CULTURAL SECURITY IN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION: THE CASE OF THE KIUNA INSTITUTION

Can cultural adaptation of a curriculum and post-secondary services contribute to the anchoring of identity of First Nations students? If so, can this anchoring bolster post-secondary perseverance and academic success?

Research conducted as part of my Master’s project\(^1\) tends to show that the development of culturally appropriate educational spaces promotes retention and post-secondary achievement of First Nations students in Quebec. The thesis resulting therefrom examines two existing formulas: 1) hospitality and support services adapted within provincial post-secondary institutions; 2) customized post-secondary programs and services offered by an institution affiliated with and for First Nations. The analysis of the first formula was accomplished following a field research conducted between 2013 and 2015\(^2\) from various specialized educational bodies\(^3\). The second formula, this article’s main object of research, was examined through the testimonies of eight students or graduates and six members of the Kiuna Institution staff. Qualitative data from individual interviews and sharing circles met the quantitative results gathered through a written questionnaire, developed in collaboration with Université de Montréal’s Jeunes autochtones du Projet SEUR team\(^4\). 25 of the 33 students of the Institute’s Human Sciences, First Nation Stream program’s French Cohort and nearly sixty adult Aboriginal students from the Huron-Wendat Centre de développement de la formation et de la main-d’œuvre (CDFM) or participants in the Project SEUR university studies familiarization visit participated (n=83). The purpose of this article is to draw a portrait of the impact of introducing cultural security at the heart of the curriculum and post-secondary services, based specifically on the Kiuna Institution model.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

What do we mean by cultural security in academia? In the late 1980s, a nurse and Maori educator from New Zealand, Irihapeti Ramsden, developed the concept in response to marginalization and discrimination experienced by the indigenous people in the non-indigenous health systems (Blanchet, Garneau & Pepin, 2012). While some criticize the concept’s ambiguity and the interpretative nature, we define it here as the result of a potential offer of services and programs developed in respect and recognition of historical, cultural, socioeconomic, political, and epistemological determinants of target populations (Dufour, 2015). The establishment of a certain cultural security within post-secondary institutions not only requires the creation and implementation of culturally sensitive measures in the framework of concerted action; we must also consider the experience and response of students in order to evaluate its effectiveness (Colomb, 2012).

The vast majority (71%) of students who answered our survey shows considerable interest in post-secondary education (Dufour, 2015). This data echoes the ratio obtained by the Survey of First Nations Peoples Living On-Reserve (EKOS, 2006) which estimated, over 10 years ago, that 70% of First Nations communities’ youth aspired to post-graduation. Yet, less than 19% of the Aboriginal population aged from 25 to 34 years-old in Quebec will get at least a col-
A college degree (Canada, 2008). Numerous obstacles to Aboriginal graduation are documented in the literature. However, the fear of not succeeding is the main obstacle mentioned by over half of respondents (see table below, data derived from Dufour, 2015)³.

This finding comes as no surprise. Many participants stressed that post-secondary education, more specifically university studies, project an image of inaccessibility. Those from the Kiuna Institution, for their part, seem to have a confidence level twofold higher than that of their counterparts in terms of their academic and professional success. This analysis, which is not solely founded on quantitative basis, nevertheless appears reinforced by the testimonies collected. Thus, if we subtract the answers provided by the 25 Kiuna students, we find that the proportion of Aboriginal students who identified fear of failing as a potential obstacle to success reaches a comfortable majority of 68%. However, students surveyed selected components that can contribute to their post-secondary success, such as personal motivation, financial assistance, the idea of being part of the betterment of their community, etc. A certain number of them correspond to particular cultural security criteria within the post-secondary project. Participants generally aspire to a school environment that recognizes their special needs and schooling that takes greater account of the role and contributions of autochthonous peoples from yesterday to today. These results agree with those published by Joncas (2013) whereby a substantial proportion of persevering academics participating in his study at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi (UQAC) were in favour of: 1) attending a post-secondary institution created by and for native people; 2) benefiting from more opportunities and networking spaces with other Aboriginal students of the university (2013, p. 153). In recent years, Hospitality and support services, as well as autochthonous curriculum or customized to the needs of communities, have been growing in demand in CEGEPS and Quebec universities. Now, the Kiuna Institution remains to this day the only Quebec post-secondary institution designed by and for First Nations.

**KIUNA INSTITUTION: “A SCHOOL MADE FOR US”**

Kiuna Institution presents curricula and teaching approaches adapted to the cultures and realities of First Nations. The bilingual Human Sciences-First Nation Stream program in which were registered, in 2014, 51 Atikamekw, Innu and Mohawk students, but also Huron-Wendats, Abenakis, Anicinabes, Crees, Maliseets and others, leads to a college diploma issued by the Ministère de l’Éducation et de l’Enseignement supérieur (MEES). It fosters a secure attachment through the exploration of three key themes: identity, community, and society. Cultural security therefore irrigates all aspects of the post-secondary education project.

**ANTICIPATED OBSTACLES (%)**

- Remoteness of the community: 38%
- Language of instruction: 12%
- City cultural shock: 18%
- Teaching staff not familiar with Aboriginal: 15%
- Lack of interest: 23%
- Lack of money: 37%
- Lack of family or community support: 18%
- Teaching methods used in school: 15%
- Health: 5%
- Lifestyle incompatible with studies: 8%
- Fear of not succeeding: 55%
- Other priorities or aspirations: 14%
- Racisme or discrimination: 14%
- OTHERS: 12%
By studying History, cultures, and policies characterizing the First Nations’ socio-economic development, students are able to better contextualize the issues facing their families and communities, to then be invited to position themselves in relation to the latter. Through educational activities and outings, students also have access to heritage and Aboriginal cultural practices, of which some were deprived of because of the colonial context.

*I was cut off from my culture all my life until recently […]. Motivation in school also stems from identity affirmation we found in Kiuna […], that’s what allows dropouts like me to focus on our true values!* (Jaimee, Attikamek and Quebecer, 21)

Thus, by comings and goings between so-called traditional and contemporary practices, the Kiuna educational project endeavours to maintain its own transversal objective of cultural continuity ensuring the integration of sociocultural realities and experiences of student populations in school curricula and teaching methods. This objective is consistent with the indigenous Mastery spirit of autochthonous education which, in 1972, recommended that be instilled in Aboriginal peoples the values and “the knowledge necessary for self-pride and understanding of themselves and the world that surrounds them”, in a context of cultural transmission, but also survival in modernity (IFAC, 1972, p. 1). The Institute’s limited dimensions, which promotes a certain proximity in a given linguistic cohort and personalization of relations with administrative, support and teaching staff, helps strengthen cultural security within the school project. The community thus created, just as the Pan-Indian type identification, acts as an additional protective factor linking people with a sense of shared solidarity. In all 25 participants, this institutional anchoring is achieved through a strong interest in post-secondary education and more specifically for the current college tuition as well as a retention rate of over 86% (Kiuna College, 2014). Along the same lines, the fact that they have been proportionately more numerous than other participants to determine the importance of learning in their conception of education suggests that cultural relevance can lead to a better appreciation of the value of training (Dufour, 2015). Post-secondary education within a program that is culturally compatible with students is not perceived as a mere obstacle course against which one must exercise a great deal of resilience, but as an opportunity for personal and collective enrichment, even an identitarian adjustment, whose benefits may be conjugated in the present. Secure attachment to the culture and the community will act in turn as a launching ramp for various levels of individual and collective successes. We then anticipate that Kiuna Institution students and graduates can in turn guaranty the success of a new autochthonous leadership, both in communities in cities, as have done before them several students of the late Manitou College in La Macaza. Note that the answers to the written questionnaire of Human Sciences—First Nations program students reveal that they have great interest in professions requiring some leadership such as teachers (56%), lawyers or judges (40%), politicians, leaders or advisors (32%) (Dufour, 2015).

**CONCLUSION**

In the fall of 2015, the majority of graduates of Kiuna Institution First Nations program were registered in a provincial or national university. Some took a pause to return to their communities, while others progressed to university in the next academic term. Some students chose transitional courses in the hope of improving their academic record and be admitted to limited-enrolment programs, while others have turned to new universities and new post-secondary programs more suited to their priorities and individual interests. Overall, the surveyed graduates attest to have successfully integrated and acknowledge that their passage in Kiuna prepared them well for their university career, on both the academic and identity aspects:

*I do not know what happened, but back in a large Quebec academic institution [University of Trois-Rivières] is very different today than in 2007 […]. It must be because well… Kiuna gave me back my pride: my pride in being Aboriginal. I have more faith in myself, in what I am.* (Annick, Attikamek, 28)

Finally, it should be noted that several participants have claimed to focus or even redirect their academic exploitation based on the presence of Aboriginal student community or on the availability of culturally appropriate services. This data allows to particularly emphasize the importance of promoting and financing structures to ensure cultural security of Aboriginal students in all Quebec post-secondary institutions. 

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1 Over a hundred high school, college, and university Aboriginal students participated in the research. They are from the 10 First Nations of Quebec, in addition to Inuit, Ojibway and Saulteaux nations, and come from 26 Aboriginal communities.

2 Part of this survey was conducted with Leah Lefevre-Radelli, Ph.D. candidate in Cotutelle with Université du Québec à Montréal and Université de Nantes. Some results will be integrated in the *Être étudiant, étudiante autochtone à l’UQAM : expériences, politiques et pratiques d’accueil et d’intégration à l’université.*

3 These include the section *Jeunes autochtones du Projet SEUR* of l’Université de Montréal, Kiuna Institute, the *Centre de développement de la formation et de la main-d’œuvre (CDFM)* huron-wendat, the First Peoples House (FPH), and McGill University’s l’Indigenous Student Alliance (ISA), Concordia University’s Aboriginal Student Resource Center (ASRC), and John-Abbott’s College’s Aboriginal Resource Center (ARC).

4 The SEUR Project (awareness on education, university and research) was established in 2001 to encourage retention among high school students by allowing them to explore different opportunities for study and careers (found in http://seur.qc.ca/).

5 Only responses of students with some interest for post-secondary studies (n = 65) were considered for this question. For the purposes of this article, the data were converted to percentages and rounded to the closest unit.

6 The Kiuna Institution is a collegiate institute affiliated with the Cégep de l’Abitibi-Témiscamingue and Dawson College.

7 Jimmy, Cree and Innu, 19 years old.

REFERENCES


