

LESSONS LEARNED THROUGH RESEARCH WITH MOTHER EARTH'S CHILDREN'S CHARTER SCHOOL¹

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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2002, researchers from the University of Alberta were invited to participate in a three-year longitudinal evaluation of the effect of culturally compatible education, as understood and offered by Mother Earth's Children's Charter School (MECCS), on the mental and physical health of Aboriginal² children. MECCS is the first and only indigenous³ children's charter school in Canada. The school was established by a group of parents and educators who believed that there were more effective ways to educate their children through indigenous approaches to learning, as opposed to conventional Euro-centered approaches to education. Wilson Bearhead, co-founder and past cultural adviser to the school, shared the following when asked about how he felt the conventional school system had failed Aboriginal children.

The importance of how you teach and how you present education was not considered and as a result we went through, I think, over 20 years of failure trying to teach someone else's structure and someone else's way of thinking... We forgot who we were ... we were trying to be someone we were not and as a result failures happened. (W. Bearhead, personal communication, March 2005)

Exclusion of indigenous languages and culture within the educational system increases a child's sense of isolation and contributes to a child's loss of identity. Aboriginal children are expected to fit in to "ways of being" pre-determined by a Euro-centered educational system and as a result are at risk of losing their sense of self and the ability to embrace the knowledge that can keep them healthy. Dr. Betty Bastien (2004:168) writes about the consequences of being denied access to ancestral tribal ways of life and possibilities for developing a sense of self:

When the ancestral context of self is forcefully denied, denigrated and removed, a dissociative identity founded upon the experiences of colonialism is located outside of the connected self and outside of the tribal context. It is severed from the natural sources of creativity, motivation and strength.

Work by Chandler and Lalonde (1998) on youth resilience has shown significant benefits for Aboriginal youth from those communities that have taken steps toward preserving and rebuilding their own culture including language and Aboriginal curriculum.

2. Aboriginal: the Canadian Constitution recognizes three groups of Aboriginal peoples — Indians, Métis, and Inuit.

3. Indigenous: means "native to the area."

Article 6 of the World Declaration on Education for All reminds us that “successful learning can only take place in healthy and culturally appropriate environments and when learning is connected to other aspects of life and to the well being of the learner” (King and Schielmann, 2004:14). Culturally appropriate educational environments are therefore critical to the successful and holistic growth and development of all children.

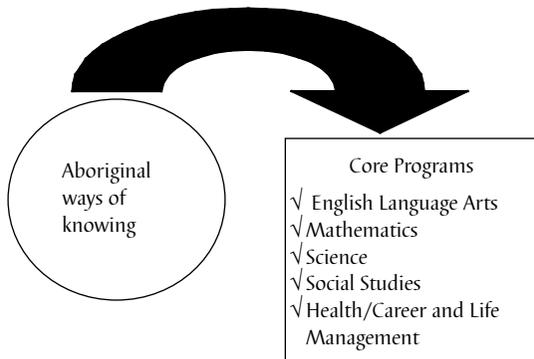
The vision of MECCS is to rediscover the gifts and potential of the children through traditional indigenous teachings and respect for self, others, and all living things. The school’s mission statement builds on the vision,

... to nurture, to support, guide and challenge each of our children to discover the gifts given to them by the Creator and [to create] a balance of their spiritual, intellectual, physical and emotional selves. Through this each child will achieve personal excellence and fulfillment. (MECCS Society Charter, 2003:1)

Co-founders of the school, Charlene Crowe and Wilson Bearhead, encouraged the involvement of individuals who shared their vision and founded a society which sought and obtained Charter school status.

Charter schools were introduced in Alberta in 1994 to address the need for educational change. The *School Amendment Act (1994)* “enabled the establishment of charter schools – autonomous public schools that would provide innovative or enhanced means of delivering education in order to improve student learning” (Alberta Learning, 2002:1). The Alberta government’s mandate for charter schools includes the expectation that the school demonstrates the potential to improve the learning of students, and that the educational services they offer will differ from what is available locally. In general, charter schools complement the educational services provided in the local public system.

Figure 1.

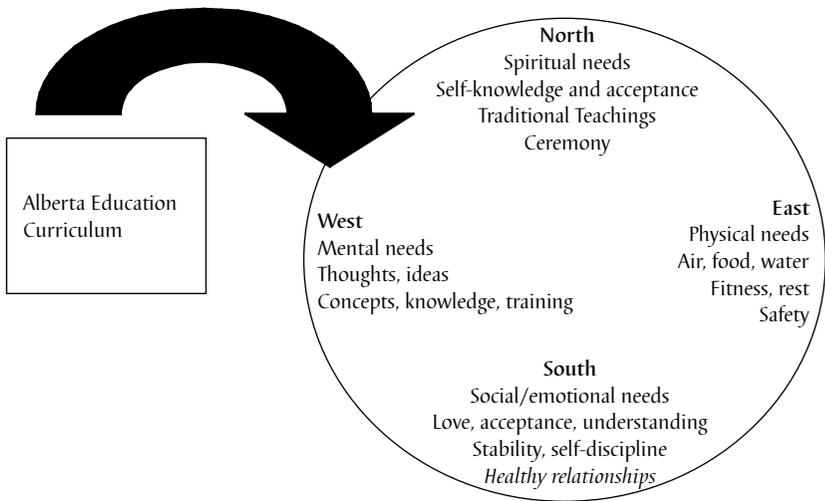


The curricular framework established within the MECCS charter acknowledges and supports the Alberta Curriculum but it also describes a parallel indigenous curriculum for all subject areas (MECCS Society Charter, 2003:3). At MECCS, the intent of the parallel curriculum is to include Aboriginal cultural knowledge, values, lifestyle, history, and language. Aboriginal curricula exist in a number of public schools in Alberta, but it is how the indigenous curriculum is situated within those schools as compared to MECCS that differentiates MECCS from schools in the public school system.

In the public school system, learning is typically situated around core programs of study and Aboriginal ways of knowing are “infused” into these programs (Fig. 1). Alberta’s Commission on Learning, in its report *Progress on Recommendations: October 2004* stated that,

Alberta Learning, as the lead, will continue to infuse Aboriginal perspectives into existing and future Programs of Study, starting with the new Social Studies curriculum that will be implemented starting in 2005. Aboriginal Studies ...

Figure 2.



also provides opportunities for all Alberta students to recognize and appreciate Aboriginal cultures and contributions to the province and society” (Alberta Education, 2004:recommendation 39).

At MECCS, the starting place for learning is the medicine wheel (Fig. 2). “The philosophy and foundation of our school is based upon the Medicine Wheel; the center of North American indigenous teachings” (MECCS educa-

Figure 3.

tion plan, 2003/2004 to 2005/2006:3). Over 82 percent of the children and families at MECCS identify as Aboriginal or indigenous, and they share a belief that the curriculum should be rooted in identity and experience, rather than something external to be funneled or infused into the daily life of the school. The vision of MECCS calls for core learning, as identified by Alberta Education, to be understood and experienced through Aboriginal ways of knowing which includes ceremonies, prayer, storytelling, circle theories, and the recognition of people's own life stories (Alberta Mental Health Board, 2004).

MECCS is located next to Lake Wabamun, in a small rural community in North Central Alberta, Canada (Fig. 3). As of June 2005, there were 113 students enrolled in kindergarten through grade 9. The majority of children self-identify as Cree (40 percent) or Nakota Sioux (41 percent), although the school population also represents Blood, Blackfoot, Ojibway, Dene, Inuit, Métis, and children who identify as non-Aboriginal.⁴ In addition to their indoor classrooms the children have access to over 30 acres of undeveloped, non-reservation land where they spend time “seeing, interacting, touching and being with the energy of the land.... [It is here that] they cut and dry meat, cook and pick berries.... This is the place where the grass and the wind moves the spirit of the children” (W. Bearhead, personal communication, March 2005. See Fig. 4).

4. All children are eligible to attend irrespective of their Aboriginal or indigenous background.

Figure 4.



BEGINNING THE RESEARCH

Researchers from the University of Alberta were invited by the MECCS community to conduct an evaluation at MECCS that examined students' learning and health over a three-year period. The partnership between MECCS and the university research group was initially formed to address the question of how culturally compatible education contributed to the health and well being of Aboriginal students. As researchers working with the MECCS community, we believed in a need to move away from a model of health that considers only the mind and the body, towards a more holistic model that supports and honors the development of the mind, body, emotions and spirit. Our interest is how culturally compatible education, as delivered by MECCS, can support the integrated development and nurturance of identity and in doing so improve the child's mental, physical, and academic well being.

In 2003, our research group, in collaboration with the MECCS community, received a grant from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Institute of Aboriginal Peoples' Health to determine whether the health and learning of children who attend MECCS improves over a three-year period. Ethics approval for the study was granted by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board. An institutional cohort design (Marsh and Wirick, 1991) was chosen to allow for within and between subjects comparisons as children progressed

through the program. The total population of the first MECCS cohort of 146 children and their primary caregiver/parent were invited to participate in the study. Consent was obtained from 114 of these children and their caregivers to complete the quantitative measures examined in the study. Measures included individual assessments of IQ and academic achievement, self-beliefs and behavioral development, attendance and school satisfaction. These conventional quantitative tools were selected to provide us and the MECCS community with a longitudinal evaluation of whether culturally compatible education, as offered by MECCS, had an effect on student learning, health, attendance, and school satisfaction. We are now completing data analysis from the final year of the study and results will be presented in a later publication. Over the past three years as our research team has worked with the MECCS community, we have developed a deeper understanding of the complexity of culturally compatible education, the importance of a mutually responsive research relationship, and the value of listening, over time, to participants' stories as a way of understanding experiences. What follows are lessons learned by the research team as we began to attend more closely to the stories of our research participants as well as our own unfolding narratives of collaborative research.

LESSON 1: CULTURALLY COMPATIBLE EDUCATION

Education that is responsive to the home culture of students is widely accepted as a critical component of student success (Cummins, 1981). In an extensive review of indigenous education Demmert (2001) identified a number of school characteristics thought to be important in improving academic performance among Native American students including: (1) Native language and cultural programs within the school; (2) effective teachers and classroom practices; (3) congruency between the culture of the school and the culture of the community served; (4) participation of parents in the educational process; and (5) responsibility for and ownership of schools by parents and other community members. These characteristics were a part of MECCS original vision and mission statements (MECCS Education Plan 2003/2004 to 2005/2006). However, as the school evolved, tensions and uncertainty developed as a result of unexpected and changing circumstances. High enrollment of special needs students, inconsistent parent and Elder involvement, changes in the school's administration, and staff turnover made it difficult to provide culturally compatible education as originally defined in the school education plan. For several months these realities resulted in tensions between members of

the research group and the school community. For the school community, the priority became a restructuring in order to address issues that undermined the development of the school. For our research group, the priority was ongoing evaluation of the effects of culturally compatible education, an important component of the research proposal. During this time of uncertainty a consistent intervention was difficult to deliver. This experience of uncertainty during the research process is well described by Heron and Reason (2001:185):

... divergence of thought and expression may descend into confusion, uncertainty and ambiguity, disorder and tension. When this happens, most if not all co-researchers will feel lost to a greater or lesser degree. So a mental set is needed which allows for interdependence of ... nescience and knowing, an attitude which tolerates and undergoes without premature closure, inquiry phases which are [difficult]. These phases tend, in their own good time, to convert to new levels of order. But since there is no guarantee that they will do so, they are risky and edgy. Tidying them up prematurely out of anxiety leads to pseudoknowledge.

With time a new order developed at MECCS. Changes in staffing, improved funding which addressed the large number of special needs students, and more consistent parent and Elder involvement resulted in greater stability within the school environment. As researchers, we learned that these changes were a necessary part of the process of developing culturally compatible education. There are no models for the development of an indigenous children's charter school in Canada and as the process moves forward, difficulties, tensions, and confusion will likely continue to arise. We need to be attentive to these changes as a new order and new possibilities unfold. The school story has a constantly shifting form and it is responsive to the lives of individuals. It continues to unfold through ongoing conversations as we "live with the tensions and continue to see possibilities for the story of the school." (Pearce et al., 2005:348).

LESSON 2: MUTUALLY RESPONSIVE RESEARCH RELATIONSHIP

As a research team we had initially planned to observe the educational process as it was unfolding at MECCS and document predetermined outcomes. We believed that remaining objective would minimize the potential of influencing what it was we were trying to measure. Over time, however, we realized that remaining distant in order to minimize bias would not build the research relationship needed to fully explore the research questions. We became aware of the importance of a mutually responsive research relationship and the expertise that each partner, including community members, organi-

zational representatives, and academic researchers, brought to the research process. This type of relationship is the foundation of community-based research and it encompasses the core values of indigenous research methodology (McNaughton, 2003). Community-based research involves community members, organizational representatives, and researchers as equal partners in all stages of the research process. Partners contribute their expertise to enhance understanding and to integrate new knowledge with action to benefit the community involved (Israel et al., 2001). Table 1 details the principles of

Table 1.

<i>Community-based Participatory Research (Israel et al., 2001)</i>	<i>Aboriginal Research (McNaughton & Rock, 2003:15)</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recognizes community as a unit of identity 2. Builds on strengths and resources within the community 3. Facilitates collaborative partnerships in all phases of the research 4. Integrates knowledge and action for mutual benefits of all partners 5. Promotes co-learning and empowerment processes that attend to social inequalities 6. Involves a cyclical and iterative process 7. Addresses health from both positive and ecological perspectives 8. Disseminates findings and knowledge gained to all partners 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Adheres to Aboriginal protocols at all stages of its enactment 2. Involves Elders and knowledge holders as recognized “national treasurers” and as decision makers 3. Emphasizes partnership and collaborative research designs 4. Identifies Aboriginal researchers as the investigators 5. Is conceptualized within Indigenous knowledge, traditions, beliefs, and values and based on Aboriginal cognitive spiritual maps

community-based research and its parallels with Aboriginal research methodologies. With more community participation in all stages of research design and implementation, researchers steeped in the tradition of community based research are more likely to achieve results that are not only reliable but that also probe more deeply into research topics. Community-based research supports the process of uncovering and producing knowledge that belongs to and is relevant to the community. It breaks down the dichotomies of researcher-researched and subject-object, and is committed to the rights of local people (Herlihy and Knapp, 2003). “Within a collaborative inquiry relationship the traditional role of researcher as expert knower disappears and there is no place in such a relationship for the researcher as objective, distant or detached observer” (Schulz, 1997:84).

A mutually responsive research relationship has produced richer information and greater opportunities for all parties involved. Community mem-

bers welcomed research team members and over time shared their cultural knowledge and expertise. Members of our research group have been invited to professional development days, school field trips, as well as community activities and celebrations. They have worked closely with classroom teachers and students and responded to school and parent requests for assessments and recommendations for children with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), autism, and learning difficulties. At the same time, community members learned more about research as they supported the writing of the research grant and participated in data collection and interpretation. School staff have expanded their professional development as they collaborated with various research group members both informally and formally through discussions and professional development days that focused on the research process. When the opportunity for a federal educational grant became available the school community and research group worked collaboratively to create a Family and School Development FASD kit for First Nation communities to be used in their school. Recognizing and responding to these opportunities and taking time to develop them has strengthened our evolving relationship and provided everyone involved with a deeper understanding of the context of the intended research.

As community-based researchers, developing relationships based on mutual trust and respect has sometimes brought us uncomfortably close to the source of decisions that are being made about the operations of the school. We observed the experience of culturally compatible education as offered by MECCS while at the same time being pulled into the experience itself. As we have continued to work with the MECCS community we have developed an increasing awareness of our role as participant-observer. There are times when our involvement and participation is key and other times when we need to step back and honour the process that is unfolding. We have found it difficult at times to choose the optimal course of action. As McDonald (2004) suggests, the notion of community is complex because internal structures and dynamics vary over time. As community-based researchers, we concurrently had to adhere to the protocols of the study while working effectively and sensitively with the people of the MECCS community.

A mutually responsive research relationship has produced richer information and greater opportunities for all partners involved. By adopting the principles of community-based participatory research during the course of

our evaluations we avoided the potential for exploitation that Coles (1998:76) describes. “Is it ‘exploitative’ ... to arrive on a given scene, ask for people’s cooperation, time, energy, and knowledge, do one’s ‘study’ or ‘project’ and soon enough, leave, *thank-yous* presumably extended?” Community-based participatory research approaches are a sound means to avoid the potential for exploiting and undervaluing the contributions of study participants. Over time, members of our research team have become valued members of the MECCS community.

LESSON 3: A NEW STORY OF EVALUATION

During the first year of the evaluation students, staff, Elders, community members, and researchers began to wonder if there were other ways to study what was unfolding at MECCS. We had come to realize that the quantitative data provides only a partial picture of the experiences within the MECCS community. Performance on a test and health behaviours based on a questionnaire provide a useful but incomplete picture of a student’s learning. The use of traditional quantitative measures provided us with important but incomplete information on the questions we hoped to answer.

To develop a more holistic understanding of what was evolving, the research team needed to listen to the many voices that make up the MECCS community. Through continued conversations with MECCS parents and staff, we identified the need to develop a complementary study that would allow us to attend to the stories that we were hearing. Ethics approval and funding was subsequently obtained for “A Visual Narrative Look at Mother Earth’s Children’s Charter School” a pilot study designed to provide a better understanding and context for the quantitative measures obtained.

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research methodology that starts with the understanding that we all live storied lives on storied landscapes (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). “Visual narrative inquiry” (Bach, 1997; 2001; 2007) draws upon experience and the use of still photography to make visible what matters to each participant. One aspect of visual narrative inquiry is listening to the stories that participants tell and retell about their photographs, about their lives. The intention of visual narrative inquiry is to uncover the *visuality* around the *evaded* (Bach, 1997; 2007), by reference to photographs of everyday stories typically not seen or heard by those outside the community. *Visuality* refers to the socialization of vision, “this socialization is a network of cultural meanings generated from various discourses that shape the social practices of vision” (Walker, 2005:24).

Hains (2002) helps us understand the need for research in indigenous communities to be holistic, to involve personal honesty and many ways of listening, to be about service and to incorporate action and reflection (see also McNaughton and Rock, 2003 for the results of SSHRC's dialogue on an Aboriginal research agenda). Through its emphasis on relational knowing and its use of photography and story, visual narrative inquiry (Bach, 1998; 2007) respects the nuances and narratives of indigenous communities. At MECCS, visual narrative inquiry helped us make visible what matters to a group of parents, teachers and children who are a part of the school community.

The visual narrative inquiry began in the winter of 2005 when five MECCS participants were provided with one-time cameras and asked to photograph their experiences of the MECCS community. Studying lived experiences visually through a process of *cameraworks* (Bach, 1997) and listening to stories emerging from their photographs made sense to the participants who wanted to make visible their experiences at MECCS. In conversation, a participant commented, "if we could *show* you and you would *listen*, perhaps together we can change the future lives of our Aboriginal children."

What follows shows a beginning space in our co-construction of a composition that connects the participants' photographs and their words. These visual composites will augment the quantitative measures of student achievement and health and provide a richer and broader understanding of the importance of culturally compatible education. The two visual narratives that follow represent the stories we began to hear about what matters to our participants during their time at MECCS.

Spaces of learning

The following visual composite, taken by one of the participants, shows a moment in the school lives of some of the children from MECCS. All of the participants in the pilot study spoke of Mother Earth and the spirit of the land and of their strong belief in the need to connect, respect and value the environment.

Spaces of identity

The following visual composite shows the entrance to the school, taken by another participant. By hearing the participant's story and listening to what she had to say, we learn of the importance of sustained conversation, of relational research, and of attending to what has been evaded in her story of growing up as an Aboriginal student in school. The participant spoke to the

Figure V

Participant: So the first one's with these little people ... there's so many pictures like this out on the land because to me this is the one thing that I love that's just so important. And I still believe ... that's when we're really going to see the difference in ... the kids — when we get on the land, because that's huge. I mean that's central to all of it...



This is the Grade 2 class ... they're all about 6 and 7 years old ... it's fall and they've got their little clipboards and their pencils and it's them making sense of it ... they do it so much easier than adults. You know the adults go, "Oh my goodness ... how are we going to teach on the land ... we don't have a desk," you know. And here they are, they've got their clipboards, they've got their pencils, any questions? ...

you just can see all of them and they've got their own little thoughts going on there ... they're ready, it was like, "OK," you know they just trust ... They show up and trust that we're going to do what we're supposed to do with them. And I love that with them ... on the land because it's not all controlled for them.

Figure 6.

Participant: And look at all the kids' shoes and boots and the sun coming in. And it's a reflection of that picture ... it makes the kids have a feeling of belonging there and I think it's very important for any human being to feel like they belong somewhere. It's a beautiful picture ... because it has the eagle feathers — the centre tail feathers there...



And they also have the protection shield there. And that's what we try to make for these guys too is a protection shield for themselves ... that's his medicine shield. And they believe. I mean don't they have blankets, aren't those blankets for protection? Aren't those blankets for comfort? And they keep them, and a lot of them put shiny stuff on them.... That's what

I liked about that ... walk a mile in my moccasins. But that again, gives the kids a sense of belonging and I think you need to belong somewhere.

roles and responsibilities of parents or teachers or Elders, to lead the owners of the shoes in a happy and positive direction, where they would see education as a ray of hope into a healthy lifestyle. The participants recognized that they are visual learners and the pilot study provided an opportunity to show and tell stories that are working for them while acknowledging what is missing — and their hope is that this research can help them change this.

SUMMARY

During the process of evaluation of the relationship between culturally compatible education and health within the context of Mother Earth's Children's Charter School our research group has developed a greater understanding of community-based participatory research and indigenous research methodology.

We have come to appreciate the complexity of culturally compatible education and its implementation in a way that is "real" for the community, the importance of a mutually responsive research relationship, and the importance of being open to new ways of documenting and understanding the value of indigenous education.

Developing an understanding of community is a complex undertaking as internal structures and dynamics vary over time. This was an important challenge for our research group. In order to respect the guidelines for community-based participatory research and indigenous research methodology, we needed to adhere to the protocols of the community, work with the interests and needs of community and non-community researchers and respond to the concerns of everyone involved. The questions, methodologies, and solutions evolved as members of our research group became a part of the school community and as the school community contributed to the research process. In the end, our hope is that the research belongs to everyone involved and the knowledge generated helps us to understand and transform practices and lives.

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