Final Report

Cynthia Gallop - #101716

Project Title: *Understanding Success: Exploring the Experiences of Former Students of the Plains Indian Cultural Survival School (PICSS)*

1.1 Project Summary

There are still many barriers to education completion for Indigenous learners in Canada. While not always directly linked to combating racism, Culturally Responsive Schooling and Education (CRS/E) is one approach that has been employed over the years to improve the educational outcomes of Indigenous youth. This qualitative hermeneutic project offered an opportunity to explore the experiences of Indigenous alumni who attended a CRS during the 1980's and 1990's. The participants reflected on both their negative experiences of attending mainstream schools, and the positive impact the CRS had on them 30 to 40 years after they graduated. The study findings support the results from research conducted around the world on the impact of racism, and CRS/E systems on Indigenous learners. Although closing the academic achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is a shared and urgent policy and practice priority, we see few examples of CRS/E programs in Canada today.

1.2 Project Outcomes and Impacts

In recent years, researchers have found Culturally Responsive Schooling and Education (CRS/E) has an important link to Indigenous sovereignty, as CRS/E democratizes schooling for students and gives them a critical voice. This important education movement also promotes community-based accountability through respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and relationships (Brayboy and McCarty, 2010; McCarty & Lee, 2014). Although closing the academic achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is a shared and urgent policy and practice priority, and CRS/E programs have been proven to be quite successful for Indigenous youth, we see few examples of these schools in Canada today. This is partly due to the fact that educators still internalize dominant Western understanding of "education". This understanding privileges Western academic knowledge over Indigenous cultural knowledge systems. CRS programs are also challenged by a focus on academic testing, and educators needing to teach to the test (Hurtado Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, Allen, 1999). This study answered the question, "how might former students of the PICSS understand their success? How might it relate to their time at PICSS?". It is positive to note, the findings of this study support the results from research conducted around the world on the impact of racism, and CRS/E systems on Indigenous learners. Most importantly, the impact from attending PICSS persisted over time, with all of the participants stating the school supported their current success and wellbeing. Moving forward, additional research is needed to better understand the long-term impacts of Indigenous focused curricular initiatives, and the best measures to determine effectiveness or success (Milne, 2017). More research is also needed on how to help youth identify, confront and resist the racist assaults on themselves and their culture.