

INDIGENOUS GRADUATION COACH



NEW ROLE FOR AN OLD PROBLEM

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RATIONALE AND BACKGROUND

A study probing the phenomenon of Indigenous students' school completion by MacIver (2012) begins with the declaration that Canada is failing Indigenous youth.

Current data from School District 57 (Prince George) indicates that the five and six-year school completion rates for Indigenous students remain at 53% and 65% respectively, compared to 81% and 87% for non-Indigenous students (School District 57 Prince George, 2019). Despite Indigenous graduation rates increasing from 22% in 1996 to 52% in 2001, nearly half of students are still leaving the system (MacIver, 2012). According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Executive Summary (2015):

29% of Indigenous students in 2011 did not complete high school compared with only 12% of non-Indigenous students;

28% of all admissions to judicial custody in 2011-12 were Indigenous people even though First Nations people make up only 4% of the Canadian population; and

3.6% of children in foster care were Indigenous compared to 0.3% non-aboriginal children.

(TRC, 2015)

This data shows the dichotomy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. These high rates indicate that a web of social inequity remains to marginalize Canada's First Nations, Inuit, and Metis populations. The historical effects of residential schools, institutional and systemic racism – and the presence of very few role models or mentors – certainly influence these statistics (MacIver, 2012). These staggering statistics further underscore the obligation for special considerations for Indigenous students' connection to education.

INDIGENOUS GRADUATION COACH AT YEAR ZERO

If, as the Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair portends, “Education got us into this mess and education will get us out” (Watters, 2015, para 18), developing a network of supports for our Indigenous students within the schools is a necessity to bridging the gap that these numbers so starkly demonstrated. To this end, we are honoured to report on a pilot of SD# 57: the introduction of an ‘Indigenous Graduation Coach’ at all of the local high schools. This portfolio exists in its infancy, ‘year zero’ as we term it, and is being built even as we write this article. Pam Spooner, Director of Instruction for Indigenous Education and Shendah Benoit, Vice-Principal Academic Success of Indigenous Education, are guiding, directing and supporting an Indigenous Grad Coach at each of the Secondary Schools in SD# 57.



Katie Marren, Vice-Principal PGSS (left) and Lauren Stelmaschuk, Indigenous Grad Coach and Teacher, PGSS (right)

At Prince George Secondary school (PGSS, one of five secondary schools in our district), the *Spiral of Inquiry* (Timperley et. al., 2014) is guiding our work: Scanning, Focusing, Developing a Hunch, Learning, Taking Action, and Checking. Through this Inquiry process, a clearer picture begins to emerge. The initial stages of ‘scanning’

and ‘focusing’ reveal a number of ‘gate-keepers’ that pose problems for our Indigenous youth; attendance, post-secondary planning, mentorship, and academic supports. Not every student requires targeted interventions for each of these gatekeepers, but each student will benefit from at least one. When exploring the situation – ‘developing

What’s going on for our learners?
How do we know?
Why does this matter?



a hunch' – clear detriments to graduation emerge. Unsurprisingly, the socio-economic status of the youth, any learning gaps to previous attendance problems, deficit ideologies of both the youth and staff who serve them, and a sense of disconnection hold the most power over the ability to graduate and find positive post-secondary life outcomes. Moving from this facet into 'learning', the work of other jurisdictions can help shed more light on what has been successful. The Four Directions Graduation Coach program from Manitoba, for example, has been incredibly helpful in designing a program for the youth here. Reviewing this work helps clarify mandates and goals; while the Four Directions program (Lessard, 2018) is a full-time portfolio and covers all high-school aged Indigenous youth, it offers key guidelines for moving the work ahead. Currently, we are in the 'taking action' phase, creating targeted interventions for students and assigning duties. This also requires a good deal of people-management to support our learners. The data being generated and gathered through this project will offer clues as to the successes and opportunities for the coming year. 'Checking' will be completed at the end of the school year, and will offer insight into what has been successful and what will require further improvements and modelling.

In discussions with case-managers, counsellors, Indigenous Education Workers, Administration and other stakeholders about each of the students in our caseload, we have found four themes emerging from a risk/needs assessment of the students at PGSS: relationship and mentoring, academic support and advocacy, transition and planning, and cultural connection, as well as attendance and outreach supports. The goal is to build a network of supports for each of the students based on their needs, and always in relation to community-building and connection. Successful post-secondary transitions will be different for each student, and it is the work of these networks to best support this success.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR SUCCESS

The Indigenous Graduation Coach Program is only just beginning to gain traction and momentum. Transitioning from the philosophical and theoretical foundation of connection and network-building will prove labyrinthine, as different students will need individualized attention and supports. It will be necessary to gain the trust not only of the students and their parents, but of the staff at large to aid in shouldering the responsibility. The definitions of success will also need attention. Is it enough to 'walk the stage', or is success placed at a goalpost of academic success? Is success truly measurable at all?

CONCLUSION

When considering the statistics of school completion and school connection, a particular focus must be given to Indigenous students as, by and large, this demographic makes up the bulk of students feeling chronically disengaged and ready to leave school (Brendtro et al., 2019; MacIver, 2012; Preston et al., 2018). The success of an entire demographic, it seems, rests at the heart of connection, care and relationship delivered through a culturally sensitive lens.

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