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“It’s Home”:

Listening to Female Post-Secondary
Students in Northern Manitoba, Canada

By Maureen Simpkins and
Marleny M. Bonnycastle

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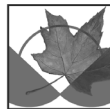
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**UNIVERSITY
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Abstract

At the University College of the North, women make up approximately 80% of the student population in the Faculty of Arts and in the Nursing program (UCN, 2012). In the University of Manitoba's Northern Social Work Program, 87% of students are female. These reflect a trend across Canada, where 3 out of 4 Aboriginal students are female (Holmes, 2006). We know anecdotally and from experience that the majority of those women also have children, many are single-parent mothers and many have responsibilities for their extended family. This means that these students tend to come and go over a number of years rarely finishing a 4 year degree

in 4 years. Using "retention rates" typically used by many post-secondary institutions, the "success" of students who don't follow the traditional 4 year path is made invisible in the statistics. This invisibility leads us to look to other ways of measuring success. In this paper, we try to answer two questions. First, how do female students define and measure their own successes? Second, what factors have contributed to their successes and what impact has their success had on family and community? In answering these questions, insights are provided that underline both the individual and the collective returns of post-secondary education in a northern region.¹

¹An earlier version of this paper entitled "We're in this Together" has been published in the Arctic Yearbook 2014 – (October 31, 2014), The University of the Arctic, Reykjavik, Iceland.

Background

It is impossible to talk about post-secondary education in the Canadian north without talking about the historic and far reaching impacts of colonialism. Wilson and Battiste (2011, p. 13) review a series of models of education in Canada beginning with assimilation and enfranchisement. They found that the focus of Canadian governmental policies toward Aboriginal people, both pre and post confederation, was to “civilize” the Indian. Furthermore, the 1857 “Civilization Act” stated that Indians could acquire all the rights and privileges of citizenship when “they could read and write either English or French, be free of debt and be of ‘good moral character’” (Kulchyski, 2007, p. 55). Learning to read and write and gain a Euro-Canadian education has long been tied to assimilationist policies of the Canadian state and the history of residential schools is a prime example of this. Aboriginal children were removed from their families and placed in residential schools, often far from their home communities (Wilson & Battiste, 2011, p. 13). The abuses that often took place in these institutions have been well documented (Milloy, 1999).

Today in the north, the residential school period is still within living memory for communities and families. While education is often seen as a

way out of poverty and into a better life, education is still connected to the negative experiences of older relations (MacKinnon, 2013, p. 51). Education is also “viewed as something that draws students away from who they are” (Tierney, 1993, p. 311). Not only have northern students had to travel out of the north for a post-secondary education, it has also taken them away from their cultural knowledge. For many Aboriginal learners in the north, the legacy of colonization and oppression has led to internalized beliefs of inadequacy that often inhibit motivation (Hart, 2010; Laenuie, 2000; MacKinnon, 2012). Many models and approaches to Aboriginal education have attempted to address the fact that often Aboriginal students arrive into post-secondary programs at a disadvantage, having faced many barriers. Some of the barriers faced by Aboriginal students today are: inadequate educational preparation, language, cultural difference, lack of role models, funding, intergenerational family and social problems and geographic location (Anonson, Desjarlais, Nixon, Whiteman, & Bird, 2008; Malatest & Associates, 2004; Martin & Kipling, 2006; Mendelson, 2006; Sloane-Seale, Wallace, & Levin, 2001).

Wilson and Battiste (2011) describe various student support models from the late 1960s onwards

that attempt to address the particular needs of the Aboriginal learner. As the number of Aboriginal students began to rise in post-secondary programs in the 1970s, universities and colleges started to add Aboriginal content and programming (15). The Access programs initiated in Manitoba in the early 1980s were designed to “admit into post-secondary studies those Manitobans facing specific participation barriers so significant that without the program, they would have little or no chance of success” (Hikel, 1994 cited in Clare, 2013, p. 62).

Today northern Manitobans have more accessible opportunities to participate in post-secondary education such as the University College of the North (UCN), the University of Manitoba-Northern Social Work Program (UM NSWP) and Inter-University Services.² The UM NSWP offers full and part time post-secondary education through different options that include traditional education, ACCESS Program (Alcorn & Levin, 1998; Clare, 2013) and cohort modalities. These three options provide the opportunity to attain a university degree for adults who have had social, economic and cultural barriers as well as a lack of formal education. These options enable students to take classes in or near their home communities and to integrate work experience

activities. Similarly, UCN offers classroom and distance delivery post-secondary education in a variety of degrees. In both universities the student support model encompasses activities such as the active recruitment of Aboriginal faculty and staff, northern course content, childcare, Elders in residence, peer mentoring and scholarship and bursary programs targeting Aboriginal and northern students with financial needs.

While there has been much research done in the area of Aboriginal post-secondary students’ success rates in Canada, these studies often come from a deficit perspective by focusing on the disparities between Aboriginal populations and the rest of Canada. (Currie et al., 2011; Mendelson, 2006; Smith, Gold, McAlister, & Sullivan-Bentz, 2011). These studies cite statistics which suggest much higher dropout rates than the non-Aboriginal population due to lack of recruitment, geographic and financial barriers and issues such as enculturation, discrimination and alcohol use as reasons for lower education rates. Other themes considered in the literature are potential employment outcomes for post-secondary students who are successful compared to those who do not complete degrees (Hull, 2009; Krebs, Hurlburt, & Schwartz, 1988).

² Inter-University Services (IUS) is a consortium of Manitoban post-secondary institutions that offer face-to-face and online courses to communities north of latitude 53.

Situating the Research

The city of Thompson is the largest semi-urban center in northern Manitoba and is situated 750 kilometers north of Winnipeg. Thompson acts as an economic and service ‘hub’ for northern Manitoban communities, including commercial, educational, recreational and medical services. Employment opportunities such as the Vale nickel mine or Manitoba Hydro also contribute to inward migration from outlying communities. The City of Thompson services an area that covers 396,000 square kilometers, which includes 32 communities and totals approximately 72,000 people. The average age of a Thompson resident is 30.6, well below the provincial median age of 38. Regionally, the area surrounding Thompson has a median age of only 24, and this trend is growing within the region’s Aboriginal communities. In communities such as Garden Hill and Split Lake, the average age is under 20. Thompson’s current population is estimated as 50% Aboriginal. The city is located on the territory

of the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation (Thompson Economic Diversification Working Group, 2012).

This research project is a collaboration between UCN and UM-NSWP in Thompson, Manitoba. The female students who participated in this project were either current upper students or graduates of these programs. At the UCN in 2010–11, 74% of graduates identified as Aboriginal and approximately 80% of students in the Faculty of Arts are female (UCN, 2012). Similarly within the UM-NSWP 87% of students are female and the majority identify as Aboriginal (Bonnycastle, 2013). Social work is typically a discipline that attracts more females than males. Typical challenges for northern female students are often the lack of consistent child-care, affordable housing, as well as emotional, academic and financial supports (Bonnycastle & Prentice, 2011). They are also typically first generation post-secondary students with few educational role models.

Methodology

Our research takes a qualitative as well as an appreciative approach in order to listen to the life experiences and educational pathways of northern female students. An appreciative approach emphasizes what works rather than focusing on specific problems. Participants themselves identify what is important and of value (D. L. Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008). We investigate how northern female students define and measure their own successes. In particular, what factors have contributed to their successes and what impact has their success had on family and community? While everyone likes to feel “successful”, many northern students do not have a reference point for what that feels like. When it happens, it can be life changing for unexpected reasons. There is a need to capture the unexpected or unintentional outcomes of post-secondary education which are often more personal as well as collective in nature, and not just the harder outcomes such as completion rates or employment (MacKinnon, 2013, p. 56). Students describe their success in terms of personal

changes but also changes they have witnessed in their children, families and communities. By interpreting emerging themes within the interview data, this research will also suggest indicators of success that may be more appropriate for northern students. We believe that this data will also contribute to discussions and policy on the collective vs the individual benefits of investing in place-based northern education.

Our research study responds to questions: how do female students define and measure their own successes? And what factors have contributed to their successes? We interviewed 27 female post-secondary students. All participants were volunteers and completed informed consent forms. We used qualitative methods and data was collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews, which used appreciative questions. Appreciative questions attempt to explore the participants’ best experiences (D. Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000). Approval for this research study was obtained from the University of Manitoba, Psychology/Sociology Research Ethics Board and UCN Ethics Board.

Demographics

The demographic data collected for this study shows that students who participated in this study were adults between 22 and 53 years old. The mean age was 36 years old. This data was very close to the median and mode, which was 35 years for the same group. This information illustrates the accessibility of post-secondary education that both universities offer to people at a mature age. Most of the

participants had children and 56% of them were single. Most of the students do not have family in Thompson as 63% came from other communities in the region and only 37% were raised in Thompson. The fact that most of the students interviewed were from surrounding communities, increased the challenges that students face, particularly with regards to consistent, quality childcare.

Findings

Meaning of Success

Personal Impacts

Some students talked about “doing what is right” for them personally, enjoying what they are doing, independence, overcoming adversities, reaching goals, and receiving positive feedback. Some examples of how aspects of personal growth were part of defining their own personal success:

“...learning to not be afraid and to be vocal and say what you need... [for example] “Hey, I need help” (#5);

“Just being confident enough with my own abilities. When I say confident, I mean even just that little bit just to admit that I really just don’t get it or I really don’t know and that faculty are there to help. I don’t think people really understand how much you guys are really there to help and I felt so supported when I walked into your office, or when I walk into G’s office” (#11);

“...getting independence...and getting the skills to get a job.” (#5)

The personal aspects of “success” also include the realization that being a student has created new possibilities for their future both personally and

career-wise. The fact that they are persevering and finishing something and the observation that the university degree opened doors had a ripple effect upon family and community.

“Finishing and not giving up... being able to say there’s a reason why I did this and at the end ... look at it.... Like I’m successful now, but then I won’t stop there. It will continue you know” (#7);

“Success is being positive, keeping a positive outlook on everything, not dwelling on the past, dwelling on mistakes, instead of that, learning from them” (#25);

“I think success is when you truly enjoy what you’re doing and truly feel in your heart... when you go to sleep at night that you’re doing the right thing and that you’re helping ... the community as a whole.” (#18)

Impact on Children, Family and Community

The majority of those interviewed defined success in terms of the impact on those around them such as children, family and community. Feelings of success also came about through the realization that their children viewed their education aspirations in positive ways. Being proud of educational accomplishment often translated into being a better parent both as a role model and also

in terms of new found confidence and a broader knowledge base to pass on to their children.

“Yeah that’s mainly my driving force is my children... making a better life for my kids”. (#8)

I think their own self-motivation to want better for their families. I think that’s number one cause I think a lot of women do it because they want something better... not for themselves but for their own families.. or a way out of something that they know is not for them, like living in an isolated community for example. So they want something better, so they come with goals in mind that if achieved... then my families lives will be better and their own lives too because they are enriching and they are fulfilling something within them for their own children. (#4)

Of course family is going to be impacted. For example, Mom’s not here all the time now, we have to be more independent. The community is impacted because there’s another social worker out there that’s going to help others. I’m more involved now with drumming, ceremonies, the grandmother’s council. I was able to help the community overall and have my children also involved in those types of activities too and ceremonies and things. My family now they turn to me a lot and they ask life questions and because I’m not judgemental and I’m given certain gifts to help people to see things and it comes back to the reflecting back. Those are the types of impacts that I see. (#26)

I’m more connected with my community. My connection to my culture has increased dramatically. I’m building my own professional development, so I would say that has helped and that has improved and changed. Overall school has influenced me to be more on top of my game... more on top of who I am and all around, so that I can just do good in all that I do. (#3)

Completing a post secondary program often meant being able to work in the field of their

choice and putting theory into practice which in turn is an inspiration to community members. There was also the sense that they could now help others in a more educated and useful way and also develop a sense of belonging.

Yeah, I think it has an impact on my community because I’m fairly well known. I think people can see that I went from one type of a life to another and that people can change. I think I’m a support to a lot of Metis people you know. They see that I’ve succeeded and they know that Metis can succeed as well. (# 1)

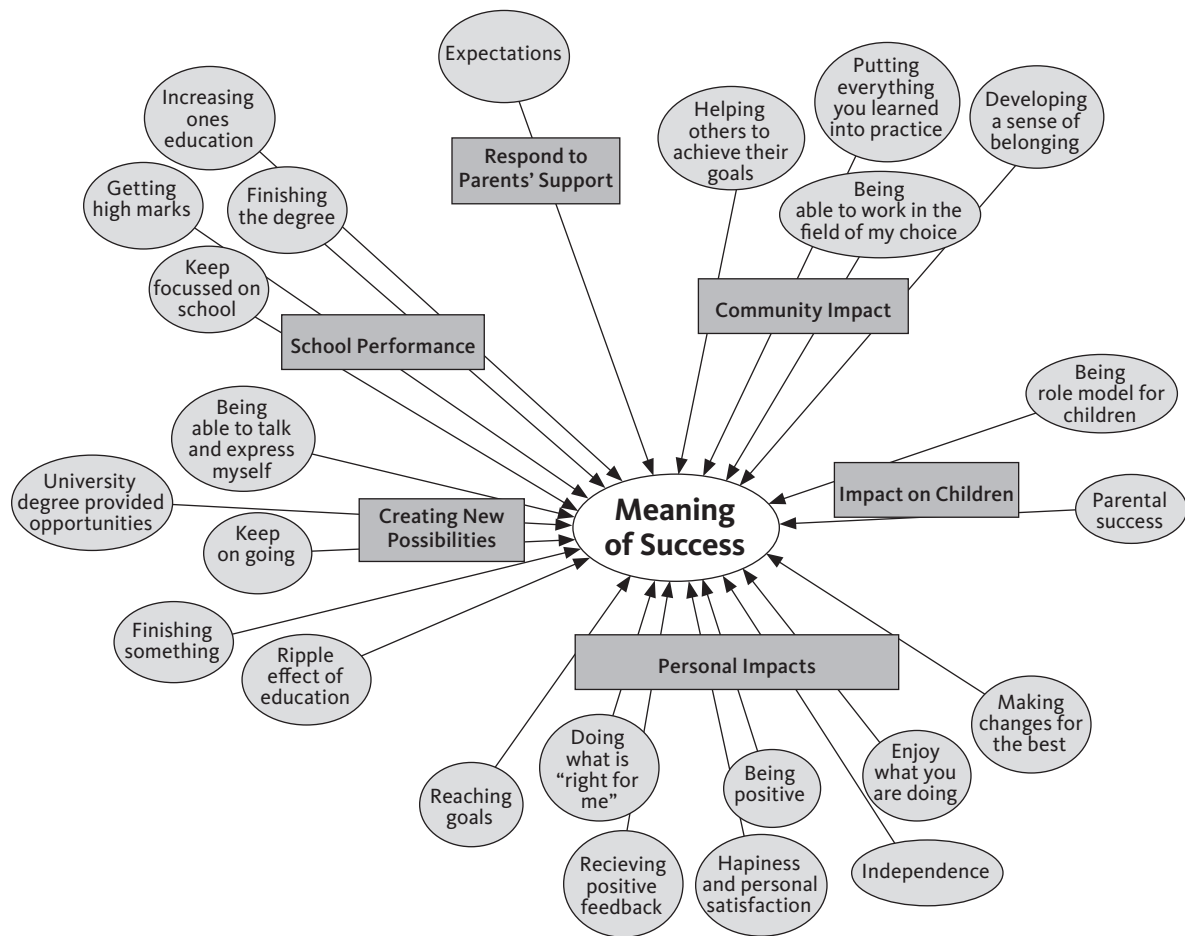
And then being that role model for my community too ... I’ve seen a lot of parents and their kids wanting to go into school you know. So it’s really nice seeing that you can influence people that way. (#12)

And in my community, I feel that I have empowered some. There are women that have decided to come to school even though they felt they couldn’t. I’ve seen other people sometimes look at me and they they say “you’re finished your nursing”? And when I say “yes”... “wow... that’s great”! they say. They often say that they are not sure they can do it with kids.. and I said “look at me. I have kids and I did it.” (#9)

How do northern female students describe the meaning of success?

Figure 1 shows the participants’ description of traditional and non-traditional types of success. Results from the study showed that success was not only defined in terms of the more traditional outcomes such as getting high marks, meeting parents’ expectations and finishing a degree. These are captured in the upper left of the Figure 1 under school performance. Success was also captured in terms of unintentional or unexpected outcomes tied to personal growth, family and community. When defining their own success, students talked about: improvement in

FIGURE 1 Meaning of Success



communication skills and confidence; feeling independent; how education furthered their connection to culture and community; as well as the fact that education created personal and career possibilities that they had not thought possible.

The results located in the right side of the Figure 1 represent how participants were able to describe success not only in terms of academic outcomes but also in terms of their increasing understanding of Aboriginal history and culture. This allowed them to learn from the past and appreciate and broaden their knowledge. They also see success in terms of the applicability of

their learning to become better parents and also open new opportunities for their children. Success was also defined in terms of their contributions to their children, family and community by offering them new roles models and showing them what changes are possible and how those changes influenced well-being for themselves, their families and their communities. In summary, the findings confirm how students have been able to increase human capital in relationship to education and economic aspirations as well as social capital in relationship to community and family.

Factors of success:
Supports from different sites

Peers and classmates

Participants in our study commented how they support each other both logistically and emotionally:

I see their struggles and sometimes a lot of them are financial, but I also went to school with a lot of women that have a lot more barriers than I do and I really admired them. I made sure that I was supportive of them as just being their classmate or if they needed a ride or whatever. Just even talking about what we are working on this week or whatever. I have to get this done and you know my daughter was sick or you know, just listening to them... listening to each other talk about what we're doing or what someone is going through. (#10)

Team work and solidarity is another approach when supporting each other:

Just to be understanding cause we're all in this together... we're searching for something together and I think if you realize that you're going to be open to supporting one another. It's always motivating to see women that have pursued something and achieved something and they did it with sometimes very little means and not a lot of support. (#10)

Students build relationships and share resources:

We work together and we talk amongst each other and we tell each other stuff. Like for example one of the students that I work with had a hard time finding places to go, places for their children to go. They wanted them to be active and so our group gave her a list of places to go [with her children]. So it's just confiding with somebody or letting somebody know what's bothering you. That person may know somebody else that has either experienced it or you know somebody that can help in dealing with it. (#23)

Working together on class projects was also a source of support among female students.

More group work, because when we come to school after hours we take into consideration "okay, do you have kids?", "are there any recreation activities that you need to go to?" It's just that on the scheduling part, we find out we can't come because I've got to travel for work or my daughter has gymnastics that evening. So, when we do work together we sometimes take a break and we ask "hey, where did you come from?" "Do you have family here?" And we just talk. (#23)

Family

For many of the students, family was a foundational source of support, although not all students had family close by. A significant number of students come from northern communities in the region.

I honestly grew up thinking that I wasn't good enough even though I was an A student and I just always had the feeling I couldn't do it and I learned that I can even though we've overcome all of these odds or had to go through all of this... I can do anything and I've got the support of my family and I think for me I also learned that getting a bad grade on a paper is nothing compared to the other stuff that we've gone through. (#5)

University

The majority of students also described how going to school close to home made their academic success possible. Being able to pursue a post-secondary education in northern Manitoba where university programs included Aboriginal course content, multidisciplinary teaching and small class sizes all contributed to reducing geographical and cultural barriers, as a participant commented, "Being here in the north is one of the conditions that has made it [success] possible" (#6).

Having purpose

What students meant by “having a purpose” included the desire to get off welfare, being the light for their children’s future and keeping the bigger picture in mind. For instance a participant pointed out, “... every time I wanted to quit, I’d just think “do you want to live on welfare? You can’t give your children what they want” (#16). Another participant affirmed, “Being here at UCN finally made me get off the fence and start actually taking action and you know ...I haven’t drank in almost two years like that was a pledge I made to the creator... so that’s my beliefs. It’s a tradition” (#6).

Community

Attending post-secondary education in the north allows students to keep their connection with their families and to continue contributing to the development of their own communities. The transformation and growth that the students experience is evident to those around them, and in the end this contributes to the elevation of their self-respect and sense of pride: “The respect that I’ve gained and I feel like I get that same respect in the community... once I’ve finished just staying in the north, learning in the north, graduating in the north, teaching in the north” (#14).

Increasing post-secondary education possibilities in northern and remote communities is having an impact on communities in terms of capacity building. Communities are educating their own people who will be the future service providers and educators:

You don’t have to go down to Brandon. You don’t have to go down to Winnipeg... you can stay here with your family and you can get that and you can have that amazing future you wanted and you don’t have to run away. I think that’s what holds a lot of people back is having to leave everything you’ve known. Not many people are going to pack up and leave and go to a school in a whole different city. (#14)

The students in this study clearly state that their successes are interconnected with their culture and the north as their home. Their successes involve a deepening of their understanding of self and the world around them in order to contribute to family and community.

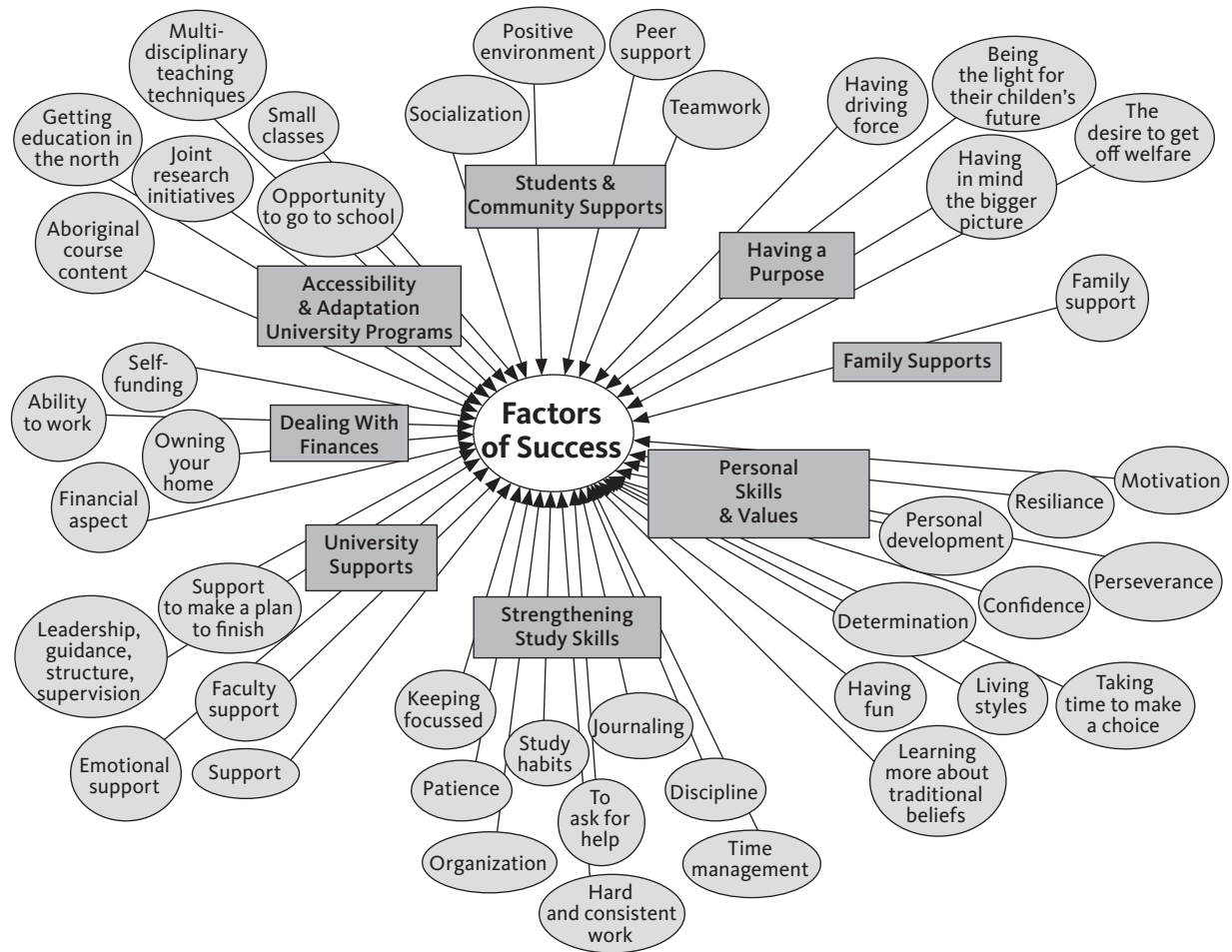
I think that doing everything here and staying here is going to be a positive aspect on the community because this is something new. Not many people have been able to do their entire careers or educational careers up north and then apply that learning to working here until recently. So I think it’s exciting and I’m hoping it will have an impact in the community and on students striving to work to graduate and raise up the graduation percentages and promote more people to go into secondary and post-secondary because it’s home you know. (#14)

What key factors contributed to student female successes?

Figure 2 shows the diverse levels of traditional and unintentional factors that contributed to the success of post-secondary female students. They include university and financial supports, accessibility and adaptation to university programs, strengthening study habits, personal skills and values, having purpose, family and community supports and being able to keep connected to the north and their own culture. These factors are related with individual and institutional motivation and commitment to northern and Aboriginal students.

When describing what factors contributed to their success, some of the main themes were the support from other students, community and family. This included the impact of going to school in a positive environment where teamwork was emphasized as well as going to school close to home. Research shows that one of the “biggest differences in completion rates were found in relation to how easy it was to socialize with

FIGURE 2 Factors of Success



other students and how well students worked together” (Hull, 2009, p. 61).

Female students in the UCN and UM-NSWP have been able to succeed not only by the increased accessibility and opportunities to attend to post-secondary education close to home, but also by

the different kinds of supports received by the academic institutions, family, and community. These supports combined, provide these students with purpose and motivation which have been the core elements to succeed within post-secondary education as well as other areas of their lives.

Discussion

While there have been many new approaches and improvements to the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal students since the 1970s (Wilson & Battiste, 2011), there is still much work to be done. There is a need to rethink the term “retention” particularly in the context of northern Aboriginal students. In the previous section, the voices of northern female students are quoted, grounding the emerging themes within their life experience and their educational paths. While systemically student success and retention is measured in terms of completion and economic gain, the benefits for northern Aboriginal students extends beyond this. “Higher education is valued for capacity building within Aboriginal nations toward their goals of self-government and self-determination” (Danziger, 1996 cited in Pidgeon, 2008–2009, p. 34).

Tierney (1993) identifies assumptions held by universities that serve as the basis for the ways they integrate students into the institution and which guide the idea of retention as the measuring stick for success. One of the assumptions is that the completion of post-secondary education is “the movement from one stage of life to another [which] necessitates leaving a previous state and moving into another” (cited in Kirk-

ness & Barnhardt, 2001, p. 4). Thus, currently, success is measured continuously along the path between starting and completing a degree.

Participants also associate success to the availability of post-secondary education in northern communities as they can then stay immersed in their own culture and northern milieu as well as to keep connected with their families who continue to provide support to the students and their children. This way, there is not the disruption or disconnection between themselves and their communities and this helps them to continue strengthening themselves as individuals and community members. When students defined what success meant to them, they consistently talked in terms of their own personal successes and this was very much connected to their family, children and community. Participants highlighted their contribution to a better life for themselves and their community. These insights are consistent with the literature on Aboriginal education. Cappon (2008) asserts, “Learning is what nurtures relationships between the individual, the family and the community and Creation. It is the process of transmitting values and identity. It is the guarantor of cultural continuity. Its value to the individual cannot be separated from

its contribution to the collective well-being” (p. 14). He goes on to say that the value and success of the individual cannot be separated from its contribution to the collective well-being, which in turn strengthens a community’s social capital (61). Silver (2013) also describes the transformative or “ripple effect” of the first Aboriginal person making the decision to enter post-secondary education, then others in the family often follow. Graduates often become agents of change in their communities (p. 15).

In 2007, the Canadian Council on Learning along with the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre with contributions from First Nations, Inuit and Metis communities, launched “Redefining How Success is Measured in Aboriginal Learning” (2008). One of the main components of the model they created emphasized the importance of the individual’s personal development. Cappon (2008) asserts, “Personal harmony and balance comes when an individual learns to balance the spiritual, physical, mental and emotional” aspects of self (pp. 63–64). Further, Pidgeon (2008) advocates for a model of Aboriginal student persistence that accommodates culture, language and ways of knowing. A holistic model would incorporate the inter-relationships of the individual, family and community (354). In other words, in a northern Aboriginal context you cannot talk about the success of the individual without linking this to family, community and culture.

Some students talked about “learning who I am” culturally and historically through the process of academic and personal exploration. Jessica Ball (2004) reflects on this with her assertion that, “In many Indigenous communities, generations of people do not know their own culture of origin or their heritage language, and their identities as members of an Indigenous community have been attenuated” (p.455). Similarly, the students in this study describe how seeing themselves within the curriculum and being encouraged to explore their cultures resulted in more positive self esteem for themselves and

their children. As described by a participant on p. 7 “My connection to my culture has increased dramatically.” Similarly, Mackinnon (2013) asserts that programs that are effective and transformative are rooted in the experiences of Aboriginal learners and this creates the opportunity to “reflect on those experiences in a critical way, and [provides] a new way of thinking rooted in Aboriginal culture” (p. 57).

The students also affirmed that their northern post-secondary universities have for the most part been culturally sensitive by integrating Aboriginal knowledge and culture into their curriculum. This allowed students to explore Aboriginal knowledge and culture within their own territory. As they learn and grow, they are not separated from their culture and communities. Instead the student experience of post-secondary education was integrated with culture and community which increased their understanding and connection to traditions and culture.

Including courses on Aboriginal history, governance systems and culture has contributed to students feelings of being valued and important and in the end this contributes to increasing their self-esteem. This is important as Anonson et al. (2008) describe how Aboriginal students often have deficits in one or more of Maslow’s five hierarchy of needs: physiological, safety, love, belonging and esteem (279). The findings also underline the importance of peer and faculty support which contributes to feelings of safety, belonging and esteem.

The students interviewed described how both their peers and their instructors gave them a lot of advice and moral support. Friendship, comradeship and academic support was emphasized by participants as critical factors to succeed at school. Hull (2009) cites that “students had more success in friendly and cooperative post-secondary environments” (59). Each of the programs that these students are a part of are small hence most often everyone knows everyone and their families. This point reflects what Ball (2004) describes as a

“community of learners” approach to community based programming that evolves as the students, their families and community are made a part of the whole academic and social environment.

Students also discussed the realization that they were now role models for their children, families and communities. For instance, some participants commented on how they have been able to inspire new generations as most of them are first generation post-secondary students and consequently this impacts future generations. As Pidgeon (2008) asserts, “Aboriginal students do not necessarily have cultural capital of prior family experience with higher education so their knowledge of negotiation is very different from a student whose parents are university educated and are able to translate that form of capital to their children” (p.345). Pidgeon (2008) goes on to link cultural integrity with the formation of cultural capital. An example of cultural integrity would be when programs take into consideration the importance of intergenerational aspects of retention that recognizes the role of family and community in supporting the success of Aboriginal students (351).

Students appreciated the proximity to home of the programs they were enrolled in. Participants referred to ‘proximity’ as both a physical and a cultural closeness to their northern communities. A survey of former applicants for post-secondary funding from a First Nation community was conducted to examine post-secondary completion rates (Hull, 2009). There were a number of factors cited that overlapped with our findings. In terms of proximity to home, the survey showed, “those who attended programs located on or near the reserve had a higher completion rate (64%) than those who attended away from the reserve (46%)” (32). In the case of the University of Saskatchewan’s community-based northern nursing program, they found that the retention rates of Aboriginal students was 13% greater than the provincial norm (Anonson et al, 2008, 1). It has been recognized that it is often

important when attracting students into post-secondary education from remote communities, to provide the option of taking the program to the student (Cappon, 2008, 65; Holmes, 2006, p. 30). Battiste (2013) reinforces the importance of “place” for Aboriginal students, stating that the unique knowledge and relationships that Indigenous people derive from place and from homeland, is fundamental to who they are (p. 69). Providing the opportunity for students to complete a post-secondary degree in a northern location was described by our students as a key factor in their success.

Though the above comments express positive factors of success, there is a need to continue to modify policies and practices of post-secondary institutions to respond to the actual needs and experiences of northern and Aboriginal students. The experiences of the students interviewed reflects that the individual as well as collective returns of education are intricately interconnected. While individual or traditional indicators of success such as good grades or degree completion are important, so are the successes as reflected through and with family and community. A significant learning from this study is that the development of place-based learning across the north has the potential to begin to not only improve post-secondary graduation rates, but also to nurture more confident and skilled northern community members and leaders, cultivating the value of the social impact of post-secondary education and investing in personal and community transformation.

As discussed earlier in this section, there are vast differences in the way that post-secondary institutions and their funders view “retention” and student success as compared to northern students themselves. Barnhardt (2002) asks “can institutions change”? (351). Is it possible to measure student success in terms of the development of healthy students and the impact on family and community? These questions need to be continually reexamined as we move into the future.

Implications

Appreciative questions helped students to vocalize and conceptualize their successes and experiences of postsecondary education, reaffirm a sense of purpose in their education and highlight a positive core of successful experiences. Our study has confirmed the benefits of providing local post-secondary education to northern communities that increases access and creates a positive experience based on cultural integrity. By increasing opportunities for people who have experienced different barriers to get professional degrees, communities have increased their human and social capital. Silver (2013) also reiterates the importance of investing locally, “a goal of adult education is to develop the intellectual capacities and capabilities of individuals in such a way that their enhanced analytical and other skills are not “exported” but are “reinvested locally” in the fight against the poverty that is so damaging to education attainment” (11). Not only can students now receive a post-secondary education in the north, while continuing to contribute to their communities, many also want to pursue a career that enables them to remain in the north. Listening to student successes, we have been able to identify areas that could be strengthened as well as areas that could be used in terms of in-

dicators of success such as the inter-relationship of student, family and community.

In summary, the success of post-secondary female students includes traditional indicators such as fulfilling the academic requirements, creating new possibilities, and responding to the expectations of parents and sponsors. Interconnected with these are the more non-traditional indicators that are equally if not often more important to Aboriginal students. These include increasing: understanding and connection to culture, parenting skills, the ability to be role models for children, families and community and the reaffirmation of belonging to northern communities and of wanting to work for their people and their communities. These non-traditional indicators are in keeping with a more “wholistic model that incorporates the inter-connectedness of the physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual realms along with the inter-relationships of the individual, family, and community” (Pidgeon, 2008). It is also important that a holistic model be flexible to the location, both geographical and culture, and to the particular needs of the student population (354). In addition, our study reaffirms the importance of creating a safe, supportive and collaborative

learning community in which the students, faculty and staff work together to build relationships. Finally and perhaps the most important finding of this study is the social return on investment in post-secondary education for women in the north and how it has helped female students to discover and reaffirm their history, culture, sense of independence and self-esteem while remaining in the north and continuing to contribute to local and community development.

“Being able to pursue this ‘new buffalo’ will mean that future generations of Aboriginal peoples will not only have a special and unique ability to participate in post-secondary education, but will be able to acquire the tools that can one day enable them to contribute at the highest levels to the country they know as their homeland” (Stonechild, 2006, p. 138).

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