

Defining the Future: Aboriginal Adolescent Girls and Literacy

Introduction

In 1997, Stardale began operations as a non-profit organization out of Melfort, Saskatchewan. Originally the concept of Stardale grew out of a major gap in service to women experiencing continual cycles of oppression and violence. Since its' inception The Stardale Model© has provided opportunity and skills for the empowerment of women. Stardale's collaborative partnership approach to business has contributed to the success of the organization. Currently, Stardale remains active in the non-profit sector and has since expanded in to the province of Alberta, and has grown internally. Furthermore, Stardale is beginning to become recognized by Aboriginal communities and with their partner organizations for their services that have enriched the lives of many through programs and services, research initiatives, and workshops.

Following is some information that may assist your organization to see how to embrace collaborative partnerships, and or find resources to reach the common goal, to End Violence by promoting *Aboriginal Literacy*. The Stardale Model© offers a multi-disciplinary approach to community development, culture, education, healing, social inclusion, prior learning, and social justice. The Stardale Model© encompasses a series of self-development tools, which provide females an opportunity and skills to empower themselves, while on a journey leading to an enhanced quality of life. This Model© offers a holistic approach that works within the context of the Aboriginal "Medicine Wheel" which focuses on the unification of mind, body, and spirit.

Definition of Aboriginal Literacy

Aboriginal literacy is a learner-centered approach to lifelong learning that honours the interconnectedness of all aspects of creation for personal empowerment, community development and self-determination. Aboriginal literacy encompasses First Nation languages, elder involvement, culture and community in a holistic developmental approach to unify the mind, body and spirit.

Community Development and Grassroots Initiatives

The Aboriginal Literacy Strategic Report (2004) recommends the use of a participatory approach to work with the communities to develop, implement and evaluate community – based Aboriginal literacy programs. Programs must be designed holistically to meet the needs of individuals and their families. The delivery format must include integrated culturally sensitive, values based curriculum. To begin working with Aboriginal communities a project must integrate curriculum by utilizing the Medicine Wheel as a base. Through research initiatives Stardale recognizes that schools, organizations, and service providers interviewed are unaware of the abuse/violence that is occurring in their own communities. Moreover, there were no provisions for counselling support, personal days off, or elders available to assist the females who were

experiencing abuse. Stardale's concept of residential programming positions the service provider to create a supportive learning environment while the females identify factors in their own personal lives that perpetuate cycles of violence¹.

For example, the project titled: *Defining the Future: Embracing our Girls: A Community-Based Needs Evaluation*² was initiated and made possible through the vision and dedication of Stardale's founder, Helen McPhaden and resident of Melfort, Saskatchewan. This project was dedicated to conduct participatory action research with a group of local Aboriginal adolescent girls that appeared to be having a hard time dealing with everyday life; expressing maladaptive behaviours in society.

The project was divided into two parts. Part I of the assessment had the youths express their views and opinions via a self-report questionnaire and a focus group. This information was supplemented by a key informant interview with an individual who works closely with the female youths in Melfort. Part II of the assessment focused on the outer levels of influence by exploring community resources available for youths in Melfort. To serve this goal, a community survey was completed, and two community meetings were held to discuss prevention, intervention, and postvention options for youth violence and delinquency.

The research then led to the development of strategies to deal with the issues involving the participants. For example, the girls were risking their own health and jeopardizing the health of others by succumbing to substance abuse, engaging in promiscuity, completely disengaging in learning and literacy, and exhibiting both aggressive and violent behaviours to the point of becoming perpetrators of criminal activities leading to incarceration. (Barton, Watkins & Jarjoura, 1997.) The goals of the *Defining the Future* project are to understand the life experiences of these girls, and to find ways of creating positive change in their world through the dissemination and transmission of the knowledge received to community groups, government, academic institutions, research centers, and other interested organizations. A strong emphasis was made on ethics and accountability to conduct this project with great sensitivity.

This journal will introduce factors associated with aggressive or violent behaviour in adolescent girls (van der Woerd, Cox et al, 2003); and will emphasize that maladaptive behaviours are strongly correlated to certain preventable factors such as: lack of healthy social networks (peer groups), poor literacy rates, previous abuse and trauma, low self-esteem, and marginalized socio-economic status of participants household and/or community groups. (Health Canada, 2004. Leschied et al, 2000. Ashford, 2000. Joe and Chesney-Lind, 1995). This journal is a shortened version of the full-length Final Report on the project.³

¹ www.stardale.org. The Beauty of Self project addresses issues of self-esteem, abuse/violence, trauma, boundaries and more. Both curriculum and art are used in a classroom style format. A follow up project was designed "Connection to Inner Beauty" for perpetrators of crime between the ages of 12 to 16.

² www.stardale.org. *Defining the Future: Embracing our Girls: A Community-Based Needs Evaluation*. Melfort, Saskatchewan. Prepared by: Rebecca Harriman. RESOLVE Saskatchewan. August 31, 2004

³ www.stardale.org. *Defining the Future. Final Report*. 2004.

Recommendations

The following set of recommendations is based on data collected for Part I and Part II of this project. These recommendations are not presented in any particular order.

- *Youth Centre*
- *Mentorship Program*
- *Increased Awareness Meetings/Public Forum Discussion Groups*
- *Youth Meetings*
- *Intramural/Recreational Sports Programs*

Additional Research

The scope of the present project only allowed for a cross-sectional (one time) look at the issues and services surrounding female youth violence in Melfort. It would be beneficial if future research could explore the history of services offered in Melfort, as well as any plans for future service delivery. In terms of the youths, the researchers were unable to explore the journey of each youth in depth, and how their opinions and attitudes may change over time. Additional research is necessary to gain more in-depth information about barriers to accessing and administering existing services in Melfort. This would serve to identify specific gaps in resource availability, as well as how to increase the number of clients in need who access resources.

Timing may be important, as this project was conducted while the youths were out of school for the summer. Summer may be a time where youths feel like they have less 'to do' because of the lack of a structured schedule. Future research could look at the experiences, attitudes, and developmental contexts of youths across several different time periods including childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. One-to-one interviews would also be valuable in obtaining information, as the youths in the present study may not have felt comfortable sharing information among their peers or with the authority figures present.

Other factors for future research to consider include whether or not some of these adolescents have attention or hyperactivity disorders such as attention deficit disorder or fetal alcohol syndrome (or effects) (*American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 2000, text revision*). These types of disorders may help to explain some of the problems that the adolescents are experiencing at school or in their home environment. Unfortunately the present study did not allow for inquiry into psychological difficulties such as learning disorders.

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