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## A Strategy for Change

Supporting Teachers and Improving First Nations, Métis, and Inuit School Success in Provincially Funded Northwestern Ontario Schools

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Edited by Barry Norris.

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# About Northern Policy Institute

Northern Policy Institute is Northern Ontario's independent think tank. We perform research, collect and disseminate evidence, and identify policy opportunities to support the growth of sustainable Northern Communities. Our operations are located in Thunder Bay and Sudbury. We seek to enhance Northern Ontario's capacity to take the lead position on socio-economic policy that impacts Northern Ontario, Ontario, and Canada as a whole.

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A growing, sustainable, and self-sufficient Northern Ontario. One with the ability to not only identify opportunities but to pursue them, either on its own or through intelligent partnerships. A Northern Ontario that contributes both to its own success and to the success of others.

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Northern Policy Institute is an independent policy institute. We exist for the purposes of:

- The development and promotion of proactive, evidence based and purpose driven policy options that deepen understanding about the unique challenges of Northern Ontario and ensure the sustainable development and long-term economic prosperity of Northern Ontario;
- The research and analysis of:
  - » Existing and emerging policies relevant to Northern Ontario;
  - » Economic, technological and social trends which affect Northern Ontario;
- The formulation and advocacy of policies that benefit all Northern Ontario communities that include Aboriginal, Francophone, remote/rural communities, and urban centres; and,
- Other complementary purposes not inconsistent with these objectives.

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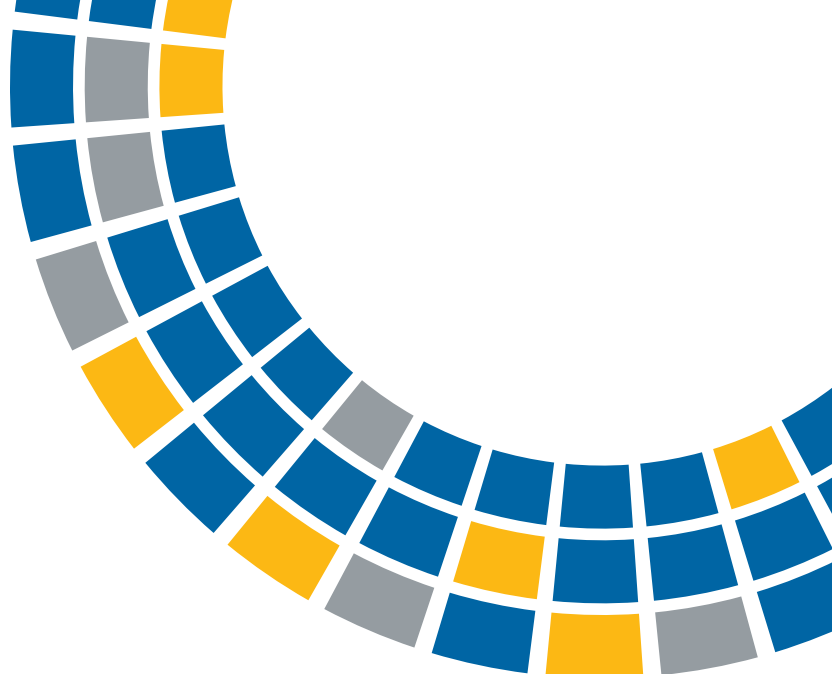
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**Collaboration:** Northern Policy Institute recognizes the value of multi-stakeholder, multi-disciplinary, and multicultural contributions to the collective advancement of Northern Ontario and works in a collaborative and inclusive approach to provide a full range of policy options for decision makers;

**Coordination:** Northern Policy Institute will complement the existing research efforts of Northern Ontario's post-secondary institutions and non government organizations and explore opportunities for coordinated efforts that contribute to the mandate of Northern Policy Institute; and

**Accessibility:** The work of Northern Policy Institute will be publicly accessible to stimulate public engagement and dialogue, promoting view points on the interests of Northern Ontario and its people.



## About the Authors

### Dr. John A. Hodson



Dr. John Akweniostha Hodson (York University) is of Mohawk descent, turtle clan, and director of the Maamaawisiwin Education Research Centre, Thunder Bay, Ontario. Dr. Hodson has worked in Aboriginal education at the primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels in Canada and internationally for over 20 years, and has published widely on the subject.

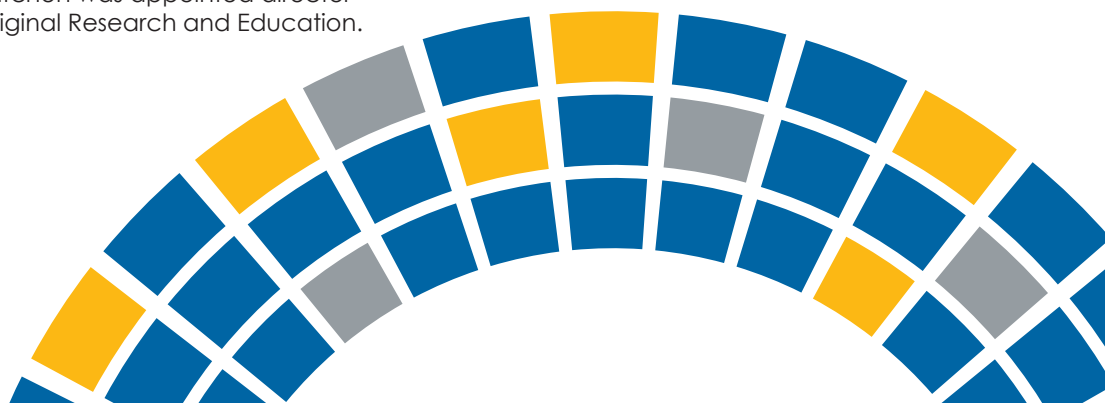
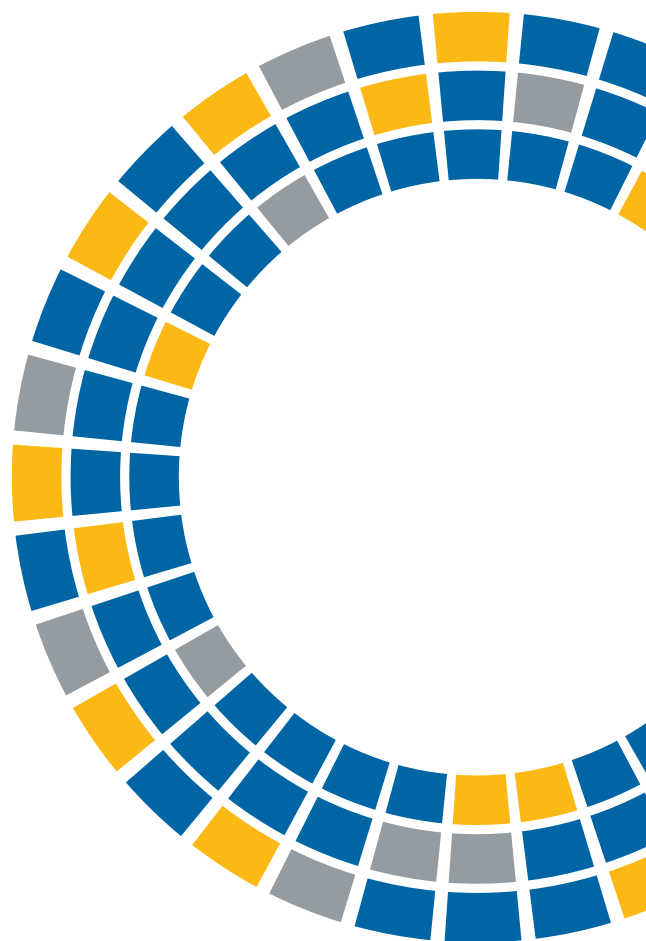
As director of Maamaawisiwin, Dr. Hodson provides leadership to this independent, non-aligned centre of inquiry that offers culturally appropriate teacher development programming and research services to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.

### Dr. Julian Kitchen



Dr. Julian Kitchen is a professor at Brock University. His work in education extends to studying and supporting teachers and teacher educators. Dr. Kitchen is lead editor of *Narrative Inquiries into Curriculum-making in Teacher Education* (Emerald, 2011) and the forthcoming *Self-Study and Diversity, Volume 2* (Sense, 2015). He was lead author of *Professionalism, Law and the Ontario Educator* (Highland,

2010), and editor of *Brock Education*, a peer-reviewed journal. Dr. Kitchen has been involved in several projects funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, most notably as PI for two projects titled "Aboriginal Teachers in Northern Nishnawbe Nations: Learning; and "Enacting Aboriginal Pedagogy" (2009 and 2011). He has published in referred journals such as *Action in Teacher Education*, *Teacher Education Quarterly*, *Studying Teacher Education*, *Canadian Journal of Education*, *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, *McGill Journal of Education*, and *Teaching and Teacher Education*. In January 2014, Dr. Kitchen was appointed director of the Tecumseh Centre for Aboriginal Research and Education.



## Executive Summary

The two greatest predictors of improving First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) school success in provincially funded Northwestern Ontario schools are: (i) access to traditional knowledge by being immersed in a cultural continuum, and (ii) access to teachers educated to impart contemporary knowledge through a culturally responsive and relational pedagogy. Unfortunately, in Northwestern Ontario, the province is largely failing to recognize the importance of the cultural continuum, and minimizing access to contemporary knowledge by continuing to implement a one-size-fits-all pedagogy that has proved detrimental to FNMI school success. This paper proposes a new approach to FNMI school success called the Biwaase'aa/Maamaawisiwin Education Innovation.

In 2011, only 71.1 percent of FNMI people in the critical 20–24 age group in Ontario had completed high school. Estimates for Northern Ontario present an even bleaker picture. The author's estimate that for the 2014/15 school year as few as 1,972 and as many as 2,641 FNMI students attending the nine schools in Northwestern Ontario's districts school boards (DSBs) will not have completed high school in the critical 20-24 age group. Individuals who do not complete high school will have little hope of employment, of furthering their education, or of making a positive contribution to their community.

Additionally, a strategic upstream investment that supports FNMI school success can prevent a significant downstream expense in adverse societal implications such as health care, the need for crisis housing, shelters, and food banks, and growing crime. In terms of incarceration of FNMI peoples, the facts are sobering: in 2011, 28.9 percent of FNMI people in Ontario ages 20 to 24 had not completed high school and 12.4 percent of FNMI adults in Ontario over age 18 were in provincial custody. Investing in the right kind of education strategies for FNMI students in provincially funded schools can reduce or eliminate these costs, and perhaps more importantly, build the human capacity and social and cultural cohesion of a generation of FNMI children.

The author's argue that a successful model for FNMI school success requires two ingredients: access to traditional knowledge and access to contemporary knowledge through a culturally responsive and relational pedagogy. The former requires a successful community-based cultural continuum that engages FNMI students in ongoing traditional knowledge education. Fortunately, this already exists in Northwestern Ontario: the Biwaase'aa Program. A recent study determining the success of the program revealed an emergent relationship between FNMI students attending Biwaase'aa and increases in literacy and math scores, lower rates of behavioural referrals, lateness, and increases in attendance.

The second ingredient requires giving teachers the tools to teach contemporary knowledge while embracing the culture of that community. John Hodson, co-author of this paper, has created a program that does just this. The Maamaawisiwin Professional Teacher Development Program (MPTDP) is derived from a successful professional development program in New Zealand known as Te Kotahitanga. The MPTDP utilizes effective teaching profiles developed through analysis of the narratives of Anishinabe, Hodeñosaunee, Inuit, Métis, and Mushkeygo students attending provincially funded schools across the province in order to support high school teachers in grades 9 through 12 to learn to teach through a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations.

The Biwaase'aa program has proven to increase the school success of FNMI students through access to traditional knowledge, while the Maamaawisiwin Professional Teacher Development Program, which is based on a successful program in New Zealand, results in increased success in teaching contemporary knowledge. Implemented in tandem yields the two necessary ingredients for FNMI school success in Northwestern Ontario. In this paper, the author's propose to combine both programs in elementary, senior elementary, and high schools across Thunder Bay; calling it the *Biwaase'aa/Maamaawisiwin Education Innovation*. By strategically combining the Biwaase'aa and Maamaawisiwin programs throughout the elementary, senior elementary, and high school years, this model will align with the body of international research and the Ontario Ministry of Education's commitment to FNMI communities that their children who attend provincially funded schools will receive both traditional and contemporary knowledge education.

The Biwaase'aa/Maamaawisiwin Education Innovation as an education initiative has the potential to disrupt the causal cycles that have resulted in exponential levels of social and economic dysfunction in FNMI lives in Northwestern Ontario. It has the potential to prevent significant adverse societal implications of FNMI peoples, and build the human capacity and social and cultural cohesion needed in Northern Ontario. The Biwaase'aa/Maamaawisiwin model can lead to access to higher education and employment, as well as enhance the overall well-being of an already at-risk population by creating learning environments for success, but can only be achieved by stepping outside the prevailing one-size-fits-all box that describes how education is currently offered in Ontario.



## Visions of Our Future

I want to tell you the story of two visions. One of these visions will dominate the future of the Indigenous peoples of Northwestern Ontario. We can see examples of each vision every day in our cities and towns. I also want to tell you that we have the power to choose one of these visions, one of these futures. We can choose to do nothing and maintain a status quo that will result in a plethora of sociological and economic problems that our grandchildren will have to solve, or we can choose to face the root causes of those problems now, and bring proven strategies to bear that will disrupt a causal cycle that results in layers of dysfunction in our community. I want to tell you that we have a choice. I want to impress on you that we have the power to choose our future, but the tipping point, the point where one choice evaporates and the other dominates, the point of no return, is close at hand.

In one vision, I witness First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people existing like ghosts on the streets and the back laneways of the cities and towns of Northwestern Ontario. I see increasing numbers of young First Nations, Métis, and Inuit adults using canes and walkers, disproportionate numbers of amputees in wheelchairs whittled down by injury, diabetes, or other chronic disease. I witness staggering numbers of young and old people dying, their spirits flying from them at the first opportunity in drunken brawls, or overdoses, or by

their own hand. It is as if they needed only the merest excuse to exit this corporeal world of hopelessness for the hope of the spirit world. In the Northwest, we live in cities and towns with unprecedented numbers of murders, youth suicides, and assaults that would generate a flood of emergency support if they were in Mississauga, or Brampton, or Scarborough. In the Sioux Lookout District, the First Nations suicide rate in the 10–19 age group is 50 times higher than in the rest of Canada (Frideres and Gadacz 2012).

I see our children living in substandard rental housing playing in back lanes strewn with empty cans of hairspray, mouthwash bottles, and garbage. I witness young First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women reduced to selling their bodies on the street corners of our cities and towns. I see other women and men with bruised and swollen faces at the beer and liquor store trying to kill the physical and emotional pain of a brutal relationship. I see the drug addicted, the sniffers, the drunks, the mentally ill systematically killing the pain of their daily lives by whatever means available.

The provincial courts and jails overflow with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people, criminalizing them within an environment so deplorable and inhumane that Thunder Bay corrections officers have called for a public inquiry (Smith 2014). In the Kenora jail, 93 percent of the female admissions are Aboriginal (Porter 2012). Ninety percent of the women in custody facilities in Thunder Bay are Aboriginal (Elizabeth Fry Society of Northwestern Ontario 2014).



There is another vision, a brighter future. In this vision, I witness First Nations, Métis, and Inuit parents working hard at jobs to keep a roof over the heads of their kids and food on the table. I see dedicated First Nations, Métis, and Inuit service providers working flat out in all manner of education programs that are perpetually underfunded and flooded with our desperate people working to break out of the cycles within which they are locked. I witness Elders patiently, tirelessly, sharing their wisdom in teachings and ceremonies, all the while praying for the people and their wellness.

I see social innovations springing from the grassroots of our communities, such as Walking with Our Sisters, where a dedicated, unfunded group of women was responsible for a healing art installation that shattered all attendance records at the Thunder Bay Art Gallery and educated 3 percent of the population of Thunder Bay about the national shame of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

I see provincially funded schools in the Northwest brimming with our children, their eyes bright with energy and promise. I know they are culturally located because I observe their pride when their schools host a Pow Wow and their parents shyly attend to witness their children sing or dance for the first time, a rite of cultural passage denied to them.

I see a handful of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit educators and support workers furiously bridging the gap between the learning needs of our children, and equally culturally located non-Aboriginal teachers struggling to meet those same needs in classrooms.

I see a co-relationship between the well-being of our children and the traditional knowledge they are exposed to throughout their school day, as well as a co-relationship between the mastery of contemporary knowledge and the culturally responsive relationships that their teachers co-create with them.

I see increased high school graduation rates, but the increments of improvement are too small to offset one vision of the future over the other. I see that the Ministry of Education's Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework has set the stage to increase graduation rates, but there is little that supports the co-relationship between traditional knowledge and contemporary knowledge that will significantly increase graduation numbers of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students and offset one vision over the other.

I know that, in the end, both visions are tied to the personal self-image and well-being of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. The choice we face right now is either to maintain the status quo of how traditional knowledge is included in provincial schools and how teachers teach contemporary knowledge that will determine which vision becomes the reality of all Ontarians.

John A. Hodson, PhD





## The First Step in Solving a Problem Is to Admit There Is One

The 2001 census reported that 188,315 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) people lived in Ontario (Statistics Canada 2001a); by 2006 that population had grown to 242,500 (Statistics Canada 2006), and by 2011 to 301,425 (Statistics Canada 2011a). Thus, in a decade, according to the census, the Aboriginal population of Ontario had increased by 63 percent. As well, 63 percent of First Nations people now live in rural/urban settings in Ontario (Statistics Canada 2011a). Table 1 shows the distribution of the Aboriginal population in urban Northwestern Ontario. Of note for our purposes, 26 percent of the Ontario FNMI population is between 5 and 19 years of age, considered the typical school age (Statistics Canada 2011d), and 71.1 percent of FNMI people 20 to 24 years of age had completed an Ontario high school diploma or equivalent (Statistics Canada 2011b).

Many FNMI organizations and service providers argue, however, that Statistics Canada's population data are inaccurate, and suggest that the FNMI population of Ontario actually increased two to threefold over the period from 2001 to 2011 (Bailey 2008). By way of explanation, these organizations argue that FNMI peoples avoid participating in the census because of an overall distrust of government initiatives or as an act of resistance to Canadian nationalism. This resistance, combined with the recent and sweeping shift in the operational scope of Statistics Canada orchestrated by the federal government, calls into question the accuracy of all FNMI population data and, by extension, provincial school data that rely on Statistics Canada.

Table 1: Aboriginal Population, Urban Northwestern Ontario, 2011

Urban Place	Total Population	Aboriginal Identity Population	Aboriginal Population as % of Total Population
<b>Dryden</b>	7,450	1,180	<b>16</b>
<b>Fort Frances</b>	7,775	1,185	<b>15</b>
<b>Greenstone</b>	4,680	1,320	<b>28</b>
<b>Kenora</b>	14,985	2,695	<b>18</b>
<b>Marathon</b>	3,333	*	<b>N/A</b>
<b>Sioux Lookout</b>	4,960	1,750	<b>35</b>
<b>Terrace Bay</b>	1,450	55	<b>4</b>
<b>Thunder Bay</b>	<b>105,950</b>	<b>10,055</b>	<b>10</b>

\* Data for this area have been suppressed for reasons of data quality or confidentiality.

Source: Statistics Canada, "National Household Survey Profiles by Selected Cities, Towns, Townships and Municipalities in Northwestern Ontario, 2011." Ottawa. Available online at <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E>.

## The FNMI Population in Northwestern Ontario Schools

This reluctance on the part of FNMI peoples to be counted and/or identified might be why many FNMI parents and caregivers have not participated in Ontario's Self-Identification Policy for schools and identify their children as FNMI. Since the release of the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework (hereafter, the Education Policy Framework), the Ministry of Education has encouraged district school boards (DSBs) to develop their own "voluntary, confidential FNMI student self-identification" policies to help the ministry and DSBs improve programming and supports (Ontario 2007, 12). By 2013, all 76 DSBs in the province had complied, but only 44 percent of the estimated 64,000 Aboriginal students attending provincially funded schools had been self-identified (Ontario 2013, 11).

We would like to report an accurate number of how many FNMI children and youth attend provincially funded schools in the nine district school boards in Northwestern Ontario,<sup>1</sup> but our attempt to determine that number was hindered by a similar reluctance on the part of FNMI parents and caregivers to self-identify their children as FNMI. Nonetheless, many of the DSBs we contacted in relation to this paper estimate that their student body is fast approaching 50 percent FNMI. Such estimates are echoed in recent research that reports that an average of 46 percent of the students attending seven schools in Thunder Bay were FNMI (Kitchen, Hodson, and Hodson 2014, 27). Based on the data we collected from eight of the nine DSBs, we estimate that between 6,824 and 9,139 FNMI students were enrolled in provincially funded schools in Northwestern Ontario in the 2014/15 school year. In addition, in the 40 First Nation communities situated between Greenstone and Kenora, 40 percent of their total population of about 4,000 people is under 19 years of age. Approximately 30 of those communities have elementary schools that send their graduates to urban high schools, while many of the others bus their children to urban elementary schools through tuition agreements with their local DSBs (Canada 2014).

## Measuring FNMI School Success in Ontario

FNMI school success has improved in Ontario over the past decade, but the increments of success have been exceedingly small (Hodson 2009, 21). The 2011 National Household Survey (Statistics Canada 2011b) reported that, in the critical 20–24 age group, only 71.1 percent of FNMI people in Ontario had completed high school — a figure that is unacceptable from any perspective.

In an effort to improve FNMI completion rates, the Ontario government released the Education Policy Framework in 2007, with progress measured in reports released in 2011 and 2013. The second progress report (Ontario 2013) presents student achievement data (on reading, writing, and math) from the provincial Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO),<sup>2</sup> as well as credit accumulation from 8,149 Aboriginal students in grades 3, 6, and 9 who are at or above the provincial standard, and yet Statistics Canada (2011c) reports a total Ontario FNMI off-reserve population of 41,210 between the ages of 5 and 14. By combining these data, we are left to conclude that the Ministry of Education's report represents only approximately 20 percent of the total FNMI population between 5 and 14, which suggests that 80 percent did not meet the minimum provincial standard or had not participated in the testing in that reporting year.<sup>3</sup>

A recent study that included seven inner-city Thunder Bay elementary schools with an average of 46 percent FNMI students mirrored similar results: "A cursory review of the 2012-13 EQAO reports for grade three and six reading, writing and mathematics demonstrated that six of the seven participating [Thunder Bay] schools underperformed their board and the provincial standard, some impressively so" (Kitchen, Hodson, and Hodson 2014, 55). In an attempt to determine if those Thunder Bay schools were outliers, the study looks at other northern DSBs with high percentages of FNMI students, and concluded, "EQAO data from Keewatin-Patricia DSB, Rainbow DSB, Rainy River DSB, Moose Factory Island DSAB and Moosonee DSAB [show that] in each case these boards also did not meet the provincial standard in 2012-13 (ibid.). Drilling down further into both the second Education Policy Framework progress report (Ontario 2013) and Statistics Canada data might be more disturbing. A review of the credit accumulation by the 2011/12 cohort finds that 1,949 FNMI grade 9 students met the minimum in order to graduate from high school after four years,

1 The nine DSBs are Conseil scolaire de district catholique des Aurores boréales (Thunder Bay); Keewatin-Patricia District School Board (Dryden); Kenora Catholic District School Board (Kenora); Lakehead District School Board (Thunder Bay); Rainy River District School Board (Fort Francis); Superior-Greenstone District School Board (Marathon); Superior North Catholic District School Board (Terrace Bay); Northwest Catholic District School Board (Fort Francis); and Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board (Thunder Bay).

2 The EQAO is an independent government body that develops and oversees standardized tests for students in grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 in Ontario.

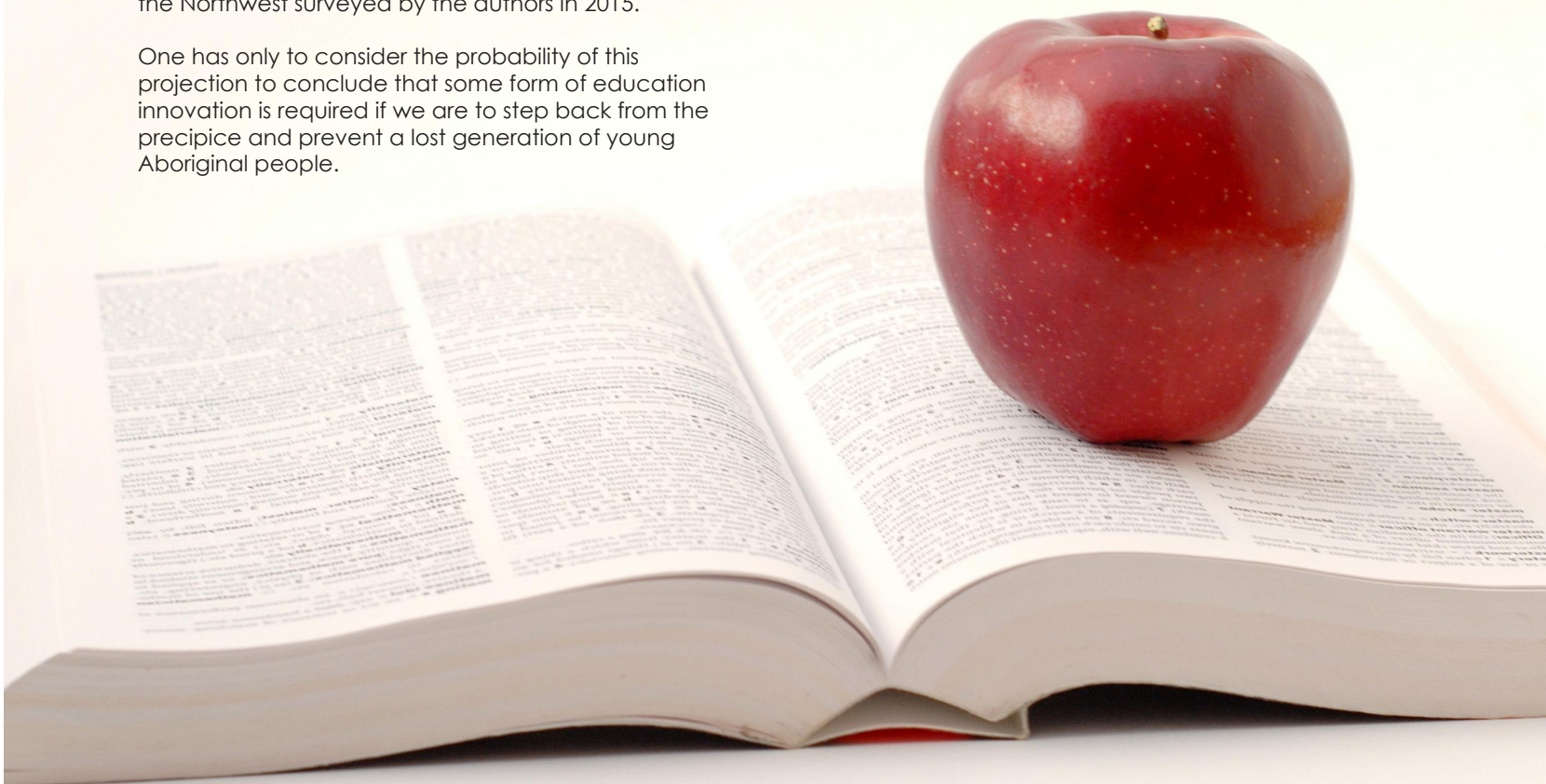
3 This calculation represents only the 44 percent of the estimated 64,000 FNMI students who have been self-identified by their parents or caregivers (see Ontario 2013, 11).

yet a conservative estimate suggests that as many as 7,500 FNMI students might have been in grade 9 that year.

Can we assume, then, that more than 5,500 FNMI students were not on track to graduate in 2011/12? If so, what will happen to them? Will they attend high school longer, be involved in credit recovery programs, or attend the handful of alternative high schools in Ontario, or will they just drop out? Admittedly both the EQAO and the credit accumulation examples are based on extremely rough calculations, because there are few accurate data on which to draw. Nonetheless both examples conjure a disturbing vision and the need for more accurate data from the Ministry of Education.<sup>4</sup>

If we sharpen the focus and project the same FNMI high school completion rate of 71.1 percent in the critical 20–24 age group (Statistics Canada 2011b) across the aggregate population range attending the nine DSB schools in Northwestern Ontario in 2014/15 it is reasonable to suggest that as few as 1,972 and as many as 2,641 FNMI students will not have completed high school by the time they are in that age group. Unlike the previous EQAO and credit accumulation projections, this calculation is based on relatively accurate data gathered from eight of the nine DSBs in the Northwest surveyed by the authors in 2015.

One has only to consider the probability of this projection to conclude that some form of education innovation is required if we are to step back from the precipice and prevent a lost generation of young Aboriginal people.



4 This lack of accurate data might be remedied when DSBs submit reports to the Ministry of Education that track Aboriginal school success of students who began high school in 2011/12 and should be graduating in 2015/16.

## Societal Implications of Low FNMI High School Completion Rates

*Thorough economic evaluation has shown that preventing just one career criminal can save society over \$2 million. It is easy to see how a prevention program that costs \$1.5 million to deliver services to 100 participants would be successful from an economic standpoint even if it only prevents 1% of program participants from a life of crime.*

— Ontario (2012, 12)

The financial implications for the cities and towns of Northwestern Ontario and for the province as a whole of an unprecedented number of FNMI youth without high school credentials are significant. Suffice it to say these young people will have little hope of employment, of furthering their education, or of making a positive contribution to their community. There are also staggering societal implications in terms of health care, the need for crisis housing, shelters, and food banks, and growing crime. Indeed, a comprehensive list of the effects is beyond the scope of this paper, with one exception: the relationship between not completing high school and unprecedented increases in the provincial incarceration of FNMI peoples. The facts are sobering: in 2011, 28.9 percent of FNMI people in Ontario ages 20 to 24 had not completed high school (Statistics Canada 2011b), and 12.4 percent of FNMI adults in Ontario over age 18 were in provincial custody (Statistics Canada 2014).

For over a decade, Canadian researchers have consistently found that a high school diploma decreases the likelihood of criminal behaviour and provincial incarceration (see, for example, Brzozowski, Taylor-Butts, and Johnson 2006; La Prairie 2002; Lochner 2004). The Ontario Ministry of Community and Correctional Services (Ontario 2012, 9) also recognizes that “poor educational achievement” is a risk factor that contributes to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples in provincial incarceration. Yet this one risk factor is by no means relegated to issues of provincial incarceration alone. Researchers studying federal incarceration have also linked the completion of high school to Aboriginal imprisonment (Corrado and Cohen 2002; Nafekh and Crutcher 2002). Trevethan, Moore, and Rastin (2002, 17) find that “one quarter (26%) of incarcerated Aboriginal offenders have less than a grade 8 education upon admission to the [federal] institution.” What should be clear from these data and the associated research is that FNMI peoples over the age of 18 are overrepresented in incarceration in Ontario, and that the lack of a high school education is one factor that increases that risk. Less clear are the related financial implications that affect every Ontarian, but here are some numbers:

- in fiscal year 2011/12, there were approximately 8,566 adults in sentenced or remand custody in Ontario (Perreault 2014, table 251-0005);
- 25 percent (2,142) of that population identified as Aboriginal (Statistics Canada 2015a);
- the median sentenced or remand custody period in 2011/12 was 27 days (Perreault 2014);
- the average cost in 2008/09 dollars of incarcerating one person for one day in a provincial jail was \$154.33 (Perreault 2014); thus,
- the total cost to incarcerate Aboriginal peoples in Ontario provincial jails was \$8,925,521.



The provincial incarceration of FNMI peoples is a significant downstream expense in human warehousing that could be reduced or eliminated through strategic upstream investment that supports FNMI youth to complete high school. That investment is not about crime prevention, but about building the human capacity and social and cultural cohesion of a generation of FNMI children in provincially funded schools (Ontario 2012, 12). What inhibits the building of that human capacity is not FNMI children, their parents, or their communities. Rather, the entire provincial education system has failed to recognize and respond to the learning needs of FNMI students, the vast majority of whom attend provincially funded schools. Indeed, the problem is so dire that an educational innovation will be necessary if we are to change our collective future.



## Innovative Education for FNMI Children in Northwestern Ontario

*First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students in Ontario will have the knowledge, skills, and confidence they need to successfully complete their elementary and secondary education in order to pursue postsecondary education or training and/or to enter into the workforce. They will have the traditional and contemporary knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to be socially contributive, politically active, and economically prosperous citizens of the world. All students in Ontario will have knowledge and appreciation of contemporary and traditional First Nations, Métis, and Inuit traditions, cultures and perspectives.*

— Ontario (2007, 7)

For a generation, Indigenous researchers around the world (see, for example, Battiste 2013; Bishop, O'Sullivan, and Berryman 2010; Cajete 1994; Castellano, Davis, and Lahache 2000; Hampton 1995) have found that Indigenous school success depends on two factors: daily access to traditional knowledge by being immersed in a cultural continuum, and access to teachers educated to impart contemporary knowledge through a culturally responsive and relational pedagogy that supports the learning needs of children in their classrooms. And yet this research-based evidence has been all but ignored by the public school system in Ontario that minimizes access to traditional knowledge by failing to recognize the importance of the cultural continuum, and that also minimizes access to contemporary knowledge by continuing to educate teachers pre-service and in-service in a one-size-fits-all pedagogy that has proved detrimental to FNMI school success.

### The Greatest Predictor of FNMI School Success: Access to Traditional Knowledge

In much of the international Indigenous education research literature, the accurate representation of “cultures, histories, and perspectives” by teachers is considered crucial to the positive well-being and self-image of Indigenous students and fundamentally connected to school success. In this regard, the Ontario Ministry of Education is absolutely correct to highlight the importance of traditional knowledge in the vision statement in the Education Policy Framework, quoted above.

We take umbrage, however, with the notion that FNMI cultures can be rendered down to “cultures, histories, and perspectives” and imparted by predominantly non-Aboriginal teachers who then become responsible for the cultural continuum. This notion displays at best a monumental lack of understanding of the complexity of FNMI traditional knowledge born of ignorance or at worse a minimization born of racism. FNMI traditional knowledge cannot be rendered down to iconography on classroom walls, the annual afternoon Pow Wow, the Mid-Winter Feast, or the occasional Elder's visit, and schools that rely on these tactics do not discharge their responsibilities to FNMI children and youth. The transfer of traditional knowledge is more complex, more nuanced, and incredibly more important to the positive self-image, well-being, and school success of FNMI children (see Chandler 2005).

#### **Traditional Knowledge and Positive Self-Determination**

To be positively self-determining in life depends on the existence and maintenance of social and cultural institutions that reflect and encourage a particular way of being. Such institutions — for example, spirituality, language, governance, law, marriage, clan,

intellectual and cultural property, and education — reflect the epistemic heritage, values, and beliefs of a culture around which an individual, a community, and a nation may align their existence (Hodson 2009). These institutions of traditional knowledge do not exist in isolation. Instead, they become and are strengthened as we decide to take them up. We strengthen the institutions as they strengthen us.

As a consequence of colonization, FNMI peoples have been systematically and purposefully stripped of these institutions, and contemporary peoples have inherited and live within imposed and unconscious forms of determination that reflect the goals and aspirations of a colonial epistemology (Freire 1970). Haudenosaunee scholar Taiaiake Alfred suggests that this situates First Nations people in a state of perpetual crisis, where “we wander a forest of frustration living inauthentic lives that make us easy prey for those who would enslave us” (1999, xi). Extracting oneself from “inauthentic lives” becomes more difficult as the passage of time dims collective memory and as the connection to traditional knowledge within the cultural continuum becomes thinner.

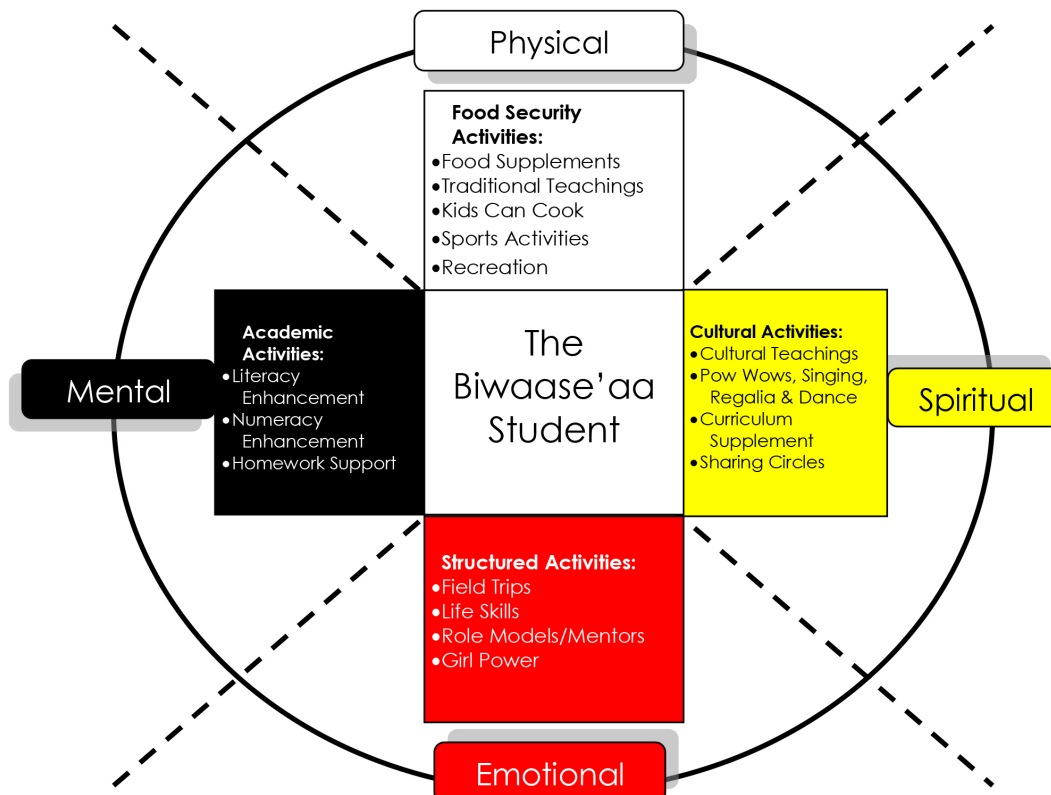
Lack of access to traditional knowledge in education can induce boredom through educational irrelevance and the mass exodus of young FNMI men and women from school, which limits a community’s journey to self-

determination. As Statistics Canada (2001b, 3) notes, “[i]n the 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey, the main reason given by Aboriginal male youth for dropping out of high school was boredom (25 percent).” We argue that the ongoing transmission of traditional knowledge depends on an FNMI student’s immersion in a cultural continuum throughout the school day, and that, in turn, is the responsibility of the community that surrounds the school and is the greatest influence on the school success of FNMI students. We further argue that an example of a successful community-based cultural continuum that engages FNMI students in ongoing traditional knowledge education already exists in Northwestern Ontario.

**The Biwaase’aa Program and Traditional Knowledge**

The Biwaase’aa program, envisioned by the Thunder Bay FNMI community in 2004, is administered by Shkoday Abinojiwak Obimiwedoon. In the 2012/13 school year, Biwaase’aa was operational in seven schools in both of Thunder Bay’s English-language DSBs and includes three core components: in-school, after-school, and food security. Biwaase’aa is offered to both FNMI and non-Aboriginal children ages 7 to 13 and their families. Each participating school has a full-time Biwaase’aa youth outreach worker and two assistants that manage the core components (see Figure 1) throughout the school day.

Figure 1: The Biwaase’aa Pedagogical Model





Each Biwaase'aa core component includes a number of connected activities, including cultural activities, structured activities, academic activities, and food security activities, which correspond to a traditional teaching method often referred to the four aspects of self-medicine wheel teaching:

- cultural activities = spiritual;
- structured activities = emotional;
- academic activities = mental; and
- food security activities = physical.

The particular Medicine Wheel Teaching that underpins Biwaase'aa is a prime example of Anishinabe traditional knowledge that recognizes that each of us has a spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical reality. This traditional knowledge shapes an Anishinabe pedagogy that reflects the cultural and relational norms and the four realities of the Biwaase'aa student.

In the 2012/13 school year, Biwaase'aa had 370 FNMI and non-Aboriginal students. During that year, a group of researchers (Kitchen, Hodson, and Hodson 2014) began a study that examined the four types of Biwaase'aa activities, qualitatively and quantitatively, to determine if there was a relationship between academic indicators of school success and attending the program. The study revealed an emergent relationship between FNMI students attending Biwaase'aa and increases in literacy and math scores, lower rates of behavioural referrals, lateness, and increases in attendance. What is perhaps more important is that Biwaase'aa Youth Outreach Workers were in schools each day as cultural mentors, as aunties or uncles to students, as advocates for FNMI students, parents, caregivers, and schools, and as tutors. For \$15.00 per day every school day (Kitchen, Hodson, and Hodson 2014, 66), a Biwaase'aa FNMI student is immersed in the cultural continuum and exposed to his or her traditional knowledge, allowing teachers to focus on what they do best: teach contemporary knowledge.

The strength of those findings quickly prompted the Ontario Ministry of Education to agree, in principle, to finance the gradual expansion of the Biwaase'aa program in English-language Thunder Bay middle schools beginning in the fall of 2015, with a high school to follow in 2016.

## The Second Greatest Predictor of FNMI School Success: Teachers Who Teach through a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy of Relations

With the 2007 release of the Education Policy Framework, the Ministry of Education set out a number of goals and some financial resources for DSBs to increase FNMI school success. Some of those resources have been directed at in-service teacher education, but many have been focused on the trinity of “cultures, histories, and perspectives” (Ontario 2013, 43) of FNMI peoples. Little of that teacher education has emphasized the depth of pedagogical understanding that underpins the Biwaase'aa program and matches the epistemic learning needs of FNMI children.

This strategic focus and associated investment while well intentioned has fallen short. The 2015 Annual Report on Ontario's Publicly Funded Schools admits that “only 47 percent of high schools and 29 percent of elementary schools reported they had offered professional development around First Nations, Métis and Inuit issues” (People for Education 2015, 10). Speaking to the CBC, Annie Kidder, executive director of People for Education and co-author of the report admitted that, despite that investment, “teachers for the most part say they are not comfortable teaching indigenous culture and issues” (Casey 2015, 1).

This in-service focus is replicated in the education of pre-service teacher candidates as well. Currently, a small number of faculties of education in the province have instituted Aboriginal education courses, but most are not mandatory and are an infusion across the entire curriculum that amounts to a few hours on the “cultures, histories, and perspectives” of FNMI peoples. Little time is dedicated to shifting pre-service teacher candidates' future practice on behalf of FNMI children, and what time is so dedicated often ignores the plethora of international research that describes how that shift is accomplished.

What seems to motivate both pre-service and in-service teacher education in Ontario is the unspoken belief in the absolute perfection of the pedagogy, while effectively ignoring the statistical realities of FNMI school success. Unlike Ontario, British Columbia has left this notion behind by mandating that every pre-service teacher complete courses that specifically present First Nations pedagogy (British Columbia 2008, 31). In Ontario, we have yet to come to the realization that endlessly enacting the same solutions and expecting a different outcome is the very definition of madness. It is time for new ideas.



## Contemporary Knowledge and a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy of Relations

If a key indicator of FNMI school success is the availability of teachers who practice a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations, this is by no means the norm in provincial schools in Ontario. Education continues to struggle between two conflicting theories of practice: teachers as individuals, responsible and accountable to only themselves, and teachers who are part of a caring community of practice that embraces the culture of that community.

The conflict between these notions is the natural outcome of two competing epistemic traditions: one that landed on the shores of the Americas in 1492 that evolved to what can be described as western democratic capitalism, and the other that emerged across Turtle Island over millennia. In the vast majority of instances, this is not a conflict born of teacher malfeasance. Teachers are doing just what they have been educated to do: enacting their epistemically shaped teaching. FNMI children, meanwhile, are doing just what they have been educated to do: enacting their epistemically shaped learning (Ermine 1995). The sad result in Ontario is that, as we have noted, less than three-quarters of FNMI peoples 20–24 years of age had completed high school in 2011, having left high school at the average age of 17, resulting in other cycles that are often underscored by poverty and criminality. This situates FNMI students in an especially vulnerable position during the early years of high school, when leaving school is top of mind.

We have never met a teacher who did not want to do a good job. Whether in pre-service teacher education courses at universities or workshops with

in-service teachers and principals, we are often asked for practical tools to increase teachers' capacity to work with FNMI students. Teachers are professionals, and they know that they need help because they see that the FNMI children in their classes are struggling and they can predict the eventual outcome.

### ***Giving Teachers the Tools: The New Zealand Experience***

Ontario's poor record of school success by Indigenous peoples is by no means unique. Many Indigenous peoples around the world are experiencing similar realities, and are developing alternative approaches to change the status quo.

In 2001, the Ministry of Education in New Zealand (known to the Maori people as Aotearoa), the Maori Education Research at the University of Waikato, and the Poutama Pounamu Research and Development Centre began an investigation of how to improve the educational achievement of Maori students in mainstream secondary schools (Bishop et al. 2007). This included an extensive scoping exercise that developed an "effective teaching profile" shaped through extensive consultations with Maori students, their families, principals, and teachers. In 2004 and 2005, the effective teaching profile was initiated in the classrooms of participating teachers through a professional development program known as Te Kotahitanga that included an extensive training and support program. In four years, the six participating Te Kotahitanga schools found that Maori students exhibited statistically significant improvement in literacy and numeracy achievement scores. Moreover, "the overall literacy data shows that Maori and non-Maori students made similar progress" (Bishop et al. 2007, 184). Today, Te Kotahitanga has been disbanded and rebranded as a program called Building on Success, but with many of its tools, principles, practices and key personnel held over from the original program.



## The Maamaawisiwin Professional Teacher Development Program

In 2010, as a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) post-doctoral fellow, a co-author of this paper, John A. Hodson, lived in Aotearoa/New Zealand and worked in Te Kohaitanga. That experience, combined with his doctoral research, resulted in the creation of the Maamaawisiwin Professional Teacher Development Program (MPTDP). The goal of the MPTDP is to support high school teachers in grades 9 through 12, the critical dropout years for Aboriginal students (Statistics Canada 2015b, 2), to learn to teach through a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations. This is achieved through the voluntary, confidential, and respectful involvement of participating teachers in the Maamaawisiwin development cycle (see Figure 2), which takes place four times in an academic year and includes:

- learning circles, at the beginning of each term;
- in-class teacher observation, at the beginning and end of each term;
- teacher feedback and co-constructing teacher goals meetings, at the beginning of each term;
- shadow coaching and catch-up; and
- a related research study, which is ongoing.

### Learning Circles

At the beginning of the fall and winter term, participating teachers come together in day-long learning circles with a group of MPTDP facilitators and Elders. Learning circles are dedicated to supporting the needs of teachers as they expand their practice to include a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations

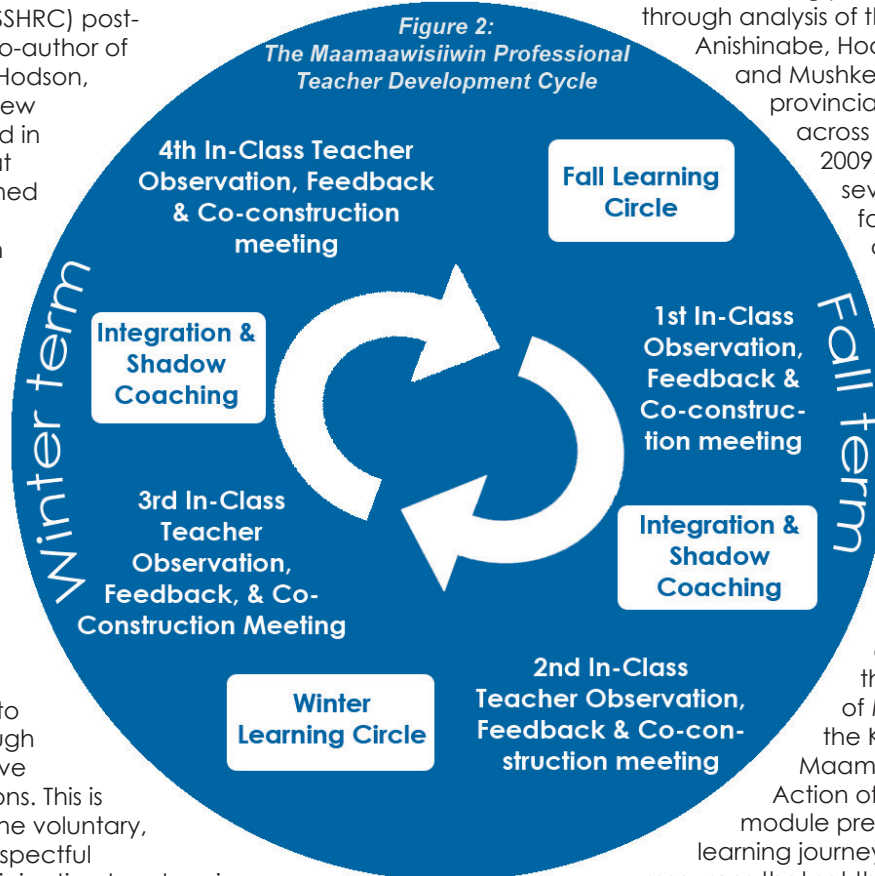
by engaging the narratives of FNMI students and the effective teaching profile through various interactive activities.

The effective teaching profile has been developed through analysis of the narratives of Anishinabe, Hodeñoosañee, Inuit, Métis, and Mushkego students attending provincially funded schools across the province (Hodson 2009). That analysis revealed seven critical teaching foci that together create a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations that can be taught to teachers interested in bringing this pedagogy into their practice.

During each learning circle participating teachers receive four interrelated modularized workbooks including: the Vision of Maamaawisiwin, the Relationship of Maamaawisiwin, the Knowledge of Maamaawisiwin, and the Action of Maamaawisiwin. Each module presents an interactive learning journey and associated resources that set the stage for the next phase of the Maamaawisiwin development cycle.

### In-class Teacher Observation, Feedback, and Co-construction Meetings

At the beginning of each term, participating teachers are observed by a Maamaawisiwin research assistant during a class of their choice. The related observation tool is designed to reflect the seven points of the effective teaching profile and how often teachers are observed using those seven points in their teaching. Each participating teacher meets privately with the Maamaawisiwin research assistant, at which time the results of the in-class observation are reviewed, discussed, and agreed on. During the meeting, the participating teacher and the Maamaawisiwin research assistant then co-construct one or two achievable and measurable goals that are drawn from the effective teaching profile. Over the next few months, these goals are integrated into practice by the participating teacher. During that period, a Maamaawisiwin research assistant provides shadow coaching and meets with the participating teacher to catch up on a regular basis. The entire process is repeated at the end of each semester.



## Implementing the Education Innovation

The education innovation needed to improve the school success of FNMI students in Ontario is quite simple. Traditional knowledge within the cultural continuum already exists in the Biwaase'aa program at a number of English-language schools in Thunder Bay, for example, and has proved to increase the school success of FNMI students. As well, the Maamaawisiwin Professional Teacher Development Program, which is based on a successful Maori program, reflects the learning needs of FNMI peoples in Ontario and helps teachers take up a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations that results in increased success in teaching contemporary knowledge. Both programs exhibit over two decades of successful operations and research evidence of success. The next step is to combine both programs in Thunder Bay's elementary, senior elementary, and high schools: call it the Biwaase'aa/Maamaawisiwin Education Innovation.

### The Biwaase'aa/Maamaawisiwin Education Innovation Research Plan

Evidence-based decision making is the philosophy of the Ontario government, which will direct ever-diminishing tax revenue to initiatives that can make an evidence-based business case for change. To that end, educational research is a strategic focus of the Ministry of Education (Ontario 2009), as is the call for large-scale education reform through teacher and leadership development (Ontario 2008). The research associated with the Biwaase'aa/Maamaawisiwin Education Innovation is designed to reveal the evidence of change from two perspectives: that of FNMI students and their high school teachers.

In the 2014/15 school year, the Biwaase'aa program expanded to include eight elementary schools in the two English-language DSBs in Thunder Bay. Based on evidence revealed by Kitchen, Hodson, and Hodson (2014), the Ministry of Education has committed, in principle, to a three-year funding initiative that includes expanding the program into one senior elementary school (grades 7 and 8) and one high school beginning in fall 2016 and maintaining a continued presence in the current eight elementary schools.

This expansion and associated funding commitment provide a holistic opportunity, through a six-year longitudinal study, to follow the experiences of FNMI students through the entirety of their elementary and high school education. In doing so, the project hopes to reveal the impact of access to traditional knowledge FNMI community experts who are part of

the FNMI cultural continuum that is at the centre of the Biwaase'aa program, and contemporary knowledge teacher experts who are educated to work in a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations that is at the centre of the MPTDP.

The vision of the study is twofold:

- to follow a group of 100 Aboriginal students who are registered Biwaase'aa program participants beginning in grade 6 and continuing through grade 12, recording their experiences each year, both qualitatively and quantitatively, through talking circles and the study of the common Academic Indicators of School Success; and
- to follow a group of high school teachers (of grades 9 through 12) as they participate in the MPTDP, to reveal the impact of the program, both qualitatively and quantitatively, through talking circles and in-class observations.

#### Methodology

The study is a multiphase, convergent, mixed-method design that includes both qualitative and quantitative elements that, in the case of students, are completed at the end of each term (six years) and, in the case of participating high school teachers, collected at specific points throughout the academic year for a period of four years. This timeframe provides multiple opportunities to follow a number of students as they move through elementary, senior elementary, and high school and to track the impact on participating high school teachers.

The qualitative data will follow the student participant cohort through a video record using the Wildfire Research Method (see Kompf and Hodson 2000) to reveal the lived experience of students attending participating elementary, senior elementary, and high schools during each year of the study. The quantitative data will be compiled through various sources, including: aggregate standardized test scores; attendance; retention; grades; early leaving; subject achievement; graduation; and behavioural referrals.

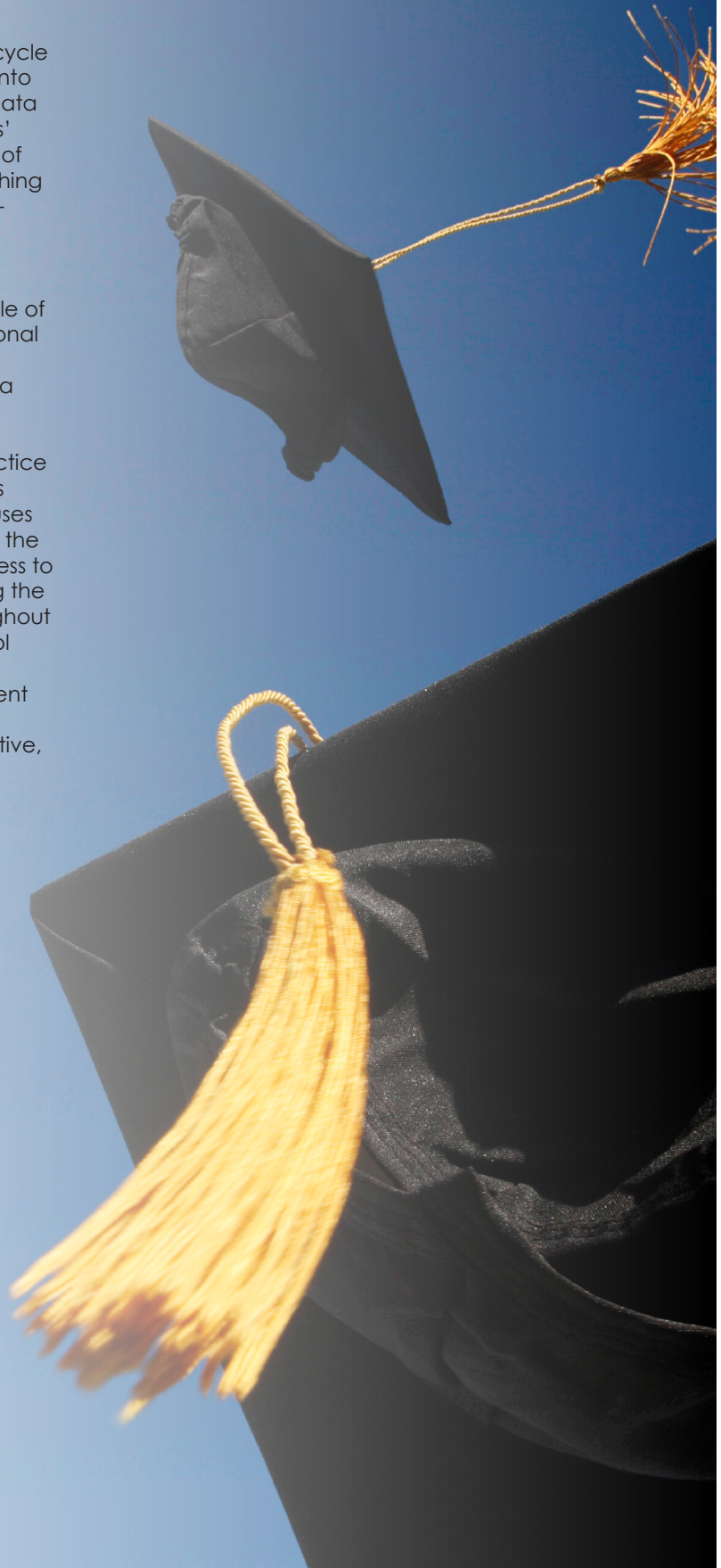
In the year prior to the transition of participating FNMI students from grade 8 to grade 9, participating grade 9 teachers will begin their involvement with the MPTDP. Each year, the MPTDP will expand to include teachers from the subsequent grade — that is, grades 10, 11, and 12. The rationale of limiting the MPTDP to high school teachers is that the vast majority of Aboriginal students are at the greatest risk of leaving school at age 17 and they therefore require teachers who are pedagogically prepared to work with them to minimize that risk (Statistics Canada 2015b, 2).



The primary focus of the MPTDP will be to work in confidence, respect, and support of participating teachers throughout a professional development cycle as they incorporate the effective teaching profile into their practice. The aim of that activity is to reveal data from: the in-class observation of teachers; teachers' feedback on the observation; the co-construction of specific teachers' goals; the in-class shadow coaching of goals; and students' surveys, both pre- and post-MPTDP involvement.

A dedicated research assistant will be assigned to each school involved in the project. The primary role of the research assistant will be to develop a professional and confidential relationship with participating FNMI students and teachers and to collect the data mentioned above for the duration of the project.

Supporting teachers to shift their pedagogical practice to include the effective teaching profile will surpass the existing Ministry of Education strategy that focuses on "cultures, histories, and perspectives" and, as in the Maori experience, will improve FNMI students' access to contemporary knowledge. Strategically combining the Biwaase'aa and Maamaawisiwin programs throughout the elementary, senior elementary, and high school years will align that experience with the body of international literature and the ministry's commitment that FNMI students will "have the traditional and contemporary knowledge...to be socially contributive, politically active, and economically prosperous" (Ontario 2013, 7).





## Conclusion

Canada and First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples are at a crossroads, where population growth, economic inequity, and social justice issues collide (Anaya 2013), and where a longstanding inability to address the core issues that give rise to harmful socio-economic cycles will, if unchanged, play out among an exploding generation of FNMI children. FNMI peoples have long held that access to teachers of both traditional and contemporary knowledge who are prepared to meet the educational needs of their children would be a cost-effective way to interrupt these cycles (Chiefs of Ontario 2005; Tremblay 2001).

*We do not have the luxury of ignoring our collective responsibilities to FNMI children. Our choice — the choice of all who read this paper — will determine what vision of the future we bequeath to them.*

In its Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework, the Ministry of Education has made a commitment to FNMI communities that their children who attend provincially funded schools will receive both traditional and contemporary knowledge education. That commitment and the resources allocated to achieve that vision have been mostly ineffective, however, because the initiative has not been grounded in the body of research on the education of Indigenous peoples.

One exception to that reality is the Biwaase'aa program, which provides access to traditional knowledge throughout the school day to FNMI students in Thunder Bay schools. Research completed in 2014 has demonstrated an emergent relationship between improvements in academic indicators of FNMI students who participate in Biwaase'aa, which has prompted the Ministry of Education to fund an expansion of the program in Thunder Bay's senior elementary and a high school over the next several years. This expansion has opened the door to improving the access of FNMI

students to contemporary knowledge by helping teachers to shift their pedagogical practices in support of FNMI learning needs through the Maamaawisiwin Professional Teacher Development Program. The Biwaase'aa/Maamaawisiwin research project will be led by a consortium of public and private partners, and funded through a proposal to be submitted to the SSHRC in fall 2015. The project has been designed to extend the research on Indigenous education to include support for high school teachers that results in new knowledge of their experience of teaching FNMI students, as well as a viable, scalable FNMI education model that has application across the province.

From a political perspective, the Biwaase'aa/Maamaawisiwin research project comes at a time when education policy is increasingly open to innovation. Through the introduction of the Education Policy Framework, the strategic focus on education research (Ontario 2009), and the call for large-scale education reform through teacher and leadership development (Ontario 2008), the Ontario government has signalled that it is prepared to direct ever-diminishing tax revenue to innovation that can make a sound, evidence-based business case for change.

Provincially funded education has the potential to disrupt the causal cycles that have resulted in exponential levels of social and economic disparity in FNMI lives in Northwestern Ontario. In this paper, we have presented a strategic response: an educational innovation — an evolution, not a revolution — that will benefit FNMI students and their teachers. Yes, a high school diploma will result in more options, such as access to higher education or employment. More important, however, school success will enhance the overall well-being of an already at-risk population by creating learning environments for success, but this can be achieved only by stepping outside the prevailing one-size-fits-all box that describes how education is offered in Ontario.

If we choose to do otherwise, young FNMI people will continue to disproportionately fill the jails and welfare rolls, many will self-medicate with drugs and alcohol with implications for the health care system, they will live their shortened lives in the back lanes of every city and town in the Northwest, and many will choose to end their lives because they see no future in which to live. In the end, a relatively minor upstream investment in the Biwaase'aa/Maamaawisiwin research project that keeps FNMI children in school will be more desirable than an exorbitant downstream expenditure on health care, welfare, crisis housing, or warehousing FNMI people in provincial jails.

We do not have the luxury of ignoring our collective responsibilities to FNMI children. Our choice — the choice of all who read this paper — will determine what vision of the future we bequeath to them.

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## Who We Are

Internally, Northern Policy Institute seeks to be as “lean” as possible with much of the work contracted out to experts in the fields under consideration. This approach avoids the risks associated with large bureaucratic organizations. It also allows Northern Policy Institute to flexibly respond across a wide range of issues while also building up in house and regional expertise by matching bright young minds on temporary placements and project specific work with talented experts who can supply guidance and coaching.

### **Some of the key players in this model, and their roles, are as follows:**

**Board:** The Board of Directors sets strategic direction for Northern Policy Institute. Directors serve on operational committees dealing with finance, fundraising and governance, and collectively the Board holds the CEO accountable for achieving our Strategic Plan goals. The Board's principal responsibility is to protect and promote the interests, reputation, and stature of Northern Policy Institute.

**President & CEO:** Recommends strategic direction, develops plans and processes, and secures and allocates resources to achieve it.

**Advisory Council:** A group of committed individuals interested in supporting, but not directing, the work of Northern Policy Institute. Leaders in their fields, they provide advice on potential researchers or points of contact in the wider community.

**Research Advisory Board:** A group of academic researchers who provide guidance and input on potential research directions, potential authors, and draft studies and commentaries. They are Northern Policy Institute's formal link to the academic community.

**Peer Reviewers:** Ensure specific papers are factual, relevant and publishable.

**Authors and Research Fellows:** Provide independent expertise on specific policy areas as and when needed.

**Standing engagement tools (general public, government stakeholders, community stakeholders):** Ensure Northern Policy Institute remains responsive to the community and reflects THEIR priorities and concerns in project selection.

To stay connected or get involved, please contact us at:

1 (807) 343-8956 [info@northernpolicy.ca](mailto:info@northernpolicy.ca) [www.northernpolicy.ca](http://www.northernpolicy.ca)

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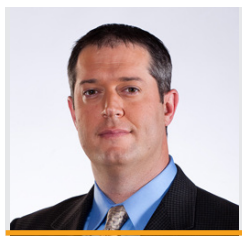
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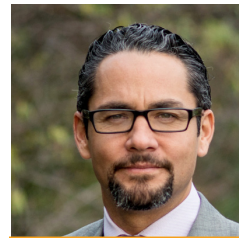
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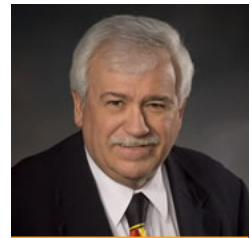
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