom. Children need to feel a sense of belonging by both their teachers and peers. Some of the early years classrooms at McCreary School have begun having classroom check-ins or class meetings. The class meetings give students a voice to express what they most enjoy and what they would like to see changed. The students are given a chance to come up with their own solutions, creating an increase in student accountability (Katz, 2012). The early years classrooms have created spirit buddies for students, whereby each student has another student to confide in. Every student has someone to talk to for a few minutes every day, effectively creating a higher sense of belonging for each student (Katz, 2012). The division social worker visits the school on a weekly basis and provides support to individuals and classrooms. Students engage in sessions where empathy, compassion and respect are of utmost importance. To encourage these same values, Respect Education is taught in the middle years classes. At the high school level, the teachers work alongside the students to facilitate positive peer relationships. Social success is a crucial area of focus at the classroom level.

### **Supporting Academic Success for All Learners**

Academically, the school has created various opportunities for teachers to support all students in being successful. Teachers are currently being given professional development days to meet as professional learning communities (PLCs), with a focus on inclusion and differentiation to meet the needs of all learners. Teachers believe strongly that “with an increase in student need there is a higher need for resources in the school and classroom” (Wiltse, Johnston, & Yang, 2014, p. 210). Consequently, the school principal has to make important decisions about how to distribute financial resources to support all teachers and students in an equitable approach (Pollack & Zirkel, 2013). Additional resource support has been added to several classes where extra student support is required. The early years’ classrooms have embraced play-based and explorative learning, encompassing student interest and therefore increasing student engagement. A shift in focus for all teachers from content-based to critical thinking and 21st century skills has taken place over the last couple years. The principal plays a supportive role in guiding teachers to create inclusive and equitable classrooms that support academic achievement for all scholars.

The classroom, where students spend the majority of their school day, has arguably the most influence on academic success. Professional development in the area of inclusion is key, “to help teachers better understand what such practices might look like” (Woodcock & Hardy, 2017, p. 683). Additionally, teachers focus on differentiating instruction, activities, and assessment to meet the learning styles of all students, in recognition that good teaching practice is not a “one-size-fits-all” model (Davies, Herbst, & Reynolds, 2008, p. 53). It is important to offer students choice, pay attention to their interests, and listen to what they believe they need to achieve their goals, because “student voice can support teachers in reframing classroom practice” (Kane & Chimwayange, 2014, p. 65). With the classroom focus on inclusion and differentiation, an increase in student achievement is slowly being noticed in McCreary School.

To support students who struggle academically, it is critical to provide extra opportunities to increase their knowledge and understanding so that they, too, may experience success. In McCreary School, as proven by school-specific data, many of those students are Aboriginal. Lessons are now infused with Aboriginal perspectives and the Seven Teachings, in order to foster engagement by these minority students. With an increase in student interest, attendance is slowly increasing, leading to increased student achievement for students who may otherwise struggle with their learning.

Teachers in McCreary School are providing students with additional opportunities to increase their knowledge and understanding, particularly in literacy and numeracy. Early literacy

intervention support is provided to give students a boost in their reading. Resources, such as levelled books, are given to students to take home for extra practice. A free program, “Kindergarten Here I Come,” is offered to all students in pre-kindergarten to prepare them for school, providing “an excellent opportunity to hone precursor social and academic skills that facilitate kindergarten and school entry success” (Pagani, Jalbert, Lapointe, & Hébert, 2006, p. 209). Giving students as much practice as possible in academics is an excellent method to increase literacy and numeracy knowledge and understanding for all students. Within the school and individual classrooms, various opportunities are being provided by teachers in order to support all students to achieve success.

## Conclusion

McCreary School’s diverse student population, despite the various challenges it may face, is starting to experience more equity in learning. Diversity poses challenges for creating equity, because students in the minority (ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and ability) typically experience a more difficult path to attainment of success, as indicated by school-specific data. The teaching staff at McCreary School agree that a more equitable learning atmosphere must be created within the school and classrooms. In generating the school plan, the staff identified three areas where changes need to occur. Meeting the basic daily needs of children, and changes at the school and classroom level in both social and academic domains, are critical for creating a sense of acceptance, safety, and achievement. The range of diverse students presents a challenge for creating an equitable learning environment, for which teachers are working hard to provide a range of equitable opportunities to support success for all students.

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