

running head: URBAN CIRCLE: CULTURALLY RESTORATIVE EDUCATION

Exploring the Impact of a Culturally Restorative Post-secondary Education Program

on Aboriginal Adult Learners:

The Urban Circle Training Centre Model

by

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### **Abstract**

The educational attainment gap between Canada's Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples both reflects and perpetuates a parallel disparity in socioeconomic conditions. Aboriginal peoples' distrust of and disengagement from educational systems can be linked to the history of their relationship with the settler state. Therefore, decolonizing education may be one way to address the education gap. This qualitative study of ten Aboriginal graduates from one of Urban Circle's post-secondary programs explored graduates' perceptions of the integration of Aboriginal cultural context and content in their program and the effect of these experiences on program completion. Responses revealed five main themes: 1) the cultural context of Urban Circle restored Aboriginal identity; 2) supportive relationships were important to graduates' success in the FSW/FASD program; 3) the Life Skills course facilitated personal growth, employment readiness and program success; 4) the cultural context of Urban Circle has influenced graduates' professional work; and 5) Urban Circle had positive influences on graduates' personal lives. The findings indicate that the cultural content and context at Urban Circle positively impacted student's educational experience and contributed to their completion of their program.

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Exploring the Impact of a Culturally Restorative Post-secondary Education Program on  
Aboriginal Adult Learners: The Urban Circle Training Centre Model

The substantial gap in educational attainment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians has been documented for decades (Cooke, Mitrou, Lawrence, Guimond and Beavon, 2007; Mendelson, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2008). It predicts parallel gaps in employment rates, health indicators and incarceration rates (Health Council of Canada, 2005; Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2010; Statistics Canada, 2009). With increasing calls for new approaches to eliminate the educational attainment gap, programs have begun to emerge that aim to address the barriers to education that many Aboriginal people face.

In Winnipeg, a number of such programs are delivered by Urban Circle, a community-based, non-profit organization that provides education for Aboriginal people. It is designed to provide education that will lead to meaningful employment in sectors that provide decent wages. Urban Circle's approach to education is a holistic one that utilizes the philosophy of the Medicine Wheel. Elders are integral to its programs; they help to guide the vision for the Centre by providing teachings, leading ceremonies, and providing regular support to students and staff. Aboriginal culture is woven into every aspect of Urban Circle's programs; from the physical design of the building and classrooms to the conceptual design of course materials and activities.

Urban Circle's programs have been highly successful in terms of graduation and post-program employment rates (Urban Circle Training Centre, n.d.). However, the mechanisms that facilitate students' success are not well understood. The Canadian

Council on Learning (CCL) has found little empirical literature on the aspects of education that facilitate Aboriginal student success, particularly with regard to post-secondary education. The CCL concluded that “much literature *hypothesises* factors which *may* contribute to Aboriginal success” (n.d., p. 1), and culturally relevant curricula is one of these hypothesized factors. But there is little research that can explain how the cultural components of post-secondary educational programs contribute to academic and occupational success. In this study, I have attempted to increase our understanding of this process through an in-depth examination of the perceptions, beliefs and understandings of Urban Circle graduates themselves.

### **Background and Review of Literature**

According to the United Nations Human Development Report 2011, Canada ranked 6th out of 187 countries on the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) *Human Development Index* (HDI: UNDP, 2011). This composite measure of a population’s wellbeing is based on three basic dimensions of human development: 1) health, 2) education, and 3) income (UNDP, 2011). Canada’s score on the HDI places it in the “very high” range; however, this rating does not reflect the realities of life among Canada’s Aboriginal population. Using the same dimensions and calculating the 2001 HDI scores for Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> peoples in Canada, Cooke, Mitrou, Lawrence, Guimond & Beavon (2007) noted that Aboriginal peoples would rank 32nd.

One reason for the inequality between the HDI scores of Canada’s overall population and its Aboriginal population is the gap in educational attainment of these two groups. In calculating the HDI, educational attainment is measured as “mean years of schooling for adults aged 25 years and expected years of schooling for children of school

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<sup>1</sup> The term Aboriginal is used in this paper to refer to First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples of Canada.



entering age” (UNDP, 2011). Between 1990/91 and 2000/01, although the gap in educational attainment narrowed, Aboriginal people continued to score lower than non-Aboriginal people in terms of both adult literacy rates and gross enrolment ratios (Cooke et al., 2007). This disparity in educational attainment poses a serious challenge to the health and wellbeing of Canada’s Aboriginal people and its population overall. In Canada’s 2006 Census, over one million individuals identified themselves as Aboriginal, and the percentage of Aboriginal peoples in Canada’s total population is increasing. As Helin (2008) has noted, the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations are “going in opposite demographic directions with the Aboriginal population rapidly rising while the mainstream population is in dramatic decline” (p. 44). Between 1996 and 2006, the non-Aboriginal population grew by 8% whereas the Aboriginal population grew by 45%. As Mendelson (2006) states, “it is unrealistic to think that [Aboriginal peoples] can thrive... if a significant proportion of their population is undereducated and unemployed” (p. 2).

Using data from the 1996 and 2001 Canadian Censuses, Mendelson (2006) compared the educational attainment of Aboriginal peoples aged 20 to 24 years to the same age group in the general population. His findings reveal striking differences. For example, in 1996, 19% of the general population aged 20 to 24 had not completed high school, compared to 48% of Aboriginal peoples in the same age group. Five years later, in 2001, the gap for the same age cohort groups had narrowed only slightly; 16% of the general population had not completed high school, compared to 43% for the Aboriginal population. Although the percentage of Aboriginal 20- to 24-year olds who had completed post-secondary programs increased between 1996 and 2001, a gap still remained between the Aboriginal (17%) and general (28%) populations. Over the same

five-year period, the rates of 20- to 24-year-olds completing a university degree fell among both the Aboriginal (3% in 1996 to 2% in 2001) and general (13% to 11%) populations, and the gap remained.

A comparison of 2001 and 2006 Canadian Census data (which track all age groups) indicates that the percentage of Aboriginal people with university degrees increased from 6% in 2001 to 8% in 2006, and the percentage of non-Aboriginal people with university degrees moved from 20% to 23%, leaving the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people with university degrees virtually unchanged (Statistics Canada, 2008a; p. 19). Yet, the recent “Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study” (Environics Institute, 2010) found that “pursuing higher education is the leading life aspiration of urban Aboriginal peoples today” (p. 9).

What accounts for this disparity in educational attainment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples of Canada? In large measure, its roots are found in the history of the relationship between Canada’s indigenous population and its colonizers, and the system of education imposed by the latter. A brief history of this relationship, and the subsequent development of the education system that was imposed on Aboriginal peoples, provide a foundation for the present study’s rationale.

**Historical background.** In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, European explorers began arriving in Canada, having no exposure to, or understanding of, the Indigenous<sup>2</sup> cultures they found upon arrival. They tended to look upon Indigenous peoples as heathens, savages, and morally inferior to themselves. They denigrated Indigenous peoples’ cultures, values, traditional knowledge and practices, and believed that the Indigenous peoples

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<sup>2</sup> The term Indigenous is used here to reflect the First Peoples inhabiting the land at the time of European settlers’ arrival.

needed to be “civilized” to bring them “up” to the European standard (Dickason, 1984; Jennings, 1976). The writings of early explorers and settlers reflected Eurocentric beliefs, and these writings were shared, published, translated, and – most importantly – believed by those in Europe and other lands. Thus, the image of Indigenous peoples as “savages”, “beasts”, and “uncivilized” became part of European scholarship and for centuries continued to foster a belief in the concept of “primitive man” (Blaut, 1993; Said, 1978). Colonialism created a “language celebrating colonial identities while constructing the colonized as the antithesis of human decency and development” (Green, 1995, p. 88). As Memmi (1967) asserts, colonizers *need* an image of the colonized that accounts for and justifies their own position and privilege, and dehumanizes the colonized. Consequently, Indigenous peoples have been subjected to centuries of misrepresentation, domination, exploitation, cultural destruction, and attempts at extermination.

Throughout the process of colonization, laws, policies and systems of governments were imposed to control the affairs of Canada’s Indigenous peoples. The economic interests of the European invaders – individuals as well as countries – underpinned this development and established the longstanding inequity of conditions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (Blaut, 1993). As Silver (2006) states, “Canada was built on the National Policy. But it all rested on the removal of Aboriginal people from their homes, their confinement to reserves, and the construction of an elaborate system of social control justified on the false grounds of Aboriginal inferiority” (p. 18).

European religious orders were the first to formally attempt to “civilize” and

assimilate Canada's Aboriginal peoples. The focus of this effort was placed on the education of children "to create a class of 'civilized' young Indians who would return to proselytize among their own people" (Fournier & Crey, 1997, p. 50). By the mid 1800s, the federal government of Canada was partnering with religious orders to develop and operate residential schools for Aboriginal children. An example of the popular belief about 'civilizing' Aboriginal peoples is contained in the writings of Reverend Thompson Ferrier (1913): "Is it possible to do anything for the Indian?" My experience for the past fifteen years has shown me that it is possible to do a great deal for him; that it is possible to civilize him, that it is possible to educate him; that it is possible to Christianize him, and that it is possible to train him that he fill a place in our civilization" (p. 21).

Until the 1950s, it was compulsory for Aboriginal families to send their children to residential schools, at which children could be severely punished for speaking their heritage language or engaging in any of their cultural practices. Children were taught that the Aboriginal worldview and ways of life were inferior, immoral, and primitive; they were taught to be ashamed of their people. Moreover, the academic education within the residential schools consisted of "meager academics augmented by agriculture and trades instruction for the boys and domestic training for the girls" (Fournier & Crey, 1997, p. 55). Schools were severely underfunded and relied on students for labour, thus fostering a system of education some have described as training Aboriginal children for the "servant class" (Fournier & Crey, 1997).

Generations of Aboriginal children were removed from their families and communities to attend residential schools - in most cases, far away from their families and communities. Children were forced to forget their languages, traditional beliefs and

practices, and many experienced physical, sexual, and psychological abuse (Milloy, 1999; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, Vol. 1.). Across Canada, there are hundreds of Aboriginal families who had their children taken away to attend school, never knowing if their child(ren) were alive or dead. The Office of the Chief Coroner in Ontario recently began a review of death records going back to the 1900s and “has so far turned up more than 100 possible cases of previously unidentified child and youth deaths linked to Indian residential schools” (The Canadian Press, 2012, para. 1).

The cascading effects of intergenerational trauma have continued to affect many Aboriginal peoples in Canada, in the form of violence, addictions, poverty, and family breakdown (Chansonneuve, 2005; Founier & Crey, 1997; Friesen & Friesen, 2002). No matter what system of formal education Aboriginal people were part of, as stated in the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996), “formal education was, without apology, assimilationist. The primary purpose of formal education was to indoctrinate Aboriginal people into a Christian, European worldview, thereby ‘civilizing’ them” (Vol. 3, p. 434).

**Barriers to education for Aboriginal peoples.** After the residential school system came to an end, Aboriginal peoples still had no control over and little participation in established education systems. For Aboriginal peoples, colonization created long-standing barriers to full and equitable participation in the educational systems, and indeed in society itself. The “Western European institutions of education and the process of colonization have led to situations where Indigenous peoples...have borne the brunt of exclusion and denial of access [to] and full participation in the introduced education systems” (Brady, 1997, p. 414).

The relative absence of Aboriginal staff, teachers, and Board members in the off-reserve public school system exemplifies the lack of visibility and participation of Aboriginal peoples in the education system. In Manitoba, for example, of the 10% of teachers that self-identified as Aboriginal (1,488) in the Aboriginal Teachers' Questionnaire Report 2009, only 7.5% were working in provincial schools compared to 43.3% working in First Nations Schools (Aboriginal Education Directorate, 2009). Information from the 2006 Census about the geographic distribution of Canada's Aboriginal population indicates that the provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, tied at 15%, have the largest percentages, and Winnipeg, at 10%, is the Canadian city with the largest percentage of Aboriginal people (Statistics Canada, 2008, p. 11). Yet few Aboriginal students attending Winnipeg schools, or provincial schools outside of Winnipeg, will be taught by an Aboriginal person. In a study exploring the education experience of Aboriginal students in Winnipeg's inner city high schools, only one in three Aboriginal students interviewed indicated that their school had any Aboriginal teachers; 95.6% of interviewees indicated that more Aboriginal teachers should be in the schools (Silver, Mallette, Green & Simard, 2002, p. 19). It is commonly agreed that the low incidence of Aboriginals among educators exists at all levels of the educational system, from preschool to university.

The mistrust that has developed between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, as well as the lack of control over and participation in their own education, has profoundly affected the educational levels attained by Aboriginal peoples. Compounding these forces are cultural, geographic and socio/economic barriers to accessing education among Aboriginal peoples (Malatest & Associates, 2007; Association of Canadian

Community Colleges, 2005).

***Cultural barriers to education.*** The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP; 1996) heard briefs from more than 2067 people, visited 96 communities, held 178 days of hearings, and commissioned over 350 research projects. During the Commission's process, Aboriginal peoples from across Canada, representing various cultures, languages, and beliefs, spoke of the need for education reforms – particularly a need to increase respect for and reflection of Aboriginal cultures and worldviews in education. The Commission's report noted that Aboriginal people view education as a lifelong process and one that focuses on the holistic nature of human development (RCAP, Vol. 3). Little Bear (2009) states, “in the Indigenous world, knowledge is about relationships” (p. 7). “Aboriginal paradigms include ideas of constant flux, all existence consisting of energy waves/spirit, all things being animate, all existence being interrelated, creation/existence having to be renewed, space/place as an important referent, and language, songs, stories, and ceremonies as repositories for the knowledge that arises out of these paradigms” (Little Bear, 2009, p. 8). This worldview was denigrated and ignored by settler societies and excluded from their education programs and systems.

While Aboriginal worldviews are reflected in the languages, the historical assault on and loss of many Aboriginal languages has compounded the struggle to transmit cultural knowledge and education across generations of Aboriginal children. In her submission to the National Working Group on Education & the Minister of Indian Affairs, Battiste (2002) made a strong case for Aboriginal languages to be an integral part of education.

Language is by far the most significant factor in the survival of Indigenous knowledge. Indigenous languages and their symbolic, verbal, and unconscious orders structure Indigenous knowledge; therefore, educators cannot stand outside of Indigenous language to understand Indigenous knowledge. Where Indigenous knowledge survives, it is transmitted through Aboriginal languages. Where Aboriginal languages, heritages, and communities are respected, supported, and connected to elders and education, educational successes among Aboriginal students can be found (p. 17).

Consultations with Aboriginal Elders from diverse cultural traditions across Canada have highlighted the lack of awareness and understanding on the part of non-Aboriginal peoples about Aboriginal peoples and, in particular, about their worldviews: “Elders deplore the fact that most Canadians do not learn about Aboriginal peoples and their ways of life, information that would help them understand issues from the Aboriginal perspective. Many Elders say this knowledge is vital to bridging the gap of understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians” (RCAP, 1996, Vol. 4, p. 119). The colonial history of Canada has meant that Aboriginal ways of viewing the world have been seen as inferior to Euro-Western philosophies, and either ridiculed or ignored. Thus, Aboriginal peoples’ system of educating the members of their communities by passing on their own worldviews and values was severely disrupted by colonization. Because the Canadian education system was based on Eurocentric knowledge, beliefs, and values, Aboriginal peoples have had to navigate a system based on a culture very different from their own, resulting in dramatically lower levels of



educational attainment (Berger, Epp & Møller, 2006; Binda, 2001; Brady, 1997; Stonechild, 2006). Schick and St. Denis (2005) have argued that without an acknowledgment of racism and ‘white privilege’ in schooling, Aboriginal students, and indeed other visible minorities, are subjected to being the “Other”, as “culturally different” from the norm. As Silver and colleagues (2002) contend, for the most part, the higher rates of Aboriginal students failing and/or dropping out of school “...would more usefully be thought of as the continuation of a long history of Aboriginal people resisting a colonial educational system which denigrates and seeks to eliminate their culture” (p. 38).

LaRocque (2010) contends that Aboriginal students have been subjected to educational systems that deny their rights and their history, and portray their peoples and cultures as inferior and primitive. Curricula present a white middle-class existence as the norm or ideal and have presented images of Aboriginal peoples in racist, stereotypical forms. In a review of 88 textbooks by 74 authors published over a 141-year period (1829 to 1970) that were included in undergraduate Canadian history programs at Canadian universities, Walker (1971) found that the picture and role of Indigenous peoples portrayed in these texts was “confusing, contradictory, and incomplete” (p. 21). With few exceptions, textbooks presented a derogatory image of indigenous peoples and very little, mostly distorted, information on the role of indigenous peoples in the history of Canada. In a follow-up study of textbooks published between 1972 and 1982, Walker (1983) found little improvement in the depiction of Aboriginal peoples and their role in Canadian history. Although progress had been made in the elimination of derogatory language, instead of revising inaccurate, distorted information, the writers simply

excluded information about Aboriginal peoples and their history.

The benefit of the new and more sensitive treatment [in the language describing Aboriginal peoples] has been that the negative portrait of Indian society and the derogatory image of the Indian as a human being are no longer being perpetuated. However, the cost has been that there is no longer any image at all. Instead of revising the previous impressions, historians have simply cut them out (Walker, 1983, p. 346).

This assessment of history textbooks, even though the last was one was 30 years ago, confirms the recent finding of the Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study (Environics Institute, 2010) that many non-Aboriginal Canadians felt that Canadian schools provide an inadequate awareness of and understanding about Aboriginal peoples' history and contributions to Canada. As Memmi (1965) states, "the most serious blow suffered by the colonized is being removed from history...He is in no way a subject of history any more. Of course, he carries its burden, often more cruelly than others, but always as an object" (p. 91).

***Geographic barriers to education.*** For Aboriginal people living in rural or remote areas, access to post-secondary education may not be easily available. The high level of high school dropout rates in rural and remote areas also limits Aboriginal peoples' ability to access post-secondary education. A recent Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey (2010) found a sharp decline in Canadian high school dropout rates, but the dropout rate for Aboriginal youth was still more than twice that of non-Aboriginal youth (Statistics Canada, 2011). In fact, in some cases Aboriginal youth are required to move away from their family and community in order to complete high school, and in other

cases they must commute from their communities to school on a daily basis. While 80% of Grade one students living on reserve attend First Nation schools, by Grade twelve, 55% are attending provincial schools (Indian and Northern Affairs, n.d., para 6). Costs of accommodation, transportation and other living expenses augment geographic barriers when students must move away from their communities to continue their schooling.

Being away from their family and support networks and experiencing the life of a larger, more urban environment for the first time can be an overwhelming and isolating experience for these students. Moreover, a majority of First Nations people who migrate to cities “face discrimination, ethnocentrism, blatant racism, marginalization and poverty (Binda, 2001, p. 181).” For many students, the combination of such factors may lead to dropping out of high school, thereby closing off opportunities to access post-secondary education.

In rural and remote communities, students’ sense of disengagement from schools can be amplified by higher levels of staff turnover caused by the challenges of attracting and retaining teachers if they are not from these areas. Although there are more Aboriginal educators in First Nations communities than in non-Aboriginal communities, many teachers in rural and remote areas are not from those communities or cultures, adding to a lack of cultural compatibility between teachers and students. These factors may contribute to difficulty in establishing teacher-student relationships, and they may negatively impact the quality of teaching programs and the level of available resources due to a high rate of staff turnover.

***Socio-economic barriers to education.*** In essence, colonization has fostered subjugation of Aboriginal peoples in their own lands and the resulting social and

economic exclusion has led to a disproportionate representation of Aboriginal peoples in lower socioeconomic circumstances. According to the 2006 Canadian Census, 3.8% of the population self-identified as Aboriginal; of this group, 21.7% were earning incomes below the low-income cut-off, compared to 11.1% of the non-Aboriginal population (Noël & Larocque, 2009, p. 5). The poverty gap was greater in the Prairie Provinces, particularly in Manitoba; 28.6% of the self-identified Aboriginal populations in Manitoba were earning incomes below the low-income cut-off, compared to 10.2% of the non-Aboriginal population. Among registered First Nation peoples in Manitoba, 42.3% were earning incomes below the low-income cut-off and among registered First Nation peoples living in Winnipeg fully 50.4% were earning incomes in that range.

Lower incomes place constraints on educational opportunities. Indeed, lack of funding has been found to be the most common obstacle to pursuing post-secondary education among urban Aboriginal peoples, who rely on Band or Aboriginal funding (EnviroNics Institute, 2010), which is inadequate to meet the need; approximately 2,900 eligible students were denied funding in 2007-08, and this number is increasing each year due to a federal cap on funding (Mendelson & Usher, 2007). The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) has stated that the government allocates less than half of what is needed to eliminate the post-secondary participation gap between First Nation people and non-Aboriginal Canadians (Waslander, 2009, p. 23). AFN National Chief, Shawn A-in-chut Atleo issued a “National Call to Action on Education” in 2010 which strongly advocates for action to address the inequities in education including funding.

The links among education, employment, and earnings are well established. Increased educational attainment of Aboriginal peoples has been found to have a positive

impact on all four major labour market indicators: unemployment rates; labour force participation rates; employment rates; and income (Sharpe & Arsenault, 2009).

Graduating from high school results in dramatic improvements in all of these indicators, and even further gains are evident after attaining post-secondary qualifications.

The history of the relationship between Aboriginal people and the settler state, experiences with public education systems and continuing barriers help to understand the inequity in educational attainment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.

**Education as a social determinant of health.** The benefits of an education go well beyond increasing employment opportunities. Education is one of the important social determinants of individual and societal wellbeing. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recently released a report, “Understanding the Social Outcomes of Learning” (2007) which explores the broader social impacts of education, specifically its benefits to health and civic engagement. This report acknowledges that while the social impacts of learning constitute a complex and emerging area of research, it is becoming clear that education promotes physical and mental health, as well as engagement in civic and social life (Schuller & Desjardins, 2007). Access to, and participation in, educational programs – from early childhood education through primary and secondary schooling, to higher levels of adult education – impact the health and development of individuals and populations by, for example, promoting healthy lifestyle choices and enabling people to manage and prevent illness (Schuller & Desjardins, 2007). Education not only leads to social and economic benefits for individuals, but is an investment in the human capital and economic growth of nations (Desjardins, & Schuller, 2007; Preston, 2008; Quesnel, 2008; Reading & Wien, 2009).

However, Schuller and Desjardins (2007) also acknowledge that, as this is an emerging area of research, other factors such as disparities in social-economic status, inequities in educational opportunities, and the quality of educational experiences need to be considered. Indeed, “inter-country comparisons suggest that national education systems *which produce highly unequal outcomes* play a role in worsening, not reducing, health inequalities. Education, in other words, works only for the people it works for” (Bell, Boughton & Bartlett, cited in Anderson, Baum & Bentley, 2007, p. 40). Keating and Hertzman (1999) have documented the importance of early environments in “setting the stage” for lifelong development. Early experiences that provide nurturance and cognitive stimulation foster brain development and establish patterns for coping and competence in children. Supportive, loving parents and families, access to pre-school programs, and quality schooling for older children, provide a foundation on which further educational attainment can be built. Nurturance and stimulation in the early years can set the stage for a child to want to learn, to be engaged in school and to take advantage of the future opportunities that education can provide. Education can positively change the developmental trajectory of an individual’s life and, in turn, those of communities and societies.

At the same time, adverse social circumstances – specifically, low family income and low parental educational attainment – can negatively impact the environments and learning experiences available to young children. In general, the social and economic conditions of Aboriginal peoples in Canada are much less favourable than those of the non-Aboriginal population in Canada due to ongoing disparities in political, economic, and social circumstances. For example, the 2001 Canadian Census showed that the

average income for Aboriginal peoples was only 64% of the average income of the total population (Mendelson, 2006). According to the 2006 Census, Aboriginal people experience a higher rate of unemployment (14.8%) than the national average (6.3%) (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2010). The disparity in socioeconomic conditions also contributes to factors that negatively impact the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples. For example, compared to non-Aboriginal Canadians, Aboriginal peoples are more likely to live in crowded conditions and in substandard housing (Statistics Canada, 2008); to have a lower life expectancy; to suffer from diabetes, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS; and to commit suicide (Health Council of Canada, 2005). In situations of such dramatic socioeconomic disparity, it is difficult to equalize educational attainment (Mendelson, 2006).

Another statistic that demonstrates the inequity of conditions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada is the incarceration rate. In 2007-2008, the incarceration rate was 22% among Aboriginal adults yet Aboriginal peoples accounted for only 3% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2009). Although many factors contribute to this over-representation of Aboriginal adults in correctional services, statistics from Saskatchewan reveal that educational attainment is a stronger factor in influencing incarceration rate among Aboriginals than is employment status. Specifically, the incarceration rate among unemployed Aboriginal young adults with high school education was four times lower than the rate among employed Aboriginal young adults without a high school diploma (9.9 versus 41.4 per 1,000) (Statistics Canada, 2009).

### **The Right to Education.**

***Treaty rights.*** Treaties between Aboriginal peoples and the British Crown prior to the 1867 confederation of Canada<sup>3</sup> focused primarily on alliances, trade, and acquisition of Aboriginal lands for imperialist and colonial pursuits, along with the promise that Aboriginal people had the freedom to hunt and fish on unsettled lands. Aboriginal peoples were compensated monetarily, or with blankets as in the Vancouver Island Treaties, but these treaties did not include any other benefits. However, the Post-Confederation Treaties, specifically the eleven Numbered Treaties (1867-1923), did include the provision of education as a benefit for surrendering land titles. It is clearly evident in these treaties that the control and provision of education for First Nations peoples is the responsibility of the Government of Canada (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, n.d.)

In 1876, the Indian Act consolidated many earlier Acts put in place to control Aboriginal peoples' lives and promote assimilation. Since then, Aboriginal peoples have constituted the only ethnic group over whom the federal government has exclusive authority, mandated constitutionally (Helin, 2008). The Indian Act institutionalized barriers to post-secondary education. The 1880 version of the Indian Act provided for the enfranchisement of any Indian who obtained a university degree and became a lawyer, priest or minister. In other words, "if an Indian wanted a higher education or to pursue a professional calling, he had legally to become a non-Indian to do so" (Helin, 2008, p. 96).

Ninety-two years later, in 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood presented the federal government with a policy paper, *Indian Control of Indian Education* that clearly

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<sup>3</sup> Peace and Friendship Treaties (1725-1779), Upper Canada Treaties (1764-1836), Province of Canada Treaties (1850-1862) and Vancouver Island Treaties (1850-1854).



outlined the need for Aboriginal people to gain control over the education of their own people. Even though the Department of Indian Affairs accepted the position put forth in the document, progress towards realizing the goal over the past 40 years has been slow and many obstacles to the implementation of the policy remain. Most importantly, “Canada’s unilateral failure to adequately fund and support First Nations education in a sustainable and meaningful manner” (AFN, 2010, p. 5) has limited the progress towards meeting the education goals of First Nations peoples.

A recent example in the First Nation community of Attawapiskat highlights the alarming discrepancy in education funding and control. In 1979, 30,000 gallons of hydrocarbon oil leaked and accumulated in this remote community, beneath J.R. Nagokee School (grades 1 to 8). In 2000, the school was closed due to the toxic environmental effects on children, and adults and the Minister of Indian Affairs, Roger Nault, promised a new school. However, ten years and four Ministers of Indian Affairs later, the children of Attawapiskat still did not have a school and instead were forced to attend classes in portables that were placed *beside* the toxic site. The portables were unsafe and unhealthy and did not contribute to a positive learning environment. Children’s attendance rate dropped. The children and community members launched a campaign for a new school but have met with ongoing resistance from the federal government (“education is a right,” n.d.). This disregard for the health, safety and education of the children in Attawapiskat is exemplary of the inequity in educational funding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children.<sup>4</sup>

***Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.*** In 2007, the United Nations

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<sup>4</sup> In the spring of 2012, 33 years after the toxic spill, the federal government announced that a new school is to be built and expected to open for the 2013-2014 school year.

(UN) adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This treaty was the result of more than 22 years of discussions within and negotiations between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples of UN member countries. It identifies and affirms the rights of Indigenous peoples, in particular, their right to self-determination. However, when the Declaration was presented for adoption at the 61<sup>st</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2007, four countries voted against the Declaration: Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, all countries with substantial populations of Indigenous peoples. In 2009, Australia and New Zealand reversed their positions and endorsed the Declaration. On November 12, 2010, Canada finally announced that the Declaration was being endorsed. This leaves the United States as the lone objector.

Article 14 of the Declaration addresses the right to education. It states:

1. Indigenous people have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.
2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.
3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language (2008, p.7)

In Australia and New Zealand, national initiatives to improve the educational

attainment of Indigenous peoples are being implemented. For example, in Australia, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP) sets out 21 national goals under the following four overarching goals for Indigenous education: 1) involvement of Indigenous people in educational decision-making; 2) equality of access to education services; 3) equity of educational participation; and 4) equitable and appropriate educational outcomes (Australian Government, n.d.). In New Zealand, enrolments in tertiary public education institutions operating within the Māori cultural context are formally recognized by the government, and their enrolments almost doubled between 2001 and 2002 (Durie, 2005). Effective initiatives in Indigenous education from regions around the world could be used to inform similar initiatives in Canada.

**Targeting Aboriginal education in Canada.** In Canada, there is no federal department of education. Although the federal government is morally and fiducially responsible for providing education to First Nations peoples, it is the individual provincial and territorial legislatures that are responsible for their respective education systems (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2008). This system has added layers of bureaucracy in the distribution of funds for education and has likely contributed to the disparity in educational outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, as well as between Aboriginal peoples living on-and off-reserve. The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) has targeted Aboriginal education as a priority for action, identifying eight specific objectives, one of which is to eliminate the gap in educational achievement and attainment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2008). In February 2009 the CMEC held a Summit on Aboriginal Education to discuss ways to eliminate this gap. One of the needs identified

was to strengthen Aboriginal language and culture.

AFN leaders advocate for First Nations control over post-secondary education and enhancement of the government's Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP). In 2010, it launched the National Call to Action on Education to bring attention to the urgent need to address the disparities in education between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and the critical role of education to individual, community and societal wellbeing. The Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples in its 2011 report, *Reforming First Nations Education: From Crisis to Hope*, acknowledged the inequities in educational standards and opportunities largely due to funding and put forth recommendations for education reform.

Besides identifying critical issues around funding, in the AFN discussion paper, *Taking action for First Nations post-secondary education: Access, opportunity, and outcomes* it also states:

First Nations ancestral languages, cultures, and histories shall be at the core of First Nations learning. It is vital for First Nations to deliver culturally-appropriate and relevant programs, as learning is an established vehicle for the transmission of culture, language, knowledge and tradition for our future generations. This inclusion of First Nations values imperative for the creation of quality holistic learning environments (p. 6)

***Culturally relevant education for Aboriginal peoples.*** Forty years ago, the National Indian Brotherhood (now the AFN) issued a call for action on Aboriginal control over education, along with changes to the education system to better meet the needs of Aboriginal peoples.

We want education to provide the setting in which our children can develop the fundamental attitudes and values which have an honoured place in Indian tradition and culture. The values which we want to pass on to our children, values which make our people a great race, are not written in any book. They are found in our history, in our legends and in the culture. We believe that if an Indian child is fully aware of the important Indian values he will have reason to be proud of our race and of himself as an Indian (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, p. 2).

Thirty years later, the Ministers' National Working Group on Education concluded that, "Canada must work together with all stakeholders to ensure that Indigenous Knowledge is respected and promoted in all funded educational programs and services" (Jeffery & Mount Pleasant-Jetté, 2002, p. 41). Others also have called for opportunities for Aboriginal peoples to learn in education systems that recognize and respect their cultures and ways of knowing, truly integrating Aboriginal knowledge, languages, and worldviews (Battiste, 2000; Smith, 2001). "It is clear...that the exclusive use of Eurocentric knowledge in education has failed First Nations children. Indigenous knowledge is now seen as an educational remedy that will empower Aboriginal students if applications of their Indigenous knowledge, heritage, and languages are integrated into the Canadian educational system" (Battiste, 2002, p. 9). However, culturally relevant curriculum is often considered an "add-on" to prescribed curricula or as "options" in course selection, thus keeping true integration a long way off (Ledoux, 2006). True educational reform is a slow process when the dominating culture dictates the ideology, content and method of delivery of public education (Kanu, 2003).

But reform is taking place. Augustine (1998) has described initiatives in Big Cove, New Brunswick – a Mi’Kmaq community – that focus on increasing cultural awareness, culturally relevant materials and community commitment to change outcomes for their youth. He concluded that traditional Mi’Kmaq knowledge needs to be the basis of education for Aboriginal students. In Ontario, the Aboriginal Institutes Consortium (2010) reported that students considered the culturally relevant components of their programs contributing factors to their success. Several studies in Winnipeg have clearly indicated the desire of Aboriginal students for education programs that integrate Aboriginal content. One of these studies focused on Aboriginal education in Winnipeg’s inner city high schools (Silver et al., 2002). Interviews were conducted with students, school leavers, and local Aboriginal community members. The vast majority of each group identified a need for Aboriginal content in school curricula. A study of urban Aboriginal community development documented that a focus on colonization in post-secondary and adult education programs helps students to situate the realities of their lives within a broader historical context, and to rebuild their lives and identities on that deeper understanding (Silver, Ghorayshi, Hay, & Klyne, 2006).

In a study of Aboriginal students attending Adult Learning Centres in Manitoba, Silver, Klyne and Simard (2003) describe the success of education programs for adult Aboriginal students that are rooted in their experiences and cultures. They conclude that Aboriginal adults’ learning will be enhanced in an Aboriginal environment, building a stronger foundation for success. A strong theme that emerged from the student interviews in the study was an appreciation of Aboriginal cultural practices and of opportunities to learn more about Aboriginal cultures. The Canadian Council on

Learning, in its broad scan of literature on factors that facilitate Aboriginal post-secondary success (n.d.) identified culturally relevant curriculum as the second factor. It recommended the integration of Aboriginal culture throughout school programming.

The terms “culturally relevant”, “culturally appropriate” and “culturally responsive” and “culturally negotiated” have all been used to describe an approach to education that values, respects and affirms the cultures of the students (Gay, 2000; LaFrance, 2000; Maina, 1997; Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). No matter the term used, the goal is to validate students’ cultural heritages and learning styles in order to maximize learning opportunities. In this study, I have chosen to use the term “culturally restorative”, as it seemed most descriptive of the model of adult education that is the focus of this research.

### **Urban Circle Training Centre**

The Urban Circle Training Centre (UCTC) is one of the Adult Learning Centres in Manitoba that has developed a model of training that is holistic, culturally based, and highly effective (Silver et al., 2003). The UCTC model appears to not only increase educational levels and subsequent employment of Aboriginal students, but to impact positive personal transformations. As Silver and colleagues (2003) state, “Those attending Urban Circle go through what seems to us to be a personal transformation that is truly remarkable. They become changed people. Lives of pain and despair are transformed into lives of hope and pride” (p. 35). Three specific factors in the Urban Circle approach that fostered student success were identified: 1) a focus on job-preparedness; 2) a month of life skills training; and 3) an emphasis on fostering Aboriginal cultural awareness (Silver et al., 2003, p. 36). In the following sections,

Urban Circle's approach to adult education will be described to provide a foundation for the purpose of the present study.

**Background.** Urban Circle Training Centre (UCTC) is situated in the north end of Winnipeg on the historic Selkirk Avenue. Urban Circle began in 1991 to meet the training needs of Aboriginal women for meaningful employment. As UCTC grew over the years, enhancing employment opportunities has remained a key focus of their programs. An Employer Advisory Committee has been established for every program offered, providing current information on employment fields and market demands, as well as practicum placements for students. The aim of the programs at UCTC is to provide targeted skills training for unemployed or underemployed Aboriginal persons that can lead to stable employment in careers that offer decent living wages or a step to further education.

According to Sharon Slater, Co-Director of UCTC (personal communication, March 11, 2010), most students who attend Urban Circle are from either the core area of Winnipeg or northern Manitoba communities and the majority are women. She estimated that students have usually ranged from 25 to 50 years of age, reflecting an older student population than may be typical for post-secondary programs. However in recent years staff is noticing an increasingly number of students under age 25 enrolling (K. Embleton, personal communication, June 7, 2012).

**Programs.** In partnership with Red River College, UCTC offers the following certificate programs: Family Support Worker; Health Care/Health Unit Clerk; Educational Assistant and the diploma level Early Childhood Education program. A partnership with Red River College provides opportunities for graduates of these



programs to obtain college-level certification that, for some students, has led to advanced post-secondary education, such as degree programs in Social Work or Education. Each year, approximately 85 students graduate from these certificate programs. Urban Circle also delivers an Adult Apprenticeship & Employment Program that offers two different streams to complete Mature Grade 12 requirements, one focused on preparing for employment/post-secondary education and the other on preparing for a trade. Approximately 47 students graduate each year from this program (K. Embleton, personal communication, June 29, 2011).

**Integrating Aboriginal culture.** One of the most important features of Urban Circle's approach to post-secondary education is its commitment to threading Aboriginal history, values, beliefs, teachings and traditions throughout the fabric of students' experiences, from the physical design of the building and classrooms to curriculum, ceremonies, and celebrations. Elders Stella Blackbird, Audrey Bone, Ann Thomas Callahan and Stan McKay are an integral part of Urban Circle, offering guidance and teachings for students and staff. Urban Circle's philosophy encompasses a broader Aboriginal belief in the interconnectedness of all life:

It is believed that our physical world exists within a natural cycle or 'Circle'. This Circle is sacred and within, all things have a place. We honor the Circle, as the Creator's Life Force exists in all of Creation and we are related to all that exists. The Medicine Wheel, honoring the Four Directions is an interpretation of such a Circle and is intended to be used as a tool for teaching. ("Teachings", UCTC, n.d. para. 5)

The Seven Sacred Teachings are fundamental to Urban Circle's philosophy and

approach to education. They are posted in every classroom and form the basis for classroom expectations. They are: Wisdom; Love; Respect; Bravery; Honesty; Humility; and Truth. Urban Circle's approach to education is a holistic one that works to support students to find a sense of balance and belonging that will foster positive changes, both personally and professionally.

**Life skills course.** All programs at UCTC begin with 4-weeks of the Life Skills course whereby "students focus on learning skills and behaviours to appropriately and responsibly manage personal affairs" (Urban Circle Training Centre, n.d.). The Life Skills component continues for one full day each week throughout the programs, illustrating Urban Circle's holistic approach to education. Aboriginal history, cultural teachings, traditions and practices are woven throughout the course. Daily class activities include smudging and Sharing Circles. As stated in the course description "the Sharing Circle is central to program delivery. It is here where the students and staff develop trust and mutual respect and learn about themselves and others in the group" ("Programs", UCTC, n.d.). Other ceremonies led by Elders, such as sweat lodges and naming ceremonies, are also included as part of the Life Skills course.

Staff at Urban Circle is particularly sensitive to the diverse backgrounds of the students in terms of their understanding, knowledge, and comfort with traditional Aboriginal teachings, traditions, and ceremonies. During the intake process, students are informed of the Aboriginal cultural component of Urban Circle's programs. It is stressed that it is each student's choice to participate in the cultural activities, but all are encouraged to be open to learning about the history and meaning of Aboriginal teachings and traditions. For example, students who choose not to participate in a sweat lodge are

asked to attend the ceremony as a way to support classmates who do participate. This is done to facilitate supportive and respectful group dynamics and a sense of belonging among students (K. Embleton, personal communication, March 17, 2010).

Elders are particularly involved with students during the Life Skills course, which focuses on three specific areas of life: “Self”, “Family” (as a member of an immediate family as well as a member in the class), and “Job”. Other areas of life skills - “Community” and “Leisure” are also included, but to a lesser degree. The Life Skills course provides opportunities for students to reflect, learn, and re-learn about themselves as individuals, family members, members of the class, and future employees. Aboriginal Teachings, shared with the staff by one of the Elders, are included in the Life Skills course.

Practice in the problem-solving needed in everyday life is integrated throughout the course. According to Sharon Slater, Co-Director of Urban Circle, “many of our people have not had the opportunity to learn and practice relevant skills in order to feel confident and competent in the daily people skills...they come with low self-esteem and self-confidence.” (personal communication, April 10, 2012). Therefore, this practice is integral to the decolonizing aspect of the program.

During the “Self” component, lessons help students to understand who they are as individuals, in terms of their culture, gender, and family roles. Most importantly, they learn what their ‘gifts’ are – that is, what they are good at (S. Slater, personal communication, April 10, 2012). This component also aims to develop trust among the group by creating a safe, non-judgmental environment and ensuring confidentiality.

In the component on “Family”, students focus not only on their roles in their

immediate families but also on their roles as members of the class. Skills such as assertiveness, understanding perceptions, and conflict resolution are learned and practiced.

The last component of the Life Skills course, Job, focuses on job preparation, resumé preparation, interview skills, working as part of a group, and employee rights.

**Evidence of success.** Evidence is mounting that Urban Circle’s approach is successful. Recent statistics compiled by the agency reveal that between 2005 and 2009, the average completion rate across programs ranged from 84% to 93%. The average number of students who dropped out ranged between 2 and 4 per year across all programs. The average rate of post-graduation employment and/or further education and training ranged between 83 % and 93% across all program (K. Embleton, personal communication, June 29, 2011). Urban Circle has been included on the list of “Aboriginal Best Practices” by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, whose criteria include: “improved academic outcomes; increased community wellness; partnership between jurisdiction(s) and stakeholders; increased student well-being, self-confidence, identity, values, pride, personal development, or competence; sharing of materials; positive link to employment; inclusion of Aboriginal content or perspective; increased participation in the education system; and active participation in community life” (The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, n.d., para. 1).

Cultural revitalization and restoration in Aboriginal education has been advocated as a road to eliminating disparities in educational achievement. It appears that Urban Circle’s culturally restorative and holistic approach to education is successful in reducing this gap. As Silver and colleagues (2003) indicated in their study, Aboriginal adult

learners attending Urban Circle seemed to experience a ‘personal transformation’. But we know very little about the process underlying this transformation. How important was, in fact, the integration of Aboriginal cultural awareness and Aboriginal knowledge in Urban Circle’s programs to the personal transformations of its students? Do they attribute their success to the culturally restorative aspects of their programs? What specific aspects of the cultural components were particularly meaningful to the students and relevant to their success? Did an increased awareness of Aboriginal culture and knowledge have an influence on graduates’ subsequent employment and/or educational choices? Gaining answers to these questions would be helpful as culturally restorative education programs for Aboriginal peoples move forward. If we can identify and understand Urban Circle graduates’ perceptions of their educational experiences, we will be able to enhance the most meaningful and influential aspects of this and other programs featuring culturally restorative post-secondary educational programming for Aboriginal peoples.

### **Purpose of the Present Study**

The purpose of the present study was to build on existing research in the area of culturally restorative education for post-secondary Aboriginal students by exploring Urban Circle graduates’ perceptions of the culturally restorative component of their education and its influence on their program completion and on their lives following graduation. Three specific research questions guided the study: 1) To what extent do graduates identify the cultural context and content of their educational experience as a factor in their completing the program?; 2) What, if any, specific cultural components are meaningful to graduates and why?; and 3) How has the culturally-restorative aspect of

the program influenced students' lives following graduation?

**Significance of the present study.** The population of Aboriginal peoples in Canada is increasing and the portrait shows a much younger population compared to the non-Aboriginal population (Statistics Canada, 2008). Therefore, the need and demand for increased investment in Aboriginal education will continue to grow. As the AFN has stated, "If the current population boom of First Nations youth is not mobilized out of poverty by educating them and ensuring they are workforce ready, First Nations people will remain in poverty for generations to come. The youthful First Nations population represents an opportunity for prosperity, not only for First Nations communities, but for all Canadians" (AFN, 2010; p. 16).

But what form should this education take? Recently, an emphasis has been placed on enhancing culturally relevant content and contexts in programs designed to attract and retain Aboriginal post-secondary students. But little is known about how these contexts actually have their impact on graduation and employment rates. The findings of the present study will be helpful to governments and educational institutions as they seek to attract, retain, and graduate Aboriginal students at the post-secondary level.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative study of Urban Circle graduates explored their perceptions of the integration of Aboriginal culture throughout their educational experience and the effect of these perceptions on their completion of the program. A phenomenological approach was chosen as a way of exploring and describing the graduates' perceptions because it is well suited to an interpretation of the essence of the students' shared experiences (Creswell, 2007).

Phenomenological research aims to gather information about a specified lived experience and it is the researcher's role to distill the information, describe the shared experience, and provide personal interpretations of the data collected. Readers should be able to see how the interpretations are supported in the data and, in the case of interviews, by direct quotes from the participants, whose voices are placed in the foreground of the research. The researcher's role is to derive common themes from their statements that can accurately summarize and describe the content of the interviews. The challenge for researchers is to recognize any influence from their own biases, experiences, or assumptions on their organization of the data and their interpretations (Groenewald, 2004).

It has been recommended that phenomenological studies should employ sample sizes in the range of 2 to 25 (Polkington, 1989, cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 61). In this study, participants were 10 graduates of the FSW/FASD program at Urban Circle. Graduates of one program were selected in order to minimize variation in students' perceptions due to program differences.

I selected the FSW/FASD program because of my familiarity with its content,

having been involved in its development in 2000 and having taught the first cohort of students in this program in 2001. Program statistics recently compiled by Urban Circle indicate that the FSW program is equivalent in its success rate to other programs offered at Urban Circle. Between 2005 and 2009, the average dropout rate was two participants per program year and the average proportion of graduates who became employed or enrolled in further education and training was 83%. During the 2008 program year, the average completion rate was 93% (K. Embleton, personal communication, June 29, 2011).

The Family Support Worker Certificate Program (FSW) began in 2001 as a 40-week full-time program to enhance opportunities for Aboriginal individuals to find employment in agencies and organizations that provide support and services for families and children. In 2004, the program incorporated the courses offered in the Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD) Certificate at Red River College. At that point, FSW became a 47-week certificate program (FSW/FASD). Students in this program are required to take 18 courses in addition to a Life Skills course and a practicum placement of 150 hours (see Table 1). Each year, 25 students, the majority of whom are women, are accepted into the FSW/FASD program. Graduates have found employment in such settings as child and family service organizations, family centres, youth programs, and schools.

My initial plan was to recruit two graduates of each of the five years from 2006 to 2010, inclusive, for a total of 10 participants. Eighty-nine letters of invitation to participate in the study (Appendix A) were mailed by Urban Circle to all graduates of the FSW/FASD Certificate Program who had completed the program between 2006 and



Table 1

*Family Support Worker/Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Certificate Program*

Course	Contact Hours
Documentation and Case Planning in Child & Youth Care	40
Understanding Attitudes and Values	40
Introduction/Overview FASD	40
Advocacy and Teaming	40
Behaviour: Learning and Teaching	40
Strategies for Daily Living	40
Interpersonal Communications	40
Child & Adolescent Development	40
The Impact of Maltreatment and Trauma	40
Helping Skills	40
Role of the Family Support Worker	40
Understanding the Family	40
Guiding Children & Adolescent Behaviour	40
Special Topics in Family Support Work	40
A Context for Practice with Aboriginal Peoples	36
Introduction to Computers	24
Integration Seminar (during Practicum)	20
Practicum	150

2010, inclusive. Ideally, the first two graduates in each of the five years to contact me and agree to participate would have been included in the study. The response to the first letter of invitation, however, was much lower than expected: only four responses to this initial letter of invitation were received.

As the required number of participants was not recruited from the invitations to graduates from 2006 to 2010, the students in the 2011 cohort were then invited to participate. Urban Circle agreed to distribute recruitment letters to them at the end of their program (Appendix B). Two graduates from the 2011 FSW/FASD program were recruited from this mailing.

The instructor of the FSW/FASD program also agreed to forward an e-mail message with an attached letter of invitation to participate to graduates for whom she had current e-mail addresses (Appendix C). That message indicated that interviews would continue during the month of December, and included contact information. Of the eight graduates who received this message, two responded and were included in the study.

Finally, a reminder letter was sent to the original group of graduates (excluding those whose letters were returned-to-sender) and to recent graduates, informing them that interviews were continuing and inviting them to participate (Appendix D). Two graduates responded to this letter and were included in the study. In total, ten graduates participated.

### **Research Assistant**

As a non-Aboriginal person, I recognized that I may have cultural biases that could potentially affect the way in which I conducted the interviews and the way in which participants related to me. For this reason, Claudette Michell, an Aboriginal

woman, was hired as Research Assistant. A confidentiality agreement was signed prior to Ms. Michell's participation in any interviews (Appendix E). She was present throughout every interview to ensure that participants felt comfortable, to co-facilitate when necessary and to correct any misinterpretations or miscommunications. Ms. Michell also has experienced returning to school as an adult learner so she was able to relate to the experiences of participants and could identify relevant issues that merited further questioning. She reviewed the interview transcripts and we discussed each one. She reviewed a draft of the "Findings" and the "Discussion" chapters.

### **Instrument**

The interview instrument comprised six sections (Appendix F), five of which I conducted, and one of which was conducted by Ms. Michell. The first section focused on basic demographic information. The second yielded information on participants' experiences with and perceptions of post-secondary education prior to attending Urban Circle. The third section of the interview explored participants' experiences of the Urban Circle program: how they decided to enroll, the supports they found available at Urban Circle, and the benefits and challenges of attending Urban Circle. In the fourth section of the interview, participants were asked about their perceptions of the Life Skills course. In the fifth section, they were asked if any of the program's cultural components were particularly meaningful and if their professional lives had been influenced by those components. (Because I expected that participants would feel more comfortable responding to questions about Aboriginal culture if an Aboriginal person presented them, Ms. Michell asked these questions.) In the sixth and final section of the interview, participants were asked about their perceptions of the program's influence on their lives,

if any, following graduation—with particular reference to employment and further education.

### **Procedure**

Interviews were arranged at the convenience of participants and Ms. Michell. At all interviews, only the participant, Ms. Michell and I were present. Eight interviews took place in the student lounge of a building next door to Urban Circle. This space had the advantage of being in the neighborhood of many of the participants and we were able to begin each interview by smudging. Ms. Michell led the smudging, and several participants expressed appreciation that the interviews began in this way. Of the two remaining interviews, one was conducted at the participant's workplace and the other at a meeting space available to Ms. Michell at the University of Winnipeg.

Prior to each interview, participants read and signed an Informed Consent Form (Appendix G). Interviews ranged from between 48 and 76 minutes. An honorarium of \$25 was given to each participant upon completion of the interview.

Interviews were audio-recorded, and I later transcribed them verbatim. Listening closely to the audio interviews allowed me to record each sentence carefully and to note any specific qualities of the participants' speech, such as laughter, hesitation, or excitement. All audio recordings, transcriptions, notes, and tapes have been kept in a locked file drawer in my home.

### **Analysis**

I met with Ms. Michell (Research Assistant) to review the transcribed interviews and through our discussions we identified emerging themes. Discussions with Ms. Michell ensured that I was identifying relevant potential themes and her input helped

further my understanding, as a non-Aboriginal person, of the participant's responses.

I entered each transcript into QSR International's NVivo 8 software program, which helps to classify, sort, and manage unstructured data collected in qualitative research. As I again reviewed each transcript, I highlighted key words or phrases that I then used to code the information by creating themes or "nodes"—or by placing the key words into an existing node. "Tree nodes" were organized in a hierarchical structure with "parent nodes" containing general categories and subsequent "child nodes" containing specific categories. I sorted and continually compared participants' responses to questions and sub-questions and continually referred to the original transcripts throughout the analysis process to ensure that I captured the full context of the participants' words. A draft of the main categories and sub-themes was shared and discussed with Ms. Michell.

### **Ethical Issues**

My experience as an instructor in the FSW program at Urban Circle and my membership on Urban Circle's Steering Committee for the development of the Makoonsag Intergenerational Children's Centre creates a potential for bias in my interpretations of the qualitative data. Designing the study to include the participation of an Aboriginal Research Assistant, Ms. Michell, helped to counter any potential misinterpretations. Ms. Michell is an experienced interviewer who is not connected to Urban Circle and she helped optimize the accuracy of my interpretations. As well, using NVivo 8 software partially controlled this bias, as it applied structure to the data and provided some objectivity to the process of identifying themes. As Creswell (2007) has stated, such computer software "...encourages a researcher to look closely at the data, even line by line, and think about the meaning of each sentence and idea. Sometimes

without a program, the researcher is likely to casually read through the text files or transcripts and not analyze each idea carefully” (p. 165). The use of NVivo 8 ensured that I read each transcript carefully and minimized the likelihood that I omitted information that should have been coded.

Each participant was assigned a code (P1 to P10) for the purpose of attributing quotations. Codes rather than pseudonyms were chosen to minimize the likelihood of participants being identified on the basis of their gender. For the same reason, gendered personal pronouns that could identify the speaker were replaced in the transcripts with gender neutral words to ensure participants’ anonymity. My experience or role in the FSW/FASD program or Makoonsag was not mentioned prior to any of the interviews. Following two of the interviews, however, my previous connection with the FSW/FASD program was discussed briefly. Approval for the study was granted by the University of Manitoba Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board.

## Findings

The primary goal of this study was to explore graduates' perceptions of the cultural aspects of their educational experience at Urban Circle Training Centre. Ten graduates from the FSW/FASD Certificate Program were interviewed.

### Participant Demographic Characteristics

Participants' demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 2. The majority of participants were over the age of 40 years and most were women. The majority were parents while they were enrolled at Urban Circle and, of these, most were living in two-parent households.

Of the ten participants, five had lived in Winnipeg throughout their lives. Of the other five, three had lived outside Winnipeg but in Manitoba and two had lived outside of Manitoba. All participants were living in Winnipeg at the time they were interviewed. Prior to enrolling at Urban Circle, the majority of participants had been unemployed. Most had completed high school.

Only one graduate reported an ability to speak an Aboriginal language, although not fluently,

due to the effects of residential [school]. So, there were eight of us in our family that went to [residential school] so we kind of got it, how my father puts it, 'whipped out of us.' But he knows I understand him quite fluently...He told me that I was scared to talk it because I still had that in the back of my mind that the nuns are going to do something to me...I'm slowly remembering a lot of the words. So, it's helping a lot when I go to these ceremonies...I'm picking up quite a bit. (P10)

Table 2

*Demographic characteristics of study participants*

Characteristic	Number
Age:	
20–25	2
26–30	1
36–40	1
41–45	1
46–50	1
Over 50	4
Gender	
Female	8
Male	2
Status as parent while attending Urban Circle:	
In single-parent family	2
In two-parent family	5
Not a parent	3
When moved to Winnipeg:	
Less than 1 year ago	1
2-5 years ago	1
10-15 years ago	2
More than 30 years ago	1
Have always lived in Winnipeg	5
Employment status prior to attending Urban Circle:	
Employed full-time	1
Employed part-time	2
Not employed	7
Level of education attained prior to attending Urban Circle:	
Grade 11	3
Grade 12	3
Grade 12 – Mature	1
College Diploma	1
Some college/university courses	1
Joint diploma/degree program	1
Year of graduation from Urban Circle:	
2006	3
2007	1
2009	1
2010	3
2011	2
Ability to speak an Aboriginal language:	
Yes	1
No	9



Four other participants indicated that either a parent or grandparent could speak or at least understand their Aboriginal language.

### **Key Themes**

Participants' responses to the interview were organized into five broad categories: 1) the cultural context of Urban Circle restored Aboriginal identity; 2) supportive relationships were important to graduates' success in the FSW/FASD program; 3) the Life Skills course facilitated personal growth, employment readiness and program success; 4) The cultural context of Urban Circle has influenced graduates' professional work and 5) Urban Circle had positive influences on graduates' personal lives. The data from which these categories emerged are presented in the following sections. Table 3 provides a listing of the main categories and sub-themes.

**Category 1: The cultural context of Urban Circle restored Aboriginal identity.** The cultural context and content of the FSW/FASD program was viewed as a positive and important factor in participants' educational experience and in the strengthening of their identities as Aboriginal people. This category had three themes: 1) The cultural context created a safe place for learning about oneself; 2) Learning about residential school history positively affected Aboriginal identity; and 3) Opportunities to participate in cultural teachings and ceremonies affirmed individual, social and cultural identities. The evidence supporting the overall theme and its subthemes are presented in this section.

***Theme 1.1: The cultural context of Urban Circle created a safe place for learning about oneself.*** Participants expressed a sense of safety and comfort in relation to their experience at Urban Circle that promoted their academic success and their growth

Table 3

*Listing of main categories and sub-themes*

- 1) The cultural context of Urban Circle restored Aboriginal identity**
  - 1.1. The cultural context created a safe place for learning about oneself
  - 1.2. Knowledge of residential school history positively affected Aboriginal identity
  - 1.3. Opportunities to participate in cultural teachings and ceremonies affirmed individual, social and cultural identities
  
- 2) Supportive relationships were important to students' success in the FSW/FASD program**
  - 2.1 Relationships with instructors, life skills coaches/counselors, and other staff enhanced students' self-efficacy
  - 2.2 Relationships with Elders promoted students' emotional health
  - 2.3 Relationships with peers enhanced students' belonging
  - 2.4 Preparing and presenting a "Life Shield" reduced students' emotional isolation
  - 2.5 The structure of Urban Circle promoted students' emotional security
  
- 3) The Life Skills course facilitated personal growth, employment readiness and program success**
  - 3.1 The Life Skills course promoted healing
  - 3.2 The Life Skills course built self-efficacy
  - 3.3 The Life Skills course provided tools for coping
  
- 4. The cultural context of Urban Circle has influenced graduates' professional work**
  
- 5. Urban Circle had positive influences on graduates' personal lives**
  - 5.1. Cultural learning transferred to graduates' personal lives
  - 5.2. Success at Urban Circle transformed graduates' self-perceptions
  - 5.3. Success at Urban Circle had intergenerational impacts
  - 5.4. Attending Urban Circle was a positive life experience

as Aboriginal people.

I'm really glad it was there, really, really glad because I think it would have been harder for me to succeed, not to say I don't think I couldn't have, like I probably would have but, it makes it a *lot* better. (P7)

You feel so good once you start taking in all the information and then it fits in with your program, your academics, and it's wonderful. (P3)

Even the physical space and design of Urban Circle was viewed as a significant factor in participants' experience.

The vibe alone of the place, like the building itself, was like a spiritual building. (P8)

Even in the building, like the way it is decorated, the way it's built. The whole entire atmosphere is so culturally Aboriginal and it just makes you feel, as an Aboriginal [person], it makes me feel at home, you know, comfortable. It makes the learning process easier and better. (P7)

Not only did participants report that the cultural context of the program contributed to their comfort and sense of safety, it seems to have had an impact on their identification as Aboriginal people. They described how it reconnected them with their heritage and gave them a sense of having a spiritual home.

Well, it's tremendous, the best I can think of is, it's just tremendous. Very supportive and enlightening, very enlightening. And that's what kept my spirit side going...and that's where I felt best. So I honour that now and stick with that and that's the way it should be...My own culture made sense

to me...This just connected the dots for me. Just gave me my roots back.

(P8)

Just getting in touch with my culture a bit through Urban Circle, going to sweats and getting my Indian name...oh, that was wonderful. Because I used to be involved with my culture years and years ago. I used to be a dancer...And then I drifted away because of outside influences and stuff like that. And I don't know, [the cultural component] is just very powerful, nurturing. In the end of it all anyway, you get a sense of who you are and even a direction of where you're headed. (P1)

I didn't know much about my culture so I learned a lot about the culture. I even got my name there... I just felt like I was coming home when I went there. That's the only way I can explain because that's how I felt, so good inside when I was there. I would just say it was like coming home. (P4)

[It was] very important for me and my own self-learning, to who I was...It brought me back to me, like my Aboriginal people and who I was as a Native person. And just learning about my identity...that cultural piece really helped out with my identity part...That's part of the reason why I came to Urban Circle. Coming here was another stone for me to step on and to gain that knowledge knowing that it was culturally based, that I'm going to get this there. It's going to give me that feeding in my heart...It's going to feed my culture piece. (P2)

For those who had not been familiar with cultural teachings and traditions prior to attending Urban Circle, the Aboriginal context and content in their educational

experience was an especially important element.

I think they need that cultural piece in there because I'm sure there's probably tons of people, like me, who are interested in it but just don't know how to go about getting involved or finding out the information. (P3)

I never had encountered my culture before the age of 17, or 18 actually. You know, if that [cultural piece] wasn't there, I probably wouldn't have known that, to get my identity...it was kind of like it was part of my path. (P7)

I never really, really understood it or practiced until I came to Urban Circle. And we learned about the cultural piece and I think that really helped because even though I was always interested in it, I never did anything to find out more and there it was laid out for me and I could access any of the cultural pieces that I wanted. And if I didn't understand there always was somebody there that was willing to sit down with you and talk to you about what you wanted to know. (P3)

One of the older participants in the group grew up in a First Nations community in Ontario, where family members had passed on traditional teachings and their native language. This was the only participant who could understand an Aboriginal language. This participant said that the cultural context of Urban Circle was not as important as it might be to others because the family had provided that knowledge. But this participant did describe the impact of the cultural components of the Urban Circle programs on the younger students in the class.

I see that it did make an impact on them because they were starting to find

out who they were...I found that really uplifting. There's a new generation coming up and starting to understand themselves. And I'm noticing that more because a lot of children today are starting to know who they are and what they want. And now they are not shying away on their Aboriginal aspects...because a long time ago...whenever they heard the word Aboriginal, they kind of shied away from it. Like for my age group, a lot of us didn't want to be. But when we came back home from, after our experience in the residential schools that's what gave us well, for us, in my family, it gave us hope and the teachings we had when we were younger played a big role because it seemed to save our family. Because we probably would have been into the drugs and alcohol and whatever else, so it saved our family. From the teachings, it gave us more initiative to go forward. (P10)

This participant also reflected on the diversity of Aboriginal cultures and how some of the Aboriginal teachings and traditional practices at Urban Circle, differed from those learned as a young child. For example, when first hearing about the Medicine Wheel, P10 asked A [parent] about it, and A counseled P10 to respect the ways of others. It appears from the following quote that P10 took that advice to heart:

I enjoy listening to other people's views on the Aboriginal aspects and the teachings and that. (P10)

P10's expressed a concern about where students can go to continue this path of cultural leaning when their program at Urban Circle has ended, Is there "...some kind of avenue where these young ones can go if they need, if they want further teachings?"

Overall, participants' responses indicate a deep need to learn about and connect to their Aboriginal identity, and this need was met by the program. A sense of connecting or reconnecting to their cultural identity was repeatedly expressed by participants.

***Theme 1.2: Knowledge of residential school history positively affected***

***Aboriginal identity.*** A theme that emerged from participants' descriptions of the impact of the Urban Circle program on the restoration of Aboriginal identity was the importance of learning about the history of the residential school system.

I never really knew as much as I did about the residential schools and the impact. Because when you learn stuff like that, not realizing that all that stuff in the past has an effect on people today, like our children. It was like "oh my God." After reading about that stuff and the intergenerational part of it, you know. That's what I enjoyed the most, learning about the residential [school system]. (P4)

As some of the participants had themselves attended residential schools, others in the class learned first-hand from them about their experiences.

I learned a lot about it because there were a few students who had been in the residential school system so they would share their experiences and it really had an impact on me. (P2)

Others reflected on their family members' experience in the residential schools and its impact on their own upbringing.

My mother didn't talk a lot about her life and she talked a little bit about school...It helped me maybe understand maybe, why my mother was the way she was. Because she didn't have a lot of good experiences of

‘mother’. I realized after, I learned to forgive her. Then I realized, you know what, there’s a reason that she brought me up the way she brought me up and it has nothing to do with me. It has to do with that past. (P4)

Some participants gained an understanding of their families’ denial of their Aboriginal heritage as they learned the history of the residential schools.

My Mom never spoke her language. She went to a residential school for a short time when she was small. Never ever spoke about it. And even when I was going to school she would ask me, “Well how are you making out at school?” and “How do you like it?” And I talked to her and said, “Well Mom, have you ever thought about talking about your experience at the residential school?” And it was just like “Oh my God! I don’t want to talk about that and I don’t know why you ask me that!” So it was very, obviously you know a traumatizing experience for her and she’s never spoken about it. And she’s always been, always tried to be as far away from the Aboriginal side of her family as possible. And I think it’s because of the racism that she faced. (P3)

Grandma, Mom all went through that [residential school] system. They never ever talked about it. But bad things happened I’m sure because they never talked. It was a taboo subject. So when I started learning more from here...that’s where I finally knew where people were coming from because all my life, especially in the north end, my Mom said, “We’re not Native. We’re not Indians.” But I said, “Why is everyone calling me half-breed?” “Well, you’re not, you’re Scottish. Tell them you’re Scottish.” So I walked



around, “Scottish. I’m Scottish” all the time. “No, you’re just a dirty Indian.” I heard that all the time. So this place connected me to my actual true roots, you know. And luckily my Mom was still alive at the time that I could connect [with] her and finally she said that, “Yeah, we just said that to protect you and your brothers and sisters.” It was easier to pretend that we’re white. So Mom would never go in the sun for fear of getting browner. She would never go out in the sun without major things all over her. (P8)

Participants’ responses to the interview indicated that not only did Urban Circle provide a safe environment in which to explore and reclaim their Aboriginal identities; it filled in gaps in their family histories, informed them about their parents’ and grandparents’ childhood experiences, and helped them to understand their relationships with their parents. It helped participants to locate their Aboriginal identities within their family contexts, so that they simultaneously restored their cultural and individual identities as they interwove those histories.

***Theme 1.3: Opportunities to participate in cultural teachings and ceremonies affirmed individual, social, and cultural identities.*** An integral part of the educational experience at Urban Circle is the provision of opportunities for students to participate in cultural teachings and traditional ceremonies, led by Aboriginal Elders. These experiences had particular meaning for participants, as they affirmed their individual and cultural identities. Participants referred to the impact of specific teachings or ceremonies that affected their sense of self, and the interconnectedness of self and others.

...the smudging. I love smudging. I just love the smell of it and it helps. I

don't know what it is but it just made me feel good. (P7)

Spiritually, I would have to say it was very healing for me to come to this program, just because of the fact that I got to participate in a sweat, which I never did anywhere else, or I didn't take that step to learn about it. But when I came here, it pushed me to want to know and I was able to move forward and ask questions and attend the sweat and learn about it with B [an Elder at Urban Circle], which was a great learning experience. (P2)

I think it's the connection with the other [students], like even before the sweat like we're gathering around the fire, we're all talking you know and everyone is expressing like a little bit of how they're feeling around it and stuff like that. I think that was also important. It's not just what was going on in the sweat, it was what's happening outside, prior to going in. And, how honest we were with each other. (P1)

I got my spirit name from [the Elder]...[Elder] caught my essence. And that was a huge thing for me, to this day, to get that spirit name because it connected me to me, if that sounds right, but it showed me who I was. It gave me something to hang onto and I still hang on to it. (P8)

I would have to say getting the teaching from [Elder], that turtle teaching...That was the most significant piece for me. Where [Elder] laid down all the rocks and pointed every rock out and there must have been maybe close to 30 or 40 rocks there. And [Elder] did a teaching on that whole wheel. So it was very interesting for me to find out where we come from as people and just to get a sense of our culture and it made me feel

good inside cause it made me feel like I was on the right path. (P2)

When we went on our outings...sage picking and stuff like that, that was good. I think it brought a lot of us closer together. (P1)

It was very clear that opportunities to participate in traditional teachings and ceremonies had a powerful impact on participants' individual, social and cultural identities. They reported that these experiences gave them insight into themselves and their relationship and that they felt affirmed as both Aboriginal people and as individuals following their life pathways.

However, one participant felt challenged initially by the cultural information and experiences received at Urban Circle,

At first I didn't think they were very important...I was a little bit fearful, reluctant and then once I got involved and allowed myself to, I guess, to loosen up a little bit and not be so tight, so full of fear and anxiety about it, it became a positive thing. (P1)

P3 described these aspects of the program as difficult to confront and they almost led her to leave the program.

I would have probably dropped out, probably the second month once it started getting into the academic part and the cultural piece and you know, family history and stuff like that. I definitely would have dropped out. I know I would have because I did not want to face all those things that I ended up facing...getting through. (P3)

The component of the Urban Circle program to which P3 attributed her capacity to

complete was the social and emotional support available to students:

[I] would never get through. I could not, to be honest, see myself finishing if you didn't have the support that they give you at Urban Circle. I couldn't see myself finishing. (P3)

The importance of support emerged repeatedly as a key factor in students' success. It constitutes the second category of findings.

**Category 2: Supportive relationships were important to students' success in the FSW/FASD program.** Without exception, participants described the importance to their success of support from and interconnectedness with others at Urban Circle. Five themes emerged within this category: 1) Relationships with instructors, Life Skills Coaches/Counselors, and staff enhanced students' self-efficacy; 2) Relationships with Elders promoted students' emotional health; 3) Relationships with peers enhanced students' belonging; 4) Preparing and presenting a "Life Shield" reduced students' emotional isolation; and 5) The structure of Urban Circle promoted students' emotional security.

***Theme 2.1: Relationships with instructors, life skills coaches/counselors, and other staff enhanced students' self-efficacy.*** The importance of the support participants received from Urban Circle staff was evident as early as the application stage.

I had to come for 2 or 3 interviews before I got accepted...And I was almost overwhelmed when I came down and I started talking to them and they were telling me about the program and what they are looking for in a student.

And I thought, 'Oh, you know, I guess I'll be out of here.' But they give you so much information and they talk to you in a language you can understand

and you know, they said like there are lots of supports, we have tons of support for you if you need it. So, I think that was the main reason I enrolled, because once I left after the last interview, it really made me feel real good to know, you know, somebody out there saw something that, in me, that I could give back. So, that's what made me enroll. (P3)

The support systems seem to have been critical in reducing anxiety that could have led some students to leave the program.

I probably wouldn't have stayed in the program. No, there's no way. Without their support, I know for fact, I couldn't do it because I would have backed out the first day. Because the first day when I went there they knew that I was uncomfortable and they made a point of it to make you feel comfortable... We got to talk. We got to know each other ... If those supports weren't there and those instructors weren't like they were, there's no way. (P6)

I would have A's [staff's] voice, 'You know you got to be there right?' in my head, so I would hear that and I would think that would be my motivation. But if I didn't have that I think it would have been more hard and challenging to get through the course... It would definitely be a challenge not having those people in place. (P2)

The supports appear to have contributed to participants' sense of being valued as students and as people. Students reported that it built their self-efficacy, affirmed their long-term goals, and helped them to navigate obstacles.

There's so much supports here, with anything, even just to talk, you know.

There was always someone there to talk to. It was great. Whereas, if you were to go to a different atmosphere, to a different environment, teaching this way, there's nothing like that there. You know what I mean, you get your work, you get your stuff and you're gone. And you're expected to be done on a certain time and there's no help. Who's going to help you?

Whereas here, you can talk to everybody. And they have the knowledge of the class you're taking, whatever else, and they were there for you. That's the good thing, you know, there's always help no matter what. (P5)

All the staff, the computer people, right down to the janitor, honest to God, everybody was, 'You guys can do this' and it felt like you were supported.

(P8)

I did a lot of talking with [the instructor]. I did a lot of talking with [the Life Skills coach]. I talked to the Elder that was there. And I think that was basically all that I really needed. I just needed that reassurance that, you know, I wouldn't be sorry at the end for going through all that and getting over the stuff that I had to deal with. So I think that in itself was the therapy that I needed. (P3)

Each participant made a point of mentioning their appreciation for the respect and support they felt from their Instructor and Life Skills Coach/Counselor.

[The Instructor] just has this way of making you feel everything you say and everything you do is important. And [Instructor] helps you, helps you to realize, you know, that your goals are within reach for you and not to ever

give up and continue being yourself and do what you want to do.

[Instructor] was very, very supportive through the whole school year. (P3)

[The Instructor] is an amazing person. Just the respect, I think the respect is the biggest thing. ... [The Instructor] is one of my role models... changed my life. (P8)

Of course there was the Life Skills Coach. [The Life Skills Coach] was always available to talk to... And I did talk to [the Life Skills Coach] about my personal situations throughout the course because you know, life happens and all that kind of stuff. So, that was really good. (P7)

[The Life Skills Coach] was a very warm, very spiritual [person] so it was very calming...[a] very wonderful [person]. (P1)

Clearly the feelings of being supported, both as individuals and as students resonated throughout this group of participants, fostering belief in themselves, a sense of connectedness and strength to continue on their individual journey in the program.

***Theme 2.2: Relationships with Elders promoted students' emotional health.***

Several Elders are associated with Urban Circle. They are involved with the individual programs, leading ceremonies and cultural activities, providing teachings, and being available for individual consultations. They were often identified as important to students' sense of belonging and emotional health.

[Elders], they made you feel like a family. (P6)

You see [Elders] would come to our class. [The Elder] would always pop by just to check on us, you know, see how we're doing. And [Elder] always

said, “You’re welcome to come to my room, you know, it’s downstairs.”

And I would say, “Yeah, we know where you are!” The Elders would always come by our classroom, which was good. (P5)

[Elder] was a very good support, I thought. Whenever I was feeling overwhelmed emotionally, with my work, I would go to [Elder] talk to [Elder], let her know my situation. [Elder] would kind of walk me through, to take it easy on myself, and I wasn’t the only one...So, it was a good reminder for me and I was able to take care of myself, I guess, my emotional part, to take a step back when I was feeling overwhelmed and just to take that breather. That’s when I would go to [Elder, who] would say ‘OK, take a breath when you’re feeling overwhelmed. Just step back.’ (P2)

They have everything there, they have the Elders and they have that beautiful room downstairs [Elder’s room]. And whenever they are there, you are more than welcome to go down and talk to them. If you have any questions, you can go and ask them. You can get them to help you with different things if that’s what you need. (P3)

Having the Elder there was really helpful because like I said, I didn’t know very much about the culture itself. So, [Elder] was there and [Elder] answered a lot of my questions. (P7)

The participants expressed respect for the Elders’ presence, and appreciation for their support and, in particular, their answering of questions and provision of teachings about culture.



**Theme 2.3: Relationships with peers enhanced students' belonging.** Feeling connected with peers was identified as a critical factor in building participants' confidence, particularly through their sense of belonging. Some participants reported that their peer connections were so strong that they became equivalent to family relationships in their importance.

I'm not one person to talk. Never have been, you know, like I keep my feelings inside. But when I came here, it made it easier to talk, especially when we had our circles and you know, like everybody is saying, 'I don't know anybody. I don't want to talk.' But then after a while it was OK, you know. I mean it was just a common thing now, you just come in, we do our little smudge, we sit around and talk. And it was just like, 'OK, pass the feather already', for talking, you know. And it was good...It was the best way and everybody got to know each other and it's just like one big family. It was so great. I loved it. (P5)

I felt really connected in that class because there just wasn't my age of people, but there was a variety ages, like older people, younger people and I felt like I fit into that group...making me feel connected, like I belonged. It was a really good learning experience...They also had families and they were very inspirational knowing that they had a few children because I was just becoming a [parent] at the time. (P2)

My schoolmates to me are family, extended family, tight family. Some are really tight. We're still really tight. Some of the other kids, not so tight. But when we see each other out and about or anything it's always loved.

You know, we're always sending love to each other. It's just there. It is.

(P8)

We treated each other as a brother and sister. (P9)

P8 described how the more mature students supported the younger members in the class.

Us more mature students, we're in there and this is kind of our final kick at the can. So we buckled down and the other ones would like to go party of course. So, we would teach through that way and role model and we would have lunch with them and always counseling each other. Keep everybody in the straight and narrow. And I do believe we all graduated. (P8)

Although P10 identified the best thing about Urban Circle as the fact that it was a close knit and supportive group, P10 also noted that some classmates tended to separate along urban-reserve lines.

Some of the students are coming in from the northern communities and I find that...it's almost like they're clashing with each other and then they don't know how to work together sometimes... and they're [saying], 'Well, we're better than this. We're better than that.' Gee, we're all here at the same village. We're learning the same thing but sometimes they don't pick up on that part then this is sometimes where the issues come to play...I always try to nip it in the bud...ask them questions like, 'What do you do?' and then they start opening up to you and once they feel comfortable with you. They're like, 'You're not different from me.' Yeah, that's what I was

trying to say. (P10)

Participants' responses to the interview indicate a strong feeling of connection with their fellow classmates. A close family feeling seemed to promote a sense of belonging along with a sense of responsibility to provide support to others in order to maintain the wellbeing of the group.

***Theme 2.4: Preparing and presenting a "Life Shield" reduced students' emotional isolation.*** An intense four-week session of the Life Skills course begins the FSW/FASD program and during the fourth week students are involved in preparing and presenting their Life Shield. Led by the Life Skills Coach/Counselor and the Elder, the students are required to prepare a pictorial summary of their journey in life thus far. This is a time for each student to re-visit their past and present journeys and share with the group. Students are guided to share only what is comfortable for them and there is always an Elder present and medicines burning. Prior to the week dedicated to Life Shield presentations, lessons are facilitated to help strengthen self-confidence, self-awareness, practice public speaking and prepare the students for this week. A crucial lesson on healthy and comfortable self-disclosure is included prior to presenting their Life Shields.

The Elder, the Life Skills Coach/Counselor, and the Instructor also present their Life Shields and are there to ensure a respectful discussion, emphasize the importance of confidentiality, and provide support to the students. This week encourages students to reflect on the cultural context of their lives with the aim of fostering awareness of similarities in the experiences of Aboriginal people. For some participants, this was a profound experience that reduced their sense of emotional isolation and built emotional

connections and empathy among students.

It's so heart wrenching...to see people that you never realized were going through the same thing you went through or been through the same thing you've been through. And then you get up in the whole class and you do your shield and it's like, it's such a relief and it such a good feeling to know that you're not alone. (P3)

For some people it was very traumatic...and to walk through those fires with them was an honour. A true honour. And to see them come out on the other side, the pride, and this place instills pride. (P8)

It's really powerful...and then you feel so much closer to your classmates and staff. (P6)

Six of the ten participants identified going through the process of preparing and presenting a life shield a powerful and meaningful one. It is an emotionally charged and difficult week but one that promotes a sense of connection to and trust in the group, along with the understanding that they are not alone in dealing with past hurts as they move forward.

***Theme 2.5: The structure of Urban Circle promoted students' emotional security.*** Urban Circle's size, its daily schedule, and the close interactions its structure allows among staff and students create a secure environment for learning, which participants identified as important to their success.

The family feeling and making me feel connected, like I belonged. It was somewhere I fit in. I felt comfortable with the teachers and the students, my peers. (P2)

I love the people, they are so welcoming and they made you comfortable.

It's so holistic here...I still always come back to kind of see what everybody is up to. You're safe here, and it's comfortable. (P5)

One participant affirmed the description that two family members (also graduates of Urban Circle) gave of Urban Circle's home-like atmosphere.

You know, they showed me their marks and talked to me about it and they said, once you get there, it's just like a big family. You know, everybody has got everybody's back and it's all like a big, friendly, warm place you can be. And you know, when you hear somebody say that you're just like, 'Uh, yeah, right'. But, when you get in there, you know, it is like that.

Everybody is friendly and it's yeah, just like a big, big home. (P6)

One participant described the atmosphere of security at Urban Circle in this way:

It's like you're walking into a hug. You know, you're never sad to be getting up Monday morning to go there. You're happy to go there...You feel safe. And everybody trusts you. (P8)

Feelings of safety and of being supported, and a sense of belonging are evident in participants' responses to the interview and seem to be critical factors in participants' successful completion of the program. Within this feeling of safety and security, lessons in the Life Skills course are presented and contribute to participants' personal and professional growth, which comprises the next set of findings.

**Category 3: The Life Skills course facilitated personal growth, employment readiness and program success.** The Life Skills course focuses on three areas; "self",

“family”, and “job”. Aboriginal teachings and ceremonies are integral to the delivery of this course and some participants described that they fostered healing in these areas. The Life Skills course was hard work for many participants; words such as “intense”, “challenging” and “enlightening” were used to describe it. Three themes emerged within this category: 1) The Life Skills course promoted healing; 2) The Life Skills course built self-efficacy; and 3) The Life Skills course provided tools for coping.

***Theme 3.1: The Life Skills course promoted healing.*** Some participants identified the Life Skills course as critical to their own healing which, in turn, they perceived as critical to their preparation to work in the family services field.

You can't go out there wounded and do this kind of work, especially on the frontlines like that. (P8)

I don't think emotionally I would have...I would be where I am now had I gone and taken a program like that somewhere else and not taken it at Urban Circle. I don't think emotionally I'd be able to do what I'm doing now because it seems like throughout the year they helped us to learn how to deal with stuff in ourselves. And see things in ourselves that they [sic] see in you. (P3)

A lot of that stuff that they talk about in the classroom, I find, was healing for me...being able to go back and look at myself and accept that I had a lot of those issues. Like I always thought I was so patient. I always thought I was a non-judgmental person. But the work that we did in there, having to self-reflect and look at my own self, I think it just made me a better person, in the end, because I was willing to accept that yeah, I do have those 'not so

nice things about me'. (P4)

In particular, the Life Shield activity was viewed as a factor in “letting go of past hurts and healing”, although the process was emotionally difficult.

Emotionally, it was up and down, up and down because of the shield...you know, going to some places where I thought I did some healing [but] obviously I didn't do enough. So that was challenging. (P1)

When you stand up and talk about your past and all that, that kind of made me let go of a lot of stuff from my past that I was holding onto, that I know I didn't have to. (P6)

Mentally it was very trying, very trying. Many times I wanted to say, you know, like 'F-that. I'm outta here.' I'm not doing this. I don't want to think about stuff like that, you know, it's too painful. I don't want to go there again, you know. I was there and I don't want to go back there. But I also learned that in order to move on you have to deal with all that old baggage. And the program and the life skills that they give you in there really, really helps you to deal with that. So in order to get through the program I think everyone had to deal with issues that they had. (P3)

It was good to work through my [parent]'s death and stuff. I finally got to grieve it properly, and let go. I was carrying that bag around you know, for 40 plus years. It was getting heavy. And so that stuff we learned here, the life skills, the shield, the releasing of all those toxic things was a really good thing. And just understanding and using the right words for what I was

feeling, you know. So once I learned all this, it was like freedom to me... You're getting rid of those bags and we all carry a lot of bags. Especially us Aboriginal people, we carry a lot of guilt, shame, a lot of it for no reason at all. It's just public perspective, whatever, and I get offended by that stuff quite easily. (P8)

***Theme 3.2: The Life Skills course built self-efficacy.*** One of the themes that emerged from participants' discussion of the Life Skills course was the ways in which it made them conscious of their own strengths. Many stated that they had previously been unaware of the capacities they possessed, and the course brought them into awareness.

A lot of the stuff was based on the person's personal strengths that we didn't recognize in ourselves. So, maybe people continuously letting us know that we have these strengths. We might not be able to see it but they see it in us. (P4)

The best part of the Life Skills course for me was learning how to realize what my strengths are and how to use them. And how I can go about and not be scared, you know, to do things on my own, that I'm quite capable of doing that. (P3)

According to another participant, the self-awareness gained from the Life Skills course contributes to a sense of greater professional competence.

I'm more aware of who I am now, of the little things that I do, my body language, the way I talk, you know, everything. I'm more aware because of it. So, if that piece wasn't there I probably wouldn't be as good of a worker as I am. (P7)



***Theme 3.3: The Life Skills course provided tools for coping.*** Participants identified the Life Skills course as a source for learning positive skills and tools to deal with everyday stressors.

Just coming to this school just opened me up more. I'm not one to keep quiet anymore. I kind of speak up for myself. Whereas, I would just keep it in and let everything build up and 'Ugghh', you know. Just really learning how to work with things, day-by-day, you know, life...now I speak up for myself. You know, I'll say, 'Ok, I'm having a problem.' Or, 'I'm angry today. Don't bother me.' Or, "Come see me later, I'm not in a good mood.' You know, just things to do with life, like that. And how to speak with your partner. That helped a lot too. I didn't speak to my partner; I yelled. And now I'm calm about it, you know. You've got to be calm and just talk. You're not going to get anywhere if you don't communicate, and how to communicate, how to go about it. It was good. (P5)

I would feel drained at the end of the day but, it was a good drain because being able to express all that stuff without walking out of there and thinking, 'Oh,' like that. Because there have been times you know, learning when to share and when not to share. I had issues with that in the past because sometimes I would just, if I was feeling a certain way I would just blurt everything out, right? So, learning how to share even and how much to share. (P4)

It also taught me the skills to budget, to take care of my finances, to budget my money...becoming a new parent that I'm going to have to learn how to

budget and manage my bills if I'm going to be living on my own. (P2)

I learned how to balance [the emotional, mental, social and physical aspects]. Obviously, that's the whole thing about the Life Skills component, is that they teach you how to balance it and how to teach other people how to balance it. (P7)

I don't think I would have been able to do the job I'm doing. Because I don't think I would have the tools to be able to carry out some of the things I have to do in my job. And I give credit to the Life Skills program for that. It really teaches you a lot. It helps you to understand. (P3)

When asked if they had any suggestions on ways to improve the Life Skills course, four of the 10 participants said that they felt the Life Skills component couldn't be improved upon although two expressed possibly making it longer.

I can't think of anything else to make it better because what I got out of it was really good. So, I could just say, make it longer. (P6)

It goes so fast. Like if I had a choice, I would like the Life Skills to last longer. (P4)

Another suggestion was to include two Life Skills Coaches/Counselors in the class, one male and one female. Other participants suggested providing more time to learn and practice such specific skills as positive confrontation (P7), the Jahari Window (P4), and report writing (P9).

The responses by participants to questions related to the Life Skills course indicate that it was a valued component in their program; 40% indicated that they would

like to see it extended. Lessons learned in Life Skills, combined with the increased understanding of Aboriginal history, traditions, and teachings and the reinforced connection to their Aboriginal identity, appears to have set a positive stage for the participants to go out and work effectively with children and families. This constitutes the findings in the next category.

**Category 4: The cultural context of Urban Circle has influenced graduates' professional work.** Of the 10 participants, seven are currently working in positions related to their training; as family support workers, case coordinators/managers, and youth care workers for example. Another participant is pursuing a Child & Youth Care Diploma at Red River College. The remaining two participants were currently looking for employment as support workers at the time of this study. One was a 2010 graduate who had taken time off following graduation, and the other was a 2011 graduate who had just completed the program and was in the process of applying for positions.

Participants expressed a strong belief that the restoration of their Aboriginal identity that occurred at Urban Circle was having a powerful impact on their current professional work.

Most of the kids we work with in our program have some kind of Aboriginal ties. We don't only have Aboriginal kids, we have kids from all walks of life and nationalities but the majority of them are Aboriginal. And I think that has really helped me because a lot of these kids, I find, feel lost. Just like I did because they have been through the system and they really don't know who they are and they want to know who they are. They want to know the cultural aspect. And they all have this big "hate-on", you know,

for the world because they think being Aboriginal is such a dirty thing...I find it really, really helps me when I work with these young people. And I try to help them to find what they are looking for. Most of the time, they just need to know where they come from, their culture. A little bit of understanding about the culture and you know, that it's not a big deal.

You can do what you want to do. Being Aboriginal is not going to stop you from finishing school, going on doing other great things with your life, you know. So I think that part is a big – a major part. (P3)

In terms of having more knowledge and knowledge to share with participants. Because a lot of times when they come here, they don't know why their lives are the way they are. And then when you get more information, because in our intake that's one thing we ask is, if they have a family member who has ever been in residential school. So, you know, teaching them a little bit about this could be why or, showing them that this could be why this is the way things are happening. (P4)

Well 90% of my clients are actually Aboriginal...Since I'm still fairly new, and I'm still getting comfortable with my clients, it will be a part of what I do with them. Like, taking them to sweats, re-introducing them to their culture because a lot of my clients are older ladies that have lost their way. And if I can help them and their family get back to that then, you know, that's so much better. Because I had no idea that 90% of my clients were going to be Aboriginal. (P7)

Some participants expressed a desire to become Life Skills coaches themselves,

so that they could have a similar impact on their clients. Urban Circle offers the YWCA Life Skills Coach Training Program and, although this specific training program does not include Aboriginal cultural content, the experience of having taken the Life Skills course at Urban Circle has provided a model to graduates of ways in which they could integrate Aboriginal culture and history into life skills teachings.

I'm going to take the Life Skills Trainers course here this summer. So, just because I loved what happened to me, I want to pull that back to my agency and work with the kids using that kind of thing...Pay it forward. Just keep paying it forward. And it comes back to me in spades. It's a great thing to help your people. (P8)

It appears that the sense of working with and giving back to the community is important to participants. They are keen to share their learning and foster their Aboriginal clients' greater understanding of and connection to their heritage as a direct result of the culturally restorative aspect of the FSW/FASD program. Participants emphasized the power and healing of feeling connected to one's culture. The next category reflects the findings related to the program's impact on their personal lives.

**Category 5: Urban Circle had positive influences on graduates' personal lives.** By restoring their Aboriginal identity, the cultural teachings and knowledge provided at Urban Circle had an impact on participants' personal lives. Four themes emerged within this category: 1) Cultural learning transferred to graduates' personal lives; 2) Success at Urban Circle transformed graduates' self-perceptions; 3) Success at Urban Circle had intergenerational impact; and 4) Attending Urban Circle was a positive life experience.

*Theme 5.1: Cultural learning transferred to graduates' personal lives.* Several participants described incorporating cultural activities, such as daily smudging and medicine picking, into their personal lives.

When we were doing things here [smudging prior to interview] like every morning, come in and we smudge. And then I got involved with that and I started doing that at home. And then my little girl got involved with it and that was a wonderful thing...she would bring the bowl up and she'd help me and so it was awesome. (P1)

We do things different at home. Every time we go home we stop on the highway and we pick cedar and bring it back for the [place of employment] and then I came and dropped some off here at Urban Circle. We go pick sage, stuff we never did before, you know. Even though we've always been outdoor people, we didn't even know what sage was until I came to school here. And we actually went out and picked sage out at Bird's Hill. So we do things that we never did before. (P3)

Some participants described how Urban Circle's cultural teachings have affected their very way of living.

I carry those teachings given to me, with me. I treat everyone like a brother or sister, I try to be positive and when something brings me down I pray for myself and others and say my miigwetches....It helped me become a more respectable and honorable young [person]. Not only at Urban Circle but wherever I go. In the long run, it was very important. (P9)

It really re-connected me to my spiritual side. And I still practice that today

and it will be with me forever. I can't think of a life without it now, honestly. (P8)

***Theme 5.2: Success at Urban Circle transformed graduates' self perceptions.*** Participants described the experience of succeeding in the Urban Circle program as transformative in terms of their views of themselves and their capabilities. One participant describe it this way:

I had a horrible upbringing at school...Back in the 60's there weren't many brown people in the [community] as there are now. It was a different hood....So I learned how to fight real good...I was called the "dumb Indian", all kinds of things. I would like to meet these teachers again by the way, especially a grade 10 Guidance teacher that told me I was going to be nothing. And I walked out of there and I thought, 'maybe he's right.' I never forgot that guy...High school was a mess. I dropped out, it was just a mess. There was too much fighting. It was not good. A lot of racism, it was the sign of the times...[But] I poured myself into my books [at Urban Circle] so I graduated with a 4.22 Honours, right. I was basically A+ average. So I knocked it out of the park. I was pretty proud of that. That was, for me, that one, because of all those times people called me dumb. I answered to everybody and to myself. (P8)

Prior to attending Urban Circle, some participants had never imagined themselves continuing their education and, in one case, entering the workforce.

I imagined myself to be on welfare for the rest of my life. Honestly, I never imagined myself being in the workplace or anything. (P6)

*[Did you see yourself as a college graduate?]* No. Because I was too scared, because I'm too old to go back to school. Plus I don't know how everything is, has it changed, you know. It was just kind of tricky, so didn't. But then I tried. And it's like, 'Oh, what's the worst that can happen here?' So I put my application in, and here I am! (P5)

I was always so busy doing other things and I was a single parent when my two children were small and that was a very struggling experience for me. So no, I just never ever dreamt that I would, you know, go on and do something like I'm doing now. So, I'm really glad that I did. (P3)

After dropping out I thought, well I have to drop out to find employment for myself cause I was already turning 18 and I was wanting to put myself out there and get the experience so I dropped my education and I took up the workforce...I wasn't really looking, thinking that I was going to graduate [from a post-secondary program]. I didn't have that motivation until knowing that my Aunties came to Urban Circle. That was a big part of my life that they went there because they influenced me to want to get my education and graduate. I wanted to do something with myself. And make myself, I guess, a positive role model for others and my child also. (P2)

Success at Urban Circle contributed to transformation not only in participants' sense of themselves as academically competent, but also in their sense of themselves as people worthy of dignity and self-respect.

This place instills pride...and respect for yourself. You can't respect anybody if you don't respect yourself first. And that's what I got out of



that...I've watched lots of people...the year I was in school. Now I see them in professional contact and it's like they're a whole different person. They got their act together. You know, they're looking after their own families, they're off the systems, and teaching how to get off the system. And that's a big thing for us. It's going to take us a long time to re-learn what was taken away from us, ripped out of our very souls. To heal that they said it was, you know, seven generations went through residential schools. It'll be at least seven generations before we can shake that bit off. Just that bit. Yet there's still a huge amount of issues going on. They're still trying to shove us in the back under the carpet. But more and more, people, us with education, we don't buy that bullshit no more. And we can talk about it, because we're not all freaked out by the language. So we can stand in that meeting and be proud and that's the kind of things I like to do. (P8)

I learned a lot about myself, who I am as a person, who I want to be. I've changed in such a positive way, like it was a life-changing experience going there. It was really, really good." (P7)

I would have to say that it kind of put me back on that, the Red Road, like that path of wanting to know who I am, and learning about who I am as an Aboriginal person, a Native person. Getting to know my heritage and where I come from, finding out my roots and my family. It helped me grow to build my self-awareness and it helped me around my confidence around people. (P2)

Clearly, participants' responses indicated that their educational experience at

Urban Circle was a transformative one. For some, releasing negative messages based on racist stereotypes that influenced their sense of self was particularly powerful.

Participants proved to themselves that they are capable people; increased understanding and pride in their Aboriginal identity was an important factor in their personal growth.

***Theme 5.3: Success at Urban Circle had intergenerational impact.*** When asked whether their educational attainment had influenced their own children and extended family members, participants described far-reaching impacts.

Absolutely! Absolutely I can say that [my children were influenced by my education] because when I was going here, my daughter was going to school. She had dropped out of school in Grade 10. She went back and got her 11 and 12. And then my son, he also went back to school. And he's going in for a youth mentor, counseling. And then my other son...he's going back to school to become a RCMP. And my other daughter she's in university right now studying to be a dental hygienist. So, yes. (P1)

Oh, for sure! For sure. I think it set some kind of ball in motion, or whatever, because they see that you're never too old to go to school. And according to my grandchildren, I am old, old, old! So, you know, that's how they see it. You know, like 'My Grandma went to school when she was like old'. And now she's working and she has a job that she likes and you know so that, I think that has really helped. They see it in a new light. (P3)

My son is very proud of me. I was so shocked when he walked up to the podium on grad day. I was just sitting there and all of a sudden...he [says] 'I'm proud of you Mom.' I said, 'Thank you.' It was good. It was shocking.

My nephews and my nieces came up there and they're all proud of me. He said, 'Yeah, I hope my grad is as great as this one!' (P5)

[My cousin is] looking into the whole Urban Circle thing because she saw how happy I was with the outcome. She came to my graduation and now she's looking into it...I'm setting a good image for my younger cousins who are only like 11, 7 and 5. I'm really excited for them to get older and see where they're going to go now. (P7)

My path on education is going to have a huge impact on my [child]. This is part of the reason why I took up my education, was not only for myself but knowing I was going to be a parent. Well, I can't be a parent and not have those skills. And so I thought about it...I really need to take this course, I'm going to be a [parent] and it's going to also help my partner ...And it's going to have a big impact on [my child]. I want [my child] to value education. It's a value of mine, I want [my child] to take that extra value and even take it further...And right now [my child]'s in Head Start. (P2)

Other areas of participants' lives, in addition to family members' views of education, were also impacted by participants attending Urban Circle. P3 describes an example of helping her granddaughter deal with racism at school.

[My granddaughter says] they're always saying. 'You're just an Indian'. So my husband and I...both have really worked hard with our grandchildren to not get caught up in that...It's just about teaching her to be proud of who she is. And telling her, 'Oh don't worry about it. Grandma used to worry about that all the time and look at Grandma now!' And they always tell me

how proud they are of me...I would never have been able to do that had I not gone to Urban Circle. Urban Circle opened up so many doors, not just for me but for my family as well. (P3)

P6 described being a long-time active volunteer in the local neighbourhood and encouraging [P6's] children to be actively involved in community programs as well. P6 felt that the determination to go back to school has contributed to [P6's] children's motivation.

I'm really proud [of my children]. If I didn't make that first step, you know...where would my kids be, right? If they didn't see the determination. So it's all good. It's still good and it'll get better. (P6)

The findings suggested that participants' positive experience at Urban Circle has influenced their family members' level of trust in education. Seeing the personal and professional changes in the participants motivated family members to see education as a future option. Participants also appear more confident and assertive in fostering their children's and grandchildren's pride as Aboriginal people as well as their involvement in the community.

***Theme 5.4: Attending Urban Circle was a positive life experience.*** All of the participants in this study viewed their experiences at Urban Circle positively and they were eager to share their thoughts about it. P7 said, "I was actually really excited to hear that there was going to be an interview because I'm like, 'Ya, I'm going to talk all about Urban Circle.'" All of the participants wanted others to benefit from the program as they had.

I always will recommend people to Urban Circle because that was a good

program for me and I figure it can benefit everybody. I'm just going to go out there and get more people into Urban Circle and hopefully, you know, there's more positive changes that will happen and if not, they can continue, I mean, they're doing great. You know, you could have taken the FSW anywhere else but I don't think you would have gotten the same, at least I know I wouldn't. (P6)

I've done nothing but recommend that program to everybody and anybody that asks me because it was such a good program and I think people, especially younger people, could really learn a lot. (P3)

It was a really supportive atmosphere. It was really a good. Yeah, it was really a great, like the best experience I've ever had in an educational setting. (P7)

I felt like Urban Circle was my home, especially my classroom. So I tried to keep it clean when possible. Today I carry these values with me whether in a work place or at my family's home (P9).

The participants were proud of having attended Urban Circle and some attributed their professional success to the education they received there.

The people I went to school with, I work with a couple of them now, and we have a really good time. We're pretty proud of Urban Circle. We had a tremendous group of people in this class...We had men, we had quite a few women, all of us rose to the top of our agencies, that I work with. So, it's a great thing that we did and we're very, very, very proud. (P8)

## Summary

For 90% of the participants their experience at Urban Circle connected or re-connected them to their Aboriginal roots. An increased understanding of Aboriginal history, traditions, teachings and ceremonies fostered an increased knowledge of and sense of pride in their Aboriginal identity. For P10, growing up in a First Nations community with a family that continued to speak the language and share the teachings provided a strong cultural foundation, so this participant did not express the need to connect or reconnect to her Aboriginal heritage through Urban Circle. However, P10 did respect the cultural aspect of Urban Circle and perceived its positive impact on other classmates as they learned about Aboriginal history and culture.

Urban Circle was a comfortable place for participants where they felt supported and a sense of belonging. The focus on building respectful relationships with Elders, the instructor, the Life Skills Coach/Counselor, Urban Circle staff and importantly, their fellow classmates was a strong positive factor in participants' experience. Several participants expressed a family-like feeling at Urban Circle and within their classes: not only would they feel supported *by* others, they provided support *to* one another. P8 described pride in the personal growth and academic success of the class, and in fellow classmates' professional work following graduation. In their work, all of the participants were involved with Aboriginal people, some exclusively, and the pride in "giving back to the community" and fostering a sense of pride as Aboriginal people in others, was particularly satisfying.

The holistic approach to education allowed participants to learn and grow in all areas, not just in the academic part of the program. The Life Skills course that is an

integral part of each program at Urban Circle offers students an opportunity to focus on themselves, their families and their future employment in a safe place and with support. Participants described letting go of past hurts, learning to forgive others, and gaining increased self-awareness as a result of the course. Learning about intergenerational trauma due to the residential school system was particularly meaningful and in some cases, enlightening, for participants. Although they described the course as challenging and emotionally exhausting, they also described learning ways to cope with everyday stressors and, importantly, increased feelings of competence and confidence in themselves. Indeed, 40% of the respondents suggested the Life Skills course should be longer.

The personal transformative power of their education at Urban Circle also impacted participant's families. In some cases, participants began integrating traditional practices or activities into their lives, such as daily smudging, attending sweats or picking medicines. Those participants who are parents and/or grandparents described examples of supporting their children's and grandchildren's sense of pride as Aboriginal people. Additionally, descriptions of their families' pride in their educational achievement points to the important role models they are providing for their families. Many described children returning to school, to either complete high school or to continue with post-secondary education, as a result of their own example of determination. Overall, attending Urban Circle was a transformative experience for the participants and a feeling of re-claiming or re-connecting to their Aboriginal identity provided a strong foundation for positive change in their lives.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of Urban Circle graduates regarding the cultural component of their educational experience and its possible role in the completion of their program. It was predicted that the cultural context and content of the FSW/FASD program offered at Urban Circle would have a positive impact on the students' experience that would contribute to their successful completion of the program. This hypothesis was strongly supported. The impact of the program was strongly evident in participants' discussions of their cultural identity, professional growth and sense of connectedness.

### **Impact on Cultural Identity**

As Leroy Little Bear (2009) states, "For Aboriginal people, the school is not a place for cultural affirmation and empowerment" (p. 20). The truth of this statement was evident in participants' initial lack of knowledge of their peoples' history. However, the findings suggested that Urban Circle is providing the type of education that has been otherwise absent in the lives of Aboriginal people. Participants clearly found their educational experience at Urban Circle to be personally satisfying and powerful, identifying the cultural components of the program as significant factors in their academic success. They viewed Urban Circle as offering an opportunity to learn about and connect or re-connect with their Aboriginal identity. P4 described attendance at Urban Circle as feeling like "coming home". Making or reinforcing a connection to their Aboriginal identity seemed to strengthen a personal "foundation" for the participants in this study. Eight of the 10 participants referred to the Naming Ceremony as a cultural activity that they found particularly meaningful. Receiving their spirit name provided an



important piece of identity that connected them to their culture and they were continuing the journey of discovering the meaning and responsibility associated with their spirit name.

Recent data from the AFN confirm that First Nation post-secondary students want Aboriginal content in their programs. The AFN held a Virtual Summit on First Nation post-secondary education on January 27, 2011 and posted a 10-question survey on the AFN website. The survey was completed 356 times. Eighty-six percent of respondents strongly agreed with the statement, “First Nations languages, cultures, histories and knowledge are important to me.” The next statement, “First Nations languages, cultures, histories and knowledge are adequately reflected in my post-secondary institution”, yielded only 23% strong agreement; 41.6% strongly disagreed with this statement. Urban Circle’s holistic approach, grounded in Aboriginal culture, is one post-secondary program that seems to meet the need for Aboriginal students’ “cultural affirmation and empowerment.” A primary legacy of the residential schools is the severe disruption it caused to the formation and intergenerational transmission of an Aboriginal cultural identity (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). At an individual level, identity as an Aboriginal person has been laden with shame and secrecy. Those who could “pass” as white were encouraged to hide and deny their Aboriginal heritage as a way of escaping racism (C. Beaulieu, personal communication, 1999). This was exemplified in the story told by P8, whose Métis parents emphasized their Scottish background in a failed attempt to “protect” their children from being taunted as “half-breeds” while they were growing up in Winnipeg. As the participants in this study gained knowledge about the impact of the residential school system on generations of Aboriginal peoples, they underwent an

emotional liberation. They reported that they were now able to understand that forces beyond the control of Aboriginal people had affected their sense of self—their identity. Even though P4's mother revealed little of her residential school experience, P4 said that awareness of the residential school system, which came from Urban Circle, helped in the process of forgiveness. "I realized, you know what, there's a reason that she brought me up the way she brought me up, and it has nothing to do with me. It has to do with the past." P8 explained that Urban Circle provided a place to where it was possible to "just be me. And be happy with myself. And be proud of my heritage. And be proud of myself." When participants saw themselves reflected in their education and felt their culture and identity affirmed, they were empowered to integrate what they had learned into their lives and professions.

### **Impact on Professional Growth**

Decolonizing education—fostering an understanding of Aboriginal history, worldviews, knowledge, and traditions—is seen by many as the way forward in promoting educational success for Aboriginal peoples (Battiste, 2001; Cajete, 1994; Kanu, 2011; Smith, 2001). In the FSW/FASD program at Urban Circle, an understanding of the history of Aboriginal peoples combined with an introduction to Aboriginal teachings, ceremonies, and worldviews provides a particularly rich preparation for employment in the field of family support/social services. Urban Circle appears to have created a culturally restorative education model whereby students strengthen their identity as Aboriginal people while successfully attaining post-secondary credentials. This educational experience has led to employment and further educational opportunities, transforming not only participants' lives, but the lives of their families and

communities as well. Urban Circle appears to have achieved what Cajete (1994) has called for: “modern education and traditional education can no longer afford to remain historically and contextually separate entities...A balanced integration must be created” (p. 18).

These results reinforce other findings on the use of culturally relevant post-secondary education programs for Aboriginal students (Kanu, 2011; MacKinnon, 2011; Silver, 2003). Prior to attending Urban Circle, the majority of participants were unemployed. Following graduation, 70% of the participants are now employed (one graduate went on to further education and two recent graduates were seeking employment at the time of the study) and all were interacting with Aboriginal people in the context of their work. Overall, participants referred to their increased confidence and pride as students, as Aboriginal people, and as professionals.

### **Impact on Sense of Connectedness**

Urban Circle’s approach to education reflects the broader Aboriginal worldview of the interconnectedness of all aspects of life, within the individual, among others, and with the natural world. As Cajete (1994) describes,

understanding the depth of relationships and the significance of participation in all aspects of life are the keys to traditional American Indian education. *Mitakuye Oyasin* (we are all related) is a Lekota phrase that captures an essence of Tribal education because it reflects the understanding that our lives are truly and profoundly connected to other people and the physical world (p. 26).

The impact of Urban Circle’s program on participants’ feeling of community, of being

connected to others, was a significant finding of this study. Participants emphasized their relationships with Elders, their Instructors, Life Skills Coaches/Counselors, other staff, and fellow classmates as crucial factors in making their experience at Urban Circle a positive one. “One of the most important tenets in the Aboriginal world is relationships” (Little Bear, 2009, p. 22). The month of Life Skills training at the beginning of the FSW/FASD course promotes understanding and healing of self and a sense of belonging to the group. Participants in this study described how their feelings of connectedness and support in a safe atmosphere fostered a sense of family. When one considers what “family” typically represents, one thinks of members of a group committed to one another, interacting with and caring for each other. To describe fellow classmates as “family” demonstrates the closeness that the participants felt in their group. “Aboriginal worldviews teach that everyone and everything is part of a whole, and each is interdependent with all the others” (Henderson, 2000, p. 270)

Many participants came to Urban Circle because it was already embedded in their existing connections and networks. Mignone (2011) has described the role of informal social networking in urban Aboriginal communities; this type of networking seems key to an awareness of Urban Circle and its programs. Informal social networking relates to “some level of recurrent interactions without the involvement of institutional players or without the institutionalization of the network” (Mignone, 2011, p. 2). Formal social networking, on the other hand, relates to networks “...when at least one member is part of the network in an institutional role” (Mignone, 2011, p. 2). Participants in this study heard about Urban Circle through informal networks of family and friends (seven participants) and through formal networks via Aboriginal agencies/organizations (three

participants). Two of the participants included in the informal social networking group, however, described how it was through their friendship with a member of Urban Circle staff that they ended up enrolling in the program, thus blurring the line between informal and formal social networks. For study participants there seemed to be an added level of trust in pursuing education at Urban Circle because of the personal connection with the person or agency promoting it. Similarly, participants in this study were clearly enthusiastic about telling others of their experiences and encouraging others to explore the program options at Urban Circle, thus continuing to promote Urban Circle through informal social networking.

### **Impact on Cultural Safety**

The concept of *cultural safety* originated in New Zealand's health care sector, specifically with reference to the interactions between Maori and non-Maori people within the nursing profession (Brascoupé & Waters, 2009), but it has broader applicability. The Assembly of First Nations has stated that "in an educational setting, cultural safety refers to the student's feelings in the learning encounter... the student must feel culturally safe in the learning relationship" (n.d., para. 4). It certainly appears that participants in this study felt culturally safe in the learning relationships at Urban Circle. In a study of grade nine students, Kanu (2011) found that "the level of trust and psychological safety felt in the learning environment [played] a critical role in Aboriginal students' academic achievement" (p. 157).

At Urban Circle, the commitment to cultural safety begins with the design of the building, the colors used, the art and materials on display. The Medicine Wheel is used as a tool for teaching, fostering an understanding of the connectedness and unity of all

life, and the importance of balance. The Life Skills course uses Aboriginal history, cultural knowledge, teachings, and ceremonies to encourage students to explore issues related to Self, Family, and, Job. With 89% of staff at Urban Circle of Aboriginal descent (K. Embleton, personal communication, May 15, 2012), the vast majority of the people providing instruction and support to the students are of the same heritage as the students. Kanu (2011) found that having Aboriginal teachers and counselors in schools contributed to students' sense of belonging. In this study, P8 captured the feeling of cultural safety by stating, "You feel safe and everybody trusts you. Nobody is looking all nervous because you're an Aboriginal [person]."

The setting and atmosphere of Urban Circle were designed to be safe and comfortable. Together with the program's holistic philosophy and supportive structure, participants gained a high level of cultural comfort, which facilitated their learning and their success. The FSW/FASD program's 93% completion rate suggests that the learning environment at Urban Circle is culturally and psychologically safe enough to encourage students to excel. As P7 stated, "I makes me feel at home, you know—comfortable. It makes the learning process easier and better".

Responses to the final research question guiding this study—how the culturally restorative aspect of the program influenced students' lives following graduation—provide a glimpse at the power of education to promote positive change in the personal lives of students. Participants described how they had integrated cultural activities like attending sweats, picking medicines, and daily smudging into their lives. Those with young children and grandchildren in their lives reported that they counseled them on ways of dealing with racism, encouraged their involvement in cultural activities at school,

and inspired their achievement. At the FSW/FASD graduation, for example P5's adolescent child, who clearly saw graduation as a future goal, said, "I hope my grad is as great as this one." Therefore, participants' personal transformations had ripple effects on their family members. In another study of Urban Circle students, MacKinnon (2011) found that "graduates of Urban Circle in particular were quick to point out that in addition to finding satisfying employment and financial independence, the spiritual and emotional growth they experienced had an equally significant impact for themselves and their families" (p. 234).

### **Limitations of the Present Study**

Soliciting participation for a program evaluation study can potentially introduce sampling bias. Volunteers with a positive experience may be overrepresented because they want to promote the program; those with negative experiences may want to take the opportunity to make themselves heard; others with no strong feelings may not bother participating. All ten participants in this study expressed positive feelings about their experiences at Urban Circle and were willing and eager to do so. Due to the nature of the sampling in this study, it is not possible to know the representativeness of this group relative to the program's graduates. Perhaps those with negative or neutral feelings about the program chose not to participate. A second limitation is the study's small sample size, although a small sample did allow for in-depth interviews. Even though the sample was small, the interviews were highly consistent in the factors identified as having an impact on their experiences. Although there should be caution in drawing broader conclusions, the consistency that does exist in these interviews suggests that this culturally restorative education program for Aboriginal post-secondary students, and others like it, are worthy

of more in-depth research.

Another potential for bias is my experience with and connection to Urban Circle. Steps were taken to counter potential bias by careful wording of interview questions, using computer software for coding the data, reviewing interview responses with the Research Assistant and sharing a draft of the results with the Research Assistant. There is, however, a possibility that during interviews I did not probe any comments made (or even silences, if any, around certain topics) that did not support my image of Urban Circle.

There were benefits to conducting the majority of interviews next door to Urban Circle. In addition to offering the ability to smudge, this location was known to participants and was conveniently situated near many of their homes. However, this setting could also have influenced the feelings of the participants. They may have assumed, for example, that Urban Circle itself was somehow connected to the study even though they had been informed that I was conducting the study independently.

In reviewing the questions I employed during the interviews, I realize that it would have been beneficial to include a question asking participants to reflect on their past schooling experiences regarding inclusion of any Aboriginal history or cultural content. How did they feel about what was included or presented? Such a question would provide an indication of the information, if any, which was included in the education system or programs they attended earlier in their lives. Whose history and heritage was reflected? Were the presentations focused solely on historical and stereotypical images of Aboriginal peoples? How did their experiences in their previous schooling influence their feelings about their Aboriginal identity? This information would have provided a context



for understanding how new the material presented at Urban Circle was to participants.

All the participants in this study had graduated between 2006 and 2011. It may be that recent graduates were able to recall more specific details about their experiences and feelings, and, critical to this study, information particular to the cultural components. On the other hand, perhaps those who graduated from earlier cohorts had the opportunity to reflect upon the personal and professional impact of their experience at Urban Circle over time. In spite of the small sample size, however, there is overall consistency in participants' responses. This is particularly the case for participants' responses relating to thoughts about the importance of the cultural component in their Urban Circle experience, the importance of supportive relationships in helping them through the program, and increased feelings of pride in their Aboriginal identity.

### **Directions for Future Research**

This study should be replicated with a larger sample that is representative of all of the programs at Urban Circle. It would also be useful to control for time since graduation, as having more years to reflect on their Urban Circle program experiences, or spending time in a professional role, could affect participants' perceptions of their experiences at Urban Circle. Participants in this study were asked if the cultural component of the program affected their professional lives. Of the eight participants who were employed at the time of the study, six described how learning about their cultural history, teachings, and practices at Urban Circle benefited their work with Aboriginal people. As P7 described, "[the cultural learning]...will be a part of what I do with them [clients]...reintroducing them to their culture, because a lot of my clients are older ladies that have lost their way." It would be very useful to explore in greater depth how the

graduates of Urban Circle use their cultural knowledge in their professional capacity.

What concepts and practices are they sharing and passing on to others, and how? What do they see as the impact of this sharing on their clients and co-workers? Are they continuing to connect with Elders and others in the community to support their work?

Another valuable direction would be an exploration of the graduates' continuing journey of learning about Aboriginal cultures following graduation from Urban Circle. Some participants in this study wondered where they could obtain information to expand upon their learning. What do such graduates identify as their needs in the areas of teachings, cultural knowledge, and Aboriginal history following graduation, and where would they look for these materials? How easy or difficult is it to continue along this path of learning?

A longitudinal study of these Urban Circle graduates could provide valuable information on a range of variables. What is their trajectory in terms of employment and further education, for example? How has their trajectory affected their health and wellbeing? What impact has it had on their families? Have they continued to seek out opportunities to learn about and participate in cultural activities?

Participants in this study described how their experience at Urban Circle connected them to Aboriginal culture and strengthened their identity as Aboriginal people. It would be valuable to explore their memories of their Aboriginal identity during their youth to gain a better understanding of this transformation. It also would be helpful to understand better how the development of their cultural identities has affected the development of their children, and even their grandchildren. Do they see ways in which they have influenced their children's sense of identity? How does the schooling

experience of their children differ from their own? How does their children's life in the community differ?

### **Implications for Policy**

Every participant expressed a desire and indeed need for the inclusion of Aboriginal history and culture in their education. Increased understanding positively impacted participants' sense of pride as Aboriginal people and, in turn, seemed to also positively influence members of their families as well. Aboriginal history and culture, and examination of the impact of colonization should be integrated into education policies and programs not only for Aboriginal people but for all Canadians. The role of Elders in Aboriginal cultures also needs to be recognized in education policies and programs to ensure their active involvement with Aboriginal students.

Including and integrating the Life Skills course throughout the education program helped participants recognize and build on their strengths, as well as learn skills and behaviours to deal with everyday life. Aboriginal teachings, ceremonies and practices (e.g., sharing circles) were incorporated into the Life Skills course, reinforcing cultural understanding and ways to manage personal affairs. Education policies should support the inclusion of a life skills component in programs for Aboriginal students.

Urban Circle has effectively created an environment that is culturally safe for its students. The building design and the decoration of the physical space reflect Aboriginal cultures and teachings. For example, the design of Urban Circle's building is shaped like a turtle to reflect Mother Earth. Importantly, the size of the building allows Elders, staff and students to interact closely with one another. There are four classrooms (for approximately 25 students each) on the main floor, and a computer lab, student lounge,

gathering space, Elders room and Boardroom on the lower level. Staff offices are included on both levels. This arrangement helps create a welcoming environment and as participants in the study described, “a family feeling” to their place of education. The physical and social environments focus on relationships. Physical space needs to be taken into account when buildings that will house Aboriginal programs are created.

The success of smaller adult learning centres targeting Aboriginal students needs to be recognized and their further development needs to be funded adequately. Large post-secondary institutions may not be the appropriate setting for culturally restorative Aboriginal programs. Instead, partnerships between smaller centres and recognized post-secondary institutions could provide these unique and supportive educational opportunities. These smaller education centres need to be funded on a multiyear basis so that staff time can be focused on the programs and the students, rather than on proposal-writing and other activities to secure short-term funding. Finally, opportunities for Aboriginal people to attain post-secondary education should be increased by enhancing the federal Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP).

### **Conclusion**

The education gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples remains a significant issue in Canada, indicating that for many Aboriginal people the education system is simply not working. Various educational institutions and education systems in Canada have been reaching out to Aboriginal peoples and seeking ways to reduce this gap. Universities and colleges are striving to attract and retain Aboriginal students and the decolonization of education is generally seen as a crucial step in this initiative (Anuik, Battiste & George, 2010; Kovacs, 2009; Newhouse, 2008; Rosenbluth, 2011).

In this study, several factors were found to have a positive influence on participants' experience and completion of their program: the cultural context and content and the sense of belonging it engendered, supportive relationships with staff and classmates, and the Urban Circle's holistic philosophy and approach to education. Urban Circle's partnership with Red River College provides students with recognized college-level credentials within a community-based center that participants in this study referred to as a "home". The impact of their education at Urban Circle has led to positive changes personally and professionally, and their children and family members have been positively impacted as well. Based on the findings of this exploratory study, Urban Circle's culturally restorative approach to education appears to be a successful model for Aboriginal post-secondary education.

There is a shared body of understanding among many Indigenous peoples that education is really about helping an individual find his or her face, which means finding out who you are, where you come from, and your unique character. That education should also help you to find your heart, which is that passionate sense of self that motivates you and moves you along in life. In addition, education should help you to find a foundation on which you may most completely develop and express both your heart and your face. That foundation is your vocation, the work that you do, whether it be as an artist, lawyer, or teacher. This, then, is the intent of Indigenous education. It is finding that special kind of work that most fully allows you to express your true self – 'Your heart and your face' (Cajete, 2000, p.183).

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## URBAN CIRCLE TRAINING CENTRE INC.

519 Selkirk Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba R2W 2M6 • Phone: (204) 589-4433 • Fax: (204) 582-6439

### Appendix A

#### Letter of invitation to participate in study

November 21, 2011

Dear Family Support Worker Graduate,

Ms. Jamie Koshyk is conducting a study to explore Urban Circle graduates' perceptions of their programs. Jamie is a Master's student in Family Social Sciences at the University of Manitoba. She plans to interview students who graduated from the Family Support Worker Certificate program.

Jamie and an Aboriginal colleague, who is the Research Assistant for the study, plan to carry out the interviews in November. Each interview will take approximately 60 minutes and will be arranged at a time and place that are convenient for you.

Each graduate who completes the interview will receive \$25.00 to compensate you for your time. All information collected will be kept strictly confidential. There will be no way for anyone but Jamie and the Research Assistant to know if you have participated or what you have said. The report that she provides to Urban Circle will not contain any participants' names.

If you have any questions about the study, or if you are interested in participating, please contact Jamie Koshyk at 223-3822 or at [jlkoshyk@gmail.com](mailto:jlkoshyk@gmail.com).

Sincerely,

Kim Embleton, Co-Director – Education



## URBAN CIRCLE TRAINING CENTRE INC.

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### Appendix B

#### Invitation letter distributed to 2011 FSW/FASD students

December 6, 2011

Dear Family Support Worker Graduate,

Ms. Jamie Koshyk is conducting a study to explore Urban Circle graduates' perceptions of their programs. Jamie is a Master's student in Family Social Sciences at the University of Manitoba. She plans to interview students who graduated from the Family Support Worker Certificate program.

Jamie and an Aboriginal colleague, who is the Research Assistant for the study, plan to carry out the interviews in December 2011. Each interview will take approximately 60 minutes and will be arranged at a time and place that are convenient for you.

Each graduate who completes the interview will receive \$25.00 to compensate you for your time. All information collected will be kept strictly confidential. There will be no way for anyone but Jamie and the Research Assistant to know if you have participated or what you have said. The report that she provides to Urban Circle will not contain any participants' names.

Please share this invitation to participate in the study with any friends or family members who have also graduated from the Family Support Worker Program, especially if during the years from 2006-2010.

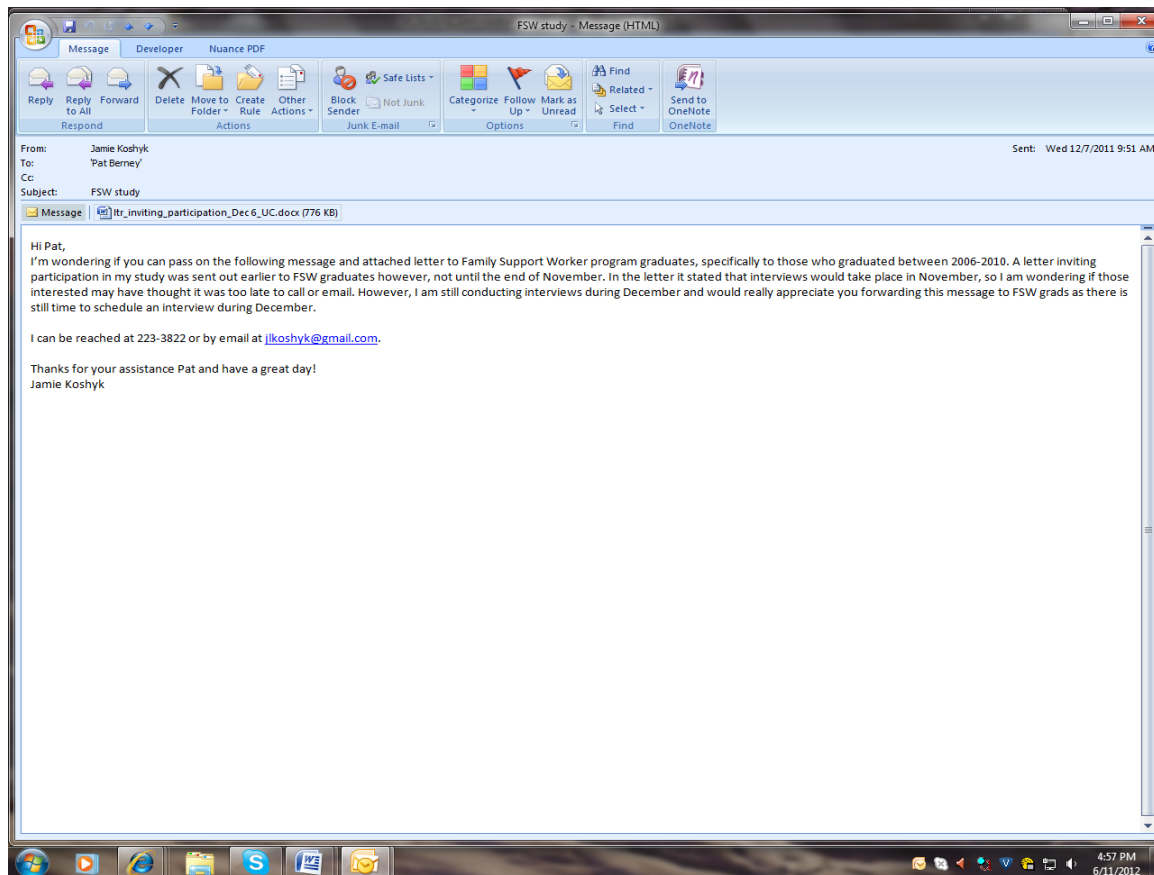
If you have any questions about the study, or if you are interested in participating, please contact Jamie Koshyk at 223-3822 or at [jlkoshyk@gmail.com](mailto:jlkoshyk@gmail.com).

Sincerely,

Kim Embleton, Co-Director – Education

## Appendix C

### Email message and attached letter of invitation sent to FSW/FASD Instructor



December 7, 2011

Hi Pat,

I'm wondering if you can pass on the following message and attached letter to Family Support Worker program graduates, specifically to those who graduated between 2006-2010. A letter inviting participation in my study was sent out earlier to FSW graduates however, not until the end of November. In the letter it stated that interviews would take place in November, so I am wondering if those interested may have thought it was too late to call or email. However, I am still conducting interviews during December and would really appreciate you forwarding this message to FSW grads as there is still time to schedule an interview during December.

I can be reached at 223-3822 or by email at [jlkoshyk@gmail.com](mailto:jlkoshyk@gmail.com).

Thanks for your assistance Pat and have a great day!

Jamie Koshyk



## URBAN CIRCLE TRAINING CENTRE INC.

519 Selkirk Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba R2W 2M6 • Phone: (204) 589-4433 • Fax: (204) 582-6439

Letter attached to email message

December 6, 2011

Dear Family Support Worker Graduate,

Ms. Jamie Koshyk is conducting a study to explore Urban Circle graduates' perceptions of their programs. Jamie is a Master's student in Family Social Sciences at the University of Manitoba. She plans to interview students who graduated from the Family Support Worker Certificate program.

Jamie and an Aboriginal colleague, who is the Research Assistant for the study, plan to carry out the interviews in December 2011. Each interview will take approximately 60 minutes and will be arranged at a time and place that are convenient for you.

Each graduate who completes the interview will receive \$25.00 to compensate you for your time. All information collected will be kept strictly confidential. There will be no way for anyone but Jamie and the Research Assistant to know if you have participated or what you have said. The report that she provides to Urban Circle will not contain any participants' names.

Please feel free to share this invitation to participate in the study with any friends or family members who have also graduated from the Family Support Worker Program, especially if during the years from 2006-2010.

If you have any questions about the study, or if you are interested in participating, please contact Jamie Koshyk at 223-3822 or at [jlkoshyk@gmail.com](mailto:jlkoshyk@gmail.com).

Sincerely,

Kim Embleton, Co-Director – Education



**Appendix D**

Follow-up letter of invitation to FSW/FASD graduates

*DATE: December 15, 2011*  
*TO: Family Support Worker Program Graduates*  
*FROM: Jamie Koshyk*  
*RE: Study to explore Urban Circle graduates' perceptions  
of their educational experience at Urban Circle*

*There's still time to be part of the  
study and you'll receive \$25 for  
1 hour of your time!*

*I want to hear about your experiences at Urban Circle and am  
booking interviews for the first two weeks in January. If you are  
interested in participating please contact **Jamie** at 223-3822 or  
email at [jlkoshyk@gmail.com](mailto:jlkoshyk@gmail.com)*

**Appendix E**

## Confidentiality Agreement for Research Assistant

**Name of Principle Investigator:** Jamie Koshyk, MSc. Candidate**Title of Project:** “Exploring the Impact of a Culturally-restorative Post-secondary Education Program on Aboriginal Adult Learners: The Urban Circle Training Centre Model”

Before I can hire you to assist in conducting interviews for this research study, I must obtain your explicit consent not to reveal the identities or any other personal information of the participants being interviewed or any of the content of the interviews. If you agree to these conditions to ensure participant confidentiality, please sign below.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix F

### Interview Questions

#### A. Demographic Information

1. How long have you lived in Winnipeg?
2. Where else have you lived, and for how long?
3. Can you please tell me where you fit in the following age ranges:
  - a. under 20 years of age
  - b. 20-25
  - c. 26-30
  - d. 31-35
  - e. 36-40
  - f. 41-45
  - g. 46-50
  - h. over 50
4. Were you a parent while enrolled at Urban Circle?
  - a. If so, how many children do you have and what were their ages at the time you began the program?
  - b. While a student at Urban Circle were you in a dual-parent family, single parent family or living in another arrangement? Please explain.
5. Before enrolling at Urban Circle, what was the highest level of education you had attained?
6. Before enrolling at Urban Circle, were you employed? Were you a student?
7. Do you speak an Aboriginal language? If yes, how fluent are you?
  - a. Do other members of your family speak an Aboriginal language? If yes, how fluent are they?

#### B. Post-secondary Education Experience Prior to Urban Circle

8. At the time you began the Urban Circle program, did any of your close family

and/or friends have experience in post-secondary education programs? Please tell me more about this.

9. Before entering the Family Support Worker (FSW) program, did you ever imagine yourself as a college graduate? Please tell me more about this.
10. What was your first experience in a post-secondary education program?
  - a. If Urban Circle was your first experience: Do you feel there were any barriers that prevented you from enrolling in a post-secondary education prior to Urban Circle? Please tell me more about this.

### **C. Perceptions of Urban Circle Training Inc.**

11. Before you enrolled in Urban Circle, what had you heard about Urban Circle and from whom?
12. What made you decide to enroll in Urban Circle?
13. Can you tell me something about your experience at Urban Circle?
  - a. What were the best things?
  - b. What were the challenges?
14. What would you say were the benefits of attending Urban Circle, mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually?
15. What student supports and services, academic and/or counseling did you find were available at Urban Circle?
  - a. Did you make use of any of these supports or services while you were a student?
    - i. If yes, would you be willing to tell me which ones?
  - b. Imagine that these supports & services weren't available. How would this have affected your ability to take or stay in the program?
  - c. What would you say was the most important aspect at Urban Circle that helped you in getting through the Family Support Worker program?
  - d. Is there anything you would like to add about the kinds of supports offered by Urban Circle?

**D. Perceptions of the Life Skills Course at Urban Circle Training Centre**

16. How would you describe the Life Skills Course?
17. What was the best part of the Life Skills Course for you? Please tell me more.
18. 18. What, if anything, do you think could be done to improve the Life Skills Course?
19. What do you think would have been the impact on your own studies if the Life Skills course was not a part of the program?

**E. Perceptions of the Cultural Component of Urban Circle Training Centre**

20. Tell me about the Aboriginal cultural components of the Urban Circle program.
21. How important to you were the Aboriginal cultural components at Urban Circle (i.e. traditional teachings, ceremonies, Elders, physical space and design, etc)? Please tell me more about this.
  - a. Were any specific cultural components particularly meaningful to you? Please explain.
  - b. How important were these cultural components to your success in the program?
  - c. Is there anything you would like to add about the role of the cultural component in your education at Urban Circle?
22. Has the cultural component of the program affected your professional life? Please tell me more about this.
23. Is there anything you would like to add about your feelings regarding the cultural component of the program? Please tell me more about this.

**E. Activities and Reflections on Impact of Education Following Graduation**

24. Following graduation from the FSW program, did you find employment in a related field and/or continue on to further education? If so, please tell me more.
25. How did your experience in the Urban Circle program influence your post-

graduation employment and/or education, if at all?

26. Are you active in any way in the community where you live? Please explain.
27. Since you graduated would you say your children have been influenced in any way by your schooling? Please explain.
28. Is there any else that you would like to add about what we're talking about?

**Appendix G**

## Informed Consent Form



Fort Garry Campus Research Ethics Boards  
CTC Building, 208 - 194 Dafoe Road  
Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2  
Phone: (204) 474-7122

**Informed Consent Form**

Research Project Title: *Exploring the Impact of a Culturally Restorative Post-secondary Education Program on Aboriginal Adult Learners: The Urban Circle Training Centre Model*

Researcher: Jamie Koshyk

Dear Participant,

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

Purpose: I am writing to request your participation in a research project I am conducting as part of my Masters of Science Degree at the University of Manitoba. In this project, I intend to explore Urban Circle graduates' perceptions of their educational experiences.

Procedures: You have been selected as a potential participant for this study based on your graduation year. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in an interview with myself and a Research Assistant lasting between 60 and 75 minutes. You will be given \$25.00 to compensate you for your time. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed.

Confidentiality: Strict confidentiality will be maintained. I will not use your real name in the interview notes or on interview transcripts. Any information that could identify you will be carefully deleted from the interview transcripts. The Research Assistant has also signed a confidentiality agreement.

In my report of findings, I may quote you, but I will assign you a pseudonym so that it will be impossible to know who said those words. Upon completion of the study I will destroy all interview notes and transcripts and erase all audio recordings of the interviews.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researcher, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and/or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Researcher: Jamie Koshyk (jlkoshyk@gmail.com)

Supervisor: Dr. Joan Durrant, Ph. #: 204 474-8060, Email: jdurrant@cc.umanitoba.ca

This research has been approved by a University of Manitoba Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Secretariat at 474-7122, or e-mail [margaret\\_bowman@umanitoba.ca](mailto:margaret_bowman@umanitoba.ca). A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

---

Participant's Signature

Date

---

Researcher's Signature

Date

Please check if you would like to receive a written summary of the research upon its conclusion. If yes, please provide your mailing or email address: