Abstract

Many Aboriginal students face extraordinary challenges as they enter and move through the school system. The risk associated with poverty plays a large role in an Aboriginal child’s early childhood development, including delayed cognitive and social development. As well, many Aboriginal students feel the neglect of their cultural heritage and the ability to speak their language. An after-school program designed to provide cultural and linguistic enrichment to struggling Aboriginal students would be beneficial to their social and academic success.

Existing research supports the success of after-school programs. Examining a particular social group and the factors that put them at risk is part of the process of identifying a target population for an after-school program. Poverty is one of the factors that contribute to at-risk behaviours in Aboriginal children. Poverty plays a significant role in childhood development, as its effects can last a lifetime. The education system also has a history of contributing to the disengagement of Aboriginal students. A sense of disconnection has affected academic performance and high school completion for many Aboriginal students. The loss of language and cultural heritage are also factors that contribute to at-risk behaviours. The combined factors make it easy to choose Aboriginal children as the target population for an after-school program.

After-school programming for Aboriginal children needs to start in the early years, as this is a very important period of time in the development of an individual. A stimulating environment is crucial to the brain development of young children (McCain & Mustard, 1999, as cited in Neuman, 2009). Early childhood is a time of tremendous cell growth and neural wiring in the brain, which continues through life but is at its most intense in the first three years (Neuman, 2009). Having an environment rich in language, sensory input, and social interaction helps the neural pathways to develop and grow (Preston, Cottrell, Pelletier, & Pearce, 2012).

The impact of poverty on early life is profound. Children living in poverty experience stressors that affect brain development (Neuman, 2009; Schibli & D’Angiulli, 2001). The learning and social development of a child are then affected, which in turn influence a child’s ability to succeed in the school environment. In 2009, 639,000 children in Canada lived in poverty (Family Service Toronto, 2011, p. 2). Thus, 10% of Canadian children live in poverty (Family Service Toronto, 2011, p. 1; Schibli & D’Angiulli, 2001, p. 17). Given these numbers, early intervention is imperative for poverty-stricken families and children.

Early intervention for families living in poverty has become an important part of Canadian government funding and programming. Educational programs that promote early childhood development are found all over Canada (Preston et al., 2012). For example, the Aboriginal Head Start Program (AHSP) provides education, support, and care to Aboriginal children and their families. AHSP also promotes Aboriginal pedagogies and strives to incorporate Aboriginal language and culture in its programming. Despite this early intervention, many Aboriginal students still display a lack of school preparedness when they enter kindergarten.

Lack of school readiness has become an indicator of at-risk behaviours in young Aboriginal children. When the Early Development Instrument (EDI) was administered to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal kindergarten children in Saskatchewan, early childhood environment was found to play a key role in the children’s developmental and learning abilities (Muhajarine, 2011). Poverty, lone-parent families, crowded households, neighborhood context, and marginalization also
played key roles in the at-risk behaviours found in young Aboriginal children. When a child’s life begins with such deficits, risk behaviours inevitably arise in Aboriginal children as they move into and through the school system.

Aboriginal students are more likely to experience poor nutrition, obesity, dental problems, and other health issues, and to have exposure to drugs, alcohol, abuse, and neglect (Neuman, 2009). Most poverty-ridden Aboriginal children live in neglected neighborhoods and have less access to extra-curricular activities (Forsyth & Heine, 2008). As a result of these factors, children living in poverty experience numerous learning and developmental issues (Schibli & D’Angiulli, 2001).

The effects of poverty on children have lasting consequences. Issues with prosocial and anti-social behaviours are evident early in a child’s school career (Muhajarine, 2011; Wright et al., 2012). In addition, the sense of being stigmatized by poverty can lead to feelings of low self-esteem and depression (Schibli & D’Angiulli, 2001). High school dropout rates for Aboriginal students are high, resulting in low employment rates (Maclver). The poor performance of Aboriginal students in the school system needs to be examined in order to understand why students struggle.

The educational system has led to the marginalization of Aboriginal students, due to the Canadian government’s attempt to assimilate Aboriginal students into mainstream society (Muhajarine, 2011; Weenie, 2008). Godlewksa, Moore, and Bednasek (2010) initiated an extensive examination of the Ontario curriculum from grades 1 to 12, with the aim of finding out how well curriculum covered Aboriginal issues. They discovered that the Canadian curriculum created purposeful ignorance in the lives of Ontario students. As a result, Canadians students have very little knowledge of Aboriginal issues. Godlewksa et al (2010) also found that curriculum portrayed Aboriginal life as an historical phenomenon and not a modern one. In her study of place-based learning theory, Friedel (2011) found that Aboriginal youth were inundated by stereotypical images of what it means to be Aboriginal and often resisted or rejected notions that are presented in mainstream schools. The Aboriginal heritage content within the educational field has had negative educational, social, and employment consequences for Aboriginal people in Canada.

The Canadian school system continues to deal with the issues that Aboriginal students face. The Manitoba government has attempted to remedy the ignorance surrounding Aboriginal issues by including many outcomes in the social studies curriculum document for kindergarten to Senior 4 (Manitoba Education, 2003). Studies and research projects have been initiated to try to incorporate culture-based practices and Aboriginal pedagogy into programming. When Nielsen (2009) initiated the Learning for Understanding through Culturally-Inclusive Imaginative Development (LUCID) project in British Columbia, he found that language had positive effects on cultural transmission and community wellness. Hence, to be effective, Aboriginal programming needs to include Native language and culture.

Language is a fundamental part of cultural, social, and intellectual development. It also plays an important role in the socialization of a child. One’s ability to think is dependent on language acquisition, so children who read and write well experience success in school (Nielsen, 2009). Also true is the startling fact that the number of Aboriginal people with the ability to speak an Aboriginal language is in decline (Guevremont & Kohen, 2011). Language fluency affects thinking and speaking, which affects school success, socio-emotional development, and the cultural continuity of a community (Nielsen, 2009). Efforts to teach Aboriginal students their language have been undertaken in many communities around Canada (Guevremont & Kohen, 2011). Language is therefore an important part of Aboriginal programming.

Language acquisition plays a key role in cultural transmission. In the past, Aboriginal parents had a rich and traditional orality (Weenie, 2008). Children acquired cultural knowledge through various forms of meaningful stories. Experiential learning took place outside the walls of a classroom and was a significant form of learning and socialization (Friedel, 2011). Activities such as storytelling, crafts such as knitting and weaving, and traditional dancing were valued.
parts of a child’s education. It was through these types of activities that language transference and social connections were made (Nielsen, 2009). Experiential learning and language infusion are thus necessary means of imparting cultural heritage and Aboriginal identity (Nielsen, 2009). All of these methods of learning can be incorporated into after-school programming, to supplement the teaching time that occurs during daytime school hours.

After-school programs have become a very important part of educational programming and childhood experience. Children spend about 67 hours each week engaged in free, unstructured activities (Boys & Girls Club of Canada [BGCC], 2011, p. 3). This free time accounts for more actual time than the structured time spent in school. In their longitudinal study, Little, Wimer, and Weiss (2008) found that after-school programs have a positive effect on academic performance, socio-emotional development, health and wellness, and risk prevention behaviours. Getting children involved early in meaningful after-school program activities is very important for future student success.

Early intervention is very important for school success. Children experience a significant amount of developmental change between 6 and 12 years of age (BGCC, 2011). The peer experiences that children establish during this time period are especially important, as they contribute to increased self-esteem, lowered aggression, lowered adolescent delinquency, and fewer emotional problems (Wright et al., 2010). After-school programs provide the supportive and social environment that nurtures this prosocial development. Since a targeted approach is more effective when designing an after-school program (Neuman, 2009), Aboriginal children benefit from an after-school program that focuses on their particular needs, including their needs for positive social interaction.

An after-school program that focuses on Aboriginal children and their families is one strategy that can help to minimize the risk factors associated with Aboriginal poverty and low academic achievement. The inclusion of family in an after-school program is very significant (Little et al., 2008). The success of any programming depends upon community support. In order to procure community support, there must be concerted effort to understand the targeted community (Nielsen, 2009). Friedel (2011) suggested that Aboriginal people desired more involvement in non-formal education programs for their children. For the success of a culturally-based after-school program, parental involvement needs to be built into the program from its inception (Fashola, 2002). With this understanding in mind, the inclusion of families in the organization of cultural activities, such as feasts, cultural dances, and sweats, are required elements.

After-school programs have greater success if they involve the community. The support of Aboriginal mentors is a significant factor in the success of the Rec and Read Mentor program in Winnipeg (Johnson & Halas, 2011). The success of this program has been credited to the mentorship provided to Aboriginal children by Aboriginal youth. Friedel (2011) also recommended that Aboriginal youth become more involved in the restoration of Aboriginal culture and language. Through the inclusion of mentorship opportunities built into after-school programming, Aboriginal students have the opportunity to be leaders as well as learners (Johnson & Halas, 2011). Opportunities to lead and to actively participate in an after-school program has positive effects on the youth involved (BGCC, 2011). MacIver (2012) found that an investment in culturally engaging curriculum content, along with positive relationships with adults and teachers, can have an influence on Aboriginal student's completion of high school. Aboriginal children and youth need to have opportunities to socialize in positive ways, to experience leadership, and to reconnect with their cultural heritage, in order to break the cycle of poverty and dysfunction.

Aboriginal children are a marginalized group who experience poverty and the associated risk factors. Risk factors begin early in their lives and continue throughout their developing years. Having a program that begins in the early stages of a child's school career is crucial to building the prosocial behaviours, academic skills, and cultural and linguistic identity that Aboriginal students need for positive development. After-school programs are one way to
engage Aboriginal students, in order to engender the feelings of belonging and achievement necessary for high school and post-secondary success.

References


About the Author

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