The Moccasin Project

Ken Reimer [1]; Jaymi Witzke [2]; Curtis Howson [2]; Rick Freeze [3]

[1] University of Winnipeg; [2] Winnipeg School Division; [3] University of Manitoba, Canada

Introduction

In Winnipeg, several school divisions (Winnipeg, River East Transcona, St James-Assiniboia, and Louis Riel School Division, to name a few) have opened alternative site "Off-Campus" programs and opportunities in an effort to better engage reluctant school attendees. Approximately 20 students, aged 12 to 15 years old, attended the "Off-Campus Program" showcased in this case study. Many of these students were Indigenous, often from remote communities in northern Manitoba such as Moose Lake, St. Theresa Point, Bloodvein, and Cross Lake. This case study explores the cultural, social and economic benefits for these students, of what has come to be called "The Moccasin Project".

Overview and analysis

Jaymi Witzke is a teacher in one of the "Off-Campus Programs". Like others, Jaymi's program is located away from the larger high school campus in a more accessible and less intimidating community space. Many students who attend her program come from Indigenous backgrounds. As stated earlier, many have moved to Winnipeg from First Nations communities in Northern Manitoba, and are no longer living near close family members.

Although she is not an Indigenous Canadian, Jaymi grew up attending a school outside of Winnipeg with primarily Indigenous students. As a result, she was exposed to Ojibwa culture very early on. Jaymi recalled, "We had sharing circles, and we had elders come in… and I have always been tied to the outdoors." Jaymi is grateful for those experiences.

Curtis Howson is an Educational Assistant working with Jaymi. Curtis is an Aboriginal male who grew up in a single parent home. After high school graduation, Curtis worked in several agencies, such as Winnipeg Native Alliance, Ma Mawi, Ndinawe, Anishinaabe Child & Family Services, and most recently the Winnipeg School Division. He has devoted his time helping Aboriginal youth find jobs, return to school and become involved in organized sports. One of his biggest accomplishments was helping create the Ndinawe Hockey League. The program assisted children and families with hockey equipment, registration fees, transportation to and from games and practices. In 2010, Curtis was selected to represent the Metis Nation at the 2010 Winter Olympics, where he performed in the Opening Ceremonies alongside 150 youth leaders across Canada.

For Jaymi and Curtis, making deep personal connections with and between the students in their program is tremendously important. They both believe that culture, heritage and family are key connecting points for many young Aboriginal students. They had noticed that their students came alive when they were engaged in culturally-relevant handiworks such as making dream catchers and medicine bags. In 2015, Jaymi invited an "Off-Campus" support teacher to conduct workshops on moccasin making with the students. Most of the students were very interested in the workshop, especially with the beading component. The students began to share the unique beading patterns of each of their home communities. Through the beading patterns, the students were able to express who they were, where they were from, and how the larger patterns of their lives were related.

A few students, who initially had not become engaged in the project, became intersted in the idea of selling the moccasins. Jaymi noted, "I had one kid in particular who perked up and said, 'We can sell these?' And that was his motivation." The business component was very attractive to him. Soon he had created his first pair of moccasins. For the purposes of this article, the student's name has been withheld.

Jaymi and the student discussed the marketing and selling of moccasins. Although his sewing skills were basic, Jaymi discussed the aspect of marketing "The Story of the Moccasins" as well as the moccasins themselves. As Jaymi explained, "We encouraged him to share that little piece of himself, so that people weren't necessarily getting just moccasins, but were getting something from a student who had really put his heart and soul into it. He set a very high price, and shared his story." (Is it possible to relate it here?)

Jaymi relied on Curtis to inspire the student to share his story. From Jaymi's perspective, the story was more valuable than the moccasins themselves, noting, "The value was really in who (the student) was, and not the moccasins." Curtis explained, "When meeting new people, I immediately try to establish a personal connection. In my culture, one way we generally do this is by asking this question 'Where are you from?' Jaymi noted that Curtis, "knew that [the student] had a really good story, and that needed to be celebrated." Over time, and with trust and creativity, Curtis found ways for the student to share his story, and wrote down what the student had told him. The story later became part of an assignment for the student's English Language Arts course. Within one day of posting a photograph of his moccasins and his personal story on social media, the student received $100.00 for his moccasins.

For Jaymi, The Moccasin Project had two distinct benefits for the students who participated. First, it was the opportunity for them to share their personal stories and culture. Second, the project gave them opportunities to earn "legit" money." Jaymi noted that poverty had driven some of her students to sell cigarettes and drugs, and to steal cell phones. Her students were very excited to earn money that, as Jaymi explained, "They can be proud of."

Bourdieu (1986) examined “capital” and its ability to be converted into various forms. While the majority of students in the program seemed to lack socio-economic capital, they were rich in cultural capital. More importantly, their teacher and her educational assistant held their cultural capital in high personal and academic regard. Through The Moccasin Project, the students were able to take pride in and share the highly valued cultural capital they possessed, and to transform it into the socio-economic capital they needed.

Status report

During the 2015-2016 school year, Jaymi and Curtis found The Moccasin Project to be very effective, and used this model with other students. For example, two students were having difficulties finding funds for a camping opportunity. The students made three pairs of moccasins over the course of three days and they were able to attend camp.

In September 2016, Jaymi began teaching in a different “Off-Campus Program”. She continues to teach children how to make moccasins, to share their stories, and to market their products. At times, students give their creations away. On other occasions, students sell their moccasins. Jaymi has indicated that there is no shortage of demand for the moccasins.

Last year, due to his age, the student at the centre of this case study left the “Off-Campus Program” and transferred to one of the largest high schools in Winnipeg to continue his secondary education.

Curtis continues to work as an educational assistant in the same “Off-Campus Program”. He is studying to become a teacher. His long-term career goal is to become a full-time teacher within the inner city of Winnipeg, the community he grew up in. He hopes to inspire others who have come from similar social backgrounds. He continues to make connections with every student he encounters by first asking students to share their stories.

Recommendations for future research

The Moccasin Project raises interesting issues about the education of Indigenous youth from remote First Nations who struggle to engage with school in the city. The following four questions should be considered with regards to future research.

First, it is clear that the variables of personal identity, cultural traditions and escape from poverty made The Moccasin Project relevant to the students. How can these variables be more successfully integrated into curricula in schools with Indigenous and other marginalized minority populations?

Second, Jaymi’s role as a teacher with a deep respect for Aboriginal culture and Curtis’s role as a cultural mentor were essential to the success of the project. How do we develop deep, as opposed to superficial, respect for and engagement with Aboriginal cultures and traditions in Canadian schools and their teachers?

Third, for some of Jaymi’s and Curtis’s students, the entrepreneurial aspect of The Moccasin Project was paramount. How far should schools go in encouraging entrepreneurship and in promoting anti-poverty projects on behalf of their students?

In addition, Curtis noted that sharing stories from The Moccasin Project with friends and family often led to the question, "That is great, but did you ever consider that you're exploiting your culture by selling a form of traditional art?" He felt this question was usually asked by those who believed that Aboriginal peoples traditionally led a communal lifestyle, divorced from entrepreneurial pursuits. Curtis’s response was to remind them of the fur trade in the past, and the need for sustainable businesses in Aboriginal communities in the present. Is entrepreneurship consistent with Aboriginal values?

Fourth, The Moccasin Project is a good example of project-based learning. It combined elements of English Language Arts (e.g., oral storytelling, autobiography and writing), Social Studies (e.g., northern First Nations, beading traditions and moccasin making), Mathematics (e.g., budgeting, marketing strategy, pricing and sales), as well as addressing other important areas such group cohesion and personal identity development. However, curricula are often separated into disciplinary silos in terms of the outcomes to be achieved and to be assessed at school. What supports and tools do teachers need to plan, to implement and to assess projects that integrate curricula and lead to practical outcomes in the real world?

Finally, The Moccasin Project took place in a small, Off-Campus community program. At best, such programs represent welcoming, right sized and culturally- respectful educational spaces for First Nation's youth seeking secondary education in the south, but lacking roots and family supports in the city. At worst, they may become places in which marginalized youth are further devalued and segregated from their roots, dreams and opportunities. How do educators ensure it is the former, rather than the latter, description that is accomplished.

Conclusion

Persistent low graduation rates for Indigenous Canadians (Auditor General of Canada, 2004: Paquette & Fallon, 2010) indicate that new and innovative approaches need to be adopted. The Moccasin Project suggests some of the directions innovative educators might consider and some of the challenges reform efforts might face.

One word of caution

While we highlight an example of some students being motivated by this approach, others may not be. Although this paper illustrates an example of one way to engage students in one particular dimension of human endeavour, it is essential that schools find ways to provide opportunities for all of our students in all areas and disciplines, including the identification and development of talents of Indigenous young people in the STEM (xcience, technology, engineering, and math) domain.

References

Auditor General (2004). *Report of the Auditor General of Canada*. Ottawa, ON: House of Commons.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (241–258). New York, NY: Greenwood.

Paquette, J. & Fallon, G. (2010). *First Nations education policy in Canada: Progress or gridlock?* Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.