

MEW Outcomes Report

proactive
INFORMATION SERVICES INC.



Making
Education
Work

**Published in 2013 by
Proactive Information Services Inc.**
101-478 River Avenue
Suite 732
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R3L 0B3

Tel: 204-943-2370
Web: www.proactive.mb.ca

Graphic Design: Kellett Copy Centres Ltd.

The opinions expressed in this research document are those of the authors and do not represent official policies of the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation or other agencies or organizations that may have provided support, financial or otherwise, for this project.

Introduction

Making Education Work

Making Education Work (MEW) was a five year research project jointly funded by the Province of Manitoba and the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.¹ The project involved high school students in six sites across Manitoba, consisting of three First Nations high schools and three provincial high schools.

The overall aim of the project was to evaluate whether the provision of additional in-school supports and services would assist Grade 10 to 12 students in staying in school, meeting graduation requirements and entering a post-secondary program. Program implementation began in the 2006/2007 school year with students scheduled to graduate in 2009.

In partnership with their school divisions and/or local Aboriginal communities, MEW was developed with a set of common components.

- a MEW curriculum, with Aboriginal content for Grades 10 to 12,
- career development and guidance,
- tutoring and mentoring,
- cultural development,
- community service activities,
- parental involvement,
- personal development.

The position of MEW provincial coordinator was put in place by the project partners in order to oversee the development and implementation of the project and its various components. The position was essential in ensuring that the project was launched and that the common components were developed and embedded within the project.

A MEW teacher oversaw the program at each site, acting as a mediator, mentor, liaison, and advocate for students and parents. The MEW teacher was the key support for the academic/career development component of MEW. MEW teachers monitored student attendance, progress and activities in all core subjects and other areas. Each student was to have a

personalized education plan, tailored to his/her needs and aspirations. Visits were made to post-secondary institutions.

The MEW teacher also played a strong mentorship role, although others in the school and community would also act as mentors and role models (e.g., community leaders, Elders, parents, university students).

A MEW classroom was designated in each site specifically to give MEW program participants a place to meet, receive academic support, do homework, and study as well as for the delivery of the MEW curriculum. The program was to operate out of this classroom for the full three years. In addition, up to 15 laptops were provided for MEW student use at each site.

MEW program students were to register in all core subject courses and electives of their choice. One of their electives was to be the MEW curriculum which was to run for three years with students obtaining three full credits (six independent courses worth half a credit per semester). The curriculum was developed by the MEW teachers along with the MEW provincial coordinator and a curriculum writer, in consultation with community leaders, school personnel, Elders, and First Nations organizations. The curriculum was taught by the MEW teacher at each site.

Tutoring was a major focus and was provided, as required, to individual students. The MEW teacher would assist with course work, homework assignments, and/or independent study courses. MEW teachers would also attend classes with students, when necessary. In addition, peer tutoring and peer support was delivered individually and/or through homework clubs.

MEW students were also encouraged by the MEW teacher to participate in extra-curricular activities, field trips and other activities to support their individual development, build life skills and enhance self-esteem. Additional monies were provided to support such activities, as well as annual MEW gatherings. Career development was also addressed both through in-school guidance and field trips to post-secondary institutions.

The cultural development aspect of MEW was another key component. Students' Aboriginal identity was to be strengthened through participation in a variety of activities and opportunities, as

¹ The Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation closed at the end of its 10 year mandate in June 2010.

well as through their involvement with the MEW curriculum. Participation in cultural activities (e.g., sweat lodges, traditional teachings, music and dance) was encouraged, but was strictly voluntary.

The community service component was intended to assist students in developing leadership skills, a sense of community belonging and citizenship, as well as knowledge of Aboriginal communities in a global society. The intent was to incorporate high school programming into the local community through strategies, such as work experience, volunteering, and job shadowing, in order to bridge the gap between the school and work environment, as well as to support preparation for post-secondary studies.

Parental and family involvement was viewed as a crucial component for supporting student success. A variety of strategies (e.g. workshops, meetings, personal contact) were used with the goal of sustaining parental involvement for the duration of the project.

Local Advisory Groups (LAG) were to oversee the project at the local level, making recommendations and providing advice over the course of the project. The volunteers who formed the LAGs included the MEW teacher, school administration, school board trustees, school division/education authority personnel, First Nations/Aboriginal representatives, Elders, program parents and youth. Each site determined its own LAG membership.

Three areas of study and related questions were identified for the evaluation.

Evaluation of MEW

From the outset, MEW was intended as a research project to determine whether participation in MEW would:

- Increase Aboriginal students' high school retention rates,
- Increase Aboriginal students' high school graduation rates,
- Increase enrollment of Aboriginal students in post-secondary study.

The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation was responsible for selecting and contracting the original research firm who worked with the Foundation and the MEW Management Team to develop the research design. When project start-up was delayed, the

design which was ultimately selected called for eligible Aboriginal volunteer students to be divided into two groups: pilot students who would participate in MEW and comparison students who were not intended to benefit from the suite of interventions available. (Students were not to be considered eligible for selection if they were in an individualized program that involved a cognitive disability, students with a history of violence, or students over the age of 18.) The research design was seen as congruent with one of the Foundation's goals which was to conduct research to support the development of educational policies and programs. It was believed that such a design would explore cause/effect relationships and provide credible evidence on which to base policy and program recommendations.

The original research firm randomly divided the students, conducted initial data collection, and tracked students over the first few years. Their contract was ended in 2009 and a new firm was sought to complete the work. Proactive Information Services Inc.², a Manitoba-based social research company specializing in educational evaluation, was awarded the contract. Proactive began work on the MEW evaluation in spring of 2009. In 2010, with the closing of the Foundation, the Province of Manitoba assumed responsibility for managing the evaluation, in collaboration with Proactive.

This report represents the second of two reports on MEW. The Implementation Report addresses process questions, as well as some of the initial outcomes. While this report provides a summary of the implementation issues, it focuses on outcomes and lessons learned.

Process Evaluation

- 1a) How was the program model implemented in various sites?
- 1b) Did the program model and implementation evolve over time and, if so, how and why?
- 1c) How did the school's characteristics and culture influence the pilot project?
- 1d) What was the role of resources in limiting or enhancing the ability of sites to implement the model?
- 1e) What changes, if any, occurred in the attitudes and behaviours/practices of MEW students, parents/families, as well as MEW teachers and principals?

² Proactive was established in 1984 to provide social research and evaluation services to clients in the public and not-for-profit sectors. Proactive's clients include ministries of education, school divisions/ districts, foundations, and other NGOs in Canada and internationally. For more information about Proactive, please visit www.proactive.mb.ca.

Student Outcomes

- 2a) How successful in high school were MEW students as compared to comparison students (credits acquired, marks, attendance, retention and graduation rates, school engagement)?
- 2b) To what extent did involvement in MEW influence MEW students' post high school planning and decision-making?
- 2c) Did involvement in MEW increase MEW students' enrolment in post-secondary education?
- 2d) Did involvement in MEW increase MEW students' success in post-secondary education?

Lessons Learned

- 3a) What has been learned about implementing education programs in diverse contexts?
- 3b) What has been learned about evaluating education programs in diverse contexts?
- 3c) What has been learned about supporting Aboriginal students' educational success?

In summary, it should be noted that:

- In total, 146 MEW students participated in the pilot program at some point in time,
- 99 MEW students were still in school in June 2009, of whom graduation data were available for 96,
- Of the 96, 59 MEW students graduated on time, and 38 MEW students received bursaries for post-secondary education.



CONTEXT

Evidence Synthesis

As part of the evaluation of Making Education Work, a brief synthesis of relevant research and literature was conducted in order to place the MEW model in relation to validated practice and evidence. This evidence synthesis centered on several relevant areas of inquiry, including:

- What supports students toward high school completion;
- What supports/guides students toward post-secondary education and eases this transition; and,
- What supports Aboriginal students toward high school completion and post-secondary education?

With high school completion and segue ways to post-secondary education being extensively covered and researched topics, certain parameters were used to narrow the search. Only sources dated between 2004 to the present were used to ensure timeliness. Where relevant sources were available, articles that focused on a Canadian perspective were consulted. As well, language was restricted to those sources readily available in English and French due to the limited language knowledge of the authors.

The process of gathering information for the evidence synthesis included searching the recourses of Google Scholar, the websites of Canadian organizations, notably The Canadian Council on Learning, Statistics Canada, and The Learning Partnership, among others. Resources included unpublished sources, individual conference presentations as well as conference summaries and findings centred on discussing education. Search terms used included Aboriginal learning, Aboriginal education, high school completion, high school dropouts, continuing education, and transition to post-secondary education.³

The most current and applicable sources were sought, however this evidence synthesis cannot be considered comprehensive. Its function is to provide a synthesis of supporting knowledge related to the Making Education Work model and to place this model in the context of validated practice and what is known regarding supporting students in high school and beyond.

High School Completion

Much evidence exists that staying in school has many benefits. The Canadian Council on Learning reports that staying in school makes people healthier and less likely to rely on a variety of public services and subsidies, while high school leavers are disproportionately represented among prison populations (2009).

One of the major anticipated outcomes of Making Education Work was an increase in the graduation rate. Therefore, the MEW program included supports to students in the six high schools in order to foster their success and increase the likelihood of students completing high school on time. These supports included tutoring and mentoring by the MEW teacher, access to a dedicated MEW classroom space where students could work, access to laptops in the MEW classroom, A MEW curriculum with Aboriginal content, and parental involvement.

Risk and Resilience

A discussion of supporting students toward high school completion necessitates a brief mention of what it means to be 'at-risk.' This term is extensively used to describe students who are at a higher risk of not achieving a high school diploma or its equivalent. The Learning Partnership, with funding from the Canadian Council on Learning, hosted The National Dialogue on Resilience in Youth in November 2008. Information from this national dialogue revealed that some students have limited opportunities to achieve academic success, as many of the current educational programs do not meet their needs. These youth exhibit behaviours often described as 'acting out,' disengagement from school, and involvement with a negative peer group. In addition, this source identified factors that can increase the likelihood of students being at-risk, including poverty, developmental delays, and community factors. These factors are often broad-ranging, leaving educators and schools feeling that they are unable to make a difference in students' lives. Ben Levin's work on the notion of students 'at-risk' seeks to reframe risk by looking at broader life circumstances including "...past and present characteristic [that] are associated with failing to attain desired life outcomes" (Levin, 2004, p. 6).

³ Please note that some of the terms were used in conjunction with others or variations on the theme to ensure the search was broadly focused enough to identify relevant sources.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from risk is resilience, often described as the ability of students succeed even though they may face issues that place them at-risk. Youth that were resilient were found to feel valued, safe, connected and engaged. Resilient students were found to come from familial environments that had been nurturing and healthy since early childhood. When this is not present in the life of a child, the community, including schools, can play a role in providing nurturing environment. More specifically, "...the presence of a positive relationship with a caring and nurturing adult" (The Learning Partnership, 2009, page number not available) is important in developing resiliency. While the presence of nurturing adult is important, a partnership composed of "...families, schools, communities, researchers, policy-makers, governments and the youth themselves" (The Learning Partnership, 2009, page number not available) further enhances resiliency.

Schools can be important in developing resilience, as schools are often an integral component in the lives of children and youth. Schools can provide an environment where students feel they can succeed - both academically and socially - irrespective of a student's plans to continue to post-secondary. Most significantly, adopting a strength-based approach fosters a climate of success. Schools can further support resiliency by adopting a holistic approach where they coordinate with other institutions in meeting students' needs.

While The National Dialogue came to a consensus that no one program can be singled out that helps to develop resilience, it was determined that successful models had universal features that included: being community-centric; being child and youth-centred; applying a positive approach; having a formalized governance structure that integrated long-term services and funding; and being founded on evidence-based research and evaluation. The child and youth-centered approach included listening to the youth and guiding them to resolving issues. Finally, the emphasis on a community-centred approach may have particular relevance in Aboriginal communities, largely through the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives within the school.

In Canada, some groups are at higher risk of not successfully completing high school. First, males are more at-risk than females. As noted by Richards (2011), the 2006 Canada Census indicated that the percentage of males in the general population without a high-school certificate by the age of 24 was approximately 50% higher (10.3%) as compared to their female counterparts (6.6%).⁴

In addition, Aboriginal youth are further at-risk of not completing high school. In fact, Aboriginal populations non-completion rates are considerably higher than the national average: 20.3 percent of Métis people aged 25 to 34 are without a high school diploma, while 28.3% of similarly aged off-reserve First Nations and 50.9% of on-reserved First Nations individuals have not completed high school. Furthermore, one-third of Aboriginal people live on-reserve, suggesting that approximately one in three Aboriginal individuals in Canada is without a high school diploma (Richards, 2011).

The difference in non-completion rates between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people increases when looking solely at a younger demographic group.

Aboriginal people aged 25-64 are more than twice as likely as non-Aboriginal people in that age group to leave high school without a diploma. Among those aged 25 to 34, they were more than three times as likely (Parriag, Chaulk, Wright, MacDonald, & Cormier, 2010, p. 20).

While trends have implications for individual Aboriginal students, the collective impact on Aboriginal communities must also be recognized.

Implications of High School Completion

As previously stated, completing high school benefits the individual on a number of levels. The most easily identifiable of these benefits is income. According to a Human Resources and Skills Development Canada special report (2008), higher education fosters increased income throughout a person's life. More specifically, post-secondary education can lead to higher earnings, greater savings and assets, higher growth in earnings, and higher income at retirement: "Higher unemployment and lower incomes result in an estimated loss to individual dropouts of over \$3,000 per year, compared to individuals with a high school diploma and no post-secondary education" (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).

This is further elaborated in the 2009/2010 Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey which indicated an income discrepancy between those who had completed high school and those that did not. For those individuals working full time, those who had not completed high school earned, on average, seventy dollars less per week than high-school graduates,

⁴ Non-completion rates reported from the Canadian Census may be the most reliable source of information, due to the coverage of the Census (Raymond, 2008).

adding up to an over \$3,600 dollar difference per year. Income discrepancies further increase with the acquisition of a post-secondary degree or diploma. Based on the 2006 Canadian census, after-tax income for those with an apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma was \$10,732 higher than dropouts; with a college; CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma \$12,373 higher; and with a university certificate, diploma or degree \$24,318 higher. Therefore, should a student complete a college, CEGEP or non-university diploma, their income will likely be almost double that of a student who does not complete high school, while the income of a university graduate will likely be more than double that of an individual without a high school diploma.

Furthermore, those with a high school diploma are less likely to be unemployed. Statistics Canada also reports that high school dropouts were more likely to be unemployed than their graduate counterparts (not currently enrolled in educational programs). Before the recent economic downturn, Statistics Canada reported those 20 to 24 years of age who did not complete high school had an unemployment rate nearly 10% higher than high school graduates (18.0% vs. 8.4%). This expanded to a difference of approximately 11.5% at the end of the downturn in 2009/2010 (23.2% vs. 11.9%) where one out of every ten high school graduates was unemployed, as compared with one in four of those without a high school diploma.

A 2006 Labour Force Historical Review conducted by Statistics Canada reported unemployment rates (for those 15 years and over) by education level: those with no high school diploma at 12.3%, those with a high school diploma at 6.5%, those with a trades or college education at 5.1%, and those with a university degree at 4.0%. Thus, unemployment drops by approximately half for those with a high school, trades, or college education and to a third for those with a university education.

The implications of high school completion are amplified for those who are Aboriginal. While the educational outcomes for Aboriginal peoples have improved over the last decade, they still lag behind Canadian norms. "For example, in 2006 nearly 40% of Aboriginal people in Canada had not completed secondary school, compared to just over 20% of the total population" (Levin, 2009). The 2007/2010 Labour Force Survey reported that for 20-24 year olds unemployment for First Nations People living off-reserve was 22.6%, nearly two and half times that for non-Aboriginals (8.5%). As improving high school graduation rates particularly for Aboriginal students was (and continues to be) a provincial priority, Manitoba was interested in partnering with the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation to participate in the MEW research project.

Attending Post-Secondary

The 2006 Canadian Census indicated that only 35% of Aboriginal people 15 years of age and older have a post-secondary degree, certificate, or diploma, as compared with 51% for the non-Aboriginal population. Even when attending a post-secondary education program Aboriginal youth were likely to wait longer to start on average as compared to non-Aboriginal youth (15 months compared to 4 months) (Hango, 2011).

The Youth in Transition Survey conducted in 2000 through Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) and Statistics Canada found that females in Ontario (58%) were more likely to have education at the university level than males (41%). Higher parental education levels, family income, reading levels, and high school grades were also found to be related to a higher likelihood of attending university (Lennon, Zhao, Wang, & Gluszynski, 2011). Other items related to university attendance included living in an urban environment and taking part in extracurricular activities or volunteering, and having a peer group that completed high school.

Supporting Aboriginal Learners

A great deal has been learned about how to support the success of Aboriginal learners: "It's primarily a matter of high-quality teaching, good awareness, respect for Aboriginal history and culture, and strong outreach to parents" (Levin 2009). This is echoed in a 2007 study which proposed the following recommendations in support of Aboriginal students: smaller class sizes; activities outside of the school grounds with emphasis on cultural activities; involving Elders in the educational experience directly with students; having mentors and/or tutors, especially Aboriginal mentors; using talking circles to involve parents, teachers, students, and community members in development of curriculum; instruction for teachers on different learning styles; and diversity training for non-Aboriginal staff (Fisher and Campbell, 2007).

Furthermore, the Canadian Council on Learning's 2009 report on The State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada stated that Aboriginal learning should be holistic, lifelong, experiential, spiritually oriented, community based, rooted in Aboriginal languages and cultures, and include integration of Aboriginal and Western cultures.

The Nunavut educational model frames strength building and inclusion within the culture of its people.

Grounded in a philosophy that acknowledges that “learning is based on and flows from a foundation of culture, tradition, heritage and language”, the school system in Nunavut has a vision, a plan and a curriculum to address the needs of the unique culture in which it exists. The goal of the entire education system, the inclusion of all students... (Philpott, Nesbit, Dahill, & Jeffery, 2004, p. 94).

An examination of this model emphasizes the importance of moving away from a deficit perspective, where students are singled out for their weaknesses, to an inclusive model, where diversity is celebrated, building on students' strengths and maximizing individual potential (Philpott, 2007). Optimally, this supportive learning environment filters down to every classroom, and is dependent on teachers taking responsibility for students' success by understanding their role in fostering each student's strengths.

Finally, the philosophy of inclusion has particular implications for Aboriginal learners. While inclusion has been the policy environment in which much of Canadian education takes place, the early focus of inclusion was on the education of students labelled as 'special needs.' More recently, inclusion has widened its scope in an attempt to create learning environments that include all learners. In a global and diverse Canadian society this broadening of who is included, “calls on educators to examine what role racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia play in inhibiting the meaningful inclusion of all students” (Ryan, 2010, p. 6). Inclusion as a model embraces differences and includes an appreciation of indigenous cultures.



MEW and Evidence-Based Practice

As previously stated, Aboriginal people do not complete post-secondary education at the same rate as the non-Aboriginal population in Canada. Despite efforts to encourage post-secondary participation by Aboriginal people, there is a 17 percent difference between Aboriginal people (44%) aged 25 to 64 years and the non-Aboriginal population (61%) from the same age group in completing a post-secondary program.⁵ Therefore, the intention of Making Education Work was to support Aboriginal students in high school completion and toward post-secondary education.

The MEW model sought to incorporate the evidence-based principles of a youth and community-centred approach, with an emphasis on Aboriginal perspectives combined with high quality academic support. In their 2007 study Fisher and Campbell further remind educators of the need to incorporate cultural activities and Elders into the learning experience. Furthermore, Making Education Work echoed the Nunavut educational model in moving away from a deficit-based perspective, building on students' strengths.

While a number of factors known to influence the likelihood of attending post-secondary education where outside the scope of the MEW program (e.g. parental education level, and living in an urban area), others were fostered by MEW activities. These included supporting students' academic achievement and providing a peer group who themselves were focussed on successful high school completion. Extracurricular activities and/or volunteering were also intended to support the development of skills that would promote students' transition to post-secondary education. While some of these effective practices were known at the time of MEW's inception, little research had been undertaken on the effects of a suite of such interventions on the educational success of Aboriginal students and their post-secondary participation.

⁵ As previously noted, this difference is even more acute for Aboriginal people living on reserve.

Methodology

Approach

In March 2009, Proactive was contracted to complete the MEW research study. Given the students were scheduled to graduate in June 2009, only a short time was available for data collection before students left their schools. Relationship building, obtaining consent, making the initial arrangements for the site visits, and developing a workplan were the foci of the first phase of Proactive's involvement. These activities were closely followed by instrument development and site visits.

The second project phase occurred between July 2009 and April 2010. Administrative data were collected from schools and additional interviews were conducted with other key informants (i.e., superintendents/education directors, the MEW Provincial Coordinator). The development of the Implementation Report and the consultation with communities represented Phase 3 of the MEW evaluation process. Consultation, in various forms, was conducted in October/November 2010.

Phase 4 was the follow-up of MEW and comparison students to determine their post-secondary status and success. This included a follow-up questionnaire to all MEW and comparison students for whom contact information was available. Then interviews were conducted with 16 MEW students who completed the follow-up questionnaire and indicated they would participate in an interview.

Instrument Development

Proactive developed primary data collection instruments including:

- Student Questionnaire (MEW and comparison students),
- MEW Student Interview Instrument,
- Comparison Student Focus Group Moderator's Guide,
- MEW Parent/Family Focus Group Moderator's Guide,

- MEW Teacher Interview Instrument,
- Principal Interview Instrument,
- Community Partner Interview Instrument,
- Superintendent/Director of Education Interview Instrument,
- MEW Coordinator Interview Instrument,
- Student Follow-up Questionnaire 2010 (MEW and comparison students),
- MEW Student Follow-up Interview Instrument 2010.

Various consent forms were also developed to ensure parental and student consent for evaluation activities, as well as release of school administrative information, use of photographs, and use of previously collected data should they become available.

Data Collection

On-Site Data Collection

The on-site data collection occurred in May and June 2009. At the final MEW gathering, the MEW graduation ceremony, attending students were asked to complete questionnaires. Then professionals from Proactive visited each of the sites to undertake the remainder of data collection, with the exception of Cross Lake. Due to an H1N1 outbreak, interviews with educators were conducted by telephone. No interviews were possible with students. The MEW teacher in Cross Lake facilitated the completion of questionnaires by the MEW and comparison students.

Interviews were undertaken with the MEW teachers, school administrators, and selected community partners, primarily Local Advisory Group (LAG) members. MEW and comparison students were interviewed individually or in small groups, depending upon what could be scheduled. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to an hour and a half. At the time of the interviews, students⁷ were also asked to complete a questionnaire (if they had not already done so), as

⁶ Data collected by the original research firm never became available for inclusion in this evaluation.

⁷ Student and parents were provided with incentives to encourage participation, as this protocol had been adopted during the initial phase of data collection.

Table 1: Overview of Student Data Available in 2009

Site	Number of MEW and Comparison Students			
	Total # MEW	# MEW with Data	Total # Comp.	# Comp. with Data
Cross Lake	27	24	14	9
Norway House	28	16	16	10
Peguis	19	13	15	4
Selkirk	27	21	25	25
Swan River	15	7	11	6
Thompson	30	18	29	29
Total	146	99	110	83

well as a consent and contact form to facilitate further research.

Focus groups were also held with MEW parents⁸ and, in one site, the MEW teacher also invited parents of comparison students to attend a focus group. Discussions with parents ranged from 45 minutes to an hour and a half, depending on the situation and size of the group.

Table 1 illustrates the total number of students by site and the number of students for whom Proactive was able to collect or retrieve some information.

Over the years, 34 MEW students were known to have either moved (11) or otherwise left the school (23). (For example, Swan Valley lost students when Sapotawayak First Nation moved all their students to a new First Nations school in September 2007.) It was not possible to determine whether students who moved away stayed in school or not. Out of the 112 remaining MEW students, data were available on 99, with graduation data available on 96. There were no school records for the other 13 students nor were they at the participating schools at the time of the interviews. The same holds true for the 27 missing comparison students.

Follow-up Data Collection

A short questionnaire was mailed to all MEW and comparison students for whom mailing addresses were available in June 2010. Two reminders were also sent. A web-version was also available. A Facebook page and blog were created with links to the web-survey with the intention of generating interest in the survey.

All of the MEW students (41) who completed the follow-up questionnaire were also asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview. While

an attempt was made to include a balanced mix of four MEW students from each of the six communities, this was not possible due to a limited pool of candidates and changes to phone numbers and/or addresses. Therefore, interviews were collected from as many MEW students as possible who had agreed to be interviewed. Attempts to contact students included up to four phone calls, two emails, a text message, and a letter asking them to contact Proactive if interested in taking part in the interview. Sixteen interviews took place in November and early December of 2010.

Other Key Informants

In addition to the school/community data collection that occurred in May and June 2009, other key informants were interviewed. They included superintendents and directors of education, as well as the MEW provincial coordinator. Four of the six superintendents/directors of education made themselves available for an interview. It should be noted that four of the superintendents/directors of education had not been in their position since the inception of MEW, which may explain why two chose not to give opinions on the program. Interviews were in-person or by telephone depending on the preference of the person being interviewed. These interviews occurred in autumn 2009.

Administrative Data

Schools were asked to provide information from the students' school records. Information requested on MEW and comparison students was credits acquired, marks, attendance, and graduation status. Data were received from schools over a number of months, with the final data received from schools in April 2010.

⁸ The term "parents" is used to refer to parents, legal guardians, or other primary caregivers.

Summary of Data Collection

The initial interviews/focus groups (which included 142 individuals) provided qualitative information that deepens or further explains the quantitative data collected through the surveys and administrative data.

In total, 107 initial questionnaires (surveys) were completed, representing: 83 MEW students and 24 comparison students. Forty-one MEW students and 20 comparison students completed the follow-up questionnaire. Of the 61, four completed the web-based survey while the remainder responded by return mail.

Table 2: Overview of Interview/Focus Group Participation: June 2009 and November/December 2010

Sites	MEW Teacher	Admin-istrator	Community	MEW Parents	MEW Students	Comparison Students	Total Participating in Initial Data Collection 2009	MEW Student Follow-Up Interviews 2010
Cross Lake	1	1	0	0	0	0		2
Norway House	1	1	1	14	13	1		3
Peguis	1	1	0	3	11	4		2
Selkirk	1	1	2	10	13	8		7
Swan River	1	1	2	8	5	4		0
Thompson	1	3	2	10	14	3		2
Total	6	8	7	45	56	20	142	16

Table 3: Overview of MEW Student Data 2009 and 2010

Site	Number of Students				
	Complete Data*	Initial Survey Data Only	Admin. Data Only	Total Some Data 2009	Follow-up Survey Data 2010
Cross Lake	21	0	3	24	8
Norway House	16	0	0	16	6
Peguis	13	0	0	13	6
Selkirk	12	2	7	21	11
Swan River	6	0	1	7	3
Thompson	13	0	5	18	7
Total	81	2	16	99	41

*Note: Complete data means for these students both the survey and administrative data were available.

Table 4: Overview of Comparison Student Data 2009 and 2010

Site	Number of Students				
	Complete Data*	Survey Data Only	Admin. Data Only	Total Some Data 2009	Follow-up Survey Data 2010
Cross Lake	6	0	3	9	5
Norway House	1	0	9	10	1
Peguis	2	2	0	4	3
Selkirk	5	1	19	25	4
Swan River	3	0	3	6	2
Thompson	4	0	25	29	5
Total	21	3	59	83	20

*Note: Complete data means for these students both the survey and administrative data were available.

Data Decisions and Analysis

Administrative Data from School Records

While schools had originally been given direction on how to submit administrative data for the research study, by 2009 this was not in evidence. Therefore, in 2009, schools provided their best available data on credits acquired, marks, course selection and attendance to Proactive. The result was a mix of different formats and differing levels of detail.⁹ The variability of school record (administrative data) meant that certain decisions had to be made in order to create comparable data sets for analytical purposes.

An in-depth review was conducted of all data provided from the six schools to determine where indicators were similar enough and consistently provided. Selecting items that could be interpreted to be consistent from school to school allowed for cross comparison between schools and the ability to provide similar analysis and results for each school. It should be noted that, even with this selection process, there are still gaps in the analysis for some schools due to lack of sufficient data. The following discussion explains the items selected for analysis.

All schools provided marks for the 2008/2009 school year, and due to graduation requirements, the majority of students completed one or more English Language Arts (ELA) course and one or more Mathematics course. Due to this consistency, these courses were selected as the measure for comparison of marks.

Most schools provided the number of absences per course or semester allowing for a comparison of overall average absences in a semester/course, as well as absences specifically for ELA and Mathematics courses.

Schools provided the number of credits for each school year, with the exception of two schools that did not provide credits for 2005/2006, one of which did not provide 2006/2007 credits for the comparison students. With an adjustment for this one school, analysis was performed for total number of credits reported. Further analysis was completed for number of credits acquired across the 2007/2008 and 2008/2009 school years due to data being provided for all students from all schools.

As much as possible, school records were also used to determine retention rates; that is, the number of students who had remained in school. Finally, graduation status was compared between those students graduating at the end of the 2008/2009 school year and those who did not.

Quantitative Analysis

Data from the initial and follow-up questionnaires were combined with the administrative data from the school records to create a profile for each youth, including both MEW and comparison students. Statistical analysis was undertaken to address the key outcome questions.

Given that MEW was built on what was known about effective practice, the key findings of the evidence synthesis were also considered. The evidence synthesis indicates the importance of providing a caring and supportive environment, and particularly the presence of a supportive adult as fostering student success and build resiliency. In addition, helping students develop self-confidence and a sense of their own identity, including their cultural identity, is known to foster student achievement. Therefore, using this evidence as a foundation, the MEW data helped inform whether certain elements of the MEW model were correlated to the outcomes of credits earned and on-time graduation (June 2009). In order to further explore these questions, a total of five of scales were constructed. These scales provide insight into students' involvement in their culture, MEW student's connection to MEW, students' confidence as learners, as well as two scales related to school climate.¹⁰

Challenges and Limitations

The first challenge to creating this evaluation report was that Proactive only became involved in the evaluation in the spring of the MEW student's graduation year (2009). No data collected over the first years of MEW were available, with the exception of the school record (administrative) data which schools could provide. Therefore, no baseline data on student engagement or post-high school intentions were available. The lack of consistency in school record keeping and some years of missing data also limited the analysis that could be performed on the school record data.

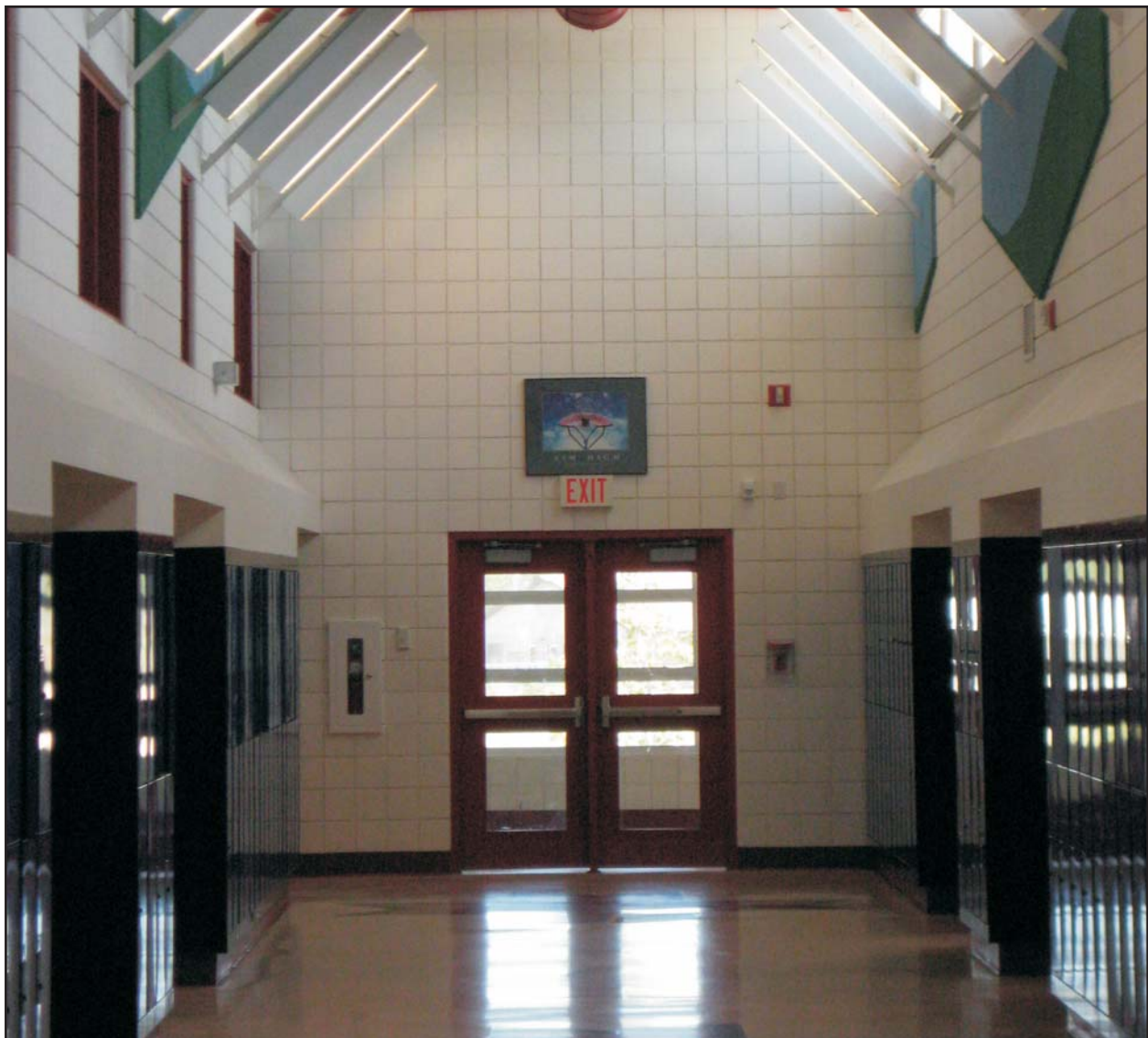
⁹ In the interests of making the process as easy as possible for schools, school record data was accepted in the format used by each individual school.
¹⁰ More information on scale construction is found on page 17 & 18.

The timing also meant that site visits took place late in the school year, making it difficult to schedule data collection with certain students who had academic or other conflicts. Finding students in the comparison group was particularly difficult. Therefore, the limited data from the comparison group inhibits analysis for some school communities.

While the original research design had been adopted with the intention of providing credible evidence that would support the policy mandate of the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, it became evident during the final data collection stage that the design presented dilemmas. The design randomly placed eligible students into the MEW or the comparison group, the intent of which was to create a situation where the comparison group received none of the MEW interventions. However, in four of six sites, the MEW teacher provided some level of support to at least some of the students in

the comparison group. In small communities with caring teachers who know the young people in their communities, it is not surprising that the teacher would provide support to any student requesting help, particularly where pre-existing (sometimes familial) relationships exist. Therefore, the potential for finding differences in the outcomes between the two groups was reduced, as the chance of educational success for students in the comparison group was increased.

Finally, engaging students in the follow-up survey and interviews a year post-high school was also challenging. Despite having collected contact information and multiple attempts to reach the youth, through both traditional means and social media, it was difficult to connect with large numbers of youth. It is suspected that many were mobile, living in outside their home communities in order to attend school or obtain work.



Discussion of Findings

Summary of Process Issues

Implementation and Evolution of MEW

Program implementation was to begin in January 2006 when students were in Grade 9. However, in November it was decided that the program would be pushed back a half year, making the start date September 2006 (Grade 10). The decision was made because work had to be done to identify eligible students, conduct the selection process, and prepare for implementation. In retrospect, many of the educators interviewed suggested that a program such as MEW should begin in Grade 9 or even earlier, in middle years.

The MEW teachers worked with the MEW Provincial Coordinator to develop a curriculum which included six half credit courses, focused on Aboriginal culture and heritage. MEW students were to take two of these courses each year as part of their high school program. While these courses were certainly valued, as students progressed through their high school program, it became more and more difficult for some students to take the MEW courses, usually because of timetable conflicts. However, all sites maintained a focus on cultural activities. While the specific activities varied according to local adaptations, attention to cultural learning and experiences was common to all sites.

The importance of having the same teacher and the same group of students over multiple years created important bonds and relationships for MEW students in all sites. Although it should be recognized that the MEW room was not equally utilized in all sites, having a designated classroom for MEW was an aspect of implementation that strengthened this sense of belonging for many students.

Recognizing the variability across sites, the program model also underwent evolution over the years of implementation. While MEW was intended to be integrated into the school, in some sites it evolved as a more isolated project and was not incorporated into the school and community as originally intended.

A number of contextual factors appeared to have an impact on implementation.

- Size of school (MEW was more likely to be isolated in larger school contexts, recognizing that three of the six sites operated in large regional secondary schools where Aboriginal students were in the minority. In the smaller First Nations schools, while Aboriginal students are the majority, fewer supports and services are available),
- Support of school administration (in some sites administrative turnover or lack of support from administration were a hindrance, while in others, supportive administration was a positive influence),
- Connection with other programs was a positive (e.g., a breakfast program operating out of the MEW room),
- Students' personal realities (as one MEW teacher noted, when reflecting on the number of young people who were young parents, "my program has eight babies"),
- Buy-in of other school staff (in some sites MEW operated in isolation from the rest of the school, occasionally with other staff showing some resentment towards the program, particularly at the outset),
- In some sites financial resources were easily accessed by the MEW teachers to support the program, while in other sites teachers were frustrated by the difficulty of gaining access to the financial resources that were allocated to their school.

Role of Resources

The computers were viewed as an important resource in a number of sites, although they did not always arrive when anticipated. The access to computers was deemed important by students as well who rated computers as the third most important element that supported their learning. Having funding available to take students on field trips was also mentioned as important by several MEW teachers.

A number of administrators perceived that MEW was “richly resourced” and voiced concerns regarding potential replication. This refers to money for laptop computers and field trips, as linking students to a caring, supportive adult in the school does not have to be costly.

Changes in Attitudes, Behaviours, and Practices

MEW Students

MEW students identified improvements in their academics, including listening and speaking skills. Changes identified by MEW students included both academic and personal changes. Many students, when asked what they wished had been different, replied that they wish they had “tried harder” in high school.

Parents noted that their child had gained confidence, as well as motivation, determination, and hope. Other parents noted the importance of the cultural aspects of MEW in their child's development.

Parents/Families of MEW Students

In many sites, the improved relationship between home and school was noted, along with parents' increased trust in the school. Parents concurred, indicating that the MEW teacher had been a great support to them. One father noted that it made him want to become an educational role model for his children, supporting the contention that MEW not only had an impact on students, but on some families as well.

MEW Teacher

In some communities, the MEW teachers indicated that it helped them connect more closely with the community. School/community connections (at least through the MEW program) were solidified.

Research Design and Application

While the original identification of eligible students and sample selection may have been consistently and appropriately applied across sites, this was not perceived to be the case. In a number of the sites,

interviewees also felt that MEW should have been available to all eligible students, rather than creating a comparison group where students could not (theoretically) access support.

Student Outcomes

Success in High School

A number of measures constituted success in high school.

- Credits acquired,
- Marks and course selection,
- Attendance,
- Graduation rate,
- Engagement in school.

Credit Acquisition

From 2006 to 2009,¹¹ MEW students earned, on average, approximately five and a half more credits than comparison students. The mean number of credits for MEW students was approximately 24, while the mean number for comparison students was approximately 18 credits.

From 2007 to 2009, MEW students earned, on average, four more credits than the students in the comparison group. The mean number of credits for MEW students was 12, as compared to eight for comparison students.

Included in their high school credits, MEW students had most frequently taken three or four MEW courses (n=56 or 69%). MEW courses were not available to comparison students.

MEW students acquired more high school credits than did comparison students.

A Confident Learners Scale was created to explore whether students who felt more confident earned more credits. Scale scores were compared against total credits earned in 2007/2008 and 2008/2009.

¹¹ Analysis was adjusted to take into account missing data from one site for the 2005-2006 school year.

Results indicated there was a low, though statistically significant, relation between learner confidence and credits earned for MEW students, and a negligible relation for comparison students.¹²

The higher credit acquisition by MEW students appears to be related to their confidence as learners.

Marks and Course Selection

Students are able to take a wide range of courses over their high school careers. In order to have sufficient and comparable data for analysis, the decision was made to focus on English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics courses.

English Language Arts (overall): When all students' ELA marks were analyzed (including non-Grade 12 courses), MEW students, on average, had 7% higher marks than comparison students (58% versus 51%). The similar result was found when only students' ELA Grade 12 courses were considered (average mark of 63% for MEW students versus 57% for comparison students).

Overall Mathematics (overall): When students' Mathematics marks were analyzed (including non-Grade 12 courses), MEW students, on average, had 7% higher marks than comparison students (58% versus 51%). When only Grade 12 Mathematics marks were considered, MEW students' average marks were 9% higher than comparison students (65% versus 56%).

Grade 12 Course Selection and Marks: The level of courses selected by students may affect their marks. Therefore, the level/type of English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics courses selected by MEW and comparison students at the Grade 12 level is presented. The number (n) represents the number of students who took each level/type of course. The percentage represents the average grade achieved for MEW students and comparison students.

The following are brief descriptions of the different ELA and Mathematics courses.

- ELA - Comprehensive:** Students develop and refine a range of literacy skills that deepen their engagement with and appreciation of a variety of texts and that help them function more effectively in their private spheres and in the global community. Students engage with and compose texts that inform, persuade, analyze, foster understanding and empathy, reflect culture, express feelings and experience, and bring enjoyment.
- ELA - Transactional:** Students develop and refine a range of knowledge, skills, strategies, and attitudes that help them function effectively in various communities. Students engage with and compose texts primarily for pragmatic purposes.
- Mathematics – Essential (formerly Consumer):** is intended for students whose post-secondary plans do not include a focus on mathematics and science-related fields. It emphasizes consumer applications, problem solving, decision making, and spatial sense.
- Mathematics – Applied:** is intended for students considering post-secondary studies that do not require a study of theoretical calculus. It is context driven and promotes the learning of numerical and geometrical problem solving techniques as they relate to the world around us.
- Mathematics – Pre-calculus:** is designed for students who intend to study calculus and related mathematics as part of post-secondary education. It comprises a high-level study of theoretical mathematics with an emphasis on problem solving and mental mathematics.

¹² Results of statistical tests for MEW students were: Kendall tau-b = 0.234, N = 65, p = 0.008, and for comparison students were: Kendall tau-b = 0.081, N = 19, p = -.640.

Table 5: Grade 12 Course Selection and Average Marks in English Language Arts and Mathematics for MEW and Comparison Students*

Courses Selected	MEW		Comparison	
	n=99	Mark	n = 64	Mark
ELA: Comprehensive	46	68%	33	54%
ELA: Transactional	43	63%	23	57%

Courses Selected	MEW		Comparison	
	n=60	Mark	n = 39	Mark
Mathematics: Essential (Consumer)	29	64%	21	54%
Mathematics: Applied	16	61%	8	52%
Mathematics: Pre-Calculus	15	71%	11	60%

*A few students took other ELA courses and one MEW student took calculus. However, the small numbers do not support further analysis

When analysis was done to differentiate between Grade 12 ELA Comprehensive and Transactional courses, MEW students had higher marks, on average, in both courses; 68% versus 54% in Comprehensive and 63% versus 57% in Transactional.

When analysis was done to differentiate between Grade 12 Mathematics courses, MEW students marks were consistently higher; 64% versus 54% in Essential, 61% versus 52% in Applied, and 71% versus 60% in Pre-Calculus.

On average, MEW students had higher marks in English Language Arts and Mathematics than did comparison students.

Attendance

Given the difficulties in creating comparable attendance statistics across schools, attendance was only analyzed for the 2008/2009 school year.

On average, MEW students had 17 absences, as compared to 20 absences for the comparison group.

When absences in ELA and Mathematics were considered separately, MEW students had two fewer absences in ELA and one fewer absence in Mathematics. However, these differences were not statistically significant.¹³

MEW students had fewer absences than did comparison students.

Retention and Graduation Rates

According to school records,¹⁴ 84 or 88% of MEW students were in still in high school during the 2008/09 school year, as compared to 52 or 64% of comparison students.

For this report, "on-time" graduation rate was assessed; that is, what percentage of students graduated in June 2009, after their fourth year in high school. In June 2009, 59 MEW students or 62% graduated "on-time," as compared to 35 comparison students or 48%; a difference of 14%.

MEW students had higher retention and "on-time" graduation rates than did comparison students.

Engagement in School

A variety of questionnaire items provide insights regarding students' engagement in school. First, it may be worthy to note that while students were randomly assigned to the two groups, in retrospect there appear to be some underlying differences. For example, MEW students were more likely than comparison students to indicate that, at sometime in their school career, they had 'seriously thought about quitting school' (an 18% difference). This raises the question as to whether the MEW group might actually have been at higher risk regarding school success than the comparison group.

¹³ Where differences are cited above these differences are statistically significant, unless otherwise noted.

¹⁴ School record data are from the six participating sites and do not include students who may have transferred to other schools.

On numerous items, MEW students were less positive than comparison students regarding their high school experience. For example, MEW students were:

- 18% more likely than comparison students to 'disagree'¹⁵ that the school helps students to respect individual differences,
- 16% more likely to 'disagree' that their school helps students appreciate cultural differences.

MEW students were also 14% more likely to 'disagree' that staff in the school care about students, although they were 19% more likely to report that a teacher (likely the MEW teacher) helped or supported them in understanding and respecting themselves. These findings may point to a difference between MEW students' view of their school and teachers in general, and their view of the MEW teacher.

A positive school climate, where students feel valued and respected, supports student success. Therefore, two scales were constructed from items included in May/June 2009 survey which inform aspects of school climate. The first of these was the Caring and Respect Scale which included four items that took into account if students felt there was a caring and/or respectful environment between staff and student and among students.

Again, this scale was compared with outcomes for MEW. There was no relationship between the Caring and Respect Scale on on-time graduation for either MEW or comparison students. However, there was a relationship between students scores on the Caring and Respect Scale and the number of credits earned. Interestingly, analysis for these two groups produced opposing results - the higher MEW students scored on the Caring and Respect Scale score the more credits they earned, while the higher the score for comparison students the fewer credits earned.¹⁶

A second school climate scale was constructed including questions that focused on students' beliefs about staff expectations, and whether they felt understood and respected. This scale, named the Expectations/Valued Scale, included three items: 'teachers seem to understand me,' 'teachers hold high expectations for my academic performance,' and 'some of the staff in this school really care about me.' When averages for this scale were calculated, most MEW or comparison students indicated teachers understood and cared about them, as well as held high expectations for their academic performance.

When the Expectations/Valued Scale was compared

with on-time graduation, a positive relationship was found for both MEW and comparison students; however, this was only statistically significant for comparison students. Nevertheless, the combined results of relational analysis of the two school climate scales echo what is found in educational literature, that understanding and supportive teachers who want students to succeed is a positive force in students' lives and fosters their success toward graduation.

MEW students participated in peer support or leadership programs at a 13% higher rate than did comparison students. Also, 19% more MEW students indicated that "love of learning" was one of their strengths.

MEW students were also asked about their participation in MEW, what they had learned as a result, how being in MEW had supported their learning, and how they would rate MEW.

As a result of being in MEW, students were most likely to report they had learned about:

- Aboriginal worldview (n=70 or 90%),
- Aboriginal ceremonies/gatherings (n=69 or 90%),
- Traditional arts and crafts (n=63 or 83%),
- Traditional herbs and medicines (n=51 or 72%),
- Pow Wows (n=54 or 72%),
- Traditional feast/pot luck food (n=55 or 72%).

Also, 96% (n=78) 'agreed'¹⁷ that being in MEW had helped them "gain a better sense of my Aboriginal identity." As MEW students confirmed in the interviews:

Most Aboriginal students don't get a chance to learn about their cultures. [The MEW teacher] explained our traditions to us.

I learned about my heritage and that, all over the country and the world, there are Indigenous peoples.

The most important thing in MEW was what I learned about my culture ... [and] how to deal with racism and not flip out.

To further explore cultural involvement and MEW

15 This represents a combination of "disagree" and "strongly agree."

16 There was a low level relationship between Caring and Respect Scale scores and credits earned for MEW students and a moderate relationship for comparison students. However, results were statistically significant for comparison students, but were not significant for MEW students.

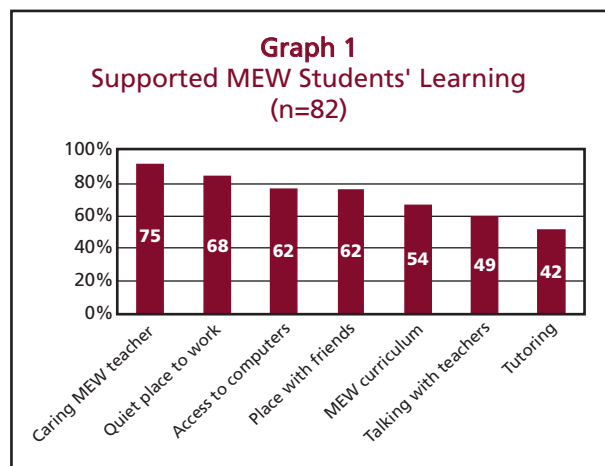
17 This represents a combination of "strongly agree" and "agree."

outcomes, further analysis was undertaken on 15 items that asked both MEW and comparison students how often they participated in different cultural activities.¹⁸ These items were used to create a Cultural Involvement Scale which measures students' involvement in Aboriginal culture. The Cultural Involvement Scale was compared against total credits earned by students in the 2007/2008 and 2008/2009 school years. Results indicate that there was no relation between students' involvement in cultural activities and the number of credits they earned during their high school careers or their on-time graduation.

In addition, in order to discover whether there was a relationship between participating in the MEW program and students' involvement in their culture, a second scale was constructed entitled the MEW Involvement Scale. Students were asked if participating in MEW was related to an increased likelihood of participating in cultural activities such as: Aboriginal music, Aboriginal dance, ceremonies/gatherings, fasting, sweat lodges, Pow Wows, and traditional arts and crafts, using traditional herbs, medicines learning more about Aboriginal world views, and learning/using an Aboriginal language. When the Cultural Involvement Scale was compared against MEW Involvement Scale, there was a moderate relation between the two that was statistically significant. This positive relationship suggests that MEW students credit MEW with increasing their involvement in cultural activities.

MEW students indicated that numerous MEW program elements "often" supported their learning (Graph 1).

Ninety-two percent of MEW students (n=75) indi-



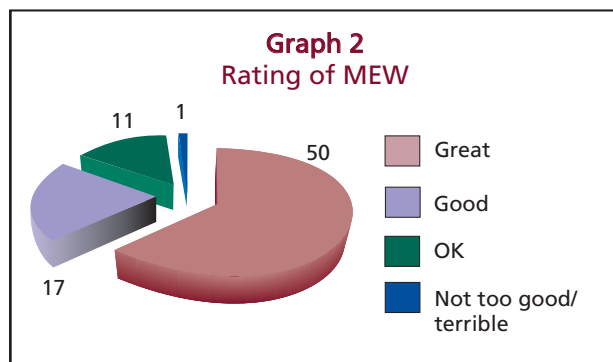
Actual number of students is shown in the bars.

cated that the MEW teacher cared about them. This was often confirmed in the interviews wherein many MEW students commented on the importance of the MEW teacher, both personally and educationally.

I didn't have support before I came here. [MEW teacher] helped me out and if I had troubles I wasn't afraid to ask him.

We wouldn't be where we are without [the MEW teacher]. S/he encourages us to do everything perfectly.

Overall, 98% of MEW students (n=79) "agreed" that being in MEW helped them with "skills for high school success." Finally, 85% of MEW students (n=67) rated MEW as "great" or "good" (Graph 2).



Note: actual numbers of students shown on the graph.

The interviews with MEW students confirmed the findings from the surveys.

The MEW class has been a big part of high school [for me] ... I always come to do my homework here [MEW classroom].

MEW did what I expected, anything I needed, food, a place to vent, help with math. It gave me a place to sit and think. I always knew I could come here and count on this room ... I can count on [MEW teacher] for everything; he is always there.

If I fall behind in assignments, I can come here [MEW classroom] and get help. I do better. I didn't expect that from my classes.

MEW is one of the main reasons I am graduating on time.

18 These 15 items asked students about the frequency of their participation in: fasting, Festival du Voyageur, local Pow Wows, making traditional music, National Aboriginal Day, other cultural ceremonies/gatherings, Pow Wow Trail, Red River Métis Day, sweat lodges, traditional arts and crafts, traditional dance, traditional feast/potluck, traditional hunting/trapping/fishing, using traditional herbs or medicines, and wearing traditional clothing.

In some sites, the comparison students wished they had been in MEW. They believed they would have “received more help, got better grades and more people would have graduated.”

While MEW students overall appeared less engaged with several aspects of their high school experience than were comparison students, they were very positive about their experiences and learnings from being in MEW.

Post-high School Planning

Prior to leaving high school the majority of MEW students for whom data were available (n=76 or 94%) 'agreed' that being in MEW helped them with advice on course choices. High school courses need to be selected to ensure students have the prerequisites for their desired post-secondary program; this is one aspect of post-high school planning. Again, almost all MEW students (n=77 or 95%) 'agreed' being in MEW had helped them know what courses they needed to graduate. Also, 96% (n=78) of MEW students 'agreed' that MEW had helped them with “skills to help me continue with my education.” As one MEW student concluded:

MEW helped me a lot with myself, my schooling and my future. It was a great program.

When they were followed up a year later, most MEW students agreed their participation in MEW benefited them by learning or developing skills that would help them continue their education (n=37 or 88%) and getting information on post-secondary education (n= 39 or 91%). When needing to decide what they would do the year after high school, the majority of MEW students also agreed that participation in MEW helped them make their decision (n=34 or 79%).

Enrollment in Post-Secondary

Prior to leaving high school 88% (n=71) of MEW students for whom data were available believed that MEW helped them with “getting information on post-secondary options.” Data from post-secondary enrollment and bursary access (provided by Manitoba Education) indicates that MEW students were more likely to be enrolled in a post-secondary program: 38 MEW students, as compared to 16 comparison students.

As of September 2009, MEW students were more likely than comparison students to have enrolled in a post-secondary program.

Bursary Supports

Bursaries to individual students were not part of the original project design. When it was determined there would be sufficient funds available to support students' post-secondary participation, both MEW and comparison students were told of the opportunity to receive a \$6,000 bursary. However, this decision was made late in the spring of 2009, students' graduation year. The timing may have affected the post-secondary plans of some students.

When asked the importance of the bursary in pursuing further education/training, only one MEW student and no comparison students said that it was “not very important;” the remainder said that it was “important/very important.” The one student who said that the bursary was “not important” explained that s/he was determined to attend post-secondary education with or without the bursary.

Success in Post-Secondary

When surveyed in June 2010 (one year after graduation) 61 young people responded to the questionnaire of whom 41 were former MEW students and 20 were former comparison students.¹⁹ Of those responding to the follow-up survey, 15 MEW students took part in some form of post-secondary education/training along with seven comparison students. In the follow-up survey, six MEW students planned on continuing their education/training in the fall of 2010, while no comparison students planned to do so. One member of each group did not know if they would continue or not.

When considering both MEW and comparison students, more females than males reported continuing their formal education/training. Those who took part in further education or training chose a variety of different avenues to take after high school (Table 7). Of females who did continue their education or training, none decided to take training or to apprentice in the trades.

Students' plans for the upcoming year (September 2010) varied, but were mostly focused on post-secondary education/training, while some chose to work full-time (see table 8).

19 It should be noted that not all respondents answered all questions.

Table 6: Overview Graduation and Post-Secondary Participation

Site	MEW				
	Total #	# with Data	Grad Data	Graduated	Bursary
Cross Lake	27	24	24	19	17
Norway House	28	16	16	9	8
Peguis	19	13	13	11	6
Selkirk	27	21	18	10	4
Swan River	15	7	7	5	0
Thompson	30	18	18	5	3
Total	146	99	96	59 (62%)	38 (33%)

Site	MEW Comparison Group				
	Total #	# with Data	Grad Data	Graduated	Bursary
Cross Lake	14	9	9	9	4
Norway House	16	10	10	5	3
Peguis	15	4	2*	2	2
Selkirk	25	25	18	10	5
Swan River	11	6	6	3	1
Thompson	29	29	29	6	1
Total	110	83	74	35 (47%)	16 (22%)

*The two students identified as having graduation data and graduating are only known because they were on the bursary list.

Table 7: Overview of Post-Secondary Education/Training Choices

Education/Training	Number of Students	
	MEW	Comparison
Trades/Technology/Apprenticeship	3	0
Community College Courses	7	3
University Courses	3	3
General Studies	1	0
Katimavik Program	0	1
Other	1	0
Total	15	7

Table 8: Overview of Future Activities for 2010

Education/Training	Number of Students	
	MEW	Comparison
Trades/Technology/Apprenticeship	2	1
Community College Courses	1	0
University Courses	12	2
Upgrading My Courses	1	1
Training	1	0
Work Full Time (30 hrs. week or more)	9	7
Work Part Time (less than 30 hrs. week)	1	0
Travel	0	1
Take Care of Family	1	0
Sports	1	0
Other	1	0
Total	30	16

Highest Planned Level of Education

Respondents from both the MEW and comparison groups had high hopes for their post-secondary education/training regardless of their recent or current plans. The majority of all students would like to complete some form of further formal education/training after they complete high school; their choices range from trades training to graduate degrees (see Table 9).

Table 9: Highest Level of Education Planned

Education/Training	Number of Students	
	MEW	Comparison
I don't know	4	0
Some High School	1	1
Complete High School	3	1
Pilot License	0	1
Trades/Technology/Apprenticeship	7	4
College Diploma/Certification	8	8
Professional Degree/Certification	5	0
Undergraduate University Program	7	2
University Graduate Degree	5	3
Total	40	20

MEW Student Stories

Qualitative information gleaned from the interviews, coupled with other data in the student profiles, allowed for the creation of stories that shed light on the importance of MEW. These stories provide a more in-depth look at the impact of participating in MEW on the lives of individual students.

The first two stories are centered on three students' stories in two different MEW sites. The third is the story from the MEW follow-up interviews that were conducted with 16 former MEW students, representing five of the six communities.

My MEW Family Supported Success

MEW operated in high school settings from smaller remote First Nations communities to larger communities of over 9,000 residents. This case study focuses

on students in one of the larger communities where students have greater access to recreational activities, as well as to health and social services. In this community the school is large with a student population of over 1000. With its size the school can offer English and French Immersion programming, as well as technical vocational education.

The MEW classroom in this school is large, brightly decorated and includes a small private room off the actual classroom space where we were able to interview the MEW students. This case study explores the experiences of three MEW students, Brittany, Jessica and Tyler.²⁰ Information about these young people emerges from a variety of sources; in-person interviews in June 2009, questionnaires from the spring of 2009, school administrative data, as well as a follow-up questionnaire and telephone interview conducted in 2010.

Brittany's Story

Brittany, who identifies as being of First Nations heritage, did well in high school, graduating on-time with her welding ticket. She saw herself as curious, grateful, courageous, and a team player and leader. She was positive about her high school; *"I like this school. There are a lot of clubs and it's really big, so you can meet a lot of friends and always find somewhere to fit in, no matter what kind of person you are."*

Brittany became involved with MEW because of her mother.

MEW was my Mom's idea but I felt if I ever had trouble I would get help and not fail. . . . I didn't need tutors but I could always come here and study. Having a room is important and you really feel comfortable here. I knew everyone and being with one group was good.

Despite her positive view on the school environment, having the dedicated MEW room was important to Brittany because it was *"a place to come where we can be ourselves and not worry about what other people think."* The friendships she made she described as being like family.

Our whole MEW class, we were like family, not friends, because we had different groups we hung out with. But we became close, like cousins, and I still talk to them to this day.

²⁰ Student names are fictitious to preserve the anonymity of the students.

While Brittany was a strong student academically, MEW provided her with more grounding in her culture. Her active participation in cultural events, combined with her academics, made her an award winner.

I was on the Committee for the Aboriginal Pavilion for Culturama. We had music, art, and food in the school. It also promoted Aboriginal student success. It helped me out with that and I won an award.

While Brittany had post-secondary aspirations in the spring of 2009 and was optimistic about her future, her plans were uncertain. *"I'm graduating but I'm not sure what I'll do. I don't want to jump into post-secondary. I got my welding CWB ticket last week, so I'll do welding until I figure out what I want to do."* However, Brittany did continue her education, going on to Red River College and completing the Educational Assistant program, graduating with honours. She credits MEW for her post-secondary participation.

Without MEW I probably wouldn't have gone on to post-secondary education. I think I would have still been working at the gas station I worked at in high school and not be a substitute E.A. [educational assistant] right now. Yeah, I definitely wouldn't have gone on to post-secondary education . . . I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do, but they took us to colleges and universities. I didn't know what I wanted to do, but after the field trips I chose to go to college. I would have to say, the field trips to the colleges and talking about it with everyone had a big influence on my choice.

Brittany credited the MEW bursary as being an important support. While she cited some confusion about bursary availability *"they told us finally we could get it, but not until the last month or so to apply . . . I would have liked to have gone into a teaching program at the university, but could not get in with that short a notice. The bursary was still a support though."*

In retrospect, Brittany stressed the importance of MEW, not only for herself but for others as well: *"It really helped people graduate. And it will help you in later life, especially if you go to school. Also, the employability skills portfolio taught us how to do good portfolios and resumes."* Looking forward, she also saw the importance of keeping young people in

school and felt that a program like MEW would be a strong support to other young people.

Society is getting worse, pregnancy rates are going up. I think they should work really hard to keep kids in school. My younger brother has problems and has come home drunk; projects like MEW could help kids like him to straighten out.

Tyler's Story

Tyler, who identifies as being Métis, followed a similar path to his friend Brittany. He too graduated on time, majoring in welding. Tyler described himself as curious, fair, forgiving, spiritual, playful and a leader. Like Brittany, he became involved with MEW because of his mother; *"I got into MEW because of my Mom. She wanted me to graduate, to succeed, and I wanted to make her happy."*

In his Grade 12 year Tyler credited the MEW teacher with helping him succeed.

Mr. [MEW teacher] was a big help. He came to Math class to help me; both in Grade 11 and Grade 12 . . . without him here it would have been different. Lots of my friends are jealous that I was in MEW. . . MEW showed me how to work hard in my other classes. The first couple of years we had MEW assignments, but this year we pretty much did other school work here to graduate. It showed me how to hustle in my other classes . . . I might not have graduated if I had not been in MEW.

Besides the MEW teacher, Tyler also mentioned how he had learned about Aboriginal peoples around the world (*"I learned about other cultures and my own"*). He strongly agreed that MEW helped him in gaining a better sense of his Aboriginal identity.

In the follow-up interview, Tyler expressed the same sentiments, echoing the fact that he might have had to stay in high school another year had it not been for MEW and that it was the MEW teacher who had been key to his success.

I graduated a lot sooner. I wouldn't be where I am now without MEW. I'm still friends with people [the other students] and with the MEW teacher.

While Tyler was not certain as to what he was going to do at the end of Grade 12; “I majored in welding and am going to try Red River College but I am waiting for a year, so I might get a welding job in the summer.” However, like Brittany, he decided to go to Red River College to the para-educator program where he did very well, averaging 80% or better in his courses.

I ended up getting six grand from being in MEW from the Millennium Scholarship Foundation and I'd have to say it was a big part of why I went to college. . . If I was not in MEW I would have had to have saved up for a year before going into college. . . . I don't know at this point, I'm going to do something, something more. I don't know if I want to be a teacher, but I'm trying it out. I want to do something more though.

In reflecting back on his MEW experience, Tyler also spoke fondly of the friends he had made as a result of participating in MEW.

We were like a big family in the classroom. Every year we went on an outing with other schools to Winnipeg. We went to cultural places all over the city. We made friends from all over Manitoba – a pretty cool experience.

Jessica's Story

Jessica, who identifies as being of First Nations heritage, has similar but different story than her MEW classmates. While a strong student in Mathematics, she passed Grade 12 English Language Arts with a final mark of 58%. Jessica described herself as fair, forgiving, truthful, responsible, and open-minded. Jessica became involved in MEW because of the cultural component, the opportunity to get help with school work, and the opportunity to make new friends, “especially the friends.”

Jessica credited MEW with helping her gain confidence and a better sense of her Aboriginal identity. She believed that MEW helped her graduate on time. She cited the importance of tutoring support and she appreciated having the dedicated MEW classroom. When she looked back on her experience in MEW, Jessica explained that being in MEW had helped her with:

Learning more and learning to pay attention. I usually don't pay attention in class and they taught me how to pay attention in class. It has been good for me to focus at work too. On focusing on what I need to do.

Jessica, as did the other students, mentioned the importance of making friends through MEW, both at her school, but also meeting other students from across Manitoba; “I'm still friends with some of them and I keep in touch through the Internet and through instant messaging.”

At the end of her Grade 12 year, Jessica intended to go on to post-secondary education at Red River College. However, she did not immediately continue her formal education. In her follow-up interview, Jessica explained that she was working and was applying for courses at Red River the following year. She continued to credit the MEW program, not only for her graduating but also for helping her with work.

I probably wouldn't have graduated and wouldn't have had a job. I probably would have still been in school working at graduating. They helped us with getting a job; they helped us to learn how to make resumes and how to apply properly, how to pay attention in the interview and to pay attention during the job.

Clearly, the three young people whose experiences are described in this case study all highly valued their participation in the MEW program, including the support from the MEW teacher, the dedicated classroom, and learning more about Aboriginal cultures. They credited MEW with supporting their academic achievement and the ability for them to graduate on time.

Interestingly all deviated from their Grade 12 post-secondary intentions. While all considered post-secondary as a viable option, the two students who attended college sequentially had thought in Grade 12 that this opportunity would have to be postponed. The availability of the MEW bursary supported their sequential participation.

Perhaps most striking was the importance of relationships, both with the MEW teacher and with the other students. The friends they made through MEW were often described in family terms. Echoing the research

literature, a relationship with a relentlessly caring adult is a key to school success, which becomes particularly powerful when coupled with the sense of belonging that was fostered by being part of the “MEW family.”

On a bright autumn day, I went to the school to present a draft of the MEW implementation report to the community. The Superintendent, the former MEW teacher, another teacher, two parents and two former students, including Tyler, were in attendance. During the discussion Tyler spoke of the importance of the MEW experience: “It was about relationships. What you did in class built relationships . . . they are strong friendships. It was like a big family. Those are still the kids I hang around with.”

Lighting the Spark

There is always a bit of apprehension when visiting a community for the first time. How will people in the community react to another researcher coming to interview them? The trip to the community is spent wondering, but any worries are dispelled upon seeing the MEW teacher. Although not surprising, a smile helps to dispel any apprehension and we head to the school to meet the students.

The classroom is small, but the walls are covered with art the students made reflecting the Seven Sacred Teachings. Students come and go, picking up or putting away laptops as they finish. Even though it is late in the school year, there is still work to do, and students come to the teacher with questions. There is one group of three students in particular who are working intensely together – one studying for a second chance at a year-end math exam, while the other helps him prepare.

A lot has happened in this room over the past few years. This is where students from the Making Education Work program have been coming to get tutoring help, to have a quiet place to work, to use the computers, and to be with friends. MEW students also took classes here, the required MEW curriculum which focused on Aboriginal culture. As is the case with many school-based programs, there is more here than meets the eye. It is only through taking an in-depth look at the experience of particular students that a more complete picture of Making Education Work can be told. Seen through the eyes of three students from the same community, this case study will attempt to provide a glimpse of what MEW provided to three young lives.

This case study includes information from a number of sources. On a site visit to the community in June

2009, questionnaires and school administrative data were collected and interviews undertaken, just before MEW students were graduating from high school. In addition, a follow-up questionnaire and telephone interview were conducted in 2010, one year after graduation. All of these sources help create the stories of these three students.

Michael's Story

Although soft spoken, Michael had a lot to say about his experience as a MEW student. When asked about why he became involved in MEW three years ago, his response was immediate and thoughtful: “...the cultural experience; I hoped it would help me get back in touch with my treaty roots.” In fact, Michael continuously returned to the importance of culture in his MEW experience. One year later, Michael returned to this theme during a telephone interview, where he stated:

They showed us in an Aboriginal program...a new way to look at life through the Aboriginal way of life. Everything was volunteer in the Aboriginal way of things. I'm more of a traditional person now; I appreciate my heritage and respect my elders.

Michael identified 24 of 30 words or phrases that described his strengths and these included the phrase 'connected to traditional culture.' He 'strongly agreed' that Making Education Work had helped him get a better sense of his Aboriginal identity.

While MEW helped Michael become more grounded in his cultural heritage, he also stressed that the program fostered his growth in more personal ways. He 'strongly agreed' that it had made him “...more confidence in myself,” possibly reflecting some of the strengths he chose to describe himself as 'persistent,' 'self-controlled,' 'responsible,' 'a leader,' 'motivated,' and 'confident.' In fact, Michael mentioned the best part of the MEW program was “Branching out and becoming who I am right now.” Michael's MEW journey was one of self-discovery, where he deepened an understanding of his past and fostered a stronger vision of his present. The supportive environment that MEW provided supported Michael, both educationally and emotionally. He mentioned his relationship with the MEW teacher and with the other MEW students.:

The MEW teacher helped me through a hard time. One was like a grandmother figure when mine died; not replacing her, but sort of filling the hole. All of us that were friends felt extra good in

graduating and 50-65% went on to post secondary; I'm still close friends with them when they come home from school.

When probed to further describe how MEW supports had impacted his high school career, Michael spoke candidly.

I would have quit school, but the teacher they brought in was always there for all of the students; s/he was not there for themselves and they helped with the class and gave us some place to go...I wouldn't have finished school on time. I would have struggled and would have still been in school now working. It helped me to graduate on time.

In addition, Michael mentioned on a number of occasions that the support he received from MEW "...opened my eyes to where I can get this training and stuff." He credits his participation in MEW to making him aware of post-secondary opportunities and to helping him realize that potential was there for him. At the time of his high school graduation, Michael plans included attending post-secondary and continuing to pursue athletics. He was contemplating attending university to study for a Bachelor of Arts or a business degree. In speaking with him one year later, Michael's life circumstances had changed, as had his post high school plans.

I started working at an elementary school as an educational assistant. It is not really a career path. I am waiting for another career opportunity. With the MEW program I was able to learn about careers in heavy machinery, automotive, and trade schools. The MEW program made me realize I could go there when I am ready; it gave me options.

In addition to changes in life circumstance, Michael mentioned there were "financial roadblocks" to him following through on his plans. However, it was clear he felt his experience in MEW had supported him through high school graduation and had fostered the choices that followed.

"I understand my culture better now. I'm Aboriginal and I understand the struggles we went through as a people and the things we have fought for. I'm a more enlightened person."

Samantha's Story

Samantha credits her experiences in the MEW project with having changed the course of her life. She spoke fondly of her MEW teacher and of how she supported her throughout high school. At the time of her graduation Samantha admitted she had "seriously thought about quitting school." However, one year later, upon reflection, she mentioned that it was the encouragement and support of the MEW teacher that had helped her stay on course and complete high school.

My MEW teacher, my MEW mother, helped us a lot with counselling, one on one. She did tutoring and she helped a lot. We called her MEW mother because she looked after us; she wouldn't judge us, she was like an academic advisor, but more spiritual and introduced Aboriginal ways to us.

She mentioned that she was optimistic about her future, and strongly agreed that her time in the MEW project had helped her to have more confidence in herself and in what she wanted to do during the year following her high school graduation. The environment of the MEW classroom was also a support to Samantha providing a place where she "...could go and talk to my classmates and my teacher." She described the MEW classroom as something of a "home" within the school setting.

"In the end it was my choice to not pursue post-secondary right away. It had nothing to do with MEW, it was a personal choice. [MEW] gave me what I needed to know so I could make the choice."

MEW also provided Samantha with opportunities which shaped her post-secondary aspirations. As part of the leadership aspect of the program, Samantha volunteered in a Grade 3 classroom. While she had thought about becoming a nurse, this experience "...influenced me into becoming a teacher." A year after her graduation, Samantha is still enrolled at university and pursuing her dream of becoming a teacher. She also credits the MEW teacher as influencing this change of course: "I want to be a teacher, probably a grade school teacher. My MEW teacher is like a role model, [showing me] how I could help my own students." In fact, Samantha would like to see all students in her community have access to the benefits she had under the MEW project.

“I think the MEW project was a great experience and helped me a lot. If it was introduced as being a regular part of school, it would be a great advantage, and keep kids in school to learn about themselves. Kids might think twice about what they can do, they just need to find it, and the MEW project helps with that. It was a great experience; all kids should have it.”

Like Michael, Samantha also stressed the cultural component of the MEW program as influencing who they were becoming as individuals.

If we don't learn it [our culture] in school it will die off. We should learn it in school. I wouldn't have learned so much about my culture and how interesting it is - and learning about individuals from different communities. It made me learn about how communities have different settings and different strengths. We learned from each other.

“It taught me to be a stronger person and taught me a lot about my culture I didn't know.”

Alyssa's Story

Like her peers Michael and Samantha, Alyssa strongly agreed her participation in the MEW program had bolstered her confidence in herself, helped her have a better sense of her Aboriginal identity, and provided her with information she needed to make decisions regarding post-secondary education. At the time of her graduation, she was optimistic about her future. But that was not always the case: *“At one point I felt like quitting school. My teacher talked to me and kept me from quitting and kept me going.”*

“I learned a lot about my culture. It made me not ashamed of my culture. I will always remember it, especially my teacher and my friends.”

The following fall, Alyssa enrolled in seven courses at university as part of her plan to become a teacher: *“I know I wanted to be a teacher, but MEW gave me more motivation to go through with it, sharing with others motivated me to pick my career.”* One year later, her situation had changed. Due to 'personal issues' she had to withdraw from post-secondary. Nevertheless, she had continued to work in the field of education: *“I am working full time as an educational assistant for experience.”* Alyssa sees this as a temporary interruption in her educational career: *“I am working on an application and an acceptance*

letter to get sponsored. Once sponsored, it will not be a problem, if not I will apply for a student loan. I'm trying to pay off my debts and get the loan if I need to.” This application process is for a program of study toward getting her Bachelor of Education degree.

“I am still in touch with my friends and with my teacher. S/he knows I've been through a lot and she still supports me.”

The Impact of MEW on Three Young People

Students' life choices are as individual as they are. Nevertheless, examining their journeys as MEW students tell the story of the impact the program had on their lives. For these three youths, the presence of a supportive and caring adult not only helped them to continue their high school studies, but also made them aware of their post-secondary potential. All three admitted they had contemplated leaving school, but the supportive intervention of the MEW teacher changed their minds, and they all graduated on time. This echoes the research outlined in the evidence synthesis, which indicates supportive adults contribute to youth resilience.

Through the MEW teacher's encouragement, Michael, Samantha, and Alyssa found the information they needed to pursue plans of post-secondary education, even if these plans were delayed. All three students identified “personal issues” as contributing to their change in plans. Furthermore, two MEW students included in the case indicated that financial considerations had contributed to changes in their life trajectory.

The cultural learning MEW provided was also important to all three students. They credited MEW with lighting the spark which ignited their desire to learn more about their Aboriginal roots. Connecting with culture instilled a sense of pride and reminded them of the importance of their heritage.

In the end, their voices clearly speak to the value they placed on their participation in MEW and that it provided a context for their success which will not soon be forgotten.

“I had a good experience in MEW - the trips, tours, and cultural [activities], meeting kids from other schools, and making friends for a lifetime. It's an experience I'll never forget. I'd like to see it a reality for other students who might need it.”

Michael

In Their Own Words - Reflections on MEW

'In their own words' summarizes the themes that emerged from the follow-up interviews conducted with former MEW students in 2010.

Completing High School

Thirteen of the 16 MEW students interviewed in November/December 2010 graduated either on time in 2009 or one year later, June 2010. The remaining three were either still working to get their Grade 12 equivalent or had plans to go back to school in the future. Reasons for not having yet graduated were; leaving school, having a child, and the loss of MEW supports after leaving the program in Grade 12.

Many of those interviewed credited MEW with either keeping them in school or helping them graduate on time.

I wouldn't have finished school on time. I would have struggled and would have still been in school. It helped me to graduate on time.

Post-High School Plans

All but one of the students said that MEW helped shape their after high school plans and influenced their choice to pursue post-secondary education/training.

I knew I wanted to be a teacher, but MEW gave me more motivation to go through with it, sharing with others motivated me to pick my career.

I wanted to get into a trade. I just felt like that was what I wanted to do. Maybe plumbing or heating, that sort of thing. They helped me figure out what I wanted to do.

While most of the students succeeded in moving forward in some aspect with their post high school plans, others have experienced challenges.

I took the fitness instructor course; it's just a weekend course... I failed the first exam and got scared since you only get two chances. I want to retake the course again before taking the exam the second time, to make sure I pass.

I took a break because I had a son. He's six months old now. I'm waiting until next year to apply to college.

The Lasting Influence of MEW

All but two of the MEW students felt that having been in the MEW program had a lasting influence on their lives beyond their post-secondary planning. The most common response was lasting friendships made with other MEW students from their own school, and for some from other MEW schools.

I made friends from the other MEW communities. I see them once in a while every three months or so, I'll see them in the city; I stay in touch by texting and sometimes phoning.

All those interviewed were exposed to learning about Aboriginal culture as a component of the program. Some students felt that this had brought about a permanent change in their life.

It helped me learn more about my culture too. I went to a couple of sweats. It was different, I liked it. I probably will continue to do that.

I went to Manito Ahbee for the first time this year. It was interesting. I liked the costumes and just started learning to make my own mukluks and moccasins. The MEW teacher introduced us to Aboriginal culture; I might not have gotten involved if not for [MEW].

While others indicated participating in MEW had influenced their cultural understanding, their current circumstances challenged their ability to continue to participating in cultural activities.

My boyfriend and I started taking pow-wow during MEW, but I stopped when I started college. I didn't have the time for it.

MEW students mentioned a number of other lasting effects that MEW had on their lives, including learning better focus, being positive about their future and working hard in order to achieve their goals.

The [MEW] teacher encouraged me... told me to think about my future. I thought about it. Maybe I'll go to school and get a job.

Something we did in MEW was the Youth Aboriginal Council. I was encouraged and [became involved]... I'm active in the University Student Council because of my experience in the Youth Aboriginal Council.

Students were also asked how they thought their lives might be different if they had not participated in the MEW project. The most common responses included not graduating, not continuing post-secondary education, not learning about their culture, and having fewer close friends. Some responses were particularly emphatic.

I think I would have been kicked out of school already. I think I wouldn't be in school and not graduating. I'd say it somewhat motivated me and make me want to get it [completing school] done.

I would have dropped out and would have got into drugs and alcohol, those kinds of negative things. Along the way I got into those things and the MEW project helped me to get out of those things and I don't do them anymore.

The Importance of Supporting Students

MEW students were asked how important it was that schools provide some form of similar support to the MEW program. There was a unanimous response that supports similar to those provided for MEW should be made available.

It would definitely help the Aboriginal students who are struggling, or not focusing on school, to keep on track. It would be good to provide for kids at other schools too.

I think it would help a lot. I think it would help troubled kids... [those that] don't have supports like that at home. They need encouragement. Kids don't have encouragement like that at home.

It was noted that there were attempts to bring continued supports, at least in some of the schools.

I think there is a class still like that at my school. I guess basically is like MEW. If you are behind you can go there and catch up.

I know they have an Aboriginal class now; the class is something like what we had with MEW... They also have a teacher that can help with tutoring. It is not set into the student's schedule... It is more of an elective, but they should make it required.

When asked what should be done to make supports available in the future, students emphasized supports should focus on encouraging youth and making them feel as though someone cares. Those interviewed expressed how important the MEW teacher was to them because they showed a genuine interest in their welfare and cared about their success.

A lot of the reason that people drop out is that they are overwhelmed and feel that no one cares. In MEW they made us feel like they cared, that we were welcome, and that it was important to be in class every day.

One student recommended having more information available to parents about the importance of encouraging their children.

I think parents should do a lot more work. My parents didn't support me; if they had I would have maybe have graduated on time. I think it would be good to have a class to teach them [parents] to encourage their children.

Most former MEW students also indicated they would consider volunteering or helping future students in some way, though some were not sure how they could help. The most common response was to go back to their school and talk to the younger students and let them know the importance of staying in school or to be a mentor or role model.

Sure, I'm planning to help the students out, tell those high school students to stay in school and not want to get out of the house at such a young age. I might go to my old MEW teacher and ask if I can talk to the students.

I was a good example of how well the project worked. I'd consider being a mentor or talking to the students.

In Summary

The former MEW students that were interviewed were positive about how MEW changed their lives for the better. In their own words, these youth have confirmed the MEW program had achieved what it had set out to do - keep youth in school, graduate, go on to post-secondary education/training, and become more aware of their Aboriginal heritage.

Many also made close and lasting friendships with their MEW teacher and classmates. While each youth took something slightly different or had other personal circumstances that took them down an unexpected path, all valued their MEW experience and credited some aspect of it for having a lasting influence on their lives.



Lessons Learned

Program Implementation in Diverse Contexts

While MEW experienced some of the growing pains often inherent in pilot projects, in all sites the key elements were implemented. MEW had sufficient flexibility to respond to different school and community contexts. While larger schools had more program offerings - a positive for students - this also increased the chance of timetabling conflicts between other subjects and the MEW curriculum.

School culture and administrative support dictated, to some degree, how integrated MEW was into the daily life of the school. However, these dynamics did not appear to have any effect on actual student outcomes.

The presence of the MEW teacher and his/her connection with parents/caregivers, as well as with students, was critical, regardless of context. Being engaged as partners in their child's education was valued by parents, regardless of the community context.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the MEW model, with some local adaptations, was a model which could be implemented in diverse contexts.



Research and Evaluation in Diverse Contexts

The original research design was intended to provide credible evidence of cause and effect that would inform policy and program decisions. The design called for creating a list of eligible students who would then be divided into the MEW pilot group and a comparison group. While the selection may have been consistently applied across sites, this was not perceived to be the case in 2009. In most sites, regardless of school or community context, people raised concerns that the individuals hired to select the sample were not consistent in their approach and/or did not apply the appropriate criteria. These perceptions speak to confusion and distrust of the selection process in a number of sites, but not necessarily to the reality of the process.

In a number of the sites, people – students, parents, educators - felt that MEW should have been available to all eligible students, rather than creating a comparison group where students could not (theoretically) access support. However, in four of the six sites, the MEW teacher supported some students in the comparison group to varying degrees through tutoring and mentoring.

While the variability in context across the MEW sites did not create disparities in the research, the MEW experience speaks, first, to the need to communicate clearly and continuously with communities regarding any external research or evaluation process, and second, to the importance of understanding the real life implications of excluding potential beneficiaries from participation in interventions developed to improve people's lives. Denial of interventions which have a strong likelihood of positive effects raises ethical and practical questions, particularly in the context of small communities with limited resources. Finally, as 'belonging' is crucial in the Aboriginal context, research and evaluation studies need to consider such cultural aspects in their design.

Supporting Aboriginal Students' Educational Success

Overall, the academic outcomes of MEW students were higher than those of students in the comparison group, including credit acquisition, marks, graduation rate and post-secondary participation rate.

What factors supported MEW students' educational success? MEW combined many features about what was known to be effective educational practice for Aboriginal students' school success. MEW confirmed that:

- Students benefit from a sustained, trusting relationship with a caring adult in the school,
- Students profit from a supportive academic environment (e.g., tutoring, mentoring, quiet and safe place to work, a place to call 'home'),
- Learning about one's culture and connecting to one's heritage and community supports students' confidence,
- Being a confident learner is related to school success,
- Building supportive trusting relationships between school and families supports student success.

There was also evidence that caring and supportive teachers positively influenced outcomes for both MEW and comparison students. Both groups achieved higher rates of on-time graduation and the more credits they earned the higher they scored on the Expectation/Valued Scale. However, results were mixed when looking at the Caring and Respect Scale, with MEW students showing higher graduation rates and number of credits earned and comparison students with lower rates and credits the higher their Caring and Respect Scale score. Again, this reflects what educational literature suggest, namely that positive school climates foster student success.

One of the important aspects of the MEW program was tutoring and mentoring by the MEW teacher. The student stories revealed that students felt the MEW teacher supported them and contributed to their resiliency by holding high expectations of their achievement and bolstering their confidence as learners. A relentlessly caring teacher appears to be the factor that is most powerful in creating positive outcomes for students; something which can and should be replicated for all students. However, the importance of the MEW teacher as a caring adult in students' lives must be considered along with the synergy created by the other supports embedded in the MEW program.



Bibliography

- Canadian Council on Learning. (2009) *The State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada: A Holistic Approach to Measuring Success*. Ottawa: Canadian Council on Learning. Retrieved August 23, 2011 from http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/StateAboriginalLearning/SAL-FINALReport_EN.PDF
- Fisher, J. R., and Campbell, L. (2007). Improving the Aboriginal Educational Experience in Canada: Lessons for Policymakers. *Business Research Yearbook*, 14, 388-394. Retrieved August 23, 2011 from http://fisherhouse.com/research/2007_Fisher_Campbell_Aboriginal_Education_in_Canada.pdf
- Hango, D. (2011). *Delaying Post-secondary Education: Who Delays and for How Long?* Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Retrieved August 23, 2011 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-595-m/81-595-m2011090-eng.pdf>
- Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). (2008). *Special Reports –What Difference Does Learning Make to Financial Security?* Retrieved August 23, 2011 from <http://www4.hrsdc.gc.ca/3ndic.1t.4r@-eng.jsp?iid=54>
- The Learning Partnership (2009). *From Risk to Resilience: Final Report for the Canadian Council on Learning*. Toronto, ON: The Learning Partnership. Retrieved August 23, 2011 from http://www.tlpresources.ca/policyresearch_conference_NDRY_2008/ndry_final_report_2009.pdf
- Lennon, M.C., Zhao, H., Wang, S. and Gluszynski, T. (2011). *Educational Pathways of Youth in Ontario: Factors Impacting Educational Pathways*. Toronto. Higher Educational Quality Council of Ontario. Retrieved August 23, 2011 from <http://www.heqco.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/YITS%20ENG.pdf>
- Levin, B. (2009). In Canada Aboriginal education still needs work, *Phi Delta Kappan*, 90(9), 689-690.
- Levin, B. (2004). *Students at Risk: A Review of the Research*. The Learning Partnership.
- Parriag, A., Chaulk, P., Wright, M. D., MacDonald, W., and Cormier, A. (2010). *A Literature Review of Factors that Support Transitions by Aboriginal People from K-12 to Postsecondary Education*. Toronto: Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. Retrieved August 23, 2011 from <http://www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/255/transitions-aboriginal-2010.pdf>
- Philpott, D. F. (2007). Assessing Without Labels: Culturally Defined Inclusive Education. *Exceptionality Education Canada*, 17(3), 3-34.
- Philpott, D. F., Nesbit, W. C., Cahill, M., & Jeffery, G. (2004). Educational Assessment of First Nations Students: A Review of the Literature. In W. C. Nessbit (Ed.), *Cultural Diversity and Education: Interface Issues* (pp. 77-102). St. John's, NL: Memorial University of Newfoundland.
- Raymond, M. (2008). *High School Dropouts Returning to School*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Retrieved August 23, 2011 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-595-m/81-595-m2008055-eng.pdf>
- Richards, J. (2011). *School Dropouts: Who Are They and What Can Be Done?* [e-brief]. Toronto: C.D. Howe Institute. Retrieved August 23, 2011 from http://www.cdhowe.org/pdf/ebrief_109.pdf
- Ryan, James. (2010). Establishing Inclusion in a New School: The Role of the Principal. *Exceptionality Education Canada*, 20(2), 6-24.
- Statistics Canada. (2011). *Youth in Transition Survey (YITS)*. Retrieved August 23, 2011 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-588-x/81-588-x2000001-eng.pdf>
- Statistics Canada. (2006). *Average earnings of the population 15 years and over by highest level of schooling, by province and territory (2006 Census)*. Database on-line. Retrieved August 23, 2011 from <http://www40.statcan.ca/l01/cst01/labor50b-eng.htm>
- Statistics Canada. (2010). *Trends in dropout rates and the labour market outcomes of young dropouts*. Retrieved August 23, 2011 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-004-x/2010004/article/11339-eng.htm>